

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# VOLUME 6

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance Collection*

## Volume 6

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a 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 produce.

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 6.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, 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

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also 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.

These stories are 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.

## Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Dozens of members chipped-in to help; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the **Table of Contents** which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

The **story titles link** back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The author names also link back to their **Goodreads author profiles**.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: [www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance](http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance).

Enjoy.

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# TINMAN

By Dani R.R. Hermit

## **Photo Description**

A young man, chained to an old bed frame, is crying out. He is collared and secured in what appears to be a basement.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*His name is Master, I have no name, just names he calls me like boy, fuck toy, dog, pet—depending on his mood. Sometimes he calls me with a snap of his fingers. I don't get to talk, unless I am asked a question by him, which is rarely since nothing I say really matters to him.*

*He bought me a month ago from my "mother". She put an ad in the local paper seeking a strong, dominant man to raise her son and teach me how to behave and act properly, since I have no father. Apparently I got into too much trouble for her liking and she needed money for bills. So she sold me to the highest bidder without even asking him his intentions.*

*I get caged, cut, smacked, sense-deprived, chained, caned and many more horrors.*

*This is my life now, and it ends any trace of the person I used to be, as if I am a rag doll—no brain, heart, senses, or feelings.*

*I like dark stories, mind numbing and that disturb the reader.*

*Please include BDSM, punishment, humiliation, anything twisted. Non-con*

*I want to know what his first few months were like and show how he changed within the first year of captivity. And anything else you want to add.*

*The captive needs to be very pale, black longish hair, blue eyes; Master—tanned, cut body.*

*Sincerely,*

*Erica*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** BDSM, dubious consent, non-consent, abuse, dark, slave, underage

**Content warnings:** **dub-con sex, extreme humiliation and abuse, mentions of long term child sexual abuse and rape, somewhat dubious HFN ending**

**Word count:** 13,040

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# TINMAN

By Dani R.R. Hermit

## PROLOGUE

It had been the same track playing on the alarm radio every morning since the boy had first come to live upstairs with his Master. The obscure AM gold song made very little sense to him at first, but after untold months he had come to see how much meaning was behind the song. The references to the *Wizard of Oz* and having everything you needed from the start of the journey had made him think too much about his own inner feelings in those first days. He wished he knew where the song came from but it was older than he was and Master had never talked about it.

Some days, like today, the boy thought Master had chosen the song on purpose. Or maybe it was just the need to find meaning in even the smallest things Master did. Maybe it was his little trick to keep sane.

But the philosophical implications of Master's musical choices were not the important thing right now. The track was four minutes and seventeen seconds long. That was all the time Master gave him to get up and prepare the house for their morning routine.

The boy had it down now. Forty seconds to rouse himself from his blanket on the floor and fold it up neatly. It was to be stashed away in the bottom of the closet, out of sight. The bedroom, or wherever the boy was allowed to sleep, had to be cleared of any evidence of him sleeping there. Normally, this was quite easy, as it was a rare occasion that Master allowed him a blanket.

Another minute to get downstairs to the front hallway where he was to fetch the morning paper that was stuffed through the old-fashioned mail slot. He brought it into the kitchen, where he could linger for a full minute and ten seconds. He had to turn on the coffee maker and lay out the paper on the table just how Master liked it, with the sports section on top so Master could read while he sipped his strong, black coffee without being bothered by the real news right away.

The boy's routine then took him back upstairs to the Master's bedroom. Every morning, if he did his routine correctly, he had a few bars left of the song to get himself arranged into the position Master most preferred. Entering the bedroom, the boy was no longer surprised to see that Master was lying awake in bed. He was always awake within the first couple notes, but he liked to linger for a few minutes. He spent the time listening, judging if what the boy was getting this morning would be a reward or punishment.

It had been a while since Master had been forced to punish him. There were mornings the boy had been tempted to misbehave, to run late in his routine or forget some detail, to draw out Master's wrath. But then, as if he were able to read the boy's thoughts, Master dished out a reward as vicious as any punishment he could crave.

The boy hoped this morning was one of those times.

As the song's final notes faded, the Master swung his legs around to the floor. He stood slowly, not saying a word to the boy. Not even looking at him for more than a moment to check his posture as he passed him on his way to the bathroom. The boy was to remain there, in the waiting position. He was on his knees, hands locked behind his head with eyes downcast. He wasn't to move at all while Master dealt with his own morning routine.

The boy listened to the familiar sounds of water running and the toilet flushing. Master had no use for a slave in the shower, helping him shave or anything else he did in the privacy of his bathroom. He spoke with derision about the people he'd known who acquired slaves and suddenly turned into invalids, expecting their slaves to perform even the most basic of tasks for them.

"I wiped my own ass before you came to me," Master said haughtily on more than one occasion. "I can still wipe it now." Master believed that a slave was to perform some of the household chores, take care of a handful of his basic needs, but mainly existed for a different purpose, one the boy had learned to fulfill.

He'd craved to ask about those other slaves and the people who owned them but Master did not like questions. The boy had learned that lesson early

on. In the time he'd been here with Master, he had not laid eyes on another person. When Master had company, which was quite the rare occasion, he stayed upstairs and silent. No one was to know he was living here with Master. Even more than "no questions", that was the most important rule. Master had made it quite clear that if he were to break that one commandment, he would be sent off to someplace much worse posthaste.

Master walked through the room, naked and still damp from his shower. The boy watched his movements through lowered lashes, still struck by his Master's lovely body. He was nothing like what he was expecting when he first realized he'd been sold to pay for his mother's debts.

It was funny how he never thought about that anymore. It had consumed his mind during those first days, but his life with Master was all he knew, all he cared about now. Everything that came before he was owned was like a nightmare that had stopped being important once it was over. His reality, his waking life, was serving Master. All else was just that other time, that other life, and the boy found it best not to dwell on it.

The boy was drawn out of his thoughts by a snap of Master's fingers. He went down on hands and knees, crawling behind Master down the hall to what used to be the second bedroom. It had been converted to a playroom long before the boy had come to live with Master.

He stopped two paces back from Master's heels and sat up in the waiting position. Master had taught him very well exactly how to behave every moment.

The boy took the opportunity to get a long look at his beloved Master. He was tall, every inch of his lean body a golden color that the boy had once only believed existed in movies. For not the first time, he wondered if Master were a model or an actor. He actually had no idea what Master did for a living. It was information that had never been offered and the boy had never asked.

Master took down the key ring hanging over the door. It held three very different keys. One was to the playroom. It was brass and well worn. The large silver key went to the basement door. The boy hadn't been back down to the training room in the basement in quite a while. It was a space reserved for the

worst of punishments. It was also where he'd spent the first weeks after Master bought him, not even realizing he was in a house until Master had deemed him fit to come upstairs.

The third key, the smallest and obviously least used, went to the small silver padlock on the collar the boy wore. The thick leather band could be loosened and tightened, but never removed. Not without the key on Master's ring. At first, he had been tempted to steal the key during the long hours Master left him alone in the house, but somehow, it had never happened.

Master hung the keys back up on the hook above the door and made a signal, beckoning the boy to enter the room ahead of him. On hands and knees, he crawled into the playroom. Almost immediately, the lightweight cane came down across his shoulder blades. Master never gave halfhearted beatings, even as a reward. The cane hit hard and square. The boy didn't stop crawling. He knew he had to get to the raised platform in the center of the room. Each lash with the cane jolted his body and the boy could already feel the red welts rising on his pale skin. That was what Master wanted. He enjoyed seeing the fruits of his labor on the boy's body.

Pulling himself up onto the whipping block, the boy resumed the position Master favored most. It was the hardest to keep up while being beaten. He had perfected maintaining his posture, spine straight and hands cupped at the back of his neck. His arms were held up and not allowed to sag even a little bit. Knees held apart, square with his shoulders, keeping him in a straight line from shoulders to knees. He was not allowed to sink back to rest his ass on his heels, nor to even hint he might bend his knees at anything other than a ninety degree angle. Master had trained him to take all sorts of abuse without breaking this all-important posture.

The boy suddenly realized there was something wrong. The strokes of the cane were no less accurate than any other day. The force and rhythm were the same as always. That was maybe the problem. Master pushed. He challenged. Nothing the boy learned stayed at the same level once he was satisfactory. This beating was asking nothing of him. It set him on edge, making the posture nearly impossible to hold.

Master stopped, returning the cane to its hook by the door. He stood there, staring at the boy's back. Something was happening. Change was in the air.

“Come, boy.” Master's voice was warm and smooth. The boy could detect the vaguely British lilt to his words now that he'd been listening to him for so long. But today, there was something else beneath Master's usual tone of seeming to be somewhat amused by all of life.

The boy hurried to fall in on hands and knees to follow Master down to the kitchen table. Master made himself a cup of coffee, another daily ritual he had no interest in giving up into the hands of a slave. He sat down, but instead of opening his paper, he stared at the boy.

The boy had to bite back the barrage of questions rising in his mind. There were so many flooding in, he very nearly lost hold on all his training and began asking them.

Master tapped lightly on the edge of the table with his finger, signaling for the boy to come closer and kneel. “Do you know what today's date is?” Master asked.

The boy shook his head, answering silently like he'd been trained. There was no need for him to vocalize if he could make a silent response.

He was very confused by the odd question and Master's actions so far today. Something was happening and the boy worried it was something he'd done to displease his Master. Maybe the older man was bored with him after so long. There didn't seem to be anything left for him to learn. Master might be considering sending him off to one of the other people he occasionally spoke of, the other masters who had slaves. The thought both intrigued and terrified the boy.

“Tomorrow will be one year since I bought you from your mother,” Master informed him.

The boy was surprised. He wasn't sure how it could have been that long since Master brought him here, away from the rest of the world. But the days had melted together. Master kept the exact same schedule every day. The only way the boy knew it was the weekend was that Master put on khakis and a

polo shirt instead of a suit. It wasn't until much into his training that the idea of counting the khaki days occurred to him, but it had been so long since he'd been bought that the idea of counting the days and weeks as they slipped by seemed pointless.

“In the morning, you'll need to make a choice with the knowledge that you cannot change your mind once you've decided.” Master's words took a long time to sink in. The boy didn't understand what he meant. He wasn't allowed a choice about anything in his life. Master always knew best. “I don't imagine this will be easy for you.” But the boy had the feeling that Master didn't believe his own words. “The arrangement I made with your mother was... unusual, even for this sort of purchase.”

The boy nodded. Master hadn't spoken of how he'd acquired the boy since those first brutal days in the basement. The boy found that it made him horribly uncomfortable to hear about it. He still wasn't sure what to make of the circumstances that brought him into Master's hands. But what person was able to really grasp how to deal with being sold to a stranger by his own mother? The boy had finally taken comfort in it being enough that he could please Master.

“I only paid a portion of the price she was trying to get out of your sweet ass,” Master continued. The boy wanted desperately to cover his ears, to block out the details. “We came to this because my conditions of your purchase eased her guilt, soothed her conscience. I agreed to take you off her hands, use you as I saw fit, but most importantly, to train you. After a year, you were to be allowed to decide if you wanted to go home to her or stay with me.” Master paused, sipping his coffee as he looked down at the boy. He silently gauged how his words were affecting the boy. After a second long sip, he nodded. “You may speak if you wish. Ask your questions now. I will not permit them later.”

There was really only one thing the boy wanted to know. “Why wait until now to tell me this?”

Master didn't have to think about his answer. “Your training would have been ruined if you knew you could leave after a year.”

The boy immediately knew he was right. He would have stubbornly resisted everything Master tried to do to him, for him, if he'd known there was an expiration date on his torment. He lowered his eyes, feeling shame at the person he'd been.

“Master,” he tentatively spoke, unsure how long his permission to speak was going to be in effect. “I want—”

Master's hand struck his face hard. The boy could feel the trickle of blood from his split lip. “I don't care what you want. I am not telling you this so I can counsel you on what to do. I'm telling you because you have to decide what you want your next year to be like.” Master rose and put his coffee cup next to the sink. “You will wake up tomorrow morning, the same as you always do. You will either put on the clothes left out for you, unlock your collar and leave; or, you will be waiting for me to rise, having completed your routine, and your training will continue for another year.” Master crossed the room to stand in front of the boy, his thick cock the only thing the boy could see from where he was kneeling. “There will be no more discussions about this. Is that clear?”

The boy nodded silently.

“Good. Your mind will doubtlessly be distracted, so I won't hold you to your usual duties today.” Master grabbed the boy by his collar and dragged him towards the door to the basement. He rattled the keys he was still holding in his hand and opened the door. Even after all this time, the boy felt the terror rising up in him as he was dragged down the stairs to the torture room where he'd lived out his first days with Master. “You will be left with your thoughts and when I get home, you will resume your usual duties as if it were any other day.”

Master pulled him across the dimly lit room and stopped in front of the cage he'd used for the boy before he deemed him worthy of coming upstairs. The boy landed inside, his back to Master as the door was shut and locked. He didn't move until he heard Master's footfalls going up the stairs. The boy rolled over and looked around the room, remembering the beginning of this new life and wondering what it was he should do now that he had the choice to leave.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER ONE

He really should have known better than to trust his mother.

He'd known since he was eight, or maybe even younger, that she hated him. He didn't know why it ran so deep, but it had something to do with how much he looked like his father. The boy had never met the man. According to his mother, he'd disappeared the night his son was born. She'd come back from the hospital, already heartbroken over the voice mail breakup that had occurred while she was in labor to find he'd taken everything out of their apartment. Her clothes, the baby things, literally everything that wasn't nailed down.

The boy could not fathom why it was she hadn't given him up, abandoned him, done something to remove the last link to the man she hated more than anything. Maybe she loved him at one point. Maybe she hoped he would be the magnet to draw his father back to her.

But whatever the reason, he knew it had evaporated by the time he was old enough to start looking like something other than a toddler, which all looked the same to him. He was growing up to look so much like his father that sometimes his mother would burst into tears just from looking at him. Even that hadn't lasted. She became cold and calculating as time went on. She started seeing men as bank accounts and her own beauty as a blank check. She dated, not for love or companionship, but for comfort.

She finally settled down with Darryl. He had a nice house, owned his own business and was the first man who was halfway decent to her son. Not that he imagined that was part of her reason to move in with Darryl. It wasn't until that first night Darryl slept over at their tiny apartment that the boy understood why he had always been so nice to him, always eager to spend time with him as well as his mother. In the middle of the night, Darryl had slipped under the blankets with the boy. He hadn't really understood what was happening, but he did know that it made him feel weird.

The boy told his mother first thing in the morning, only to be told that he was the reason Darryl was willing to stay with her. She'd somehow run across

Darryl's secret stash of underage porn. Rather than be disgusted, she turned into a shrewd businesswoman and bartered her son's body for her own comfort. Darryl was willing to take them in, maybe even marry her, in exchange for unrestricted access to her ten-year-old son.

For Darryl, it had been a dream come true. But for the boy, it was the start of his own personal nightmare. The horrible truth was, after the first few times, it wasn't so bad with Darryl. He was awkward but gentle. He genuinely liked the boy and the boy found that, despite himself, he came to like Darryl as well. They had an unusual but happy family life when his mother moved them into Darryl's house.

But once they were settled, his mother began to take advantage of the long hours Darryl had to put into the garage and the constant stream of men began. They all came to the back door, cutting across the yard from the parking lot of the church behind the house. At first, they were all his mother's callers. But then she began to come home with men who wanted to "meet" her son. These ones always handed her the largest wads of cash. He had been sworn to never say a word to anyone, especially Darryl.

It was months before Darryl found out, but when he did, he was furious. The boy was never sure if he was jealous of the other men who were allowed to use him, or offended that he was being treated as no better than the strangers his mother found online or at shady bars. Either way, Darryl's house was the one place they had lived that he missed the most.

They were homeless again, and his mother's dreams of a nice wedding were gone. She became colder than ever, angry at him for ruining her life yet again.

Things were no different once they were in the new apartment. But this time, the boy was a little older and began to make himself scarce. He found places to be until late in the evening, making it impossible for his mother to make appointments with men who wanted to fondle and fuck him. As they were repeatedly forced out of one place after another, it became worse and worse.

When all of their history was taken into account, the boy should have

known better than to trust the food left out for him when he came in well after midnight.

One minute, he was eating the reheated dinner, and the next he was waking up in what he could only guess by the musty smell was a basement.

Sweaty hands were squeezing his thighs and a gruff voice was speaking. The boy's head was still too fuzzy to comprehend the words. He struggled to move away from the unpleasant touch, only to find he was securely tied in place. There was something stuffed in his mouth and his eyes were bound tightly. He struggled but the bonds were too tight on his wrists and ankles. Thin metal strips pressed into his chest and legs as he was held in place for the sweaty hands to feel his ass cheeks through the cotton of his boxers.

A few more roughly spoken words and there was the chill of scissors cutting away the remnants of his clothes. He recoiled from the touch of the cold metal, trying to make it clear that the probing fingers that followed were not welcome. When the hands moved away from his body, he expected much worse. But it never came. He was left alone, though it wasn't for long. More hands, more voices came and went.

He was able to pick out his mother's voice in between those of random men. He listened as she negotiated prices. A few of the men obviously met her demands and were allowed to fondle or fuck him. "Sampling the merchandise," she called it.

It was in this madness that he heard Master's voice for the first time. Soft, warm and not at all nervous. That was the quality that set him apart from the others his mother had brought. Master didn't lower his voice into conspiratorial whispers. He didn't use vague euphemisms or weighted silences when discussing his intentions. The boy could clearly hear how uncomfortable it made his mother. She had always seemed to prefer pretending she didn't know what the "nice men" wanted when they paid to "spend time" with her young son.

"I can leave you to inspect the merchandise, if you like," she said, pandering to the man who must have been dripping money. At least, the boy had assumed he was, based on the way she was talking to him.

“No, that won’t be necessary.” Master’s voice sounded so loud in what had been a deep silence just a moment before. “I can see your son has been handled more than enough for one day.” It was the first time anyone had said anything that counted as recognizing the boy as human. It was certainly the first time anyone had reminded her that she was selling her own child.

“You’re right,” she hastily agreed, though her voice was quite strained.

“Has he ever been beaten?”

“Not more than he’s needed,” Mother replied. “Probably not as much as he needed.”

“Your ad would imply the latter,” Master replied. “Where is his father?”

“Dead, if the Lord has mercy.”

Master made a sound like he was choking back an ironic laugh. “And when did you begin pimping out your son?” Master might have been asking about the weather for all the emotion he put behind his words.

“He had his first when he was old enough.” His mother was getting defensive now, probably remembering how she’d sold him off for her own comfort while he was still in grade school.

“He’s barely old enough now,” Master observed.

“He’s sixteen now. That’s plenty old enough for what you want.” The righteous anger sounded utterly ridiculous coming from her, as she lied to this stranger just like she had to every other man who’d asked. The boy had been every age today from twelve to twenty-two, but he didn’t think she’d once told anyone his actual age of eighteen.

“I suppose you’re right.” The man sounded like he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t push the issue. “Would you say he definitely prefers cock over pussy?”

Now she was really stumbling over her words. “He’s never told me otherwise. But I wouldn’t know what he’s up to. He’s never home during normal hours for a kid his age.”

“Well, if he’s old enough to be sold for sex, he’s old enough to keep his own hours.” Master was starting to sound a touch annoyed. “Let’s step out for a drink and discuss the terms of his sale.”

And then they were gone.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

The boy was drugged again. This time with some juice his mother pressed against his parched lips after roughly pulling out the makeshift gag. If she apologized or said goodbye, he never heard it.

He woke up some time later in a dimly lit room. He was no longer blindfolded or gagged. But the bonds were still in place and he could see now that he was chained to an old bed frame. A new piece had been added to his bondage—a collar. It was tight, and a pair of black cords held his head in place near the frame. For a moment, he panicked, thinking he was being strangled. But as uncomfortable as the collar was, it was not meant to deprive him of air.

Turning his head as far as he was able in either direction, all he could see was the brown wall extending out into darkness and a bare floor made of faded gray concrete.

His hair felt damp and he wanted to brush back the dark locks sticking to his forehead. The air was cool against his naked skin. He thought maybe he'd been bathed while he was unconscious. That didn't seem like something his mother would do. Maybe it was the man she'd been talking to.

At least, he hoped it was that last one who had taken him away. The others she had brought around had been real creeps. Not that a man who'd buy a boy was an outstanding example of humanity, but he'd at least seemed the least horrible of the lot.

It was so quiet. The boy's ragged breathing seemed to echo in the large, empty space. He couldn't find a way to hold himself against the metal frame that was even remotely comfortable. He'd been shifted up the frame just enough to keep his feet off the floor. He wasn't sure how he'd stayed in place while he was unconscious, other than leaning into the bare metal of the crossbars. That would take the pressure off his feet and ease the tenseness in his arms. But he just couldn't do it. He had to keep the tension, to fight. If he didn't, he would be sucked down into the darkness, swallowed up by the despair and surrender his mother demanded of him.

He was so caught up in his struggle, the boy didn't hear the footsteps

coming across the room behind him. It wasn't until he felt the crack of the leather strap across his ass that he realized he was no longer alone.

“What the hell?” The leather stung his tender skin. The blow forced him to fall against the metal mesh of the frame.

The strap hit him again, a little lower, catching the lowest curve of his ass. While the pressure being taken off his calves and ankles was a release, the strap was rattling his body and banging him against the bed frame.

“Seriously, man! Knock that shit off!” He tried to turn his head to see who was wielding the strap, but whoever it was stood outside of his line of sight. The strap responded to him by coming down across the back of one thigh and then the other. The supple leather wrapped around to sting his inner thigh, closer to his genitals than he liked. “I said stop!”

He was surprised to not feel another blow. Just as his body was starting to relax, a cool hand reached between his spread thighs to cup his balls. He let out a surprised hiss as the chilly fingers ran over his sac then up and down the length of his cock.

“You shave your balls.” The observation was made by the voice he'd last heard speaking to his mother, but now the boy was far less relieved by the reality than he had been by the idea of it being him. Master's hands slipped up his back to rub under the boy's arms. “Your armpits and legs as well?”

“My customers like their fucks smooth like little boys.” He felt his voice crack. Puberty was running a little late and he was just starting to feel the effects of his voice changing. “And I don't shave, I wax.”

“You won't pass for a little boy much longer. I'm surprised you can now.”

“I can find new customers when that happens,” the boy retorted. “There are always horny men willing to pay.”

“You are correct.” The appraising fingers stroked over the boy's black hair. “Is this from a bottle?”

“You can't tell?” The boy was feeling more brazen now that there was no strap hitting him. He'd met this kind before. They were just dirty old men who liked to spank mouthy little boys.

“I wouldn’t ask if I could. But, we’ll see soon enough.” Master came into sight. He wasn’t old at all. He looked to be in his late twenties, though it was hard to say exactly. The fine blond hair and golden tan might have skewed him a good ten years younger than he was. “I have bought you to fulfill a specific purpose. If you fail to perform adequately, I will have no use for you and—” He stopped suddenly. “Well, there’s no good to be served by levying threats, is there? Let’s just see what happens and deal with the consequences as we need to.” He stopped talking long enough to step back out of the boy’s view. “And on the subject of consequences, you’ve earned five lashes for every time you’ve mouthed off to me.”

The first few lashes were met with protests and angry jibes. But the boy soon learned that every act of defiance added five more lashes to his punishment. After a while, he lost count of how many he was given. Unlike the men who’d wanted to play spanking games with him before fucking, this man was relentless in his beating. He wasn’t playing a game.

Each stroke landed in steady succession, moving from his thighs to his back and down again. He didn’t stop to check if the boy liked it. He didn’t pause to catch his breath. He just administered the punishment without treating it like a game or a way to incite either of them to sex.

Every inch of the boy’s body burned and ached by the time his new owner finished beating him. The wire mesh of the bed frame was biting into his skin and the leather strap had left his back, ass and legs feeling swollen and raw. There wasn’t another word said, even when Master was done beating him. He was left hanging on the bed frame and the lights were turned off.

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## CHAPTER THREE

It was hard to say how long he was left hanging in the darkness. The boy drifted in and out of sleep, or something like it. Whatever it was, it wasn't truly restful. He was left utterly alone during those dark hours, with only his own thoughts and the burning pain of his back. The feelings of rage and betrayal faded as time wore on. Every moment, he could feel how utterly useless those feelings were. He was where he was. No amount of rage was going to change that. What he needed was to be clever. But it was hard to be clever when his stomach was empty and cramping from his need to use the toilet.

By the time the lights came on again, only one of those issues was still a problem.

The soft footfalls came right after the lights blasted to life. They stopped and Master made a disgusted noise. The next thing the boy knew, he was being hit by a harsh stream of ice cold water. It beat on his bruised skin, moving slowly from the back of his neck all the way down to his soiled legs.

The boy whimpered and cried out as the icy water hit the most tender spots. He let out an embarrassing squeal as the stream was narrowed nearly to a laser point and ran down his ass crack, pausing at his hole for an excessively long time. The pressure was turned up even more or Master was stepping closer. Either way, the freezing water was forcing its way into his ass.

He felt like his dry throat was tearing open as he screamed. It was too much, and the worst thing, the most horrible part was the pressurized water was pushing against that special spot in his ass that made his cock ache for attention. The only relief he had was that his tormenter was behind him and couldn't see his embarrassment.

The pressure from the stream grew even more, the man now obviously stepping closer. The boy could hear his feet slapping in the rivulets of water on the concrete floor. When he was close enough to touch the boy, one hand roughly took hold of his ass cheek. He was held firmly as the nozzle of the hose was brought to his hole, then pushed inside of him. The metal was hideously cold and the stream of water didn't stop.

The boy was crying out, his entire body shaking with cold and shame. He could feel the heat of tears coming from his eyes, a stark contrast to the water.

After what felt like forever, the water was turned off and the nozzle removed from his sore ass. He hung limply in his bonds, silently sobbing and praying it was over. Master's steps grew quieter as he walked away.

The boy had just relaxed when he heard the steps returning, accompanied by the jingle of keys. He dared to hope that this was the end of the sick game and now he would be set free.

"I was under the impression you were already housebroken." Master's voice hit him as hard as the cold water. "Well, if you're going to act like a bad dog, I guess I'll have to start treating you like one."

The tanned hands moved deftly to unlock the padlock holding the chains securing his ankles and wrists to the bed frame. He unhooked the cords keeping the boy's head in place from the sides of the frame. The boy felt like he was melting. Without the restraints to hold him in place, his body refused to support itself. Master let him crumple to the floor, stepping back to give him space to do it properly.

Master reached down and grabbed the thick metal hoop on the side of the boy's collar. He drew him up high enough to clip a heavy leash to it. He dropped the boy back to the floor and tugged on the collar using the leash.

"Heel, boy." When his command wasn't immediately followed, Master yanked hard on the leash. The already dazed boy was dragged forward a good foot, losing what little balance he had regained. "When I give an order, you are to follow it immediately."

"Why should I?" The boy pulled back on the leash, trying to find good purchase on the wet floor with either hands or feet.

Master turned and yanked the leash again, pulling the boy to the left. As he fell, Master kicked him, planting the heel of his dress shoe in the boy's side. "You will obey because I own you. I am your master now."

The boy moaned, wanting to fight back, to do something more than lay there. But there was no strength left in him. He had no idea when he'd last eaten and what little sleep he had was the result of drugs or utter exhaustion.

“You will have to do better remembering that.” Master took his foot off him and tugged on the leash again. “Heel.”

Again, the boy didn't respond quickly enough. The leash was tugged, then yanked. The boy was dragged, protesting and struggling, across the room.

Master stopped, winding the leash around his fist as he drew the boy closer. He hooked the loop on his collar with two fingers, but he let go almost immediately. Master instead took hold of his hair and used that to draw him up. When the boy tried to get his feet under him, to ease the pressure on his scalp, Master kicked his shin, making the boy fall. His hair felt like it might be pulled from his head as Master's grip became the only thing keeping him from crashing to the ground.

“You are my pet, a stray dog I've taken in. There's no reason for you to rise up off all fours unless you're doing a trick.” Master unhooked the leash. He turned his body, stepping to the side and out of the boy's line of sight. Now he could see the three-foot-square cage, the kind designed to hold an animal. Master reached down and pushed the partially open door all the way open. “In you go.”

“Fuck you!” The boy struggled to get away from Master's strong grip. “I've had enough of this! Enough of you! Let me go. Give me my clothes back. I'll call the fucking cops, you goddamn pervert!”

He started swinging his fists and flailing his legs in a desperate bid to get away. Master gave him a shake by his hair and brought the leash in a wide arc to slap on his side.

The boy let out a gasp but didn't stop his struggling. Master brought the leash hard across his face then on his side again. Master swung his arm over and over, the leash cracking against the boy's skin. Even after the boy went limp, Master kept beating him. The leash left uneven welts on his arms and legs and long, ugly slashes across his sore, bruised back.

Finally, it stopped. Master was breathing heavily, a thin sheen of sweat on his face. He used the still tight grip on the boy's hair to throw him into the cage. The boy fell, a tangle of limbs, against the bars. He was softly sobbing, every movement a shock of pain so overwhelming, he stopped moving

altogether. He didn't look up as the door to the cage fell into place and he heard a padlock click closed.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

The food Master brought to him was cold and there wasn't much of it. But the boy didn't care. He ate it with relish out of the bowl, not caring how it looked. He gulped down the cool water, trying to ignore how it numbed his tongue. He was also ignoring the way Master stood there, watching him eat and drink. For a moment, after he had all there was to have, the boy paused to wonder if he was supposed to be putting on a show. Master hadn't ordered him to lap up the water like an animal but maybe he was supposed to just assume he should. When Master said nothing about it, he let the thought pass.

The boy settled back down in the cage, trying to find a position that didn't put too much pressure on the welts and bruises from his beatings. He waited for Master to say or do something but nothing came of his visit. He was left alone in the dark for what felt like several hours.

When Master finally returned, he was carrying a long black tube and the thick leash. He turned on the bright lights over the boy's cage. In the glare, the boy could see several pieces of equipment around the room. He had no idea what the shiny leather and metal contraptions could be used for, but he was certain he probably didn't want to find out.

"I'm glad to see you were better behaved this time." Master beckoned the boy to the door of the cage. He opened the door and waited with false patience to be obeyed. When the boy didn't listen, he reached in and grabbed him roughly by the leg. "Don't be a bad dog."

"I'm not a dog!" The boy found his voice. "I'm a person and I have a name! It's—"

Master slapped his face with all the force he could manage from his awkward position. "I'm quite aware of which species you are. Genetically, at least. But if you insist on behaving like an ill-trained animal, then I will have to treat you as such." He snapped the leash into place. "Now, be a good dog and heel."

The boy moved to obey, not willing to be dragged around by the leash as he had been earlier. Master gave a little nod and began crossing the room. As

he crawled behind Master, the boy was able to identify the object he carried as a flashlight. It was one of those big, long ones carried by security guards and rent-a-cops on TV. He instantly worried about what it might be used for. He was quickly learning that Master was willing to use just about anything as a tool for his torture.

The boy was led over to the farthest corner of the room to a door. While Master dug the key out of his pocket, he turned to look at the boy. He frowned down at him. “You do look like a dog. We’ll have to work hard to correct that.”

He didn’t say anything else about the matter. Master turned to open up the door and led the boy up a set of stairs, out to a lush patch of grass. It was nearly completely dark outside. He wondered for a moment if they were outside at all. He stayed next to Master for a long time, until he was nudged by the toe of Master’s shiny black dress shoe.

“Well? Go on, dog. You surely need to relieve yourself by now.” Master’s voice was more amused than usual. “I won’t have you going in the house again.”

The boy was shocked, but the pressure in his abdomen told him he should take advantage of this opportunity. He certainly didn’t want another punishment with the hose. He began to push himself to his feet. The flashlight hit him on the shoulder. Master’s condescending voice was clear, reminding him that he was Master’s dog and dogs were meant to stay on all fours. Hearing it said aloud stung more than the thwack of the flashlight.

He crawled forward into the darkness to the limit of the leash. It was the height of humiliation, but at least it was dark. From where he was, the boy could barely make out Master’s silhouette so he felt it safe to assume he was nearly invisible as well. The same moment the boy thought that and had resigned himself to the act, the flashlight came on. Bathed in the harsh beam, the boy felt his face burning with shame. Hot tears filled his eyes. He wanted to scream for the light to be turned off, but all he could do was whine softly and finish what he’d started.

He was turning carefully, doing all he could to avoid the mess so he could

crawl back to Master when a long pole landed in the grass in front of him. “Clean up after yourself, dog.”

The boy stared at the pole with the scoop and baggie on the end. He was beyond appalled, pushed right to the edge of his tolerance. He started to shake his head, to open his mouth to defy Master.

“Hurry up.”

The tug on the leash warned him to obey or suffer the consequences. At the moment, if Master tugged on the leash, he would be dragged through his own filth and certainly face the hose again. With shaking hands, the boy cleaned up his mess and disposed of the soiled baggie where Master indicated. He couldn't look up as he was lead back through the door and into the basement. He very nearly tumbled down the stairs several times as he tried to figure out how to crawl down them.

The boy barely registered the ice cold hose-down before he was put back in his cage and left alone in the darkness again.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

One day blurred into the next with Master appearing only to feed him and take the boy outside to use the bathroom. It was always dark when he went outside. It didn't become easier to do what Master asked of him. There were more beatings and ice cold hose-downs. The only reprieve from sleeping in the cage was when Master left him tied to one of the various contraptions in the basement.

The boy found he could still be shocked when Master appeared with only the leash. There was no flashlight or food in his other hand. The boy waited with a touch of fear in his stomach for Master to tell him what was expected now.

“I think it's time for you to begin to serve your purpose. It's a waste of money to keep you down in this hole where you are not available for use.”

The boy looked up at Master with wide eyes, wondering what he had in mind now. Maybe he was bored with the sick games and was going to be rid of him. Or it might be he intended to fuck him. The boy had seen Master grow hard during some of the punishments, but he had yet to fuck him. Actually, the boy hadn't even seen more of Master than the occasional short-sleeved polo shirt revealed. This was the first moment he wondered why that was.

Master opened the cage, attached the leash and led the boy towards the door to the outside. At the top of the stairs, instead of going through the heavy white door to the yard, Master turned to the left and opened another door. It was painted the same shade as the wall. The boy had never even noticed it there before now.

The door had opened only a crack to reveal glistening white linoleum when Master paused. He looked down at the boy and spoke softly.

“Upstairs is no place for a misbehaving dog. If you continue to behave as one, you will be sent back to your cage permanently. I know a few people who would love to have a naughty puppy to break in. None of them are as kind as I am.” Master stopped for a moment, giving the boy a long look. Seemingly

satisfied that his words had the desired effect, he pushed the door open the rest of the way.

The boy followed him into the room, eyes wide as he looked around. He could hardly believe how normal it all looked. It was like something out of the magazines his mother had always sighed over. His wide-eyed reaction seemed to amuse Master.

“Did you expect the entire house to be a Gothic torture basement? How would that look to my Auntie Lucille when she visits?”

The boy blushed brightly and looked down at the floor. He wanted to speak, to snipe back at the man who tormented him. But he couldn't think of anything to say that would be worth the beating he'd surely get.

“Now, our first order of business is making you presentable for upstairs.” Master pulled on the leash, leading him into a small bathroom. There was barely room for the two men between the sink and the wall. It also held a pristine toilet and a narrow shower stall. “This will be your bathroom. You will never set foot into mine unless you are specifically ordered. You are expected to keep yourself and this space clean and orderly.” Master pointed to the various objects in the room as he spoke. “Shave that pathetic excuse for facial hair. You will keep your face smooth and clean. The rest of your body hair will be kept clean and neat but you will not shave it. You're not a child anymore and I will not have you looking like one.”

He continued on, very specifically outlining the boy's daily regimen of cleaning and grooming himself. From the acceptable length of his hair to explaining how to use the attachment for the shower hose in order to keep his asshole clean inside and out.

“Every night, or when I've had enough of you, I'll put you back in your cage. If you're well-behaved, I may let you sleep upstairs. But I don't expect that to happen anytime soon.” Master reached down and unclipped the leash. “Normally, you'll have only twenty minutes but today, you have forty-five. Make good use of your extra time. You have quite a few days of crud on you. When you're done, present yourself to me in the kitchen.”

With that, Master left the room. The boy could hear him on the other side of the door, opening and closing what sounded like cabinet doors in the

kitchen. He just stood there, shaken to the core. The sudden assault of a normal bathroom and the normal sounds of Master making coffee hit the boy at the center of his tightly controlled emotions. He crumpled to the floor, wrapping his arms around himself and wept.

He curled up on the floor, letting the misery of his situation overwhelm him. The boy wasn't sure when the last time was that he cried, let alone when he let himself be so utterly destroyed by mere sobbing. He had no idea how long he was laying there, body trembling with so many emotions he would never be able to catalog them all. But the allotted time must have passed because the next thing he knew, the door swung open and Master was glaring down at him.

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## CHAPTER SIX

The beating was the same sort of brutal, unfeeling whipping Master had given him on the first day. His body was sore, covered in welts and left dangling on the X-shaped wooden frame. He was still crying through the whole ordeal.

Master had left him, openly disgusted by the boy's tears and wailing. Every word of pleading, every cry for mercy only brought a harder beating. The boy finally let go of the notion that he'd be shown kindness or even be given the chance to try again. He was past the point of being allowed to prove he could do what was asked of him.

It was some time later that Master returned, the leash in his hand. He clipped it to the boy's collar before freeing him from the wooden frame. He snapped his fingers and pointed to the spot just behind his feet. He didn't slow his steps, but instead walked at a much quicker pace than usual across the basement and up the stairs into the yard.

It was the middle of the afternoon. The warm, bright sunlight burned the boy's eyes. His vision came into focus on the large metal tub placed in the grass. The boy didn't understand what was going on. Besides being out in the daytime, the metal tub was quite a mystery.

"Since you're not capable of performing the most simple tasks of basic self-care, we have to do this the hard way. Pay attention because I will not do this for you again."

Master grabbed him under his arms and lifted him up. The boy was surprised to find that Master was more than strong enough to carry him across the yard to the tub and drop him into the hot water. It was just short of burning his skin, but the boy didn't dare object.

He wasn't in the water long enough to get used to the heat before Master was pushing his head beneath the water. The water tasted slightly salty and as it hit the cuts on his skin, it burned. He wasn't held under for more than a couple of seconds but it felt like an eternity.

Letting go of the boy, Master reached down beside the tub to grab a bar of soap and a scrub brush. "Hold still," he ordered, slipping both items into the water. He set to work, scrubbing the boy's body. The bristles on the brush were hard and dug into his skin.

The boy winced as Master raked the scrub brush across the tender skin of his back. Between the stinging salt water and rough bristles, he was not able to escape the pain. To make it even worse, every time he moved even a little, the boy was freshly reminded of the heat of the water.

The lather of the soap smelled strongly of lemon. It made the boy's eyes tear up. He trembled under Master's harsh, silent treatment. He thought he could push the man away and make a run for it. He so very much wanted to get away. Everything about this forced bath was painful, humiliating; and when the boy saw the tool that Master had shown him in the bathroom, the one intended for cleaning his ass, lying out on a towel on the grass, he knew he had to run.

They were outside. There was nothing stopping him from bolting from the tub to the fence around the yard. Once he was over it and in the neighbor's yard, he could beg for help. Or maybe there was a gate around the corner of the house that would let him escape onto the street. He'd have the element of surprise on his side and Master was in the awkward position of kneeling in the grass with his entire focus on scrubbing the boy's body raw.

He should go now, while his body was still aching and covered in welts. He'd make sure both this horrible man, and the mother who'd sold him, went to jail. He'd go to the police and tell them everything. He'd have to go into the foster care system or an orphanage or something. But could that possibly be worse than what he'd been through so far?

Master took his hands off the boy to lather up the brush again. The boy took that as his chance. He pushed out of the tub, moving in the opposite direction of Master. He was heading for the fence and what looked to be a nice two story house on the other side. The people who lived there would surely help him. He hoped so, at least. It was possible that Master's neighbors knew what kind of man he was and what he had in his basement.

The boy was about halfway to the fence and drawing breath to scream for help when Master caught him. He grabbed the boy by his hair and drew him roughly back. The boy lurched and would have fallen had Master not caught him in his arms. He was furious, glaring down at the boy.

“Let me go,” the boy begged softly. “I don’t want to be here. I didn’t ask for this.”

“That’s life,” Master replied.

He threw the boy over his shoulder and stalked towards the house. The boy struggled until Master threatened to throw him down the stairs. He expected to be immediately thrown back in his cage, or to be tied down to be beaten senseless. But instead, he was dropped onto the top of a cushioned square. It was raised up a couple of feet off the floor, creating a sort of platform. Master turned away, moving to the wall nearest to them and began to grab several mysterious objects off pegs embedded in it.

“It’s past time you learned that you are mine. I own you and expect you to perform for me.”

The boy thought of running again. The cold rage in Master’s voice scared him. He dreaded what might be in store for him now more than anything else so far. Master threw a pile of straps and buckles down in front of the boy.

He took out one piece at a time, beginning by tying the boy’s hands behind his back with a pair of leather cuffs connected by links of chain. Then he pushed the boy down onto his back and secured more leather bands to his ankles. Between the bands was a stiff, leather wrapped pole. It forced the boy to keep his legs spread apart.

The final piece was the most terrifying. He was pulled up into a sitting position, not easy to maintain in his current state. In his hand, Master held what at first glance looked like just a tangle of black leather and buckles. Then, as he unzipped it, the boy realized it was a mask. It went over his face, completely blocking his sight. A thick rubber piece was forced into his mouth, gagging him as the leather was pulled tight. The thick pads settled over his eyes, then another set covered his ears.

Everything was gone. The zipper being pulled down the back of his head was the last thing the boy heard before being plunged into a terrifying world of nothing. No light, no sound. Nothing at all. He had no way of objecting to whatever Master wanted to do to him, but worse was having no way to anticipate what that might be.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

The boy had smacked his face on the side of the raised platform when he was flipped over roughly. He had to assume that Master used the bar between his ankles to do it because he didn't feel him touch any part of his body. It was only the padding in the oppressive hood that kept him from splitting his lip or getting a bloody nose. There had to be some kind of holes for him to breathe but they didn't let in any light or sound.

His legs were pulled up, forcing him to bend his knees or be pushed off the other end of the platform, face first onto the cement floor. He was manipulated into place, thrown this way and that, until he was exactly the way Master wanted him. His ass was exposed in a way he had never experienced, making him feel even more vulnerable than ever.

A finger rubbed over his asshole, teasing and applying a thin coat of lube. The boy felt his entire body tense. He was struggling, but there was no way to stop what was happening. It was hardly the first time his ass had been penetrated, but it was so much more terrifying than any time before. Maybe it was the lack of sight and hearing or his inability to vocalize anything at all.

Being trapped inside of his own head made everything happening to his body seem completely impersonal, as if he were just a thing without needs or feelings of his own. He had no control as one finger, then a second, slipped into his ass. They pushed him wide, testing his limits. Then they were gone and he was left untouched and wondering what was to come next.

Hands were on his thighs, holding him firmly in place. His ass, though teased and lubed, was not ready for the sudden plunging thrust of Master's cock. Or, he thought it was his cock. It was slick and smooth, slightly cool as it first slid into his warm hole. He assumed that was from Master wearing a rubber.

The boy's entire slim body shook as he was fucked. There was no pretense, no consideration for anything but Master's own need to get off. He thrust deep, over and over. His hands gripped the boy's thighs then moved up to his

hips. The fingers digging into his flesh were strong, unrelenting. The boy could feel the bruises forming already.

It took forever, but then Master pushed deep and gave a little shudder as he came. He stayed like that for a few lingering seconds, before pulling away.

The boy relaxed as best he could. It was over. Master had done what he needed to do and, unlike the porno novels his mother had left out for him to read, his cock wasn't going to magically reinflate with need. He'd need some time to recover before he wanted to fuck again. Only, that didn't seem to be true. Moments after he pulled out, Master pushed into him again, his cock chilled from a fresh rubber.

He was being fucked for a few horrifying seconds before the boy realized it wasn't Master's cock but rather a thick butt plug being inserted into him. Somehow, that wasn't any better. He squirmed but there was no making the large plug comfortable. Once it was in place, there was nothing else. Master just left him like that.

The boy had no idea how long he was left waiting for Master's return. He stayed on his knees because he couldn't think of a more comfortable position to move into with the butt plug in place and the awkward bondage holding his hands and feet. When he next felt the touch of Master's hands, his entire body was stiff and cramping.

What he discovered was that Master had not returned to offer him relief, nor comfort. He pulled out the butt plug roughly and began to fuck the boy again. This time, it was slower, more relaxed, but still the boy felt disconnected. The different pace did nothing to make him feel less like a lifeless toy, something for Master to use and discard.

Over and over this happened. The boy lost all track of time. He lost count of how many times Master fucked him. He even lost the ability to tell if it was Master's cock in his ass, the butt plug or maybe some other toy. All that he knew was it was becoming more and more obvious he was only made for fucking. He only existed to satisfy his Master and nothing else.

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## EPILOGUE

The day in the cage dragged on and on. The boy should have been upstairs, doing his usual duties. He was expected to perform light housekeeping, take care of Master's laundry, and, as it drew closer to time for Master to come home, he would engage in his daily ritual of cleaning himself. Having to skip that because of his time in the cage made the boy feel grubby. He longed for his tiny bathroom, still mostly the same as when he had first been taken to it.

What had really changed over the last year was the boy himself. The naive child who'd broken down, crushed by the pain of betrayal, had been replaced by a careful, well-trained slave. He no longer indulged in the selfish beliefs of adolescence. He'd learned that they were useless, frivolous thoughts. He had no reason to stay wrapped up in the illusion of safety they represented. What he now had was true safety.

Even if he didn't love the boy, Master was fond of him. He kept him protected from the uncertainty of the outside world. The boy knew just what to expect from every day of his life. Even when Master varied from their routine, it wasn't a scary event. It was a part of pleasing his Master. It was still safe.

But not today. Today, Master had presented him with a true uncertainty. The boy had no idea what choice he was to make. If he left, would he go back to his mother, a woman he did not love and could never trust? Would he have to take to the streets, hustling for survival? And what if he stayed? Was he going to be in training forever? How long would Master keep him? Did he intend to sell him off, now that he was trained and had chosen to stay a slave?

The myriad of potential futures spun in the boy's head. It was too much to think about. But one question still rose to the top of his mind over and over. What did Master want him to choose? He wished he could answer that with absolute certainty. That one answer would decide his fate. If Master was tired of him or displeased in any way, the boy would take his chances with the outside world. But if Master wanted him to stay, he would never leave.

The boy was no less confused at the end of the day, when he could vaguely hear the clock in the kitchen chime six o'clock. Master would be back any

moment. He should be upstairs, kneeling by the table where Master would have left him if not for the unusual circumstances of the day. He was Master's toy and at the end of every day, no matter what he did while Master was gone, he was expected to be waiting where Master had left him.

It was quite a while later, well after the chime for eight o'clock, when he heard Master coming in the front door. He wanted to run to the front door and greet him like an eager puppy, but he could only wait in the cage for Master to come down and let him out. Master didn't stop anywhere in the house on his way to the basement door and down the stairs. He appeared and the boy did his best to not call out a relieved greeting.

Master took him upstairs, into the kitchen. The boy was following him without the need for the leash. It had been hanging unused on the wall for quite some time now. On one of the kitchen chairs, a bag from the mall was sitting. Master didn't say a word about it, but the boy guessed that those were the clothes he was to wear if he decided to leave tomorrow. Somehow, looking at the bag made the boy a little sad.

But it also jolted him into an acute awareness of what his life was with Master. All the things he was missing, all the experiences of the world outside came rushing into his mind. He felt the heat of tears building in his eyes. The boy tried to blink them away. It wouldn't do for Master to see him this upset.

He should want to go out, to experience what there was for him on the outside. The world was happening without him. People were falling in love, having fun, living and dying while he stayed here and suffered under Master's cane. The pain of being so separate from the normal world of malls, clothes, people, hit him much harder than he thought could be possible.

But there wasn't time for him to think about anything more. Master was waiting in the doorway of the kitchen and snapped his fingers to get the boy to hurry up. The boy followed him down the hall into the living room. Master had apparently already eaten while he was out shopping. It was now time for the boy to do what he was here for. Once in the living room, the boy was bound in the familiar way Master preferred to fuck him. Hands behind his back and ankles tied to a spreader bar. But instead of the usual comfort of the black-out hood, he was merely gagged.

Master positioned him on the floor, bent over his ottoman. He used the boy's ass as a foot stool, leaving his socked feet in place long after it became uncomfortable for the boy. By the sounds, he was reading his paper. This was not unusual. During the cold weather, Master had used his body to warm his icy feet.

It was the bondage that had the boy confused. This position was used almost exclusively for fucking. Master had made the pattern. He had taught the boy this was how things worked. Why would he break the carefully structured pattern? The boy did his best to hold still, to not let his agitation show. His patience, or what passed for it, was rewarded with Master's cock pounding into his ass. The boy wasn't sure what he'd expected when it happened without the insulation of the hood, but this wasn't it.

There was nothing from Master but the sounds a man couldn't help but make while he was fucking. No words of mocking or approval. No endearments or insults. Nothing but a man fucking for the sole purpose of getting off.

The boy had never felt more like an object. He'd never come so hard either.

He was left on the ottoman as Master went on about his night. He watched the news, worked on something at his laptop and returned to fuck the boy once more. But not once did he give any indication that the boy was anything other than another piece of furniture, no more important than the ottoman he was lying across. This was what he never saw while he was hidden under the hood, caught up in the sensations of his own body.

Master had revealed to him what really happened during those hours between dinner and bedtime, while he was bound and hooded. This was how things would be forever if he stayed. If he left, this last night would haunt him and Master would always own a part of him.

Finally, as the night wound down, Master untied his arms and legs. He left the gag in place. He put the implements back inside the ottoman and began to turn off the lights. This was the signal that it was time to go upstairs, time for bed. Once Master left the room, the boy had a few minutes to clean himself

before going upstairs to the bedroom. He was expected to be in place before Master was done with his evening ritual.

The boy settled in the kneeling position Master liked most, on the spot on the carpet that to his eyes was worn from his knees. He had only moments to prepare himself before Master appeared from the bathroom. This was the time when Master would decide where his behavior would allow him to sleep. Master pointed to the floor at the foot of the bed, the same spot the boy had slept the night before. He reached down and took off the gag, throwing it to the floor for the boy to clean in the morning.

Master then made his way to the bed, where he sat on the edge. He stared at the boy for a long time before snapping for him to come over. When the boy was close enough, Master grabbed his hair and drew his mouth to his cock. He leaned back, propped up by his other hand while the boy's tongue began its work. Like nearly every other night, the boy sucked Master's cock, getting him off one last time before bed. Then he was released to go to his spot on the floor. Master turned off the bedside light and went to sleep.

The boy was certain, as he settled into his place, that he wouldn't be able to get to sleep with as fast as his mind was running. He quickly found that habit took over and he was asleep in minutes.

The alarm was playing the familiar song before he knew it. The first rays of sunlight were coming in from the window. The boy rose and began his day like he always did, putting away his blanket and heading downstairs to start the coffee.

It was only when he saw the bag from the mall and the small silver key on the table that he remembered how important this morning was.

He kept going, turning on the coffee pot, arranging the morning paper. Every few seconds, he glanced over at the bag. He dared a peek inside. There wasn't anything special. A pair of jeans, black T-shirt and some socks. A shoe box was jammed down the side of the bag next to a wrapped package of underwear. The boy could only assume everything would be a perfect fit. Master knew his body better than he ever dreamed anyone could. He would not allow his boy to wear ill-fitting clothes. It would be an embarrassment.

Everything was so clear to him then. The entire journey from the drugged food his mother had given him to the bag of clothes Master had bought him. Every step meant something. Every humiliation, every pain, had burned him, but it had also forged him into something new. The boy closed his eyes and listened to the music as the song from Master's alarm was just loud enough to reach him.

He took a deep breath, feeling all the tension leave his body and knowing in that moment that his decision was made.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*After having the earth shattering realization at twelve years old that SOMEONE had to write all these books in the library, Dani R.R. Hermit began the long and arduous journey to becoming one of those people. Along the way, she discovered that she was much better at writing dark, twisted sex stories than anything else. Having to put aside the dream of appearing in the “local authors” section of her local library, Dani found that she still wanted to write. Her love affair with telling stories about sexy people sexing was put into fan fiction and all of the original worlds she had crafted were put aside. But after many, many unfavorable reviews deriding her ability to keep her fics contained to the world that had been laid out for her, Dani put aside her fan fictions to do what it was she always wanted and began to work on her original stories again. This time, she had the support and aid of her life and writing partner, Nevi.*

*In January 2013, they self-published Monster #1, the first novel in the Parliament of Twilight world they crafted together. In March, Ghost House #1 was released and Inertia #1 will be out in June of this year. The second books of all three storylines are currently being prepared for release.*

*Dani is more than happy to interact with her fans, answering questions about her writing process, upcoming releases, and her cat!*

## Contact & Media Info

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## **BRANDON'S LAUGHTER**

By **Ellen Holiday**

### **Photo Description**

Black-and-white photo of two men laughing together; one is leaning on the other's shoulder.

### **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*We have known each other nearly all our lives. We grew up in the same mid-sized conservative town in the south, but it took music and distance to bring us from acquaintances to this moment. How did we get here from there?*

*Sincerely,*

*Brandilyn*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** musicians, military, sweet no sex, coming of age, reunited, young adult characters, angst

**Word count:** 16,212

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*Author's Note*

Some minor liberties have been taken with historical timelines in this piece. Hopefully they will not distract from your enjoyment of the story.

# BRANDON'S LAUGHTER

By Ellen Holiday

I remember hearing it from the time we were children. Babies, even—our birthdays were just a few weeks apart, and to hear my mom tell it, she and Mrs. Burns next door used to take walks in the park together, pushing their strollers or toting their bundles of joy on their chests like good mamas. I sang, she tells me, and Brandon just laughed, a burble of infectious baby laughter that made old men playing chess and teenagers having a smoke near the fence turn and laugh in return.

And when we were six and seven, and we played games of tag across the yard or dragged our scooters out to the edge of town to tear across the pavement, he'd always laugh the whole way, laugh and win, and I'd sit there afterward with a skinned knee, glaring at him and wondering why it was that he didn't take anything serious.

Brandon used to change the rules midway. When we were tearing for the fence, and I reached it first, he'd say "and back" as he came up behind me, barely touching it, and race back the other way. Of course he won when he did stuff like that, but he'd just laugh and laugh in triumph and enjoyment. I got sore about it. Mom would say "Richie, for Pete's sake, it's just a game," and all I knew was that Brandon was a terrible person who was an awful cheater and a liar and he didn't even care that he was a terrible person, and nobody else cared either 'cause when he laughed everyone else would laugh too. But I glowered and I demanded that wrongs be righted—and everyone just told me not to take it so seriously.

Not surprising I shook myself free of Brandon as soon as we were old enough. Middle school was the way to do that. Everyone was separating, cracking apart like ice under a stream of warm water, into their own little groups. By then I was a musician. I had picked up my dad's old guitar at the age of seven and been picking at it ever since. A few chords I needed to be taught, and the rest just fell into place. After school you could usually find me, Eddie, Dara, and a couple of the others out on the back stoop, scaring off the

squirrels with a little country jam. Dara had a sweet voice and liked to bang out a rhythm on her knees. Eddie wrote lyrics about dusty roads and the moon, and I set 'em to music. Dara and I worked out harmonies, and we had our own little concert to get us geared up for the homework we still had to do.

Brandon was an athlete. He played baseball after school, on the other side of the yard. He slammed that ball farther than I'd ever seen. And every time he rounded the bases and came back on home, he laughed. Laughter that echoed, caught the sunlight like the wing of a bird, scattered all around us in iridescent fragments. Laughter I could see and feel deep in the heart of me. It got in the way of our songs, and I used to break off, my chords useless against the resonant everywhere-ness of all that laughter.

Dara called me on it. "You gotta stop cuttin' off every time Brandon laughs, or we're never gonna be ready for the talent show."

"He's gotta stop laughing," I said. "Sounds like a hyena."

"He doesn't," said Eddie. "It's not even that loud. Why you care so much, Richie?"

"I don't care. It annoys me." As far as I knew that was the truth. I pouted at Eddie defiantly and took a loud strum of the guitar to cut off the conversation. "C'mon, one more time, from the top of the second verse. *In the wind*—"

We were damn proud of that song. It was a mutual writing effort, everyone giving their little bits of lyrics and chord changes and vocalizations, and in the end we were sure it would propel us straight to fame and fortune. Richie, Dara, and Eddie—someday we would think of a decent name for our group. For now we were going with R.E.D., because of our initials. Didn't matter if you pronounced it RED or R-E-D. Half the time we went one way, half the time we went another.

The announcer at the middle school talent show pronounced it R-E-D. We went on after the majorette and before that weird girl who could juggle beanbags while standing on one foot. Dara, Eddie, and me, shuffling onto the stage, Dara with her single cymbal, Eddie holding the microphone for both of us and me on the guitar with my pick. We sang our little hearts out, and just after that part where we did the three-part harmony, singing about the way our

hearts filled up like a river and dried out again into sand, I swear you could have heard a pin drop in that auditorium.

Boy, we were right about fame and fortune, or at least the middle school version of it. At fourteen years and three days, my life was made. The way people clapped and cheered. The way the teachers came up afterward to tell me they had no idea I was that talented. I shuffled my feet and went aw-shucks to it all, but inside I was doin' a jig. Felt so good. Got my first hit of the fame monster then and God, was I addicted. And the best of it hadn't even happened yet.

The best of it was the weekend after the talent show, Brandon hanging over the fence that separated our yards. "Hey," he said.

"Hey." I still wasn't liking him much. Nothing but a stranger with an annoying laugh. The races of our childhood weren't pleasant memories, and they were a long time ago.

"I liked your song," he said. There was something about the way he was peering at me, like he was curious, like I was some kind of weird animal. I felt caged in, sized up. I muttered out a thanks.

"I mean, I thought it was really good. I think you're talented. I hear guitar playing some days but I never thought it was you, I thought it was your dad."

"Oh." What did he want? "Well, it's me."

"Do you write them, too?" he asked after a moment. "The songs?"

"We write 'em together. The band and I." And now I felt a flare-up of pleasure. They were the band. Even though we were just a cymbal (sometimes a drum set, when we practiced at Dara's place) and a guitar. Now, that felt good no matter who I was telling it to.

"That's cool," Brandon said. "I can't play anything. Dad says I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

"You play baseball," I pointed out.

"Yeah, not the same kind of play, though."

"No," I agreed, "not quite the same kind—Why are you talking to me?" It just came out, spitting itself out of my mouth like an unruly cough. "We don't talk."

“Told you.” Brandon eased upward onto the fence. I could see his whole body now, line of his arm, cock of his hip against the picket. He was wearing a clean white T-shirt that ought to have been dirty from the way he seemed to shinny up the fence. “I liked the song. I liked your voice.”

“And I said thank you.” This was getting weird.

“Anything wrong with me talkin’ to you?”

I fidgeted. “I don’t know you very well.”

“You used to.” He grinned and with all those white teeth bared I could hear his laugh without him even letting it loose. “We used to be friends.”

“We were kids.” I was fourteen saying it, as far from a kid as I could imagine at the time. The gulf that separated then and now seemed a universe wide. “And you were...”

His eyebrows shot up. “I was what?”

“Nothing.” I looked at my feet.

“C’mon, Richie, what?”

“You were kind of a jerk.”

“I was?” He leaped over the fence then, and a flash of tight stomach flesh passed before my eyes when I looked up in surprise. His T-shirt was riding up around his chest and something hot sunk in my gut to a place I wasn’t expecting. I took in a breath. “I’m sorry. I remember you were fun.”

“Yeah, ’cause you got your laughs messing with me.”

“Well, I’m sorry.” He walked toward me. Cornered in my own yard, I looked to and fro for a place to hide. “I didn’t mean to make you sore at me, honest.”

What was I supposed to do with that? His eyes, little brown buttons, were grabbing mine. “S okay.”

“So friends, then?”

“Whatever,” I said, and his face fell. I’d never seen him that disappointed, and it was my fault. I extended a hand. “Sure, then. Friends.”

His hand fell into mine, warm and big, the hand of a jock. “Cool.” And he

smiled full and bright again. “So do you have other songs you wrote? I wanna hear them.”

“They’re no big deal,” I protested, but he kept needling at me until I was heading inside again to grab my guitar. That day I sat on the back porch ’til night had fallen and the mosquitoes were out, just playing songs, Brandon Burns on the steps listening raptly.

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Things changed after that. Brandon said hi in the halls. He came to listen to R.E.D. jam. Eddie gave him odd looks at first, but Dara smiled as sweetly as she could and started wearing more skirts to school. I don’t think Brandon ever noticed. His eyes were on me every time. I could feel them, steady and admiring. It was a good feeling, to have Brandon think I was so cool, especially since the whole world seemed to think he was so cool.

And as high school wore away and he popped over the fence a few times a week to hang out and talk, I guess I grew to admire him too. He had a sense of humor that was always pulling a breezy comment from the most serious of subjects. And I still couldn’t help being serious about too much: tests, and the band, and my parents asking me too often if I had a girlfriend. (It was a pain. They kept asking about Dara, even though it was obvious Dara only had eyes for Brandon. Even when we were eating dinner together, along with Eddie, after a practice, Dara would go on and on about how Brandon had hit two home runs the last game, and Mom would nod and smile and look vaguely distressed.)

Brandon saw me practice, so I started going to baseball games when I could. It was only fair. But at sixteen, I felt like a hopeless dummy sitting there in the stands by myself, along with all the parents, with the kids all clustered along the fence cheering. I asked Dara if she wanted to go with me, a few times, but she was always going with her girlfriends. Besides, the way she came up to Brandon between innings, offering him water and a towel, made me feel kind of sick to my stomach.

Watching Brandon stretch his glove high in the air, watching his feet leave the ground like he was some kind of rocket ship—it made me feel things I

really didn't want the other kids to know about. Or see. Because they'd be able to see it, if they got close enough.

We knew about queers, of course, in a nebulous sort of way. I didn't know any, and I was pretty convinced that there weren't any in our town. We didn't know much about how it worked, except for it was something pretty bad and basically turned a boy into a girl. There was also something about bath houses that we heard people grumble about. But as far as I knew, they were some kind of other species. I didn't ever expect it to touch my life.

Still, I was a teenager, and I did stuff, in the shower or late at night, and when I did stuff there were tight muscles and long legs in my mind, not girls' breasts or curvy backsides. Afterward, I felt weird and guilty, but nobody ever knew or caught me, so it didn't matter in real life. What I thought about in private was my business.

Dara wheedled Brandon into going out with her, and they were an item for a little while, but they broke up pretty fast, and Brandon stopped coming to practices. It hurt, not to have him there, but I got it. Still, Dara was changing, too. She was starting to wear all kinds of weird makeup and listen to pop music on the radio, and somehow she ended up like a ghost—fading away from the band one absence or excuse at a time, sometimes showing up but not singing, sometimes thumping on a drumbeat absently like she didn't much care what song we were practicing. By the time we were juniors, R.E.D. had winnowed itself down to R.E.

Eddie was pretty cool with it. He liked the harmonizing, and he'd started taking voice lessons. For a while there was no band, because he got the lead in the school musical and had to practice every day after school. Those afternoons I would just watch the baseball team practice, or head home with my guitar and write songs into the night. Songs about being alone, and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, or who I wanted to be with.

“That's a depressing song,” Brandon said when I finished playing one for him. “You really don't have any idea what you want to do?”

“You do?” The thought was alien to me. I couldn't imagine being that together.

“I’m going into the army.”

The answer was as ready as it was shocking. Brandon’s dad had fought in Korea, so it made sense, but this wasn’t a time to think about joining the army. Not with what was going on in Vietnam. My heart clenched with fear, but I wasn’t going to show it.

“That’s okay,” I said dismissively, picking at the strings of my guitar, trying to look idle, unconcerned.

“Yeah.” If Brandon picked up on my sudden nerves, he didn’t show it. “But you should go to Nashville. Get famous.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s right. I’ll get famous.” As good as we were, it was always about playing here and there at clubs when we got old enough to do that. We weren’t gonna end up on the radio.

“I mean it.” Brandon leaned in. It was dark out, and the porch light was a dim, blinking bulb above us. When he towered over me, hunching over so I could look up and meet his eyes, I was thrown into shadow. My heart skipped, then danced an odd, quickened two-step. “You’re good, Richie. You’ve always been so good.”

Dollars and Opry engagements flew past my mind. I couldn’t help it. It was a tempting fantasy.

“See?” He grinned. “You’re thinking about it.”

Whatever expression I’d let creep onto my face, I wiped it out in a second and scowled. “And you’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not.” But the giggles were threatening to escape his mouth even so.

I got up. The guitar made a terrifying creaking sound as I swung it downward and held it loosely by its neck. For a moment I thought I’d broken it, and looked down. It was still in one piece. When I looked up again, I was an inch from Brandon’s face.

Something happened, something I couldn’t name. It happened in less than a breath, just with Brandon’s eyes on me and my eyes on him in the dull light. Something jumped between us and stood there, throbbing like a beating heart, invisible, but I couldn’t rid it from my vision. My whole head started ringing with the reverberations from its every beat.

“Look,” I said, and I could barely get the words out. “I take things too seriously. So if you tell me I’ve got what it takes, I’m gonna believe you, and I’m gonna try, and I’m gonna fail, and then you can laugh at me even more. Don’t be that jerk you used to be. Don’t do that to me.”

He sighed. Though I wouldn’t have thought it possible, he inched a little closer. I could barely see his features, just a pink, out-of-focus stretch of flesh with hazy eyes and lips somewhere.

“I told you,” he said, “I’m not laughing.”

The hazy pink of his eyelids drooped. I heard myself swallow.

Then cicadas were buzzing and the porch light fizzled out entirely, and I was standing so still I couldn’t bear it and started to tremble. It took time for the realization to work its way to my brain that Brandon had closed the distance between us and sealed his lips on mine, that he was kissing me, and that I was letting him. With the realization came a sudden flare of sensation dropping down into my gut and through to my toes. I thought I was being set on fire.

It was over in a moment. Brandon gazed at me, eyes half lidded, mouth curled into the barest smile. The kind that didn’t even hint of laughter.

I searched for words. But Brandon already had them.

“Nobody has to know,” he said.

It was all I needed to hear. I wanted to feel that plunge of heat, the one that was still making my knees shake, one more time. When I reached out to pull him in by the back of the neck, when his lips hit mine again, there it went, crimson washing in front of my closed eyes and prickles making everything on my body that could stand on end do just that. And over and over it returned, when his mouth moved on mine, when I opened my mouth and he licked along the shape of my lips. When he touched his tongue to mine, brief contact though it was, I heard myself make a noise I’d never made before in my life. He had grabbed my hand on the neck of the guitar, covered it with his own. The strings made some strangled noise and then fell silent.

I don’t know how long we stood out there, just kissing and kissing. It felt like forever. And when it stopped, it was way too soon.

“Richie,” he said urgently, and repeated himself: “Nobody has to know.”

I nodded. My lips were tingling too hard to let sound through.

“I should go back,” he said, nudging his head toward the fence between our houses.

Another stupid nod from me.

“Good night,” he said.

He was off the staircase before I managed to mumble a hoarse “good night” back.

The minute he was gone, I made a break for my bedroom. My head was swirling and I didn’t want to talk to anybody. I had too much on my mind, and too much tension in my body.

God, I slept so well that night.

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Brandon still played baseball. He still got girlfriends. Hell, I had one for a few months toward the end of junior year. And Eddie finished his play, and came back to the band, for a while. But things were different. Eddie had fallen in love with theater. He wanted to study singing, seriously. He wanted to do opera, he said. And some of those new musicals by some guy from London. I was on my own when I played my guitar, so I did it mostly in my own backyard, or on the bridge over the creek, or somewhere dark and isolated where nobody could ever find us.

Because it was always me and Brandon. He listened to every iteration, every new verse and chorus I worked out. He suggested better rhymes. And then we kissed. And kissed and kissed and kissed some more, and pressed our bodies close together on the blanket or the porch steps, or in the back of Dad’s pickup when he let me take it out. His hands were warm and wandering under my shirt, on the bare skin of my back. Our hips moved together, like they were their own animals. I had to pull back so I wouldn’t come in my pants most nights. Sometimes I just did. Sometimes I brought another pair of boxers with me. Sometimes I just hoped nobody would notice.

Like Brandon said, nobody had to know a thing. We just did what we did.

It didn't mean anything. We weren't queers, we were just... doing things. As friends. It was okay. We liked it, so what did it matter why?

In the meantime, I found a guitar teacher in town and started to look toward college. Maybe I could study music. Maybe I had a shot at Nashville after all. At least I could try. And then I could come back here if I messed up, and Dad would have me join the family business and it'd be all okay. Optimism had started to brighten all my days. I saw a future for myself for the first time.

Mom and Dad asked me if there was a girl once or twice. I said no. They looked at each other knowingly and told me to take good care of her. I rolled my eyes and went on doing whatever I was doing. They could think what they wanted. I was just happy.

Brandon had a girlfriend when senior prom time came around. Elaine was pretty, with ringlets of brown hair and a bright smile, and it was never in doubt that they'd go to the prom together. I thought maybe I wouldn't go at all, but Brandon convinced me, told me it was the only senior prom I'd ever have. I'd rather have been playing on the stage than dancing on the floor, but I asked Dara to go with me and she said sure, why not.

So off we went to the school gym, plastered with ribbons and balloons as it was, Dara in a green dress that looked good with her dark hair and me in a tuxedo that itched. We didn't hang out that much anymore. I didn't know what to talk to her about. I drove in silence the whole way.

Once we got there, Dara immediately splintered off into a group of girlfriends. They were clucking and gossiping away, and I ended up standing against the wall, watching the goings-on, with no date to dance with and no appetite for the punch. I was just existing, just breathing against the backdrop, as much a piece of furniture as any of the folding chairs that sat abandoned, or occupied by similarly awkward types, around the corners of the room.

Not Brandon. He and Elaine made a splash from the minute they walked in, arm in arm like some sort of royal couple, and his teammates immediately surrounded them, their dates in tow, creating a wide circle of chatting that turned quickly into a dance circle in the middle of the floor. They all clapped

their hands together and moved in time to the music in an effortless wiggle that I was sure would look stupid on my own body. Taffeta shimmered and tuxedo jackets were thrown over shoulders as the guys got sweaty. Eventually, one by one, they retired to the side to leave their jackets on the folding chairs. I was surprised nobody left one on top of my head. That was how useless and inanimate I felt.

I closed my eyes and tried to tune out the music. There was a song here, something about being the musical chair, watching the kids go round and round and never settling down on me. I lined up rhymes and put words in front of words, starting to nod my head to my own beat. Maybe the night wasn't a total waste after all.

“Ugh,” Dara said in my ear, “that is so disgusting.”

My eyes flew open, and I glanced at her before following her gaze. She was staring at Brandon and Elaine, who had moved into a slow dance in each other's arms. Elaine was gazing up raptly at Brandon, who was smiling down at her, saying something funny that made her laugh. They were as handsome a couple as I could imagine, and Dara staring at them with such animosity only meant one thing.

“You still like him?”

“I never stopped liking him,” she said, scowling. “You know, in three months of dating he never even kissed me. How much do you suppose he kisses that girl? I wonder if they've done it. I know I've seen him making out with her after games.”

I froze. Of course Brandon and Elaine would make out. They were boyfriend and girlfriend. But having it pointed out to me felt weird and uncomfortable, like I'd been splattered with mud. I wanted to go hose myself down.

“I wonder how his lips feel,” she said. “I bet he's a really good kisser.”

And now it was guilt that kept me frozen. I knew the answer to that question. Yes, he was. The best. But what we did was just for fun, because it felt good. It didn't mean something the way a boy and a girl did. I shouldn't be feeling anything. Brandon was my friend. I should be thinking about a

girlfriend too, especially since I was going to college soon. I'd have to get married someday, right?

I turned to her. "You know," I said, trying to be clever, "you could make me jealous if you talk like—"

But then Dara took in a breath and covered her hand with her mouth. I looked over and had to clench a fist at my side to keep from crying out. There they were, kissing. Right on the dance floor. Brandon's lips on hers the way they had been on mine, with the same tenderness. Her body arching toward his with the same heat I had felt so many times. His body stayed stiff. I knew his body better than that. It moved, arched, too, when it wanted more.

"Lucky," Dara muttered.

"Yeah," I might have said, and turned away. My stomach was lurching. She laid a hand on my arm. "Richie?"

"Um." I cleared my throat. "Um, you want to dance?"

"We might as well," she said, noncommittal.

I put my arms around her, led her onto the dance floor, strategically placing Brandon out of her line of sight. I could see him, though. Odd angle, but I was pretty sure they were still kissing. I didn't want to watch, and I pulled Dara closer, lowered my head toward hers.

"You're not gonna try to kiss me, are you?" Dara said.

"What? No."

"I guess it would be okay," she went on. "I mean, we don't have anyone else."

I shook my head. "I don't want to do that. It'd be weird."

"It's no big deal, it's only a kiss."

"I thought you didn't want to." I lifted my head to scowl at her.

On the way, my eyes met Brandon's. Another shot of adrenalin raced through me, and Brandon broke his kiss with Elaine, staring at me, his lips red stained with her lipstick.

I never saw Dara coming. For the instant when she first touched my mouth, I froze, eyes closing, and then I came back to myself and pushed her away.

God, no. Just... *no*. I sought Brandon's gaze again, and caught it a moment before he grabbed Elaine by the shoulders and wheeled her around. The two of them retreated from the dance floor, and I watched them make their way through the throng and toward the door.

Dara stared at me like I was crazy. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't," I said, and nodded over her shoulder. "They're gone."

She turned, spinning out of my arms, and stomped her foot in frustration. The dance was spoiled. I wanted to tear off my tuxedo jacket and run home full tilt. This whole prom had been a mistake.

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Somehow we made it through the rest of the night, and these are the times I guess when friendship really helps... Dara and I kept assuring each other that we weren't going to let them ruin our night, that we could have just as good a time as friends, and there was nothing wrong with that. By the end of the night, we managed to dance together a few more times, but there was no more kissing—just talking, and maybe a little laughter, even if neither of us felt much like laughing.

I dropped her off and headed home. Mom and Dad were still up. They wanted to hear all about it. "It was fine," I told them, "and I'm really tired. Can I tell you in the morning?"

Thank God they said yes. I'd have 'til the morning to come up with a half-decent lie.

Taking off my jacket and tie, shirt, and pants felt like a labor and a relief all at once. As they fell from my body, I felt the weight of too much knowledge, too much of the outside world melting off me. Here, in my own room, in my plaid pajama bottoms and a sleeveless white shirt, I was free, myself. The guy I knew I was, the guy who only came out when I was playing my guitar or talking with Brandon somewhere where nobody could see us. But just removing the layers was exhausting, and the knowledge that in the morning I'd have to put them back on—not the tuxedo of course but the other layers, the ones that hid who I was—made my eyelids droop and my heart sink into my stomach. Why couldn't the rest of the world just leave me alone? Why couldn't I hide here, in my own room, totally myself, forever?

Answer number one—because someone was throwing pebbles at my window.

One hit with a loud clunk, the others missed and fell in a scattering sound along the siding. I ran to the window and opened it. No doubt who it was. “Shh,” I hissed, scowling down at Brandon. “My parents will hear.”

He dropped the pebble in his hand and lifted his other to beckon at me.

I didn’t want to go. The image of him and Elaine kissing was still swimming in a sick circle around my brain. To get close to him, to feel the magnetism, would be like being turned upsidedown. But his eyes were steady as he kept on beckoning, and he said something in a stage whisper that I could barely hear. In the end, I was going to have to go down to him, or he wouldn’t go away.

I eased through my window onto the eave over the porch then dropped down onto the wooden planks, landing quietly on the balls of my bare feet. A quick look behind me, to make sure nobody was watching from inside, and I hurried down the steps onto the cool grass. Brandon stood still, a warm presence, drawing me in like a moth against a lantern. I had to force myself to stop a few feet away, or I would have gone right into his arms.

From this distance I could see the distress on his face. His lips were drawn tight and his cheeks looked sunken in, more than usual, as though he’d lost ten pounds in a single night. “Richie,” he said, and reached out, then forced his hand back.

I had more control, or more fear. One of the two. “What?” I said, carefully, after biting down *Why are you home? Or, shouldn’t you be at a hotel somewhere with Elaine?*

“I was at a hotel,” he said, “with Elaine.”

Damn him for reading my mind.

“She wanted me to,” he said, and I didn’t need to ask what she wanted him to do. “I was supposed to.”

“Did you?” I asked. My whisper ached like the scratch of chalk against a blackboard.

“I tried,” he said. “I did my best, I got—she got me to—” He shook his head. “I was thinking of you.”

My heart swam with fear and joy and sick anticipation. “You did it with her and you were thinking of me? That’s—that’s not fair.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “I couldn’t. Richie, I—”

In another minute he was stepping forward, sliding his arms around me, and his mouth was on mine in a heartbeat, hard and insistent. That mouth, God, I’d missed it, I’d craved it on the dance floor, even when it was on Elaine’s and I was dancing with Dara it had felt like we were dancing with each other, just our eyes in contact but our bodies aching. And it had felt so good, and it felt so good now, so good I wanted to pull him down over me in my own yard and—

“Shit,” I whispered, and pushed him away. “Shit, stop it. Stop it, you were supposed to be kissing Elaine, you’re supposed to be with her. She’s your girlfriend.”

“No, she’s not,” Brandon said. “She’s a mask. She’s a good girl and I’ve been terrible to her because I have never kissed her and not thought about you.”

“Stop saying these things.” I kept shaking my head, like I could push them out of existence if I just rattled them hard enough.

He reached for me again, pulled me close. Our bodies, our thighs, our stomachs, our chests, both flat, both boys’, so right together alone in secret places but so wrong here, accompanied by words I never wanted to hear, truths I was determined not to acknowledge.

“I love you, Richie,” he said. “You’re the one I wanna be with. Not Elaine, not anyone but you.”

“Stop it,” I said. “Stop it.” I summoned all my strength, placed my hands flat against his chest and meant to push. I meant to, but my hands slid upward instead, across his neck, prickling at his stubble, cupping his face. “Stop this.”

“I know you love me, too,” Brandon said. He kissed me again, and the bright fire that leaped through my gut never felt so sweet. I wanted to lie down in the grass with him more than anything, wanted to let him touch me all over.

“I’m not...” My voice sounded hollow in my own ears. “Damn it, Brandon, we’re not queers...”

And he laughed. Brandon laughed, loud enough that I looked around to make sure he hadn’t woken the neighborhood. That goddamn laughter, my curse ever since I was born. “Really?” he said. “Richie, what do you think we’ve been doing?”

Blood rushed to my face. “We—that’s—that’s just between us. It’s just—it’s nothing, it’s our secret, it doesn’t mean—”

Oh, God.

With his laughter still echoing in my ears, I felt like the world’s biggest fool. “Brandon, I can’t be. You can’t be. They won’t let you in the army—”

But then his hands were gliding over my chin, and his smile so gentle in the dim night, and when his lips met mine I felt the tolling of a church bell deep inside me, and all I knew was I wanted to kiss him like this forever, wanted our bodies to slot together as perfectly as they always did, wanted anything and everything so long as Brandon was next to me, and none of it was right, all of it was a mistake and dangerous, and yet my hands were on his back, one taking a fistful of his shirt, holding on tight.

God, he was right. He was always right, and I loved him, and soon he’d be leaving, going off to boot camp and I’d be left alone and I didn’t want to let go of him for even a moment before that inevitable parting. But the implications, the fallout, if I called myself that word, if I let myself be that thing... I was terrified, shaking against his body, and for all the solidness of him reassured me it was also a reminder of all the things that were wrong with this, with us...

“We can’t,” I whispered against his mouth, and then “I can’t,” and then I was pushing him back, not just pulling but shoving, hard, forcing him away from me until he stumbled and nearly landed on the grass, his long legs buckling. He stared at me, hurt, shocked. “Richie,” he said.

“Go away,” I said, and the words tasted like bitter medicine in my mouth. “Go home, don’t come back, don’t come see me anymore.”

“Richie, don’t.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, you don’t. You have to go to the army, you have to, and, and you’ll be far away and it’s not worth it, you’ll get over it, and you’ll think, why the hell did I spend my days on this? And... and you’ll find a girl, and what are you gonna tell her, that you thought you were queer, and how’s she gonna feel about that? You’re gonna ruin your whole life and I won’t let you. I won’t be part of it, so go home.”

I was probably crying. There was a salt taste on my lips. “Go home, Brandon.”

He made an unsteady step toward me, “Richie, don’t, you don’t mean it.”

“Go home,” I said, and turned away, heading for the back door. Didn’t matter if Mom and Dad caught me, punished me for sneaking out. It was better than staying out here with everything that hurt so bad and felt so unfairly good. It took all my strength not to look back, take one last look at Brandon’s face. But I couldn’t, or I’d be lost. I was already too close to the point of no return. My body, my aching heart, everything but my common sense wanted nothing more than to launch myself into Brandon’s arms and damn the consequences.

The door slammed behind me. I leaned my back against it, breathed hard, tried to control my racing heart. For a long time I counted my breaths, tried not to look back through the window. Eventually I gave in to the impulse. The yard was empty. Brandon was gone.

My parents slept through the whole thing. I crept upstairs, threw myself into bed, and curled up, trying to squeeze my body around my broken heart like the press of hard fingers around a wound. It just made my whole body throb, pain radiating out to every muscle and inch of skin. I’d never be with him again. I’d never touch him again. Even though I knew the pain would fade, right now I couldn’t imagine how I could make it through the night. How I fell asleep I didn’t know, but somehow I did.

Somehow the morning came, and somehow life went on. I saw Brandon in the hall at school, but it was like seeing a stranger. Our eyes would meet, and we’d look away. Where electricity had once set my whole body buzzing there was nothing but ice. It was over. We were over.

We graduated in late May, and Brandon left for the army that summer. I didn't talk with him about it, but I knew everything through the conversations Mom and Mrs. Burns had. She related them over dinner, without a glance at me, without a word to acknowledge that Brandon and I had any kind of friendship. Either she figured I was talking to him on my own, or she had picked up on the way my whole body froze up at the sound of his name and figured we had some kind of falling out. I never loved my mother so much as in those moments. She understood, and she respected my feelings, even without knowing what they were.

Without Brandon next door, I wasn't living so much as waiting for the next chapter of my life to begin. I was enrolled in the local community college, and in September I'd begin classes. The normal lot, but also guitar and voice and composition, and my excitement at starting those classes tore through my boredom and melancholy. My guitar was my best friend in Brandon's absence, and all summer I wrote songs, melancholy ballads and toe-tapper tunes alike, about leaving old lives behind and looking back on mistakes and waiting for the next sunrise. I must have churned out two dozen songs by the time classes started. Eddie came by every so often to give me advice and help me work out the tough bits, but he was going to a fancy music school in New York I'd never heard of and in the fall he'd be gone. Dara wasn't in the picture anymore. The disastrous prom had ruined what was left of our friendship.

But college would bring new friends, and teachers who could help me write even better songs, and despite my leftover sadness, I was excited. It was just a shame that Brandon wasn't there to listen. Finishing a song no longer meant I had an audience to play it for. I just had to move on to the next song.

So when class started, I had a hell of a repertoire built up to share with my professors. They tried to fit me into a classical mold, to teach me basics and make my sound into their creations, but I knew after every lesson that I wasn't playing or singing what I wanted to play and sing. As much as I got the concept that you gotta learn the fundamentals, my heart was throbbing with the desire to make my own kind of noise, and I couldn't do that in their classes.

And college wasn't the new life and new freedom I had wanted it to be. I made some friends, but not good ones, and a terrifying number of people from

my high school were wandering around, as though I'd never graduated at all. Guess that's the way it happened in a town like mine. Nobody made much money, and you had to be something really special to make it out of the city limits and off to a university somewhere else in the world. I thought about Eddie a lot. Wished I was something special, like him. But no, I was just a country singer like every other country singer, with a guitar on my lap and a sob story or barrel of laughs to sing about. And I was only really happy when I had a chance to just let loose and do what I did best.

There was a sandwich shop on the corner near where the campus gave way to an ugly strip mall, and one day I wandered in to the strains of a guitar and the crooning of a voice, amplified so it echoed around the café. A girl in a red cowboy hat and equally red boots was singing, covering an old tune that had been popular about five years before, and in a second I forgot that I had actually come in to buy a sandwich.

"Can anyone sing here?" I asked the manager, who was in the back pulling packages of brown paper napkins out of huge cardboard boxes.

"Not anyone," he said. "You gotta make a demo tape for us and get some references."

"I can get that," I said. "Just tell me where to go and what to do."

I probably sounded like an idiot. Overeager, too young, whatever. All I knew was I saw an opening for a place where I could play my music, and I had to take it. And so for the next week, as I begged my professors for reference letters and sang into my tape recorder (and listened, and curled my lip, and re-recorded over the old tape until I could live with what I sounded like), my brain was locked into sandwich-shop-singer gear. It was the biggest dream I could imagine, singing and strumming while folks around me chowed down and maybe, just maybe, tapped their feet or nodded their head to the beat. Applause wasn't even a part of the picture.

So when I finally booked the gig, and sang my first song, the applause very nearly scared the living daylights out of me. I'd sung, just one little song that always cheered me up when I felt blue about the world, and for a while all I could hear was my own voice, weird through the amp, and the comfortable

strum of my guitar. It felt right, and I sang, enjoying the silence around me, thinking maybe nobody was even there to listen.

*It's like I hit the sky and now*

*I'm travelin' down, to meet the sweet green earth again.*

When it was over, I looked up and realized I'd misjudged the silence. I hadn't driven folks out. They'd put down their sandwiches, stopped slurping their soda pop, and were watching me from behind the counter, in the booths, even the doorway to the store. And an instant later, every last one of them put their hands together and applauded.

It sounded like an avalanche and it went on forever. I sat there, my guitar still buzzing from the last chord, and stared like a dumb owl. It didn't even occur to me to say thank you. I just waited for it to die down and went on to my next song.

By the time my set was done, the sandwich shop was packed with people—students mostly, including some kids I knew, but strangers too, who had been wandering by and stopped to listen. I didn't know what to make of it. Something small and exciting was beating inside my heart, a trapped bird, itching to fly out and take over my whole body, make me tremble all over. It was something I hadn't felt since the last time Brandon had kissed me.

Brandon. The memory came like a punch to the gut when I wasn't expecting it, and I looked down, my fingers tightening on my guitar. A piece of me wanted to crawl away, hide from them all.

But the manager was approaching now, and asking if I could do the same hour next week, and students were pressing forward to shake my hand. Before I knew it I was pledging to perform at the student fair the next week and the meeting of the country-western club the following month. And sometime, when it was all dying down, someone said to me, "You should go to Nashville."

*"But you should go to Nashville. Get famous."*

I heard it in Brandon's voice. And for the first time, it didn't seem ridiculous. As much as it stung to think of him, he'd been my biggest fan since

day one. He'd been determined to see me get this kind of recognition. And I couldn't help a smile thinking he'd be so delighted to watch this breakout performance. That's sure what he'd call it. And he'd give me a huge hug, after everyone was gone. I imagined him there, laughing, his arm slung around me as I buried my head in his shoulder, and started laughing myself, just from the excitement, and the birth of a new dream, and Brandon there beside me to witness it and help it happen.

And even as I headed home, the sound of Brandon's laughter followed me, as though it had really been there, ringing loud and joyful over the hubbub of the shop's patrons and the excited throbbing of my own heart.

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I made it through the year without dropping out, but in my head I was already packing. There was no feeling like the one I got when a song ended and the applause started, whether it was in a sandwich shop or at a party or in a concert hall. Oh, yeah. I got to do an end-of-year recital with my fellow music students, and all I can say is, it's great to be the only guy in the whole show whose songs everybody sings along to. I'd performed enough times by then that people knew the lyrics.

Mom and Dad were the last to be persuaded, but when I told them about the money I'd made, they added a little of their own to my starting funds. I shipped off to Nashville with the best wishes of the whole college, and my family to boot. It was a good start.

But when I arrived in Nashville it was raining, a dismal summer rain that blanketed the whole town in gray, and the dim neon lights of the Opry could barely penetrate the darkness. I sat in my new, unfurnished apartment, watching the rain outside the window, my clothes hung in the closet and my suitcase open and empty on the floor. At least I had my guitar, safe in its case, battered and loved. I kept it company on the floor that night. A mattress would have to be first on my to-buy list.

There was a song itching in the back of my mind that first night, something about gray days and lonely nights, but even when I strummed out a chord progression for it, it wouldn't go past the first verse.

The city got sunnier, and I started to pound the pavement looking for gigs. Problem was, I discovered, you had to know someone, you had to have a reference, and community college concerts didn't much count. I gave demo tapes out, but at some point my master tape got warped and I couldn't make copies anymore. And I couldn't sing loud enough in my apartment to make a decent demo, or the guy next door to me started whacking the side wall and yelling for me to cut down on the racket. Didn't make me feel very good about my music.

No word and no job, four months in. Money was running out. I had been singing on the sidewalks near bus stops for a few hours a day, but my music didn't turn heads like it did back home. I was a little fish in a big pond, like they say. Even wrote a song about it. I came home with money in ones, not twenties, but it kept me eating, barely.

And then, finally, I caught a break. I was pleading my case to every performing house in the city, crossing off names in the *Yellow Pages* as I went, and I walked into a café across town with a "Help Wanted" sign in the window. See, this was why I didn't have a job. I was holding out for one that'd let me perform. And finally, a heavysset fellow named Barry looked at me and folded his arms over his chest and said, "I'll tell you what. You wait tables for me at rush every night for a month, and you can do a set then."

I could have kissed him. I didn't, obviously, partly because it would have nullified the job offer, and partly because he wasn't my type.

Yeah, it was happening. I was starting to notice men—notice my reaction to them, and not hide it under a pile of bullshit seven stories high. Part of it was knowing now that gay people—I didn't call them queers anymore—were people, not some different species, and there were enough of them to put out a magazine. Part of it was being alone, in a town where nobody knew me, where I didn't have to hide from anybody but myself. Then there was the part of it where I just couldn't afford the effort it took to fight it anymore.

I worked that dinner rush as best I could, seven nights a week, for Barry. I dealt with complaining customers and drunks, eat-and-runners, and fickle tempers worthy of Goldilocks, smiled and returned orders to the kitchen and apologized for lukewarm fish and sour beer, which nobody seemed to mind a

minor serving. No days off, no gold stars from Barry. Occasionally a good tip, which I cherished. And all the while I was listening to the live entertainment, comparing myself, imagining being in that spot, scaring myself with images of the patrons' disgust at having to put up with the subpar strumming and crooning of some just-out-of-high-school wannabe from the sticks who couldn't even please his next-door neighbor. By the time the end of the month had rolled around, I was starting to think maybe I should just keep waiting tables.

But Barry was as good as his word. "Tomorrow night," he said. "Bring your guitar."

It's amazing I even made it through the next day. I was shaking so hard through the dinner rush, you would have thought I'd drop every tray and break every glass in the restaurant. My head was a mess of what-ifs and oh-nos. My feet were itching to run away. This was going to be a disaster.

But all I had to do was get onto that stool, perch my guitar on my lap, and pull the microphone close, and my body knew what to do. A strange calm settled over me like a sudden, heavy fog. My guitar resonated calming chords into my gut, and by the time I sang my first note, I was in my comfortable place again. This was something I knew how to do. How people liked it, whether I got applause or not, was something entirely different. I could deal with that part later. For now, sing.

I sang "Falling" and "Dusty Roads" without a break, just lost in my own music. Then I looked up and remembered the restaurant around me. It wasn't like the sandwich shop; I didn't have people wandering in from outside, people dropping their sandwiches with slack jaws. But the patrons were attentive, some were smiling, some were holding hands with their dates and maybe swaying a little, coming to a standstill as the final chord faded out. And then, yes, there was applause.

I grinned hard. "Thank you," I said into the microphone. "Thank you. I'm Richie Wilkins. This next song is called 'I Think I Was Dreaming.'"

A grin near the bar caught my eye—just in my peripheral vision—and I thought for a minute Brandon was there, watching me. I didn't want to look and be proven wrong. I folded the thought into my heart and kept on playing.

At the end of my set, I left the stage in a jumble of emotion. A euphoric kind of assurance had settled over me—yes, this is what I wanted to do my whole life, even if just in restaurants, even if it meant a month of waiting tables for each gig—but it was paired with sadness that this gig was over, that I had no prospects for another, and that now it was back to reality. I kept my head down as I returned my guitar to the back room and reattached my waiter's apron, trying to control it all so it wouldn't show on my face when I returned to the tables.

I nearly head-butted Barry in the chest.

He put one big hand on each shoulder and said, "Have you got more songs?"

It took me a minute to look up and face him. The smile on his face was totally uncharacteristic. He'd never so much as given me a nod of the head before. I had to blink to make sure this was the same guy. "Yeah," I said, and wouldn't you know it, a new one was trying to hatch itself into my head as I looked at him in puzzlement. "I've got about thirty original tunes total."

"You'll do five more of them next week," he said. "Same day, but this time at nine."

I had to set my jaw to keep it from dropping to the floor. "Really?" I must have stuttered like a kid.

"Really," he said. "Take the rest of the night off, Richie. Have a drink at the bar."

My heart still hammering, I wandered back out to the restaurant in a haze. A million possibilities were trying to etch their way into my mind. I was brilliant, a prodigy songwriter. Barry was putting me on and I would show up Saturday to a roomful of people pointing and laughing. I should go to the record companies tomorrow and tell them I was too good to miss. I should get out now, while I still had the applause ringing in my ears, before I screwed it all up again. My head was swimming so hard, I got dizzy and had to clutch the bar to keep my balance.

"That was great," said a fresh, tenor voice next to me. I looked up and saw Brandon.

No. It wasn't Brandon. It was the grin I saw earlier in my peripheral vision, but it didn't belong to Brandon. This was a man a few years older than me, with chestnut-brown hair and broad shoulders. He slid his elbow onto the bar and reached out his other hand to steady me. A curl of warmth went through me at the contact. "You doing okay?"

"Mm," I said. Not very eloquent, but it was all I could manage.

"Want a drink?" I shook my head. "My treat."

"I can't." His eyebrows shot up. I gave him a shaky grin. "Ask me in nine months."

"You must not be local," he said with a laugh, and the laugh was nothing like Brandon's—it was adult, deep and knowing, where Brandon's had been full of fresh, joyful innocence. "You think you're the only minor at this bar right now?"

I squinted. "You?"

"Not me," he said, laughing again. "But look around. This town is full of kids trying to make it big. Richie, right? I'm Josh." He held out his hand.

"Yeah." I shook his hand, and kid though I might be, I knew what he wanted. It was in the firm press of his palm, the way his fingers moved on mine as the touch lingered. "Thanks for the compliment."

"I mean it," he said. "Those were originals, right? There's a nice sense of small-town innocence to them. You've got roots."

I nodded, though it was actually a little disheartening. I had hoped to shake off my hometown, not bring it with me to Nashville. "Thanks," I repeated. "But do me a favor. Don't tell me you're a record producer here to help me make it big."

He threw back his head and laughed. And again, he reminded me of Brandon—not the sound of the laugh but the look of it, the way he looked like he was having so much damn fun just being alive. "Are you kidding?" he said. "That'd ruin my chances."

"Your chances?" I immediately regretted reflecting his words back at him.

But he was unashamed, nodding. “I think you’re cute. And I can tell what a guy likes.”

It was too much. Another whirl of dizziness upset my head and I white-knuckled the edge of the bar. “I, uh...”

Now he looked taken aback. “Don’t tell me I was wrong.”

“I...” I gave him a wan smile. “I’ll have a drink now.”

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I didn’t go home with Josh that night. But he returned to the bar, and over a week we talked when I had a break and he bought me beers when my shift was over. And at the end of the week, after my second set was finished, I let him kiss me. It was a warm kiss, exciting, and my body thrilled to the sudden presence of that feeling, thought so long gone when Brandon disappeared from my backyard two years ago.

And the first time I referred to myself as gay, it was with Josh. The first time I lay down on a mattress and felt a body come down on mine, completely naked and vulnerable, it was Josh, and it was Josh who taught me how men could make love to men, who taught me to love the burn and sweat of it, and it was Josh who first slung his arm around me in public and introduced me to his friends as his boyfriend.

He wasn’t a record producer, but he was a reviewer, and his work appeared in *Nashville Out*. And though I hadn’t noticed in the whirlwind of our romance and the feel of his eyes appraising me during every one of my sets, he’d coaxed more and more of them to come out on Saturday nights to listen to me sing. He couldn’t review my work, but he could give me an audience. And eventually one of them had a friend with a small recording studio, and eventually I found myself there, recording a demo tape worth listening to.

When I took off the headphones after listening to the first track—expertly mixed and fleshed out with a piano riff and drums—I looked over at Josh, standing in the back of the mixing room with a small smile in his face, and said, “I didn’t know I sounded like that.”

“The magic of the music industry,” Josh said. His grin gave me strength.

I still had no record deal. But somehow Josh had found a way for me to sing in a place that wasn't Barry's restaurant. It was a small club, and I was opening for another act, but I never heard cheers like that in my life. I'm pretty sure they were just cheering for the main event. But for whatever fraction belonged to me, I'd take it without complaint. And when the lead singer of the band following me shook my hand and told me I had real talent, I felt as though I could fly.

That night Josh told me he loved me. I didn't know if I could return his love, not with this whirlwind zooming around me, but he said I didn't have to. I told him I hoped I could, in time.

I wanted to. I truly did. But something was holding me back. Something that had taken hold of my heart long ago and wouldn't release it to just anyone, no matter how kind or good-hearted he may be.

I went home that night and wrote another verse to that same song that had wormed its way into my brain the night I arrived in Nashville, when the rain felt like it'd go on forever. I still didn't know the chorus. It'd come to me, someday. When everything worked out.

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In the meantime, the nation was at war. Men were being drafted, plucked from their prime to go someplace where the heat and the stickiness rivaled the worst Louisiana swamp, and from what I heard whispered, things were happening there that warped a man's brain. I was thankful my number never came up. What happened on the other side of the world didn't concern me. I had enough trouble turning the gears of my own life.

But, I knew guys. I got to know guys who came into the restaurant for their last beer before basic training. I saw angry men yelling in street protests that were brought down by police carrying shields, as though the street was itself a battle. The city filled with men in uniform. A part of me had learned to appreciate that, but an undercurrent of sadness had crept into every interaction. There was fear everywhere—of being shipped out, of dying, of killing, of being used as a pawn in the chess games of a few very powerful people. And there was also the knowledge that if the government had turned to a draft, that

meant most volunteer enlisted men were already fighting. It meant that someone I hadn't spoken to in years, someone I still thought about, was probably there.

I didn't like to think of how Brandon might be changed by the war. For me, the greatest sorrow would be if it stole his laughter. I prayed that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he still found reasons to laugh. Amazing how that sound had been an annoyance when it was inescapable. Now, I longed to hear it again.

Josh and I broke up. I couldn't return his feelings, and I didn't know why. I was sure it was because I was starting to get regular gigs, paying ones, and I'd even been invited to play at one of the side tents at a festival in the summer. I was writing songs a mile a minute, testing them at the restaurant and then putting them out there in clubs if they did well enough.

That was my reason for not making things work with Josh. I was too career focused. But Josh was sure it was something else, and when it came right down to it, I wouldn't say he was wrong.

There were other men, as the months wore along: some one-night stands, some one-date disasters, some that lasted longer, and got further than others. But where my repertoire kept growing, until I'd filled a second album with the sounds of a little guy in a big city somewhere in a dangerous world, they kept crumbling. Some foundational step was missing. Something very basic, left in the dust a long time ago, and I couldn't recapture it with anyone.

Josh's friend, the studio owner, signed me. My first record had fair to middling sales. "Dusty Roads" made it onto the radio as a single. I didn't hear it often, but when I did, I had to smile. That song wasn't the same as the song Eddie and Dara and I had been so proud of, but it was based on it, and I wondered if either of them would hear it and recognize me. They didn't play a lot of country up in New York where Eddie was surely still singing though, and God only knew where Dara had got to. I asked my parents, during one call home, if they had any idea. They said they thought maybe she'd gone to Atlanta to get married.

"There's mail for you, though," Mom said, as an aside. "I'll go to the post office tomorrow and forward it on."

The way she put it, and the way it rolled through the conversation, I thought she meant mail from Dara. Looking back on it, that didn't make much sense. If there was mail from her, Mom would know where she was. But my mind was on songs and verses and the new bed I was planning to buy tomorrow with the profits from the single release of "Dusty Roads," and I wasn't thinking about anything very hard.

So a few days later, when I went to collect my mail, I nearly dropped the sheaf of bills and papers, and nearly slid to the ground myself. I had to collect my breath and straighten up. The lady in the first-floor apartment near the mailboxes asked me if I was feeling all right.

The letter was from Brandon.

\*\*\*\*

*Richie,*

*Hey, man. I hope you get this. I only know your parents' address. Maybe they can send it to you, wherever you are.*

*I wanted to write to tell you that I'm all right. I'm doing good. The Army's been good to me. I got to live on a base in Hawaii for a little bit, and then 'Nam happened. But I'm keeping away from the worst of it. We're taking care of a small city that we managed to hold before I even got here, so it's just about keeping healthy and not letting the locals rob you blind. But it's hot here. You can't imagine. And the mosquitoes are so bad.*

*They tell me we'll be heading home in another month. It feels like forever that I've been here, and I can't even imagine what a McDonald's hamburger looks like anymore. When I get back, I'm going to visit my folks, and then I'm going to McDonald's.*

*Richie,*

and here a few things were scratched out, hard, with black pen. What he'd decided on was:

*There are guys here. But none of them are you.*

*I hope you're still singing.*

*Love,*

*Brandon.*

I pressed the paper to my nose, trying to smell him, trying to catch a whiff of his sweat that might have made it onto the page and traveled around the world to make it to me. A little piece of Brandon. My eyes were stinging.

I wiped them, sniffing, glad nobody could see me, glad I'd waited to come upstairs before opening the envelope. Blinking, swallowing hard, I went to reread the letter and saw something on the folded-back edge of the page. I turned it over.

*P.S. Don't take everything so seriously. Laugh a little!*

The paper fluttered to the floor. I'd pick it up later, treasure it, tuck it in a book and take it out to read every night from then on. But for now, I scrambled for my guitar.

I finally knew the chorus to the song I'd been writing since I came to Nashville. And I knew what it was called.

\*\*\*\*

“Dusty Roads” faded from the charts. “Think I Was Dreaming”—they'd taken out the first “T” from the title, some sort of advertising thing—flopped. But I released another single, not on the album. This one was called “Sorry, Baby.” It was about Josh, even though the “baby” in the song was a girl. And this one took off.

I started to get fan letters. I was interviewed for magazines. Not big ones, like *People*, but important country music magazines. And I was playing, traveling even. I did a gig in New Orleans, another one in Jacksonville. Both opening for other acts, but people knew my name, and when I sang “Sorry, Baby,” they sang along. Even had a girl tell me it was an awful song and I was a terrible person for dumping that girl. I told her it was just a song. I told her it was years ago. I never told her it wasn't a girl, of course.

Eddie got in touch. I went up to New York to visit him. He was in the chorus of a Broadway show. He had learned to dance, too—even ballet. We

had a good laugh over it. I told him a little about my life, and he congratulated me on my success—as though one single meant success. He asked me what it was like to be famous. I told him I was really just in the chorus, too. Nobody would remember my name in five, six months. But he laughed at that.

“It’s gotta be amazing, to have your own concerts,” he said. “I wish I could get anyone besides my voice teacher to listen to me sing. I miss the band.”

“Me too,” I said. It was funny. I was coming to miss a lot of things about home.

Eddie wasn’t the only one from home who wanted to know what it was like to be famous. Names from high school started to filter their way back into my life through my mailbox at the studio. I wrote back to a few, sent an autographed photo to the rest. Josh’s friend—Darren—was frantic. His studio hadn’t gotten so much play in a long time, and he barely knew what to do with me.

As for me, it was still all about the guitar and my own voice. The applause was nice too. The marketing was hard work. But the music was simple. I didn’t have anything better to tell them than that, so what could I say?

\*\*\*\*

“I want to put you on TV,” Darren said. I squinted. I didn’t even own a TV. Everyone else did these days, but I only ever got depressed at the news.

“They put singers on TV?” I said dumbly.

He laughed. “Yes, they put singers on TV. Haven’t you heard of *Soul Train*? *American Bandstand*?” I nodded, but my brain was muddled. I couldn’t imagine what I would do to entertain anyone on a little screen.

“Anyway, this isn’t any of them. It’s a telethon. To help the soldiers coming home. They’re busing in a bunch of guys from Fort Campbell to the Opry and...”

“Did you just say Opry?”

Because really, that’s where everything stopped—my heart had seized up and exploded out all my pores in a burst of giddy sunlight. I never dreamed. Really. I never even considered it a possibility. I was an opening act. A two-hit wonder. I couldn’t play the Opry. I’d never play the Opry.

“Don’t get too excited, they just want you in for five minutes to play your two singles. It’s not a paying gig either. It’s for charity, that’s the whole—”

“I’ll do it.”

“Hold on, Richie, don’t...”

“I’ll do it.” It was the Opry. Who was going to say no to that?

When I calmed down enough to stop grinning and listen, Darren filled me in some more. The GIs from Fort Campbell would be the studio audience, and it would play on regional TV, since northern markets had little use for country music, even for the sake of the troops. The money was going to a charity to help veterans, especially disabled ones, find work and homes again. The statistics on homeless veterans blew me away. Turned out what they said about ’Nam was mostly true. You came home from that country so broken that, at worst, you still thought you were being shot at, and you couldn’t live, couldn’t work. I’d seen them from time to time in town with cardboard signs: HOME FROM NAM; NO WORK; PLEASE HELP. Half of them talked to themselves. It scared me half to death. I used to cross the street. Now I wanted to go out and find them all and give them each a twenty. They called it some kind of syndrome, what was wrong with them all. Most folks I knew just called it crazy, but suddenly it was simultaneously more and less scary. More, because I had shut my eyes to just what was going on in that country so far away. Less, because if Brandon were one of them...

I closed my eyes. A wave of nausea rolled over me. The thought of Brandon homeless with a cardboard sign, or jumping every time a truck backfired, made me want to sink down onto the floor and die. He had to be okay. He couldn’t have been one of the unlucky ones. Not when his letter had been so upbeat and full of his trademark gentle humor. Not with that postscript tacked onto the other side. He had to be fine.

But there hadn’t been another letter, and it was well past the time Brandon said he was coming home. And the news out of ’Nam was worse and worse with each passing day. Talk of soldiers forced to retreat, helicopters lifting them away. What if Brandon hadn’t even gotten out? What if...?

The what-ifs would kill me. So I resolved to concentrate on the gig instead. I’d sing my heart out for those GIs who had made it back. If I could soothe

their hearts with my tales of dusty roads and love gone wrong, it was my solemn duty to do so. Even the excitement of an Opry gig faded into the background. This was the work I wanted to do.

The logistics of the gig were pretty keen, though. They were holing all the performers up in a nearby hotel, which meant a room larger than my whole apartment, fancy food, maids to turn down my sheets for me. The hotels were often the best part of traveling. To get to stay in one right here in Nashville, without even having to deal with trains or planes to get there, was a luxury, and I was going to enjoy every minute of it. The other perk was a brand-new guitar, a gorgeous, gleaming slab of golden wood whose strings reverberated sweet sound with the barest strumming of my fingers. I'd come a long way since my dad's guitar and the back porch.

My parents would be watching. I offered to fly them in, but they said it was for the soldiers, not them, and it would be their honor to see their little boy on the television. I wished they lived closer. They were so proud of me and what I'd achieved, and all I wanted to do was embrace them. I could hear the tears in their voices.

Then, in what seemed like an eyelash's blink, the night had arrived, and I was standing backstage, with my guitar in tow. Darren paced behind me, anxious as a mother hen, but I was barely conscious of him. I'd brushed against people I never thought I would share space with in my life. Rosemary Clooney. Kris Kristofferson. These were the people who had volunteered their time for the local boys coming home from war, and somewhere among them, Richie Wilkins was supposed to fit in? The whole thing would have been laughable a year ago. I chuckled, and Darren looked over my shoulder, concerned. "Don't crack up," he warned me. "No funny business. This is live."

"I know live," I told him, putting on my most serious face. "I've been playing live for years. You're the one who's used to re-recording when things don't go well."

"Which is why I'm so nervous!" Darren said, and despite myself, I up and laughed. The craziness and nerves and excitement and dread shot through me in a peal of laughter that loosened my whole body and made me feel as though I was buzzing with sunshine. Now I was ready to perform.

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I had makeup on. That was the one thing that hadn't bothered me and suddenly started itching as I made my way onstage in the dark. In a minute they were going to introduce me and the lights would come up and I was supposed to start performing even before they were up all the way, and all I could think about was how badly I wanted to claw the foundation off my face. But that would create a mess on the strings, not to mention make me look as though I were the Striped Man. I fought the urge until I heard the announcer start to introduce me. And then I just wanted to keel over and die. I was sure my heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest and help me get there.

“Here to perform his hit singles, one of Nashville’s brightest talents—” well thank you, but I still want to die—“Richie Wilkins!”

My fingers moved to the strings. The opening chords of “Dusty Roads”, their resonance, on the new guitar and with the microphone in front of them amplifying each tone, shocked me into total awareness. The crowd in front of me was massive, a black sea only marked by the flash of dog tags in the dark. I suddenly became aware of all of them, of all their desires and their pain, all projected upward, seeking comfort for what they’d seen and what they’d been through. They all wanted to go home.

I sang “Dusty Roads” for them. I sang about the river that headed south of town, the streets that were never driven on and were created for children’s play. I sang, my new guitar and my voice resonating in the huge hall, about that place we all want to go back to. And if I missed home a little more than I’d missed it in all my years away, if that showed in a tear on my cheek, glistening in the harsh glare of the television spotlights, well then, maybe it was their fault. Their desire overwhelmed me, and I sang for them—I sang in their place. I’m pretty sure they sang along.

Spotlights roved over the crowd as they erupted into cheers. Roars, really. These men, standing up, applauding. I thought I saw tears on some cheeks, but maybe that was the wavering of my own vision. My fingers stung from the plucking of strings. My throat ached. And I was sad, and I missed home. I missed the part of me that I’d pushed away.

I leaned forward into the microphone. “Um,” I said, and heard my own

voice echo around the huge arena. In my peripheral vision, I could see production assistants stiffen. I wasn't supposed to speak.

“Um, I was going to sing ‘Sorry, Baby.’”

Cheers at the name of the song. My heart lurched.

“I was going to, but I'd like to sing a different song instead. This is—” I strummed a B flat major on my guitar, got the feeling of it. “This is a song I've been working on for a long time. It's about a friend of mine, good friend, who went to war just like all of you.” My fingers were working on the intro now, on automatic pilot. For all the panic I was causing backstage, this moment, right now, felt totally natural. “I'm sending this out to him and to all of you, who did the bravest thing I can imagine, and who came home. And I'm...” I looked up at the ceiling, blinded by the lights, as though he were somewhere up there in a bleached-out heaven. “I'm just hoping you're home by now too.”

The arena was quiet. I nodded and settled forward in my seat to sing.

*Made it through the desert*

*Found my way to town*

*But the pavement here is thirsty*

*And the water's pourin' down*

*Who's gonna see me in all this rain?*

*When am I gonna feel like I belong somewhere again?*

*'Cause the sound of Brandon's laughter*

*The way he used to laugh at me*

*That used to be my true direction*

*That used to be my family*

*He used to be my family*

*Scraped myself up off the pavement*

*Found somebody who loved me*

*Found a place to play my music*

*And now I'm living and I'm free*

*But there's a chorus missing from every song*

*And I'm still not sure if this is the place that I belong*

*And still the sound of Brandon's laughter  
Just keeps on rollin' round my heart  
How long's it been since I've heard it?  
How long's it been we've been apart?  
How long we gotta be apart...*

My voice cracked. I swallowed hard, and a rush of tears burst from my eyes.

*And if we could laugh together just one more time  
And if I could tell him anything at all  
I'd say the earth used to turn around your smile  
I'd say you'd better make it back here  
  
Because I've got so much to tell you  
I've got so much to show you  
I've got so much that's missing  
And only you can find*

I couldn't see anything through the tears. They were running down my cheeks, streaking the makeup from my face. Maybe ending my career. I didn't care. I had to sing, and somewhere far out there in the world, even if Brandon couldn't hear it, he had to feel it.

*So now the sound of Brandon's laughter  
Echoes forever in my soul  
And someday I pray I'll hear it  
And that day I will be whole,  
  
Doesn't matter what comes after  
Or what battles we will fight  
Just bring me back Brandon's laughter  
Bring him back to me  
  
Bring him back to me tonight.*

I don't know what happened. I don't know whether they applauded or booed. I don't know if I was shuttled offstage like an embarrassment or hailed as a hero. I don't even remember leaving the stage. I just knew what I had

sung was true, truer than anything I'd ever sung, and I felt as though my heart were lying on that stage still, pale under the lights, beating desperately against the tide of a life that was taking me somewhere I didn't want to go.

I missed home.

"Why'd you never play that song for me?" Darren was hissing in my ear. I think he was angry, or maybe he was impressed. It was hard to tell, and I didn't care. I trudged my way through the trample and rush of the backstage crowd and made my way out into the night. I lost Darren somewhere along the way. I might have stepped on the toes of somebody famous. None of it mattered.

I made it out past the security guards and the media tents, finally finding unobstructed sidewalk, and I set out for my hotel. Or I tried. But a hand caught mine.

One of the vets, a brown-skinned young man with earnest eyes, had been running after me. He'd reached out and grabbed me with, I realized, his only hand. The other arm was cut off at the elbow. I stared at the stump a second, then forced my gaze back to his face. And if the amputation had made me catch my breath, his eyes riveted my attention.

They knew.

"You'll get him back, man," the vet said in a shaking voice. "You just gotta have faith. You just gotta keep praying."

I opened my mouth, closed it again. What could I say?

"I know what it's like," he went on. "But you have got to have faith. It's the only thing, it's the only thing that makes it worth it, knowing that you've got him back there at home waiting for you." It took me a moment to realize he wasn't talking about me. "You fight and you hurt and you lose things, you lose people and friends, and you remember he's there and you keep on fighting. You gotta live. Because you've gotta see him one more time."

I nodded. The tears that had been stuck behind my eyes came flowing forward, two hot streams that wet my face and tingled with salt taste when I licked my lips. "I don't even know where he is," I said. "I haven't seen him in years."

“He’ll find you,” he told me. “I promise, he’ll find you.”

I reached out and pulled him into a hug. He hugged me back, fierce, the stump of an arm pressing against my arm, his one hand on my back. The whole night stopped around us, letting us be brothers, letting us understand each other.

“Pray,” he whispered in my ear, and even though I’d never been a praying type, that’s all I did the whole way back to the hotel.

\*\*\*\*

Morning came too suddenly and too early for my liking. My head was pounding and I felt dry from the bottom up. I stumbled into the bathroom and drank three glasses of water straight from the tap before I could even turn on the bathroom light without being blinded. My throat ached and my hands felt stiff and useless.

They’d stuffed a note under my door, information about checkout, saying I had to be out by noon. I figured some of the big names staying had transport waiting for them, but I just had the bus. Which was plenty for me, but I wasn’t looking forward to it so much. I stepped in the shower, let the water run over my body, and slowly awoke to the memory of what happened last night.

I realized I had no idea how things had worked out. How the telethon had gone, whether my outburst had caused a storm or been hailed as brilliance, or maybe ignored completely. For the first time, those things seemed like they might be important. I had made it so far past the goals I’d set for myself that I realized I had a career that could be broken. As in, I could actually ruin my life with a mistake like this. If it was a mistake. All I’d known in that moment was that it was a song I needed to sing.

I wondered if Darren would have a message waiting for me at the front desk. It seemed like the sort of thing he’d do. After my shower, I picked up the phone to call downstairs, but the sound of the dial tone made me feel sick. At least if I wandered downstairs, I could wear dark glasses. This was the worst hangover I’d ever had, and I’d managed a few since the night Josh took me out to celebrate my legality.

I might as well just gather my things and check out now, I figured. I only had a duffel bag for clothes, plus my guitar case. It took me a few minutes to

put everything together, and I took a long look at the room. Big bed, fluffy pillows, clean and quiet and starched, a luxurious respite from the apartment I had to scour and sweep myself if I wanted to keep it free of ants and rats. I'd miss it even more than I'd miss the stage at the Opry, miss that moment of bittersweet triumph when a thousand military men put their hands together for a scrawny singer who wasn't even brave enough to face his feelings. With a sigh, I retreated to the door and headed downstairs.

“Sir, I'm not allowed to give out that information!”

A concierge's voice, booming and full, hit me the minute I stepped out of the elevator. A group of hotel patrons were standing close to the elevator banks, looking at something around the corner and whispering to each other.

“Did you not hear what I just told you?”

“I heard you, sir, but we have confidentiality, please, I'm going to have to call the police.”

My head pulsed. Some loudmouth was stalking one of the celebrities staying here. Maybe I would go back upstairs and hide in that room until it all blew over. I hit the elevator button.

“Didn't you watch the damn concert? That song. It was about me.”

My guitar hit the floor with a slam and jangle of strings.

“The song was about Brandon. I'm Brandon. Look at my license, that's me.”

I didn't hear my duffel bag hit the floor. I didn't hear my own feet scuff against the tile. I felt it all, but everything was muted. All that mattered was action. Was getting around that corner. Was coming face to face with—

Brandon.

I lifted my sunglasses from my eyes and stared, open-mouthed.

*Brandon.*

“Richie?”

Oh, my God. The curly hair. The arms. The eyes. It was. It was him.

“Richie, it's me.” The corner of his mouth, quirking upward—that smile—

his fingers reaching out... “It’s me,” he said, again, but I knew, I knew from the smile, and when I propelled myself full speed into his arms, he laughed.

He laughed. Thank God.

I held him, shaking, not caring who saw, not caring if my career imploded and I received death threats from fundamentalists for the rest of my life, all the nightmare scenarios flashing by me like slapstick comedy, too ludicrously unimportant to be anything but cause for laughter. And soon I was laughing too, my head buried in his shoulder, feeling the warm rich rumble of his voice as his laugh joined mine, as his arms held me tight and everything that was wrong with the world righted itself.

He kissed me, right there in front of everybody, and his lips were soft and it was as though no time had passed, as though we’d just kissed goodnight on the back porch of my parents’ house the night before. I don’t know if I was laughing or crying into the kiss. Maybe both. Probably both.

The first sign that any time had passed was the flash of his dog tags in my vision when I pulled back. I slid my hand under them, remembering a pair winking at me from the blackness last night. “Were you at the concert?” I asked. The idea seemed too wondrous to be real.

He laughed again, and if he never answered me and just kept making that joyful noise for the rest of my life it would have been okay. “We watched the concert on TV,” he said, “My folks and me. I told you I was going to see them first when I got back, didn’t I?”

I nodded. I’d reread that letter enough times to recite it from memory. “Then how’d you—”

“You should have seen it, Richie,” he said, grinning. “You played that song, and it ended, and I was just sitting there with my jaw on the floor. And my parents looked at me, and my father cleared his throat, and suddenly I was all ‘I gotta go.’ And I rode all night ’til I got here.”

He nodded toward the front doors, big glass affairs with a revolving door in the middle. On the other side, a policeman was busy writing up a ticket for an ostentatious motorcycle parked right up on the sidewalk.

“Oh, my God,” I said, and Brandon looked back and took note, but didn’t care. I wanted to yell at him. A parking ticket like that was going to cost real money. But it was Brandon, and he was here, and suddenly I understood why he never took anything seriously. He knew the things that really counted, and a parking ticket wasn’t one.

But he looked like he’d remembered one just now. His face had drained of color. “Richie,” he said. “There’s not—there’s nobody else, is there? I didn’t just screw you up, did I?”

I looked him square in the eye. “There were others,” I said. “But none of them were you.”

The recognition of his own words flashed through his face and then he was bringing me in for another kiss, and though there were scoffs around me and maybe that policeman was headed in here next to break us up I didn’t care. Brandon’s lips were on mine again and we were pressed together so tight nobody could break us apart. Everything that mattered was all right.

“Think I can fit on that?” I said, looking back toward the motorcycle. “With my bag and my guitar? I wanna go back home with you.”

He blinked. “You do? To your folks?”

“I miss them. Besides,” I shrugged, “I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

“You—” He kept blinking, as though somehow his sight could clear and make sense of my words. “Let me get this straight. You’ve played at the Opry, but you’ve never ridden on a motorcycle?”

I frowned. “So? So what?”

Brandon just threw back his head and laughed. And after a moment I laughed too, pressing my face into his leather jacket, my grin wide and my heart sailing. It was pretty funny, when I thought about it again. But my laughter wasn’t amusement, it was happiness. Brandon and I were laughing together again, just like I’d prayed. That missing piece of me was back, strong and unbroken by time or war. Brandon’s laughter was ringing in my ears again.

“Get your stuff,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

I looked up at him expectantly, and he gave me a grin and nodded.

“C’mon, Richie. I’ll take you home.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Ellen Holiday released her first novel, Inside the Beltway, last year with Dreamspinner Press. Her most recent novella, Small Miracles, was a best-seller. She lives in the greater Washington, D.C., area with her husband and two novels in progress.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# LUCKY PANTIES

By MC Houle

## Photo Description

A young man is standing against a mirror. He is only wearing a pair of pink panties.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*This boy likes to wear sexy women's underwear but it was his secret. He got caught out in a car accident by very manly, sexy, dominant rescuers. How did he get from there to "Property of xxx and xxx" tattooed on his ass after that fateful day?*

*If you really want a challenge—I would prefer if nobody cries (they can get angry and lash out instead or if they have to, cry in private), communication of feelings is difficult most of the time and the word love isn't mentioned or thought until it has absolutely beaten them over the head and it dawns on them that is what is going on.*

*I am a big believer in the generalization that men "show" their feelings before they "say" their feelings.*

*This was my contribution to the event last year but the story wasn't able to be completed so I'm trying again so it might look familiar... but it's not too much to ask, right?*

Sincerely,

Jen McJ

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** cross-dressing, submission, poly-mmm, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, police officer, doctor

**Content Warning:** attempted non-con

**Word count:** 18,041

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# LUCKY PANTIES

By MC Houle

Byron Leighten's grin could have reached the sky, if he weren't walking on clouds already. He'd woken at peace, something that hadn't happened in months. His first day at MeShoes had gone well. And after that, when he went to Pink Laces to buy a pair of lace panties for a non-existent girlfriend, he hadn't stuttered to the clerk over there. Nothing could compare to that feeling of pure happiness.

Silence reigned when he arrived home, as his calls for his sister went ignored. He assumed she was with friends or listening to loud music. Two years had been enough to change his sweet little sister into a twelve-year-old rebellious teenager.

Then his father appeared from the kitchen, holding Byron's washed-out black backpack. The last time his father had looked that red and puffy Byron had broken the window of his father's beloved car. He was seven at the time, and that face still scared Byron to the bones.

"Dad?"

"Don't you fuckin' call me Dad."

Byron stepped back. His voice was smug and confident, but he didn't feel as such. "What have I done this time?"

One twist of fate and the day had turned sour.

The slap stung, but not as much as the act itself. His father was known to anger easily and violently, but never against them. The wall, sometimes, but never Byron, Amber or their mother, while she still lived.

"Get out of my house."

"What? Dad!"

Byron stopped listening to his broken pride and implored him. They had moved after his mother's death, just before college. He had nowhere to go, knew no one in the neighborhood.

His father got very close, very fast, and his breath smelled strongly of bourbon. Byron's body tensed in expectation of a slap that didn't come. "Get out of my house, faggot."

His first reflex was to deny it. He *wanted* to deny it. He did it for twenty-two years, one more wouldn't hurt. Hell, two days ago he would have denied it.

The words stuck in his throat.

That morning, for the first time in months, years, he had accepted he was gay. And now he was forced out of the closet.

He closed his mouth without saying anything.

His father leaned in. Byron's reflexes kicked in, and he squeezed against the wall. If he hadn't moved, the edge of the door would have hit him in the shoulder when his father opened it.

His father grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him outside. Byron stumbled out the door where he was able to stand in the wild garden instead of crashing onto the cement.

His father slammed the door.

Byron knocked furiously, calling for his dad, even calling him "Daddou" like he hadn't done in years.

"Please, let's talk about it."

After a while, he accepted that his father wasn't going to answer. He stepped back and caught Amber looking at him. Her hand rested against the window as if she wanted to reach out.

He blew her a kiss for comfort, as tears began to pour down her face. She opened the window.

"Don't go. Please don't go."

"I'm fine, Gem." He even used her childhood nickname, hoping to make it better. "Don't worry about me."

He saw his father go into her room and force the window closed. Just before he lost contact, he heard his sister yelling that she didn't care, and that she loved him.

Byron promised to call her, but he didn't think she heard him. He waited to be sure his father didn't hurt her, only left her to cry in her bedroom.

Instead of contacting her again and risking his father's wrath falling on her, Byron opened his bag and checked what he had: some clothes, his wallet, his uncharged smartphone, and his non-refundable airline ticket for the end of the summer. At least he had money to survive on until a solution came along. He still had school tuition and the rent on his apartment back in Philly to worry about.

After glancing one last time at the house, he walked down the street and headed toward the rest of his life.

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Byron drifted away from the suburban neighborhood. The sky had darkened before he made it to the downtown area. He used his credit card to pay for the last train to leave that night.

"I'm sorry sir, but the card has been declined."

Byron's nerves exploded in laughter, but he calmed when he realized that the woman at the counter was looking at him as if he had two heads. He walked away.

"Sir, don't you want your card?"

He didn't turn to her, just gestured that he didn't care. And there went his sleeping plans. Hell, there went any plans involving money. The twenty bucks in his wallet wasn't going to get him far. For a second, he thought about sleeping on the station's benches, but the large lettered sign "NO SLEEPING HERE" was a dead giveaway.

Besides, he already shivered from the cold. That early in the summer the nights were still fresh and cool. The only idea he had was to head back to Philly where he might find some friendly soul to shelter him. Unless the word has already gotten around about what happened with his ex-roommate, Truman. He still needed to get there. He couldn't get the money back for his ticket, but he hoped maybe he could sell it.

He put his hand in his pocket and grabbed the panties he bought at Pink Laces. He had forgotten about them but now that he thought about it, the soft

fabric between his fingers made him feel somewhat safe and optimistic, like suddenly the situation wasn't so miserable anymore.

He wanted to wear them so badly he went to the closest restroom. An odor of piss and bleach assaulted him and he gagged. He sighed at the feel of the fabric against his thighs, and it felt even better on his cock. Maybe a little tight, but he would know to get a larger size next time. He put his forehead against the door. The soft blue paint crackled, but he smiled anyway.

He felt it again, the sense of power he had when he'd picked them up in the shop, and it didn't faze the salesgirl. She'd assumed they were for his girlfriend, and he hadn't contradicted her. He'd gotten out of the store feeling as if nothing could put him down anymore, like he was the king of the world.

And he felt it again.

The door of the restroom opened, and he jumped at the sound of two strong, drunken voices. He buried his boxers in his bag and slipped on his jeans. He washed his hands, somewhat intimidated by the aura of the two bear-type, forty-something drunks. As he was leaving, one of the men stopped him.

Byron had a great view of his soft cock, still dripping with urine. He stepped back when the man shook it.

"You're not leaving already, are you, sweet pea?"

"I need to take the train before it leaves."

The other man laughed loudly, sending a displeasing shiver through Byron's spine. "Well you're not in luck 'cause it already left."

Byron wasn't afraid of fighting, but he was tired, and they were taller, and bigger, and probably stronger than him. He could have gotten away with it if the guy was alone, but two to one was against the odds.

He could almost read the headline. "Pansy-boy found dead in downtown restroom. He was wearing women's underwear."

He wasn't planning on letting that happen. He moved one of his legs back, ready to pounce at the first sign of attack. The first man stepped toward Byron when the door behind him opened. The light from the outside lamp blinded Byron, and all he could see was the silhouette of a man about the same size and shape of the other two.

He stepped into the restroom, and Byron got a good look at his face. “Everything okay in here?”

Byron muttered something about having a train to catch and left in a hurry, trying to put the most distance between those men and him.

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The street was empty of pedestrians, and the cars drove by fast, heedless of him. He ignored the eighteen-wheeler truck that slowed down, but he couldn't ignore the low voice calling for him. The truck had the black logo of Aboil Inc. The driver opened the passenger door and Byron noticed it was the same man who had given him the opportunity to escape earlier.

“You going somewhere, boy?”

“Rosetown.”

“You need a lift?”

Byron didn't hesitate for long. He was sick of walking. And how much trouble could he get into in half an hour? He pulled himself up into the truck.

“Thanks.”

The radio played alternative-rock shit. He yawned and leaned his head on the seat. He was almost asleep when the man spoke again.

“Bad day, eh?”

“Yeah.” He kept his answer short on purpose, hoping the driver would understand and shut up.

Byron closed his eyes, and leaned back again. Yet he couldn't fall asleep. He kept having the freaky feeling of being watched. He opened his eyes to get confirmation that, yes, the driver was glancing at him. The driver smiled at him, and Byron's bad feelings were confirmed when he suddenly felt a hand caressing his thigh.

He moved his leg away, and sat up, alert.

“Don't,” he said loud and clear.

If he had apologized, Byron would have let it go.

“You didn't think you could get a lift without paying your dues, did you?” The driver grinned at him.

“I have cash.”

“I don’t need your money, boy. Just a blow job.”

The driver put his hand behind his neck and pulled Byron in the direction of his crotch.

Byron pushed back and made an attempt to open the door, but it was locked. The hand gripped his hair, hard, and pulled again. This time, Byron pushed against the man’s shoulder. The truck swerved in the middle of the road, as if unable to decide which lane to take.

The driver ignored Byron as he tried to right the truck; so he used the time to shake the door handle to open it.

“It’s locked, little bastard, and don’t you dare leave without delivering on your promise.”

“I never promised anything.” Byron’s voice was shaky and breathless.

“You did when you got in the truck. NOW. SUCK. MY. FUCKING. DICK!”

He grabbed Byron by the hair and pulled. He forced Byron’s head down towards his thigh. Resisting didn’t get Byron far away from the driver, but it did help him not to get too close.

Byron had his nose an inch away from the guy’s cock, which he must have freed while Byron was trying to escape.

He grimaced in disgust, as the driver’s hand got harder to fight off. In a last attempt, he grabbed the man’s throat with his left hand and pushed back while his free hand grabbed the half hard cock and pressed until the man screamed, a high-pitched cry of pain.

As the man pushed him away from him, Byron grabbed the steering wheel.

He felt the vibration when the truck hit the shoulder of the road. The street seemed to dogleg to the left, as Byron’s head hit the roof of the truck. He felt a sudden pain in his back and then everything went dark.

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It seemed to Byron that he had a ton of bricks on his chest, making sitting up impossible. He wanted to speak, but something lodged in his throat wouldn't let him.

He didn't know where he was. Last thing he remembered was—Amber begging him to stay. No wait. The driver trying to—he shivered just thinking about it. Wanted to throw up. Someone came in—a cute, blue-eyed man, and Byron fell back into limbo.

When he woke for the second time, he felt better until he sat up too fast. He coughed, and his vision blacked out. The room spun, but his balance came back after a second or two. This time, the whiteness of the room and the backless gown gave away his location: a hospital. He was alive, and that was better than the alternative. The small but persistent pain in his left leg turned out to be related to the cast that went from his toes to above his knee. He had to use his hands to help move his broken leg, and just doing that took so much effort it left him breathing heavily. He thought about lying down again, but then the cost of the hospitalization came to mind, and he decided against it.

He put his good foot on the ground, but when he did the same thing with the other one, a flash of pain travelled up his leg and he hissed. He grabbed the edge of the bed, refusing to let the tears escape his eyes.

A blonde nurse came over to him and pushed him to lie back on the bed.

“But I need to go.” Byron wasn't proud of the whining in his voice.

“Your doctor needs to see you before we let you leave, okay?”

“I don't—”

“It's hospital policy. We just need to make sure your situation isn't life-threatening anymore.”

Too exhausted to oppose, he surrendered to the confines of his bed.

The next person to enter into the room was a tall man wearing black pants, a light blue shirt, and a black tie under his white coat. There was an authority in his demeanor that excited Byron in the same way Professor Goldbarth had during his first semester.

“I'm Doctor Cobin Shrenk. Can you tell me your name?”

“Byron.” He seemed to be waiting for something, so Byron continued, “Leighen.”

“Well, Byron Leighen, how are you feeling today?”

“Really good. Can I go?”

“How’s your leg.”

“I’m telling you I’m fine.”

“How old are you, kid?”

Byron was exasperated, but he answered anyway. “Twenty-two.”

The doctor was skeptical; Byron could see it by the way his eyebrows flinched.

“Look it up. I have a file here. L-E-I-G-H-T-E-N.”

Doctor Shrenk made note of it in the little pad of paper he had with him, then tore off the sheet to give it to the nurse. “Get me his file,” he told her, before going back to Byron. “You have insurance?”

“I used to, but not anymore.”

The nurse was back with the file, and the doctor ignored Byron while he read it. Byron shifted. He didn’t like being ignored.

“Actually, your insurance seems to still be valid.”

“Not for long.” Byron muttered.

“Why the hurry then? Stay at least one more night.”

Byron hesitated, but seriously, where else would he go? His father wouldn’t think about the insurance for a while anyway. And it wasn’t like his father wasn’t somewhat responsible for his predicament.

“Good, because you did give us quite a scare you know. If you need to call someone, ask one of the nurses or there’s a pay phone in the hall.”

Byron nodded. There wasn’t anyone to call.

“If you’re good now, I’m going on to my next patient, and you can ask the nurse if you think of something.”

“My leg does hurt, and I kind of have a headache.”

“Of course you do, especially with the whack to your head. I’ll get you some acetaminophen.”

Byron wanted to look at the hot doctor some more, but he didn’t say anything as the man left. He couldn’t help thinking about how his ass must look under the coat.

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The nurse needed to clean the cut on his back.

“Couldn’t I clean it myself? Haven’t I had enough humiliation for today?”

Earlier that day, he was given the clothes he had been wearing, with the panties on display. Byron hadn’t been able to look into the girl’s eyes. She had a great view of his bum as she cleaned his lower back.

“There, it’s over. It wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Did you hear what I said about being humiliated?”

She wasn’t angered by his dry tone, and she didn’t look guilty at all. Instead, she sent him a compassionate glance and he hated her more just for that.

Byron was alone for five seconds before the nurse was replaced by a cop. Byron knew it had to come at some point, but he preferred not to think about his father, the driver, or the accident. There was too much to think about, too much anger and frustration, and deep down, pain and sadness.

“I’m Officer Rick March. I have some questions about the accident.”

Despite himself, his voice cracked. “Did anyone die?” He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself if someone had died because of him.

“The driver didn’t survive. But there were no other casualties.”

Byron sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s just a few questions.”

He couldn’t bear talking about the attempted rape. “Don’t I have the right not to answer?”

“You do. But it doesn’t look good. The driver was found unzipped. If it is proven that you were—hum—satisfying him before the accident, you could be arrested for manslaughter.”

“What? No!” Suddenly, his mind was going to the worst-case scenario. He didn’t consider himself pretty, but he was sure he wouldn’t survive being around those kind of men he’d find in jail and getting away untouched. “I didn’t do anything. He—he was—”

He couldn’t talk. The words collided together; his heart beat so hard he was convinced the officer could hear it. He was saved by Doctor Shrenk.

“I said to take it easy, not to attack the poor kid.”

“You don’t really have a say.”

“I do have a say if it’s for the well-being of my patient.”

They looked at each other, both trying to out-dominate the other, and Byron glanced between the two men. It was really impressive.

The cop finally bent. “I’ll come back with a warrant.”

With the cop gone, Byron muttered, “I didn’t want to.”

“I believe you.”

“You do?” Byron couldn’t hide the surprise or his pleasure in hearing that.

“People do stuff they don’t want to when they don’t have money or feel lonely.”

Crestfallen, Byron shook his head. “You don’t get it. I didn’t let him, and then I—”

Doctor Shrenk touched his shoulder and squeezed. “It’s okay. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

Byron wiped his eye with a rude gesture. “I’m not going to cry over this.”

He was glad the doctor didn’t say anything about his moment of weakness.

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Just having Doctor Shrenk—or Cobin like he’d started to call him in his head—in the room was enough to relax Byron. He was always nice to him, and despite knowing it was only his job to do so, it gave Byron a warm feeling.

The cop didn’t come back with a warrant, but he did bring Byron’s backpack to him. The backpack smelled of smoke, and it was burned in places. Byron was lucky to get the rest of his stuff back.

Byron was feeling more comfortable now that he was wearing his real clothes (including his brand new underwear), so he barely felt himself blushing when he asked Cobin point blank if he was single. Damn panties were making him do stupid stuff.

It was better received than he expected from someone he wasn't even sure was gay. Cobin smiled at him and didn't actually reject him.

"I can't date a patient."

"Well, I wouldn't be a patient anymore if you were to release me."

Byron would swear that Cobin's laughter was flirtatious.

"And have you on the streets? I much prefer to have you well."

He wanted to tell Cobin he didn't need his help, but he did need it. He just wasn't going to tell him that either. Plus, it was really sweet of Cobin to say that.

Byron gazed into his eyes and only glanced away when he heard a familiar voice from the reception desk. It wasn't even close to the room but the loud voice carried.

Cobin went into the hall and headed in the direction of the desk.

Byron gripped the crutches next to his bed and hobbled towards the hall but stayed inside the door.

"Is there a problem?"

"Doctor, this man here wants me to cancel a paid insurance claim."

"Sir, you need to contact your insurance company for this. We only send them the bill. If you really want to, I can direct you to the billing office."

Byron was really impressed with the way Cobin was able to get his father to back down. His father calmed down, but when he saw Byron in the doorway, he bypassed Cobin and came screaming at Byron.

Byron's retreat was hampered by his cast, and he could only back up towards his bed. He heard the nurse calling a Code White and Cobin needed the help of two guards to keep Bryon's father away from him. He was still calling Byron a fag as he was escorted outside.

Other patients came out into the hall to see what was happening, but Byron didn't care because he had Cobin asking him if he was okay as Cobin put a hand on his shoulder.

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Byron held both crutches in one hand so that he could dig the folded pamphlet for the local shelter out of his pocket. Despite his efforts to keep them under his arm, the left crutch slid on the ground and it took all of his balance to stay upright. He cursed and bent down to pick it back up. Damn cast didn't allow him to bend at the knee, so he had to get into an awkward position to retrieve it. Doing so without putting any pressure on his broken leg was nearly impossible. He had just enough reflexes to put the palm of his hand out on the cement to protect his nose as he fell. He sat and placed his leg in a more comfortable position by using his arms to move it.

He wasn't going to cry. He'd promised himself that, but it didn't make it any easier.

A nervous laugh bubbled inside him, and he had no other choice than to let it go. If only he hadn't alienated the few friends he had, maybe he would have someone to call. It didn't help that his cellphone was destroyed in the accident. Now, all he could do was find a way to survive until the end of the summer so he could catch his flight and mend his friendships. Maybe he could convince his ex-boss to hire him again. He was going to need a new job more than anything. Of course, he could always keep the one at MeShoes, but the long commute would be a pain.

Feeling confident of his new plan, and with hope warming him (despite the already warm day), he used his good leg and his hands to stand again. He was almost there when he fell again. He didn't reach the ground this time because someone was suddenly holding him from behind.

“You okay, kid?”

Byron recognized that smooth voice because he'd been fantasizing for days about it whispering the most obscene things to him.

Byron turned to the left, but Cobin didn't move. His arm slid around Byron's lower back and left a heated path in its wake. With his nose almost in

Cobin's neck, Byron picked up the scent of his cologne. It was intoxicating, but not as much as feeling the strong, obviously-well-maintained body against him, or Cobin's touch.

"What are you doing outside?"

"I was leaving."

"Already? I thought we had decided you'd stay until tomorrow?"

Byron's voice echoed the regret of Cobin's demeanour. "It wasn't really my choice. My father revoked the insurance."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Byron believed him. "You have somewhere to go?"

"They gave me the address of a shelter close by. I guess I'll go there until I get a job or something."

Byron tried to not sound defeated, but Cobin picked up on it. "Not the most fun, eh."

"Well, I'd much rather stay with you, but I don't suppose it's a possibility." He said it like it was a joke (a really flirtatious one at that), but deep down, he couldn't be more serious.

Whatever he thought Byron's intentions were, Cobin moved slightly and squeezed his shoulder. "I've been told my couch is really comfortable."

Byron coughed, hoping he heard right. "I didn't mean your *couch*—" He couldn't help the childish inflection on his last word. He figured there was nothing wrong with some flirtation. It wasn't like it was going to go somewhere, was it?

"I'm afraid it's all I can offer for now."

"Really?" Byron stepped back as he realized Cobin was serious. "Because that would be way better than the shelter."

Cobin smiled and pointed towards the parking lot. "My car is that way."

Byron took a step and then stopped. "Wait? Aren't you working?"

"Oh no, I just forgot something in my locker yesterday and was picking it up. I can get it later," Cobin said quickly.

“No really, you should go. I can wait.”

“You sure? Well, at least get back inside and sit in the waiting room.”

Cobin led him inside and hurried away. “Can you believe I forgot my phone at work?” Cobin said as he returned and Byron smiled back at him. The apartment building they drove to was on the north side of town, not so far from the hospital. A safe, middle class neighborhood which had been developed a lot in the last couple of years.

Acting like the gentleman Byron was hoping he wasn't, Cobin unlocked the door and let him go first.

“You don't want the elevator to be out of service.” Byron said when he saw Cobin clicking on the twelfth floor button.

“They have a great service. The first and second basements are for storage, and the first also has the utility room.” Five girls took that moment to stop the elevator door from closing and got inside. Cobin nodded at them, and had to move closer to give them space, but didn't stop talking to Byron. “The janitor's office is on the ground. There's a gym on the fourth; I'll try to put you on my membership if you want.”

Byron had a hard time concentrating on something other than Cobin's scent and his proximity.

“I'd like that.”

“Good. We also have a playroom on the fifth, and the rest is all apartments and lofts.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah I know. All that's missing is a pool, but there's one about two blocks down the street.”

The group of girls left them on the seventh, but Cobin didn't move away. They were quiet for the last few seconds of the ride. The hallway smelled like cleaning products and there were only three doors. Cobin unlocked 1202 and once again let Byron go through first.

The loft was narrow but long, with a lot of empty space. The walls were neutral colors but Byron loved the art that hung on the walls. It was classy, warm and welcoming.

Byron heard the patter of feet on the light hardwood floor, then a whimper as a pug ran to them. He was the cutest little thing, all black and compact, and Byron bent to rub his head.

“You’re a good dog, aren’t you?”

“His name’s Percy. I have a cat too, but he’s most likely hidden under the couch. I hope you’re not allergic.”

Cobin told Percy to go to his bed.

Byron faced the kitchen at the corner to the left of the loft where the counter made a U-shape with the stainless fridge and stove. Byron didn’t look long though, as the whole wall behind it was actually a window. He skirted the counter, passed under the spiral staircase, and hurried to the window as fast as his leg allowed him. If it wasn’t for the crutches, he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from leaving his handprint on the window. Beyond Rosetown, which he bet had a view that was even more beautiful at night, he could see Lake Erie.

“Wow.”

“You should see it at sundown. It’s worth the price of the loft in itself.”

Byron turned from the window to smile at Cobin. At his left was the living room, with an actual real fireplace instead of one of those fake things. Behind the black leather couch was a painting—a colorful interpretation of a romantic walk in the park. Byron went closer in an attempt to see the painting at a better angle. He bent his healthy knee on the couch in between the green and purple cushions—there were six in total, each one of the colors of the rainbow. His other leg dangled over the couch’s edge. A black and white cat ran from beneath the couch back towards the kitchen.

The couple on the painting was holding each other close under an umbrella.

“It’s two men!”

He heard the soft laughter of Cobin behind him. “According to my mom, it’s me and the future love of my life.”

If Byron would have turned his head any faster he would have broken his neck in addition to his leg. “Your mom?”

“She painted it.”

“Really?”

“She’s a talented artist. Every painting in the loft is by her.”

“You’re really lucky.” Byron could barely hide the little bitter part of himself from being heard in his voice. It made him miss his mother. She would have been okay with him being gay and she would have been able to calm his father.

Cobin put a hand on his shoulder and Byron sat on the couch. It was good to have his leg in a normal position for once.

“My bedroom and the bathroom are upstairs. You can’t see it from here, but the bathroom door is on the left. You just have to push.”

The upstairs was about a half of the total loft, protected from falling by a curved stainless railing. The peculiarity of the loft was that, from where he was sitting, he could see himself.

“A mirror. The wall is a mirror?”

Cobin shuffled his feet. “Not my idea. I should tell you that it’s a one-way mirror, so it’s basically a window from my side of the bedroom. We’ll have to find some way to give you some privacy.”

Byron was honest when he said he didn’t mind. It was so much better than the homeless shelter anyway, and he didn’t *have to* do anything to have a safe place.

“At least they put an actual wall in the bathroom. They did, right?”

Cobin shrugged apologetically. “You get used to it.”

“Oh my God!” Byron put his hand on his mouth. “Who designed that shit?”

“I don’t know. Someone with a weird God complex.”

Byron lowered his voice on purpose. “I see everything. I am everything.”

Cobin burst out laughing, and Byron liked how it made his shoulders relax, how he bent in two and held his chest, and mostly, how the strong, low tone sent sparkles up his spine.

His cock hardened. He was young, and hadn't had sex since things had gone to shit with his ex-roommate/fuck-buddy/boyfriend/whatever. He grabbed Cobin by the belt and pulled. Cobin fell atop him. His cologne made Byron's head spin, and he felt Cobin's minty breath against his skin. Cobin glanced into his eyes and then at his lips. He wasn't making any moves, so Byron didn't hesitate to stretch up and kiss him.

The touch was electric. Byron reacted to it, opening his mouth to welcome Cobin's tongue. He moaned, or maybe Cobin did.

Byron reached behind Cobin to pull him closer, wanting to touch him. His free hand reached for his belt.

But Cobin didn't let him. He moved backward, breaking the kiss. He pulled Byron's hand away from his belt. "You don't have to do this."

"But I want to." Byron went to kiss him again but Cobin moved away from his reach.

"I'm serious, kid. You don't owe me anything."

Byron opened his mouth to deny it, but Cobin was already on another subject.

"Are you hungry? I know you missed dinner at the hospital. Or you can watch TV. I have cable and all."

And as Cobin went to the fridge and babbled about what he had and could do, Byron kept thinking about how now he was going to have blue balls all evening.

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By the time Cobin put something into the microwave, Byron made his way slowly to the wall opposite the window where a display was installed on the wall. A curvy contemporary piece of dark reflective metal was in the middle, with two frames on each side. Cobin was in the first picture with a baby wrapped in his arms, a young teenager, barely older than Amber, maybe thirteen or fourteen, and an older woman with a salt-and-pepper version of Cobin's hair color.

The next picture showed a man in his thirties, looking a lot like Cobin—the same nose—but bulkier and wearing flannel and overalls. He had a fishing

pole in one hand, and the other was holding up a trout. The boy at his side, around eight, was holding up the tail of the fish. His chin was high, his eyes gleaming, and his father looked just as proud himself.

Byron recognized Percy the pug in the third picture. A baby in a white dress was holding the dog by the neck but Percy didn't seem to mind. The cat was trying to get into the fun too, putting its paw onto the baby's back.

Cobin was also in the last picture, this time with a shorter man. He had an arm around Cobin's shoulder and was laughing into Cobin's neck. There was so much emotion in the picture, in the way their eyes sparkled, in the way the man held Cobin close, and in the laugh lines on Cobin's face.

Byron smiled derisively. The boyfriend, he thought. "You look happy together."

"What?"

"You and the hot guy, you look great together. I'm sorry I pushed. I didn't know you had a boyfriend. I'll keep my hands to myself from now on." Byron hadn't heard Cobin coming, so he shuffled back a step, right into Cobin's chest.

"That's Nathan, my best friend. We're not—we're just friends."

Byron turned to face Cobin, but he didn't move away from him. "But you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Cobin's eyes on him, his scent, and his proximity, all hypnotized him. "Some things aren't meant to be."

Byron bit the corner of his mouth. He only had to move forward a little; he didn't even have to move his injured leg, just stretch his neck, and his lips would touch Cobin's.

But then someone knocked on the door and Cobin was walking away. Byron hunched and tightened his lips but didn't say anything.

He forced a smile when he saw the man from the picture at the door. The man was keeping him away from Cobin so Byron resented him. What was he doing here if he didn't want Cobin anyway?

The man—Nathan—was welcomed by Percy, but as soon as he saw Byron he gasped, and slowly stood up.

“Hi.” The sound was drawn out.

“Nathan, this is Byron. Byron, meet Nathan. He’s also the man who rescued you from the truck.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you look great. I mean healthy.” They glanced at each other. No words. No gestures.

“I was making sandwiches, do you want some?” Cobin said.

Nathan glanced away from Byron and told Cobin he had already eaten. Byron couldn’t stay now. He didn’t think he had ever been with so many hot guys in the same room before.

Cobin went back to the kitchen counter and the sandwiches, and Byron followed Nathan’s glance at Cobin’s ass.

Byron made his way to the counter as he imagined how totally hot Cobin and Nathan would be together in a bed, naked. Nathan joined them at the counter.

Cobin slid a plate to Byron who sat on the bench and took a bite. He devoured the sandwich like he hadn’t eaten in a week, which might as well be the case with Rosetown Hospital’s food.

Byron swallowed. He wasn’t sure what deity had possessed him to torture himself like this but he asked Nathan how long he’d known Cobin.

“He patched me up after I got shot the first time.”

*Fucking shit*, Byron thought. “You’ve been shot? That sucks.”

“And it hurts like shit. But anyway, he operated on my shoulder and got the bullet out without ruining my shoulder and the rest is history.”

Byron ate the rest of the sandwich, emptied his full glass of water, and excused himself.

“I don’t want to get in the way of whatever you have planned.”

“Don’t worry.” Cobin put a hand on his shoulder, and Byron pushed away the sudden happy jitters that gave him. “We were just going to the gym.”

“You should go then. I can entertain myself. I’ll try to call my sister and watch TV.” *Please stay*, he thought.

“If you’re sure—” Cobin grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled something. “This is my cell number. I’ll have it with me and I won’t leave the building. Call if there’s anything. You can use my computer on the living room table.”

Cobin and Nathan hesitated a little, but in the end Byron looked secure about not needing them. He refused to be a burden.

Nathan picked up a gym bag near the door as Byron was walking to the living room area.

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Byron bypassed his father by calling Amber on her cellphone.

“You give me just a minute, Kerry.”

“So I’m Kerry now. Is Dad nearby?”

For a moment, all he heard was Amber breathing on the phone.

“Not anymore.”

“He’s treating you all right, isn’t he?”

“He’s an asshole, that’s what he is. Can you believe he actually went through *my* cell and blocked your number? Now the only one I have access to is the one from my contact list.”

“How did you—”

“I asked Lindsay to hack into Dad’s account and we played with the parental permissions.”

“Amber.” He wanted to scowl at her but he couldn’t pretend he wasn’t happy to hear her voice.

“He won’t know. He had to ask Lindsay’s father how to change them in the first place.”

“Just don’t make it difficult for him, okay?”

“Don’t defend him. After what he did to you!”

“I’m not defending him but you are living with him.”

“I could go live with you.”

Byron heard the whining, but he refused to encourage it. “Gem, it would be illegal for you to come live with me without Dad’s permission.”

“I don’t care.”

“We’re both too pretty for jail.”

Her laughter caught in a sob and Byron’s chest tightened. “You know it wouldn’t be realistic. But, eh, I’m fine. I’m living with a—friend.”

He hadn’t been sure how to classify his budding relationship with Cobin but he had figured that friend worked.

“A boyfriend? Are you like *doing it* with him?”

Byron thought he was going to choke on his own saliva. “A *friend* friend, Gem. Why in hell would you think something like that?”

“Girls think about sex too, you know.”

“Not twelve-year-old ones, no.”

He could almost see her roll her eyes. “Thirteen. And Ashley already did it, you know.”

*No no no. That could not be happening. I need to ask Cobin to steal deadly drugs and kill me before it gets to be too much.*

“You mean sweet little Ashley? With her ponytails and sparkling ribbons?”

Amber had hummed on the phone but she hadn’t stayed serious. “You’re so gullible.”

“Don’t joke about that. I almost had a heart attack.”

After that, they talked a little and Byron was all smiles when they hung up. He was still smiling when Cobin came back from the gym.

“Someone’s happy.”

Byron sank back into the couch. “Yeah.”

Cobin smiled back and said something about a shower before going upstairs. Byron watched him, thinking that it couldn’t feel better than at that moment.

Cobin had been in the shower for two minutes when Nathan entered the apartment. He was still sweaty, his hair stuck to his forehead, and still wearing his workout clothes. He called Cobin's name so Byron told him where he was.

He was jumpy and his breath was fast and shaky. "Oh. You mind if I—" He fingered the couch.

With his tight T-shirt and shorts, his square build, and the muscled arms, Byron's brain couldn't find any good reason why he couldn't sit there too. With friends like that, no wonder Cobin hadn't accepted his proposition. He wouldn't want himself either if he had someone like Nathan in his life.

Nathan sat next to him, but kept two pillows between them and crossed his arms on his chest. Byron would have taken it personally if it wasn't for Nathan's tensing at every movement.

"You okay?"

Nathan waved him off; his teeth tightened and pain flashed through his eyes, eyes that seemed too blue to be natural. Byron pushed the pillows to the ground and used his hands to get closer to Nathan without hurting his leg. Nathan's trapezius muscle tensed as Byron gripped his shoulder. Byron's mouth was dry and his voice flirtatious as he whispered in Nathan's ear that his ex-boyfriend loved his massages. Byron's eyes followed Nathan's Adam's apple as it moved up and down. He rubbed Nathan's back muscles and shivered when Nathan moaned low. It wasn't long before Byron's ministrations and Nathan's reactions got Byron hard.

If Nathan was this hot with just a massage, he didn't want to imagine what he would be like if he was blowing him. The image was just too clear in his mind—on his knees, worshipping him with his tongue.

His cock was pressing against his jeans so Byron moved on the couch to find a more comfortable position. He thought that maybe his cock may have brushed against Nathan's lower back, but Nathan didn't react. Instead of backing off, Byron raised himself up, kneeling behind Nathan with his broken leg touching the wooden floor.

His hands slid down Nathan's back, and Byron lowered his head. He was close enough to kiss the base of Nathan's neck; his cologne was reaching his

nostrils, stronger and spicier than Cobin's, when the bathroom door opened and Byron jumped in surprise.

He was glad when Nathan moved away from him. What kind of whore was he, jumping on the best friend after having been rejected? Suddenly, he didn't want anything more than to disappear, to be anywhere but there, feeling so dirty.

"I think I'd like to go to the bathroom." His words were fast, and he stood as he said them. He hurried as fast as he could to the stairs. He heard Nathan moving behind him.

"Need help?" Nathan's voice went straight to his cock.

His refusal was louder than he had intended it to be, and the stairs were harder to go up than he thought. He almost fell twice and then Cobin was grabbing his arm. Cobin forced him to stand and Byron's arm circled his back to make things easier, only realizing his mistake when Cobin's fresh-out-of-the-shower smell, and the heat of his bare chest against Byron, doubled his arousal.

As soon as they hit the top of the stairs, Byron pushed open the bathroom door and disappeared inside.

Just before the door closed behind him, he heard Cobin asking Nathan what the hell had happened while he was in the shower.

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Byron purposely avoided watching them through the one-way mirror. He didn't want to know what they were saying. He still couldn't believe what he had almost done. If Cobin hadn't been there, he would have propositioned Nathan too. He watched himself in the mirror above the counter and couldn't stop a nervous chuckle. No wonder the two guys at the station and the driver had wanted a piece of him. His mouth had a sour tang to it; his lips curled, and he swallowed.

Cobin had said the neat, light scars would fade with time but Byron couldn't bring himself to care.

He was a fucking easy slut.

He turned away from the mirror. The bathroom was simple—white, with a bath and a shower, but nothing outside of the ordinary either. Well, besides the one-way mirror.

He glanced at the living room. Cobin must be dressing in his bedroom because Nathan was alone on the couch, crossing and uncrossing his legs, readjusting himself. A flash of desire vibrated through Byron and he turned away.

He splashed cold water on his face, hoping it would calm his erection or his fast-beating heart. He didn't do anything more than that, both as punishment for being such an easy lay and because he was too petrified to do that with both men so close.

He looked back at the living room but it was now empty. Deciding that he couldn't stay hidden forever, he left the bathroom.

Cobin joined him upstairs, taking two steps at a time. "I'm going to help you."

He didn't trust his voice and nodded. Back downstairs, Byron looked around.

"He's gone back to the gym. He wasn't done yet I guess."

Byron rolled his eyes. Really? *Asshole*, he thought. "Well, there goes all my effort."

Cobin's question could be seen all over his face.

"He was over-exerted so I massaged his back. Now he's going to undo all I did."

He hated that sort of patient. When he did his first internship at the school gym, he always had to fight with the students to listen. He thought a cop, of all people, would know not to overdo it. It was making Byron moody but Cobin laughed it off.

"That's Nathan for you. He probably was trying to impress some twink with how much he can lift."

Byron frowned. He felt his cheeks reddening and his words rushed together as he spoke. "It's not funny. He could hurt himself. Gravely, even. Maybe even have to leave the police force with just one little injury."

Cobin raised his hands, and realizing he was getting a little too enthusiastic, Byron apologized. “It’s what I’m—was majoring in. Physical Therapy. I want to work with athletes.”

“So you like sports?”

“All of them. Hockey, football, soccer, baseball, swimming, even fuckin’ artistic skating. I like to watch and play, but I’m not good enough to be a pro. And I could never choose just one sport.” Once again, his arms moved in excitement as he spoke, and he hit a frame which crashed to the floor. Byron put his fist in his mouth. “Fuck.”

Cobin bent to put it back. The glass was broken right from the area of the baby’s head ending on the cat’s ear.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s nothing. Just a frame. I’ll buy a new one.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

Byron thought he was going to refuse, but he must have looked imploring enough, because he didn’t say anything. Byron sighed.

A growl took his attention away from Cobin and the picture. He hadn’t felt it but Percy was patting his cast. Byron grabbed Percy under his front legs and took him in his arms. He nudged his nose against Byron’s neck as Cobin was looking for the cat.

“Not the most gay-friendly job, is it?”

Byron didn’t want to talk about it. Didn’t want to think about it. About how much of a homophobic ass he’d been in high school, and even in college. How he hurt his childhood best friend because he was gay, all the while crushing on him, or how he hurt his roommate, Truman, because he was so damn terrified of anyone finding out they were having sex.

He fidgeted on his feet but he didn’t have to say anything because the clock chimed five and Cobin’s smile wavered.

“What?”

Cobin’s lips pressed together in a slight grimace. “It’s injection time.”

It didn’t explain much to Byron who frowned.

“Horace is a diabetic.”

Byron tilted his head to the side. “Horace?” Who the hell was Horace? Not another hot friend was he? Wasn’t Nathan enough to torture him?

Cobin laughed and the sound sent shivers through Byron’s body.

“The cat. He needs insulin, but he’s a brat. Let me just find him and you’ll see.”

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Nathan was back just in time to see Horace fleeing the living room. He threw the gym bag near the door.

“I see you still haven’t flogged him into submission.”

Cobin, his clothes and hair flattened by his struggles with Horace, burst out laughing. “You’re the one who likes impact. I’m more of a punishment kind of guy myself.”

The light sexual undertone made Byron blush. His plan was to ignore the attraction and not act on it. That didn’t help him much. All he could think about now was Cobin, ruler in hand, scolding him for some fictional homework he hadn’t done.

He shuddered and found an escape by concentrating on Percy in his arms. He heard a cough but he ignored it and still nuzzled the pug. Nathan laughed deep and shoved Byron’s shoulder. The impact gave Percy the opportunity to jump to the ground and escape to his bed next to the couch.

“So now you’re getting prudish.”

It didn’t really matter if it was Nathan’s intention to elude the massage, but Byron didn’t like to be made fun of, and he still had the dirty feeling of wanting both men. He kept his back straight, his chin high when he said with a calm that contradicted his queasiness, “Well, maybe next time I’ll let you hurt yourself by overworking.”

Nathan opened his mouth to say something but Cobin put a hand on Nathan’s chest.

“Down boy. No need to get aggressive. Are you staying for supper?”

The way Nathan responded to Cobin's gesture and tone surprised Byron, but if Nathan was anything like he was, Nathan would want to please Cobin above everything else. It was fascinating to see Nathan nod and submit completely to Cobin. Byron licked his lips and kept them apart. It was so hot to see them like that. The sex between Nathan and Cobin would be passionate, no doubt, if only they let go.

Byron's chest felt heavy at the thought. It was just his luck to meet the two hottest men in all Rosetown and have them so close and yet so out of his reach.

Cobin stepped back from Nathan. "Sorry, kid."

Byron ground his teeth. "What's with you two calling me kid? You're not that much older than me."

"We're thirty!"

Like that explained everything, but Nathan coughed, apparently also disagreeing with Cobin's statement. "We're twenty-nine, thank you very much."

"Not for very long."

"Don't talk to me about it."

Cobin leaned on Byron to whisper loud enough for Nathan to hear, "His birthday's this month while mine's next year. He's cranky about it."

Byron laughed into his hand and Nathan glanced at them.

"So what are we eating? Takeout, or is there anything edible in that kitchen of yours?" Nathan asked Cobin. Then he turned to Byron and he whispered in his ear, "He likes to pretend he knows how to cook, but really, don't eat anything he tells you he made."

"Once. You were sick once, and I still hear about it every fuckin' time."

Byron liked the bickering between them and he forgot his earlier behavior and no longer felt stuck in the middle. For a second, he cultivated the fantasy of an *us* instead of a *them*.

Nathan went to the fridge, and Byron sat on one of the forest-green stools while Cobin stood behind him. Byron tried to ignore Cobin's hand on his

lower back but all he could see was the equally distracting Nathan bending over. That ass was just too great not to be looked at every chance he had.

Nathan twisted his body with his ass still in their direction. He had a square container in his hands. “Your mother’s recipe?”

“Yeah.”

Nathan stood and glanced at them. “How do you feel about spaghetti, kid?”

Byron rolled his eyes and heard Cobin chuckling behind him. “Fine by me, old man.”

The chuckles just got louder, this time joined by Nathan. “I like you more and more, kid.”

Byron refused to admit that the comment flustered him.

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After a whole two weeks doing nothing but watching TV and playing video games, Byron was itching to move, to do anything but hang around doing nothing. His days were lonely since Cobin worked most of the day.

But now his leg felt better and didn’t hurt every time he put a little pressure on it. He still needed the crutches, but he could walk around the loft for longer periods of time. He’d tried to take a walk around the neighborhood, but it was too soon and it hurt too much so he went back to the loft.

That Friday afternoon he borrowed Cobin’s membership card which was lying on the kitchen counter. He couldn’t do much with his lower body but at least he could keep his upper body in shape. He’d already noticed his abs were less visible and his belly was softer. A broken leg didn’t mean he should get complacent.

It was a good thing Cobin had taken him shopping for some clothes at the thrift store (it was the only way Byron would have allowed him to pay). He grabbed some comfortable clothes to wear at the gym.

The gym was mostly empty. Two girls were using the treadmills, and Byron recognized them as two of the girls he saw in the elevator when he first started living there. He tried to ignore them but they stayed in front of him,

distracting in their tight white T-shirts and tiny—purple for one and pink for the other—shorts. They had nothing to interest him but it wasn't like they were leaving room for his imagination. He kind of wished they would cover themselves, especially since he'd forced himself to pretend he enjoyed such a view for so long. Some habits died hard.

They stopped their workout, and as they wiped the sweat from their necks, Byron made sure he wasn't looking their way. He didn't want them to think they could approach him.

Luckily, a young man started using the treadmill next to him and Byron moved quickly. If he was already talking to someone, there was less chance of getting chatted up by the girls.

Irvine was only a couple years older than Byron, new in the building, and was at the gym to lose some twenty pounds. He looked too juvenile with his sandy blond hair and oval clean-shaven face to attract Byron, but he was nice and fun to talk to. Byron gave him some pointers for a more effective training session.

The two girls passed near them. One had an obvious disgust for Irvine but sent Byron a bright smile, brushing her hand on his side. Byron stepped away from her and closer to Irvine.

If Irvine noticed, he didn't say anything about it. Byron gave him some more advice, laughing at some of his funnier comments, and started a new series of arm extensions.

"I was thinking, after you're done here, maybe you'd like to get a coffee or something."

"Oh. You mean like a date?" Byron asked.

Byron had never been on a date before. Not like that anyway. Things with Truman were based on stolen moments in the apartment, and the few "dates" he had with girls were more excruciating than anything else.

"You're not gay are you?" Now Irvine looked afraid. "I'm sorry, pretend I didn't say anything."

"It's not that, it's just, it's—complicated."

Irvine sent him a crooked smile, a conversational “isn’t it always?” and went to work on another set.

Byron completed his workout shortly after that. He waved at Irvine and received a “see you later” in return.

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Cobin was awake when Byron came back from the gym. He’d been asleep when he left, as he had worked the midnight-to-noon shift for the last three days. He looked less tired than Byron would have expected, considering the lack of sleep he had.

“Already up?”

Cobin didn’t usually wake until at least eight p.m. when he worked the night shift. “Not if I want to shift back to a normal schedule. Plus, I have to be at my mom’s house by five. You want to come?”

“To your mom’s?”

“Yes. For some reason, she insisted on hosting Nathan’s birthday party.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“If you knew my mother, you’d know that’s pretty much a fallacy. She has probably invited a million people already. What’s one more?”

Cobin’s mother lived one town over in an old suburban neighborhood where all the houses were the same: bricked single-story rectangular houses. Byron was pretty much certain the interiors were the same too.

Byron heard music and loud voices before they got to the backyard. They went directly to the off-white picket fence with the peeling paint.

A woman Byron recognized from one of the pictures in Cobin’s loft hurried over to them. She went directly to Byron. “Oh you poor boy, don’t stand like that. Sit. Sit. You don’t want to hurt your leg more.”

Cobin reached to pull his mother back. “He’s fine Mom. As his doctor, I can guarantee you he’ll survive standing.”

“Don’t be an ingrate. Let me take care of the poor boy and go wish Nat a happy birthday.”

Byron was smiling at Cobin when he said, “I could really use a seat. My leg is killing me.”

“Says the guy who was at the gym less than an hour ago.”

Byron was surprised to have the conversation broken by a small hand touching his healthy leg. A boy, probably no older than four, was pulling on his cargo shorts.

“Are you a robot?”

“Why would you ask that?”

The boy was serious, and even conspiratorially so, when he loudly whispered, “Your leg is hard.”

As he was talking, he touched the cast, and Byron had a hard time keeping his expression serious with Ms. Shrenk and Cobin chuckling at his side. Byron didn’t want to insult the boy, but his naïveté was funny.

“I was in an accident, so the doctor put a cast around my leg after it was hurt.”

“Wow. My uncle is a doctor.”

“I know. He’s the one who put it there.”

Byron thought he might be the baby from the picture and was probably talking about Cobin. And if he wasn’t? Well it didn’t really matter, did it?

The boy’s eyes got bigger. “Can I draw on it?”

Byron was saved from answering by Cobin. “Not now, Sid.”

“But I want to draw on it now.”

“Why don’t you let me meet some people and maybe after supper you can draw whatever you want.”

“Even monsters?”

“Even monsters.”

Satisfied, Sid ran to better things.

Cobin put a hand on Byron’s lower back. “You don’t have to do that.”

Byron shrugged. “The cast is off in a week and a half and no one’s gonna write anything on it anyway.”

“He’s not an artist.”

“He’s like what? Three? Four? Nobody’s good at that age.”

After that, one of the cops present noticed that the grill was smoking and he went to help but Ms. Shrenk pushed him away. Cobin showed Byron around, introducing him to the people he knew.

At some point, Nathan left a group of three uniformed officers and came over to them.

“How the hell did your mother get all those people here? I don’t think you know even half of them.” He nodded at Byron. “Hey, kid.”

“Probably handed out invitations at the station.”

Byron nodded back. “Hey, old man.”

The meal was delicious. Steak, hot potatoes, homemade gravy, and salad. Some people came and went, and at some point while Ms. Shrenk was back in her kitchen preparing dessert, Sid drew on the cast. It was colorful and abstract but apparently so was Sid’s mind. Nathan and Cobin had been gone at that point, helping in the kitchen.

Byron didn’t mind staying with Sid and everyone else but he didn’t know anyone. He watched Sid and listened to the discussions around the table. He only spoke when included.

Byron’s full attention was only claimed when the people present (mostly cops) talked about his two favorite persons. They all seemed to agree that the tension between them was palpable, but they all disagreed on when they would finally let it burn.

Byron raised his head on an impulse. “How much would you bet I can get them together before the end of the summer?”

It ignited the conversation with everyone taking sides on whether or not Byron could do it.

Uninterested with the results, Byron leaned closer to Sid. “What do you think, kid? Are Nathan and your Uncle made for each other?”

Sid completing a rainbow on his cast was all the imaginary answer he needed.

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The following week, he checked the university website. He worked to get things sorted out and applied for a loan. He also applied for student housing because, frankly, he couldn't pay for a high-rent apartment, even if he could make up with Truman. He wasn't sure he wanted to. It's not like he was in love with Truman, or Byron wouldn't have been such an asshole to him, and he would actually miss him. He looked for a job in Rosetown, hoping he could stop freeloading on Cobin, and also emailed his old boss even though he didn't expect an answer. He got an interview on Friday, and another one on Saturday, but still hadn't had an answer from the boss.

On Tuesday Byron worked on his upper body at the gym, using his time to watch Cobin running on the track. He was watching Cobin's behind as he ran past him when Irvine got on the gym equipment next to him.

He had a spot of sweat under the armpit of his shirt and his towel hung around his neck. He pointed his chin in the direction Cobin had taken.

“Is that Mr. Complicated?”

“Sort of. He's in love with someone else.”

“Sucks.”

Irvine was doing his moves all wrong, so Byron corrected him. He still wasn't doing it correctly, so he left his bench to help him. Byron directed Irvine's elbow in a way that wouldn't hurt him when he heard cursing from behind. He turned his head and saw Cobin holding his foot and grimacing painfully.

Irvine nodded in direction of Cobin. “For someone who's in love with someone else, your man doesn't like me much.”

Byron chuckled, trying not to get his hopes up. “That's because you haven't seen them together.”

Later, Byron felt Cobin's eyes on him when they were in the elevator.

As soon as they stepped into the loft, Cobin lifted his T-shirt over his head and headed for the bathroom. Byron watched him head up the stairs as he sat on the couch. Percy jumped up on Byron to be rubbed while Horace peeked out from under the couch. With one hand on Percy's back, and his other under

Horace's chin, he thought about what he needed to do to get Nathan and Cobin together.

It was torture to see Cobin come out of the bathroom, shirtless, with his towel hanging low over his hips. Those hips formed a V which made Byron fantasize about getting rid of the towel.

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One of the advantages of living with a doctor was that he could do a small thing like getting rid of a cast, free of charge, even without valid insurance. Cobin had taken Byron to his office at the beginning of his shift, and now Byron had exercises for his leg that he could do once he returned to the loft.

Byron was about to take the bus when a police car stopped on the side of the road. Nathan told him to get in. He nodded at his partner, a man he briefly met at the birthday party, and got inside.

It was strange sitting in a police car, but at least this time, he wasn't there for public indecency. He'd been so drunk the night before he was to leave for his father's house, he still couldn't believe he'd sunk so low. No wonder Truman had dumped his ass.

After they dropped Nathan's partner at the station and changed cars, Byron kneaded his leg.

"You're okay?"

"Post-cast fluffy leg that's all."

Byron knew the city just enough to realize after five minutes that they weren't going to Cobin's loft.

Nathan stopped on the side of the road not long after that. He left the car and invited Byron to follow.

Byron closed the door and looked around. It looked like any other neighborhood but every few shops displayed a rainbow flag. Byron wasn't sure what to expect, but it was obvious he'd been stupid to fear coming here the few times Truman had suggested it. He watched two men passing by, their hands in each other's pocket, laughing like any other couple, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Byron grinned with the realization that here it was the most natural thing in the world.

The thought of being this close to another man in public had seemed the worst possible thing only a few months ago, and now he was itching for it. Itching for the kind of connection the two men shared, for the freedom of doing the same.

“Ever been in this part of Rosetown?”

“Hell no.”

“I assumed you’d like to celebrate. If you’re too tired, we can go back to Cobin’s.”

“I couldn’t be any less tired than right now. What is worth seeing around here?”

“Well, there’s a couple of great bars around but it’s pointless at this time of the evening. Some great boutiques and a sex shop where I buy, like, everything.”

Byron leaned forward, his touch lingering lightly on Nathan’s arm, “Sex shop, eh? Anything kinky you’d like to share?”

Nathan smiled back at him. “You have no idea.”

There was something quite exhilarating about flirting on the street, and kind of scary too, like he was making a statement or something. He liked the feeling. It was a rush, making him feel like he was on the field.

“Where are we going first?”

“You need new pants. The T-shirt will do, even though it says ‘I’m straight and got lost in Gay Town’, but the sweat pants? Really, they need to go.”

Byron faked being insulted but he had to admit he wasn’t at his sexiest. “And what do you propose?”

“One of my exes has a clothing line down the street that would be perfect for you.”

“And I won’t look like I got lost?”

“Oh, that? No.”

Byron had always made sure to look his straightest at all times, but if he was to live his life openly like he'd decided, he couldn't hide behind his clothes anymore. It could be a new step into embracing who he was, like buying the panties had been.

It was time to embrace his real Byron.

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The window showcased three male mannequins. One of them had tight yellow pants, a black "*Some people are gay, get over it*" T-shirt, and small sunglasses, while another modeled black leather pants, a white button-down shirt, and a black, leather sleeveless jacket. The third one was the one that caught Byron's attention the most. The mannequin, even though obviously male, was wearing a tight, sparkly, green dress, a red-haired wig and tall black high heels with some silver glitter on the heel. He just couldn't turn away from the scene.

"*Golden* has a drag queen section, if ever you're interested."

Byron was powerless against the heat in his cheeks and the blush he was sure Nathan could see. He'd always been good at pretending he didn't notice women's clothing too much and getting caught *in flagrante delicto* was new to him. But when he faced Nathan there was no disgust, no expectation in his eyes. Byron realized Nathan was only expressing facts about the shop.

A small bell rang when they went inside, where Nathan was soon hugged by a skinny man wearing pink jeans and a white, almost transparent shirt. The man kissed Nathan on both cheeks, leaving a trace of his lipstick the color of his jeans.

The salesperson, Stephen, as introduced by Nathan, took one look at Byron and headed directly to the section next to them. He took a few pair of jeans and pants, all at least one or two sizes too small in Byron's opinion, and hurried Byron in the direction of the changing rooms. As they walked to the back of the shop, Stephen also picked out some T-shirts.

Left alone in the room, he changed, taking the first shirt and the first pants he had in the pile. He looked hideous in the mirror with the off-yellow pants and the red shirt.

Nathan laughed when he saw him come out, but Stephen just looked at him with a pensive face. He then turned to Nathan.

“When you said he was the gay anti-cliché, I wasn’t expecting that much.”

“Hey, you have to give me a chance. I’m new to this.”

“New to what, sweetheart? Wearing clothes?”

Nathan gave Stephen a friendly nudge and Byron hopped on his feet, “New to the whole gay thing, you know.”

But Byron wasn’t sure Stephen did know. The guy didn’t have any qualms showing people he was gay. And Nathan wasn’t shy about it either, from what he’d seen. It seemed to excite Stephen though, who jumped up and down at the news. “An initiation. How fantastic!”

“How new exactly are you?”

Byron scratch his chin. “Fresh out of the closet I’d say.”

“But you’ve been in a gay bar before, right?”

“Are you kidding? No. No. That would have made me gay. Which it turned out I am, but I didn’t want to be.”

“Okay, now sweetheart, you’re going to go back inside the dressing room and try on this and this. You need to feel sexy tonight. You should always feel sexy. Now get rid of those clothes and let me choose something totally for you.

Of the stuff he already had chosen, Stephen kept one of the black pants but took all the shirts and came back with a black button-down shirt.

The pants fit. Sort of. But the line of his boxers was more than visible. Stephen shook his head and came back with some briefs.

“That should do.”

The briefs were aqua blue with black elastic. He figured the size would do, but they didn’t look quite right to Byron but he had no idea how to say it. He took them to add to his purchases even though he didn’t want to, and he thought he hadn’t made a big deal out of it, but Stephen just shook his head even more.

“You don’t like them, sweetheart? Because those boxers won’t work, but I do have more models and colors.”

“No, they’re fine. It’s just briefs anyway.”

Plus, he wasn’t really expecting anyone to see them.

Stephen brushed him off. “Yeah, and then surprise, you end up in bed with some guy who can’t stop laughing long enough to suck you off because your underwear is ridiculous.”

Nathan leaned against the dressing room door while Stephen led Byron to the underwear display. The briefs were of all colors and shapes, some were man thongs and others were tight boxer-type briefs, but the display next to that had all sorts of more feminine choices. Lace. Satin. Cotton. All colors too. And Byron surprised himself by looking at them carefully and reaching out his hand to touch.

“I see we’ve found your style.”

It was tempting. Byron had to admit that, but he didn’t know how to do it. This time he couldn’t pretend it was for his girlfriend; he had to admit he wanted them.

When they got back to the changing room, Byron was happy to see that Nathan had left and was now occupied in the shoe department. Stephen took his old clothes from the dressing room, and told him to get into the panties.

“It’ll be my treat.” Stephen said as he winked suggestively.

The panties were black, laced with a pink ribbon going through the stitching and forming a bow on the side. They felt wonderful on his thighs, better than the ones he’d bought. They were a good size, unlike the old ones, and his cock felt better inside them. He turned his upper body to get a good look at his ass. The black lace was covering half his cheeks and it was beautiful.

“I could, like, stay in them forever.”

It earned him a chuckle from Stephen. “They are made for comfort and sexiness. You won’t find that in any women’s store.”

Byron resisted the impulse to tell him to talk quieter and put the pants back on. This time there were no marks, or at least nothing visible.

He took a big breath and left the dressing room.

“Nathan! Come see this.”

Nathan turned around. He nodded and smiled. “Wow. He’ll take it.”

“Of course he will.”

Byron didn’t think he could get away with not buying anything, but he hoped it wasn’t as pricey as he thought it was. “Okay, so I’m just going to—”

He was reaching for his old clothes in Stephen’s hands, but Stephen shook his head. “You’re not getting those clothes back. Keep them in the car while you guys go out.”

Stephen twisted his hand in the air, and Byron turned around. He was stopped with his back to Nathan and Stephen. Stephen snatched the ticket from the shirt and did the same with the pants. As he lingered, he leaned in to whisper, “You’ll make some boy incredibly happy.”

He winked, and Byron blushed.

Then Stephen was moving away from him, and they were heading to the front desk.

\*\*\*\*

The air had cooled down outside, and the sun was setting. Byron felt pumped and happy, ready for the next part of the evening. Confidence was radiating from him.

“It’s eight already, and I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. There’s a great place down the road,” Nathan said.

The place in question was a steak house and was packed. They were told there was a forty-five minute wait, but that they could wait at the bar.

They both got a beer, and sat at one of the stools. Because the place was also a restaurant, the music wasn’t so loud that they couldn’t hear themselves talk.

“Are all your exes like Stephen?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. He’s not—Damn. He’s a—”

“A queen?”

“Yeah.”

Byron couldn't have been more relieved to have Nathan help him out because none of the descriptions he could come up with to describe Stephen were nice, and he couldn't say them to describe Stephen. He'd been nothing but great, not even telling Nathan about the panties.

“A lot of them are, I guess.” Nathan said.

“Well, it's no wonder Cobin thinks he's not your type.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just saying it was your type.”

“You wondered what my type was?”

Byron picked up on the rising tension. Nathan was too close to him to be casual. Despite the typical bar scents in the air, he could smell a lingering scent of oranges. He licked his lips unconsciously. “Maybe. But since I'm not your type...”

Nathan leaned even closer, the corner of his mouth close to Byron's. “Maybe you're more my type than you think.”

Byron was close to moving his head sideways and kissing him, letting himself be transported by the moment. His heart beat in his chest like it wanted to run a marathon, but Byron needed to stop before he did something he'd regret tomorrow. He couldn't let his hormones get in the way of Cobin and Nathan's getting together.

“What about Cobin?”

Nathan stepped back, and Byron ignored the letdown flashing in his eyes, or his own feeling of longing.

“Yeah, you're definitely his type.”

“No, I meant for you? Is he part of your type too?”

Nathan was amused now, and he held his laughter. “What makes you think there's something between us? He's just a friend.”

“Or so he says, but the looks you give each other? They can't be missed.”

“I think you drank too much.”

Byron moved his beer so Nathan wouldn't touch it and his other hand stopped Nathan as he leaned in. His hand felt right on Nathan's chest. They looked into each others' eyes—Nathan's were deep brown—with Byron's hand on his chest, he was close enough to kiss easily.

“Sorry to disturb you, sirs, but we have a table ready for you.”

Byron used the interruption to leave his stool and follow the girl.

With the table in between them, Byron hoped it would limit the touching and near kisses but it didn't stop Nathan from rubbing his foot on Byron's ankle.

As the drinks flowed, tongues loosened, and they chitchatted over the meal. Byron talked about his mother and his sister, both of whom he missed, and Nathan told him about his own family and how awful they'd been after he was forced out of the closet back home.

Byron also told Nathan about how, when he got to Rosetown, he refused to hide who he was anymore and then told him that no one knew he was gay at the university.

Nathan opened up about meeting Cobin after a bullet grazed his arm while stopping a robbery. How they'd ended up at Cobin's loft for the most awkward almost-sex possible and been friends ever since.

They had fun, mostly, and knowing more about Nathan's and Cobin's past together was both a torture and a good thing. He still believed they were made for each other. One attempt at a one-night stand three years ago didn't mean all hope was gone. Maybe they just needed a little push.

At that moment, his final plan took shape in his mind.

\*\*\*\*

Byron and Nathan got to the club around eleven, and Byron used the time Nathan spent to get them beer to text Cobin. He wasn't expecting any answer until the end of his shift, but he was hoping Cobin would join them. What better way to unleash hormones than on an oversexed sweaty dance floor?

After sending the text, he enjoyed some flirtatious dancing with a short blond guy until Nathan came back. The guy understood the cues and left them.

Nathan nodded in the direction of the blond. “You won’t hit that?” he asked.

He picked up his beer and slid over to Nathan, moving his body closer than necessary. He put his arm around Nathan’s neck as he said in his ear, “I have everything I need right here.”

Nathan’s arms swept him off his feet, locking their chests together, and then Nathan kissed him.

Nathan’s lips were hot and plump and Byron opened up to him. Then some guy slid between them facing Byron, but he spoke to Nathan. “Hey cutie, want some of this ass?”

He ground his ass against Nathan’s front, but before Nathan could do anything, Byron was pushing him to the side.

“He’s with me, moron. Find your own guy, fucktard.”

Byron thought the guy was going to attack him, and Byron was ready to defend himself, but Nathan dragged him away. “He’s not worth getting arrested for.”

They went further into the club. Nathan turned him so they’d continue dancing. Byron stood on tiptoes and kissed him again. The kiss wasn’t sweet. It ignited passions in Byron and he moaned. The club didn’t have much appeal now that all he needed was a bed.

His phone vibrated in his back pocket, interrupting the kiss. Byron groaned. “It must be Cobin. I told him to come here after his shift.” He checked the text, which was Cobin asking if they still wanted him. Byron wanted to smile because Cobin had no idea how they wanted him. “I’m going to tell him to come.”

He ignored the disappointment in Nathan’s demeanor and after the text was sent, pulled Nathan into a kiss. He liked that he was the one reaching out, making the first move, but it was so much better having Nathan take total control of the kiss.

They were dancing when Cobin appeared in the crowd. Byron grinned and waved. Byron got both arms around Cobin’s neck and gave him a chaste kiss

near his lips before backing up into Nathan. Byron reached for Cobin's hands and pulled him to them.

"Come dance with us."

"Is he drunk?" Cobin asked Nathan.

"He only had three beers, two of them when we ate."

"Maybe he's a lightweight."

Byron rolled his eyes. "I'm here, you know, and I'm not drunk. Maybe a little tipsy, but not drunk. Now dance with us."

Cobin sent him a pointed glare that went right to Byron's cock. He was so getting laid tonight.

He took Nathan's hand in his and reached for Cobin, and then he brought the two men against him. He put Nathan's hand on his waist and Cobin's against his neck. He liked feeling Nathan's pectorals against his back and the way he fit just perfectly in between the two men.

He brushed his lips against Cobin's and Nathan got closer, kissing his neck and rocking his hard cock against his ass. Cobin moved his arms, forcing Nathan to move his, and Byron closed his eyes. He let himself be rocked in a complex dance of possession between Cobin and Nathan until his cock was pushing against the panties and getting them all wet.

"What's the closest?" His voice shuddered from desire. He kissed Cobin, "Your loft?" and turned to Nathan to ask, "Or your house?"

They both looked confused.

"Do you need a drawing? The closest bed, where is it?"

They both agreed that the loft was the closest. Byron grabbed their hands and led them outside where he got a cab. He pushed both men into the cab and Cobin gave his address.

Byron snuggled up to Nathan, forcing him as close to Cobin as possible.

Byron couldn't wait to get to the apartment to see them together. "Kiss." Nathan leaned toward him, but Byron turned his cheek. "No. Him."

The internal lightbulb lit up in Cobin's eyes but Nathan commented, "Then you should have sat next to him."

“No, dummy, he means us.” And then Cobin leaned toward Nathan and kissed him.

Byron watched Nathan relax into the kiss, submitting to it for a second, before taking control again. It was like their tongues fought, their passion igniting the car as they started groping each other like teenagers.

It was hot as hell, but it didn't stop the ping in his stomach, despite Nathan's hand lying on his thigh.

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They stopped kissing when the driver coughed, and Nathan followed Byron outside while Cobin paid. Byron pulled him into a kiss, making sure they both knew he meant to be part of tonight. Thinking of tomorrow was not an option right now, as it threatened to ruin the mood.

When they entered the elevator, Byron watched their reactions as he slipped between them. Neither of them seemed to mind, so Byron moved his hands into each of their pockets.

Nathan pushed Byron against the door and kissed him.

Cobin *tsk-tsked*. “My turn.”

Nathan stepped to the side, letting Cobin lean on Byron and kiss him. Byron opened his mouth, happy for Cobin's presence in front of him and of Nathan's hand in his.

Cobin unlocked the loft while Nathan was kissing Byron's neck, and then Cobin led the way to his bedroom.

Byron followed Cobin with Nathan at his back.

Byron hadn't had time to look into the bedroom before Nathan pushed him against the one-way mirror. Nathan devoured his neck while Byron was leaning on the wall looking toward the empty living room. He could see the image of his own faded reflection, his eyes lost in the moment.

Cobin whispered in Nathan's ear that he wanted to see him too, so Nathan backed up and Byron turned his back to the living room. Cobin grabbed Nathan's pants and pulled him backwards until they hit the bed and fell on it. Byron was waiting for something. *Anything*.

“Undress.” Cobin’s order made Byron shiver.

Yes. That. Exactly what he wanted. He reached for his zipper.

“The shirt first.”

He did, and then he unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. The pink ribbon showed up and Byron realized he would have to show them the panties. He stopped a second, but by then he was too far gone. His heart was beating fast; his cock was about to explode. Nothing else really mattered.

He got his pants down to his knees and stepped out of them. Byron stood slightly shaking before them and he reached to get out of the panties too.

“Wait. Come here.”

Weak on his legs, he followed orders. When he was in front of them, Cobin told him to come closer until he had Nathan’s right leg and Cobin’s left between his own.

Cobin gave him a kiss through the panties but it was nothing like the touch he was craving. Nathan did the same and then they each put two fingers into their side of the panties and slid them down his legs.

His cock bobbed free. Nathan licked his lips and glanced at Cobin. Cobin nodded and Nathan reached for Byron’s cock. His hand was wrapped around it and Byron arched his back to get more contact. Nathan stroked him. Byron closed his eyes for a second, his head leaning backward with the pleasure and, when he opened his eyes, Cobin had backed up on the bed and gotten lube and condoms from the nightstand.

The shivers that took over Byron could have been from the fresh air on his naked skin, or from excitement. He didn’t know. Cobin came back to the edge of the bed on his knees and kissed Byron. Nathan took Byron by the waist and directed his body to the side. Cobin shifted to match Byron’s movement. Byron placed his hand behind Cobin’s neck, getting closer. When his cock was engulfed by Nathan’s wet mouth, Byron started in surprise. Cobin smiled against his lips and went right back to kissing him.

Byron moaned and broke the kiss to watch Nathan deep-throating him. Their eyes locked together and Nathan stepped back. Nathan brought Byron’s lips to his and Byron could taste himself.

While they were kissing, Byron heard a zipper opening, and with Nathan's hand on his neck and lower back, he knew that Cobin was the one undressing. When his kiss with Nathan ended, he turned slightly to watch Cobin. He was lying on the bed, completely naked. He was stroking himself. He was cut, long and thick, and his balls were as smooth as the rest of his body.

At his back, Nathan was kissing his neck and gently pushing him towards the bed. His knees buckled on the edge and he fell forward in between Cobin's legs. He crawled closer as Cobin stopped stroking himself. Cobin looked at him and Byron knew instinctively what he was meant to do in this instant. He licked Cobin's cock, appreciating the moans he got from him. Cobin's hand on his head was brushing his hair but wasn't forcing him down on his cock. After what the truck driver tried to do to him, he appreciated that. Once or twice, an involuntary movement from Cobin made his cock hit the back of Byron's throat but Nathan's hand on his back and ass was enough to relax him again.

Cobin pulled him up for a kiss and their cocks brushed together. At the same time, Nathan spread his cheeks and licked. Byron yelled out but leaned into the kiss. He'd never allowed anyone to do something so intimate but, *oh God*, was it good. A finger joined the tongue and Byron thought he was going to come at that moment.

Cobin reached for the condoms and the lube. He rolled the condom on Byron's cock and put some lube on the condom and on his fingers. He then gave the bottle and another condom to Nathan.

Nathan moved and Byron knew he was undressing but he was all too captivated by Cobin's fingers going in and out of his own ass.

Byron moved closer to Cobin, leaning above him, and kissed him. Cobin grabbed his ass with his two hands and pulled him in. Cobin closed his eyes and moaned as Byron was entering him. Byron stroked slowly until he lost his rhythm when he felt Nathan's cock poking his own entrance.

He forced himself to relax, abandoning Cobin for a second, but Nathan didn't move forward.

"You bottomed before, right?"

Byron had a hard time thinking with his cock in Cobin, but he forced a "yeah" out of his mouth.

Nathan kissed his back and pushed his hips, but his cock didn't enter him. He did it a couple of times, getting Byron back into his tempo inside Cobin. Byron groaned, his breath harsh, and Nathan finally pushed into him, matching the tempo.

Byron dug his nose in Cobin's neck as the dual sensations became too much. He was so close to coming he couldn't think of anything else.

Then Cobin reached for Nathan's neck and kissed him, hard and perfect, with Byron only watching from the corner of his eyes. Nathan froze and came, and only then did Byron allow himself to come too. His balls tightened, the blood pulsed through him, and the orgasm was nothing like he had ever experienced before. Cobin followed right after them.

Nathan rolled to the left, and Byron did the same to the right, with Cobin in the middle. Their condoms were ditched into the garbage. Byron tried to get his breathing under control. He turned his head to see Nathan and Cobin were still kissing.

Reality came back to him. He smiled sadly. He had no place here in this bed. They belonged together. He knew that when he'd called Cobin at the club. He sat on the edge of the bed, ready to clean Cobin's come coating his chest and leave the guys together. He put his hands on the side to push himself to stand when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Where you going?" Cobin asked; his touch and his after-sex voice sent shivers through Byron's body.

"To my bed."

"Stay."

It was an order Byron was happy to follow, and Cobin pulled him back between them.

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Nathan and Cobin fell asleep rapidly but Byron couldn't. His eyes were burning as they darted around the bedroom. He slid away from their heated embrace. The alarm clock on the nightstand read that it was only six thirty, which was early considering they went to sleep around five. He grabbed his

pants and T-shirt but he couldn't find his panties without opening the curtain and risking waking them up.

He put some water in Horace's bowl and some food into Percy's. Horace came purring, rubbing his leg, but when he bent to caress him, he ran. He grabbed the few things he had laying around the living room and put them in his backpack. Percy was sitting on the couch. Byron went over to him, kissing his muzzle. The dog licked his cheek and Byron let a strangled sound escape him.

He wrote a letter thanking Cobin for everything and Nathan for the friendship and for saving him. He wished them a good life together and for their romance to continue.

He gave the loft a once-over, picked up his bag, and left. In the hall, he leaned on the door and closed his eyes a minute. He took a deep breath and headed for the elevator.

The street was wet, but the sun was shining down on him. A rainbow crossed the blue sky. Grabbing the old pamphlet for the shelter from the front pocket of his bag, he checked the address. The building door opened and Byron turned by reflex.

Irvine was there with a garbage bag.

"You okay?"

Byron, from having seen himself in the large mirror in the loft, knew that he looked like shit. His eyes were red from tiredness and his stomach threatened to empty itself.

"The cast's off so it's time for me to go."

"What about your complicated situation?"

"They're together now. I'm not needed anymore."

"The bastards!"

Byron laughed but not wholeheartedly. "It wasn't meant to be."

"Where are you going to go?"

"There's a shelter close by. I don't know. I'll figure something out."

There was no trace of flirtation when Irvine offered to let him stay at his apartment, but he still didn't think he could do it. Not with Cobin and Nathan living in the same building.

"I've got a job lined up already, but thanks."

On a whim, he hugged Irvine and wished him good luck with his training. Byron left the parking lot without looking back. It wasn't an easy thing to do, on the contrary, his whole body was telling him to go back to the loft but he didn't want to come between Cobin and Nathan.

Instead, he headed for downtown. His feet hurt by the time he found the shelter. The woman who welcomed him was nice and didn't push too much for information. She gave him rules and instructions about the place.

She told him that the breakfast would soon start, and that if he wanted, he could help distribute it or just mingle with the other homeless youth.

Byron ended up talking and eating with a sixteen-year-old trans guy whose parents kicked him out two months ago. They bonded over shared experiences, talking about family, but Byron avoided talking about his romantic entanglement all together.

And then his resolution not to think about Cobin or Nathan was shattered by Cobin appearing in front of them. Byron spit out his water.

They ended up talking outside where no one would hear them.

"You don't want me around while you're building som—"

"You don't get to tell me what I want, you know."

"You're in love with Nathan. I don't want to get in the middle of that."

"I have feelings for him, best friend feelings, but I'm not in love."

"You are. You just can't admit it."

Cobin rolled his eyes. "Fine. Maybe I am, but it doesn't mean I'm going to put you on the street."

"It's not so bad, you know. It just needs some getting used to."

Cobin's work cell phone rang and he checked the number. "It's Nathan."

Byron's smile was sad when he told him to answer, and as he turned to leave, Cobin put a hand on his shoulder and forced him to face him again.

“I found him... Yes, at the one on Second... Yes, see you soon.”

“I really like both of you and I want you to be happy,” Byron said before Cobin could say a word, “but please, don’t make me watch.”

“We wouldn’t.”

The kiss was unexpected and Byron wished he had the will to push him away but instead he responded to the kiss.

“We talked about it and we do want you in the middle. Nathan will tell you. *We* want you to stay.”

“I—”

Byron’s “can’t” locked in his throat when Nathan got out of a taxi. Nathan launched himself at Byron, grabbed his shoulder, and gave him a bear hug.

Nathan released Byron from the strong embrace but kept his arms around him.

Cobin put an arm around Nathan. “I’m still trying to convince him.”

“You’ve got to stay,” was Nathan’s way of convincing him, that and cupping his face and kissing him hard.

An old man passing near them sneered and the three of them took a step back. Byron felt his face reddening. PDA in a straight part of town wasn’t the same as PDA in the gay neighborhood. He beat the shame in his gut with a bat and took it on himself to face the two men who already meant so much to him.

“I’ll stay, but only until my flight leaves. After that I’m gone for good. And I sleep on the couch.”

“Deal!”

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### *Epilogue*

Byron was thrown back into reality by an elbow in his rib. He jerked in his uncomfortable wooden chair and faced his professor who was standing next to him.

“I’m sorry, what was the question again?”

Professor Goldbarth sighed, disappointed, and repeated his question.

Daydreaming was nothing new for Byron. The first time he'd been in one of Goldbarth's classes, he'd been fantasizing about reprimands and desk sex with the gorgeous six-foot-six professor. The fantasy still visited him from time to time, but it was nothing compared to what would happen after graduation when he'd be able to see Cobin and Nathan again.

They talked on the phone and Skyped. They hadn't seen each other in person since spring break and Byron was itching to see them again. Only one week of exams to go and he would be done with his degree and back in Rosetown.

He already had a part-time job at the local gym—not the one at Cobin's loft since he sold that last year and was now living with Nathan in his house—and a conditional job at St. Rose High School's Sports Club.

He was ready. Ready to live his life without compromise to who he was. Ready to push his own boundaries. Ready to give a shot to his relationship with Cobin and Nathan because they were worth it. He was worth it. He knew, in his gut, in his heart, that he belonged with those men. He belonged *to* them. And he had just the thing for showing them.

Byron made the effort to concentrate on the class for the rest of the day, but his mind kept wandering to Cobin and Nathan.

At the end of class, he packed up his books and headed for the dorms. He had a small bedroom, with just enough space for a bed and a desk, but it was all he was able to afford for himself. Truman had told him he could stay, but he hadn't thought it was a good idea, and at the end it had been the right choice.

That way, they'd been able to stay civil toward each other, and they were now in a place where they could call each other friends without bitterness.

He had just enough time to take a shower before his meeting downtown.

Truman was nothing like Cobin or Nathan, and Byron knew that even if he had been able to admit to being gay when they met, he never would have been happy with Truman. They didn't have much in common outside of sex, and even then, their kinks weren't complementary.

They shook hands as Truman pulled Byron toward him, and they both slapped the other's back.

“So you’re still doing this?”

Each artist had their own private stall and Truman brought him out back to his and showed him the stencil. “Still what you want?”

Byron nodded as he unbuttoned his jeans. Truman had seen plenty of his body, and Byron didn’t think twice about it. That was, until Truman raised an eyebrow. He realized then that he was wearing his standard black-lace panties. He fought the blush that threatened to embarrass him.

“What?” Almost in defiance, he got rid of the panties and lay on the plastic-protected bench.

“Nothing.” Truman gathered his things. “I didn’t judge when you got into something as complicated as a threesome. I’m not going to do it because you happen to cross-dress. Now be ready, I’m going to start.”

“Thanks man.”

It wasn’t a particularly complex tattoo, so it wasn’t as painful as he had thought it would be. Truman slapped his non-tattooed cheek and told him to get dressed. Truman gave him some privacy to check out the tattoo, but when Byron tried to pay him Truman refused for old time’s sake.

\*\*\*\*

Byron was packing up all of his possessions. The exams were over, and it was graduation night. The results of the last exams weren’t out yet, so it was symbolic. Thinking that neither his mother, his father, nor Amber, would make it to the ceremony was gut-wrenching, but he shook it off by looking forward to seeing Cobin and Nathan again.

Byron was zipping his last bag when his cell phone vibrated.

“Here” was the only word on Nathan’s text, and Byron grinned. Nathan’s texts were legendarily short and cryptic.

Byron picked up his wallet and overnight bag. They tried to sleep on campus the first time they visited, but three grown men on a single bed? It just didn’t work. The hotel would be just perfect.

Byron was so happy to see them that he didn’t mind leaning up between the front seats to kiss both men. He was barely back in his seat when Cobin drove off.

As Byron tried to unlock the hotel room door, Nathan squeezed him up against it. Cobin followed calmly behind and, as Byron was walking into the room, he pulled Byron's T-shirt to his midsection before Cobin stopped Nathan.

"Not so fast, sweetheart. Don't undress him until he gets his surprise."

Byron turned on his heels. "I get a surprise?"

"A graduation gift of sorts. Yes."

"I thought you guys were my graduation gift."

Cobin's face softened before getting commanding. And, as always, it gave Byron the shivers.

"Sit on the bed and close your eyes."

Byron opened his mouth to complain but resigned himself to sitting on the bed.

After hearing someone digging through stuff for a while, he felt a hand on his thigh. Someone—Byron guessed Nathan because of his build—sat next to him, and a pair of hands—probably Cobin's, since Nathan was holding him—took off his shoes and socks. At the same time, Nathan's hand unbuttoned his pants. With his free hand around Byron's neck, Nathan turned Byron's face and kissed him. Oh yes, that was definitely Nathan's full lips against his.

Without ever opening his eyes, he raised his ass to let Cobin get rid of his pants. He left the panties in place. The kiss ended and Nathan finally got rid of Byron's shirt.

Naked, with nothing but his panties on, Byron was dying to look. Nathan's hand was playing with his nipple and he was kissing his neck. Cobin kissed the inside of his thigh, and then he felt his feet sliding into a pair of shoes.

"Open your eyes."

Byron did, and saw them—silver, with pink and purple swirls, high heels, and fine silver leather straps. They sparkled on his feet. He liked them. They were beautiful, feminine, high heels. Unlike the secret underwear, they were

visible for all to see. But here, in front of Cobin and Nathan, the outside world didn't matter.

He twisted his feet in front of him. Cobin stood and stepped back. Cobin held out a hand to help him but, never having worn high heels before, Byron was shaky on his feet.

He sat back into Nathan's arms and had his neck sucked.

"Are they the right size?"

"Yeah. I just never wore anything like that."

Cobin didn't say anything; he just kneeled and opened Byron's legs. Nathan stepped to the side and joined Cobin on the ground.

Nathan moved aside the panties and Byron's cock appeared, hard and leaking already. Byron moaned when Nathan licked the length. He wanted to touch them so badly, but every time he reached to touch, Cobin would slap his hand away. He would have begged if he had thought it would have help get relief.

Then Cobin pulled Nathan away, and the begging "pleases" slipped out of Byron.

"Turn around, and get your knees on the ground."

Byron did, his cock rubbing on the corner of the bed. His panties were pulled off and then nothing. No touching, no licking, nothing, and Byron realized what they saw—"*Property of Cobin and Nathan*" tattooed across his ass in black letters.

"I don't want it to end," he said, not sure if he meant the tattoo, the scene right now, or both.

Nathan pulled him up by the waist. Byron stood, despite the high heels, and accepted the kiss. Cobin joined them for a hug and kissed Byron too. "It's not going to end."

Nathan said the same thing. He even added that he would do anything to honor the tattoo.

It filled Byron with pride, joy, and arousal. "Are you going to fuck me now? I'm dying here."

Cobin laughed wholeheartedly, and Nathan pushed him against the bed.

“Be careful with what you wish for, kid.”

“Cause you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Byron’s eyes twinkled. “My body is yours to do what you want with it, old men, and you just talk, and talk, and talk.”

Then Cobin was on him, and when Cobin was on him, Nathan wasn’t far behind.

As he was swept into a world of love and desire, he thought that this moment in time was just the perfect beginning for his life.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*MC Houle is a Canadian writer who fell in love with M/M fiction at fourteen and never looked back. Fluent in both English and French, her interests outside of writing include, but are not limited to: foreign culture and cooking, traveling, science, swimming, and digital art.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# TO STEAL THE TITHE

By Laylah Hunter

## Photo Description

A sepia-toned, head-and-shoulders painting of a handsome young elf, looking intently and maybe challengingly at the viewer. His hair is short and tousled, he's shirtless, and he's wearing a thick leather collar with one heavy ring at the front.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Elves are rare gifts. In distant lands, in a fantasy world where humans and demons are in constant war, this elf is a rare magic creature that, not against his will, prefers to be with a human. Even if it's against the elves' rules to take a side in this war.*

*Of course it's a forbidden love, of course it must seem like he is not in love, but a possession.*

*Who is the human the elf is in love with? So in love he decides to risk his own life, going against his own race's rules?*

*Just few requests: no hardcore BDSM (no pain, no cut), can be even a story without sex scenes at all and must be a fantasy, nothing more :), freedom to do whatever the writer's muse tells him/her to do.*

*Author can do anything with this elf. :) HEA, HFN, it's up to the writer.*

*Thank you :)*

Sincerely,

Bookwatcher

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** elves, magic users, demons, magical bonding, adventure, light bondage, teasing

**Word count:** 10,777

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# TO STEAL THE TITHE

By Laylah Hunter

The hour is late when Keliel crosses the wall into the human town. The guards have shut the main gate and would question anyone who asked to have it opened; the wall itself is warded against demon essences, but not to repel the magic that Keliel embodies. The great war is between the World Above and the World Below—but Keliel’s people occupy the Under-Hill spaces, rare and scattered and giving their allegiance to neither cause. They are strangers to humans, but not enemies, and thus the shadows Keliel draws around himself are enough to hide him as he scales the wall and drops down lightly on the other side.

He releases the shadows as soon as he has his footing. He has little need of them now. The street where he finds himself is dark, lamps extinguished in all the homes, and he can smell the acrid stench of waste that seems common to every substantial settlement humans establish. Somewhere in the distance a tomcat yowls for his queen. Keliel tugs the hood of his cloak closer around his face and follows the sense of thrumming, fast-beating human magic that drew him here.

After two wrong turns and more confusingly curved streets than seem entirely fair, Keliel finds himself in front of a house that he’s certain is the right one. Even at this late hour, one of the windows glows with warm light, and Keliel can sense the hum of tamed power close at hand. He takes a deep breath and steps up to the door. What he’s about to do will leave him an outcast among his own people at the very least, but some things are worth the price. He knocks.

When the door opens, he says, “I’m so sorry to disturb you, especially this late,” the words he’s rehearsed in his head the whole time he was making this trip. “But I need your help.”

Only then does he really take in the appearance of the man—the human mage—who has opened the door to him. He had expected someone twisted and wizened, carrying the marks of age the way humans do after a few short

decades, but this man is nothing like he expected. The hair pulled back in braids is silver, yes, but the walnut-dark face is unlined and the green eyes are bright and clear instead of rheumy with age. Where Keliel pictured ceremonial robes, the mage wears a simple tunic and trousers, clean but plain.

“One of the Fairest needs my help?” His voice at least is imposing: smooth and deep, resonant with controlled power. “This is an unusual occasion.”

He hasn’t done anything to suggest that Keliel is welcome yet. Keliel tries not to fidget, tries to simply meet those piercing eyes and let his sincerity show. “I do not come seeking favors with no recompense to offer. I am prepared to pay.”

The mage simply inclines his head, acknowledging the offer but no more. “And this is a thing your own people could not assist with? I flatter myself to think that I am skilled, but the Fairest are known for their magical prowess.”

“It is a matter my people *will* not assist with,” Keliel confesses. “It concerns the tithes.”

That produces a reaction, silver brows rising toward the mage’s hairline. “Perhaps you might come inside and tell me more.”

Keliel bows. “Thank you.” He steps into the mage’s house and tries to ignore the nervous prickle down the nape of his neck when he hears the bolt slide home behind him. He has walked into this cage of his own volition, and he will bear it as gracefully as he can.

“Here, draw up another chair by the fire.” The mage takes a book from the seat of his own chair and sets it aside before he sits down again. Keliel sheds his cloak, the better to bear the warmth of the room, and pulls a second chair toward the fireplace. He glances around as he takes his seat; shelves along the walls hold books, bottles, strange instruments, little carved figures. The mage clears his throat delicately, and Keliel flushes, turning his attention from his surroundings to his host.

“A matter of the tithes, ser...?”

“Keliel, ser.” He inclines his head in another bow. “Keliel te Pellinye.”

“Thank you. I am Tavren Balefire.” He smiles faintly. “As you probably already know.”

Keliel keeps his face carefully neutral. He simply followed the trace of power, shaped in the particular sharpened form that human sorcery produces; luck has brought him to a man renowned for his battle magic. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, ser.”

“Now. Tell me what troubles you about the tithe, and why you would seek human assistance.”

Keliel takes a deep breath. “My sister was chosen.”

For the People Under-Hill to maintain their precarious position in the middle of an ongoing war has required sacrifices. Humans will leave them be in trade for blessings on crops and livestock, widespread but gentle applications of the magic best suited to elvenkind. Demons require a payment in souls.

“She has been taken, and you want revenge?” Tavren’s tone suggests that he seeks simply to clarify an implied truth.

“I want her back.” Keliel swallows hard. “The gates that open the way to the World Below can only be opened at the full moon. She’s not yet truly lost.”

“You want me to undertake a rescue mission.” Tavren laces his fingers together and props his chin on his hands, studying Keliel in fascination.

“I can trace her, but I... You know the limits of our magic, I’m sure. I’m not a warrior. I would have no hope of defeating the guards and setting her free.”

Tavren nods slowly. “And the payment?”

“You’ll do it?”

“I haven’t ruled it out.” Tavren looks him up and down slowly. “I pray you don’t think the chance to kill demons is enough of a reward in itself. What are you offering me in trade for my assistance?”

Keliel fights the urge to wipe his damp palms on his trousers. Better that he should suffer torment at the hands of a mortal than that Muriel should have her soul consumed by ravenous demons. “I offer myself.”

Tavren’s eyes glitter, catching the firelight. “You have my attention.”

“I will put my magic at your service, to be fuel for your spells, for a year and a day.” In that one sentence he has doomed himself to exile or worse; he has chosen a side in the war, and will never be welcome Under-Hill again. His voice is steady, though he has to look down to maintain his composure.

A flicker of Tavren’s power brushes him—an inquiry, it feels like, testing to see what he has to offer. “A fair trade, if you can bring yourself to go through with it. Now, the question is, do you cringe so because you have heard the method by which I bind another’s magic to my own, or because you have not?”

Keliel looks up again in surprise. “Ser?” He’d thought there was only one way to manage such a binding, and that common knowledge—inducing pain and shedding blood to break the boundary that keeps the giver’s magic self-contained.

“You have not,” Tavren concludes. “You expect me to carve you up like a sculptor’s block, while you tremble and suffer and tell yourself you’re willing.”

“There is another way?” Keliel asks. He can hear the way relief creeps into his voice, and it shames him. He should not shrink from this; it was his choice, and he knew the cost.

Tavren stands, apparently simply to pace, as though the leashed energy in him will bear only so much stillness. “There is. Quite possibly there are several, though most mages don’t bother to seek out others when they already know of one that works perfectly well.” He turns on his heel so he is facing Keliel again. “Have you ever had relations with a man?”

Keliel’s ears feel hot with embarrassment at the sudden invasive question. “It is common among my people to express no strong preference for one sex over the other.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I have,” Keliel says. Was that the correct answer? He can’t remember all the details of human practices; they seem to vary widely from one region to another and one age to the next.

Tavren nods slowly, accepting, measuring him. “I prefer a sexual connection with my adjutants rather than a bond of blood. No, do not rush to

answer,” he says, holding up one hand when Keliel opens his mouth to speak. “Before you mistake me, it is still a matter of power. I would require your surrender, unflinching and honest. You would need to give yourself to me without resistance.” He smiles wryly. “Some people find the blood ritual easier to bear.”

“I have no desire to bleed,” Keliel confesses. He looks at Tavren, trying to see him as a potential lover rather than a stranger who holds the keys to his sister’s salvation. Tavren is an attractive man, in an alien way—there is a sharpness to his features unlike the smoothness of elvenkind, and his build is solid and sturdy rather than lithe and lean. Keliel imagines himself pinned under that powerful frame, pictures those green eyes fierce with passion. “I am willing to accept your terms.”

“Willing is an excellent first step.” Tavren paces closer, and Keliel begins to think he should rise. Before he can do so, Tavren’s fingers snarl in his hair, pulling his head back and baring his throat. “Now it remains to be seen if you are able.”

Keliel’s mouth has gone dry. “What would you have of me, ser?”

Tavren kisses him, not cruel but firm and insistent, and a rush of power thrums between them as his magic curls up against Keliel’s with the same unhesitating certainty. Keliel responds clumsily, not sure what Tavren wants from him—should he be entirely yielding, pliant in response to Tavren’s desires, or should he try to match that hunger with his own?

He’s breathless when Tavren pulls back, and he leans forward unthinkingly, trying to follow. Tavren’s grip on his hair stops him.

“You’re lovely. But what I need most from you is the willingness to obey.” Tavren lets go of Keliel’s hair and strokes his cheek once, fondly. “Go upstairs, light the lamp, and undress. I’ll follow you once my business is done here.”

Keliel bows his acquiescence and Tavren steps back to let him move. He’s trembling slightly when he rises, when he makes his way up the narrow staircase tucked along the back wall of the house. The upper floor is dark, but not so cold as he feared, the fireplace downstairs apparently enough to heat the entire house. Keliel takes a moment to adjust to the darkness again so he can

pick out the shape of the lamp—a glass chimney on the small table beside the bed. Tavren didn't send him upstairs with a lit taper, and there are no matches to be found nearby. Is this a test as well?

At least this one is easy enough to pass. Keliel pulls heat inward from the rest of the room, gathering it into a tight point at the lampwick until it kindles. The flame stretches upward, a fierce, tiny light, steady and bright inside the protective glass.

By lamplight the room seems inviting, pleasantly cluttered in a way that makes Tavren seem less a legendary battlemage and more a living person with varying interests and curiosities. A small stack of books sits on a shelf beneath the lamp. The bedclothes are disheveled, as though the bed was made up in haste by someone with more important things on his mind. A table on the other side of the room is strewn with notes, sprays of dried flowers, and chunks of unevenly faceted crystal. The wardrobe stands half open, abandoned with as little care as the bed.

Keliel shakes himself. He was sent up here for a purpose, and that purpose was not to investigate Tavren's belongings and speculate on what they mean about their owner. He unlaces his tunic and slips it off; the thin linen shirt beneath follows. Keliel shivers, his nipples pulling tight against the sudden chill of bare skin. It has been years since his first time, and he'd thought himself done with the nervous anticipation of inexperience. But Tavren will be different, both in what he wants and why he wants it.

Different doesn't have to mean bad, though. From what he said, it sounded like Tavren developed this technique so that he could *avoid* doing harm to someone who offered him power. That should be reassuring, shouldn't it? A sign that he's worth taking a risk for. Keliel tugs off his boots and tucks them against the wall neatly.

When he's stripped entirely bare, Tavren has yet to come looking for him; it feels as though the hot, thrumming center of Tavren's power has not moved. Keliel wonders where he should wait, whether it would be presumptuous of him to crawl into Tavren's bed. No doubt he will end up there—but if his obedience is being tested, will Tavren want to order him there specifically?

Keliel kneels on a rug in the middle of the floor, facing the stairs. He tries to calm himself, breathing slowly, smoothing the flow of power inside him. He pictures it as a well, silvery and still, energy ready to be drawn. He closes his eyes and imagines the ripples fading, leaving the surface smooth and bright as a mirror.

He opens his eyes to the tread of footsteps on the stairs. Tavren steps into the room without a word, and Keliel can feel his power expanding to investigate at the same time that he looks around.

“Good,” Tavren says after a moment, and Keliel’s shoulders relax slightly in relief. Tavren opens a small box on one of the wall shelves and lifts out a collar, thick leather, of a size that would suit a wolfhound—or a man. “You are familiar with human sorcery?”

“Some,” Keliel says. “Enough to know the basic differences from ours.”

Tavren nods. “This collar will work as a talisman, to focus the conduit between us. Your throat, please.”

Keliel tips his head back, deliberately relaxing his shoulders, making himself available. Tavren wraps the collar around his throat, and he bows his head to allow it to be fastened at his nape. The leather already feels warm against his skin, even though it was sitting unused until just now. Whatever enchantment has been laid on the collar makes him feel unbalanced, his center of power shifting upward to his throat instead of resting at the base of his ribcage.

“Given the bond we’re seeking to establish here, I should be able to feel it if you cease to be willing,” Tavren says, running his fingers through Keliel’s hair slowly. “If I don’t, or if I’m not responding quickly enough, then speak up. I have no desire to tear your power from you by force.”

“As you will, ser.” Keliel leans into the touch. “I... confess I thought you might plan to have me bound and gagged.”

Tavren’s hand closes, tugging gently on Keliel’s hair, and Keliel’s cock stirs. “Not this first time, certainly.” The warmth in his voice—or perhaps the promise implied in that statement—makes Keliel shiver. “If things go well tonight... we’ll see.”

He releases Keliel and steps back. “In bed, please. On your back.”

It seems strange that he would be so polite when Keliel is supposed to be demonstrating submission of will; there are too many things about him that Keliel simply can't correctly anticipate. Maybe it would be better to stop trying to anticipate him—to simply be the pool of still water, and ripple when the wind ruffles his surface but not before.

Keliel rises to his feet and climbs into bed, only slightly unsteady. The sheets on Tavren's bed are cool against his skin, and his heart pounds as he stretches out. He spreads his legs, watching Tavren's face for a reaction, and his cock stirs again when Tavren licks his lips hungrily.

Instead of disrobing, Tavren kneels between Keliel's legs fully clothed, stroking his way lightly up the inside of one thigh. “What I need from you most is receptiveness,” he says, quiet and calm. “Any method for forming this bond is designed to allow me to reach past your defenses. The spirit echoes the body. Relax.”

He leans forward, bracing his arms on either side of Keliel as he claims another kiss. He remains more thorough than aggressive, exploring Keliel's mouth deeply but with no urgency. The heat of his mouth and the flickering tease of his tongue make the order to relax an easy one to obey; Keliel melts under him, and when one of Tavren's hands starts to wander, teasing aimless paths over Keliel's skin, Keliel arches into the touch.

Tavren makes a low sound in his throat, half moan and half purr, and Keliel shivers in response. It's easier than he would have thought to give himself over to this, to treat Tavren like a lover, when it feels as though Tavren wants to learn every inch of him intimately. The only difficult part is remaining passive instead of pushing back into the encounter, but Keliel does his best to let Tavren lead him.

He arches his back, pressing into Tavren's hands and mouth, moaning when Tavren leaves lingering, hot kisses down his throat. “Yes,” he breathes, “yes, aah,” squirming as Tavren's fingers trace lower.

“Beautiful,” Tavren tells him, curling a hand around his cock for one quick moment and then releasing him all too soon.

Keliel's hips rock toward Tavren's retreating hand and he whimpers, "More, please, more."

"Yes," Tavren says hoarsely, "gods, yes, you'll have more from me." He fumbles with something Keliel can't quite see, and then his fingers press between the cheeks of Keliel's ass, slicked with some kind of ointment. "Keliel te Pellinye, let me in."

He pushes, and Keliel rocks down to meet him, concentrating on relaxing the muscles there to make it easier to take him in. The sensation echoes through Keliel's body and resonates somewhere other than his flesh as Tavren reaches into the well of his power, warm and human and strange. None of his lovers have made him feel quite like this, so vulnerable, so *opened*. He can't tell whether it's more that Tavren's fingers are a distraction from his magic or the other way around, only that the feeling is inescapable.

He dares to wrap his arms around Tavren's shoulders, pulling him closer, and that makes Tavren groan, a low sound that could be either pleasure or pain. "It feels good," Keliel breathes, "having you—inside me," and he thinks he means it both ways, Tavren's fingers and magic both.

"You're taking to this, ah—even better than I could have hoped," Tavren answers, crooking his fingers forward against the spot that makes it feel as though he's stroking Keliel's cock from the inside. Pleasure surges up through Keliel's spine and he moans, writhing in the sheets.

"Please," he gasps, "please, I—" The words fall away as Tavren takes hold of his cock again, pumping him steadily. His body is humming taut as a strung bow, pulling ever closer to orgasm, but his magic is opening, unfolding, spreading out to allow Tavren into its source.

"Let go for me," Tavren demands, low and raw. "Let me feel you."

Keliel nods frantically, trembling, tensing in Tavren's hands. He's close, so close, overwhelmed by the multiple layers of sensation, the touch to his magic so intimate he can hardly stand it. For one drawn-out moment he teeters on the precipice, and then climax overtakes him. His fluids splash his chest and belly and his hands clench tightly in the rough fabric of Tavren's tunic, desperate for any kind of anchor as the wave of pleasure crashes through him.

“I believe you’ll do.” Tavren’s voice belies the coolness of his words, ragged and barely controlled. “You’ll do quite well.”

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The previous night’s experiment is still replaying in his head when Tavren starts to pack his bags in the morning. He is no stranger to working with an adjutant to boost his power; it’s necessary, for a battlemage who handles frontline combat. The natural power of demonkind requires concentrated force to resist. But all of Tavren’s previous partners have been humans, and none of them have responded so beautifully to his methods from the first attempt. Most of them have been more wary of Tavren’s technique than they would be of the more traditional bloodletting.

It’s a stupid limitation in the human understanding of magic, one that holds them back from the chance to truly realize the power of shared energies. Tavren seizes on that familiar hot anger, focusing on that instead of letting himself linger on the way Keliel trembled, the way soft lips shone wet in the lamplight when he cried out—

Perhaps theory is not enough of a distraction after all.

Tavren has no delusions about their experiment being some grand romance. Keliel barely knows him, and agreed to his terms for the same reason that Tavren offered them: as a means to an end, a stepping stone on the way to his actual desire. Their connection will be an effective one, given how readily Keliel responded to Tavren’s control, but that doesn’t mean there is any more to it than a potent catalyst.

When he comes downstairs with his pack, Keliel is waiting, quiet and still but alert. The connection they established last night thrums between them, a barely perceptible current on the air that ties Tavren’s controlled, deliberate sorcery to the wildness of elven magic. It feels intoxicating in its strangeness, almost as much so as its bearer.

“You’re ready?” Tavren asks.

Keliel nods, rising smoothly to his feet. He watches Tavren warily as if he’s expecting a command. When none comes, he says, “At this distance I can only feel a faint trace of her presence, but it should be enough to find the trail.”

Tavren nods. "I'd prefer to ride. Can you provide for yourself?"

"Once we're outside your city walls, yes." Keliel lifts the satchel of provisions gathered from Tavren's larder, and Tavren leads the way outside.

The sky is clear this morning and the day promises to be warm. Tavren watches Keliel absently as he readies his horse—by firelight the elf was already striking, but in the full light of day he's beautiful. His skin is the warm, pale color of birchwood, his hair the red-tinged brown of fallen leaves, his features smooth and finely sculpted. It's easy to see why superstitious men of earlier ages thought the elves were born literally of the trees.

As they leave Tavren's home for the city gate, the well of Keliel's power wakes, a strange tickling sensation at the edges of Tavren's mind. "Are you tracing her?"

"I don't need to. We're of the same blood—I can find her without an active working." Keliel walks beside him, hood up, ears hidden. "I'm calling for a ride."

Sure enough, when they reach the road, there's a huge elk stag emerging from the pinewood ahead, walking steadily toward them as though it's tame as a milk cow. Keliel reaches out a hand to the beast as it approaches, and it ducks his head in a rough bow. It even kneels for Keliel to mount its broad back.

"I've never seen an animal controlled so smoothly," Tavren remarks as the stag climbs to its feet again.

"It isn't control, not truly." Keliel touches the stag's withers and it starts to walk again, falling in step beside Tavren's brown bay. "I asked for help, and he volunteered."

"The same way I volunteered?" Tavren can't keep the amusement from his tone.

Keliel flashes him a quick smile, breathtakingly beautiful. "His needs are easier to meet than yours."

Tavren falls silent, contemplating his companion as they travel. Elven magic, so far as any theorist has been able to determine, uses the same forces

as the human variety but applies them very differently. Human sorcery is far more direct, a road built with a destination in mind; elven magic is more like a game trail through the wood, meandering, detouring around obstacles rather than dismantling them. Keliel seems to use a similar approach to solving his problems in general, seeking assistance and making trades instead of facing things head on.

The road is nearly empty, especially after they reach the first fork. Keliel hesitates there for a long moment and then chooses the northern path, deeper into the wood, instead of taking the wider track that leads to the settlement in the next valley. The deep wood's darkness and unfamiliar sounds make the hairs on the back of Tavren's neck stand up; he knows he is a match for any mundane threat he might meet here, especially with the potent reservoir of Keliel's power to fuel his fires, but the reflexive unease is hard to dispel.

"How far does the wood continue?" he asks eventually. The fiercest fighting between humans and demons has always been further south, at least in Tavren's lifetime. His knowledge of the country further north comes mostly from books and maps.

"In some places, nearly to the edge of the endless winter." Keliel sketches a shape in the air, a curve that sweeps upward on one side like a drinking horn. "We aren't going that far. From the strength of Muriel's presence when I reach out to find her, she can't be more than three days off. If we stay on this path we'll be camping at the wood's edge tomorrow night."

One night under the pinewood's smothering branches, then. One night is bearable.

Keliel is peering at him curiously. "You're uncomfortable with some part of this."

"I'm out of my element, that's all." Anticipation and uncertainty have always made Tavren uneasy; he much prefers an experiment with a clear result, or the direct problem-solving of combat.

"Would it help to share my senses?" Keliel asks. "I think... If the bond you established last night works the way it feels, then you should be able to experience what I'm feeling." His voice is calm and level as he makes the

suggestion, no hint of embarrassment or blush. Tavren should have sought an elven adjutant years ago.

He nods. "I'd like to try it, yes." He steers his horse a little closer to Keliel's stag, and reaches out to take Keliel's hand. Close contact makes any form of power-sharing easier, which is excuse enough; he won't allow himself to dwell on the callused warmth of it or the delicacy of the bones.

Then the connection unfolds between them, and Tavren has plenty of other things to distract him. He conceives of Keliel's magic as something like a lake, a pool of swirling, opalescent colors. This connection feels like he's immersing himself in it, no longer still water but now a swirl of fog, tendrils stretching out in all directions.

"You can seek in any direction you choose," Keliel murmurs. "Here, follow me for a moment and see what our surroundings are like."

The fog sense expands, and Tavren starts to be able to pick out variances in it, the steady hum of trees and the tiny quick pulses of birds and rodents. The wood is an entirely different experience through Keliel's power, a sprawl of light and color and sound instead of the dark unknown it seemed previously. Tavren stretches his reach further, following a meandering track through the wood that feels like a ribbon of blue. Everywhere he looks, every time he presses further, there's more waiting for him, ready to be discovered. Wary foragers and cunning little hunting minds, slopes and streams and brambles—

And something he can't identify, some snarl of rust and crimson and discordance, a sharp horrible tang in the back of his throat that makes him wrench free of the connection. His heart pounds. "What was that?"

Keliel nudges his stag into quicker motion. "Something corrupt and hungry. Something tainted."

"Demonic, then?" No wonder the elves have such trouble fighting demons themselves, if close contact with them feels like that.

"Or something they've ruined." Keliel's earlier calm is gone, replaced by an alert tension that resonates between them. "Demonic influence can do that to what was once an ordinary mortal creature."

Anticipation and uncertainty again. Tavren glares into the dark of the wood as they hurry onward. “Will it have noticed us?”

“We can hope not,” Keliel says, but his tone suggests he’s not optimistic. “It was hungry, whatever it was, so it’ll be looking for something to devour.”

Whatever senses the demonic thing hunts by, it’ll be tempted if it gets close enough to notice them. The animals offer plenty of meat, and Tavren and Keliel themselves would be a potent source of the emotional energy that demons seem to thrive on.

“I don’t like the idea of leaving it out there to prey on whatever— whoever—it finds,” Tavren says. “But we don’t have time to lie in wait for it, do we? Not when we have a tithing party to catch up with.”

“I’m sorry to take you away from your prey,” Keliel says ruefully, and Tavren starts. Does he truly seem like a hunting beast himself? Keliel is smiling when he looks over, at least. “Let’s hurry.”

They spur their mounts into the quickest pace that seems safe on a trail this rough. The muffled thump of hooves on soft dirt is the only sound that reaches Tavren’s ears for long moments. The birds and rodents seem to be hiding now, whether from the hunting beast or from their own rushed passage Tavren can’t tell.

“Can you keep track of it?” he asks as the animals slow to pick their way down a slope. “See whether it’s moving toward us?”

“I’ll try.” Keliel falls silent, his face smoothing into calm. Tavren mostly senses his power welling up, rising from dormant to active—then Keliel sways and nearly falls from his stag’s back, clutching at its shaggy neck in a flailing, graceless manner that Tavren tries desperately not to laugh at.

“It’s definitely getting closer. I didn’t get a chance to feel its focus before, ah...” Keliel gestures awkwardly as if he doesn’t have words for his clumsiness, like a cat who’s fallen from a windowsill.

“We’ll assume it knows we’re here. I’m going to start looking for a place where we can make a stand against it.” Tavren takes point, moving faster now that they’ve hit the bottom of the slope again. There should be a stream or river nearby, from the shape of the terrain. That might provide some clear

space, room enough to fight this thing—and a ready source of water to douse any fires he starts.

“It’s gaining,” Keliel says shortly.

They’re definitely being pursued. The knowledge makes Tavren’s nerves thrum, makes his senses sharpen in preparation for the fight. Little does that monster know what dangerous game it’s hunting.

He *is* the wild thing Keliel sees in him, isn’t he?

“This is the best we’ll do,” he decides, when the trail leads into a clearing, with the burbling sound of a stream off to the right somewhere. He slides easily from the saddle. “Can you use those charming skills to secure the animals so they don’t bolt?”

Keliel nods, landing light on his feet and taking the stag’s face in his hands for a moment. Whatever he does, the elk and Tavren’s horse amble off toward the sound of the water together, unhurried and calm. Tavren can only hope they remain so unruffled when the pursuer arrives.

“Can you fight?” he asks.

Keliel hesitates, which is already answer enough. “I..”

“Get yourself somewhere safe, then.” That’s easier said than done, when they’re making a stand in a place with enough cover to hinder visibility but nothing solid enough for protection. Tavren scans the clearing, trying to figure out where he could best keep Keliel out of the creature’s path—and turns back to see Keliel already disappearing up the nearest tree. He laughs. “That’ll do nicely.”

Something crashes through the brush, close enough now that Tavren can smell the first hint of rot on the breeze. The connection he has with Keliel flares to life, power pouring into him as the demon beast lurches out of the shadows into view.

It was a bear once. The shape is still a bear’s, hulking and heavy-bodied—but its fangs are ugly, overgrown daggers, and its fur has split in long lines down its back to accommodate the gleaming black spines that rise from the flesh. It smells like blood and death.

Tavren gathers power into a crackling sphere and hurls it at the beast, a searing bolt of lightning too bright to look at directly. The afterimage floats blue in front of his eyes and the air feels taut with the promise of a storm.

The beast pauses, shaking its head, growling a low, ragged warning. It looks more irritated than harmed. Fire, then? Tavren has plenty of power to call on.

A quick pull, a twist from what-could-be to what-is, and the greasy fur on the thing's back bursts into flames. It bellows, rising onto its hind legs for one furious instant before dropping down and charging toward Tavren. The flame is a nimbus around it, burning brightly but not seeming to do the creature any harm.

Tavren drops to a crouch, slamming his palm into the ground. *Sunder*, he demands, and the earth cracks and splits, dropping the beast into the crevice that opens. Its claws dig furrows into the earth as it tries to climb free, snarling its rage. Tavren forces water from the surrounding soil into the creature's pit, turning the clay to slick mud, then to a wet slurry that the beast sinks into, flames slowly drenched as it slides deeper.

When it's completely submerged, Tavren wrenches the crevice closed again, sealing the opening shut with heat and pressure. He stands to watch the space, to see whether the beast might still struggle free again, but the ground doesn't move.

Keliel drops out of the tree, eyes wide, raw energy echoing from him to Tavren. "That felt amazing." His voice is a hoarse whisper. "The amount of, of force alone..."

Tavren's blood sings in his veins with triumph, with the magic still coursing between them, with the need to pin Keliel up against the nearest tree and—

He makes himself turn away. Keliel agreed to offer him power, no more; he won't abuse that offer by demanding anything selfish. "We should find the animals and keep moving." At least he sounds more calm than he feels. "We still have far to go."

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At the end of the third day, the ruined castle looms ahead of them in the twilight, crumbling stone still imposing, still standing guard over a traditional pathway to the World Below. Keliel tries to keep himself focused; he should be thinking about the battle ahead of them, and how he can best help Tavren gain the victory. Instead he's thinking about the night before.

Tavren with his eyes shining by the firelight, with hunger written in every line of his face, as he wrung helpless cries of pleasure out of Keliel. Like the first time, Tavren didn't disrobe or ask anything in return, exhausting Keliel with skillful hands and nothing more. Would it harm the magical effectiveness of the act if he did otherwise? The collar is warm at Keliel's throat, pulsing faintly with the depth of the connection between them.

"Can you tell how many there are?" Tavren asks, his eyes on the castle. It's the only structure left standing as far as the eye can see; once there was a human settlement here, hundreds of years ago, before a volcano to the north scorched its fields and buried its walls under layers of ash. By now the empty plain is treacherous and marshy, with deep, sucking mud punctuated by small islands of solid stone.

"Of course." Keliel shakes himself, turning his attention back to the task. Muriel is in there, close by, and soon they'll be reunited. He extends his senses carefully, opening himself to the flow of energy here.

Much of the plain is silent, stagnant, too thickly choked with volcanic mud to be home to much life. Still, there are places where stands of reeds grow, and small animals that make their home among them. Keliel exhales, seeking further, stretching toward the castle. Muriel, a vivid impression of swirling colors and chiming music. Near her, the small furtive traces of rats. Scattered throughout the castle, half a dozen tangled, discordant knots of demon energy. And *below* them, down in the castle's foundation...

"The spirit of the city is still here. Slumbering and weak, but it's there." Usually a city spirit is too big to touch, too big to even feel the edges of, but this one is barely a shell of what it once was.

"The demons," Tavren prompts.

"Six, and they're scattered." This close, probably Muriel can sense him, too. She was never as magically inclined as he was, but no elf is entirely

without the gift, and they're close kin. "Muriel probably knows I'm here. She... might try to cause a distraction herself."

"So we should draw attention before then." The air tingles between them, Tavren beginning to wake his magic.

Keliel nods. "I might be able to wake the city and ask its help. Then you could save your efforts for direct attacks." He smiles. "Which you've already shown you can do very effectively."

"You and your volunteers," Tavren says, but he's smiling. "Try it."

The city stretches beneath the plain, but its spirit is concentrated in the castle, the only remaining home for it. Keliel reaches out again, not just to find the spirit this time but to touch it, the withered shape of wood and stone, the memory of breath and blood. He pushes a little of his own strength into the slumbering spirit and feels it shudder, uncurling like the new growth of a fern in spring.

The spirit wakes curious, brushing up against Keliel's mind, its questions not in words but in slippery sense impressions as it absorbs their presence and purpose. When it becomes aware of the demons, the heat of its anger washes outward in a slow, intent tide. The ground quakes underfoot, rumbling up through Keliel's bones.

"Don't let it do too much of that," Tavren warns. "I don't think the castle's stable enough to support it."

"I'll tell it, but I'm not exactly holding it by the reins." *Danger*, Keliel tries to explain to the spirit. He focuses on Muriel, on her safety, on how important she is to him.

A surge of power through his connection with Tavren disrupts his concentration, and he opens his eyes to see Tavren striding out from behind their cover and throwing a bolt of lightning at one of the parapets. A body plummets from the ledge, trailing tattered wings as it falls.

"The others are moving. They'll be expecting attacks now." It's all Keliel can do at this point to keep up with the movement around the castle, to feel the blight of demon presence surging toward the castle's half-fallen tower. The filth of their energy makes him sick, and he hopes he isn't spilling too much of

his nausea into the bond with Tavren. The city spirit has stopped shaking the ground, at least. Keliel tries to keep offering up his power, for Tavren and the spirit both, as the attacking demons come over the castle wall.

They shriek and squawk in flight, horrible sounds that must be a language but mean nothing to Keliel's ears. One of them throws a ball of fire at Tavren, and he whips up a hand to take control of it, forcing it to ground instead of letting it reach him. He blasts back and the demon dives to avoid the attack—but it isn't quite fast enough and one of its wings tears, forcing it to the ground.

The air between Tavren and the demons becomes a crackling, seething tangle of energy, spells traded so quickly and so violently that Keliel can scarcely keep up. There are four demons against him but he never falters, making a dance of it as he diverts their attacks and lashes out with his own. One by one the demons fall to earth, baring crooked fangs and thrashing their damaged wings in rage, but on the ground they're only easier targets, quicker to fall to the bolts of Tavren's lightning.

Then something changes inside the castle—something changes for *Muriel*, and Keliel cries out in alarm as he feels her energy shift. But it's not the shattering he'd expect if she were attacked. Instead it's a surge of wildness and fury that ripples out around her, flaring bright and loud.

The last demon falls to Tavren's magic and he looks back at Keliel, twisted bodies ringing his boots and seeping foul ichor into the mud. "How many more?"

Keliel pushes through the residue of the fight and the sudden intensity of Muriel's presence. "One? It's hard to be sure." He waves a hand at the fallen demons. "All of this muddies the waters."

"Then we go carefully. Follow me." Tavren steps over the nearest body and starts picking his way toward the castle. It's unpleasant going, trudging through the heavy mud and struggling for footing, and Keliel is starting to feel light-headed. Between extending his senses enough to expose himself to demons continuously and allowing Tavren to draw his power for open battle, he's nearing his limit. He grits his teeth and forces himself to keep going.

The castle's main gate is halfway submerged in ash mud, and the old wooden door is rotted away almost completely. Tavren ducks through the opening and Keliel follows close behind. There was a courtyard here, surrounding the central keep. Fallen stones litter the space now, half submerged, the walls crumbling slowly. Muriel's presence shines from the keep, overwhelming whatever demon presence is left inside.

“Almost there,” Keliel says, as much to himself as to Tavren. “She’s—”

And the words die on his lips as Muriel steps out of the darkened doorway to the main keep. The air around her crackles with energy, her hair standing on end, black demon ichor splashed on the front of her tunic. She has a jagged sword in her right hand. “Kel?”

Tavren pulls more power, as if he's expecting her to attack, and Keliel sways on his feet. “It's all right,” he says, probably to both of them. That's the power of the city spirit, settled on her like a cloak, naming her its champion. “Don't do anything stupid.”

Muriel laughs, and that means it's going to be fine. “If you came all the way out here just to tell me that, I think for once you might be the one who needs to hear it.”

“I didn't come after you *just* for that.” Keliel sways again and this time Tavren catches him by the elbow to steady him. He smiles weakly. “But it usually needs to be said.”

The cloak of borrowed power burns off like mist under the morning sun, leaving just Muriel behind. “Oh, Kel. Running off into trouble is supposed to be my job.” She drops the demon sword and crosses the courtyard toward them.

Keliel shakes off Tavren's hand so he can meet her partway. “Finally learned from your example, I guess.” He opens his arms and she hugs him, hard enough to crack the riding-stiffened joints in his back.

“Thank you,” she murmurs against his shoulder. “Thank you.”

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The return trip passes quickly, without the weight of anticipation hanging over them. Keliel's sister is outgoing and talkative once she's recovered from

her captivity and the guardian spirit's intervention. She can't return to her former home, after the ritual exile that preceded her tithe sacrifice, but she seems to count that as no great loss. Instead she quizzes Tavren on life among humans, asking questions about everything from proper manners to major trade routes, until his voice is hoarse from answering her. In the evenings both of the elves bid goodbye to the mounts that have carried them that day, and in the mornings new volunteers arrive to take their places. Tavren has to wonder whether his horse feels ill-used by comparison.

By the time they get back to town, Muriel is talking about disguising herself as a human and going to join the war effort, or possibly hiring on as a sellsword with a merchant caravan, or possibly going to sea and learning to be a sailor. If Keliel is a deep pool of still water, then Muriel is a swirling gust of wind, catching up anything that doesn't hold fast to its place and carrying it off. She pores bright-eyed over the maps in Tavren's library until he produces quill and parchment to allow her to make copies.

"I'm glad to see the exile has not succeeded in dampening your spirits," he says as he sets down the bottle of ink.

Muriel laughs. "It might just turn out to be the best thing the entire clan of Under-Rowan-Hill ever did for me." She looks up at Tavren, and he can see her similarities to Keliel for all that her smile is more sly and her eyes more fire-golden. "Thank you for listening to Keliel and coming after me. Take good care of him."

Tavren holds very still until he's certain his voice won't betray him. "I will. I admire his courage intensely." Has Keliel disclosed the terms of their agreement, or has something in their behavior made it obvious to her? Tavren has done his best to maintain a respectful distance on the return trip, and with no new battles to fight there was no harm in failing to renew the bond for a few days.

"Good. It'll help him to have someone he can treat as an anchor while he learns how to live in the human world." She shrugs. "And I've never been a grounding influence."

Keliel comes back inside then, carrying water for the evening meal, and the subject is closed. Tavren keeps thinking about it over the course of the

evening, though, trying to be circumspect as he watches Keliel. An anchor, is he? He'd have thought of the bond as more like shackles; he knows how little choice Keliel truly had. If he were slightly more honorable, or less practical, he would release Keliel from the year-and-a-day obligation—but having an adjutant means he can return to the battle, and having an adjutant of Keliel's power and skill means he'll be able to fight better than ever. Irritability makes him restless; how neatly he's found a moral justification for what he wants.

He excuses himself upstairs shortly after dinner, to give the siblings some time alone. It seems like the decent thing to do, when Muriel will be striking out on her own soon enough, and he'll be taking Keliel to the capital with him to report to the war council for a new posting. They should have some time to spend with each other before that happens.

It comes as a surprise, then, when he hears footsteps on the stairs perhaps an hour later. He has been reading at his desk, and now sets the book aside. "Is something the matter? Your sister..."

"My sister thinks I need to be more direct in going after what I want." Keliel comes closer and Tavren rises to meet him. "And I suppose she's probably right. Waiting patiently doesn't lead anywhere fast."

Tavren frowns. "If you wish to be released from your obligation," he begins, and then feels ashamed of himself. Wasn't he just thinking earlier tonight that continuing the bond was a dishonorable thing to insist on? If Keliel outright says he doesn't want it, then it would be inexcusable for Tavren to refuse.

"That's not at all what I wanted to say," Keliel answers, his back stiffening, "and I hope you don't find me that dishonorable."

"Certainly not," Tavren protests. "If anyone has behaved dishonorably it was I, in taking so high a price to aid you. You asked me for a skirmish and now I'm taking you to war."

Keliel puts his fingers to Tavren's lips, and Tavren lapses into a startled silence. "You accepted my offer, and under kinder terms than I expected. You have been a pleasant companion and a respectful master. Will you listen to my actual request before you fault yourself further?"

Tavren bows his head in acquiescence. “Suddenly I can see how you resemble your sister. Please, go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Thank you.” Keliel pauses for a moment, breathing deeply, as if collecting his thoughts. “I don’t mind sharing my power with you. I don’t mind making the bond through a sexual connection. It—it feels good. But I want to know why you’re holding back.” He takes a step closer, so their bodies almost touch. “Would it harm your ritual for you to take pleasure in it?”

“No, it—I’ve had lovers who—” Tavren cuts off that sentence; he has no wish to speak of the dead. “You didn’t come to me by choice. I didn’t want to demand more than what was required.”

“You wouldn’t have forced me if I said no.” It’s clearly no question, but Tavren still shakes his head. It would have been both cruel and counterproductive, and he has no wish to be a tyrant. Keliel looks him in the eyes, not quite challenging but certainly not passive. “Then give me the chance to say yes.”

The heat that washes through Tavren’s body isn’t from Keliel’s magic this time, though it feels just as intense and intoxicating. “I want you,” he says, and Keliel’s expression sharpens with hunger. “I want to take you to bed, spread you out, and bury myself in you.”

“Yes,” Keliel breathes. He drapes his arms over Tavren’s shoulders. “I want you to.”

Tavren takes hold of Keliel’s wrists. “And if I wanted to bind you, as you suggested that first night?”

Keliel’s breath hitches. “Yes.”

Tavren pulls Keliel’s arms down and pins his wrists at the small of his back, dragging him into an embrace. Keliel relaxes into him, beautifully willing, lips parted already for a kiss. Tavren takes the offer gladly, savoring the yielding softness of Keliel’s lips, groaning when Keliel nips at his tongue. This is not a passive surrender, an acceptance of inevitable conquest; it’s a willing welcome, and it makes Tavren’s blood sing.

He pulls back. “Undress for me.”

Keliel pulls at the laces of his tunic, his fingers quick and nimble. “Will you do the same, ser? I’d like to see you.”

Tavren nods. He’d already intended to—they come to bed now as lovers, not as mage and adjutant—but it certainly does his pride no harm for Keliel to ask. When he strips away his shirt he catches Keliel taking in the sight of his scars, the old battle injuries where a stray spell or arrow left its mark. They track pink and pale over his torso, the flesh pulled back together in a hurry by battlefield healers with no time to spare for finesse. He refuses to be ashamed of them, but he does wonder how they must look to one of the Fairest, sleek and unblemished and ever-young as they are.

If the marks trouble him, Keliel doesn’t show it. By the time he’s stripped bare his cock is already beginning to swell. After a second’s hesitation he crosses his wrists behind his back, meeting Tavren’s eyes steadily, wearing only his collar and his pride.

“Yes, like that.” Tavren tosses the last of his clothes away and wraps his arms around Keliel again, relishing the feeling of bare skin against his, the fine-boned strength he can feel when he closes his hands around Keliel’s wrists. “You look so beautiful.” He lets his teeth graze the lobe of Keliel’s ear, then bites the soft flesh below the jaw, suckling with every intent of leaving marks. He can taste magic on Keliel’s skin and smell the wild strangeness of him, as though he carries the wild wood everywhere he goes, even when he’s trapped behind human stone walls.

And the sounds he makes! Keliel moans at the bite, trembling, and his breath comes in ragged pants. “Please,” he murmurs, “oh please, more.”

The words are even more intoxicating now than they were the first night, now that Tavren knows how much more he can have. “You want more?” He slides one hand up Keliel’s chest to take hold of the ring in the collar. “Shall I tie you to my bed and take you, then?”

Keliel shudders in his arms. “Yes, yes—I’m at your mercy, ser.”

Heat thrums down Tavren’s spine, a heavy sense of need settling at the base of his cock. “Come, then.” He crosses to his bed, fingers still hooked in the collar to pull Keliel with him.

He uses a length of silk to secure Keliel's wrists to the headboard, admiring the way the position draws him out into a long, lean arc of beautiful bare skin. Keliel's back arches, pressing toward his touch, when Tavren draws his fingers down over the gentle curve of one bicep. "You suggested I might gag you, as well," he says, cupping Keliel's jaw in one hand. "But then I couldn't listen to you beg."

Keliel's hitched breath then might be a surprised, swallowed laugh; he turns his head to kiss Tavren's palm. "As you wish, ser." He smiles, playful and sly. "What should I beg for?"

Tavren laughs, letting his fingers slip down to curl in the collar's ring again. "Whatever comes naturally." He pushes a little power into the collar, just enough to wake the bond between them, so a touch will have magical resonance to go with the physical. Keliel catches his bottom lip between his teeth, but he says nothing.

Tavren settles himself between Keliel's thighs, drinking in the sight of him, sleek long limbs and skin warmed to golden by the candlelight. It feels so different from the first two times, knowing how much more liberty he has. When he coaxes Keliel's body to a more receptive state, he does so for more than just the magic's sake.

He lets his hands explore—the gentle hollow where ribs give way to soft belly, the smooth arches of hipbones, the unbearably delicate skin of inner thighs. Keliel presses into his touch at every moment, and the connection between them is filled with a slow, smoldering longing. Tavren leans down to leave another love bite on Keliel's thigh. The scent that fills his nostrils is rich and earthy, cut with a wild sharpness that leaves him hungry. He licks at the mark he's made and deliberately holds back, despite the temptation to turn his attention to Keliel's cock and balls.

When he sits up, Keliel makes a stifled noise of frustration, hips arching after him. The gold of Keliel's cheeks is suffused now with a rosy blush, and he squirms in the sheets.

"Something you wanted?" Tavren asks, calmly as he can.

Keliel's chest rises and falls with his quick, needy breaths. "If I had no suggestions, what then?"

Tavren runs his fingers up the inside of Keliel's thigh and trails random patterns across his hip instead of offering any relief. "Then I would have no direction, and in its absence I would have to entertain myself." This teasing resistance comes as a surprise, after how readily Keliel surrendered to form the bond—but the surprise is pleasant, making the difference more clear. This is not an obligation to be performed correctly, but play Keliel engages in of his own free will.

Delightful play, at that. Tavren has always enjoyed the challenge of a partner who refuses to be too easily overwhelmed. He takes his time, learning the contours of Keliel's body, the particularly sensitive places, the ticklish spots, the places his hands fit most comfortably to the contours of warm flesh. Keliel responds beautifully, arching toward him, sighing and moaning, crooning with need. His cock is stiff and flushed against his belly, foreskin drawn back to expose the crown, and Tavren can scarcely tell whether it's Keliel's desire or his own that makes him want to lean down and take it in his mouth.

"Please," Keliel gasps at last, and Tavren stills. He's close enough to ghost hot breath over Keliel's cock, waiting for more. "Please, touch me."

Tavren laughs. "I thought I had been."

Keliel whines, a thin and needy sound, and Tavren would almost take pity on him if he weren't so lovely when he was desperate. "Touch my cock," he pleads, rocking his hips up helplessly. "Please, I want you so much."

Perhaps he should have more control, Tavren thinks, but already he's seen Keliel reduced to moaning, beautiful incoherence twice without having the chance to indulge his own needs. He takes the pot of ointment from the bedside table and leans down to lap at the head of Keliel's cock. Keliel is gloriously vocal, wonderfully responsive, moaning and sighing his pleasure shamelessly as Tavren licks and sucks him.

"Yes," he gasps when Tavren presses slicked fingers into the cleft of his ass, spreading his legs wider. He yields easily, tight muscle relaxing to let Tavren's fingers press deep, and a wave of pleasure echoes through the bond between them. Tavren's cock throbs with answering need, and he takes Keliel's cock deeper in his mouth.

The hum and pulse of Keliel's magic is almost as pleasurable as the sleek heat of his flesh, and the more Tavren focuses on that sensation the more intense it gets. By the time he has three fingers in Keliel's ass, he feels like he's on the edge of catching fire, lit up with power that's only half his own. He gives the tip of Keliel's cock one last lick and sits up.

"You're ready for me?" His voice is raw, and he can still taste salt on the back of his tongue.

Keliel pulls against his bonds, as if he wants to reach for Tavren despite them. "So ready, please—please, fill me. Give me your cock."

Tavren groans, pulling his fingers free and slicking himself up. He sits back for just a moment to admire the picture Keliel makes like this—collared and bound, holding himself spread open to be taken. A moment is enough, though, when he's been craving this since the first night Keliel turned up on his doorstep and surrendered to him. He guides his cock carefully into position and pushes, and Keliel lets out a low sigh of satisfaction as he slides home.

At first Tavren has to simply hold still, letting himself adjust to the feeling; it's been some time since he last had a lover, and with Keliel's magic crackling and sparking against his, amplifying every sensation, he's nearly overwhelmed. He takes a few slow, steady breaths, and Keliel's body ripples around him, muscles clenching tight. Tavren gasps a curse.

"I need you, Tavren, gods, please move," Keliel says, breathless. He wraps his legs around Tavren's waist, pulling him closer, pulling him down. Tavren braces himself against the mattress, pulls back, then drives in deep again to the sound of Keliel's sweet moaning.

Tavren mouths at Keliel's skin, anywhere he can reach, tasting the wild sharpness of him and leaving love bites behind. Keliel rocks up to meet him at every thrust, crooning, pleading, trembling. The pulse of magic through their bond redoubles, a heady flood of power and sensation, so that Tavren can feel the shadow of what Keliel is experiencing, the pressure and fullness, at the same time that he loses himself in the physical pleasure of burying himself in Keliel's ass.

When climax hits it scours through him like wildfire, brilliant and inescapable—and Keliel sobs beneath him, coming with his cock untouched,

their pleasure reflected back to each other with wrenching, breathtaking intensity. Tavren is gasping by the time it finally ends, shaking with the effort of holding himself up even for long enough to pull out.

He collapses to the mattress beside Keliel, leaning close for a kiss that's wet and languid and sated. Keliel hums into his mouth, kissing back, and then tugs on the scarf binding his wrists. Tavren laughs, and reaches up to undo the knots.

“There. Better?” He chafes Keliel's wrists gently, and when he lets go Keliel drapes an arm over his chest. The bond between them is finally settling now, leaving a warm, soothing exhaustion in its wake.

“Lovely.” Keliel tucks his head against Tavren's shoulder and sighs in contentment.

Tavren wraps an arm around him to hold him, and the immensity of this adventure finally starts to sink in—the amount that Keliel was willing to risk for his sister, and the amount that he was willing to trust a human stranger in his desperate gamble. It wakes something hotly protective behind his ribs, something he can't blame on the magical bond at all. He wants to know what lies beneath that fierce courage. He wants to know what makes Keliel happy, what he enjoys when he's not fighting for his life. He wants to make sure Keliel never regrets giving up this next year to serve Tavren's cause. He wants...

Well, plenty of things. But they can wait. Keliel is falling asleep on his shoulder now, a well-earned rest at the end of several long days of battle and traveling. There will be time enough in the morning to start learning each other in truth. For now, Tavren closes his eyes and follows Keliel into sleep.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Laylah Hunter writes speculative fiction, often queer, often erotic, often concerned with power dynamics, and sometimes all of those things at once. Hunter's mild-mannered alter ego has a day job in one of the driest and stuffiest corners of the publishing industry, a video game habit, and two cats who consistently fail their aloofness checks. Hunter writes best on rainy days and is powered mostly by lattes, which made moving to Seattle a wise career choice.*

## Contact & Media Info

*Connect with Laylah Hunter:*

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# FINDING BIGFOOT

By Kate Islay

## Photo Description

A young man sleeps on a bed with white sheets, his arms curled above him, and his expression furrowed in dreams.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I always considered myself straight, had girlfriends in high school and a few here at college. But I'm taking this Sociology class and I'm in a group with a guy who's openly gay. The first time I met him, I felt like I'd stepped off a cliff. He has beautiful peach skin with a cute red blush on his cheekbones, a super lean tight body (smaller than mine), and the most beautiful eyes and smile. I've tried to ignore the attraction, but now I find myself dreaming about him—a lot. Like crazy, hot dreams. What should I do? I kind of want to explore this, but even if I worked up the nerve to say something, why would he want some clueless, supposedly straight guy like me?*

*Requests: No (heavy) BDSM or ménage. Light angst okay but not heavy/drugs/abuse, etc.—oh, and an HEA please!*

*Sincerely,*

*Eli*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college student, sweet no sex, coming of age, coming out

**Content warnings:** HFN

**Word count:** 8,933

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# FINDING BIGFOOT

By Kate Islay

“Legends of wild men have been with us throughout human history, but it wasn’t until 1958, when loggers in Bluff Creek, California, reported footprints along the logging roads far larger than any human, that the name *Bigfoot* was coined.”

From this angle, I could see the neat trim of dark blond hair around his ear when he sat back, his lips tightening in a pained expression as someone recounted her cousin’s Sasquatch sighting in New Jersey three years ago. He’d looked pained a lot this semester. I wondered why he was in the class at all. Tully’s urban legends class was famous, or at least infamous, with a waiting list deep enough to discourage even the die-hard fans.

I wondered why I couldn’t seem to stop staring at him.

“...but what’s at the core of the legend of the Sasquatch, or any of the folktales we’ve been talking about, isn’t whether or not they’re true, but what they tell us about the human condition. Or so the folklorists tell us. What do you think?”

A few students offered tentative responses. Personally, I thought it mattered if it was true to the people who wanted to believe it, but maybe they didn’t count.

Tully wrapped up her lecture, letting loose a chorus of squeaking chairs and shuffling of notebooks into backpacks. Her voice carried over the noise. “Don’t forget that blurbs for your collaborative paper are due next week.”

Fuck. I’d been putting off even thinking about the joint paper. There were a few other guys from the team in the class, but for obvious reasons I wasn’t going to ask them if they wanted to partner up.

Tully’s next words froze me in the act of putting away my notebook and pen. “Mr. Romano. And Mr. Harper. Can you stay a moment, please?”

A few classmates gave me sympathetic looks as I forced myself to step up to Tully’s desk, very much aware of *him* coming forward to stand next to me:

a couple inches shorter and more slight, his tucked in button-down and gray slacks a sharp contrast to my jeans and hoodie.

Leigh Harper. I'd looked him up in the student directory the first week of class, going down the names on the class roster until I'd found him. Gray eyes, like an overcast sky. Senior. Political Science major. Phi Beta Kappa. President of the Gay-Straight Alliance.

I'd known the name, of course. Buchanan was a small campus, and Leigh was an active guy; probably most of the student body knew his name. He wasn't how I'd pictured. I'd expected an activist to have more flamboyance and style, not look like the boy next door. Apparently, I'd stereotyped the guy before I'd even met him.

Not to mention that my type usually had a lot more curves.

"Your group matchups were due to me last Tuesday. Unless you've made arrangements I don't know about, I think you know where I'm going with this."

"Actually," Leigh said slowly, "I was hoping to do the paper on my own."

I tried not to take that personally. I wasn't *that* bad of a choice. Plenty of people would've wanted to partner with me, if I hadn't alienated half of them.

And I had my own reasons for not wanting to partner with *him*. Just standing next to him made the hair on my arms stand up.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harper, but that's the assignment. Perhaps it will help you to see the benefits of collaboration." Professor Tully gathered up the rest of her notes. "Don't forget that your blurb is due next week, gentlemen." She left the classroom.

The silence that followed was deadening. "Uh, I'm Drew," I ventured. "Drew Romano."

"I know." Leigh didn't exactly sound like a fan. "This must make a change from screaming crowds and cheerleaders."

Ouch. Well, I'd known people were going to make assumptions. *You wanted the bicycle, now pedal*, as my grandfather would say.

Leigh grimaced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I—" His eyes

flicked around the empty classroom as if looking for an unlikely rescue. Not finding any, he sighed. "I guess we're partnering, then."

"Guess so. So what's your excuse?"

Leigh shrugged. "I don't know anyone in the class. I was hoping she'd let me do it on my own."

"So you said." Maybe there was an edge to my voice, because Leigh gave me a look.

"What's yours?"

"Huh? Oh." I felt my face heat. "Same thing, I guess."

Leigh nodded. He took a breath, likely bracing himself for the inevitable. "So, we should get together to discuss it. Tomorrow night at the library?"

Tomorrow was Friday. Was that a test? Maybe Leigh didn't know that I had zero social life these days. "Sure. Eight o'clock?"

He hesitated, bluff called. "Eight o'clock."

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I left first, as much to save my ego as anything else.

After the gloom of the classroom, the sky was overly bright as I made my way with the rest of the student body to the union building, the air clear and crisp. *Football weather*. I pushed the thought aside as I shouldered my way through the crowds in the cafeteria.

Courtney had snagged our usual table, which was no small feat in this lunch crowd. Typically, she was flipping through a textbook as she ate. "I've got a draft paper due to my study group tonight, so I can't stay long."

I settled in the chair across from her with my tray. "Wow, Courts. Hey. How are you?"

She put down her fork with exaggerated care. "Hi there, Drew. I'm great. The weather's wonderful. So chipper and fall-like. How's everything in your corner of the world?"

"Crappy," I said. It just came out. It wasn't like I had a lot to complain about, honestly. I was a twenty-year-old junior at a decent college with a rosy future ahead of me, if the Dean's office propaganda was to be believed.

Though I'm not sure they believed it any more than we did.

Courtney's face shifted to concern. "Are you still getting fallout from the team?"

"Just giving you a hard time. Everything's good."

Most of the team hadn't said much of anything to me, aside from a few uncomfortable brushes in the mailroom and some strained conversations with my roommate, Andre. The funny thing was, it wasn't like I'd been a star player or anything. I'd been an average wide receiver on a Division III team. Football wasn't a career choice for any of us.

My coach had understood that just fine. So had my parents. Only my former teammates didn't seem to understand why I'd want to spend my last two years of college doing something other than play football.

I leaned forward to steal one of her fries. "You seriously don't need all of those."

"And you don't need any," she said, flicking my hand away as I tried for another one. "And hey, do you mind?" She moved my water glass and tray from where they'd been slowly encroaching on her territory. She liked to complain that my stuff always ended up taking over her space. I didn't mean it to happen; it just did.

Successfully diverted, Courtney settled back into her reading. I let my eyes roam. The cafeteria was packed, a good number of faces familiar. I'd seen them in classrooms, in the stands, in the halls giving me nods like they knew me because they'd caught the game the weekend before. I'd wanted to go to a small school, but it felt claustrophobic at times, too, all those people knowing who I was. Quitting hadn't helped, either.

A familiar face stood out. I couldn't seem to escape him today. A few tables up, sitting across from a guy with streaked-blond hair, who leaned forward and said something that made him smile.

How cozy.

"Do you ever find yourself checking out other girls?"

Courtney stared. I think I'd actually thrown her, which is hard to do with

Courts. “Are you asking seriously or because you’re getting off thinking about it?”

“Hey. You’ve known me for two years. Am I like that?”

Heck, most guys I knew were like that. Two girls together, sure, I’d check that out. I took comfort in the knowledge. Maybe I wasn’t a complete goner.

“I assume you are when you’re with your male friends, but as long as I don’t have to hear it, I can give you credit for not being like that.”

“You, Miss Deveaux, are a cynic.”

“I’m not actually forgetting about your question.”

I wish she had. I wasn’t even sure why I’d asked it. Man quits football team, turns gay. It was like a red state horror story.

If that’s what was even going on with me. Part of me felt so turned around this year that I didn’t know what was constant anymore. I’d thought my sexuality pretty constant. At least until Leigh Harper and his gray eyes and bleached-blond boyfriend.

“You’ve gone through a lot of changes this semester,” Courtney said slowly. “I think it’s a normal thing to think about and wonder.”

Changes. Right. I took a few more of her fries. “So you *do* check out other girls. Let me know next time.”

“Ass,” she said, moving her plate away. “Get your own.”

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*A normal thing to think about and wonder.* It wasn’t like I’d never checked out a guy before. It was a given that you’d compare yourself to your teammates in the locker room, maybe offer up some healthy aesthetic appreciation. But I’d never had my pulse flip quite so unnervingly from the curve of another guy’s neck.

Friday night, I threw on an ancient gray henley from high school that was one wash away from the trash can, and jeans that weren’t much better. I’m not sure what statement I was trying to make, other than I didn’t mind looking like a slob.

Leigh, when he found me in one of the library study rooms, looked like he'd never pulled a shirt to wear from the floor of his closet. He'd traded the button-down and slacks for crisp jeans and a blue polo that brought out his eyes and put some color in his skin.

I cleared my throat. "Hey."

"Hey," Leigh returned. He looked as awkward as I felt. Maybe he'd thought I wouldn't show. "So," he said, sliding into the chair across from me and pulling a laptop from his bag, "the assignment is to research a local legend through written and oral sources, then contextualize it within the surrounding culture and mores."

He actually made a class on urban legends sound dry. "Er, yes. At least I think so. I figured we'd come up with a topic then write up the blurb that's due next week."

"Right. Do you have any ideas?"

"Local newspapers?" I hazarded. "Either that or surfing online until we see something interesting."

"Online it is." Leigh was already typing into his laptop.

I pulled out my phone, but the page proportions were all off. "I'm just going to," I said, gesturing to the library computers in the main room. Leigh nodded, not looking up.

The library was deserted, so for once it was no problem getting one of the desktops by the windows. I opened up a browser and started searching. Professors hated when we did that, but it was easy enough to retroactively find a few boring tomes that said the same thing as Wikipedia.

It was dark on the other side of the glass, even with the outdoor lamps. That plus the subject matter and a large, eerily empty library meant that I jumped a little when Leigh sat down next to me.

"Jesus. Warn a guy."

The corner of Leigh's mouth quirked. "Sorry. I just wanted to show you this." He put his laptop down to the right of my keyboard and leaned forward. His hand brushed mine as he reached for the touchpad and I went to angle the screen toward me.

He stared at me when I jumped again. “What?”

“Uh, nothing. What did you want to show me?”

He pointed at the screen. “I was wondering if we could use it. It’s local, or at least local enough to drive to, and some of the people involved may still be alive if we wanted to interview them.”

“Oh. Right.” I struggled to focus on the screen and not the neatly trimmed nails of his hand, or the way his fingers curled almost possessively over the touchpad. There was a precision about Leigh that felt deliberate, like he thought through everything he said and did before saying and doing it. So different from my usual sprawl.

I forced my attention back to the Web page. *Black Aggie*, I read. Demonic stone angel who’d frightened a local fraternity brother to death one night in a cemetery. Great. Leigh was right, though, it was a story based in some truth, if the site he’d found was to be believed, and was close enough to drive to. If Leigh had a car, that is. My parents lived close by, so I didn’t need one to get home; they or my grandfather picked me up for holidays and breaks and the occasional weekend home. And enough guys on the team had cars for off-campus trips to cover the ones who didn’t.

Leigh was still waiting for a response. “It sounds good. Let’s go with it.”

“Okay.” He sat back and propped his elbow on the table, chin on his hand, scrolling through the page with his off hand.

“Can I ask you something?”

Leigh’s eyes flicked over warily. “Sure.”

God knows what he thought I was going to ask. I wasn’t sure myself. “So I noticed you’re not keen on the class. You know there’s a waiting list to get in, right? It’s one of the most popular classes on campus.”

“I’m sure it is,” Leigh said dryly.

“So how’d you get in if you didn’t want to take it?”

Leigh hesitated a moment before answering. “I did want to take it. Or rather, someone I was with wanted to take it, and I needed another elective in order to graduate. He talked me into that one.”

“Oh.” Now I was sorry I asked. I’d forgotten about bleach boy. “So what happened?”

“We broke up the end of last year, and he decided to withdraw. I still needed the elective, so I stayed in.”

So maybe bleach boy was new? “Why don’t you like the class?”

“I like the class. It’s just—not what I’m into, I guess. Bigfoot, Bloody Mary, kidney theft—it’s all pretty ridiculous.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “But people believe in that stuff. Or at least want to believe. Well, maybe not in kidney theft, but the rest of it—Bigfoot, the Hook Man, demon angel statues.”

That’s what fascinated me about it, actually, the idea that there was more mystery in the world than what we could see, hear, and feel. All that collective belief had to give the stories some power, right?

“Is that why you’re taking it?”

I shifted on the chair. One of the backhanded results of playing football is people often think you’re thick, even though that’s not true of most of the guys I played with. So you’re not always asked about secret ambitions that don’t have to do with throwing and catching a ball.

“My grandfather likes to tell stories. Stuff from Italy from before he and my grandmother came over here. I know half of them aren’t true and the other half are exaggerated, but I always liked them.”

“Oh. Makes sense, then.”

“Does it?” Leigh gave me a weird look, so I clarified. “I mean, it feels like a leap from that to an actual academic discipline. It’s just a bunch of stories.”

“Well, it’s not my field or anything, but the class we’re taking now is just a bunch of stories, and they’re offering it as a course here. I don’t see why you couldn’t specialize in something like that.”

A lukewarm endorsement, maybe, but it was still nice to hear. I’d actually been trying to get up the courage to ask Tully about becoming a history major. It was the kind of thing I’d imagined when I quit football: getting more serious about school, figuring out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life after I’d realized I had two years left of college with no idea at all.

Half a semester in, and I still hadn't taken that step.

“So if you're not interested in this, what are you interested in?”

I hadn't intended it as innuendo, but by the way Leigh flushed, maybe he'd read some into it. “What do you mean?”

I said awkwardly, “Just, you know. Hobbies. Activities.”

Leigh's index finger brushed the touchpad, scrolling down the site. His eyes were fixed on the screen. “I think you probably know some of my activities.”

“Uh, sure. I mean, I guess so.” Leigh didn't respond. “What's it like being out?”

I don't know what I was thinking, asking him that. There was a long pause. “That's a pretty personal question.”

I closed out the open tabs on the library computer, glad that my hand wasn't shaking. “I know. Sorry. Should we start working on the blurb?”

Leigh said slowly, as if he couldn't believe he was talking about this with me, “It's... a relief, of course. Not having to lie. But it's hard to live exposed. At least that's what I tell the kids who join the GSA.”

“Oh.” I didn't know what else to say to that. It would certainly scare the fuck out of *me*.

“But sure, we should start working on the blurb.” Leigh straightened, the shift in his face clearly stating that the subject was closed. “I'll start copying over the information from the site.”

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It was past ten by the time we'd haggled our way through the blurb and went our separate ways. Lights, noise, and music spilled out from dorm rooms onto the darkened, tree-shadowed quad as I made my way back to my dorm.

I thought about what he'd said, about how coming-out was a relief. In a way, it had been a relief to admit to myself that I didn't want to play football anymore, like shedding a burden I hadn't even known was there. Not that I was comparing football to leading the effort to ensure equal rights for an oppressed group on a mostly liberal but still insular college campus. Except I guess I kind of was.

To my surprise, Andre was in the room, one of his psych books propped open on his chest. Andre wasn't a partier, but the guys usually had something going on the night before a game.

"Exam next week?"

"Yeah," he said. "You go out to dinner?"

"Met someone at the library for a paper."

Andre nodded, turning back to his book.

I hated how polite we were with each other now. It had never been that way with Andre. I could see why he'd be pissed. We'd been roommates since freshman year, and I'd never even mentioned to him that I was thinking about quitting. I don't know why I hadn't told him. I hadn't told anyone, though, not until the night I'd knocked on coach's door and his wife had let me in.

I sat on my desk chair to take off my shoes. "Who're you playing tomorrow?"

His eyes flicked up. We didn't talk about football. Not these days. After a pause he said, "Shippo. Away game. They're putting us up for the night, so I won't be back."

"Shippo has always been a breeze."

"Yeah," he said. "We'll see."

I hadn't even been to any of the home games, not even to cheer the guys on. I guess I'd figured they wouldn't want me there.

It surprised me what I missed about it—not the endless practices and drills, or even the games, but just hanging out with people with whom you'd just shared an experience. Going to the games wasn't going to bring that back; it would just remind me of what I'd chosen to give up.

And would still choose, if I had the chance again. I might not have told anyone what I was thinking before I did it, but it hadn't been spur of the moment.

*Don't make a step longer than your leg, as my grandfather would say.*

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I was sitting on a couch in an open, light-filled room, familiar in that hazy way that places in dreams are familiar. I think it was the living room of my best friend from fifth grade. Bobby Jenkins. He wasn't there, though, it was just me, my arm slung along the back of Bobby's brown and orange plaid couch, relaxed and easy, and Leigh leaning back into it, turning to me with a smile.

I woke up, heart pounding. It took a second for it to sink in that it had been a dream. The emotions in it had felt real.

Though you'd think if I was going to have an erotic dream about someone, there'd at least be sex.

Likely it was just a by-product of the cafeteria's mystery meat the night before, I told myself as I waited for Leigh at the curb outside my dorm. We'd made plans to drive down to Baltimore to check out the Black Aggie story. The statue, apparently an unauthorized replica of one in D.C., had originally been in a cemetery outside the city until repeated visitors and nightly vigils had driven the owners to remove it and ship it off to the Smithsonian and out of the public's morbid eye. The original caretaker had retired, but his replacement had kept in touch with him, and said he was willing to take us to see him when Leigh had called last week.

A gray Focus pulled up to the curb, brakes squeaking a little.

"You should get those looked at," I said, when I let myself in the passenger door. The car was tidy, which didn't surprise me, but was neither new nor a parent's hand-me-down BMW, which did. I'd pegged Leigh as coming from money. Most of the kids at this school did.

"Yeah, I know," Leigh said absently. He checked his mirror and pulled away from the curb. "I brought some of the notes we took at the library. They're on the back seat."

I retrieved the notes and skimmed through them. There were different variations of the story, but the short of it was, the Agnus family had commissioned the statue of a grieving angel for their family plot in a cemetery outside Baltimore. The angel was creepy enough that stories around it started to form: that if you sat on her lap at night, she'd come to life and crush you;

that the spirits of the cemetery would rise up to gather around her; that at midnight her eyes would glow red. A local fraternity forced their pledges to spend the night with the statue as part of their initiation rites, which culminated one night in one of the initiates actually dying of fright.

Likely the caretaker would have his own spin on it.

“Thanks for driving,” I said, glancing over. Leigh was wearing jeans and a gray zip-neck fleece. He drove with his left knee bent at a casual angle, right hand at two o’clock, left arm resting on the window frame.

The image of him from my dream flashed through my head. I looked away.

“Sure,” he said. “It should only take us an hour and a half or so to get there.”

Saturday morning, the roads were nearly deserted. Early morning light refracted off the few cars we passed and filtered through trees already starting to turn. The college station murmured on the radio.

“You must have gone to some of the games.” Apparently, that had been on my mind since Tully’s classroom.

Leigh glanced over. He looked embarrassed. “Uh, that guy I was with. He had a thing for... football. Or, you know,” another sideways glance, “football players.”

“Really.” I wondered if Leigh’s ex had checked me out. I looked out the window, feeling oddly self-satisfied.

“Actually,” Leigh said slowly, “I wanted to talk about what you asked me in the library.”

My stomach flipped warningly. “Oh?”

“I shouldn’t have brushed you off like that.” He resolutely studied the road. “Or made assumptions about how open-minded you’d be. It’s the Gay-Straight Alliance. If you were interested in being an ally, you’d be welcome.”

“Oh. Sure. I mean, I’d support you and all.”

Pretty weak for an ally, much less someone who was starting to feel less and less *straight*, but Leigh didn’t seem to mind. “I can send you some

information about the group. Don't feel obliged to join if you're not interested."

"Sure," I said, staring at the back road scenery sliding by outside the window.

My parents had been into road trips when I was a kid, taking us out west to see all the national parks and making us camp in sleeping bags in one of those old-fashioned tents. When we got into our teens, my sister and I bitched enough about the conditions that they'd eventually stopped, but I still remembered the first day of driving, the early morning excitement and anticipation with all that empty road in front of us.

"You live around here?"

"Huh?" Leigh gave me a startled look. "Oh. No. Massachusetts."

"Must be hard. Going to school so far away, I mean."

"No." Leigh's eyes were fixed on the road. "Not really."

There was too much in that loaded statement to untangle. I realized how much I didn't know about him or his situation. I turned back to the window when Leigh didn't offer up anything more.

It was eleven by the time we'd reached Baltimore and met up with the current caretaker, Malik. He was a young guy who only vaguely knew about the legend, but he seemed pretty fond of the old caretaker. "Some visitors will be good for him," he said, directing us to a house only a few miles from the cemetery.

Leigh pulled up to the curb in front of a porch and a bit of scraggly grass. The siding was new but the house itself was old, I noticed, as Malik led the way through to the screened porch out back, complete with creaking hardwood floors and peeling wallpaper. It reminded me of the houses in the neighborhood I'd grown up in, until my parents moved outside the city.

A balding man in his eighties sat at a patio table in khakis and a white button-down over a tending-to-stocky frame. He peered at us over wire-rimmed glasses and put a folded *Baltimore Sun* on the table. "Are these the kids?" he asked Malik, who nodded. "You're not from that fraternity, are you?"

“We’re from Buchanan College, Mr. Perry,” Leigh said, holding out his hand. Perry ignored it. “We’re doing some research on the Black Aggie story for a class on urban legends.”

Perry shook his head. “Doesn’t take much to get a degree these days, does it?” He made a gesture toward the remaining chairs around the table, which I took as a sign to sit down. Leigh and Malik followed. “Call me Gus, by the way. No one calls me Mr. Perry. So what do you want to know? I was around when that kid died, but you’ll be disappointed if you think a statue had anything to do with it.”

“Actually,” I broke in, “We were wondering what you thought about the statue. Why you thought it had such appeal.”

Perry—Gus—zeroed in on me. “I wouldn’t exactly call it *appeal*.” He shook his head. “Who am I kidding. The thing was creepy. If it actually had been some minion of hell, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Why is that?”

“The family had meant it as a kind of guardian. An angel to look over their family. Sometimes irony’s just too rich to pass up. Or maybe it’s easier to see something as evil than good.”

“Do you think that’s how other people saw it?”

Gus shrugged. “How do I know what goes on in folks’ heads? But they used to come here in droves, just to see that statue. They’d drive by Sunday afternoons and camp out at night, making up stories about what happened. I don’t know what they were looking for, but it was something. There was one group who was convinced it was the spirit of a nurse who’d been hanged by a mob some years back, come back to haunt us. A newspaper reporter came by about twenty years ago asking about that, but he never did find any facts to back it up.” He snorted. “I went to go see her once. After.”

I perked up at that. “I thought she was in some museum basement?”

“That’s what they all think, but no. In the eighties she was transferred to the courtyard of some Federal building.” He shook his head. “None of them have any idea of the stir she caused here. I’ll tell you what, though. That kid dying was real enough. Folks sure get themselves worked up about a thing.”

I got a few more stories from him, but that seemed to be the extent of what Gus had to share with us. Pretty soon Malik had to get back to work and Gus was clearly fading.

“Used to be, I’d get four or five calls a month asking about Black Aggie. Then they started to peter off. Like anything, people’s interest fades. Kind of nice, talking about her again.” He stood up to see us out, despite Malik’s protest. “You boys take care now.”

Leigh dropped Malik back at the cemetery. We parked and wandered around a bit, Malik showing us where Black Aggie had once held court, but it was just a cemetery. It was hard to imagine it had once swarmed with curiosity seekers.

Leigh glanced over at me when we got back in his car. “You were really good with him.”

I thought back. I guess I’d kind of hogged the conversation. “Sorry. I should have let you get a few questions in.”

“Why? You were doing great.”

A highway sign flashed by with food and fuel options ahead. For reasons I wasn’t going to examine too closely, I didn’t want the day to end. Besides, I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “Want to stop for lunch?”

I was sure the last thing he wanted was to take more time on a Saturday to spend with the guy he’d been saddled with for a class he hadn’t even wanted to take, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask.

Leigh’s eyes flicked over. “I could eat.”

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“So what happened with that guy you were with?” I said, as we settled into one of the diner’s booths. The place was clean if not fancy, the prices cheap enough to fit a college budget. “Your, uh, boyfriend.”

Leigh clearly hadn’t expected me to ask that by the few seconds it took him to regroup. “It’s not an exciting story.”

I shrugged, picking up one of the laminate menus the waitress had dropped off. “I was just curious.”

He had to start wondering where all this curiosity was coming from. “I got an internship offer in D.C. for after I graduate. Seth’s planning to go to Michigan for grad school. He wanted me to go with him, give up the internship.”

Leigh was right. As reasons went that was a pretty standard one. “You didn’t want to try the long distance thing?”

“He didn’t.” Leigh shrugged. There seemed to be a lot caught in that shrug. “And we thought it better to quit now and stay friends than start to resent each other for the decisions we’d made.”

“That sounds like someone trying to rationalize something they don’t agree with.”

That got a startled laugh. “Yeah. Probably. But sometimes life takes you in different directions, whether or not you want it to.” Leigh leaned forward. “But now it’s my turn.”

I forced myself to say casually, “Ask away.”

“Why’d you quit the football team?”

I could tell he wasn’t asking as a fan—mostly the fans had been bewildered, the few who’d said anything to me. A couple had been angry, as if I had no right to throw the opportunity away, as they’d put it. There were opportunities everywhere, I’d wanted to tell them.

“I knew it had to end sometime, right? It wasn’t like we were all going to keep playing football the rest of our lives.”

“Sure, but you still had a couple of years.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I guess it’d become more habit than anything else. It would have been easy to keep going with it, but it just didn’t feel like me anymore.”

I couldn’t help wonder if, unconsciously or not, I’d known there was more going on with me than a need to experience life outside the football team. Because *I think I may be gay* would have been a considerably more complicated conversation than *I want to quit the football team*.

“Quitting must have taken a lot of guts, then.”

Most people thought it had been cowardice, not bravery. “I don’t know about that.” I played with a crease in the laminate menu, folding it back and forth. “But my coach was cool with it. Surprised, but supportive.”

“How about everyone else?”

“Oh, they’re fine. The people who matter, anyway.”

Which were my parents and the friends who’d stood by me, like Courtney. I think for the rest of them, it wasn’t that they disagreed with my decision, though I’m sure most of them did: it was that they felt like they didn’t know me anymore. I’d become unpredictable. We’d ended up more awkward with each other than confrontational.

The waitress came by to take our order. I ordered a burger and a Coke. Leigh got the grilled ham and cheese.

When she’d gone, I asked him, “So what’s the internship? The one in D.C.?”

“My uncle works for the political action committee of the Human Rights Campaign. He got me a spot for the summer. It’s mostly lobbying and fundraising, organizing HRC groups for local issues and elections. Hopefully making the world a safer place for people who don’t fit someone else’s mold of normal.”

“Sounds like that takes a lot more guts than quitting a football team.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Leigh smiled. “I like to think it won’t always have to.”

“So your uncle, he’s...?”

“Gay? Yes.”

The waitress dropped off my Coke and topped off Leigh’s water. “Your parents, then, are they cool with, you know?”

Leigh took longer to answer. “I wouldn’t go that far. Though sometimes I think it has less to do with me being gay as me being... me. My father doesn’t have a lot of tolerance for what he perceives as weakness.”

“Why would he think that about you?”

Leigh smiled. “Thanks for the vote. But I was... bookish as a kid. My brothers were the outgoing ones. I preferred reading to sports, and in my dad’s

eyes that made me weak. My mom pretty much follows his lead in most things, though it's her brother who got me the internship, so she's more tolerant than a lot of people. Cool with it, though? I wouldn't say that." He took a sip of water, looking at me over the raised glass. "Your turn."

"Me? There's not much to tell."

"Come on, you must have some dark secrets lurking beneath that perfect surface."

*Perfect surface.* Huh. Our eyes met. He raised an eyebrow at me as if in challenge.

"I had a pretty normal childhood, I guess," I said, feeling my pulse speed with the effect of that challenge. "I was more like your brothers as far as sports went. Though my sister liked to dress me up in our mom's clothes, too, so I can't say I was the butchest guy around."

"Now there's a picture."

"Oh, she's got plenty of them. But we get along okay. She's a few years older. My parents aren't actually that into sports. They let me play football, but they weren't upset when I quit."

"What about your grandfather?" I must have looked surprised. "You, uh, mentioned him. In the library."

"Oh. Right. He lives with my parents. My grandmother died a few years back. He's your typical cranky old man, except when he's telling stories. He'll tell them to anyone. I take him to church when I'm home. He's infamous there."

"It sounds like you're all pretty close."

Leigh didn't sound envious, exactly, but it made me think about how easily rifts could form in a family. The kind of distance and gaps in understanding he'd had to deal with.

I couldn't imagine my parents ever not being proud of me, or being ashamed to call me their son. Whatever was going on with me, I couldn't imagine not sharing it with them once I'd figured it out.

But I knew there were no guarantees, either. I liked to think my parents

were tolerant, that they'd love me no matter what, but the possibility that I might be wrong scared the hell out of me.

The waitress came by with our food. Leigh moved his water glass at an angle to his plate, unfolding and refolding his napkin. Apparently, he was as precise in eating as everything else. Halfway through lunch, he started eyeing my Coke like it was a stray dog he was trying to determine was friendly or not, and I realized it was nearly at his elbow.

"Oh, God. Sorry." I moved it back, along with my plate. I'd taken up three-quarters of the table. Courtney was right, I really did intrude on everyone's space.

"It's okay." Leigh sounded surprised to hear himself say it. He cleared his throat. "I don't mind."

He changed the subject, though, to the details we'd gotten from Gus. We spent the rest of lunch hashing through them before hitting the road again. It was late afternoon by the time Leigh pulled up to the curb in front of my dorm. "I can do some more research into the secondary sources, but we should get together soon to start working on the draft."

"Sure," I said.

There was a pause. "Everything okay?"

I realized that I'd been sitting there the last few minutes. "Sorry, just spacing out." I opened the door.

"Drew."

I looked back. He had a strange look on his face. Probably I was just baffling him with my straight-boy crush and inability to articulate any of it.

"Do you..." Leigh trailed off. "Sorry. Never mind." He laughed a little, though it seemed rueful. "I'll see you in class."

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"Let's say you wanted to ask someone out, but you weren't sure they felt the same way."

Courtney eyed me over her coffee. The sound of running washing

machines and dryers hummed in the background. I'd always liked the sound. It reminded me of Sunday mornings at home.

"Isn't that every dating dilemma ever?"

"Is it?" I said.

"Drew," she said, disbelieving. "Wait. Are you telling me you've never been turned down by *anyone*?"

"It's not like that," I said defensively. Except I guess it kind of was. The girls I'd dated in high school and college had all seemed enthusiastic to be asked, though dating at Buchanan mostly amounted to meeting up at parties, having a few too many drinks, and making out in the room of whoever could get their roommate to leave for the night.

It was how I'd met Courtney. Not the making out part, but the roommate part. Hers had been crazy, as I'd discovered after a few weeks of seeing her, which had been enough of an experience to bond us since freshman year.

"You, my friend, are too gorgeous for your own good."

I grinned. "I know, right?"

Courtney didn't seem to think it the bonus I did. "It's completely unprepared you for rejection. I can't believe there's never been a girl with the good sense to turn you down."

As pop-psychoanalysis went, this was starting to suck. "Hey."

"I'm serious. I mean, Drew... you're charming. You're good looking. You care about people, and you make them *feel* cared about."

That was better. "So where does good sense come in?"

"I don't know." She seemed to take the question seriously. "You do it so naturally that I wonder if you register any of it." She took a sip of coffee. "So tell me about *them*."

Apparently, that hadn't slipped her notice. "Uh, *they're* someone I just met recently, but I've been, uh, checking them out a while."

"Uh-huh. So what makes this person different from the others?"

Aside from the obvious, I wasn't sure. Was it just because Leigh was a

guy? Was that the missing key to my previous relationships? If so, I'd buried it pretty deeply.

"He's—" Her eyebrows shot up, but coyness only went so far. Even though my voice had shaken on the word, because *fuck* that had been scary. "—an unknown, I guess. A mystery. It's hard to describe."

"So ask him out. If he turns you down, then at least you'll know."

I snorted. "Know what?"

She grinned. "That you're not completely irresistible."

\*\*\*\*

Just ask him out. Right.

I was starting to feel some sympathy for all the people trooping to the cemetery to see Black Aggie, or the ones combing the woods of New Jersey searching for Bigfoot. All that fear and longing for the unknown.

He'd sent me an e-mail with an attachment when we got back from Baltimore. *Hope everything's okay. Here's some info on the GSA, if you're interested. No pressure.*

I hadn't been to any of the meetings. I'd read the attachment, though, and I could see why Leigh was so active in the group. He seemed like someone who cared about other people. *Making the world a safer place for people who don't fit someone else's mold of normal.* I could see why he was so passionate about it.

Despite what Courtney thought, I could imagine rejection just fine. I couldn't think what Leigh, who seemed to know exactly who he was and what he wanted from life, could possibly see in *me*.

At least there was one thing I could get up the nerve to do. "Professor Tully?"

She looked up from where she'd been taking notes from a book held open with the weight of another one. Stacks of books and papers surrounded her, making the office look even smaller.

"Sorry for bothering you. Do you have a minute?"

“These are my office hours, so yes.” She gestured to the chair next to her desk. I moved a pile of books from it and sat down. “What did you need, Mr. Romano?”

I took a breath. This couldn't be nearly as hard as I was making it out to be. “If I wanted to become a history major, say, what would I have to do?”

I'd surprised her. Maybe she'd pegged me as the non-serious type, though I was doing all right in her class, or at least I thought I was. But I could see a gleam of interest peeking through her surprise. Every department wanted more majors.

“I would say that you should set up a time to talk, or we can talk about it now. I can tell you about the courses we offer, and you can tell me why you're interested. Any particular field in mind?”

I still had a hard time shaking the feeling that if I told people what I really wanted to do, they'd just laugh. “Oral history.”

A little more interest peeked through. She gave me a contemplative look, as if sizing me up. “Then let me tell you about our courses.”

It was past three by the time I left her office. She'd had some good advice and a few book recommendations that I stopped off at the library for. If I did go with oral history, then she'd be my advisor, so it had felt as much like an interview as an information session. But I thought I'd done okay.

Back at my room, I flipped through one of the books, and then through the course catalog she'd given me.

“Heads up.”

My hands went up reflexively as a football flew past my head. It bounced off my palms and hit the closet door behind me.

“Hands are gettin' soft, son,” Andre said.

“Not as soft as your defense.” I retrieved the ball from the space between my desk and the closet and tossed it back. Andre rolled it back and forth in his hands.

“We're heading to the quad for some catch. You in?”

I stared. “Er.”

Andre gave me a look. “It goes both ways, you know.”

That took a second to sink in. I hadn’t realized Andre had been feeling that way. I guess I hadn’t exactly made myself available or approachable to the guys on the team, either. Maybe I’d been pushing them away as much as I’d felt they did me.

“You must be pretty desperate for a decent receiver.”

Andre snorted. “Right.” He tossed me the football again. This time I was ready for it. “Let’s see how out of shape you are.”

\*\*\*\*

“I separated out what we gathered from secondary sources, what we got from the interview with Perry, and then miscellaneous notes from the Web,” Leigh said, after he’d let me in and led the way up to his room. It was midterm season so all the study rooms were booked, and Leigh had a single.

He stepped over three piles of books and papers on the floor and sat on his bed, indicating his desk chair for me. I took the chair, surveying the piles at my feet. They were as neat as the rest of the room. “It’s, uh, very organized.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That sounded suspiciously like mockery.”

“Oh, no. No mockery here.”

“Anyway,” he said, giving me a look, “I thought we could work through them and pick out a few themes to focus on for the paper.”

My usual approach to paper writing was to read as much as I could on the topic, let it marinate a few days, then start writing.

Phi Beta Kappa. Maybe we should try it Leigh’s way.

I retrieved a notebook and pen from my backpack before putting it on the floor behind the chair. Reaching down, I grabbed the pile of notes from our interview with Gus. “Okay if I start with this?”

“Sure,” Leigh said, taking the one on secondary sources.

I read through Leigh’s notes, both from the interview and from our conversation about it after. I had no idea he’d been recording all of that in his head. His notes were scattered with references to me: *D. thinks we should look*

*into the story about the nurse, or D. mentioned that all the sources talk about the angel's red eyes.*

I had to admit that I liked the thought of him thinking about me. Even if it was just in this context.

Leigh had made a few observations that I'd missed, and I mentally slotted them into place with my own memory of the conversation. I wasn't sure what Leigh meant by themes, though. We had a lot of information, sure, but I didn't know how to categorize it.

“Do you think place had anything to do with it?”

Leigh looked up from his pile. “What do you mean?”

I thought through what I'd meant by that. “It just seems very place-oriented. People go *to* the cemetery. Like an event, or a spectacle. But it doesn't just happen anywhere, it has to happen there. A lot of the urban legends we've been talking about in class could happen anywhere—the stories around them just mention some generic rural or urban landscape. But this one is very specific to that cemetery.”

“I hadn't thought about it that way, but I like it. Write it down.”

I grinned. “Bossy, aren't you.”

Leigh gave me a startled look. There was a flash of warmth, of unfolding interest, and then it faded into bemusement. “You're flirting with me.”

My hand tightened around my pen. It was either that or let him see how much it was shaking. “Maybe. Is that okay?”

I couldn't tell by Leigh's expression. “I don't know. It depends on what you mean by it.” He took a breath. “If you're confused about... how you're feeling, I'm more than happy to talk with you about it, or refer you to someone. There are some people at the GSA you might want to talk to.”

As far as responses went, that was a fairly deflating one. “I'm not confused.”

It was becoming clear, however, that any interest of Leigh's was purely professional. I closed my notebook, trying to ignore the sick feeling in my stomach. “Maybe it would help if we each took a stab at the draft separately. See what we come up with, then merge the versions together.”

“Drew.”

Something in his voice made me pause. He’d sounded as scared as I felt.

“I’m usually a pretty good judge of people,” Leigh said slowly. “Or so I’ve always thought. But so far I’ve been lousy with you.”

I’d thought he’d read me pretty well, actually. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t interested.

“It would be easy to take what you’re saying at face value. Scarily easily.”

Now I was confused. “Isn’t that what you’re good at, though? The scary stuff, I mean. Standing up for what you want.”

Leigh laughed a little shakily. “Is that how you see me? That’s—” He paused. “Okay, that’s flattering, actually. I wish I were that fearless. But I’m not.”

I guess part of me had figured it would be easier with guys. No pesky emotions getting in the way, just mutual need. I guess it was never like that when you were dealing with other people’s hearts.

I got up from the desk. Leigh watched me warily as I approached, but he didn’t stop me from sitting on the bed next to him, and he didn’t pull away when I leaned in and touched my lips to his.

Nothing crashed down around us. A pit didn’t open up to swallow me whole. I could feel my heart beating like crazy, but it hadn’t burst out of my chest.

Leigh put a hand behind my head and pulled me in deeper.

*That* was a revelation. I didn’t know kissing a guy could feel like this. I realized my hand was in his hair and his was burning a brand on the side of my ribs through my shirt, and we’d scattered his notes to the ground.

“I have a confession,” Leigh said, his voice a low thrum against my ear. “It wasn’t Seth who wanted to go to your games.”

That sank through even my hormone-addled brain. “Good to know.”

“I have to say, I was a little disappointed not to see you on the team this year.”

I groaned, burying my face in his neck. “Don’t do that to me.” But I could feel a grin tugging at my mouth. “What if I made it up to you?”

Leigh’s lips brushed the underside of my jaw, and I shivered. “You know where to find me.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*About Kate Islay: I'm still getting my feet wet in the original m/m genre, but I've written fanfiction and slash, and I'm slowly finishing up some original writing projects. My upcoming works include the revision and publication of In Allegiance, a pseudo-historical m/m romance about a war captive taken as a slave, and the novella version of By Design, my short story from last year's Love Is Always Write event.*

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# DADDY'S BOY

By Isla James

## Photo Description

One very naked, heavily muscled, man with his back to the camera. The words “Daddy’s Boy” are tattooed across his back from shoulder to shoulder. His legs are spread and he is obviously standing over another man who appears naked from the waist down. The man below him has a large ruddy cock that is nestled between Daddy’s Boy’s ass cheeks.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've been searching for so long. People think I'm dominant or that I want to top. What I really want and need is strong man who won't abuse me, someone who will let me trust. I would do anything for a man like that. I'm so tired. All I want is to be Daddy's Boy.*

*Feel free to take this anywhere you want to go. Just please make it HEA. Thanks.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sassy*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** daddy/boy, tattoos, gay marriage, former military, security men, sex club owner, BDSM

**Word count:** 6,926

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# DADDY'S BOY

By Isla James

## CHAPTER ONE

I stood on the street looking up at the sign for what felt like an eternity. When I made this appointment I was one hundred percent sure that this was the most perfect wedding gift to give my future husband. After all, what do you buy the man who has everything? We of course had done the usual “the wedding is enough, no need to buy gifts for each other” thing, but I knew Rafe and he would do something spectacular for me. So I spent almost a month trying to come up with the perfect gift. Now as I stared at the sign “The Human Canvas” I thought I might chicken out for the first time in my life.

For a former SEAL who had been in some serious clusterfucks that was saying something. I could feel my hands sweating and my heart racing. I was, quite frankly, appalled and embarrassed by my reaction, this was ridiculous. It wouldn't be my first tattoo. After leaving the SEALs I got the usual trident, pistol and eagle, and I had my security company logo on my right bicep, but those were nothing compared to what I was about to do. I took a deep breath and thought of Rafe. This was the one thing I knew he longed for but would never ask of me, the one thing I told him I couldn't give. Yet over the last month as I tried to come up with a gift for him, I realized there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for him, nothing I wouldn't give. He already had my heart and soul; this was just going to inform everyone else who I belonged to. I wiped my hands on my jeans and opened the door.

The walls were covered with some impressive flash. I could see why my best friend Owen had recommended this artist. According to Owen, Damien was the only man who could do this tattoo justice. As I looked at the guy behind the counter, I started to think it was more than just his talent that had Owen recommending him. He was propped against a stool watching me take his shop—and him—in, and the smile that spread across his face made me realize that perhaps I was being a bit obvious in my perusal. He wore jeans and

a white T-shirt, was probably six feet and nothing but muscle. Good looking with amazing blue eyes and a jet black Mohawk. Yet that wasn't what made him remarkable. It was the silver collar circling his neck that caught my eye, and was most definitely the reason Owen sent me here.

"I see Owen left some of the facts out. I'm Damien Cole." He smiled as he held out his hand.

"Max Jones," I replied, grasping his palm with mine and hoping I had done a decent job drying it on my jeans.

"I wondered if you were coming in. You were out there for quite awhile."

I could tell he expected an answer even though it wasn't a direct question. He was probably worried I intended to back out, which I'm sure would totally screw up his afternoon schedule.

"Just needed a minute to make sure. This isn't something that's going to be easily hidden when changing with the team."

Damian started to laugh as he gave me the once over, his eyes sweeping me from head to toe. "I think you can handle them."

I guess I could; at six foot three and two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle there weren't many men willing to challenge me.

"You're probably right." I returned his smile and could feel myself starting to relax. Damien gave off an easygoing vibe that I am sure put everyone around him at ease. He reached back onto the counter and grabbed several papers.

"After we talked I worked up a couple of samples to show you." He spread the papers in front of me. "Any of these what you had in mind?"

I looked over the drawings he had laid before me. To say they were amazing doesn't adequately describe them. They were breathtaking in the literal sense, in that I honestly think I stopped breathing for a few seconds. I had been worried the words I wanted worked onto my skin would be somewhat girly, but all the samples were done in several styles of very masculine script. As I looked them over, one stood out above all the rest. I ran my fingers over each letter and I could almost feel them declaring Rafe's

ownership on my back. It was amazing. Somehow Damien had managed to work the design in Rafe's own handwriting.

"How..." My throat felt tight and the words seemed lodged there. I swallowed trying to clear it while I found the words I needed. I looked at him, obviously waiting for him to explain.

"Master and Rafe are friends, and when I told him about you..." Damien shrugged his shoulders, his lips twitching in a slight smile.

"I decided to help," A deep voice from behind me cut into Damien's explanation.

I turned around to find a handsome man in a designer suit standing there. He was slightly older than Damien but you could feel the connection as he smiled at his boy.

"Damien doesn't tattoo other subs without discussing it with me first." He walked up to the counter and looked down at the designs resting on top. "I agreed that this is the perfect gift for Rafe, so I called Micah and had him get some handwriting samples." He looked up and smiled at me. "I had Micah put some of his skills to use so don't worry, Rafe doesn't know anything about this. It's still a surprise."

I was struck speechless for a minute. Micah and Owen were not only my business partners but had been my best friends since kindergarten. We grew up together, entered the Navy together and now ran JRT Security together. They were my only family before Rafe came into my life. They also tended to meddle worse than old women.

"You know Rafe and Micah?" It was disconcerting to not know this man who claimed to be friends with not only my fiancé, but my best friend as well.

"I own The Club de Sade here in Houston, and have known both men since they opened Chains."

That made sense, as I really hadn't been involved in the club Rafe and Micah owned and had actively avoided it until last year.

"I'm Jonathan Taylor," he stated in a matter-of-fact tone, giving me a head nod as if that should explain it all.

“You’re on the guest list,” I stammered out, feeling as stupid as I sounded.

“Absolutely, we wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He smiled, although I’m not sure if it was at Damien, or myself. Jonathan approached the counter, looking at the drawings placed there. “Have you decided?”

I looked over each of the samples before me. They were all impressive but the one in Rafe’s writing was without a doubt the one that called to me. “This is the one.” I handed the sheet to him, reluctant to let it go. “It’s really amazing. I can’t believe you managed to do this.”

Damien lifted his shoulders in a quick half shrug. “I thought you’d probably choose it, but drew the others just in case.” He looked up, those blue eyes capturing mine. “The letters will be about two and a half inches high and will cover you from shoulder to shoulder. Not everyone wants a tattoo that big, so if that’s an issue one of the others might be a better choice.”

I took one final look at the drawing. I might have had doubts to begin with, but seeing those words in Rafe’s writing they all disappeared. It was as if he was here getting ready to brand me for all to see. I looked up at Damien and nodded, then glanced at Jonathan, “I’m sure, I’m totally his.”

Damien led me to a chair behind a curtained area. Jonathan informed me that since my master couldn’t be here to supervise and make sure I was safe, he would be sitting in. It was reassuring to know I wasn’t alone.

“Get comfortable, we’ll be here awhile.” Damien had already placed the transfer on my back and gotten settled on his stool.

My head rested in the opening of the chair, and my arms were on the armrests. I noticed my fingers were gripping the ends of the chair so hard they were white-knuckled and I tried to relax them. “I’m fine, just tense, but I’ll be good for the duration.” I shifted slightly, trying to find the best position, but something wasn’t right. No matter which way I moved I couldn’t relax.

Jonathan stood suddenly from the chair beside me. “Give me a minute pet.”

He left the cubicle and I raised my head and looked at Damien. “Problems?”

He just gave me the patented shoulder shrug I was quickly beginning to associate with him, and continued prepping my back. I wanted to turn around and see where Jonathan had gone, but a year on my knees to Rafe had taught me it was best to hold the position and wait when dealing with a master. It wasn't long before he returned and crouched down so he was eye level with me.

“Give me your wrists.”

I looked at him warily for several seconds then slowly placed my wrist in his hand. He wrapped a black leather cuff around my right wrist and fastened it securely. I had never submitted to anyone but Rafe, and my uncertainty must have shown on my face.

“You are submitting for him, not me,” Jonathan reassured me, and indicated my left wrist. I placed it in his hand and let him fasten the other cuff. He took each arm and placed them back on the armrests. Before I realized what he was doing he had fastened each D-ring to a clip under the arm. I was restrained in front of two men I had just met and my master wasn't with me. I started to sit up and Jonathan placed his hand on the middle of my back, instantly settling me.

“Do it for him, give him this gift from a place of submission.”

My body stilled. I heard Damien start his machine and move into position behind me. “Just relax. Go where it takes you—we'll watch over you.”

I felt the needle enter my skin, beginning to tattoo my master's ownership in a way that would be difficult to dispute. As the sensations began to coalesce, I felt like Rafe was the one wielding the machine, marking me as his for all to see. The thought removed the lingering tension from my body and allowed the whirring of the motor and the pain of the needle to carry me to the place only my master had ever taken me. It was as if each time the needle entered my skin it validated each touch, every kiss, the laughter and even the tears that had gotten us to where we were today—and, truthfully, to the step we were about to take on Saturday night. I realized it wasn't just the tattoo itself that honored my master, it was the trust I placed in him to never make me regret the words that were being written in his hand across my back. With

the clarity of the moment I understood he had known from our first night together that the time would come when I would offer these words to him. I loved him more than I ever thought possible for his faith in me and his unshakeable belief that we were meant to be together.

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## CHAPTER TWO

*One year earlier*

“Why are we here Owen?” The look on my best friend’s face could only be described as a combination of pissed off and heartbroken, and it was damn hard to stare at. I took a drink from my beer and watched him scan the club, his eyes so obviously looking for something or someone. “Why do you insist on torturing yourself this way? Tell him how you feel, just be honest with him and get it done with.” My exasperation was obvious and my words came out harsher than I intended. I smiled and tried to lighten the moment. “You never know, he might surprise you.”

I was getting so tired of watching my two best friends dance around what was so obvious to everyone around them and had been since we were eighteen years old. Quite frankly, I didn’t have the energy to give to their little drama. I was tired in that bone-weary way that only emotional stress can cause and no amount of sleep will fix. We had just got in from our latest mission and Owen had insisted we stop at Chains for a beer. Although Micah was joint partner in our security firm, he was also a partner in Chains with Rafe Santos. Chains was the premier BDSM and fetish club in the Washington DC area, and although it was the place to be on a Saturday night for those in the lifestyle, I rarely entered the doors.

“How about you be honest. Why don’t you tell me why you hate coming in here?” He grabbed his beer and drained it, slamming the glass down on the bar top, hard enough to draw attention.

I hadn’t seen Owen this angry in a long time. His face was reddened, his mannerisms agitated and the words poured from his mouth in an unstoppable tirade. “Yeah okay, I’ll admit it just about kills me to watch Micah with the subs that flock to him. But while I’m sitting here I can at least see what he’s doing and not torture myself wondering. You sit here letting everyone think you are some big bad Dom when I know you’re every bit the sub I am. You think I don’t know that you would give just about anything to hand over control to Rafe, how badly you want to get on your knees before him and

never get up.” He stood scraping his stool against the floor. “You forget, Max, that as well as you know me, I know you. So don’t talk to me about honesty.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. I had been so careful to keep my feelings to myself. Even if Owen had figured it out, wasn’t there some sort of best friend rule that you didn’t say it out loud until I admitted it?

Owen took a few steps away, stopped, and deflated. The anger leaving him, he just looked broken as he watched me. “I’m gonna take a walk, I’ll be back.” He disappeared into the crowd, walking past the dance floor and into the playrooms. I stood to follow when a hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

“Let him go. Micah’s on DM duty and isn’t playing, so he’ll be okay.”

My heart picked up speed at the sound of that deep, husky voice. “Oh, thanks, Rafe,” I mumbled as I sat back down and took a drink of my beer. I still hadn’t looked his way but I knew he hadn’t left and had taken the seat beside me. I could feel his body heat along my left side and I swear I could smell his sandalwood cologne and the musky scent that was just him. I wanted to bury my face in his neck until that scent was imprinted on my soul. God, Owen was right; I’m not just obvious but desperate as a well.

I started to lift my beer, intending to drain it so I could make my escape, when Rafe reached over and wrapped his hand over top of mine. He lowered my arm back down and I turned to look at him, stunned that he had touched me. Not once in the three years I had known him had he ever touched me. Not even to shake hands.

“Are you ready?” He asked in such a nonchalant tone, I was sure I had missed something.

“Sorry, ready for what?” I responded, still conscious of his hand covering mine, holding my fingers around my bottle with little pressure, but still trapping my arm beneath his.

He looked at me and smiled. “To admit the truth. I have waited for you to come to me, and as I stood here listening to you and Owen, I realized you are not willing to admit you’re mine, any more than Micah’s willing to admit Owen’s his, and I’m done waiting.” He stood up and moved behind me so

quickly that in my stunned state I didn't realize what he was doing until he had both of my arms pinned to the bar in front of me. I could feel his breath on the side of my neck as he held me in this position and not once did it occur to me to struggle.

"I'm not willing for our first time to be in the middle of the club. I find I don't want to share you." His voice sounded somewhat confused at this revelation, as if he hadn't expected the possessiveness inside him. "Come up to my suite?" He stayed that way with his lips an inch from my ear waiting for my response, not rushing me.

It was the most incredible feeling to be wrapped in Rafe's arms, freeing in a way I had never felt before, and as much as I wanted to be offended at his high handedness, I wanted what he offered more. After telling Owen to be honest and take a chance perhaps it was time for me to do the same. "I'm not your regular sub, Rafe. I'm no boy," I answered, my consent implied in the warning of my words.

His voice was slow and husky promising a night I wouldn't soon forget. "I know, you're more."

He took my hand and entwined our fingers, moving back and letting me stand up. We walked through the club hand in hand toward the private staff entrance, and not one person looked shocked at the two of us together. Perhaps I was no better at hiding my feelings or needs than Owen was.

Rafe's suite was on the top floor of the club. I don't know what I was expecting, but the space we entered took me by surprise. The room was large and open-planned. A large four-poster bed was the focal point of the room, with a small sitting area and bar set off to the side. It was well decorated and comfortable but more like a fancy hotel suite than a BDSM playroom.

"Not what you were expecting?" Rafe laughed beside me. "I don't usually entertain up here. I prefer to play downstairs." He walked over to the long mahogany bar set against the wall and bent down to reach something in the mini fridge. "I'm having a Coke, do you want one?" It took a minute for me to make out the words he was saying. God, he was beautiful and bent over, I couldn't look anywhere but at his ass. With the tailored suit pants molding to

the muscles of his ass, it was a work of art. I could only imagine how amazing it would be naked.

“No, I’m good, thanks.”

He closed the fridge and walked over to the seating area, choosing one of the armchairs. He did that thing with his pants that only guys who are comfortable wearing suits do, lifting at the seams to give him more room in what was obviously a well-endowed crotch. He crossed his legs by bracing his ankle on his knee and leaned back, taking a moment to run his eyes over me. The look he gave me was like a caress to my cock and there was no way he didn’t notice my aroused state.

“Come here and kneel beside me.” Rafe said it in such a way that I knew it wasn’t a suggestion. My body did, too, as it moved forward and was on the ground beside him before I totally comprehended what happened.

We both sat there staring at each other for what felt like forever. Although I’m sure it was only seconds, I knew to wait for him to make the first move. I didn’t want to be in control and there was no reason to pretend otherwise. We both knew Rafe firmly controlled the moment at hand, and it dawned on me that this was one of those times when my life was about to change. For better or worse, it was going to change, and at this moment I had no idea which way things were going to roll.

It amazes me what you notice and how life seems to slow down in the critical moments. I could smell Rafe’s addicting scent, the cross between his cologne and that musky cock-swelling scent that was just him. I saw him reach out and grab me. His long fingers wrapping around my neck, pulling me close. His grip strong but still so gentle, that I never wanted to escape. I felt his lips touch mine, whisper-soft yet firm and unyielding, a prelude to so much more. Yet everything felt like I was living it through a filter. An out of body experience, watching myself be kissed by this beautiful man, and yet not really being present. Knowing it was happening to me, but not living in the reality of the moment. It was surreal. Then with two small words the world slammed back into place, leaving me breathless and wholly unsettled.

“Open, boy.”

Two words.

I knew before I came up to his suite that Rafe was a dominant. I knew I was a submissive. I also knew that many Doms used the term boy lightly, interchanging it with pet, sub and other endearments. However, the way Rafe said it, his tone of voice, the way he cradled my head—this word carried great meaning to him and scared the shit out of me.

I ripped my head from his grasp and was on my feet in seconds. “What are you doing?” I asked as I turned to face him. “I told you I’m not one of your regular subs. I won’t sit at your feet, calling you Daddy and waiting on your every word, needing your direction to take a piss.”

He sat there watching me, his eyes taking in every detail. I felt like he could see into my soul and it made me angry that he was trying to breach my well-fortified walls.

“I came here to fuck. That’s it. We both like the kink so go ahead—tie me down, beat me and fuck me raw. But let’s leave the mind games out of it. We both want to get off so let’s go.” I pulled my leather jacket off and threw it on the sofa behind me. I was just starting to pull my white T-shirt over my head when I heard Rafe shift on the chair as if he was settling in for the show. He made no move to stand, and his unwillingness to follow my plan angered me more. “Well, you planning on joining me?” I threw my words and shirt at him and started working on opening my jeans.

He continued to watch me with that deep amber gaze, slowly raising my shirt to his nose and inhaling slowly. I felt like a trapped animal and he knew it.

“If all you wanted was a fuck, why are you here with me?” His voice was calm, and even though he asked the question, he didn’t wait for a response. “You knew who I was, too, before you ever stepped foot in this room, and you knew what I wanted from the moment we met three years ago. That’s why you have avoided me.” He slowly stood up from his chair and walked over to me, each step that of a predator stalking his prey.

“No, you want this. You want to be on your knees before me, and more importantly, you want to be my boy—submitting to me and letting me care for

you. You're just afraid. Scared of the feelings and desires I bring to life inside you." He approached me slowly, stopping within inches of my body. He handed me my shirt balled in his fist, refusing to release it even though my own hand was clutching it.

"If you don't want to be here, then by all means don't stay. But make no mistake. We both know that not only do you want what I'm offering, you need this."

I knew I was being unfair and yet I didn't seem to have the off button to shut up and save myself from my own stupidity. After a lifetime with Micah I knew that throwing a challenge at a Dom was a bad idea, yet my anger overrode every thought of self-preservation. "You think you can take me, make me submit? I'm at least thirty pounds heavier and several inches taller." I smirked as I looked him up and down, making sure he didn't miss the insult I had just implied.

Rafe stood there for what felt like forever watching me, waiting.

"Are you done?"

Three little words that took the wind right out of me. What was I doing here? I had agreed to play, but being someone's boy was beyond new territory. I knew I was being an ass and Rafe was right—I wanted this. I might not be ready to admit it out loud, but I knew I needed him.

I felt the telltale whisper of movement too late, and couldn't counter Rafe's move as he cleanly swept my feet from under me. He cradled my head as he followed me to the floor, resting securely over me and yet breaking my fall. I was so surprised that he managed to get the drop on me that I lay beneath him motionless, aware of every inch of his body against mine.

"You might be bigger and you might win against me but I guarantee, boy, I will give you one hell of a fight and neither of us will go home unscathed." He shifted above me and I could feel the ridge of his hardened cock against my hip.

"Maybe one night we will fight for who gets to top, I think we would both enjoy that, but not tonight. Tonight you're mine, boy." Rafe's stare was unwavering as he stated his intentions, his voice husky and promising untold

pleasure if I would just submit, and I could feel myself giving in. His will, becoming my own.

“I won’t call you Daddy. I don’t play that game.” My voice seemed quieter than usual but I had to make him understand. “I don’t think I will ever play that game. I want to be yours, you can tell me what to do and I’ll obey. I really don’t want to be in charge but it feels weird to call you Daddy. I’ve never had one not even when I was little and I really don’t need one now. Besides, age play just isn’t my kink.”

Rafe looked taken aback for a minute and he released an unexpected laugh. I wasn’t sure what I had said that was so funny and my confusion must have shown on my face. He shifted slightly but made no move to let me up. Finally after several moments he stopped laughing and looked at me. His beautiful amber eyes staring into my soul, he reached up and ran his fingertips down my jaw. Slowly he lowered his head and brushed his lips across mine in a move that was more promise than passion.

“Someday you will call me Daddy. Not today, and that’s fine.” He silenced my token protest by placing his thumb over my lips, gently rubbing back and forth in a rhythmic manner. “You just need to realize that my role isn’t some age-play game. I have no desire to change your diaper.” His face broke into a grin as he continued. “I just want to cherish you and protect you from the world when you need it. I want to help you be the man that we both know you can be.” He paused to kiss me once more, and what started as a gentle press of lips quickly ignited into so much more, until we had to part in order to breathe.

“I never want to belittle you or your abilities and you are no child.” His hardened cock was pressing firmly against me and I couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped as his hips rolled against mine. “I just want to be the man who stands in front of you to keep the world at bay when you need it and the man beside you when you don’t and right now I’m really loving being the man on top of you.” Our lips met once more as his words resonated with truth in my soul, and as our passion flared I was beginning to accept that not only was he probably right, but that I had no intention of letting him go either.

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## CHAPTER THREE

The wedding was held in the backyard of our home. It was perfect and everything I never thought I would have. We had planned the day so that following the wedding we would have a brief reception with all the vanilla friends and family before those in our lifestyle joined us at Chains for the collaring ceremony.

Rafe and I had agreed we would do the usual blushing groom routine and hadn't had time alone since I returned from Houston the night before. I had made the rehearsal supper but my delayed flight hadn't given us time for more than a kiss hello.

Micah and Owen had insisted I spend my last night of freedom with them reliving our youth, drinking beer and eating pizza; the usual tension between them put on hold to help me celebrate my last night as a bachelor. It was nice to be the three of us again, just hanging out, but I was more than ready to finally have time with my man.

I hadn't told Rafe I would be wearing more than my white leather jockstrap to the collaring. He had given it to me just before I entered the change room, as in his words, "the goods were now his and no one else needed to see them." I couldn't help but smile as he really had no idea just how clear it would be to everyone that I was all his. I slipped into the black robe I'd had Micah place in the change room for me, and opened the door to the club. It was time to declare to Rafe that not only was I his boy, but he truly was my Daddy.

The club was full. Our friends were all present to help us celebrate, and the mood in the club was definitely joyous. Rafe was standing on the raised dais, beside Micah who would be performing the collaring ceremony. The crowd quieted as I approached. I climbed the stairs and kneeled in front of Rafe. He looked down at me, his gorgeous amber eyes visibly confused.

"We are here to celebrate the commitment of Max and Rafe as Master and sub." Micah began, smiling down at me. "However, before we begin Max has a surprise for Rafe."

My throat felt dry and I was more nervous now than I was during the wedding. The speech I had planned for this moment disappeared from memory. I looked up and into Rafe's eyes and as I stared at the man I loved the words just started to flow.

“A year ago you explained the relationship you wanted with me, and at the time I told you that I couldn't give you what you needed.” I cleared my throat and blinked rapidly to try to clear my vision. “You told me that someday I would call you Daddy and what that word truly meant, and you were right—you are that to me and so much more.” The tears were rolling down my cheeks now and Rafe leaned down and cradled my face between his two big hands. The small gesture felt so right and it truly was as if the whole room fell away. “I wanted everyone to know who you are to me so there is never any doubt just how much I love you, Rafe.” My fingers unknotted the tie at my waist and slipped the robe off my shoulders, letting it pool on the floor. I slowly turned so my back was to my master allowing him to see the words, *Daddy's Boy*, written across my back from shoulder to shoulder. The sudden intake of breath had me nervous, and I was tempted to turn around so I could see Rafe's face. For one brief minute I was afraid that he hated it, but then I felt him reach out and trace each letter.

“It's perfect. How?” His voice broke and I knew I wasn't the only one affected by this moment.

“A little help from our friends.”

I turned so I was once again on my knees facing him. He leaned forward and slowly placed his lips on mine. I could still taste the champagne he had drunk earlier during our wedding toasts. The kiss didn't deepen, but it conveyed everything we were both feeling in that moment. As we broke apart our eyes held and I couldn't help but smile; I could see Rafe's impatience and his next words confirmed it.

“Let's finish this, I want to celebrate. I've missed you this past week.”

Micah began the ceremony, and it wasn't long before I had an elaborate platinum chain collar around my neck. The weight of it was a reassurance that my Daddy was always with me. It was closed with a platinum padlock

engraved with a scrolled R. It matched our wedding bands, and was simple enough that to the vanillas around us it would look like a fancy monogrammed chain necklace. One I had no intention of ever removing. We had discussed just a simple metal collar but Rafe had decided to surprise me, as I knew he would, with a truly exceptional gift.

The ceremony ended to a round of cheers, well-wishes and plenty of boisterous catcalls. Rafe took my hand and helped me to stand. He pulled me into his arms, one hand secured around my neck to hold me in place for his kiss. The kiss started out slowly but it wasn't long until Rafe's tongue swept across my lips requesting access to my mouth; our teeth clashed and it was obvious we couldn't get close enough to each other. We pulled apart, our breathing ragged, our foreheads resting together.

"I wasn't planning on loving you in public tonight but I've changed my mind. I want everyone to understand you only belong to me." Rafe's voice was quiet but filled with possession. I loved it when he got like this. Often it meant his hard-held control was close to breaking, which only ever meant good things for me.

We were still on the raised area in the center of the club where our ceremony had taken place. I had presumed Rafe would want a quieter location but apparently he was in too much of a rush to relocate. He glanced around, finding a chair pushed off to the side. He grabbed it, dragging it into the center of the stage. Micah had obviously been watching from the sidelines and understood Rafe's intent, approaching with both lube and condoms and setting them discretely by the leg of the chair before winking at me and leaving us.

I moved to stand directly in front of Rafe before starting the slow slide to my knees. I was determined to wait for his direction, and thankfully he was in too much of a rush to drag our pleasure out. "Undo me and wrap those lips around me, boy." His hands were in my hair and guiding me in before his pants were open. I roughly pushed them down and out of the way, at the same time taking his plum-shaped cockhead into my mouth. Resting it in the cradle of my tongue. His taste and smell exploded onto my senses and for the first time in a week I felt like I was home.

I continued to lick and suck, hitting all his favorite spots, and it wasn't long before he was actively fucking my mouth. He pulled his cock from between my lips so suddenly that I didn't have time to break suction and a noisy pop followed.

“Christ boy, it's been too long, but I refuse to come down your throat this first time.” He roughly pulled me to my feet, crushing his lips to mine once more. I knew it turned him on when he could taste himself on me. We pulled apart, short of breath and so close to the edge that I wondered if we were going to make it to the main event. My head was resting in the curve of his neck as I tried to regain control.

“I need you in me so bad, Sir. Please fuck me.” My voice was so husky and the words so quiet I wasn't sure he would hear them in the noisy club. His eyes flew to mine and I could see his desire and need clearly written there and knew the wait was over. He held onto my hand as he backed up to the chair. He pushed his pants to his ankles before sitting and, placing both of his legs between mine, reached to the side and grabbed a condom. He hastily rolled it down his very engorged cock before slathering it in lube. It gave his reddened cock a glorious shine and I couldn't wait to feel him inside me.

“I want you to ride me so that everyone can see the words on your back as I fuck you.” Rafe's voice was rough and filled with emotion as he pulled me into position, holding his cock upright before nestling it between my ass cheeks. I could feel the pressure of him at my rim and slowly started lowering down onto him. My ass felt stretched and the burn was amazing. Taking him in this position, I knew I was going to start our honeymoon feeling his possession for several days. He grabbed my hips and quickly set the pace and rhythm he wanted followed. I may have technically been on top but I was under no illusions about who had control. As he picked up the pace, my moans of pleasure quickly turned to pleas for release. His fingers dug into my hips as he thrust up once more, at the same time pulling me down hard onto his lap. The head of his cock slammed into my prostate, and with the growled “Come boy,” we both exploded.

I fell forward, resting my head on his chest, as we both came back to

earth. His voice was ragged and short of breath as he placed his lips next to my ear and said the sweetest words I had ever heard.

“I love you Maxwell Jones Santos.”

I leaned back to look my husband directly in his gorgeous amber eyes. Needing the soul-deep connection to him as I responded with the words that were permanently written on my body and etched into my heart and soul.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Isla James is a first time author who finally decided to start writing down the stories that float continuously in her head. Between three teenage boys, a husband and a house that never stops she looks forward to the quiet conversations with the very manly men who occupy her thoughts. She enjoyed writing for this event so much she has already started on Micah and Owen's story.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# NOTHING'S MISSING NOW

By Westbrooke Jameson

## Photo Description

Model and former Marine Alex Minsky poses in red briefs while holding a rolled-up white towel behind his shoulders. Most notable are his tattoos and the fact he wears a blade prosthesis on his right leg.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My name's Liam and I'm sure you've noticed that I'm missing a leg. That hasn't stopped me though, well, maybe it did for a little while. But he's (yup, I said he... shocking right?!) here in my life now and not letting me give up.*

*\*Angst is good if it fits\**

*\*Story can start either before or right after the loss of his leg\**

Sincerely,

Rissa

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** blue collar, military men, bears, disabilities, hurt/comfort, PTSD

**Word count:** 8,089

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# NOTHING'S MISSING NOW

By Westbrooke Jameson

Everything seemed difficult today.

Liam resisted thinking that he'd had a lot of good days so, of course, he was due for a bad one. That kind of pessimism didn't help him or change anything. Useless? Put it aside. He did really want to get to the point where it was a rough moment instead of a whole day. If he could find some reason to smile or laugh he could beat this mood back and get on with things. The crap on TV wasn't cutting it.

Then he saw his hand curled on the arm of the recliner like there should be a glass in it. Or a bottle. He fisted that hand, then grabbed his crutch. With a series of hops and pulls, he headed upstairs to his bedroom—the one he'd had from birth to shipping off with the Marines eight years ago—to give himself a reminder he obviously needed.

On top of his dresser was his six-month sobriety chip. You see that? Six months, man. You earned that. It was hell, but you did it. He picked it up, ran his thumb over the letters. Liam had accomplished a lot in the year and a half since an IED took his leg, but this little coin meant he'd saved himself. He'd chosen to live, no matter how hard it was, and not get lost in an alcoholic daze. I can do this.

He had a lot of people who supported him from therapist to sponsor to parents... He smiled. And now he had someone who he might just get to call his boyfriend soon. Well, there went his spirits lifting. Just thinking about Ray picked up the corner of Liam's mouth and added a little heat to the thump of his heart. He took his cell from the back pocket of his jeans, checked the time, and figured Ray would probably be driving home from work right about now.

“Hey there, Li.”

Liam's smile grew. “Ray. On your way home?”

“Yeah, and God, how I love your voice.”

Liam could relate; sometimes Ray's voice managed to growl and purr at the same time.

Ray went on to say, "It's like you've just finished blowing some lucky bastard." He huffed a laugh. "Raspy and rough, but so damn satisfied too."

Hell but this man could make him blush. And squirm. He was still learning how to live out and hearing Ray talk like that gave him a rush. Ray didn't hide anything. A big guy, a little coarse, a good man, and ever so very queer. But what Ray said... No, Liam couldn't go there.

So Liam pushed out a chuckle. "Thanks, man. I was needing a lift."

"Yeah? What's up?"

No worry, no alarm, just concern. Genuine concern too. That was one of the things he liked most about Ray.

"Just a rough day. I'm dealing."

"Course you are. How about I swing by and give you some more reasons to smile?"

"Be good to see you." And it would be, but—

"I'll be there in five."

"Oh. Uh. Ray? Ray?" Liam looked at his phone and realized Ray had hung up.

Well, shit. His new guy was on his way over to meet the parents.

Liam grabbed his crutches, put one back since he maneuvered better with one, then hopped for the door. His heart pounded in his ears. He'd only come out to his parents a few years back. They'd never seen him with a guy because he'd never really had one he'd wanted to introduce to them. Ray had picked him up or dropped him off, but neither of them had ever made a move to have him come in. Was this Ray's way of making sure it happened?

"Mom! Dad!" Damn, but he felt like a teenager even though he'd never had his parents meet anyone then either. "Where are you guys?" he asked while practically throwing himself down the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” his mom asked, suddenly below him. She looked him over fast, obviously worried.

“No, it’s fine. Sorry. Not an emergency.”

He could see her sigh and swallow like a crisis had been averted. It struck him with guilt over all the times it had been that serious since he’d gotten out of the hospital and moved back in with them.

“Ray’s coming over. I just... I didn’t realize... But he’s on his way right now.”

“Oh,” she said, brightening. “Is he staying for dinner?”

“Uh, I... don’t know.” He stopped a couple steps above her, annoyingly winded from the sudden exercise. He really needed to work out more.

“Well, ask him if he’d like to. I made lasagna, so there’s plenty.” Smiling, she reached up and squeezed his hand. “It’ll be good to finally meet the man who makes you so happy.” She winked one blue eye. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Liam felt a blush heat his cheeks before she patted him and walked off toward the kitchen. So, okay, his mom was good with getting to meet his sort-of boyfriend. One down.

From the archway into the living room, his dad said, “Ray’s visiting?”

Liam came down the rest of the steps and hovered near the front door. “Yeah. Right now.” He resisted asking if it was okay, not wanting to revert that many years; he was twenty-eight, he could have a visitor over without getting permission first. Technically.

“Good,” his dad said with a nod. “I can ask him about the kitchen.”

“He’s not coming over to do an estimate, Dad. This is just... He’s, uh...”

“Coming to see you. I get it.” He rubbed his hands together and grinned. “But if the opportunity to pick his brain comes up over dinner, I’m taking it.”

Liam smiled but squeezed at the back of his neck. “Okay. Knock yourself out.”

“Maybe we’ll get a family discount.” His dad waggled his eyebrows.

Two down. And, apparently, sleeping with Ray to get a deal on a kitchen renovation was fine with Dad, too. For crissakes.

Then Liam realized Ray had never seen him without his prosthesis on. Shit. Sure, he’d pinned up that sweatpants leg this morning since he hadn’t been planning on going anywhere and... sometimes he just didn’t want to wear that contraption. Now it was too late to go back up and put it on since that was Ray’s truck parking out front. Don’t freak, Ray. Please.

Something in the center of Liam’s chest eased while he watched Ray walk toward the house. He felt himself smile, just a little, as those big, booted feet propelled strong legs and thick thighs forward. He hadn’t seen Ray’s bare legs, but he’d felt the firmness of the muscles. At six three, Ray had really long legs, and Liam was nothing if not a leg-man. Or maybe a Ray-man since the whole, muscular body of the man did it for him. Though Ray absolutely knew Liam was interested, he didn’t push for more than they’d done. And that was just a couple make-out sessions in Ray’s truck when a goodnight kiss hadn’t been enough.

Then Liam was opening the door and getting a close up look at Ray’s scruffy cheeks bunched up over a grin so wide it almost hid his brown eyes. Solid jaw, slightly Roman nose, full pink lips and all of that face so damn happy to see Liam standing there waiting.

“Hey,” Ray said and cupped Liam’s cheek before giving him a quick kiss. “Look at you brightening up my day right back.”

“Yeah,” Liam said, almost sighed. That thing easing inside him kept spreading outward. Having Ray here, now, did feel really good. Really right.

Ray’s eyes flicked down below Liam’s waist, but his expression said curious. He didn’t say anything and then he gave Liam a wink and a cocky grin. So not bothered, but what was that? Liam backed up to let Ray inside, baffled by his reaction.

Realizing both his parents were behind him in the entryway, Liam made the introductions. Ray didn’t bother with handshakes, but dove right in to

hugging both Liam's mom and dad. The man was definitely a touchy-feely type and unapologetic about it. He liked you; he hugged you. Period. Liam had found himself touched and held seconds after meeting Ray and, though it had been odd and a little awkward for him at first, he'd grown to like it and maybe even depend on it. So few people touched him in any way that wasn't required for therapy. A touch just because was pretty wonderful.

"Well, let's let the boys have a few minutes," Liam's mom said with a hand on her husband's arm. "We'll finish up prep for dinner and give a holler when it's ready."

Liam felt a twinge of annoyance that his mom might think something was wrong and Ray was there to smooth it over. He pushed that away since, yeah, that was why Ray was here and Liam really did need to get used to and comfortable with asking for help when he needed it. He felt better already, but did need this.

His parents headed off down the hall behind the stairs for the kitchen. Liam gasped as Ray shoved his arms up under Liam's and manhandled him backward and into the wall. Ray's grin and wink made a little more sense. Had Ray anticipated that he could pin Liam like this? Wouldn't be surprised if he had.

"Hi," Ray said with another big smile an inch from Liam's face.

Liam chuckled, feeling silly and happy because Ray did this for that very reason. "Hey, big fella. You gonna let me stand up?"

"You are standing."

"Not really. I'm on my toes and... you."

Ray leaned in to make their stubble rasp together. "You can be on me whenever you like." He nipped at Liam's jaw. "Shorty."

"Hey, now. I'm a perfectly respectable five-ten, you giant."

Liam had to ignore the innuendo. He wasn't ready. Still getting used to this body himself, how was he supposed to just let someone else have at it? It wasn't just the missing leg either. Sure, his left thigh ended in a stump, but he

had scars and scar tissue other than just there—places on him where it was obvious muscle had been rerouted to fill a gap gouged out of him by that fucking bomb. He'd considered himself pretty hot before, but now? God, but he didn't want to see pity or disgust on Ray's face. Not yet.

Quietly, Ray asked, "Where'd you go?"

"Huh?"

"Those whiskey eyes were staring over my shoulder for a minute there."

Liam sighed. "Nowhere. Just the day."

"You're a tough one to distract," Ray grumbled. He pressed in closer, a thick thigh wedged between Liam's now. Then he leaned in even more, fitting them together very closely. "How's that for giant?"

Liam rolled his eyes and readjusted his hold on Ray's shoulders.

"Not gonna answer?"

"You don't need an ego boost, big fella."

Ray made a pleased, growly sound, but didn't rub or grind his heavy dick into Liam's good hip. Liam was learning that just wasn't Ray's style. He was a hugger, a cuddler. Ray liked getting Liam in close and then just holding onto him. Liam could imagine lazy Sundays lounging with Ray in bed or on the couch, comfortable and in no hurry. Like now, this close contact was the payoff for Ray.

When Ray kissed him, Liam just gave himself over to the sensations while practically sitting on Ray's leg. He did want to take Ray upstairs—okay, maybe go to Ray's place, not here—and push away all his doubts and worries and fears to have sex with this man. Ray wouldn't freak, and if anything did bother him, he'd say something. Ray talked about things. Not in the "let's analyze all our feelings" way, but in the way that solved problems. Should they talk about this?

Ray eased back, concern on his face while he slowly rubbed his palm over the high and tight hair on Liam's head that was no longer anywhere near Marine respectable. "You really are distracted."

“Sorry. It’s not you.” Liam tried to fight back his guilt.

“Tell me?”

Liam opened his mouth despite not knowing what to say, but his mother interrupted from the other room. “You boys come along and wash up. Dinner’s on the table.”

“Later,” Liam said.

Ray set him on his foot, nodding, before he fetched the fallen crutch too. Liam got a rub along his back, reassuring him, then he led the way toward the dining room.

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Liam leaned back in his chair, laughing right along with his parents at another of Ray’s work stories. Apparently, home renovation had a lot of opportunities for some slapstick comedy and a few surprise discoveries.

In between giggles, his mom asked, “They really had no idea?”

“The looks on their faces when those pages started raining down all over the floor said they definitely had no idea their son had hidden about a hundred centerfolds above his drop ceiling.”

Liam’s dad shook his head. “I’d have mailed them to his dorm room. Or better yet!” He waved his hands, a mischievous smile on his face. “I’d have gone up there and hidden them all over the place so he’d never know when one might pop up.”

“Oh yeah, you would’ve,” Liam agreed. “Like the time you decided to have an Easter egg hunt only you forgot where you hid all the eggs?” He looked at Ray as his dad threw his hands up. “We were finding eggs for weeks and one not until almost a year later.”

His mom shuddered. “I still have trouble being near egg salad.”

“Was it rotten by then?” Ray asked, grinning with Liam at his dad’s misery.

Dad groaned. “Yes, it was. It was a horrible experience and I rue the day I

ever thought I was clever for hiding the blasted thing under that loose floorboard.”

Ray laughed with the rest of them while Liam’s dad rolled his eyes and blushed. It was one of those family stories that would never fade away.

It struck Liam, right then, just how well Ray was fitting in with his parents. He’d charmed them from the moment he entered the house and kept them in smiles the whole time. He didn’t even hold back on the PDAs, which thrilled his mom all to pieces. She loved romantic demonstrations.

“Ray,” Liam’s mom said, “would you like more to drink? I think we could all use a refill after this workout laughing session.” She pushed back her chair to stand.

Liam was the closest to the kitchen. His pride took a hit from knowing she was going to get the damn pitcher because she didn’t want to burden him. She’d said as much a couple times before. But he was better now and, even on one leg, he could do it just fine.

“I’ll get it, Mom.” Liam got up and snagged his crutch from where it leaned against the wall. There was a silence that felt tense to him before Ray started up another story, one Liam had heard already. Liam gave Ray’s shoulder a squeeze in thanks as he passed him.

Suddenly, a flash of light confused Liam for a second. Did someone just take a photo from outside? Then the explosive noise of a thunderclap shook him. It wasn’t so strong a vibration that it actually made him shake—he knew that—but he couldn’t stop how it startled him. His heartbeat kicked into double-time and he was gasping before the sound faded. He felt his fingernails bite into the wood of the doorframe, but he couldn’t make himself relax enough to let go. Not yet.

“Liam?” his mom asked in the quiet voice she used when she didn’t want to push—when she didn’t want to make it worse.

The lie was automatic. “I’m fine.”

No one said anything else, but he could feel them watching. He had to release his death grip on the doorframe or they’d know he was faking. Move

the crutch forward, lean, hop, and he basically ripped his fingers free of the wood. He clenched that fist, used it to balance him against the wall as he kept going around the corner and into the kitchen.

Another flash, and he tensed. Another bang, and he flinched anyway.

“Dammit,” he whispered into the darkened window over the sink. He could see his pale face reflected there and it disgusted him. Fear, worry—He wasn’t a child! Why couldn’t he separate the destructive concussion of an IED explosion from the impotent boom of a thunderstorm?

He looked beyond his own face to the backyard, a place he knew so well, and tried to see nothing but rain on summer grass in the twilight of evening. No scorching sun, dry winds, or danger there. It wasn’t the same. It’s not the same.

“Li?”

He closed his eyes and something like shame bit at his heart. Couldn’t he have had more time before Ray saw just how messed up he was? A crippled, recovering alcoholic who was also afraid of thunderstorms? Oh yeah, he was a catch.

“Hey,” Ray said quietly as he came to stand beside Liam. “You’re not fine.”

Liam glared at the window, into the dark. “It’s not your problem.”

Ray huffed a breath, an almost laugh, then moved in so he stood facing Liam’s side. He slid a hand up Liam’s back until he could tease the short hairs at the base of Liam’s skull. “Couples share problems, dumbass. What hurts you, hurts me.”

“We’re not—it doesn’t—” He sighed and closed his eyes, rubbed at them.

Ray’s hand settled on the back of Liam’s neck. The heat of that big, calloused palm cradled Liam’s head until Ray made Liam turn to look at him. He couldn’t raise his eyes to Ray’s face.

“Yes, we are and yes, fear hurts,” Ray whispered. “If there’s something I can do to help, just tell me.”

Lightning, thunder, like it was right over their heads, and Liam gasped and trembled. Ray's soft lips and the bristle of a day's beard pressed to Liam's cheek. Ray lingered there, leaving more kisses along Liam's cheekbone and around and down his jawline.

Acceptance. The lump building in Liam's throat was the pure gratitude of knowing Ray accepted this part of him. He actually wanted to be here.

Liam tentatively reached toward Ray, worried Ray might not be as accepting as he said. But Ray was right there to gather Liam into his arms and hold him tight. Liam relaxed against him.

"This helps," Liam whispered. "You, like this."

"Being close? Touching?"

Liam nodded, and Ray moved in closer, wrapping Liam up in big, muscular arms. Letting Ray hold him felt so good, Liam couldn't care about seeming weak. Ray didn't mind that. Liam would be strong later, but right now... Right now, he'd let Ray help.

Ray nudged Liam's head up, and Liam saw Ray smirk. "Kisses might help too," Ray suggested. "Instead of a make-out session, we'll call it therapy. Very important."

Liam chuckled even into the kisses Ray dropped on his lips. Then Liam opened his mouth, inviting Ray in, and the kiss went deeper. Slow and thorough. Liam heard his crutch clatter to the tile flooring, but he didn't care. Ray was kissing him, holding him so tightly that nothing as silly as the sound of something falling and drawing Liam's parents into the room could matter.

Until Liam heard a tiny gasp from somewhere behind Ray.

She might've witnessed that hello kiss at the door when Ray arrived—which was, technically, the first time she saw her son with another man—and a dozen other touches through dinner, but seeing Liam's new 'kiss therapy' in her kitchen... He pulled back enough to peek over Ray's shoulder, the worry of being caught still alive and kicking in Liam's gut.

Hands clasped under her chin and grinning so hard he couldn't see her eyes, his mom stood there in the doorway. Okay. So she was pleased as punch.

“Smiling?” Ray barely whispered.

Liam chuckled. “Her face might split.”

Ray gave him one more peck, then turned to look too.

“Why don’t you two go on upstairs?” She shooed at them with her little hands. “I think you’ve got the right idea for what to do during a thunderstorm.”

“Mom...” he couldn’t stop himself from whining. Was she honestly suggesting they make out in his bedroom instead? It was like she wanted them to go have sex. While his parents were down here. Knowing about it. Oh nuh-uh.

“I think so too.” Ray turned around and crouched down a bit. “Hop on, babe.”

Hop on? Crissakes. Liam’s face burned at the offer of a piggyback ride, but he took it anyway. Draped over Ray’s broad, hard back was a place he’d wanted to be for a while now, so hell yes, he leaned on Ray and wrapped his arms around the man’s neck. Ray held Liam’s forearms so he couldn’t choke him, then straightened up, lifting Liam off his foot. Ray didn’t hesitate to hook one hand behind Liam’s knee while the other cradled the underside of his stump. That lack of hesitation to touch it was nice.

“Stairs right behind you,” Liam said. As his mother tittered, he hid his blush by pressing his face into the back of Ray’s neck.

Ray turned around, wished Liam’s mom a good-night, and then stomped up the old servant’s stairs to the second floor.

“This is ridiculous,” Liam muttered.

“I guess you haven’t noticed I’ve got a thing for picking you up.”

Well, he had but... “What’s that about? ’Cause I’m no damsel.”

Ray snorted and reached the top of the stairs. “Damsels don’t weigh as much. Which room?”

Liam pointed. “It’s a dominant male thing, I bet. Used to getting your way, Raymond?”

“Oh yeah, I’m a total top.” He snorted again. “Not.”

Liam was surprised. As Ray opened the door and got them inside, Liam reevaluated what he’d thought he’d known about what Ray wanted. Sweet as the man was, Liam had thought Ray was an always-in-control kind of guy. If he was being sarcastic here... Goddamn, but now Liam was a hell of a lot more interested. Are you ready or not?

Ray set Liam down beside his dresser and there, on top where he’d left it, sat his six-month chip. If he could do that... If he wanted this... He looked back at Ray, who was just closing the bedroom door.

“This okay?” Ray asked and waved a hand at the door.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

Ray smiled uncertainly. “You had a look on your face... If you don’t want me here...”

“I do.” He glanced at the coin again, then focused on Ray. “I do want you here. I’m just... sorry it’s like this.”

Ray shrugged one shoulder and came over just as another crashing thunderclap made Liam flinch. There was nothing in Ray’s eyes but a reflection of his soft smile of concern and acceptance.

“Can you tell me about it? All the things that bother you? I don’t want to get you in a situation or do something that makes anything worse.”

Liam nodded. He owed Ray that knowledge.

“You know about me and crowds.”

Ray nodded, probably remembering their second date when Liam had to ask if they could leave the sports bar for somewhere quieter. Liam was fine with normal large groups of people and he could even go to a bar without too much temptation now. It was the rowdy, active crowds that he couldn’t handle well. All that trapped noise and movement made him anxious, fidgety, jumpy, and unable to concentrate.

“This is the other big thing.” Liam looked away and noticed the open window blinds. He hopped over to close them, giving himself something to do

while he spoke. “I don’t hear thunder. I mean, I do, but I also hear the explosion. I’m better now because I know there’s a difference, I don’t get lost in the past like I... like I did before.” He rubbed at his forehead, his eyes closed. “The problem is when I’m asleep and a storm wakes me up. I don’t know where I am and I... I forget about... That I can’t walk.”

Twice his parents had found him panicking on the floor. Trapped in the nightmare of seeing his body broken, burnt, bleeding out...

“I don’t sleep when storms are in the forecast, but I didn’t watch the forecast tonight because, well, I was on the phone with you.”

“So I should keep you awake.”

Liam nodded and finally turned around. “I pretty much can’t sleep now that it’s here,” he said through another boom. This one did shake the house some, but hey, his voice hardly warbled at all.

“If we do fall asleep now,” Ray said, coming closer, “and it wakes you up, what should I do?”

Liam closed his eyes. He knew he shouldn’t feel ashamed, but... He sighed, then said, “Tell me where I am. That it’s all over. Tell me I’m... safe.”

Ray moved in then and held his face while he kissed him. It felt like reassurance, but also like a reward. Liam smiled against Ray’s lips, and Ray smiled back.

“Let’s get more comfortable and stretch out,” Ray suggested, then dropped down to sit on the bed and get his boots off.

Liam nodded, reminding himself he could—should—do this too. Getting comfortable and using the bed was perfectly normal. Of course, he had a lot less than Ray to take off to get himself comfortable. One sneaker and a sock later, he wasn’t sure if he should lose the T-shirt. He’d definitely keep the sweatpants on since he only wore a jock under them and, no, he wasn’t ready to throw that much temptation at Ray only to make him resist it.

Unless he wasn’t going to make Ray resist anything.

Damn it, make a decision already.

But Liam couldn't think when Ray stood up after he was done with his work boots and socks to shuck his jeans. Boxer briefs wrapped around his hairy legs, their muscles thick and heavy. Gorgeous legs. I knew it. Suddenly, a very vocal part of Liam was screaming for him to stop waiting, stop questioning and worrying, and just grab on and not let the man go.

"Come on," Ray said over his shoulder as he lifted the blankets. "Let's get in here."

Since Ray left his shirt on, Liam did too. He scooted up to slip under the covers as Ray climbed in with him. For a moment, they lay on their sides facing each other and not touching. Then a bang of thunder made Liam shiver, and Ray inched over to him so he could rest an arm across Liam's waist and rub on his back. The up-and-down touch, the warmth, the scent of Ray here in his bed... "This is good," Liam whispered. "Just... this."

"It is."

"Means so much. You doing this," Liam whispered. He blushed from admitting that, but Ray deserved to know.

"Liam, I wanna be here for everything."

He'd known that. Kind of. The confirmation was good. Liam let go of more of his worries and pressed his face into Ray's chest in thanks.

"Not just to help you when I can, but to watch you push through each struggle. You're an amazing man, Li. So strong."

Ray hugged him tighter, and Liam realized he was shaking, little tremors vibrating his arm and chest muscles. Why was Ray saying all this?

"I'm not," Liam insisted. "Not always."

"Babe, you might wobble some and you might fall, but you've got this fire that won't let you stay down for long. You inspire me."

He inspired Ray? Tears leaked from Liam's eyes despite how tightly he squeezed them closed. He couldn't get a word out to make Ray stop.

"I know it wasn't always like that. I know you've been through so many different kinds of hell. But you do it now. You get up and you keep going."

Oh God, he was breaking. Right here in Ray's arms, he was just falling apart. The storm raged on above them, flashes and bangs, but it was Ray confessing his feelings that ripped into Liam now. He wasn't worthy.

"And, Li, I want you to know that if you need it, need me, for help... I'm here, okay? You need a smile, a hand, or someone to sit up with you when it storms, pick me."

Liam moved fast, desperate to make Ray stop before he lost it completely. He fused their lips together, bumping in, pushing hard. Ray opened up, just let Liam's tongue in to thrust and parry, and held him tightly.

But Liam couldn't maintain the kiss as a sob ripped out of him. He choked back any further such noises and hid against Ray's shoulder again. Ray's words had broken him, but he knew he'd needed them, needed them from Ray. This man wasn't going anywhere and wanted whatever Liam would give him. That was love. Dear God, Ray loved him already.

"I pick you," Liam managed to whisper near Ray's ear. "I do. I pick you."

"That's all I want."

Ray rubbed at Liam's back, soothing all the aches he'd started. Slowly, Liam stopped shaking and the tears dried up. He felt cleaned out and exhausted, like the storm had moved through him as it was moving over the city. Leaning heavily, half on top of Ray, Liam just breathed and realized he didn't know and didn't care about what he should do now. All that mattered was this moment right here.

"All right?" Ray asked and stopped rubbing to hug him.

"Yeah." He refused to feel embarrassed about weeping on Ray. He'd obviously needed that, and Ray wanted everything. "Thanks."

"I meant it."

"I know."

Liam sat back enough to look Ray in the eye. They both wiped at Liam's wet face, then shared a smile. "Can you stay for a while?"

"How's all night sound?"

A wiggle of worry about his parents had Liam hesitating, but only for a second. “All night sounds perfect.”

“Good. Now get on my other side so this one can dry off.”

Liam snorted and moved around, making sure to get his elbows and knee in soft places so Ray would grunt and twitch. When he lay down again, Ray started arranging Liam’s limbs so one arm was tucked against Ray’s side, the other went across his chest, and his pelvis was snugged right up into Ray’s hip. Ray even gripped Liam’s stump leg and pulled it across his thighs, then went and left his warm palm resting on it.

“Comfortable?” Liam asked with a smirk.

Ray seemed to consider it, then nodded. “Yep.”

“Sure you don’t—” Liam was cut off by a roll of thunder. More distant now. The storm was receding. Okay. “—want a glass of water?”

Ray chuckled. “Nope, I’m good. Well, there is one thing.” He used his other hand to push Liam’s head down onto Ray’s shoulder. “Ah,” he sighed. “Now we’re good.”

Liam smiled and closed his eyes. He probably wouldn’t sleep until the storms had passed, but if he slept and woke in the night, Ray was here to ground him and remind him where he was. He’d be just fine.

\*\*\*\*

In the morning, Liam woke to find himself on his back with Ray draped over and hugging him like one of those full-body pillows. He smiled before he even opened his eyes, so complete just knowing Ray was still here, softly snoring into Liam’s ear.

They’d talked a little more last night while the storm rolled away, but about nothing important to anything except the fact Ray stayed and distracted Liam from his worries. Some more “kiss therapy” hadn’t really wound them up, but Liam had fallen asleep in about the same state of arousal he was in right now. Feeling Ray against his hip just added to that.

Then Ray rolled to his side and hauled Liam with him. Ray’s hand against the small of Liam’s back made sure their erections lined up perfectly.

With his voice gruff from sleep, Ray asked, “Are two trees enough to count as a forest of morning wood?”

Liam snorted, then chuckled. He squeezed his eyes closed, but nope, the mental image of a forest of giant, erect cocks didn’t vanish. He laughed more when he imagined himself running naked through all those “trees” looking for the perfect one to climb.

He laughed until he realized his mental image of himself had two whole legs. When he tried to imagine an update on that, he only succeeded in drawing out a memory of waking up in the hospital with a stump.

Ray made that fade away—bless him—when he said a good morning to the side of Liam’s neck. Lips and breath ghosted over his skin before a firm, wet tongue teased itself against his stubble. The wash of warmth that cascaded from that spot southward through Liam had him sucking in a breath and holding tighter to Ray.

When Ray nibbled Liam’s earlobe, Liam knew he either had to give in or stop. “I don’t want to stop,” he said, his voice even rougher from a night’s sleep.

“Then don’t,” Ray said before moving his head around to find Liam’s mouth for a kiss.

Liam moaned into Ray, hot and eager that fast. He held tighter to Ray’s shoulder and waist, feeling a little squashed when Ray rolled back on top of him, but it was under nearly a couple hundred pounds of thick muscle, so he just couldn’t care. Except... Except then Ray’s heavy erection lined up with Liam’s and everything got real.

When Ray came back for another kiss, Liam turned his head away. “Wait.”

“Okay.” Ray eased back. “It’s okay.”

Liam covered his eyes. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Hey, seriously, it’s fine. I mean, if it physically causes you pain—”

“It doesn’t.”

“Oh.”

Liam looked at Ray. Had he let him think there was a physical problem? Or had Ray gone there on his own? Then Ray smiled.

“And it feels like everything’s in working order too,” Ray said with a small grin and ground his hips into Liam’s.

Liam groaned, near defeat. That felt so good. Just that much. “Everything works fine. I... I don’t want to... to—”

“Listen, you want more time, I’m—”

“—disgust you.”

“Disgust me?” Ray jerked and frowned. “You couldn’t possibly.”

Liam’s temper flared. “I have a lot of scars, Ray. It’s not just my missing leg. It’s a patchwork of scars from putting me back together again.”

“So? You’re a dumbass if you think I don’t want to see and touch you anyway. D’you really think some injury takes away from how fucking hot you are?” He glared at him. “I’m not missing out on sex with you because you’re a moron.”

Liam glared back. “Keep calling me names, asshole.”

“Keep being stupid, and I will. For shit’s sake, Liam, I don’t care about a missing leg or bunch of scars. I don’t need you in pristine condition. I just want you.” Ray pressed his forehead against Liam’s. “Need me to repeat everything I said last night?”

Liam’s anger dissipated and he sighed. “No.”

“Remember everything?”

“I remember. I know.” He relaxed again beneath Ray. If he really wanted this...

“Then let’s just see what happens, hmm?” Ray kissed his forehead and rubbed one hand along Liam’s side. “Let me love you this way too.”

Liam squeezed his eyes shut, swamped by a new, scarier emotion. He’d thought maybe Ray was saying he loved him last night, but to hear the words now... Ray did love him. Couldn’t imagine why, but there it was. Oh God.

Ray nudged Liam's forehead, and Liam tilted his head back. A moment later, Ray's exhale seemed to convey his relief just before his kiss told Liam all about the man's excitement. And need. Ray hadn't kissed him with so much passion before. Feeling that, knowing it was for him, God, it melted Liam right into the bed. He just gave in completely, come what may, because he trusted Ray.

When Ray tapered off the kiss and looked into Liam's eyes, Liam saw the question. He nodded, his course set. Ray made all the difference now.

Ray's smile was equal parts triumphant and devilish. Liam smiled, and Ray grabbed Liam's T-shirt and pushed it up. Liam was going to hold it out of the way or maybe just take it off completely, but Ray dove down and swirled his tongue around Liam's nipple.

"Aw yeah," Liam practically sighed.

"Oh good. Love doing this."

Liam's breath came faster as Ray licked and sucked at his chest. He couldn't hardly keep still as Ray worked both nipples at once, the different sensations thrumming pleasure all through Liam. Then suddenly, Ray moved on top of him, some of that big-guy manhandling coming into play as Ray wrestled Liam out of his shirt. Liam let him do it and laughed while he did.

When Ray whipped his own T-shirt off, Liam paused to appreciate the sight. Thick whorls of black hair covered Ray's chest, hard, square pecs and rippled abs. Liam would have to conduct a mini-savenger hunt to find the man's dusky nipples and navel beneath all that dark fur.

"You look like you're about to start drooling," Ray said with a chuckle.

Liam grinned. "Nice sweater."

"Hey, just because you're practically bald..." He tugged on the fuzz between Liam's pecs.

Liam batted Ray's hand away. "I like the sweater look, Raymond."

Ray dropped down on top of Liam again, this time with a cocky grin and a move that rubbed their chests together. Liam laughed a little breathlessly at the

way Ray's chest hairs tickled his skin. A solid, warm, male body wanting him... No, accepting him. Priceless.

After a swift kiss, Ray began meandering down Liam's chest, gripping muscles and licking skin. It felt so good to lie there and let Ray do whatever he wanted. It was arousing as all hell to be worry free now and just content to explore each other with no more secrets.

Ray grinned and wiggled Liam's waistband down another couple inches to reveal the top edge of his pubes. He ran his tongue along that sensitive line, making the hair all over his body stand up. Ray still looked so pleased with himself at that. Liam tensed a few muscles to keep from shivering, but it didn't work. Of course, the shiver made Ray look up and grin like he'd accomplished some mission.

Then Ray's fingers pulled Liam's sweats down farther in the back and his nails lightly scratched Liam's bare ass. Okay, yeah, he so needed this. Suddenly, it was sex, with Ray, and right now. But Ray flinched, making Liam look down in time to see Ray's eyes go wide. Another tug and Ray uncovered Liam's ass.

"Christ on a thumbtack," Ray said before his eyes panned up to meet Liam's gaze. "You've been wearing a jock? All night? Around the house? This whole time?"

Liam chuckled at all the overemphasizing and shrugged one shoulder. "They're comfortable."

"They're porn, you son of a bitch. They're locker room fantasies and—" He huffed a breath, and then dropped his head down onto Liam's naked hip. "You little bastard."

Liam bit his lip to keep from laughing again. Ray looked up, with more than arousal coloring his cheeks now, and barked a laugh before dropping his head into Liam's groin and moaning. The vibrations made Liam squirm and grab Ray's hair, some pleased noises ripping out of him. When Ray started rooting around down there, Liam felt his eyelids flutter as he groaned and rubbed back.

“Yeah,” Ray said and got up on his knees over Liam. “Much as I love these damn things, I gotta get you out of it right now. Right now.”

Ray tugged Liam’s sweats the rest of the way off, while Liam took off his T-shirt completely. Given Ray’s enraptured expression, it was apparent he paid a little homage to the jock as he slowly worked it over Liam’s erection and down his legs. Ray actually gave the underwear a kiss and promised to visit it again soon before he tossed it over his shoulder.

Then Ray was staring down at Liam’s naked body. No more hiding, there he was. And wasn’t. Pink and white, battered and abused. Every last broken bit of him right out in—

Ray sighed. “I won’t lie and say it isn’t hard to see you like this, Li.” Ray’s gaze flicked from spot to spot on Liam. “You shouldn’t ever have had to go through any of this.” He trailed his hand down Liam’s thigh, his fingers gentle as they smoothed over the stump end. When his eyes found Liam’s again, Ray smirked. “Still hot as hell, though, you gorgeous fuck.”

Liam chuckled, posed to get another wink, and realized... Yeah, we’ll be okay.

Holding his gaze, Ray leaned down and kissed Liam’s scarred hip. The look in those chocolate eyes raised Liam’s heart rate. Ray’s touch, though, that was a bit fascinating. The feel of Ray’s fingers and tongue would disappear as they passed over a scar, then come back almost too strong on the other side. Liam knew his nerve endings were still getting their act together, but God, he hadn’t known their misfiring could feel so intensely good.

“Ray,” he whispered and reached down to touch the man’s hair.

Ray hummed and took Liam’s hand, holding it against the mattress. Liam grinned and gave in all over again now that he’d been told not to disturb Ray’s explorations.

Honestly, despite the fact Ray had only one and a half legs to explore, to Liam the experience didn’t feel all that much different from when other—

No. No, this was completely different. He looked down his damaged body and it was Ray taking his time to leave kisses and gentle touches over every

inch of him. Liam might've gotten laid plenty of times, but he'd never had a man make love to him and mean it before right now. This was completely different.

“Poor babies,” Ray whispered.

Liam came out of his revelation with a confused frown. “Babies?”

Ray cupped Liam's sac and moved it away from the scar high on Liam's inner thigh. “That was way too close.” He took away Liam's ability to comment by sucking one nut into his mouth.

A moan stuttered out of Liam and he spread his thighs wider. He tilted his pelvis up toward Ray, desperate. Liam reached down to stroke himself, but Ray's hand pushed him away before doing it himself. The sloppy suction on his balls combined with the firm pull to his cock had Liam writhing, thrusting into Ray's hand because he couldn't not do it, and teetering on the edge already.

When Ray swallowed the hard, hot length of Liam's cock? “Oh God, Ray, yes,” Liam said, hissing that last word. Plunge and suck, plunge and suck, then Ray's mouth left him. The loss of it had Liam gasping and moaning in confused desperation. “Please. Ray.”

But then Ray's hand was on him again, slick this time and pumping fast. Liam saw Ray watching him and the intensity of his touch, his gaze, was overwhelming. It bowed Liam's spine, arched his neck, and stole his breath. Sensation shot through Liam hard, tensing every muscle he had from his toes to his ass to his jaw, pausing his lungs, tripping his heart, until a shock of release freed him to groan. He melted under Ray's touch even as it grounded him again, letting him wallow in the beauty of that hard-fought moment of release. Freedom. God, he was so free.

Ray left him again, but this time, when Liam looked, he saw the incendiary sight of Ray using Liam's cum to slick his raging erection and get himself off with urgency. Liam touched Ray's furry belly, felt it tremble, and combed Ray's short hair back from his sweaty forehead. Jesus, he was beautiful fighting for his own orgasm. Fierce and strong, just struggling to fly.

“Come on, big fella,” Liam said and kissed Ray’s chin when he tipped his head up, eyes closed and panting. “Shoot all over me.”

Ray tensed up, his face a clenched-jaw grimace, then he barked out a sound of release and warm jizz splashed onto Liam’s belly and cock. Ray’s deep bellow preceded him falling against Liam and he pressed his face into Liam’s shoulder as he shuddered a couple more times.

“Goddamn, you’re gorgeous.” Liam pulled Ray against him, just held him, welcoming the clinging heat of their bodies and the way they panted in sync.

One of those deep breaths told Liam his mother was awake and frying bacon downstairs. He felt and heard Ray inhale before the man chuckled.

“Forgot about your parents.”

“Me too.” Liam winced internally. How much might they have heard? Enough of him was still basking that he sort of didn’t care if they’d heard every grunt in surround sound.

Ray rolled to his side, and Liam felt him wipe them both down with something cotton. Probably a T-shirt. No doubt Liam’s.

“How about you spend the weekend with me at my place?” Ray asked.

Liam peeked at him with one eye. “That’s cheating.”

“How so?”

“My brain’s all mushy.”

Ray chuckled and leaned against him again. “So it might be easy to influence you?”

Liam rolled over, daring to seek out more closeness. “Your words are too big.”

“And you’re one of those guys who’s useless after an orgasm.” Ray gathered him into those strong arms. “I’ll remember that.”

“What?” Jeez, Ray was a post-orgasmic Chatty Cathy.

“Spend the weekend with me and I’ll give you lots of orgasms,” Ray said into Liam’s ear, his voice a real nice rumble.

Liam snorted. “Deal.”

“Slut.”

“Yup.” Liam sighed, then tilted his head enough to kiss Ray’s throat. “But only for you.”

“Mmm... And why’s that?”

Moment of truth time. Liam opened his mouth and just said it.

“Because I love you, too.”

Ray sighed, sweet and satisfied. He pulled Liam closer into the warmth and solidness of his big body.

Liam sighed, too, with exhaustion, yes, but also with peace. So much soft, decadent peace. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt like this and he realized... Nothing’s missing now. Liam relaxed completely and knew he was finally ready for the next chapter of his life to begin with Ray by his side.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*I might be an escaped con or a former sheriff's deputy. Once I was a chef... or was that a chief? It's entirely possible I'm a used-car salesman or an insurance agent. Go-go boy, I might have done that... recently. Then there were the years as either a waiter, dog walker or bike messenger, but I don't like to talk about them. I might be a carpenter and singer, and though I don't have a sex tape available anymore, I'm definitely gay now. Oh! Occasionally, I write a thing or two.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# BTW I LOVE YOU

By Nico Jaye

## Photo Description

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

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We got to know each other via the internet and did not meet until a year later. We've had a lot of complications, things getting in the way of our relationship, like the distance and people not believing that it could work, but we got through it. Now we're on vacation celebrating my college graduation and I think something exciting is going to happen!*

*What were the events that led up to this vacation? What is going to happen next? (No BDSM please, thank you!)*

*Sincerely,*

*Jane*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, friends to lovers, geeks dorks, Internet relationship, long distance, chatty boyz, emoticon abuse

**Word count:** 18,985

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# BTW I LOVE YOU

By Nico Jaye

## PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

*To: Aidan Montgomery*

*From: Jake Everett*

*Subject: You & Me?*

*Attachments (1)*

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

*If you're lucky. ;)*

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

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

The small two bedroom flat was dark, which made sense since Kai had finished up with his finals on Tuesday and was probably out and about enjoying his hard-won freedom already. Aidan made his way through the apartment by the afternoon light filtering through the university-issued horizontal blinds and grabbed a Coke from the fridge on his way to his room. After adjusting the blinds to let in some of the sunlight and setting his Coke on his dresser, he tossed his backpack by his desk and pulled out his phone again.

*I'm always lucky. X*

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

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

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

*xoxo.*

It was just easier that way.

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

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

Damn, it was complicated.

Once their relationship had gotten off the ground, Aidan had discovered that Jake didn't really talk about his feelings... at all, actually, so between the

two of them—what with his shy ways and Jake’s proclivity towards more... physical expression—Aidan had grown accustomed to this state of just having to assume that they were on firm ground.

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

Like that picture Jake had just sent.

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

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

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

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## CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Stranger: ugh*

*Stranger: geek*

Then she left.

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

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

*Stranger: Batman.*

*You: Wolverine???*

*Stranger: come here often? :)*

*You: lol*

*You: You might have seen me around as Bruce.*

*Stranger: \*gasp\* letting me in on your secrets already? ;)*

*You: You look like a guy w/his own secrets to deal with. :P*

*Stranger: ain't that the truth*

Aidan's gaze lit up, and he leaned forward, his fingers flying as he typed to—*he grinned*—Wolverine. He couldn't see too much of him other than the oversized Wolverine mask that covered nearly his whole face, but Aidan could make out broad shoulders covered by a thin dark grey T-shirt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Stranger: looking for something? someone...?*

*You: Maybe...*

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

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

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

*Stranger: ?*

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

*You: Besides, you already know MY secret ID.*

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

When he faced his laptop again, Aidan made eye contact with a dark-haired hunk. His hair was cropped short, and Aidan could just make out the glint of a silver bar that was pierced across the upper curve of his right ear. His features were even and strong with a defined jawline that swept down to a determined chin. Shining grey eyes glinted at him with good humor. And that mouth. Oh god, that mouth. As Aidan's gaze returned to the stranger's mouth, those beautiful lips curled up in a little half-smile. Aidan flushed. *Wow.*

*Stranger: hello, stranger*

*You: lol*

*You: Hi.*

*Stranger: I'm Jake.*

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

*You: USC?*

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

*You: j/k :)*

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

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

*Stranger: amount of charm ;)*

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

*You: ha*

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

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

*Stranger: nobody, but a guy could hope :)*

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

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

*You: Yum.*

*Stranger: very—Thai place*

*You: Double yum! Hot date?*

*Stranger: maybe...*

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

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

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

*Stranger: j/k*

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

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

*You: Well, hope you have a good time.*

*Stranger: I'm gonna try*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're not gonna fit in my bag, squirt," Aidan said to his eleven year old sister with a roll of his eyes. *God save him from his Belieber sister.* "Besides,

you gotta keep Mom company while the menfolk are gone,” he added with a teasing smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then a window appeared in the corner of his screen.

*jake.everett09@gmail.com added you to Contacts. Accept?*

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

*Jake: hey Red*

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

*Aidan: Hey!*

*Aidan: Red??*

*Jake: for obvious reasons :)*

*Aidan: Hrm...*

*Jake: you don't like?*

*Aidan: I dunno...*

*Jake: b/c I do...*

*Jake: very much*

*Jake: :)*

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

*Aidan: Then I guess it's okay.*

*Aidan: I GUESS. :)*

*Jake: better than okay... pretty damn adorable if you ask me*

*Jake: oh wait, you didn't ask me*

*Jake: did I say that out loud? :)*

*Aidan: Well, dunno if you said it out loud, but you um... typed it out loud. :)*

*Jake: haha*

*Jake: true, didn't SAY it out loud, but thought it out loud :)*

*Aidan: And I thought it... but didn't say or think it out loud.*

*Aidan: Until now. :)*

*Aidan: Whatcha up to? What time is it over there?*

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

*Jake: not much. almost 10am. got a few min between classes, so just checking email and stuff*

*Jake: but saw you come online and thought I'd say hi...*

*Jake: so...*

*Jake: hi :)*

*Aidan: Hi :)*

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

*Aidan: Fun class?*

*Jake: eh, it's okay so far. only the first week and I'm still getting used to the new place. ppl are cool, though*

*Jake: what're you up to?*

*Aidan: Packing stuff. Heading back to SoCal tmrw b/c the quarter starts next week. Ugh. :(*

*Jake: awww, but LA's fun, though :) go have some Roscoe's for me*

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

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

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## CHAPTER 2

“Dude, you ready?”

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

“Party...?” Aidan cleared his throat. “Oh, right. Um, gimme five minutes, ‘kay?”

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

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

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

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

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

*So... where's Jake?*

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

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

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

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

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

He didn't know how to explain it, but he just knew he'd grown to want it.

Simply talking with Jake and sharing their inside jokes and knowing that Jake would just get it brought more sunshine to his day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, Aidan.”

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

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

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

“No kidding. I can barely draw a straight line, and they expect me to draw graphs in five colors?” Tyler grimaced. He hesitated a moment, then cleared his throat. “You know, I was gonna get together a study group next week if you’re interested. Maybe we could pool all of our resources and figure out what the hell’s going on in that class.”

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

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

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

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

Aidan flushed. “Oh, c’mon. It’s for a study group.”

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

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

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

Aidan dropped his forehead into his hands. “You guys are hopeless.”

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

“I am happy,” Aidan said, lifting his head. He squinted at the guys. “Who said I wasn’t?”

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

“Eric?” Dean murmured to Kai.

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

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

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

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

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

Kai returned the smile. “Good.”

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

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

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

*Aidan: Then heading back home for break.*

*Jake: awww... you'll do great*

*Aidan: I hope so.*

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

*Jake: :(*

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

*Aidan: Ohhh, jealous! I love the beach.*

*Aidan: Pack me in your suitcase. :)*

*Jake: wish I could*

There was a pause.

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

*Jake: I'll miss you, Red*

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

Aidan swallowed hard before responding.

*Aidan: I'll miss you, too.*

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

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

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

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

*To: Aidan Montgomery*

*From: Jake Everett*

*Subject: (no subject)*

*Attachments: (1)*

*just wanted to say hi*

*so...*

*hi :)*

*saw this on the beach and thought of you*

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

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## CHAPTER 3

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

Especially not from halfway around the world.

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

Most concerning of all, though?

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

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

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

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

Tyler grabbed his arm and kept him from falling. "You okay?" At Aidan's nod, he smiled and let go. "Yeah, it was really amazing. I mean, it was a

family vacay, so not all fun and games. Still, for my first time there, it was pretty cool. We went skating in Rockefeller Plaza, we caught a taping of Letterman, and there was snow on the ground and everything.”

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

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

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

“So he’s not, um, your boyfriend or something?”

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

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

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

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

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

Tyler lifted his brows. “Okay as in...?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Towards the southern hemisphere, in fact.

*Maybe that’s why you should give this thing with Tyler a chance, then. Do you really want to be hung up on a guy eight thousand miles away?* Aidan

could hear Kai lecturing him as clearly as if his roommate were standing right there.

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

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

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

Or he should be feeling something, at least.

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

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

And that terrified Aidan.

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

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

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

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

He'd just gone on a perfectly decent date with an attractive, smart, and really sweet guy. He should've enjoyed it immensely, but instead, he had been comparing it to time he spent with Jake. Time spent online with another person, not even in Jake's physical presence.

And that scared him because holy shit.

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

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

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

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## CHAPTER 4

*Aidan: Hey there, stranger.*

*Aidan: Long time, no talk.*

*Jake: hi Red!*

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

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

*Jake: aww, I know what you mean*

*Jake: my bro was complaining to me about his homework*

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

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

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

*Jake: ;)*

*Aidan: ha*

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

*Jake: oh yeah? what's up?*

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

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

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

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

*Aidan: And it should have been amazing.*

*Aidan: But it wasn't.*

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

*Jake: ok*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jake: Red. Aidan. I don't want you to go. And there's no need for you to go, I swear. I feel the same way—about everything and about you. Seriously, you almost gave me a heart attack when you just mentioned your date. I could try not to feel jealous or anything, but I want that. I want to have a reason and a right to feel jealous of this guy. I never said anything before b/c it's kind of crazy and I didn't want to tie you down or hold you back or whatever. The distance, the timing—I'm not coming back to LA until January, you know. Everything is pretty crazy about our situation. But you're really special and we're smart people. And I think we can make it work. I know I want to try.*

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

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

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

Jake.

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

“Hi, Red.”

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

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

“I threatened bodily harm if they didn't leave.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay."

"Okay."

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

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

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

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When Tyler mentioned going out the next weekend, Aidan blushed and told him that he was seeing someone now. Tyler wasn't too devastated by the news and hadn't looked all that surprised when he found out who it was. He

mentioned staying friends and keeping up with their study group, to which Aidan agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

Aidan had never done anything like that before. He'd always thought the idea of it seemed a little weird, but with Jake, it actually seemed... well, pretty

normal. Aidan supposed it was because they'd exposed so much of their personal thoughts that baring himself physically felt like a natural progression. It just felt good to share that part of himself with Jake. Actually, it felt really damned good most of the time.

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

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## CHAPTER 5

“Are you seriously going to count down the days like that?” Kai’s voice drifted over his shoulder as Aidan drew an X across December 3<sup>rd</sup> on his wall calendar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Happy birthday, Red!*

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

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

*– Jake*

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

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

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

Before he could become distracted by the memory, Aidan had turned his attention back to the package. Underneath a few layers of bubble wrap, he found a box, and inside that box, he found a smooth leather billfold in an unusual burgundy color. It was classic and stylish and would be the perfect replacement for his ratty old wallet, which he’d admittedly had since his sophomore year of high school. In fact, as he’d once told Jake in one of their numerous random chats, it was still intact thanks to some small miracle and an unhealthy amount of duct tape.

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

“Oh god, he’s got that goofy look again,” Kai groaned from the front seat.

Jane flicked her gaze up at the rearview mirror, her eyes mostly shielded by sunglasses, before leaning forward to check for traffic at the intersection.

“Yeah, been seeing that a lot these days. And this guy’s worth putting your dating life on hold during these prime college years?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The guys were crazy. He knew what to expect.

Right?

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He had no idea what to expect.

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

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

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

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

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

What if Jake didn’t like what he saw?

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

But... it was still an unknown element.

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

What if they just didn't mesh?

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

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

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

And that day was finally here.

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

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

His phone buzzed.

*Come downstairs, Red—your chariot awaits :)*

Aidan took a bracing breath.

*Here we go.*

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## CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aidan wasn't sure if the smile he tried on then was wobbly, but it definitely felt unsure. Just like he did now that he saw Jake. Jake who drove a Porsche

and whose six-foot-one frame looked like he'd stepped off the side of a billboard.

*Oh god, what am I doing?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s wrong?” Jake asked softly.

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

“Talk to me, Red. It’s just me.”

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

He was startled when he felt gentle fingers graze against his jaw. Blinking

his eyes open, Aidan found Jake's face close to his, his grey gaze warm and affectionate.

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

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

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

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

It just felt so unbelievably right.

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

and take that leap of faith; after all, it was clear that Jake—gorgeous, smart, perfect Jake—was already prepared to do so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake's place was enormous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aidan cocked his head. "Really?"

"Yeah, when I was moving out here from New York, my parents came together in a united front to surprise me," Jake said. Aidan remembered talking with Jake about his parents' divorce, and Jake had mentioned that there was actually no bad blood between them. Jake gestured at the posh furniture. "My

mom took apartment duty, while my dad took car duty. So, yeah, the apartment kind of reflects my mom's taste, and the car was totally my dad's idea. Think my mom wants to rent out the place when I finish up with school." Jake took a sip from his glass of water and smiled before setting it down on a side table. "Almost four years later and I still can't believe it, but I'm not gonna complain. Honestly, as long as it's a roof over my head and a set of wheels to get my butt to campus, I'm happy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

And moments later, as Aidan settled onto the queen-sized bed in his inside spoon position while wearing his T-shirt, boxers, and a pair of borrowed

sweats, he had to agree that naps were, indeed, highly underrated. Especially when they were accompanied by the feeling of being held close to Jake with the weight of Jake's arm curled around his waist and his fresh ocean scent on the pillow.

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Aidan blinked a few times as he came awake.

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

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

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

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

Those lips...

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

Then he realized that he could.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clothes. They needed to come off. Now.

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

He stroked across them with the pads of his thumbs. The cool metal was a sensual counterpoint to the firm warm skin that it ran through. "These are so

hot. You're gorgeous," Aidan murmured, flicking his gaze upwards to Jake's face.

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

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

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

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

Aidan shoved the sheets and blankets aside, and, after a moment, they emerged naked from a tangle of legs and clothes. He returned to straddling Jake's hips, and when they made cock-on-cock contact, Jake's groan matched his own. Aidan watched their two cocks sliding against each other and thought he might come just from the sight of that deep pink shaft pressing against his own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With his hand still gripping Jake's sac, Aidan pulled back to watch, his hips stilling as he savored Jake's movement against him. Aidan's gaze

alternated between the press of their two cocks and the intense look in Jake's eyes as he reached his finish. Jake's grip was firm as he milked their two cocks with strong strokes. His smoky grey gaze was fixated on Aidan's face, and his breath came in short gasps as his stroking and thrusting quickened.

Aidan felt the exact moment when Jake began to come.

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

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

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

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

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

His eyes rolled back in his head.

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

Jake was watching him, and when his gaze met Aidan's, his eyes lit up with wicked intent. Aidan felt Jake's hands on his ass as they pressed him forward. Jake's sucking was relentless, and his head bobbed rhythmically as he worked Aidan's cock. Jake adjusted his grip on Aidan's ass, and one hand

delved between Aidan's rounded cheeks. Jake's fingertips brushed tantalizingly... thrillingly... against the sensitive skin surrounding his hole. Aidan gasped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## CHAPTER 7

Today was the day.

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

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

He'd never been in love before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So I have some good news, Red.”

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

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

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

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

Aidan, who'd just heard last week that he had been accepted into a fellowship program at a water treatment facility nearby, could hardly believe it. A whole summer together—actually, a whole after-college together. He'd tried not to think about what would happen after graduation. He'd known Jake

was applying for jobs in SoCal, but he hadn't wanted to pin his hopes on that possibility given the tight job market. Now, though? The fact that Aidan knew with certainty they'd be in the same city indefinitely excited him to no end.

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

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

The right time would come. He knew it would.

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## CHAPTER 8

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

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

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

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

"Alright, that should do it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake's eyes opened.

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

Aidan had been so afraid all this time of what Jake would say back that he'd made up excuse after excuse not to say it. He figured Jake's sweet, loving, thoughtful actions spoke louder than words, so the fact that Jake hadn't said the L word hadn't made Aidan feel uncomfortable about being in love with Jake all this time. But Jake hadn't said it, so Aidan had kept his mouth shut. The few times he'd mustered up the courage to say it, it had never been the right time to do so.

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

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

"I love you, too."

Aidan blinked rapidly at those simple words.

Jake loved him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aidan shook his head slowly. “No... I’m pretty sure I would’ve remembered that.”

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

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

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

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

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

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*A native of San Francisco, Nico Jaye has finally returned home after spending time doing stuff (yes, very mysterious stuff) in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. She thinks reading is awesome and loves that she can hang out night after night with crinoline-wearing debutantes, brawny firemen in suspenders, and werewolf shifters with Scottish brogues. An overall feline enthusiast, she may or may not have a cat named “Nico” from whom she borrowed this pen name. If you’d like to read more by Nico Jaye, then please feel free to check out her website for online freebies and additional info about other publications. Happy reading!*

## Contact & Media Info

*She can be found online chit chatting about cats, popcorn for dinner, spontaneous trips to Iceland, and boys who like boys at any of the following:*

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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# CORAZÓN

By Jenna Jones

## **Photo Description**

Adventurous-looking, mid-thirties Caucasian man, crouching by a fallen tree in the jungle, is juxtaposed against a handsome Latino man in his mid-twenties in a white T-shirt, at an event.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I want a story where this man is an archaeologist studying Mesoamerica (Aztec, Maya). He is very passionate about the history and culture of the region, despite not being native to the area. The younger man is a Mexican college student from a wealthy family who is interning at the dig site (maybe his parents are contributing to the project financially or something). He's never cared much about history, especially not the barbaric people who were civilized by the Spanish conquistadors.*

*He starts out bored and annoyed with his job. Eventually the archaeologist's passion wears off on him and he learns to love the ancient culture and maybe the man who studies it too.*

*Happy ending is a must, some sort of sex would be great (these guys are too gorgeous not to). There will obviously be an age gap, but not too big. I was thinking the archaeologist is early to mid-thirties and the college student is early to mid-twenties. Necessary elements are archaeologist/ Mexican guy, everything else are just suggestions.*

*Sincerely,*

*Bridget*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, teaching, non-explicit, friends to lovers, young adult character

**Content warnings:** minor accidental violence, blood, discussion of ancient religious practices

**Word count:** 12,345

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# CORAZÓN

**By Jenna Jones**

“Office hours are two to four every Tuesday and Thursday,” said Obie Pogue as he opened his front door, unsurprised to see someone who was not one of his students smile at him sheepishly in the yellow light of his front porch. His students rarely came to his house uninvited, but Javier del Bosque had the right of both long friendship and endless charm that let him get away with things that would fell much lesser men.

“Office hours for me are always and always,” Javier said, smiling sweetly. “Can I come in, Obie, or are you going to make me stand out here all night?”

“It’s eleven o’clock,” Obie said, stepping aside to let him in anyway. “Shouldn’t you be breaking hearts at some hot spot?”

Javier ambled through the house to Obie’s living room, unwinding his scarf from around his neck as he went. “It is my heart that is broken. I have received the most terrible news and I don’t know what to do. I met the most beautiful boy tonight and even he couldn’t help.” He dropped himself in one of Obie’s armchairs, his long legs draped over the armrest.

“What bad news?” said Obie in an indulgent tone. Javier was a dramatic person—every new relationship was his one true love, every setback was a disaster. Obie found it cute, if exhausting to deal with.

“Can I have a drink? I can deal with this news so much better if I have a drink.” He shimmied out of his jacket to reveal a silk shirt of ruby red, patterned with tiny darker-red diamonds. The color made his skin look rich and glowing.

Obie tore his eyes away. “It’s a school night, Javier. You don’t need any more drinks.”

Javier leaned his head back with a deep sigh and toyed with the tufting in the back of the armchair. “My adviser tells me that I need field school to graduate, and that the university will only let me stay one more year before

they quite insist that I do. But all of the deadlines for this year have passed, so I must wait until next summer—which is, of course, too late.”

Obie had often thought Javier could have a PhD by now if he'd just apply himself, but on the other hand he wasn't the only third-year senior in the anthropology department. Not for the first time, he wondered what Javier was doing in anthropology in the first place. Out loud, he said, “What are you planning to do?”

“I don't know, Obie!” Javier wailed and covered his face with his hands. “Tell me what to do. Father always says to take your advice—perhaps it's time I did.”

Obie leaned back to take Javier in fully. As usual, Javier looked like he spent as much on clothes as he did on tuition, a carefully constructed persona of carelessness, a hairstyle made to look like he'd just rolled out of bed, colors selected to highlight his olive skin and unusual, amber-colored eyes. Obie sighed, reminded himself that Javier was his friends' son and he'd known Javier since he was a teenager, and tried not to feel ratty beside him in his thin flannel sleep pants and T-shirt so old the graphic of whatever event it commemorated had faded beyond recognition.

He said, “Both your father and I have asked you if you're sure college is the right thing for you. You've always assured us it is, and I haven't told him about a lot of the shenanigans you get up to—”

“What is that word? Shen—Shen—”

“Shenanigans. It's like mischief, but sex is usually involved.”

Javier chortled. “I like that word! I am going to use it.”

“Anyway,” Obie said patiently, “I haven't told your parents about them because I've tried to respect your privacy as an adult.”

“Very kind of you,” said Javier with a gracious nod.

“But this isn't something you can charm your way past, Javi. Is anthropology really something you want to do? Because if it's not, maybe it's time to go home and figure out what that something really is.”

Javier sat still for a moment, picking at a cuticle, and then said, “If I must leave without my degree, my visa will also expire, and I must go home. And if I go home, Father will put me in an office at one of his factories.”

“Is that so terrible?” Obie asked gently.

Javier shrugged and got up from the chair to amble around the living room. He picked up a small head carved from red stone and ran his thumb over the tiny face. It was an artifact from the site owned by the Del Bosque Foundation in the Yucatan peninsula, where Obie participated in a field school session every summer. The little head had been a gift from Marisol, Javier’s mother, for the discoveries he’d made on behalf of the foundation, and Obie wondered if it reminded Javier of home. From the bleak look on Javier’s face, Obie didn’t think that was a good thing.

“There’s no shame in making steel,” Obie said.

“I know. Anything that is built in Mexico, my family’s steel holds it up. But no, it is not what I want to do.” He turned to Obie. “Mother thought anthropology would be good for me. It’s about people. I like people. But not digging in the dirt, I don’t like that.”

“What do you like?” Obie said, smiling to himself.

“You know what I like. Fucking, dancing, beautiful boys. Speaking of beautiful boys, where is Jason? He is usually in about now, to scold me about taking up your precious time like a jealous wife.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Obie said, letting the subject drop. Javier obviously didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “He moved out.”

“No! Oh, Obie, and you let me prattle on about my own little problems when you are heartbroken.”

“I’m not heartbroken,” Obie said as Javier came to sit beside him on the couch, his expressive face soft with concern. “I’m fine. I ended it.”

“But why? I thought at last you had someone to make you happy.”

“Well,” Obie said slowly, enjoying the scent of Javier—spicy cologne, leather from his trousers, end-of-the-day perspiration, expensive soap—as

Javier stroked his shoulder to comfort him. “There were a lot of things, little things. His jealousy, for one thing. You’re right about that.”

“I am always right in matters of the heart.”

“Of course you are. But the last straw was when I took Jason shopping with me for some more cargo pants, because I go through pants like crazy during field school—”

“Summer in Cancún,” said Javier dreamily. “I miss the beaches.”

“Summer in the jungle outside of Cancún,” Obie corrected. “Anyway, we were shopping for pants and Jason held up a pair to me to eyeball the size, and then he *tsked* at me.”

Javier tilted his head. “*Tsked?*”

Obie clucked his tongue. “That. He did that.”

“Oh!” Javier started laughing. “I would leave a man who did that to me, too. Why did he?”

“Apparently I’ve gone soft and gained weight over the school year.”

“You have not.” Javier rapped on Obie’s abdomen with his fist. “Listen to that. Belly of steel.” He looked up at Obie with a smile, and then slid his hand up Obie’s chest and laid it flat. “I can feel your heart beating.”

For such a simple touch, it made Obie’s heart race. He closed his eyes to enjoy it before he murmured, “Javi, don’t,” and pushed Javier’s hand away.

Javier sighed and leaned his head against Obie’s shoulder. “Come out with me, now that you are single again. You should be dancing.”

“And watch you flirt and break hearts? No, thank you.” He wound his arm under Javier’s head so he could cradle Javier’s face in his palm. “I hate watching you throw yourself away on people who don’t matter.”

Javier smiled ruefully. “Someday I will have you dancing with me.”

“Maybe,” Obie said. He let Javier go. “Go home, Javi. Talk to your parents and see what they think about all of this, okay?”

Javier shoved himself up from the couch and picked up his scarf and

jacket. “You think they will throw money at the university to make them let me graduate,” he said gloomily.

“I think they will help you find an actual solution,” Obie said as he got up from the sofa too. “C’mon, I’ll see you out.”

“You’re getting rid of me?” Javier said as he went to the door.

“I have a class in the morning. So do you, as I recall.”

“Maybe I do. What is tomorrow?”

“Thursday,” Obie said, smiling despite himself. For all of his carelessness and party-boy lifestyle, Javier still managed to turn in essays and pass tests. A B-minus average wasn’t remarkable, but it was better than Obie could have done if he treated his classwork that way.

Javier shrugged. “My first class is after lunch. I could stay a little longer. I would love to stay a little longer.”

Obie took the ends of Javier’s scarf and tucked them into his jacket. “Go home. Call me over the weekend and tell me what your father says.”

“He will say the same thing he always says. ‘Why did you have to go to school in *del Norte*?’” Obie chuckled—Javier did a perfect Enrique imitation—and Javier smiled as he looked down at the knotted scarf. “I am well protected against the night air, I see. Good night, Obie.”

“Good night, Javi.” He opened the door and let Javier out, and then leaned against it and exhaled a deep breath.

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Obie was out for his morning run when the phone strapped to his arm buzzed, interrupting his music. He tapped it and greeted the caller with a sharp, “Hello?” expecting it to be Jason, who’d fallen into the regrettable habit of scolding him when Obie was doing things he actually enjoyed.

“Oberon,” said Enrique del Bosque, a much more welcome voice, and Obie slowed down so he could talk properly.

“Enrique! Good morning. Or is it afternoon where you are?”

“I am in Sao Paulo, and it is morning. I was woken this morning by a call from my son. I understand he spoke to you last night about the school’s ultimatum.”

“He did,” Obie confirmed, pausing on a street corner to check for traffic before jogging across. “It sounds to me like they’ve got him between a rock and a hard place.”

“He should have been finished three years ago. Or he should have an advanced degree by now. I had two at his age.”

“I just had one,” said Obie, “but I only planned on one, anyway. Did you figure out a plan for him?”

“He refuses to leave.” Enrique sighed heavily. “Why did he insist on a school in the States? We have perfectly good universities in Mexico, with perfectly good anthropology programs.”

“I remember. I don’t think he’ll really have much say in whether he stays or goes.”

“There is no program that can squeeze him in?”

“If the application deadlines have passed, that’s the end of it.”

“I think if you visit us more often, he will concede to coming home.”

“He’s not a teenager with a crush anymore, Enrique.”

“Yet he is no better at hiding his affections.” He paused again. “You will visit us after the field school this summer?”

“I will.” He was approaching his house now. “I’ve missed the hacienda.”

“I am eager for what you find this year. About Javier, Obie—will you speak to him again? Convince him it is time to stop being a student and earn a living?”

“I’ll try,” Obie said, thinking of Javier’s face as he described the life that awaited him at the steel factories. It would be like burying the boy alive. Obie said slowly, “Or I could try something else.”

“Anything. I am tired of letting him be a child.”

“I haven’t hired a T.A. for field school yet. I could bring Javier. He’ll get the class credits and earn a little money, and there will be the responsibility of helping me and the other students. He’s very good at that, Enrique.”

“My son, a teacher,” Enrique mused. “There are worse vocations. Very well, Obie. If he agrees and the school will accept it, I accept it, too.”

“Wonderful.” He ran up his front steps and paused on the porch, breathing in the cool morning air. “I’m done with my run. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“I think there is nothing. Thank you, Obie. I will rest easier tonight.”

“Talk to you soon,” Obie promised and tapped the phone to end the call.

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Javier lived in a house he shared with four or five other students (the number seemed to change every time Obie visited), owned by the family of one of them, an art student who was painting the house for his senior thesis. Every room had a mural in it, some more complicated than others, and the house always smelled like linseed oil. Two of Javier’s roommates were international students like Javier—one from India, a quiet man who could usually be found outside reading when he wasn’t in the physics labs, the other from Hungary who spent a lot of time in the common room, making out with various girls who were charmed by his accent. Obie suspected the art student was a little in love with Javier, since he was constantly touching up the mural in Javier’s room, whether Javier was in it or not.

He gave Obie a heartbroken look when Obie asked if Javier was in. “Kitchen,” he said and turned to lead Obie there, even though Obie had been there many times. “He’s leaving us, he says.”

“I heard.”

“Isn’t there something you can do? You’re in his department.”

“I’m not even tenured yet,” Obie said. “I have no influence on anyone, let alone to dictate department policy.”

“He’s drowning his sorrows,” the art student said. “Or he was,” he added

when the kitchen appeared to be empty, but then they heard voices in the backyard. “Or the party’s moved outside.”

“Good place for it,” said Obie and went through the back door. The yard was unenthusiastically maintained—there was an apple tree with several mini trees beneath it, where apples had fallen and seeds had taken root, and there was a space intended to be a vegetable garden that inevitably grew nothing but zucchini, which none of the students ate. Javier and Sanjay were in deck chairs under the apple tree, Sanjay looking on with bemusement as Javier rambled in Spanish about having to go home without graduating.

“Professor Pogue,” Sanjay said with relief when he saw Obie. “Save me.”

“Gladly.” He sat on Javier’s deck chair and Javier gave him his most mournful smile. “I talked to your father this morning,” he told Javier in Spanish. When Javier had indulged too much it was as if he forgot every word of English he’d ever learned.

Javier covered his ears. “I don’t want to know what he said. He’s already bought me the plane ticket home, hasn’t he?”

“Not yet,” Obie said. “I had a thought, and he agreed we should give it a shot.” He wrapped his hands around Javier’s wrists, and Javier took his hands from his ears cautiously. “Be my T.A. this summer.”

Javier regarded him. “Are you propositioning me?”

“I’m trying to save your degree, dummy. If you’re my T.A. this summer, it gets you around the class size limits, you get the lab credits, and you can graduate on time. Well, late, but at least you’ll graduate.” He ducked his head to look into Javier’s eyes. Even red-rimmed and sorrowful, they were lovely, a fascinating amber color that Obie didn’t think he’d seen on anyone else.

And they lit up beautifully when he smiled with genuine happiness, as they did now, and he lunged at Obie to hug him tight. “Lifesaver! Why didn’t you think of this last night? You could have saved me the hangover.”

“I didn’t think of it last night,” Obie said, laughing. He patted Javier’s back. “The department has already agreed, but you have to graduate next year, Javier. You hear me? You walk next year.”

“I hear, I hear,” Javier said, bobbing his head, and then held out his bottle to Sanjay. “Drink with me! I will be a college graduate!”

Sanjay looked at Obie helplessly, and Obie took the bottle. “Your roommate’s a Muslim, remember? Come on, let’s get some coffee in you.”

“Coffee is an excellent idea,” said Javier, hauling Obie up with him as he rose. “Let us have coffee and celebrate Cancún! Beautiful Cancún with its beautiful beaches!”

“The jungles of Quintana Roo,” Obie reminded him, but Javier was far too giddy for it to sink in.

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Thanks to the Del Bosque Foundation, the base camp outside the little town of San Rafael had dorms rather than tents. The students were two to a room, while the professors got private rooms to share with their partners. Most anthropologist spouses were hardy enough to handle six weeks in the jungle, digging and hauling along with the students.

Students came from all over the world to attend the field school, many more than once, so a mixture of languages and accents could be heard as returning students greeted each other and new ones introduced themselves around. There were two other professors as well, both specializing in Meso-American anthropology and archeology, and Obie spent a few minutes, after he’d dropped off his belongings in his room, saying hello and making sure they were settling in.

As he passed down the hall from the common room, he glanced into one of the rooms and saw Javier sitting on his bed, looking despondent. Obie rapped lightly on the door. “Javi?”

“Obie,” Javier said and attempted a smile.

“What’s wrong?” He sat on the bed beside Javier, and Javier shrugged.

“Nothing, I suppose. The rooms are very nice. My mother’s touch, yes?”

“Yes. This place is her other baby.”

Javier smiled and looked away. He looked out of place here, in a T-shirt and khakis, and Obie supposed he felt it, too. “They were so happy when they

found you, you know. Someone as devoted to the cause as they, with so little self-interest.”

“Hey, I have plenty of self-interest. I want tenure and publications just like any other academic.”

“Self-interest aligned with theirs, then.” He leaned his head on Obie’s shoulder. “We are very far from the beaches.”

“Over a hundred miles.” He hesitantly laid a hand on Javier’s slender back. It was warm through the cotton and damp from the humidity.

“And the town is tiny. I suspect the social life revolves around the church.”

“It is, and it does. The residents seem to like it when we have lectures there about the dig, so they know what’s going on.”

“I’m sure it’s the highlight of their year,” Javier said wryly and lifted his head. “And tomorrow the work starts. I suppose we should get a good sleep tonight.”

“I recommend lots of good sleep. Your roommate has been here before and he’s a good guy, so I’m sure you’ll get along.”

“Roommate,” Javier murmured with a twist to his mouth. “I have never shared a room with anyone I wasn’t also sleeping with.”

“Don’t sleep with him,” Obie said. “Hookups happen, of course, but I don’t recommend you hook up with your roommate out of boredom.”

“I have never hooked up out of boredom!” Javier exclaimed, and then laughed. “All right, perhaps once or twice... a year. Besides,” he added and gave Obie a look through his thick, dark lashes, “if I were to attach myself to anyone, it would be someone who is already a friend.”

“None of that.” Obie stood. “It’s an adjustment but you’ll be fine if you focus on the work. Have you introduced yourself to the rest of the class yet?” Javier shook his head, and Obie said, “Do that, Javi. We’re going to be together for six weeks. It’s never too soon to start making friends.”

He started to go when Javier caught his hand and tugged him back. “You will be my friend, won’t you, Obie?”

“Of course I will.” He put a hand lightly on Javier’s hair. The humidity was making it curl, despite Javier’s use of many products. Obie liked it this way. “Haven’t I always been?”

“This is new,” Javier said. “This is not my parents’ house or your house or school. It is entirely different and I am—” He swallowed.

“Javier, you’re not scared of meeting new people, are you?”

“Never!” He hesitated again. “I am going to graduate after this, if I do well.”

“Your parents sure hope so.”

“And then what happens?”

Obie sat on the bed again. This could be a long conversation. “I’ve thought for a long time that you could earn a PhD if you wanted. You’re intelligent enough for a career in academics and curious enough for research when you let yourself be.”

“As my father is fond of telling me, I lack the drive.”

“Well,” said Obie, not wanting to confirm it even though he agreed.

“It is all right, Obie. We have had this conversation many times—usually when another year passes and I am still a student. I cannot imagine spending the rest of my life digging in the dirt.”

“There are other paths you could follow.”

“And because of my parents, everyone will expect me to study the Mayans and the Olmecs and all the rest of them, when I find them barbaric, at best, with their human sacrifices and bloodthirsty gods.” He shuddered. “The best thing those civilizations gave us is chocolate.”

“There’s more to the Mayans than human sacrifice,” Obie said, though he knew there was no convincing him otherwise. They’d had this argument many times. “It’s your mother’s culture, Javi, and your culture. That’s why she is fighting so hard to preserve as much as she can.”

“It is her culture, not mine. Father’s family imported brides from Spain for centuries—I am more Spanish than I am Mayan.”

Obie said slowly, “I know it can be difficult when you feel caught between two worlds.”

“I do not feel caught between two worlds,” Javier muttered. “I feel forced to appreciate something I cannot. I always have been. Mother has dragged me to villages to watch mumbling priests and to sites to look at crumbled stones and to museums to marvel over shards of pottery for as long as I can remember. The sooner I am done with it, the better.”

Obie sat back, surprised at his vehemence. “I had no idea you felt that way.”

“It is difficult to bring up when it is your passion, also.” Javier shook his head. “If I were to pursue the path of anthropology, I would prefer another part of the world to be my specialization. Australia, perhaps, or Asia. As far away from this peninsula as I can get.” He glanced at Obie’s face and gave a lopsided smile. “Never fear, I will be a faithful and diligent assistant to you, even though my heart longs to be elsewhere.”

“No fear of that,” Obie said.

Still, as he lay in bed that night, Obie didn’t know what to feel about this revelation. Javier had been feigning interest all this time, not only in Obie’s work and in the passion of his parents, but in his own ancestry. What a disconcerting feeling that must be, especially when he was surrounded by it. No wonder he’d gone to school in the States instead of Mexico. Obie had no illusions about why Javier had chosen the school he did—Obie’s presence, his parents’ contributions to the school’s Meso-American collection—but he’d never thought it would be an escape for him, too.

Yet he still wanted to go into the field, rather than rebel entirely and go into whatever the furthest discipline on the spectrum would be. Astrophysics, maybe, though Obie couldn’t imagine Javier being satisfied with peering through telescopes, either.

*Figuring out Javi’s life is not your problem*, Obie told himself sternly, and rolled onto his other side with his pillow bunched under his head.

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The first two weeks of field school went exactly as it had in previous years. The students worked hard, carrying away dirt and overgrowth from the site, which was a small minor temple the school had unearthed two years before and now had authorization to properly excavate. There were carvings to clean, sketch and photograph, and artifacts to document and carefully store, but mostly there was dirt to clear so that the building would be exposed to the sun for the first time in half a millennium.

Obie and the other professors gave classes and lectures, advised and discussed, negotiated a few personality clashes and tried to keep everyone's focus on the work. This got easier the longer school went on, as the new students became acclimated and the returning students settled in.

Javier did exactly what Obie asked him to, documenting the finds and helping to set up lectures, and Obie had never heard him say so little in the ten years they had known each other, even when Javier didn't speak any English and Obie's Spanish was little more than rudimentary. He put out only a minimal effort to pass his classes, and when they took a field trip to Chichén Itzá he brought a book rather than tour the temple complex, telling his classmates, "I've been here before. It never changes."

"Should I worry? I'm worried," Obie said to Brendan, one of the other professors. "Maybe he's depressed."

Brendan stopped typing on his laptop long enough to give Obie a glance, and then resumed typing.

"What's that look for?"

"You're worried about a student being depressed? I've been doing this with you for three years and I've seen you worry less when a student got lost."

"I was worried," Obie said. "I disguised it with an aura of calm."

"If you're worried about Javier, ask him how he's doing," said Brendan as he typed. "You've known him a long time, haven't you? He'll probably tell you."

"But he's my student, so I can't get personally involved."

"But he's a friend of the family so you're already personally involved. Now go away, I have a lecture to prepare."

“Going,” said Obie and went to find Javier.

He was in the common room, his laptop on his crossed legs, and he glanced up when Obie came in. “Did you get the photos I e-mailed?”

“I did.” He sat on the sofa beside Javier. Two other students were playing chess on the other side of the room, and paid them no attention. “I have a strange thing to ask you. Are you doing okay?”

Javier paused and gave him an uncertain look. “I’m passing the translation class, last I heard.”

“You’re doing fine in translation,” Obie said. “You’ve always been good at languages. I mean in general.”

“I am bored stupid,” Javier said. “My body has never hurt so much for so many days, the Internet connection is too slow for me to Skype the boys who offered to keep me amused, and all the other men here are straight.”

“I’m not,” Obie said.

Javier smiled as he typed. “Every time I have come near to asking you out, you barely restrain yourself from physically pushing me away.”

Obie’s hopes that he had been more subtle were dashed. “It’s not appropriate for you to ask me out. You’re my student, and the son of my friends. You and I, we have a very complicated relationship, have you noticed?”

Javier laughed. “I have.” He paused. “If I was not me and you were not you, would you go out with me?”

“If I weren’t me, I don’t know if I’d like you.”

“You are teasing me,” said Javier and resumed typing.

“Maybe a little,” Obie admitted. “I was worried you’re depressed. At least you’re only bored. And maybe a little lonely, but so are most of us.”

“I can finally count to one hundred in Mayan,” Javier said as he typed. “My mother will be so proud.”

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Most of the artifacts the field school found were small—shards of pottery, arrowheads, beads, maybe a tiny figurine carved from a semiprecious stone like jade or jasper. As Obie told the class, every anthropologist may hope for a big find, but the reality of research was in the small things, the objects of every day. “When we’re dust and bones,” he said, “researchers will puzzle over our cell phones and sunglasses, the things we hardly think about.”

Every basket of dirt was carefully sifted to reveal its secrets, and anything big enough to readily see was first photographed where it was found before it was carefully removed. The site being a temple, Obie knew they would likely find a few knives and more delicate things in addition to the beads and shards, and so one of the lectures covered the religious practices of the Mayans—as bloody as the Aztecs, if less well-known.

Javier frowned throughout the entire lecture, and told Obie afterward, “And you wonder why I find them uncivilized.”

“They were perfectly civilized,” Obie said. “They were just civilized differently than we are.”

Javier snorted, and went off to talk to his roommate instead.

Three weeks into school, they had cleared the north side of the temple to its foundation and had begun work on the east side. Obie was taking rubbings of the inscriptions in the north side wall when Felicia, one of the students, came around the corner, her eyes alight with excitement. “Professor Pogue, we’ve found something that might be huge. Come see!”

Obie climbed out of the pit and followed her to the east side, where the trenches were still shallow. Even so, among the dark layers of undergrowth and soil, there was the unmistakable gleam of human bone—the round top of a skull, and the ridge of a cheekbone. More soil had been cleared away to expose further remains, enough for the students to realize what they’d found and lay down their tools until they knew what to do next.

“Javier,” Obie called, “get the camera. Everybody else, step back a bit.”

“It’s bodies, isn’t it?” said Felicia. “We found bodies!”

“What this likely is,” Obie said, “is the skeletal remains of the sacrifices offered here. They were often thrown down the steps of the temple after the

heart was removed or otherwise disposed of, and they were pushed up to the top of the strata over time.”

Javier came to the trench with the digital camera, and stopped short, staring down at the bones. “Thanks, Javi,” Obie said, reaching for the camera, but Javier made no move to give it to him. “Javi?” Still Javier didn’t move, staring down at the bones, and Obie said, “Javier,” more sharply than normal.

Javier shuddered and looked at him. “Obie.”

“Are you okay?” Obie said more gently. “You’ve dealt with human remains before, haven’t you?”

Javier shook his head, his expression solemn. “Never. It’s always been... cleaner.”

Obie put his hand on Javier’s shoulder. “Get a hold of yourself, Javi. They’ve been dead for at least five hundred years. They’re not murder victims. We treat these just like any other artifact—document it, clean it, store it, study it. Okay?”

Javier looked at Obie again, his eyes brimming. “No,” he said. “No, I am not okay.” He shoved the camera into Obie’s hands and turned away to stride in the direction of the road.

“Javier!” Obie called after him, and when Javi didn’t turn he added, “Wait by the bus,” though he suspected Javier wouldn’t listen to that, either.

There wasn’t a sound from Felicia and the other students as they watched Obie. He took a deep breath. “Come on, guys. There’s work to do.”

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Javier didn’t return by lunchtime, or by the time the class went back to base camp at sunset. Obie hoped that meant he had walked back to base, but he wasn’t in the common room or his room when Obie looked for him, the cleaning crew and cooks hadn’t seen him, and he didn’t appear during dinner.

Finally Obie texted Javier’s cell phone, even though the reception this deep in the jungle was unreliable at best, and told him, *Call me. I’m worried.*

He took one of the Jeeps out, to check the roads between camp and the site. He drove slowly with the lights on, and tried to keep his imagination from

adding details to his worst fear—guerrillas kidnapping Javier because they knew of his family. Obie knew this jungle, but even so, he had no idea how to read it for signs of struggle.

If Javier was in real trouble, Obie had no idea how to help him. Enrique might, but Obie dreaded the possibility of telling Enrique he'd failed his son in the worst way possible. Still, with the night only getting darker, and the unsettling sounds coming from the jungle, Obie drove back to base and prayed Javier had seen fit to return while he was gone.

The communal showers were deserted. Obie showered off the dirt and sweat of the day, and returned to his room with his dirty clothes bundled under his arm. He stopped short when he saw Javier lounging on his bed, flipping through one of Obie's books. "Javi," he breathed, and Javier looked up with a faint smile.

"I got your message. You're very sweet when you're worried."

"Javier del Bosque," Obie began, and then dropped his clothes and crossed the room. Javier stood, that faint smile still in place, and Obie hugged him with his arms around Javier's neck. Javier sighed and leaned his head against Obie's, his hands on Obie's back. "Where have you been?"

"I walked to the village. It's farther than it seems by Jeep."

"It's an hour if you keep up a good pace." He held Javier's face in his hands and looked into his eyes. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out there, in the middle of the night? This isn't a city park, Javi!"

"Obie, I have been traveling here since I was a boy," Javier said patiently. "Of course I know, and I'm never worried unless I have reason to be. I just went to the cantina and had a drink and a long contemplation."

Obie took his hands from Javier's face and stepped back, suddenly aware that he was only wearing a towel. "Well, good. I'm glad nothing horrible happened."

"Thank you," said Javier wryly.

"You know what I mean. I'm glad you're okay." He picked up a pair of sweat pants and tried to pull them on as casually as he could. "You *are* okay, aren't you?"

“I think so,” Javier said, sitting on Obie’s bed again. “I am uncertain.”

Obie sat on the bed too. “Tell me what happened back at the site. I’ve never seen you react to anything that way.”

Javier picked up the book again and ran his thumb over the binding. He said slowly, “Doesn’t it seem to you at times that history is a tide that pulls people along? Until one day, you realize, no, history happens because of the decisions that people make. It is an unsettling feeling, realizing that.”

“I think it happens to everyone who studies history, in any form,” Obie said. “One day it hits you that the past didn’t just *happen*. It’s people doing things, or not doing things, and their consequences.”

Javier nodded. “The Mayans have always been a blur to me. Strange pictures in old documents, wizened old men in villages mumbling in a strange language, stories they told us in school that gave me nightmares as a boy. Mother has tried so hard to make me appreciate them as her people, but I could never accept them as mine. I felt nothing for them.” He lay back and held the book on his chest. “Until today.”

Obie leaned on his elbow and watched Javier, waiting for him to continue.

“Bones, Obie, bones in the field, in the dirt. I have never seen them so... real before. Not a picture or a neatly-wired skeleton, but actual bones of actual people...” He looked at Obie. “It made me want to weep.”

Obie stroked Javier’s hair back from his forehead. “It can feel pretty raw, experiencing that for the first time. But you have to develop some objectivity. Bones are part of the job.”

“I think this is why I prefer the art side of things,” Javier said. “Even at its most bloody, there is still no actual blood. I know there was no actual blood today,” he added, “but there was at one time. Blood and flesh, and beating hearts.”

“It was an honor to be sacrificed to the gods, Javi. Even if it seems horrific to us, to them—”

“I know,” Javier said impatiently. “I know all this, Obie. I have heard the lectures too. But it is one thing to hear the stories in a lecture hall and quite another to look at bones in the ground and realize *this is my family*.”

“Ah,” said Obie in understanding.

“My mother’s people did this—*my* people did this. They wielded the knives or they offered themselves or they carried the stones to make the temples—or most likely, all three. They walked this ground. They drank this water and breathed this air. They lived and died, fought wars and grew food, hunted and prayed—and they are mine, Obie. I am here because of them.” He flexed his fingers. “I have my mother’s hands, I am told. I have to wonder what those who gave her those hands did with them.”

“Nothing you need to be ashamed of,” Obie said. “They lived their lives the best way they knew how. All the ancients did.” He lay down near Javier so their heads were touching. “As bloody as it may seem to us, as violent as it may seem, it’s still worthy of respect. The world was a tough place. Tough people were the ones who survived.”

“Including,” Javier said softly, “the ones tough enough to offer one’s self to the gods, so the rain would fall.”

“Including that.”

“It is stronger than I would be.”

“Me too, I’d say.” He tried to imagine Javier climbing the stone steps to an altar and a waiting priest with a stone knife, and shuddered. “As much as I admire the culture,” he said softly, “I’m glad we don’t live in that world anymore,” and got a lopsided smile from Javier in response. “I’m even glad you felt safe enough to walk to the village, even though you probably shouldn’t—”

“I am a native son,” Javier said, laying his hand on Obie’s cheek, “and you worry too much.”

“Only about you,” Obie said, and Javier kissed him.

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Everything that had kept Obie from kissing Javier before was still true—Javi was still the son of his friends and mentors, he was still a student, he was still Obie’s employee for the duration of field school.

None of it really seemed to matter as Javier kissed him, gentle and hungry.

Javier had been fifteen when they met, with long skinny limbs and floppy hair, handsome and fresh and just beginning to understand how attractive he was and the power that gave him. His crush on Obie had been obvious, flattering, and surprisingly sweet, as they tried to talk to each other in languages both of them barely spoke. Obie had been twenty, absorbed in his studies, overwhelmed by the del Bosques' interest in him, and he knew then that he and Javier could never be more than friends. Anything more was much too complicated.

He knew he should stop kissing Javier. He knew he should stop letting Javier kiss him. He knew he shouldn't find Javier's kisses so sweet, so satisfying, fulfilling every yearning he had to touch someone he already held dear. He knew he should stop kissing Javier back.

*Not yet*, he thought, pushing a hand into Javier's hair and letting Javier move them onto their sides. *Not yet*.

Javier pushed Obie onto his back and knelt over him, amber eyes dark, a hesitant smile on his lips. "I have wanted to kiss you since I was fifteen," Javier said softly as he slid his hands down Obie's chest. "You taste even better than I imagined."

"Javier," Obie said, shaking his head, "nothing has really changed."

"I know. We are still complicated."

"Getting involved like this won't make things any simpler."

"And you don't want people to think wrongly about me." Obie shook his head, and Javier laughed and leaned down to kiss him again. "You are so sweet."

"I think," Obie breathed, tilting his head back, "it's being pragmatic." His hands settled on Javier's hips as Javier kissed around his face and beside his mouth, before finally kissing him deeply, his hand cradling the back of Obie's head.

"You are very practical," Javier said as he kissed him, "and thoughtful, and I am charmed that you think I need protection in my own country."

"In the jungles of your own country," Obie said, turning his head so Javier would kiss the other cheek. "I wouldn't go into the woods or swamps in the U.S. unprepared."

“I followed the road,” Javier said. He wove their fingers together and held Obie’s hands over his head. “You are sweet to worry so much about me.”

“I worry because I care.” He ran his thumbs over the insides of Javier’s wrists, smiling when he felt goose bumps rise on Javier’s skin. “Not just because you’re the son of my friends, either.”

“I know,” Javier said, dipping his head to kiss Obie again. “You worry because you think I throw myself away on people who don’t matter. Perhaps I have only been waiting for you to notice that I am your Javi and always will be, and until then, people who don’t matter are the best I can do.”

“Javi,” Obie whispered. Propriety suddenly seemed much less important than getting his mouth and hands on Javier’s skin. He pulled his hands from Javier’s and ran them over his back, his shoulders, his chest, as Javier turned his head to capture and tease Obie’s mouth.

“*Bésame, bésame,*” he said, so Obie kissed him over and over. He smelled delicious when Obie buried his nose in the crook of Javier’s neck, and Obie was genuinely surprised at how gently Javi cradled Obie against him, nothing like an impatient boy. “*Corazoncito, mi corazón,*” Javi said, and Obie touched and kissed him until the only language he spoke were moans and sighs.

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Obie was awake to see the light in the window gradually lighten from dark to gray. Javier slept against his chest, a hand splayed over Obie’s heart, and Obie threaded his fingers through Javier’s hair as he watched the window.

The rest of the school would be up soon. Not only that, but it was guest lecture night and the guests Obie was expecting were Enrique and Marisol, to give their annual lecture about the Del Bosque Foundation. Normally this was his favorite night of the entire summer, but now Obie wished they had a day or two to get used to each other before coping with Javier’s parents, too.

In the morning light, the complications that had slipped away the night before were back to gnaw at him, but all the uncomfortable questions they would have to answer once they returned to the university were nothing compared to what Enrique would do when he found out—while he was resigned to Javier’s sexuality, he made no secret of the fact that he wanted

grandchildren. And Obie was certain that Enrique and Marisol both would be more guarded in their friendship once they found out—punishment, whether it was a conscious choice or not, for seducing their son.

He took a little comfort in the knowledge that they were aware of Javier's fondness for him, and that he had chosen the university because of Obie's presence there as well as the family's connection.

Everyone would find out soon enough, he supposed, but that didn't stop him from wishing they could have a few days of keeping this tender little thing a secret between them.

Javier's hand slowly rubbed Obie's chest. "I can feel you worrying."

"I'm just thinking." He kissed Javier's hair, and Javier lifted his head to give him a sweet, sleepy smile. *Ah*, Obie thought, *that's why this is worth it*. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning, *hermoso*." He kissed Obie's mouth.

"I was worrying," Obie confessed. "You're right."

"Worrying about what?"

"What your parents are going to do when they find out, for one thing."

"I'm not a child, Obie," Javier pointed out gently.

"You're their child." Javier rolled his eyes and Obie laid a hand on his cheek. "I'd rather they were happy for us than upset, but I'm not counting on it."

"They will be happy," Javier said. "They are always saying I should find a nice man. Well, Father says I should find a nice woman and sleep with men on the side, if I must, but I don't tell Mother that."

"It's a bit cold," Obie said. "The world's moved beyond that, anyway. But they're not the only ones we have to worry about—there are also the regulations at the university. If we're still together when we get back—"

"If?" Javier said.

"I don't want to assume anything."

Javier sat up slowly, the sheet slipping down to pool at his waist. "You think I am so changeable?"

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, Javi. We may decide we don’t like each other after all. Don’t get upset.” He sat up too, and put his arms around Javi’s neck so he could press their noses together. “I want to be with you.”

Javier laid his head on Obie’s shoulder with a sigh. “Good. That is what I want, also. Tell me about these regulations.”

“Students and instructors who date have to register with the Dean of Students, and sign papers agreeing not to sue each other if they break up.”

Javier huffed. “How very mercenary. It’s like those ‘in case of divorce’ papers. People assume everything will go wrong.”

“Prenuptial agreements,” Obie said. “I suppose it is. But it’s also to protect each other—so, for instance, you don’t accuse me of making you sleep with me for good grades. And a job, in this case.” He sighed, gloomy at the mere thought, and said in the hopes to lighten the mood a bit, “But your grades aren’t good enough for that to be true. Anybody you slept with for grades should give you a better deal.”

The moment he felt Javier stiffen, he knew he’d said the wrong thing.

Javier drew back from him, brows furrowed and thunder in his amber eyes. “You think I fuck my professors for *grades*?”

“It was a joke!”

“I’m not laughing, Oberon Pogue. What a terrible thing to say.” He got out of bed and started picking up his clothes.

“Javier, don’t go.”

“You are so worried about what people will think? Don’t be.” He pulled on his pants. “They will never know. There is nothing to know.” He pulled his shirt over his head.

“I don’t think that about you, Javi. I swear I don’t.”

Javier turned to him, hurt in his face like a mortal wound. “And don’t worry about passing me, Professor Pogue,” he nearly spat. “I’ll earn whatever marks I get—and not on my back.” He let himself out.

Obie sat there for a moment, blinking, and then flopped on his back with a frustrated groan. He shouldn’t have said anything—not about his worries, not

about Javier's parents—not until they'd figured out what they were to each other, not until this fragile little thing had some resilience to it, when it might bend but not break.

Instead, he had to try to be funny. He knew Javier—he knew how truly sensitive he was, and instead of protecting him he'd cut out his heart as surely as if Javier were tied to the altar at the little temple at the dig site. Knowing that Javier would be both too angry and too proud to tell anyone about their tryst gave him no comfort.

He could hear people chatting in the hall as they walked to the dining room or the showers. He rubbed his hand over his face, told himself he would think of something later, and got up to start his day.

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The del Bosques' Jeep was already parked in front of the site by the time the school arrived. Obie was relieved, despite his worries—Marisol never failed to soothe Javier no matter how moody he was—and smiled when he saw Javier sit up a little in his seat when he saw the Jeep, before he glanced around and went back into a disinterested slump.

Obie barely restrained himself from hugging Marisol and confessing everything when he got off the bus and she came to the clearing to greet the school. Javier didn't hesitate—he swooped to her with a “Mami!” and she laughed and hugged her much taller son, pushing her booney hat from her face and scolding him for not using sun protection. Enrique kissed both Javier's cheeks, and then said, “Oberon,” and kissed Obie's as well.

“Newbies, meet the del Bosques, the ones who are paying for most of this,” Obie told the students, and there were a few minutes of students thanking Enrique and Marisol for the chance to be at the dig and instructors catching up with all that had happened in the last year. Javier stayed with his mother, his arm casual around her—but there must have been enough amiss with him to cause Marisol to glance up at him frequently and call him, “*Mijo*,” like she hadn't since he was a teenager.

Obie finally said, “Okay, guys, time to work,” and waved off the groans. “That dirt won't haul itself,” he said and told the del Bosques, “Wait until you

see what I have to show you,” as he took them to where the school had begun to excavate the bones. He thought Javier might join the other students but he stayed with Marisol, his expression solemn as they went inside the protective tent to view the little trench.

“I didn’t expect this,” Marisol said. “It is strange sometimes, to be so confronted with the reality of history.” She hugged Javier to her and he quirked a tiny smile.

“That’s what I said.”

“I think it’s necessary for anyone who studies history,” Obie said. “It takes it from the abstract to something concrete. It reminds us we’re truth-hunters.” He looked at Javier, hoping he might understand the deeper meaning Obie desperately wanted to convey, but Javier was gazing at the bones and didn’t look up.

“They’ll make a fine addition to the collection,” said Enrique. “I hope you will want to be on the team to study them, Oberon.”

“Bones aren’t my area, really,” Obie said. “I’ll be happy to collaborate with whoever studies them for the paper afterward.”

“Will there be a paper?” said Marisol.

Javier chuckled. “There is always a paper. I should get to work.” He kissed Marisol and then Enrique, and gave Obie a cool look as he passed him on the way out of the tent.

Marisol took Obie’s arm. “Show me around,” she said, while Enrique stayed in the tent with Brendan and another instructor who were excavating the bones.

“We cleared one wall,” Obie began, but by then they were out of earshot of the others and Marisol turned to him, her face determined and startlingly like Javier’s.

“The two of you have been close as brothers for years, and today he has barely looked at you. What has happened?”

“I—” Obie said, “We—” He knew he was blushing, and it must have been obvious from the way Marisol’s eyes widened.

“You and Javier,” she said, shaking her head. “I suppose I have known it would happen someday. You have always had a special place in his heart.”

“I’ve fallen off the pedestal,” Obie replied. “I said something stupid and now he thinks I think he’s a slut.”

“Do you?” Marisol said calmly.

“No. Never.”

“Then what are you going to do about it, Oberon?” she said, still calm, but there was steel in her eyes and in her tone that reminded Obie what fierce warriors her ancestors had been.

He swallowed hard. “I don’t know yet.”

“I suggest you discover this soon. Javier has asked us to take him home with us.”

“I’m sure a weekend away will do him good.”

“He wants to come home for good, Oberon.”

For a moment, Obie felt as cold as if his heart had stopped beating. “Without his degree?”

“He said he is done.”

“He needs to finish field school—he has another year to go until he graduates—”

“Which is why,” Marisol said, “I can easily believe he is unhappy with you.”

“He wouldn’t leave the university just because of me.”

“Why not? He went to the university because of you.”

Obie looked away, his throat closing. “I don’t know how to make this right, Marisol.”

“Perhaps you can’t. Perhaps you have broken his heart so completely there is no healing it.” She patted his cheek, then leaned close and said, “But I do not believe it. Now.” She took his arm again. “Show me this temple of ours.”

He found a smile for her—he always did—and took her around the site to do just that.

One fortunate thing, he supposed, about giving Marisol the complete tour was that it gave him the perfect excuse to watch Javier. The students tended to blend together into a dust-covered blur, but Javier stood out even when he was moody and sulking. He was unexpectedly patient with a tiny brush clearing dirt away from fragile artifacts, and no matter how much he complained, he would still carry away baskets of dirt and vegetation as they exposed the temple inch by inch.

The most obvious difference between yesterday and today, Obie thought, was that Javier wasn't talking, when normally he could get a conversation started with anyone from the other students to tourists to important visitors. The usual meandering conversation was going on among the students—their lives at home, their studies, their theories about their finds—but Javier was not taking part. Obie knew Javier wasn't self-conscious in front of his parents, so... it had to be Obie's fault, then.

He doubted Javier's heart was broken, no matter what Marisol might say, but he could believe it might be bruised a little.

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After Marisol's lecture that night, Obie saw them to the guest room and passed by Javier's on the way to his own. The door was open and the light was on, and Javier's roommate was reading on his bed while Javier packed his belongings. Obie hesitated, torn as to whether he should say something or leave him alone, then thought, *Fortune favors the bold*, and said, "Javi—Mr. del Bosque, can I have a word?"

Javier gave him another cool look, then silently rose and went into the hall. "Come to the common room with me," Obie said, and Javier sighed but went with him. He slouched in one of the armchairs, giving not an inch for Obie to move closer.

Okay, then. Obie said, "I am so, so sorry for what I said this morning."

"Why? What did you say, Professor Pogue?" Javier said calmly.

"You know. The thing about your grades."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't see you until breakfast, did I?" He picked at the seam of his jeans. "You would never sleep

with someone you were ashamed of. Certainly not a pretty student with more cock than brains.”

“Javi—”

“I need to pack,” Javier said. “My parents are leaving early in the morning and I’m going with them.”

“You don’t need to go.”

“Don’t I? I’d hate someone to say I only have a degree because I’m so good in bed. That would taint my future plans.” He shook his head. “No, I am doing what I should have done all along. I will sit in an office in one of my family’s factories and I will make steel. No one will make cruel accusations to me there.”

“I...” Obie began, but then a group of students came in, boisterous with excitement for the weekend break, and one of them said, “Javier, come play some *fútbol* with us! We need one more person to have even numbers.”

Javier gave Obie one more level look, then said, “Just for a few minutes,” and left with them.

*That was less than successful*, Obie thought, scrubbed a hand through his hair, and went to watch the game while he thought this out. Other students, a few instructors, and the del Bosques were watching too, most of them sprawled on blankets laid on the grass, and Obie thought they would have more than enough people if the players wanted to switch out.

The wise thing, he supposed, would be to let Javier go. Javier’s crush on him had to run its course eventually—it was a pity it had happened now instead of years ago, but everybody had to grow up sometime, even Javier. And maybe taking the advice he’d been getting all this time was the best, too. He’d never taken school seriously, not the way someone who intended to pursue the field would. Not for the first time, Obie wondered what Javier could have done if he had taken his studies seriously, if he’d made an effort, but it was too late for that now. And who knew, maybe Javier would be as good at whatever Enrique had in mind for him as he was at playing around.

The soccer ball bounced into the observers and someone threw it back with a, “Pay attention, del Bosque!” Obie looked for Javier—his expression was

serious and he didn't smile in response to the jibe, only caught the ball and tossed it to the team captains so they could kick off again.

"Too bad we couldn't play at Chichén Itzá," one of the students, Lauren, said to the girl beside her. "It would have been amazing to play in that ball court."

"Would we sacrifice the losing team after?" said her friend with a laugh.

"We could," Lauren said with a solemn nod. "Though it would be a pity if *his* team lost." She nudged her friend and they both giggled as they watched... Oh. Javier. Of course.

Obie looked at Marisol, wondering if she'd overheard the conversation too, but she was cheering Javier and he suspected she didn't. Just as well.

People began to shout and cheer again as the game continued in earnest, and Obie couldn't help feeling proud at how good Javier was, how fast and graceful. Most of the American students hadn't played since elementary school, from the look of it, while Javier took the game as seriously as any of his countrymen, and he even smiled when a few of the international students shouted "Goooooal!" when he scored.

He wanted to tell Javier, *You can't leave. You've only just begun making friends and enjoying yourself.* More than that, he wanted to find the right words to say, *I'm sorry, stay at the dig, stay at school until you graduate. Stay with me.*

So much for wanting the practical solution for him. Obie smiled wryly to himself. It was selfish, after all, wanting Javier around. Well, he was selfish. He had wanted Javier for longer than he cared to admit and didn't want to lose him to a stupid mistake.

There was a sudden shout from the students and Obie snapped out of his reverie as Marisol leapt to her feet and ran onto the impromptu field. One of the players was down, his hands clasped over his face.

"What happened?" Obie asked Lauren. "I wasn't watching."

"Javier got kicked in the face," Lauren said, eyes anxious as she watched the field.

If Obie had thought he went cold before, this was even worse, and he was on the field and kneeling at Javier's side before he could even decide to do it. Blood was gushing down Javier's face despite the T-shirt one of his teammates had pressed to his nose, and Marisol held Javier's head and said, "Lie still, *mijo*, lie still," her voice calm despite the fear in her eyes.

Obie picked up Javier's wrist and forced himself to breathe calmly as he took Javier's pulse. It was quick but steady. Not in shock, then. "Can you move your hands, Javi?"

"Yes, Obie," Javier said, his voice muffled by the T-shirt.

"How about your toes? Can you wiggle your toes?"

"Yes, Obie."

"Okay," Obie said and released Javier's wrist. "Let's get you inside and make sure your nose isn't broken."

Marisol let out a whimper and hugged Javier's head to her bosom, while he muttered in embarrassment, "I'll get blood on you, Mami."

Enrique finally got Javier to his feet, and his teammates clustered around Javier as they took him inside the dorms to the kitchen. One of the house staff already had an ice pack made up, and she waited with it as Obie knelt in front of Javier and inspected his nose. It was unmistakably out of joint. He put his hands on either side of Javier's nose and said, "On the count of three, okay?"

Javier nodded. His eyes were already starting to swell.

"One," said Obie, "two," and he pushed Javier's nose back into place with a crunch. Several of the students exclaimed in disgust, and Marisol hid her face in Enrique's chest. "I think you won't even have a bump," Obie told Javier, and took the ice pack to press it to his nose. "We'll get you something for the pain and keep the swelling down, and you'll be just fine."

"I'll have character," Javier said, touching his nose gingerly, and winced.

"You have plenty of character," Obie said, and Javier glanced up at him in surprise. "All right, guys," he said to the rest of the students, "clear out. Javier needs to rest and it wouldn't hurt the rest of you, either."

They shuffled out reluctantly, many touching Javier's shoulder or scrubbing their fingers through his hair in sympathy, and he gave them faint

smiles in return. Obie and Enrique each took a side to help Javier to bed, and Obie said, “Let’s put him in my room so I can be there if he needs help in the night.”

Enrique said, “Good idea,” and Marisol’s mouth quirked a moment.

When they had put Javier to bed, the ice pack still pressed to his nose, Marisol took Obie aside. “Be gentle with him,” she said, soft enough that Enrique wouldn’t hear.

“I just want to watch over him for a while. If he’s leaving, I—I need one more night.”

“I don’t know that he is,” Marisol said, and there was a twinkle in her dark eyes. She stood up on her toes and whispered in his ear, “I would rather he have you than anyone, *mijo*,” smiled, and joined Enrique.

Obie swallowed the lump in his throat and went into his room. He sat at the foot of his bed and watched Javier, shivering as the adrenaline that had kept him calm ebbed from his system. The sounds of the dorm eventually died out—doors closing, music playing and then going silent—until there was nothing but Javier’s breathing and the sounds of the jungle outside.

“Well,” said Javier, and Obie’s gaze snapped to his face in surprise. “Now what, Obie?”

“You get some rest, mostly. And eat some breakfast with protein tomorrow. Did you take any of the pain reliever? I know Enrique had some for you—”

“Babble, babble,” said Javier. “I took some. It will put me to sleep soon, but first, we should have words.”

“I suppose we should. Are you sure you don’t want to wait until tomorrow?”

“I am sure.” He sat up slowly and Obie moved closer to steady him in case he wavered. Javier put out a hand to stop him. “Let me. I will lie down if it’s too much.” He took a deep breath, and then smiled at Obie wryly. “It was like a very bad nosebleed.”

“It was like you broke your nose,” Obie said, equally wry. “Who kicked you?”

Javier shrugged. "It was an accident. It's not a proper game unless someone bleeds."

"I've heard that about lacrosse but not about soccer. Sorry, *fútbol*."

"*Norteamericanos*," Javier said affectionately, and then picked up the bloody T-shirt to dab his nose again. "I see why Mami and Father have let you lead this school all these years, despite how young you are. You are the man to turn to in a crisis."

"I can keep a steady head, that's all. You've never really had the chance to see it before."

"So if I can see you worry, then you must truly be near panic."

Obie looked down at his hands and didn't answer.

Javier said after a moment, as he folded the T-shirt again, "You made me feel like a whore this morning, Obie."

"I know," Obie said miserably. "I'm so sorry. I should never make jokes. They always fall flat."

"There is some truth in humor," Javier replied. "I adore you, you know. I have never thought you might love me back, but I thought you at least respected me."

"Oh, Javi, I do. I think you're amazing."

"But stupid."

"I don't think that. I think you coast because you can. I think you'd astound us all if you actually tried."

"So I am lazy."

Obie said, after a moment, "Yes. If you put as much effort into your classes as you do your boyfriends, you'd have a PhD by now."

Javier looked up at him, then at the shirt he was restlessly folding and refolding in his lap. "I didn't want to leave," he said softly. "Not if it meant I would only see you when my parents had an event at their wing of the museum, or when you came to Mexico to dig and explore."

"You could have stayed anyway, after graduation," Obie said. "We would have found a way."

“I’m sure some law or another would force me home. And you are unwilling to be an expat.”

“I could live here,” Obie said. “If I had a way to make a living, I could live here easily. And if you want to stay in the States, we can find a way to make that happen, too.”

“Why would I stay now?” Javier said, looking directly at Obie. “Even if I do achieve my degree, I have no desire to teach.”

“You have no desire to work in an office, either. You’re good at field work, Javi. You’ve got more patience than most of your classmates, and that’s more vital in this job than most people realize.”

“More bones,” Javier murmured.

“We deal with the past. That includes the dead.”

“Do they ever make you weep, Obie?”

“Sometimes,” Obie admitted. “Sometimes. Not as much as the living, though.” He added softly, “Don’t go,” and Javier closed his eyes. “Here’s what I’m thinking. We can go back to being friends through the rest of field school—the rest of the year, too. Perfectly innocent. And then after you graduate, we can try again, with no hiding.”

Javier said slowly, twisting the T-shirt in his hands, “I’m not certain I can be your friend again.”

Obie swallowed and whispered, “Okay. That’s—”

“You are still *mi corazón*.”

Obie looked at him. “Javi?”

Javier smiled helplessly. “What? You think such a little thing as love disappears in a moment? Why do you suppose I wanted to be away from you? To learn to live with the pain, of course.”

“Javi,” Obie said again, much happier this time, and moved closer to Javier to kiss him, stopping only when Javier said, “Ah, careful,” and so Obie kissed his forehead instead. “I’m going to kiss you so much when you can handle it. Just to warn you.”

“I want you to kiss me so much,” Javier said, and leaned his head against Obie’s shoulder. “I think the painkillers are setting in now.”

“Lie back,” Obie said and helped to prop him against the pillow, in case his nose started bleeding again. He settled at Javier’s side and Javier leaned his head against Obie’s shoulder again, so Obie held it there gently, his hand cupping the side of Javier’s face. “Are you going to remember any of this tomorrow?”

“If not,” Javier said sleepily, “help me remember. I will believe you.”

\*\*\*\*

*The following commencement season...*

Obie thought, with absolutely no bias whatsoever, *what are you talking about*, that none of the graduates of the school of anthropology were quite as handsome in their caps and gowns as Javier del Bosque. He wished for a moment that he was in the audience with Enrique and Marisol, to cheer for Javier when he crossed the stage to get his diploma—well, the cover for it, the diploma itself would be mailed over the summer—but as an instructor he was close enough to sit up a little straighter in his own regalia and catch Javier’s eye.

Javier had not managed to pull his grades high enough to graduate with honors, but even so, Obie thought, no degree had been quite so hard-won. A few schools had even responded positively to his application for graduate studies, and Obie supposed essays, recommendations, and passion could make up for a less than stellar GPA.

They had not spent a year apart. They had made no attempt to hide how much they adored each other, and while the Dean of Students had shaken her head and warned them few relationships between students and teachers worked out, Obie thought there was an exception to every rule, and he was lucky enough to be just that.

The harder test was still to come, because Javier had been accepted into a graduate program on the east coast. But it was only two years, and there were always vacations, e-mails, road trips. There would be the field school, which

bound people together no matter how far away they might be the rest of the year.

The announcer read, “Javier Xiu del Bosque,” without stumbling over the unfamiliar sounds, and Javier rose from his seat, to the applause of his classmates around him and his friends in the audience. Obie applauded vigorously, earning a nudge from Brendan, and grinned back. “If you can’t be proud of your boyfriend, who can you be proud of?” he whispered, and Brendan chuckled.

There would be a party at the house they shared after the ceremony, which was stuffed in every corner with Javier’s family who had come to see him finally graduate. Obie supposed it would be a few days before they had a few moments of privacy. Still, there were ways for a man to talk to his lover without anyone else overhearing, and when Javier turned from the dean to hold up the diploma cover, Obie caught his eye and made a little heart-shaped sign with his fingers. *Mi corazón.*

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Jenna Jones is the author of m/m romance such as the EPPIE-nominated Chiaroscuro, Something Beautiful and the Apples & Gin series. She lives in the Wasatch Mountains, where she reads, writes and watches a lot of movies. She enjoys her imaginary worlds.*

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## **A FRAGILE LOVE**

By **Les Joseph**

### **Photo Description**

Two men are entwined on a seat while riding a subway. One of the men, in a black long-sleeved shirt, is leaning over the other, who is lying across his lap and wearing a white T-shirt. Their lips are just a breath away from touching.

### **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*I'm so glad we're finally at this point in our relationship where we are comfortable with each other like this in public; I was an idiot for so long, trying to hide what we had. But after what happened, I'll never take him for granted again. I'm through hiding. I'm going to make sure that he knows every day just how much I love him.*

*Note: I'd love this to have both sweet and steamy moments, but no BDSM please. The rest is up to you!*

*Sincerely,*

*Sas*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** drama, sports, coming out, out for you, hurt/comfort, celebrity, tattoos

**Word count:** 19,809

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## A FRAGILE LOVE

By Les Joseph

Adam stood at the window, staring into the dark. The inky black night provided a perfect backdrop for the reflection of bright red numbers glowing on the alarm clock beside the bed, casting a strange, almost eerie light over Peter's sleeping form. Adam was exhausted; it was after three in the morning, and he should have been asleep. There were still aches in muscles he didn't know he had. His body hurt, but his mind was flooded with too many thoughts for there to be any hope of rest. He sighed and pressed his forehead against the cool glass, his tense shoulders lifting all the way to his ears before falling. The slight movement caused the ice to tinkle in the tumbler he held next to his thigh. Adam looked down, frowning as if he'd forgotten the double shot of scotch he'd poured for himself in the hopes of being able to relax. So far, it hadn't worked.

Behind him, Peter mumbled some nonsense and burrowed beneath the covers. Adam looked over his shoulder at his lover, and the immense relief he felt at having Peter here, in his bed, washed over him, stealing his breath for a moment. He took a drink. The warmth that started in his chest and unfurled, filling him completely, had nothing to do with the ill-advised alcohol and everything to do with the man lying in the bed. Adam still had trouble wrapping his head around all that had happened, and there were definitely questions he needed to have answered; but the fact was, Peter was here.

It blew Adam's mind.

Turning back around, Adam crossed his arms over his chest and winced at the dull burn in his left biceps. Glancing at the clean white gauze, he couldn't help but smile. Of the many aches and pains he was currently nursing, this newest one was the most welcome. He should have waited; he was an idiot for being so insistent in his condition. After close to two weeks in the hospital and the medication he still needed to take, stopping at the tattoo shop immediately after being discharged wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done—but he couldn't, *wouldn't*, delay any longer. It was something he and Peter had

discussed before but always put off until another day. They'd both just had a crash course in not taking anything for granted, so Adam begged and pleaded—even promised a week's worth of morning blow jobs—if Peter would agree to get inked right then. Adam couldn't wait until the tattoo healed. The thought of seeing a symbol of Peter and him etched into his skin in black and blue and red made the anticipation that much sweeter. Knowing that Peter had the exact same design in the exact same spot caused Adam's stomach to flip and his heart to fly.

The marks would stain their skin forever. "Forever" was a word Adam never really appreciated all that much and definitely didn't spend a lot of time pondering. Oh sure, he understood the concept in theory, in that way most people approached abstract topics like space and physics, but with each sharp sting of the tattoo gun it became crystal clear. He loved Peter. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with Peter. They weren't new thoughts, but after all they'd been through the word "forever" had taken on a whole new meaning.

Almost from the first moment they'd met a little over a year ago, when Peter accidentally bumped into Adam in the waiting area of a crowded restaurant, Adam sensed Peter was going to be an important part of his life. Once Adam realized he'd fallen in love, he couldn't imagine being with anyone but Peter. He didn't want to imagine it. Over the past few months he'd begun to question their relationship, to doubt Peter's commitment, but Adam didn't need to do either any longer. What Peter had done proved that to him and basically the entire viewing population of Denver and beyond.

As Adam's mind wandered he took another sip, held the spicy liquid in his mouth until it began to burn, and swallowed, enjoying the heat along his throat before it settled in his stomach. He watched the raindrops slither and meander down the window. The lights of Denver twinkled, even at this hour. Everywhere he looked—the curtained windows in the apartment complex a few buildings down, the occasional car travelling the street of their neighborhood, the condo next door—life went on. Everything about Adam's life might be in limbo right now, but for the rest of the world it was just another day.

It was a humbling, if not somewhat melancholy, thought.

There was another rustle of sheets and then the muted sound of Peter's bare feet on the hardwood floor. With every step closer, Adam's heart raced faster and faster. Before Peter reached him, Adam knew where his lover would touch first, so he turned his head, leaning it against the window frame, granting Peter perfect access to his neck.

Sleep-warmed soft lips attached themselves to his skin, followed by the slow lick of a wet tongue. "What are you doing up? Are you hurting? Do you need me to get your pills?" Each question was punctuated with a kiss, the last with a scrape of Peter's teeth across Adam's shoulder.

"Can't sleep."

Peter rubbed his hands up and down Adam's arms, as if warding off a chill. "You should be passed out. Your body needs rest, babe."

Adam lifted his glass and swirled the watered-down scotch. "I tried this. It hasn't helped."

Taking the glass from Adam, Peter set it on the small table beneath the window. "You shouldn't mix alcohol with your pain meds," he fussed.

Adam scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mother. I was there when the doctor went over the discharge orders, but I thought it might help me relax. Besides, I've only had a few swallows. At this point, it's more water than alcohol."

Peter stepped closer, pressing his chest tight against Adam's naked back. He circled his arms around Adam's trim waist, resting his hands lightly on Adam's firm stomach. Peter's fingers ghosted along the waistband of Adam's boxer briefs, and he was barely able to keep his fingertip from dipping to slide across the sensitive, warm skin beneath. There was no stopping the way his semi-hard cock settled right between the cheeks of his boyfriend's ass, though; he didn't even try.

"I wish you would have woken me," Peter whispered as he nuzzled the side of Adam's neck with his nose. He inhaled deeply, the brisk, clean scent of Adam's soap and shampoo familiar and comforting. It was a smell that would always make him think of Adam, only one of the countless things that would.

Adam sighed and kept his eyes focused on the window in front of him. Peter knew not to push. It had been a long-ass day—a long two weeks, if he

were honest. Two weeks of almost unbearable stress. Days upon days of incessant worry, of picturing every worst-case scenario his brain could conjure up—some so farfetched, Peter had made himself sick. Pacing until his feet ached, feeling anger so acute Peter swore he'd never see anything that wasn't filtered through a red haze ever again. Hours spent sitting at Adam's bedside, begging Adam's silent, unmoving, battered- and-bruised body for a sign, any sign, that he was still there beneath the tubes and bandages.

"I can't get my brain to turn the fuck off long enough to sleep. I want to, I'm fucking exhausted, but every time I close my eyes, all I see..." Adam shivered, and Peter tightened his arms.

Peter wouldn't let his mind go there. If he did, they'd both be up all night. "Come back to bed so I can hold you."

He didn't wait for Adam to agree; he simply took his boyfriend by the hand and led him toward the bed. Peter pulled the blankets back and gently but forcefully pushed Adam's shoulders to the pillow, getting him settled as comfortably as he could. Turning, he grabbed the glass of scotch and hurried to the bathroom to dump the liquor and rinse the glass. He refilled it with cool water, knowing that Adam needed to take another pill before he fell asleep. The stubborn ass would bitch and complain about how they made him feel loopy and out of it, but the man's body still had to heal. It was going to take months until Adam was fully recovered.

By the time Peter walked back into the bedroom, Adam had rolled onto the side without the healing ribs. He'd shed his boxer briefs. The slope of his hip and the top of one ass cheek peeked out from beneath the sheet that was already tangled around his legs. Peter smiled when he spied the dimples in the small of Adam's back; the spot was one of his favorite places to lick. His eyes roamed, savoring the view, before they narrowed at the yellowing bruises and numerous scrapes that still covered so much of Adam's body. They would fade with time, but Peter knew he'd never forget the look of Adam's mangled skin. He planned to kiss each inch every night to remind him of how close he'd come to losing the most important person in his life.

Scooping up the bottle, Peter walked around the bed and held out both hands. "Take a pill. You need it." His tone left no room for argument, and the

fact that Adam accepted the water and the medicine without even so much as a huff let Peter know how badly the man was hurting.

Peter took the glass when Adam was through and placed it on the nightstand, then stripped and climbed into bed. The two lay on their sides, facing each other in the silent, dark room. It was the first time since the accident they'd had the luxury of really stretching their legs, of being close enough to share the same breath, not to mention being free from interruptions. No nurses waking Adam at all hours to take his temperature or blood pressure, no lab tech to whisk Adam away for another test or to draw more blood, no trays being delivered with bland, bordering-on-barely-edible food. They were blessedly alone. So much had changed since the last time they'd been in bed together like this. The one thing that hadn't changed was how Peter's body responded to being so close to his naked lover. Adam was skinnier and paler than normal, but he was still able to make Peter hard doing nothing beyond just breathing.

Tentatively, Peter reached out and skimmed his fingers down Adam's slightly stubbled cheek, along his arm and over his chest, stopping so he could feel the comforting beat of Adam's heart beneath his fingertips. His cock swelled, aching, his breath becoming more choppy and erratic with every inch of skin his fingers traversed. "Are you really okay?" Peter whispered, the words almost harsh in the quiet of their bedroom.

Adam's eyes were heavy with exhaustion and pain, though the drugs were beginning to take effect. He nodded and tried to give Peter a smile, which wound up looking more like a grimace. Peter scooted closer, needing to touch as much of Adam as he could, and wished he could cover Adam's body with his own like a blanket without causing him pain. He settled for sliding his legs between Adam's longer, thinner ones and laid his hand on Adam's hip, molding it around the bone that protruded more than it should. Peter immediately found the sensitive skin just inside with his thumb, tracing circles over and over.

"Kiss me?" Adam mumbled. Peter didn't move for a moment, wondering what in the world would make Adam think he needed to ask, but it certainly wasn't a request he'd deny.

Sliding his hand up Adam's side, Peter took his time, peppering Adam's face with soft, barely-there kisses—both eyelids, the tip of Adam's nose, both cheeks—before sweeping his closed mouth across Adam's chapped lips. Peter cupped the back of Adam's head and found Adam's lips again. This time he was more insistent—licking, nipping—until Adam opened his mouth and invited him in. Peter didn't wait; instead, he invaded Adam's mouth, using his tongue to kiss him deep and slow. Adam groaned and arched his back, rubbing his cock against Peter's. Hot sparks shot up Peter's spine, and he growled. It had been so long since they'd made love, and it would still take a little time before Adam would be healed enough to have sex.

“Peter,” Adam sighed sleepily, almost dreamily. “I wanted that to be the last thing I felt before I went to sleep. Maybe now I won't have bad dreams.” He slurred, but Peter heard and understood him perfectly.

“I'll be right here if you need me, babe. I won't let anything happen,” Peter vowed, fighting back the urge to bury his face in Adam's neck and cry.

Adam burrowed, finding a comfortable position against Peter's body. “You'll always be here. It says so on my arm.”

Minutes later, Adam's quiet, even breaths filled the room. Peter lay beside him, unwilling to close his eyes until he was sure Adam would sleep for a few uninterrupted hours.

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It was days later before Adam felt up to doing much besides sleeping. Peter had managed to arrange his schedule for more time off, which really didn't take a lot of effort considering all the attention and publicity surrounding Adam's accident and subsequent, albeit not particularly wanted, fifteen minutes in the spotlight. The sports channels had only just stopped using the infamous sound bite during every show. The two hadn't even left the apartment since Adam had been released from the hospital. Between takeout, a few helpful friends, and the pharmacy delivery service, there hadn't been a reason to go out.

“Hey,” Adam called out to Peter, hobbling from the bathroom to the bed. He tried not to use the crutches at home; he hated them.

Peter poked his head in the door and glared as Adam hopped on his good leg, but Peter wisely kept his mouth shut. There'd been enough arguments over the crutches, and he didn't feel up to another. Adam was as stubborn as a mule, and reminding him that he was supposed to use them, even from the bathroom to the bed, was a waste of breath.

Arching an eyebrow, Peter crossed his arms, waiting.

Adam rolled his eyes at his boyfriend's nonverbal reprimand and held up two shirts, smirking knowingly as he did so. "Which one?"

The corners of Peter's mouth lifted slightly, even though he tried really hard to keep a straight face. Of course the little shit *had* to pick his favorite. Giving in gracefully, because there was no reason not to, he pointed to the faded, light-blue polo in Adam's right hand. The collar was slightly frayed, but the color looked absolutely lethal on Adam. The blue brought out Adam's eyes and highlighted his tanned skin, and the cotton stretched across his body in all the right places. Seeing Adam in that shirt always made Peter want to do very dirty things to his very sexy boyfriend—a fact Adam was very well aware of, judging by the glint of mischief in his sky-blue eyes.

"This old thing?" Adam laughed as he waved it back and forth. He tossed the other shirt onto the bed and clumsily tried to balance himself on one leg while he pulled the polo over his head. His arms got twisted in the sleeves, and he grunted as he struggled. Warm, strong hands gripped his sides, steadying him.

"You know, this would be much easier if you'd just ask for help," Peter growled in his ear once Adam was able to get the shirt over his head.

Adam sagged against Peter's chest, out of breath from the exertion. "I know," he admitted, albeit grudgingly. "I hate not being able to do even the simple shit like getting dressed by myself."

"Babe," Peter started, trying not to sound frustrated, though he knew he did. He couldn't help it; he *was* frustrated. "The longer you're too stubborn to use the crutches and continue to put weight on your foot without your brace on, the longer it's going to be until you can get rid of them. I know it sucks, but damn it, you need to listen to me. Or at least to the doctor."

Properly chastised and feeling pretty guilty for whining and being a brat, Adam wrapped his arms around Peter's neck. He leaned into Peter, trusting his boyfriend to keep him upright. Most of Adam's aches and pains had disappeared. Every now and then he'd move wrong, and his body would let him know; except for the ribs, his head, and right knee, everything was mostly back to normal. There was still an ugly purplish-brown bruise on his hip from landing on the asphalt after being flung into the air and a shiny pink scar on his left cheek, both of which made him cringe when he looked at himself in the mirror. He knew he was lucky, damn lucky, to be alive. There wasn't any permanent damage other than a few new scars, so really, whining was rather pathetic.

Adam turned his head and placed a gentle kiss against Peter's jaw. "Thank you," he said simply. The words encompassed so much more than just thanking Peter for helping him get dressed.

Peter chuckled and kissed the side of Adam's head. "No thanks needed." His response was light and breezy, but Adam knew by the little catch in Peter's voice that his words had a double meaning as well.

They stood silently for a few moments longer, until Adam's knee began to throb. "I need to sit," Adam quietly told Peter and gratefully accepted his help to the side of the bed.

Peter started to step away but was stopped when Adam grasped his fingers. "Do you think we can grab some lunch after we're done at the doctor's? I'm going stir-crazy, and I'm dying for some sushi. I mean, we can bring it home if you don't want to be out in public with, uh, me..." Adam trailed off.

Feeling as though he'd been gutted, Peter wrapped an arm around his stomach. He turned his hand and gripped Adam's so tightly his knuckles turned white. "Adam," he started and had to pause for a calming breath. "I promised you no more hiding or allowing others to think we're less than we are, and I meant it."

"I know. I believe you. I do. I just wanted to make sure you were still okay with it. We haven't really talked about everything. I mean it's kind of a big deal." Adam shrugged his shoulders and looked away. Kind of a big deal—an understatement if there ever was one.

Adam curled his fingers into the comforter that was thrown haphazardly over the bed and stared at the floor. They'd both been walking on eggshells since Adam woke up in the hospital two days after the accident, disoriented and confused. Peter's pale and haunted face was the first thing Adam had seen when he'd opened his eyes. Between the nurses and the many visitors always stopping by, there hadn't been any time for them to talk about everything. There was a lot to discuss.

Strong fingers squeezed Adam's chin and tipped his head back. "I'm so sorry," Peter choked and swallowed past the thick ball of emotion lodged in his throat. Keeping his fingers beneath Adam's chin and their other hands clasped, Peter leaned down and gave Adam a desperate, punishing kiss. He sucked Adam's tongue into his mouth so hard his cheeks hollowed, and continued the kiss until his chest burned.

"I love you. So fucking much," Peter said, panting, as he rested his forehead against Adam's and closed his eyes.

Peter's heart hammered behind his ribcage. He had so much making up to do to Adam. Leaning forward, Peter let his head rest more heavily. Peter sighed as Adam's strong fingers slid through his hair.

"I love you, too," Adam replied softly.

The two stayed that way, quiet, absorbing the moment, until Peter glanced at Adam's watch. "Damn, we need to get moving if we're going to make it to your appointment on time."

Peter kissed the top of Adam's head and asked, "Can you finish up without me? I need to change and pull the car around front."

Adam nodded and watched Peter walk out of the room. His stomach was in knots, and it wasn't because of the impending visit to the doctor. Finally going out with Peter for the first time, here in their hometown, without having to watch their every move or pretend to be friends and not lovers, was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure. Adam hoped that Peter was as prepared as he insisted he was, for both their sakes.

He managed to slide his feet into his favorite pair of red Vans without busting his ass and snarled as he situated the crutches under his arms. He

really did hate the fucking things. By the time he made it to the front door, he was sweating; he could feel it in the small of his back and along his hairline. For a moment, he wondered if it wouldn't be better to come home after going to the orthopedist. He knew, however, that there were issues that still needed to be addressed—most importantly, how to move forward now that they weren't exactly off the grid any longer—and both had sidestepped the landmines long enough.

Lunch out, where they weren't confined to the condo, would give them the perfect opportunity to talk.

Peter had the car parked along the curb in front when Adam opened the door. Adam gritted his teeth as he began to slowly shuffle down the sidewalk. The sun was shining. Cool air sent goose bumps up his arms and a shiver down his spine when a gentle breeze blew, chilling his slightly damp skin. Fluffy white clouds dotted the sky above, like dollops of whipped cream strewn across a brilliant cobalt sky. He watched as Peter got out and walked around the front of the car, Peter's eyes hidden behind dark designer sunglasses. Adam froze in place as he gazed at Peter, mesmerized by his drop-dead gorgeous boyfriend.

“Babe?” Peter called out as he leaned against the car, arms loose by his side and ankles crossed, waiting to open the door for Adam. “You need help?”

Jerking his head to clear it, Adam said, “Nah, I got it.”

“We're going be late, and traffic will get heavier if we don't get a move on. Shake a leg, huh?”

“You're really fucking funny,” Adam snapped, glaring at Peter.

Chuckling, Peter was totally unfazed by his grouchy lover. He figured there'd be a few more flashes of anger before the day was through. It made him smile, though he turned his head so Adam wouldn't see. It meant Adam was almost back to normal.

Eyes locked on his boyfriend, Adam stared as Peter fluidly pushed off the car and took two long strides, stopping right in front of him. Without saying a word, Peter reached out. He took Adam's head in his hands, held him still, and proceeded to kiss him, mouths fused, tongues working, until they were both dizzy.

Peter brushed the pad of his thumb across Adam's slightly swollen, shiny bottom lip. "You look so fucking hot," Peter growled. "That damn shirt," he said as he shook his head and turned to open the door for Adam.

Adam was glued to the sidewalk, struck totally stupid. Peter had never, *ever*, kissed him out in public like that before. And not just in public, but right there, in front of all the neighbors and anyone else who happened to be driving by.

*Holy shit.*

Adam teetered on his crutches while his heart tried to beat its way out of his chest. His body was electrified, thrumming with happiness and surprise, not to mention a healthy dose of lust that curled low in his stomach. He'd give anything to be able to strut over to Peter, drag him back into the house, and proceed to ravage his hot boyfriend for hours.

He took a deep breath and groaned, uncomfortable and more than a little pissed off. Adam's dick was rock hard and nudged the zipper of his jeans. His eyes flicked down and took in the bulky brace and gleaming crutches, and he muttered an emphatic, "Fucking hell." He was in no condition to do any ravaging of any kind. It sucked balls.

"Come on. Let's go," Peter huffed, concerned that maybe Adam wasn't up for such displays of affection out in public quite yet.

Nodding, Adam slowly took the last few steps before he stopped in front of the car. He grinned at Peter, lips still tingling from the kiss moments ago, and leaned forward just enough to press his mouth to Peter's ear. "In case you were wondering, feel free to kiss me like that anytime you want."

Peter gulped and laughed at the same time, and a ridiculous sound bubbled up out of his throat. "In you go, Hopalong." He waved Adam inside the car.

The light tone settled the butterflies in Adam's stomach. He took one last deep breath as he got situated in the front seat and pulled the seat belt over his shoulder. "Damn," he swore when he moved and felt a sharp jolt in his tender side.

"What's wrong?" Peter questioned, sliding into the driver's seat. He reached out and covered the hand that Adam had pressed against his ribs.

“Just twisted wrong. Christ,” Adam snapped and threw back his head. “I’m so fucking tired of this shit.”

Peter squeezed Adam’s hand before he pulled back, starting the car. He kept quiet. Placating Adam would do nothing but get his ass chewed, and Peter was in too good of a mood to let anything ruin it.

“Are you still feeling like sushi?” Peter asked once they were underway and it appeared Adam had calmed down.

“Yes. And some strawberry frozen yogurt for dessert.”

Peter chuckled, loving the excitement in Adam’s voice. “Anything you want.” He meant it, too. He’d been feeling as cooped-up as Adam, unused to having so much unstructured time, and he was really looking forward to spending a few hours out of the condo.

Adam turned his head and his gaze settled on his boyfriend. He took in the day-old scruff along Peter’s jaw, noting the way the sun highlighted barely-there hints of red mixed with the dark brown. The way Peter’s hair curled slightly behind his ear in a perfect swirl. How the muscles of Peter’s forearms flexed as he worked the steering wheel. Adam’s pulse raced. He was hot all over, and he shifted in his seat, trying to relieve some of the pressure between his legs. “Well, what I want, I can’t have,” he mumbled.

Cutting his eyes sideways for just a moment, because there was no way Peter could let that comment go by without a response, Peter tucked his chin and looked at Adam over his sunglasses. His voice lowered until it was little more than a purr. “You can have whatever the hell you want once we get home.”

Peter’s voice, smooth and sultry, but with just a trace of a bite, like a piece of rich, dark, red chili chocolate, sent a shiver down Adam’s spine. Immediately, images flickered in Adam’s mind. Nights spent in bed, Peter looming over him, staring into his eyes as Peter entered him, their eyes locked as the burn turned to pleasure with every slow, measured thrust. He relived inching down Peter’s body, letting his tongue paint his lover from collarbone to hip while his fingers danced over every dip and well-defined muscle of Peter’s stomach and thighs. Quiet mornings spent in the shower merely

touching, holding one another, whispering softly as the warm water cascaded over them, in constant contact with mouths and hands until the water ran cold.

The car stopped at a red light, and Adam still hadn't said a word. He couldn't. Tongue-tied and turned on beyond belief, it was all he could do to continue to breathe, though even that was pretty damn hard.

"Peter," Adam whispered when he was finally able to speak. He rubbed his hands up and down his jeans, just to do something with them because, really, all he wanted to do was crawl over into Peter's lap and grind his aching cock against Peter's—healing ribs and blown-out knee be damned.

Peter slid his sunglasses down his nose and turned his head. He winked. "It's the shirt, babe. Gets me every single time. You know that."

They laughed, lightening the mood, and the rest of the trip to the doctor's office passed quickly. Peter managed to find a parking spot relatively close to the door, so the walk wasn't unbearable. However, Adam acted like he was being forced to run barefoot across hot coals, cursing and glaring at everyone that passed by. He really hated the crutches.

Holding the door open, Peter rolled his eyes as Adam shuffled past him into the doctor's office.

"Go sit before you bite someone's head off, and I'll get you checked in," Peter scolded.

Adam fell onto a sofa with a heavy thump. His knee ached beneath the heavy brace, and his temple throbbed with the beginnings of a killer headache. The whole left side of his torso felt battered and bruised from the drive and the walk from the car. He was exhausted. It frustrated him to no end that he could still do so little before his body became fatigued. He definitely wasn't used to being so immobile and limited. To say he made a piss-poor patient was being generous.

He leaned his head back against the wall. Plush, slate-gray carpet and smoke-colored walls lent a calming atmosphere to the waiting room, and the supple black leather of the sofa helped the time pass comfortably. The muted jazz wafting from hidden speakers made it difficult for Adam to stay awake. He floated, half-asleep, and smiled when warm, familiar fingers slid between his.

“The receptionist said it should only be a few minutes until you can go back,” Peter said softly.

Adam nodded and squeezed Peter’s hand, but kept his eyes closed. Peter didn’t say anything further, and Adam appreciated the silence. Having Peter beside him soothed him in a way nothing else did. Just as he was about to succumb to sleep, Adam’s name was called.

Peter patted his knee and stood. “Come on. Let’s get this over with so we can go eat. I’m starving.”

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Two hours later, Adam and Peter were seated in a quiet corner of their favorite sushi restaurant. It was past the lunch rush so the place was mostly empty, which suited both just fine. A few tables over a busboy cleared a table, a waitress was busy refilling the soy sauce bottles in a booth in the back, and toward the front door the hostess was folding crimson napkins. Peter picked at the label of his Sapporo while Adam watched, somewhat envious. Having a drink at home, at night, when he could collapse into bed afterward was one thing, but there was no way he was up for even so much as a beer during the day while he was still taking painkillers. Adam took a sip of his iced green tea and stretched his sore leg beneath the table, sighing as he slouched down in his chair to get more comfortable. The heavy brace on his knee was cumbersome, and Adam loathed wearing it.

“So, it wasn’t all terrible news,” Peter said after the silence dragged on for a few more moments.

Adam ran a hand through his hair and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess. The PT is going to suck ass, though.”

Peter agreed. “No doubt, but at least you’ll be up and moving around. It’s not much, but it’s better than sitting around the condo all day.”

Scowling, Adam huffed, thinking over what the orthopedist had told him earlier. “Three fucking months until I can jog again, not even run but jog. Damn.” Just the thought of being restricted that way, for that long, was enough to set Adam’s teeth on edge.

Being a sports analyst who covered most professional sports for one of the major television networks, Peter knew a thing or ten about knee injuries. He'd seen more than he cared to count, and he knew how serious they could be. One like Adam's, where the "big three" —ACL, MCL, and meniscus—were damaged, required rehab and physical therapy that would be intense and painful. For someone as athletic as Adam, who ran religiously, hiked ten miles as if it were a casual stroll, and played basketball like the Tasmanian Devil, it was going to be torture to have to wait so long until his body could be pushed and punished.

Peter was not looking forward to the cursing, raging, and crying that were certain to come up from time to time as Adam worked to get his body back in shape, but he knew it was all a part of the process.

"I'm sorry," Peter said, reaching out to cover Adam's hand with his own. "You know I'll be with you every step of the way."

Adam's breath caught in his throat. The gesture was simple, but one Peter never would have dared to attempt before the accident. Adam stared at their hands as they rested on the shiny black tabletop. He loved Peter's hands. They were big, slightly larger than his. Smooth, though there was a scar across the palm of his right hand—an accident during Peter's skateboard/extreme sports phase in high school—that Adam traced over and over again every night in bed before they fell asleep. Peter had long, strong fingers with blunt ends and perfectly shaped fingernails. It wasn't an odd thing for Adam to daydream about Peter's hands and fingers, about how they touched and teased and felt so good on his skin.

Adam always wanted Peter's touch. He craved it, yearned for it, *needed* it, which meant that the long days while Peter was away working were always especially difficult. Lately, in the weeks before the accident, the touches had been less frequent, fleeting, and given more out of habit than want. Adam missed, quite deeply, the way his body would light up like a Christmas tree with simply the ghost of Peter's fingertip on the inside of his arm or across his shoulders. Looking back, Adam recognized that their relationship was considerably more fragile than either realized. It wasn't until he'd woken up in the hospital that he was able to appreciate just how fragile.

“Babe?” Peter urged softly when Adam had grown quiet, rubbing his thumb in a circle on the back of Adam’s hand.

“I’d been so scared,” Adam whispered haltingly, as though he didn’t want to say the words but they were going to come out anyway.

Peter sucked in a sharp breath. “What? Why? What are you talking about?”

Peter’s eyes darted around Adam’s face. Adam’s mouth was drawn into a tight line, the corners pinched. His nostrils flared as he slowly inhaled deep breath after deep breath. And his boyfriend’s eyes? They stopped Peter’s heart. Normally so warm and full of sparkle, with just a hint of naughtiness, now they were cold. Worse than that, though, was that Adam looked lost. So fucking lost and unsure.

The waitress arrived with their food, setting down plates of elegantly wrapped sushi on the table. The food was picture-perfect, gorgeous and mouthwatering, except the thought of eating right then made Peter’s stomach roil.

“Thank you. It looks delicious,” Adam told the server when she asked if everything looked okay. Adam’s voice was hoarse. It wavered, and the sound filled Peter’s veins with ice. Tentacles of doubt and panic slithered beneath Peter’s skin, filling every crevice, every dark, hidden part buried deep inside.

The waitress hovered, which made Peter grind his teeth. *Couldn’t she see that he was about to lose his mind?* He must have made some sound in the back of his throat, because she jumped and her eyebrows crawled up her forehead. With one last furtive look at first Peter and then Adam, she scurried off like a scared rabbit.

Neither man moved. Long, uncomfortable moments passed while the clank of glasses against the lacquered tabletops and the hushed conversations between the few patrons in the restaurant floated in the air around them. Peter couldn’t remember a time he’d ever been so afraid to speak, to even take a breath or reach out and touch Adam like his mind was screaming at him to do. Peter knew that whatever Adam was scared of, it wasn’t anything he was prepared to hear. He quickly catalogued the past few weeks, all the images like a flip book, until a clear picture formed, and it wasn’t one that would cushion the blow he was almost positive was coming.

“Ad... Adam?” Peter stuttered.

Across the table, Adam looked down at his plate but he shook his head, saying nothing. Peter watched as Adam’s shoulders bunched, his hands curling into fists beside his plate then releasing over and over. The rustle of Adam’s jeans as he jerked his good knee up and down, a telltale sign that Adam was working himself up to saying whatever was bothering him so badly. After being together so long, Peter was well versed in how his boyfriend operated. Little things—Peter drinking the last of the orange juice and not replacing it, erasing the latest episode of *Game of Thrones* to record *Top Chef* instead, leaving his wet towel on the floor of the bathroom—were met with snarky comments or a pointed look. Bigger things took Adam longer to talk about. Normally Peter could tell when something was bothering Adam. He’d get quiet, his temper quicker, he’d fidget until Peter would ask what was wrong, and Adam would word-vomit in one long rant everything he’d been holding inside. Sometimes they argued afterward, sometimes not, but any argument was short-lived—and make-up sex, whether truly warranted or not, always followed.

But this—sitting, waiting, wondering—was new territory. Peter pushed his food around his plate, too scared to eat. Seconds ticked by, the air practically suffocating them with whatever was to come.

Adam cleared his throat, the sound abrasive and harsh. Peter held his breath, clutching the unused chopsticks in his hand so tightly he was surprised they didn’t snap. “I’d felt so alone before the accident.” Adam spoke in an even tone, almost devoid of all emotion, and that hurt Peter more acutely than if Adam had screamed the words. “You’d been gone so much and I was so fucking tired of hiding, Peter. So tired. It had gotten so hard...” He took a big gulping breath, and Peter’s eyes burned. “We’d had that terrible fight. I was pissed, you were upset, and everything felt so up in the air with us.”

“I thought, I mean I know it was hard, but I thought you’d understood,” Peter trailed off before clamping his mouth shut. “Never mind.” He waved the words away, hoping at the same time to wave away the cold ball of unease swirling around in his gut. “I’m here. Now everyone knows who you are to me, how much you mean to me. None of that matters anymore.”

Adam snorted, and the anxiety inside Peter multiplied tenfold. Again, all the recent trips from one football game to the next, an assignment that took him to Florida for a four-day PGA event and then all the way back to California for an MLS game, played out in his mind. It had been an exceptionally busy month. There hadn't been much time to come back to Denver, and Adam's few trips to meet him had been frantic, bordering on desperate, now that Peter really examined them. He'd known Adam was growing frustrated, but he hadn't known how to fix it, and there really hadn't been any time to have the heart-to-heart Peter had known was necessary.

Witnessing Adam's near breakdown, Peter realized how blind he'd been.

Peter stared at Adam, dread and guilt churning in his stomach as if they were in a blender. He felt sick, and it was hard to breathe. His hands shook, sweat slid down his spine, and the blood in his veins ran cold. Heart splintering apart, Peter swallowed the bile bubbling up his throat and whispered hoarsely, "I almost lost you, didn't I?"

Adam said nothing. For a few interminable moments, Peter's world stopped. Peter swayed, dizzy and nauseated. "I did. You were going to leave me. Oh, God," he gasped.

It took a few beats for Adam's brain to catch up with Peter's words. He opened his mouth to tell Peter he was wrong, crazy for thinking that, but quickly closed it, unable to answer. Another few seconds passed before he was able to meet Peter's devastated eyes. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Adam," Peter choked. "Why?"

Adam looked at Peter, not really seeing him, lost in thought as he remembered.

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*A little over two weeks ago...*

"What do you mean you're not coming home tomorrow?" Adam barked at Peter, squeezing his cell phone so tightly he was afraid he'd crack the screen.

Peter sighed on the other end, and Adam gritted his teeth, glaring even though Peter couldn't see. "Babe, I have to fill in for the Seahawks game. You know I can't say no," Peter told Adam.

“Bullshit. You *won't* say no. Big fucking difference,” Adam spat. “This is getting really fucking old, Peter.”

“It’s not like I’m going to be partying in Vegas. I’m working.” Adam heard Peter breathe heavily, like he was trying to calm down. Instead of doing the same, Adam’s anger built and his body vibrated. Another beat, then Peter started to say, “You know, you can always—”

“Fuck that. No. I’ve got work to do this week. Cam has two new websites for me to work on and I’m behind on the others, thanks to the trip to Chicago last week. I need to stay home.” Adam paced back and forth in front of the sofa, growing more agitated with every step.

“Adam,” Peter countered slowly, testing.

“What?”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Adam refused to budge. He was pissed off and tired of always being the one who gave and gave. He wasn’t giving in this time.

“What do you want me to do? Do you want me to come home? I can try to find someone to take my place if that’s what it’ll take to get you to stop pouting,” Peter replied, annoyance tinting every word.

Adam saw red.

“You know what, Peter? Kiss my ass. I’m not pouting. What I am is sick and fucking tired of always coming to you. Of only being with you when it’s convenient for *you*.” Adam’s voice rose, shaking with rage and all the things he’d been holding inside. He couldn’t stop. “Fuck whatever I have going on. If I want to see you, to be with you, *I* always have to go to *you*! And why? Because of your fucking job and the fact that it always comes first. Because you’re too fucking scared of anyone at work finding out you have a boyfriend! A boyfriend...” He gulped in a breath of air that made his chest burn, or maybe that was the crushing combination of anger and hurt, “that you won’t even hold hands with when we go to the goddamn grocery store. I’m tired of it. So fucking tired.”

Sweat pooled under Adam’s arms, dripping down his sides, and he couldn’t catch his breath. The arm that hung by his side tingled, and he

clenched his fingers so tight he could feel his fingernails dig into his skin. His pulse roared in his ears.

The words *fuck you* were on the tip of his tongue, but he forced them back down his tight throat.

“Jesus, babe,” Peter said hoarsely.

Adam squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm his thundering heart. He was done. He knew if they kept talking he’d wind up saying something he’d regret. “Look, I can’t talk to you right now. I’ll call you later.” He didn’t give Peter a chance to respond before hanging up.

“Fuck,” Adam howled and threw his phone on the couch. He stood still, his chest heaving. “God fucking damn it,” he hissed.

The phone on the sofa buzzed with an incoming call. He glared at it, watching the picture of him and Peter light up the screen. He didn’t move to answer. The cell buzzed again, and still, he didn’t answer. The next time, it vibrated with an incoming text message.

“Asshole,” Adam mumbled, still glaring.

Finally, the phone was silent. Adam flung himself onto the sofa, turned off the ringer, and tossed it onto the coffee table without even looking at the text. Even if Peter were calling to do some very necessary groveling, Adam was in no mood to hear it—and he damn well didn’t need to hear more of Peter’s condescending remarks.

He ran the previous few minutes back through his mind, his stomach twisting painfully. *Jesus*. While he wasn’t necessarily sorry for what he’d said, he was sorry for blindsiding Peter the way he knew he did. He’d known for weeks, probably more like a month or so, that he and Peter had needed to talk. All the time apart, the quick, secretive visits when Peter would slink into town then leave before anyone knew he was home, and the exhausting travel week after week was taking its toll.

They were drifting apart.

Adam rubbed his chest, right above his heart, as if it would ease the ache. Tipping his head, he stared up at the ceiling. Thoughts and images flickered in his mind. He was madly in love with Peter, that hadn’t changed; in fact, it had

only grown stronger. It was the hiding and the pretending that were eating away at his soul.

Long, quiet minutes passed as his thoughts bounced like marbles dropped onto concrete. Scattered and jumbled, going every which way, there wasn't one he could hold onto long enough to dissect. He didn't even attempt to try.

A sharp, staccato knock on the door made Adam jump. He groaned and scowled as the next knock was louder, quicker. Only one person ever knocked on his door that way.

"Adam, I know you're in there, so you might as well let me in. I'll just use my key if you don't," came the annoyed, slightly panicked voice of his best friend.

He debated for about thirty seconds the ramifications of not opening the door, and decided that the punishment wasn't worth it.

Just as he was about to reach for the doorknob, another knock. "I'm coming. Damn." He shouted before yanking the door open and staring into the bright green eyes of a very feisty female.

"What's going on? Why aren't you answering your phone?" Cami fired at him as she shoved him out of the way and stomped inside. "Peter sent me a text thirty minutes ago and told me I had to come over here."

Adam grunted derisively and rolled his eyes. "What? Did he tell you to check and make sure I wasn't pouting?"

She stared at him a moment, then blinked slowly. "Why would he think you'd be pouting?"

"Nothing. Never mind." Adam turned to walk to the kitchen.

"Where are you going? What's wrong?"

"I'm getting a beer, do you want one?" Adam asked, ignoring her questions. He grabbed two beers, thinking if she didn't want it, he sure as hell would need more than one anyway, and turned around.

Cami stood in front of him, her hands on her hips and her mouth twisted, waiting for the answers he didn't want to give. He'd give them, though. He always did.

“Adam,” she sighed, her voice softer. “What happened? You look like shit.”

He looked down, eyes glued to the floor. “We had a fight. It’s not a big deal,” he lied.

Of course she knew he was full of shit. “Come on. You’re talking,” she plucked a beer from his hand, “and I’m drinking.”

She manhandled him down onto the couch, kicked her shoes off, got comfortable, and plunked her feet in his lap. “Spill it, AJ.”

Snorting at the awful nickname, he poked her foot, smiling when she squealed. Her feet had always been ticklish, a fact he had used to his advantage on many occasions during their almost seven-year friendship. She was the only person he ever allowed to use his middle name, Juddson, and only the initial at that. As his assistant, she was invaluable. More than that, though, she was his rock. She was the one person, other than Peter, he knew he could always count on.

Adam took a swig of his beer and said, “I had a fight with Peter. He’s not coming home tomorrow, and I got pissed.”

Cami waited to see if Adam offered any more information, and when none was forthcoming, she kicked his leg. “And? I know it sucks he’s not coming home tomorrow like he said, but it’s not like you to get so upset over something you know he can’t change.”

He waited, not wanting to talk about what was really bothering him, but needing so badly to get it off his chest. It had been building for weeks, longer even, and he’d been so afraid to bring up his concerns with Peter. With Peter’s schedule, there was never a good time, but Adam knew that it was mostly fear that kept him from saying anything. Adam didn’t know how to fix the distance between them. Peter had worked so hard to get to this point in his career, and the future for him was wide open. Adam was proud of him and would never want to get in the way of Peter’s goal. It was just getting harder and harder to watch from the sidelines instead of being by Peter’s side.

“I’m losing him,” Adam said, the words difficult and bitter in his mouth. Hearing them out loud was like a sledgehammer to his sternum, stealing his breath and sending shards of pain through his body.

“AJ,” Cami said slowly, reaching out to take his hand. She turned his hand over and let her fingers trace the lines of his palm, saying nothing as she gathered her thoughts. “You know that’s not true, no matter how it seems. Why do you think that? Has he said something?”

Adam shook his head but said nothing else. Cami’s soft, familiar touch soothed the jagged edges of his anger, and he took a deep breath. He turned, looking at her with tired, pained eyes. “What will I do if he leaves me? The two of you are all I have.”

That wasn’t quite the truth, but that’s the way it certainly felt most days. His dad was gone, he had no brothers or sisters, and his mom, well, she might as well live on the other side of the world for as often as they had contact. He could go weeks, sometimes longer than a month, between phone calls to his mother. She and his stepdad lived in Durango, about eight hours away from Denver. Thankfully, they spent very little time in the state; instead, they wintered in Florida and travelled a good deal of the time. If they saw each other more than twice a year, it was rare.

They weren’t a close family, which was probably for the best. Adam had known he was different from a very young age—fourteen, and a freshman in high school. Standing in the locker room after lacrosse practice with naked guys everywhere, Adam knew when his heart started to race and he had to hold his plain white towel in front of him to hide his growing hard-on that the feelings and desires pulsing inside of him made him unlike his friends. It took him a while to use the word gay to describe himself. Time spent surfing the internet and prowling message boards and chat rooms, of watching gay porn beneath his blankets late at night with the sound turned down low enough that no one would hear, and one very long, life-changing conversation with a very intuitive and pushy guidance counselor, and Adam’s life was irrevocably altered. Realizing and understanding he was gay weren’t quick or easy processes. A stepfather who refused to talk about it, and a mother who took every opportunity to tell him that liking boys was wrong, made things even more difficult once he came out.

He tried dating while in high school, not an easy task when you were a varsity athlete. Adam was the star attacker on his school’s lacrosse team, a four-year starter. He was tall and well-built, fast and agile, and with his light-

brown hair, brilliant blue eyes, and killer smile, he could have had his pick of any girl in the school—except he much preferred bulging muscles and stubbled jaws to boobs and fake-baked skin. He didn't make a habit of announcing his preference for cock over pussy, but he didn't hide it either, and that made him a target, as well as somewhat unapproachable for other boys who weren't blessed with Adam's confidence and jock status. It wasn't until Adam got to college, deciding to stay local and go to the University of Denver versus heading to any of the number of schools that offered him a scholarship, that he really spread his wings.

College was a whole different world for Adam. A sea of beautiful boys just itching to get their freak on, or at least get their first sexual experience under their belt, and Adam was more than willing to be the one who showed them the way. He had one-night stands, he had flings that lasted a few weeks, and he even had steady boyfriends from time to time. If a guy interested him, if there was chemistry, Adam was all for giving anyone a try. The first two years of college flew by. With lacrosse games and practice, his coursework, and partying, Adam was having the time of his life. He met Cami in one of his web design classes during his sophomore year. They'd been paired as partners for a project, and Adam knew they would be best friends for life when Cami looked him over from head to foot and said, "Don't make me want to kill you. You're too pretty to die young."

They were pretty much inseparable from that point on. Once they were introduced, they realized they'd had two other classes together, but due to Adam's tendency to arrive late and his preference for sitting in the back of the lecture hall, they'd never crossed paths. They studied together, ate lunch together, and partied together on the weekends—an interesting endeavor in itself, since they tended to be attracted to the same type of guy. Cami was the first person he turned to his junior year after catching his boyfriend of almost a year, Nathan, balls deep inside a body with probably the most perfect tits Adam ever had the misfortune of seeing. And it was Adam's lap Cami spent an entire weekend curled up on when her parents were killed in a car accident shortly before her college graduation.

They were best friends, closer than most brothers and sisters, and there was no one alive, including Peter, who knew Adam as well as Cami. So Adam

knew, sitting there on the sofa together like they'd done a thousand times before, there was no way he'd not tell Cami everything. They just didn't work that way.

"Hey," Cami tugged on his hand to get his attention since he'd obviously spaced out. "First, he's not leaving you. And second, you will never, ever lose me. BFFL, remember?"

Adam couldn't help but snicker and roll his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, best friends for life. Like that doesn't make me sound like the gayest gay dude around." He took a drink of his beer, and then turned to grin at her.

"No, what would make you sound that way is if you asked if we could go buy those cheesy heart necklaces where you get half and I get half. Oh wait," she squealed dramatically, adding a girly clap. "You already did that!"

"That was totally a joke, Cam." He nudged her foot with the bottom of his beer bottle. "Besides, you can't tell me you don't secretly take it out and wear it."

Her cheeks flushed pink, and Adam snorted. "Busted!" he laughed, but it died as quickly as it came.

"Come on. It's me, what else is it?" Cami urged softly, turning her body so she could lay her head on his shoulder.

Shifting, Adam slouched down enough to throw his arm around Cami's shoulder and lay his head on the back of the sofa. "It's just everything. He's gone all the time, and yeah, I get to see him when we meet between assignments if he can't come home, but it's not the same. It's exhausting." Adam sighed and squeezed her arm. "This is home, you know? Our life is here. Our house, my job, you, our friends, Peter's family. It's not like no one knows Peter's gay, he just hides it at work and out in public. I fucking hate the pretending and the hiding from the world." His words slowed as he admitted guiltily, "It's gotten to the point where I resent him for making me do it, Cam."

"Oh, Adam," Cami comforted. "Why haven't you said anything to Peter? He needs to know how you feel."

Adam shrugged. "When am I supposed to talk to him? He's gone all the fucking time. It's football season, so between filling in for college games and

then covering the NFL, plus all the other things they keep sending him to, I hardly ever see him.” He winced, hating that he sounded so whiny and needy, but damn, he was just over it all. “Sure it was fun at first, exciting to fly all over the country, staying in hotel rooms and eating room service, fucking all night in city after city, but it’s sure as hell not fun anymore. Now it just pisses me off.” He was on a roll, the words tumbling out, just like he knew they would. “We can’t go out here like a normal couple because everyone knows who he is, and God forbid someone sees him on a date with a guy and word got back to the network. We can’t go out when we’re out of town because you never know who’s watching. I’m so tired of being treated like I’m a dirty secret,” he whispered painfully, the words burning his throat as if they were coated in acid.

He ran his fingers through Cami’s curly red hair while he tried to get a handle on his careening emotions. The bitter taste of his frustration curdled his stomach, but he was relieved to finally give voice to the feeling that bothered him more than anything else. He’d been out of the closet for a long time, he was never really in it to begin with, and he despised being made to feel like what he felt for Peter was wrong. That feeling had manifested itself into resentment of Peter, a small kernel that had steadily grown and grown until now Adam wasn’t sure what that meant for their future. Not knowing terrified him.

“When he is home, all we do is stay in bed and avoid all the things we both know we need to talk about.” He laughed, but it was hollow. “We’ve never had a problem with sex, but it’s not going to fix what’s going on between us.” Adam knew that much. The gap between them would only continue to grow wider the longer their problems went unresolved.

Cami didn’t say anything for long minutes, not that Adam was surprised. She always needed time to process and analyze before she tackled an issue; it was one of the reasons their friendship, not to mention their business, worked so well. She was the thinker. Adam was the spontaneous one, prone to go by what felt right rather than what was most logical. Her need to plan and look at something from all sides drove him crazy, and more than once his fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants approach to most everything drove her to drink. They were perfect for each other.

“You know,” Cami began quietly, “you really just need to talk to him when he comes home.” She held her hand up when Adam opened his mouth to argue with her. “No, Adam. You do. You love each other. Neither one of you is stupid, even though right now you’re both acting ridiculous. You don’t talk, he doesn’t talk, and look what happens—I have to miss *The Notebook*.”

“Oh, hell. You’ve seen that movie a thousand and one times,” Adam scoffed at her, rolling his eyes to emphasize his point.

“Well,” she drawled as she sneakily elbowed him hard in the side, “it could have been a thousand and two.” Standing up, she set her empty beer bottle on the coffee table and then moved in front of him. With her fingers she pushed his hair back and leaned forward, kissing his forehead. “Talk to him, AJ. He’s not just your boyfriend, he’s your partner. He deserves to know how you feel. You two can work this out. I know it.”

Adam reached up and laid his hands over hers where they rested on his shoulders. “Thanks for coming over and listening.”

“Like you wouldn’t and haven’t done the same for me. It’s part of the job description, you know? BFFLs... it’s what we do.” She flicked the end of his nose and giggled when he growled at her.

She moved toward the door, and he smiled as he watched her walk away. “Love you.”

“I love you, too, even when you’re an idiot. Call me tomorrow,” she quipped before she blew him a kiss and left.

Adam threw his head back on the couch, sending a silent prayer of thanks to whatever force put them in the same class. She was a pain in the ass at times, but he’d be lost without her.

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The next morning, Adam woke up more tired than he had been when he finally managed to fall asleep. His muscles ached, the sheets on the bed were a twisted mess, and all of the pillows were strewn across the floor. Obviously the few hours of sleep had been anything but restful. He sat up and yawned, jaw creaking as he rolled his head from side to side to stretch out a painful crick. A glance at the clock let him know it was way too early to be awake on

a Sunday, and he gave serious thought to trying to catch a few more hours of shut-eye. But when he remembered that Peter wouldn't be arriving later on, he knew sleep was the last thing he'd be doing with his morning.

“Damn it all to hell,” he groaned loudly before falling backward onto the bed.

He knew he should call Peter. They hadn't gone a day without talking since their first date, and they'd never gone to bed without saying goodnight until last night. Adam ignored the flare of guilt that burned his stomach. He wouldn't be able to ignore it for long, though. Sitting up once more, Adam slowly glanced around the bedroom, taking in all the little things that made it their room. Peter's softball glove and bat in the corner. His favorite black Armani suit that Adam had picked up from the cleaner's just the day before hanging on the hook on the closet door. A picture of the two of them, slightly drunk and sunburned, from Cami's Fourth of July party a few months ago hung on the wall. Peter's battered sneakers were by the dresser, and the book he'd been reading before he left was still open on the nightstand beside the bed.

Bits and pieces of Peter were everywhere. From his gourmet coffee and his favorite Frosted Mini-Wheats in the pantry, to the country music programmed into the satellite radio in Adam's Jeep, Peter had infiltrated every part of Adam's life. The condo was no longer his. It was theirs. Peter still had an apartment in town that he went to about once a month to grab more clothes—truthfully, it was little more than a big, expensive storage closet. Peter never slept there, and most of his things were at Adam's. Adam wasn't sure why Peter still had the apartment. He sighed. It was just another thing to put on the list of issues they needed to discuss.

He stood and stretched, the muscles in his back pulling tight as he leaned from side to side. Feeling on edge, restless, he bounced on his toes. He needed to run. Needed to feel the burn in his legs, the steady, rhythmic thud of each stride against the asphalt beneath his feet. Wanted to lose himself in the way his heart rate slowly increased as his blood started to pulse in his veins and in the music that pounded from his earbuds. Glancing at the clock once more, he did a quick calculation of what time it was in Seattle; he always got the time zones confused. He knew Peter would be tired, having worked the Huskies

game yesterday afternoon. Thinking about it in the light of day, it made sense for Peter to fill in for the Seahawks game since he was already in Seattle, but it didn't make the fact that he wasn't coming home today any easier to accept. Frustrated again and still antsy, Adam grabbed his phone and fired off a quick text to Peter, telling him good morning and that he'd talk to him later. Chickenshit, sure, to send a message when he knew Peter would still be asleep, but it was all he could do for the time being.

Needing to wake up a bit more, Adam decided to take a shower. He slid his lime-green boxer briefs down his legs and kicked them toward the hamper just inside their bathroom. Naked, he stood in the middle of the room and bent at the waist, trying to get his blood flowing. Fifteen minutes later his muscles were loose, and he was ready to get started with his day. His mind was focused on Peter, about what he'd said to him the night before and what he knew he needed to say once Peter got home. With effort, Adam pushed those thoughts away as he strode toward the bathroom. Instead he let his mind travel a different course, one that was way more enjoyable. He palmed his cock as he stood beside the shower, hissing as the first jolt of pleasure from the simple touch shot through his body.

“Ah, fuck,” Adam cursed as he wrapped his fingers around his shaft.

Reaching out with his other hand, he slapped at the faucets making the water as hot as he could tolerate. The bathroom quickly filled with steam. Adam stepped in the shower, dick still in hand, his strokes firm and sure. The first stream of hot water against his skin made him jerk, but as soon as he stood with the water sluicing down his body, he groaned because it felt so damned good.

He hung his head, watching his hand move up and down his length, and leaned forward, smacking his palm against the tiled wall.

“Oh, yes,” he moaned, sweeping his thumb across the flared head of his cock, gathering the pre-come that seeped from the tip. Using the liquid to coat himself, his fingers slid down to the base. He twisted his wrist on the up stroke, again circling his thumb when got to the head.

An image came to life behind Adam's closed eyelids—Peter on his knees in that very shower, with his lips wrapped around Adam's cock. Adam could

almost feel the slick slide of Peter's tongue as he swallowed around Adam's cock, taking him impossibly further into his sweet, hot mouth. In his mind, Adam could see his hips flex as he moved in and out of Peter's talented mouth. Standing beneath the shower, Adam's hand pumped up and down his aching cock, mimicking the way he fucked Peter's throat.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Adam babbled as his cock swelled in his hand even more.

The cheeks of his ass tightened and his thighs burned. He clenched his jaw as his orgasm approached. Stroking faster and faster, his hand flew, the sound of his palm against his shaft almost obscene as it echoed in the confines of the shower.

He threw his head back and grunted loudly as he came. Ropes of his release painted the wall in front of him, spilling onto the floor and swirling down the drain. His chest heaved as he squeezed out every drop of come. It took a few moments for Adam's head to clear and for his legs to no longer imitate Jell-O. Relief and warm pleasure made his muscles loose, his entire body relax, and for the first time since the phone call the night before, Adam felt like he could breathe. His heart was still heavy because of the fight with Peter, and especially from the talk with Cami and all the things he'd finally admitted after holding them in for so long, but he knew it was time to face some difficult truths about his and Peter's relationship.

Decisions needed to be made. Now he just needed the strength to follow through.

Twenty minutes later he walked out the door, slapped his favorite tattered, black ball cap backward on his head, and tucked his cell phone into his pocket. He was going to call Cami and treat her to breakfast when he was finished with his run as a thank you for being his rock, as usual, the night before. She'd been a lifesaver. He didn't know what he'd do without her. The morning was slightly overcast. Smoky-gray clouds hid the sun, leaving the air damp and cool. Perfect running weather, at least for what Adam needed. He checked his watch and stretched again for a few minutes as he tried to focus.

Once on the sidewalk in front of the condo, Adam looked up and down the street, mentally planning his route and how far he wanted to run. If he were

being honest, he'd really like to pull a *Forrest Gump* and just take off, running as far as he could. He grabbed his phone, found the playlist he wanted and popped in the earbuds. Music flooded his ears, hard with a driving beat. It suited his mood perfectly. The tightness from earlier pulled at his chest, and before his warmed-up muscles cramped on him, he looked right and began to run down the street and toward the park about a mile away. Step after step, he timed his breaths with each stride. It didn't take long for the music and the steady cadence of his feet on the ground to work their magic.

Adam's mind cleared as he found his groove, leaving behind nothing but a slight burn in his thighs and the knock of his heart against his ribs. Trees blurred as he passed. He nodded at an old man, still dressed in his slippers and plaid robe, picking up the Sunday paper off the still damp grass of his yard. Dodging a stray basketball that rolled out of a driveway, his feet chewed up the asphalt. Breathing faster, his pulse quickened and the endorphins flowed. He looked left. There was a perfect trail that he always enjoyed running that went around the park. The sun made its first appearance of the day as he approached the end of the sidewalk. It blinded Adam after being hidden all morning, and he squinted as he started to run across the street. He didn't slow down; the way was clear in both directions. He made it about half way when there was a squeal of tires, the long wail of a horn, and then... searing pain. Adam sailed through the air after the front of a car clipped his hip and sent him flying.

He landed with a grotesque thud. His hip and knee absorbed most of the impact before he rolled, and his head slammed against the asphalt with a hollow crack. Blood seeped from a large gash, pooling before it slowly spread. Shouts and shrieks filled the air as Adam tried to understand what had just happened. He groaned, tried to take a breath, and hissed as white-hot pain shot to every point in his body.

Stunned, Adam struggled to focus on the people that suddenly surrounded him. The ground beneath him was warm, but he was cold all over... or at least he thought so. He blinked slowly. A blurred face was above him, but all Adam could see was the sunlight that looked more like a halo around whoever was there.

“What—?” Adam strained to ask, tasting blood. His stomach lurched and his body jerked, sending spikes of agony everywhere. “Fuck,” he whimpered.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” somebody frantically asked.

There were so many voices all around him, panicked and urgent even though they sounded like they were underwater. Adam tried to turn his head, but unfamiliar hands held him still.

“Don’t move. You’re hurt badly. The ambulance is on the way,” the stranger told him in what he assumed was supposed to be a soothing tone of voice. It was anything but, and the longer the person talked, the more agitated Adam became.

“What’s your name? Should we call anyone?” someone else questioned.

With effort, Adam managed to lift a finger. “My phone. Peter,” he slurred. He hurt everywhere. His head throbbed, he knew his knee was in a position it shouldn’t be in, and it felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest.

Adam looked up at the sky, then quickly closed his eyes as a blinding jolt of pain stole his breath. It felt as though a red-hot poker was being stabbed through his eyeball. He cried out, the sound garbled, and he struggled to focus. As he lay on the ground, bloody and broken, there was just one thought he was able to hold onto. Darkness was creeping in, the pain too much for his body to withstand, and when the paramedics arrived and began to treat him, Peter’s name was the only word he was able to croak over and over again. Peter was the last thing he thought of before he lost consciousness.

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“I don’t remember much that happened after that,” Adam told Peter, looking up and meeting his eyes for the first time in many minutes.

Peter was grief-stricken. Shaking from head to foot, he reached out and clutched Adam’s hand as if he didn’t really believe Adam was sitting right there in front of him. “Babe, Jesus Christ. I don’t know... how did you... fuck,” Peter’s voice broke. He didn’t look away from Adam as scalding tears streamed down his face, didn’t notice as they dripped from his chin and ran down his neck. All he saw, the only thing that filled his world, was his boyfriend, lover—partner—sitting across the table from him.

“You were all I wanted, the only thing I could think about,” Adam whispered hoarsely, ignoring his own tears.

Peter closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them to look at Adam once more. “When I got that damn phone call, I felt like I was the one that had gotten run over. I swear, Adam, I have never been so afraid in my whole fucking life.”

Neither man said a word as they processed everything, but they couldn't let go of each other. As always, touching one another, the skin-to-skin contact, kept them connected in a way nothing else did. Peter's mind raced as he filled in the details he'd been told at the hospital with what Adam had just told him.

Peter cleared his throat, swallowed the lingering terror from reliving the accident, and stared intently at Adam. “You know when the police officer came to the hospital to take your statement and you were still unconscious, he told me that it was the glare from the sun that caused the driver not to be able to see you. Can you believe that? Something as simple as sunlight almost took you from me,” Peter scoffed, tightening his grip on Adam's hand. Whispering roughly, he continued, “Of course, I almost managed to do that all on my own, didn't I? I've been such an idiot.”

Leaning forward, Adam covered their joined hands with his free hand. “It wasn't just you, Peter. I was as much to blame. I knew we needed to talk, that you were slipping away, but I didn't say anything either.”

Unable to resist the urge, and unwilling to worry about who would see, Peter pulled Adam's hand across the table and lifted it to his lips. He kissed the inside of Adam's wrist once, twice, saying a silent prayer of thanks for the strong, healthy pulse he felt beneath the newly healed skin.

“I love you, and I'm so sorry,” Peter apologized profusely.

“I'm sorry, too,” Adam replied immediately. “I love you. It's over now. You're here, we're together, and I'm okay. Everything's fine.”

Thinking about the conversation with Cami that Adam had just told him about made Peter's stomach turn all over again. He was extremely grateful to her for always being there for Adam, even more so for being the voice of reason when both of them were being ridiculous. Thinking that Adam went to

bed the night before the accident wondering if their relationship was over hurt Peter in a way he was sure he'd never forget.

Peter growled in the back of his throat, and narrowed his eyes at the most important person in his life. "It's not fine, Adam. Not even close. Do you know how close I came to losing you? How will that ever be fine?"

Adam swiped at his face, finally cleaning it of the tears that burned his cheeks. "But you didn't lose me. I'm here."

"Were you really going to leave me? Without talking to me first?" Peter had to ask. He needed to know.

Letting out a huge huff of frustration, Adam sat back in his chair. "Of course not. I was pissed and scared and not thinking clearly. I missed you and wanted you to come home, and when you didn't, I overreacted." Adam picked up his very much watered down glass of tea and took a sip.

He felt a million times better. Knowing that the worst was behind them, that nothing stood in their way any longer now that anyone who followed sports of any kind—and many who didn't—knew Peter was gay and in a relationship, made their future look very bright indeed. After all, it wasn't every day a man came out on national television.

Unable to stop the shit-eating grin that spread slowly across his face, Adam laughed. "I still can't believe you blurted out you were gay like that. Talk about putting it out there!"

Adam's throaty laugh settled deep in Peter's soul, and in that instant, he let go of everything. No more worrying about what might have happened, no more guilt for all the things he didn't say. It was all gone. Adam was right—none of it mattered. There was ink on his arm that would remind him every day of how much Adam meant to him. If that wasn't enough, the new scars on Adam's body would never let him forget. Ogling his gorgeous boyfriend, appreciating that damn shirt on a whole new level, his jeans became uncomfortably tight. Peter's stomach fluttered, followed by a deep flare of heat that made his heart skip a beat. He licked his lips, the bitter taste of beer a shock on his tongue. His dick twitched, and he groaned.

A wild, needy sound gurgled out of Peter's throat. "Pete—" Adam began,

then stopped, taking in the way Peter's eyes were almost black as well as the slight curl to his upper lip. "Oh."

"You done?" Peter rasped, tipping his chin toward the table covered with all their uneaten food.

Adam gulped. "Hell yes."

The chair behind Peter screeched across the floor as Peter stood up, but he didn't care. He couldn't take his eyes off Adam. He moved around the table to help Adam with his crutches. They passed the hostess, who wished them a sweet goodbye, but neither man acknowledged her. Peter rested his hand in the small of Adam's back as they exited the restaurant, and he didn't remove it during the short walk to the car. Beneath his palm, the muscles of Adam's back worked as he moved forward. Peter couldn't wait to lick over every inch of that skin.

His fingers dug into Adam's side. Urgent need and intense want warred for dominance as they approached the car. Mindful of Adam's crutches, Peter forced Adam up against the door and attacked his mouth, wedging his knee carefully between Adam's legs. Adam moaned when Peter's cock ground along his hip, making Peter hiss.

"Need you so fucking badly," Peter told his very stunned boyfriend. Craving the warmth of Adam's skin, Peter slipped his hands beneath the damned blue shirt and covered Adam's stomach. "Oh, yes." Peter urged, needing more. He fanned his hands, allowing his thumbs to drag across Adam's nipples. When Adam moaned, Peter kissed him harder, deeper, forcing more of his tongue inside Adam's hot mouth.

"Damn," Adam muttered once Peter stopped his assault. Breathing heavily and with hungry eyes, he reached out and held each side of Peter's face. "Take me home, Peter."

Once in the car, Peter could only think of one thing—get home as fast as fucking possible. Get Adam naked as fast as fucking possible. Get Adam inside of him as fast as fucking possible, and never, ever, forget how close he came to losing him. Well, that was three things, plus a little extra, but the point was, Peter wanted to be home.

Immediately.

Peter gripped the steering wheel so tightly his fingers went numb. The air in the car was thick with tension, both sexual and the lingering effects of Adam's admissions. Pieces of their conversation bounced around in his mind, but Peter's concentration was focused almost solely on Adam. It was a good thing he'd lived in Denver all his life and could practically drive with his eyes closed.

Beside him, Adam cleared his throat. "Peter—"

"Just wait. Please." Peter snapped his head to the side as he passed a car. "I can't, not while I'm driving. I need to touch you, look at you, and if you say anything right now, I'll lose it."

A strangled sob ripped from Adam's throat, but he swallowed and kept the next one inside. Tentatively, he reached out and ran his fingers through the hair behind Peter's ear.

"Oh, God. Keep touching me, baby. Don't stop." Peter didn't care that he sounded desperate and on the verge of a full-fledged breakdown. He needed Adam like he needed to breathe, and nothing would keep him from letting Adam know that ever again.

Adam's hand shook, but he didn't stop touching Peter. Fingers in Peter's hair, then down the side of his neck and across his shoulder, he made the same circuit over and over again. His stomach clenched, protesting the few pieces of sushi he'd managed to eat during their time at the restaurant. He couldn't keep his eyes off Peter. The discussion they'd just had was probably the most painful he'd ever experienced, even harder than telling his mom and stepdad he was gay. There was still more to say, he knew that, but the worst of it was out there. He knew he'd never forget the look of complete horror and devastation on Peter's face when he told him about the accident.

Because it wasn't quite rush hour yet, it didn't take long to get home. As Peter turned the car down their street, Adam's heart felt like it would explode right out of his chest. Hunger and urgency mingled with a frantic desire to scream and cry. In the restaurant, aware of others watching, it was impossible for both of them to freely give in to all the emotions Adam's confession had

wrought. Inside the safe cocoon of their condo, the one filled with the things that made their place a home, Adam knew that the tenuous thread they were both hanging onto would break the second they walked through the front door.

He wasn't wrong.

Peter slammed on the brakes as soon as he reached the driveway at the back of their condo, threw the car into park, pressed the button to open the garage door, and turned to Adam with wild, bright eyes. "Inside. Now."

The shiver that wracked Adam's body from the deep, almost feral, tenor of Peter's voice was completely involuntary. After a beat of stunned silence, Adam did as he was told. It was difficult considering the crutches, the brace, and the enormity of all that had been said, but he got out of the car and started to move. He felt Peter behind him, heard him breathe. His heart raced and he was hot, so hot all over, even though it was cool inside the garage. The whir and clank as the door began to lower made him jump, but Peter was right there to keep him from falling.

"I've got you," Peter whispered as he pressed his mouth to Adam's ear. He wrapped his arms around Adam's chest and felt the way Adam's heart beat so fast beneath his hand. The second Peter touched Adam, he was done. All the pent-up frustration and anxiety, mixed with the fact that there really wasn't ever a time when Peter didn't want Adam, had Peter like a rocket, ready for takeoff. With no shame whatsoever, Peter pushed his hips against Adam's ass and let him feel how hard he was already.

Gently, so he didn't knock Adam off balance, he turned Adam's head to the side. "Do you feel what you do to me? All the damn time." They kissed. It was messy and awkward, but Peter couldn't make himself let go of Adam enough to change positions, or to even go inside the house.

Need escalating, Peter wanted more. More skin, more touches, more of his mouth over every inch of Adam's slightly damaged but still very sexy body. He lowered his hands, letting them skim along the hard planes of Adam's chest and over Adam's firm stomach. When he reached the bottom of Adam's shirt, he quickly slipped his hands beneath, sighing when his hands met warm flesh. The silky hair that led from Adam's navel down to the best part tickled Peter's palm as his hand glided back and forth.

He pushed Adam's shirt up and over his head, ignoring the goose bumps that broke out all over Adam's exposed skin. He'd warm him up soon enough. "I want you. Right here, right now," Peter said into the skin along Adam's neck. He dragged his teeth across Adam's shoulder and dipped his tongue into the hollow between Adam's shoulder and neck before pulling the skin into his mouth. "I can't wait any longer." Lowering his hands to Adam's hips, Peter slowly turned him around so they were face-to-face.

Energy crackled between them. It had been so long since they'd been physical. There had only been a few make-out sessions since before the accident consisting of nothing more than long kisses and gentle touching that didn't even result in an orgasm. Now everything was so very different. All their walls were down, their secrets brought into the light and dealt with, leaving nothing between them but their deep love and commitment to each other.

The realization took Peter's breath away.

And with that thought, the garage was no longer good enough for what Peter wanted. "Let's go inside. I need you in our bed where I can get at every inch of your gorgeous body."

Adam followed Peter into the house, his insides twisting and his pulse racing. Peter didn't pause as they entered the kitchen, but kept moving toward their bedroom. He was like a man on a mission, and it was obvious that mission was to drive Adam completely out of his mind. Adam was sweating so much his hands slid on the handles of his crutches. He was nervous, excited, and so turned on he could hardly stand it, but the second they entered the bedroom, the only thing that mattered was Peter.

He watched as Peter threw the car keys on the dresser, the clank as they hit the glass bowl loud in the silent room. Peter tossed his phone without even checking for messages, something he never did, making Adam's stomach flip. Next he kicked off his shoes and pulled his shirt over his head, all without saying a word. Adam's throat went dry. His boyfriend was so hot, fit and hard all over. Unlike Adam, who got his exercise outside, Peter kept his body in shape by spending countless hours in the gym. Lifting weights, cross-training, yoga—Peter pushed his body as far as he could, then pushed it some more.

Through his youth, then on into high school and college, Peter had played football, but one too many concussions kept him from moving on to the next level. Being a sports analyst was a perfect fit for Peter. With his charisma, All-American good looks, and a sexy smile to boot, it was no wonder he was well on his way to being one of the most popular analysts out there. And now, after his unintentional, though very public, coming out, the world knew he was taken.

Very, very taken, and Adam had no intention of ever letting him go.

Peter's back was to Adam—who still had yet to move—as he undid his jeans and slid them down his legs. When he turned around, clad in only a pair of very tight black boxer briefs, the grin on his face was sexy and naughty, and it made Adam's cock ache.

Peter crooked his finger. "Come here," he ordered.

Crossing the room, Adam stopped just in front of Peter. "Sit," Peter whispered gruffly as he took his crutches and leaned them beside the bed.

Peter stood in front of Adam and let the tips of his fingers ghost across his shoulders and chest, then down his arms. Nothing was said, but words weren't really necessary. Adam could feel Peter's love, and the regret that was buried beneath as well. Adam took a stuttering breath. His chest felt like it could crack right down the center, exposing him completely, with the slightest encouragement. The moment was wrought with so much intensity he could hardly keep his eyes open.

Kneeling in front of Adam, Peter began unbuckling the brace, the sound of the Velcro incredibly loud in the silent room. Once Adam's knee was free, Peter laid the brace on the ground, forgotten the moment he faced Adam again. Adam watched as Peter bent down and began removing his shoes for him. Almost reverent with each motion, Peter removed one shoe then the other before he did the same with his socks.

He slid his hand up Adam's denim-covered legs, carefully avoiding his injured knee. Even through his jeans, Adam could feel the heat from Peter's touch.

"Peter," Adam breathed when the backs of Peter's fingers brushed against his stomach as he grabbed the button on his waistband.

“Please let me do this,” Peter implored.

Adam nodded, sucking in his stomach while Peter slid the button through the hole. Peter leaned forward and kissed the exposed skin just above Adam’s underwear. Adam closed his eyes. “Jesus.” His voice caught, the motion so intimate it made his heart hurt.

“Lift. Hang on to my shoulders so you don’t hurt yourself,” Peter instructed. Adam obeyed, and hung on while Peter tugged on his jeans and pulled them over his hips and down his legs. He was about to pull Peter onto the bed with him, needing to feel his lover’s hard body next to his, when he felt Peter’s warm lips once more—but this time it was on his scarred knee.

“I’m so sorry,” Peter murmured against the sensitive skin. “I’m sorry we fought,” he went on, using his lips to rub against the scar on the side of his kneecap. “I’m sorry I hurt you.” This time, he used his tongue to lick the next mark on the other side of his knee. “And mostly, I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you, that you were alone. It won’t happen again, I promise.” Peter used his teeth to nip at the skin on the inside of his knee.

“Baby, please. Come up here. I need you.” Adam’s hands grappled at Peter’s shoulders.

Peter placed one more closed-mouth kiss—really it was more a resting of his lips against Adam’s knee—before he stood up. It took a moment for them to maneuver Adam to the center of the bed with a pillow placed beneath his knee to keep him from hurting himself, but they managed. Once he was comfortable, he wasted no time in pulling Peter on top of him. Adam ran his hands up and down his lover’s back, sighing as Peter allowed his body to relax and settle between his legs. He lifted his head and began to ravage Peter’s mouth with his own.

They kissed over and over, using their hands to explore each other in a way they hadn’t done in much too long. Familiar became new and uncharted—as if with their new beginning they were making love for the very first time.

And with that thought, Adam couldn’t wait any longer.

“Let me make love to you, Peter.”

In a flash, Peter yanked Adam’s briefs down his legs. Peter grinned at his lover’s surprise before he crushed his lips to Adam’s, plunging his tongue

deep into Adam's mouth. Peter's hands reached and scraped, grabbed and pinched—Adam's nipples, the inside of his thigh, the top of his shoulder. Peter's mouth followed his fingers, licking and biting every bit of skin he could get to. Adam was so turned on he could hardly think. He spread his legs wider so he could get Peter where he wanted him to be. Adam gripped Peter's sides, trying to urge him higher so that he could touch him, get him ready for his cock. He threw his head back when Peter licked a long line up his chest, along his jaw, all the way until he reached his ear.

“You just lie there and look hot. Let me do all the work this time,” Peter told him with a smirk as he sat up and rested on his ankles. “You're going to feel so good, babe. I can't wait for your cock to be buried deep inside of me.”

Adam grabbed his own dick and slowly began to stroke as he watched Peter do the same.

“Mmmm, yes. You should see yourself right now,” Peter taunted, licking his lips suggestively when Adam looked at him. “Naked, your cock in your hand, getting yourself nice and hard so I can ride you until you beg me to stop.”

Peter's words were like blazing-hot brands, setting Adam's entire body on fire. “Peter, fuck,” he stammered.

“Oh yeah. You're about to fuck me so good, aren't you?”

Adam bucked his hips; his cock throbbed in his hand. “I want to touch you. Let me get you ready.”

As much as he wanted to do what he said, watching Peter stroke himself, giving himself over to his pleasure, was the hottest damn thing Adam had ever seen. Peter's cheeks were flushed, his lips were swollen from their kisses, and Adam couldn't help but stare at the ink that stood out so starkly against Peter's golden skin.

Their mark was there, and the image was so powerful, Adam's hand skipped along his shaft.

Peter, whose eyes hadn't left Adam's, whispered in a voice full of emotion, “Yes, Adam. You feel it, don't you? Feel how much I am a part of you and you are of me? I know you do.”

Mesmerized, Adam stared, panting, as Peter sucked two fingers into his mouth. He groaned loudly when Peter released his fingers then slowly, so slowly Adam thought he would die, made a wet trail down his stomach and reached lower, below his cock. When Peter threw his head back and his whole body shook, Adam knew where those sinful fingers were.

Adam said roughly, no longer willing to let Peter do all the work, “That’s it, stretch yourself. Get ready for me. You know I’m going to fuck that ass so good.”

“Damn, it’s been so long.” Peter still had his eyes closed, but Adam could hear the wet slide of his fingers in and out of his ass.

Adam reached out to get the lube from the nightstand, fumbling with the lid once he grabbed it. He poured a generous amount on his hand; he wasn’t about to cause any pain to the man he loved. There was no way he could resist helping Peter out, not when it had been weeks since they’d had sex.

“Get up here,” Adam urged. “I want to feel you.”

Peter listened and scooted forward until he was close enough for Adam to touch. “Give me your mouth, let me kiss you,” Adam told him.

Lowering his mouth as his lover asked, Peter got close enough so that Adam could kiss him. Adam rolled slightly, keeping his leg propped on the pillow, but moving in such a way that he could wrap a hand around the back of Peter’s neck. He hungrily kissed Peter. It was messy and noisy, but he didn’t give a damn. He needed this so badly, to lose himself in Peter, to take him, claim him, and make him his.

He reached out with the hand that was covered in lube and stroked Peter’s cock, loving the way it pulsed beneath his fingers. Peter began to rock his hips in time with Adam’s hand. Low, demanding sounds rumbled in Peter’s chest, turning Adam on even more.

Adam firmly stroked Peter one last time before he allowed his fingers to dip lower to Peter’s balls. He spent a few moments rubbing the soft, wrinkled skin before he moved even lower. Peter wantonly spread his knees wider, an invitation for Adam to do what he wished. Adam complied, searching out Peter’s opening with his fingers. He pressed slightly after circling around it a few times, feeling the tight ring of muscle give just a little.

“Ah, oh, yes,” Peter cried out.

That voice, full of passion and love and hunger, settled deep inside of Adam, curling around his stomach, his heart, and filled every part of him.

He added more pressure, pushed a little harder, and slid his finger about halfway in. He continued to move slowly, until his finger was completely inside. Heat surrounded it, and the sound that erupted from Peter’s mouth was raw and desperate. Adam’s own cock responded, throbbing between his legs.

Peter’s chest was covered in a sheen of sweat, drops trailing down the center, mingling with the dark-brown hair that led down to his cock. Adam wanted to lick every drop with his tongue. He added a second finger, scissoring them to stretch Peter, preparing the way for what came next.

“Ah, yes.” Peter tilted his hips as Adam rubbed the spot that he knew curled Peter’s toes. “There, right fucking there,” Peter told him.

Ignoring the ache between his own legs for the moment, Adam gave Peter all his attention. He didn’t slow his fingers; instead he kept the rhythm the same, timing each in and out with every breath Peter took. He bit his lip to keep from leaning over and taking Peter into his throat because, God help him, he loved the way it felt to have a mouthful of Peter.

That would have to wait. Adam was so hard he hurt, and he knew Peter was close to coming just from his fingers. He wanted to watch his lover come, to feel himself let go while buried balls-deep inside of Peter, so he pulled his fingers out and used the leftover lube to coat himself. Condoms were a thing of the past since both had been tested months before, a definite bonus to being in a committed relationship.

“Come on, I want inside of you,” Adam said as he held his cock, his voice hoarse and his throat dry.

In one smooth motion Peter straddled him, and each man groaned as he slid down Adam’s length.

Neither moved for a few moments as Peter took all of Adam’s cock inside of him and settled against Adam’s thighs. When Adam couldn’t wait any longer, he dug his fingers into Peter’s side and urged him to move. Their bodies were slick with sweat. Peter bent, drew his tongue up Adam’s chest and up the side of his neck.

“You feel so good, babe. So big and full inside of me,” Peter breathed between biting kisses and sweeps of his tongue anywhere he could reach. “I could stay right here with you inside of me all fucking night, just like this.”

It was a lie, of course. Both of them were going to come before too much longer, but that didn't mean Adam didn't wish it were true. Making love to Peter, being with him this way, was everything he ever wanted.

“Love you, so fucking much,” Adam panted after Peter rocked against him, driving him even deeper inside.

Hooking his arms beneath Peter's thighs, Adam stretched, mindful of his knee, his own thighs burning from exertion. He went deeper, kept fucking Peter. It felt too good to stop. Adam arched his back and again dug his fingers into Peter's hips hard enough to leave bruises. He held Peter and buried himself as deep as he could get.

Peter's spine curled forward, allowing Adam's cock to slide right along his prostate, and he moaned a loud, hoarse, “Yes. Don't stop.”

The pace increased, their bodies slamming against one another. Grunts and groans, the sticky sound of Peter as he stroked himself, the slap of Adam's balls against Peter's ass, filled the room.

“So close. Do it. Come for me,” Adam urged, trying to hold off his orgasm until Peter had his first.

Peter threw his head back, his neck stretched, his mouth open. “Adam, oh shit. Love you, ah, fuck.”

Adam watched as Peter closed his fingers tightly around his shaft and then roared as he shot stream after stream after stream of come onto his chest. Seeing Peter lose it, feeling himself covered in jizz, set Adam off, and he bucked, stilled, and filled Peter with his release.

Unable to hold himself upright any longer, Peter collapsed onto Adam's chest, apparently not caring in the least about being smeared with spunk. Peter kissed Adam's chest. Adam kissed the top of Peter's head. They didn't move, didn't speak, they simply lay that way until the mess became too much to take. Peter rolled off Adam and grabbed a T-shirt, wiping them both off.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, and Peter pressed his lips to

Adam's. "Thank you for not giving up on us—on me—babe. I have no idea what I did to deserve you, but whatever it was, I'm so damn grateful."

Adam pulled Peter forward, pressing his chest to Peter's. He tangled their legs together, being careful not to jostle his knee too much, and ran his fingers through Peter's damp hair. "I love you so much."

"Adam," Peter sighed, too overwhelmed to say anything else.

They were quiet long enough that Adam felt Peter's body relax and drift off to sleep. Adam pressed his lips to Peter's forehead and whispered, "I'm glad I didn't give up on us, too."

\*\*\*\*

Peter woke slowly the next morning. With his eyes still closed, he groaned as he became aware of aches in muscles he hadn't used in a while. He peeled his eyes open, wincing at the sunlight that filtered through the trees outside the window, sending streaks of bright light across their bed. Tentatively, he stretched, stopping when he bumped into something hard and warm. Adam. He smiled and scooted closer to his boyfriend, laying his arm across Adam's stomach. He lowered his head and nuzzled his favorite spot behind Adam's ear. The scents of salt, soap from last night's shower, and of the sex they'd had, again, before falling asleep for the night, filled his nose. Using his lips, he left a trail of soft kisses across the span from Adam's neck to his shoulder.

His heart was light, though his mind was full of everything that had happened the day and night before. He almost couldn't believe how easy it was for both of them to let go of all the negative feelings and concentrate only on moving forward. Of course, it didn't hurt that they'd had sex three times since getting home yesterday afternoon. Peter knew Adam was a little frustrated by his inability to actively participate, but Peter had no complaints. At all. Being with Adam was always an enjoyable experience, but with his newfound appreciation of how fragile life could really be, the pleasure factor was off the charts.

"Good morning," Peter whispered in a voice still rough from sleep. He should feel bad for waking Adam, but he didn't. Mostly because his dick was hard, and he wanted to feel Adam's hands—and maybe even his mouth if he was really lucky—all over him.

Rolling his hips, he slid his dick between the cheeks of Adam's ass. Adam chuckled. "Again? Jesus, Peter. If we're not careful that thing might shrivel up and fall right the hell off. Then what would we do in the shower?"

Peter's chest rumbled as he remembered just how they had spent their time in the shower a few short hours ago—his knees were still protesting. He flattened his hand against Adam's chest and pulled him backward; laying him flat so he could get at the lips he couldn't seem to kiss enough. Kissing Adam was one of his favorite things to do, and he would never get tired of it. Not of the way Adam tasted, or how his lips fit perfectly against his own, or how, when he kissed Adam, he never wanted to stop.

Low moans from the back of Adam's throat had Peter rocking his hips against Adam's thigh, his hard cock pressed tight between their naked bodies. Peter let his fingers travel across Adam's chest, using his thumb to tease his nipples into hard peaks. Adam sucked in a quick breath and dug his fingers into Peter's back.

"That feels so good," Adam rasped.

Flattening his tongue, Peter lapped and sucked Adam's right nipple before licking his way toward the left. The flavor of Adam's skin exploded in his mouth, and the only word Peter could think of was *more*. More skin, more of Adam. He continued his descent, taking long moments to enjoy the span of sensitive skin beneath Adam's navel. Peter loved to drag his tongue through the soft hair that covered the few inches of one of his favorite spots on Adam's gorgeous body. He could spend hours with his mouth right there.

The buzz of his cell phone made him utter a harsh, "Fuck." He dropped a quick kiss to the tip of Adam's hard, already-leaking cock before he rolled over and snatched the phone off the nightstand.

Adam huffed as he listened to Peter, obviously with work judging from the one side of the conversation he could hear. It took a few minutes for his erection to go away; it didn't help that he couldn't stop staring at Peter while he paced back and forth in front of the bed. Still naked, still semi-hard, with stubble covering his jaw and the faint scratches he'd left along Peter's arms and back, Adam thought Peter was as sexy as he'd ever been. Adam sighed, blowing out a long breath to release some tension. From the tone of Peter's voice as he wrapped up his call, sex was going to have to wait.

“Well, shit. God damn fucking pain in the ass...” Peter cursed as he tossed his phone on the bed, mumbling under his breath.

Adam couldn't help but chuckle as he carefully rolled on his side to face his very worked up boyfriend. Peter was ridiculous when he ranted—that he was doing it naked just made it even more so.

Peter spun around and narrowed his eyes at him. “Oh, you can stop laughing any time now, jackass, considering you're not going to like this any more than I do.”

“Why? What does anything with your job have to do with me?” Adam asked, alarmed, as a bad feeling settled in his stomach.

“Ugh,” Peter groaned. He sat on the bed, and Adam couldn't help but reach out and grab his boyfriend's hand, wrapping his fingers tight in a show of support. Adam watched closely as Peter took a deep breath before he turned to face him. “It seems that the big bosses at the network have had a lot of requests from some of the major sports magazines and sports shows to have me do a few interviews, make some appearances. *Behind The Lines*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Real Sports*, just to name a few. The list is... kind of mind boggling.”

Adam gulped. “Holy shit, baby, that's fucking great! Just think what that kind of exposure could do for your career. I always knew you'd make it to the next level. I'm so proud of you,” Adam gushed, so happy for Peter. When Peter didn't look as excited as Adam felt, Adam snapped his mouth shut. “What is it?” He whispered with trepidation.

“They want me to talk about the accident. About what happened to you and what I did. And about being gay and being on television and around athletes all the time. They want me to talk about everything, babe.”

“Oh.” Lamé, but it was the only word that came to Adam's mind.

They were silent for a bit, but Adam didn't let go of Peter's hand. He knew they were asking Peter to take a big step—the biggest of his career—one that could make or break him, and as much as he wanted Peter to tell them no, secretly he hoped Peter said yes.

Adam opened his mouth to offer Peter some kind of encouragement, but as soon as he started to speak, Peter said in a rush, “You know, when the phone

rang that day, and I saw on the caller ID it was from St. Luke's, I knew right away it was bad news about you. Nothing else mattered but finding out what was wrong. I would have answered even if I'd been in the middle of calling the Super Bowl."

They hadn't talked much about what had happened, and now that Peter brought it up, Adam asked the question he'd been dying to know the answer to ever since he woke up and Peter was sitting at his side. "What happened? How were you even on the air?"

Peter laughed, and it was a mixture of embarrassment and humor. "Well, I was taping a sideline interview during the pregame that we were going to show during the broadcast, and the camera guy was supposed to pan to the field for a shot and then pan back to me. We had discussed what he was going to film and for how long before I would finish my commentary. Somehow, I'm still not a hundred percent sure what happened, but at the exact time my phone vibrated with the call from the hospital, he'd already turned the camera back toward me. Of course I didn't pay attention to anything except what the doctor was saying, but the camera picked up every word, starting with, "Yes, Adam Westbrook is my boyfriend," and ending with, "I'm getting the first flight out, tell Adam I love him and I'll be there soon."

"Damn," Adam said, shocked.

"Yeah," Peter snorted. "I dropped my microphone and ran off the field without even looking back. I didn't even think to call anyone until I was in a cab on the way to the airport. It wasn't until I got back here to you that I even paid attention to what I'd done, and by then every network had already run the clip of the phone call."

Adam swallowed, his throat suddenly dry and tight. Hearing how Peter had reacted, without even thinking about himself, and after the fight they'd had the night before the accident, had Adam reeling, and more in love with his boyfriend than ever. Needing to be closer to Peter, Adam slowly rolled and sat up so he could lay his head on Peter's shoulder. "I'm sorry I scared you so badly," he whispered, rubbing his cheek against Peter's arm. Their tattoo was right there, so Adam lowered his head and placed a soft kiss, murmuring his thanks against the mark that would stain Peter forever. "I love you, so much,

for risking everything just to come home to me. I can't even tell you what it was like to wake up with you as the first thing I saw. I couldn't remember everything that had happened, just bits and pieces, but seeing you, it was like I knew everything would be okay. You were home, and that was all that mattered."

Hands shaking, Peter turned and slowly lowered Adam to the bed. He crashed his mouth against Adam's, pouring out all his love and thanks and fear and hope into the kiss. Breathing became necessary, so Peter slid his mouth to Adam's neck where he said softly, "You know nothing is going to be the same once I do what they want, right? My being gay is going to be big news for a while."

Adam shrugged. "So? Everyone that matters already knows anyway. Besides, I want the world to know you're mine. I could give a shit if we get stared at when we go to the grocery store." He smirked. "You might want to rethink your love of gummy bears, though. That might really be big news." Adam wagged his eyebrows, making Peter laugh, and in that instant Peter didn't care what anyone thought either.

He'd been out to his friends and family for a long time. The only thing different now was that he could take Adam with him to the Pro Bowl as his boyfriend. A week in Hawaii a few months from now with a healed, healthy Adam sounded pretty fucking perfect to Peter just then. In fact, there was nothing he could think of in their future that didn't sound perfect.

Grinning as he got an idea, Peter stood up and held out his hand to Adam. "Come on. I'm hungry, and I'm taking you out for breakfast." He helped Adam stand up and twined their fingers together before laying a loud, smacking kiss right on Adam's lips. "Hurry and get dressed," Peter laughed. "I want to hold hands with my boyfriend while we stuff our faces with pancakes."

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Les Joseph lives in Texas with her husband and children. She's been an avid reader ever since she can remember and enjoys everything from erotica to YA to paranormal and everything in between. Les has always had a passion for writing, even writing short stories to share with her friends when she was little, and has finally decided to take the leap and put her words to print.*

*There have always been stories in her head and multiple characters at a time trying to talk to her, and it's just a matter of which voice is the loudest. She's currently working on her first novel and hopes to have it ready to print in the very near future.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# DOUBLE EXPOSURE

By Sam Kadence

## Photo Description

A beautiful young man looks outward through a tumble of messy, long, blond hair.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm a guy who doesn't care what he looks like. I wear glasses and prefer baggy sweatshirts and jeans. My hair, super long for a guy, is always tied up and stuffed inside a beanie or the hood of my sweatshirt. No one really pays much attention to me in school, and frankly, I don't mind. I'm not a loner or anything, although my friends and I aren't exactly the popular ones in school.*

*I don't really care about popularity or being in a relationship or being invited to parties and stuff like that. I'm happy getting good grades, hanging with my friends, and being with my family, even if they drive me crazy most of the time. I'm pretty close with my dad's sister, my Aunt Patricia, who's a fashion photographer. She pays me to be her errand boy on Saturdays, which is pretty cool.*

*This Saturday however, is a little different. My aunt shows up at the studio with a couple in business suits, followed by the model for the day's shoot. I only get a glimpse of his face, but I know it's Lucas.*

*Let me explain about Lucas: he's the most popular guy in my school. No, he's not a jock or anything, he's a model, since he was in fifth grade or somewhere around there. He's the guy everyone wants to be friends with, and the guy most of the girls in school want as a boyfriend. I'm not one of those people.*

*Anyway, everybody's in a rush now that the model has arrived, and I've got about a hundred things to do helping get ready for the shoot. Then it turns out the female model is a no-show. The next thing I know, my aunt tows me into a dressing room and tells me she wants me to be the female model.*

*Honestly? I think she's crazy. For one thing, I'm clueless about clothes. For another, I'm pretty sure I don't look like a model. And I'm definitely not a girl.*

*Before I can tell her no, my aunt drags me into another room so the make-up artist and hair stylist can attack my face and my hair—and then my aunt is helping me get into a dress. A dress! I look ridiculous! And on top of all that, I have no idea how to model. I was never going to hear the end of this.*

*But when my aunt leads me over to Lucas, I'm almost positive he not only doesn't recognize me from school—no surprise there—he thinks I'm really a girl! And there's no time to say anything because I'm being put into position and the camera is clicking away. I am so awkward with him—the poses are a little too romantic for comfort. After a few poses I start feeling weird—my heart pumping harder than usual, my stomach in a knot—I'm pretty sure I might be getting sick.*

*Finally, my aunt announces that we're almost done. Finally! I suddenly feel Lucas' hand on my lower back, and turn toward him. He cups my face with his hand, looking at me with eyes that are so intense I have to swallow my spit. The weird feelings are back, even worse now. Lucas tilts his head and leans in slightly, closing his eyes. The last things I remember are a click from Aunt Patricia's camera and gasps from her direction...*

*Sincerely,*

*Leandro*

Due to publishing requirements, this letter has been edited with permission from Leandro. The original full-length letter may be found [here](#).

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary, young adult

**Tags:** cross dressing, coming of age, visual arts, high school, sweet no sex

**Word count:** 12,751

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# DOUBLE EXPOSURE

By Sam Kadence

The last thing I remembered before blacking out was Lucas Hart's lips touching mine. Only seconds before he'd been staring at me, eyes such a pretty pale shade of blue, like a bright sunny day. His face just inches from mine several times before that moment, then, just suddenly, it happened.

Waking up on the couch in one of the studio dressing rooms gave me a minute to try to refocus my thoughts. How did I wind up here, dressed like a girl, a pretty-looking girl at that, fainting at the kiss of Lucas Hart, heartthrob and model? And why couldn't I stop thinking of his lips touching mine?

It all began less than twenty-four hours ago at my friend Jenny's house. I had readjusted the lens of my camera and snapped off another half-dozen shots. Jenny's hamster, Cherry, blinked at me with a semi-dazed look over the giant strawberry she was eating. The contrast of her soft white-gray fur against the bright red of the fruit was well worth the creature's irritated chatter. I pushed my glasses up my nose and raised the camera for another shot.

"Only you would think Cherry is art," Jenny grumbled from her place on the bed. She brushed her ginger hair out of her face and sighed. "Do you really have to work tomorrow?"

Stupid question, but I understood her frustration. Saturdays meant shopping, friends, and fun for most kids our ages. I would be working with my aunt Patty at her photo studio. No, she never let me touch her camera—mine was just a cheap knock-off, but I did get to watch her technique, examine her photographic eye on the world, help with lighting, and ask questions. All of those things were priceless. "It's a big shoot. You know how well she pays."

"Enough to buy a new lens. I know, I know. How many lenses does one sixteen-year-old boy need? I just want to hang with you on the weekend for once."

I put my camera away and tugged my messy, long, blond hair into a ponytail before fastening it with a rubber band. "We're hanging right now, aren't we? And since it's Friday, it *is* technically the weekend."

She glared at me hard enough that I had to check my clothes again. Was something stained? I didn't pay much attention before changing out of my uniform after school and rushing over to her place, so all I had on was my normal faded blue jeans and a dark gray hoodie.

"What?" I finally asked.

"You're taking pictures of my hamster."

I sighed and threw myself down on the bed. Sometimes girls just made no sense. Since she was my best friend, Jenny often explained things in simple terms for me. Especially when something was bugging her. Today it seemed I'd have to pry it out of her. "Talk to me. You wanted me over right away. Something has been bothering you all day."

"So you know Lucas, right?" she began, eyes darting away from meeting mine. Something she only did when she was really nervous.

"Yeah, duh." Everyone knew Lucas Hart. Well maybe not everyone. Just everyone in our school. He was a model, had been since he was a kid, even starred in a few commercials. Now he mostly did fashion modeling for major retailers. No one was going to open an ad for Target and scream "OMG, it's Lucas!" unless they were from our small Madison, Wisconsin high school. He wasn't a jock. He wasn't a brain. He was just pretty. And even though I was a guy, I could appreciate good angles when I saw them. That guy had "capture me" written all over him. Practically made me want to hide in his locker with a camera.

"He was talking to Katie."

"Okay, and?" Katie was the school gossip, a cheerleader, and dating the football half-back. Cliché from her little mini-skirt covered butt—which couldn't have met the school clothing standard for length—all the way to her bleach-blonde roots. But she was nice enough to most everyone. I'd taken a bunch of pictures of her in various clubs for the yearbook and the school newspaper. She was photogenic, but the camera didn't love her nearly as much as it did Lucas.

"Katie broke up with Teddy last week."

"So you think she was hitting on Lucas." I put my hands beneath my head and got comfy. This was going to be a long, mostly one-sided discussion.

Jenny, like every other girl in school, lusted after Lucas. I think it was more his status as a model than him. Sure he was nice enough, good-looking of course—he was a model, after all—but there were better-looking and more popular guys in school, and he never did seem to date anyone. He was the local celebrity. Unattainable, but wanted by all the girls. I didn't get it. One guy was as good as the next right?

I must have dozed off because I woke to Jenny smacking me hard enough in the stomach to knock the wind out of me. "Ouch!"

"I'm pouring out my heart to you and you're sleeping. You're such a guy."

"Uh, yeah, you're talking about boys. What else am I supposed to be?" Though frankly, I wasn't interested in girls either, just photography. I shook my head at her then glanced at the clock. Almost seven; I'd have to get home soon or Mom would insist on making something hot for dinner even though I'd already missed the meal. "Lucas doesn't date anyway. He says he's too busy working and keeping his grades up. He tells every girl who asks him the same thing. It's like his mantra or something. I get it. I don't date either. School's enough of a hassle without having a hanger-on demanding time. And don't tell me you wouldn't get mad if I suddenly started dating and saw you once a week or only at school."

"But I heard from a friend of Katie's that he was asking questions about me."

That couldn't be good. "Okay, so maybe you should talk to him."

"She said it was just about what classes I was in."

"Maybe he needs a study partner. You are one of the smartest girls in school."

"I don't want to be smart. I want to be pretty."

I laughed. "Did you really just say that?"

She sighed. "It doesn't have to be Lucas, I guess. I just want a guy to look at me like I'm a girl."

"You are a girl. How do guys not look at you like you're a girl?" I glanced at her. She looked like a girl to me. Though I guess we were sort of similar in

build—tall, slender, not curvy, long hair. She didn't wear glasses like I did, but I guess that just meant people saw more of her face.

“Argh! You're so dense sometimes, Tory.” Cherry began to run noisily on her wheel. Obviously the trauma from being photographed had worn off while I napped. Jenny paced the room, and I laughed to myself about pets mirroring their owners. “There's a spring dance coming up. I'd like to go with someone other than you this time.”

“Hey!”

“You know what I mean.”

“I guess. I don't know why you want to go to the dance anyway. It's not like you can talk to anyone over the music and no one really knows how to dance. Everyone just sort of sways. The lighting isn't even good enough to get reasonable pictures.” I dragged myself from the bed, stretching and letting my back pop a few times. “I need to get home before my mom starts freaking.”

“I really wanted to go dress shopping with you this weekend.”

'Cause I was *so* the guy to help with that. Those adventures usually meant me sitting on a bench for hours while she tried on every dress she could find, only to buy nothing, no matter what I said. “Call Shayla. She loves shopping.” And gossip. Put those two together and they were in their own world. No Tory needed. I grinned. “I'll call you tomorrow after the shoot if it doesn't run long. Maybe we can do dinner or something.”

“Okay. Night, Tor.”

The four-block walk home was quiet enough. Sounds of kids playing, an occasional car passing. Several of my neighbors waved. I put my hood up over my head and shoved my hands in my pockets, camera bag dangling from my wrist.

Oddly enough, I looked forward to working the weekends. Always finished my homework during study hall so I could have evenings and weekends free, not to party or mess around with my friends, but to take pictures. Tomorrow's shoot was going to be a long one, eight in the morning until just after three in the afternoon if everything went according to schedule. As my aunt Patricia's assistant, it was my duty to keep everyone on schedule.

Her car was in the drive when I walked up. The sound of voices hit me before I even opened the door. My mom rambled about some new art project the museum was picking up, and my aunt loudly agreed. The two were alike enough to be sisters, but Patty was my dad's sister. "There he is," my mom cried as I walked in the door. "I was beginning to worry." She pulled out a chair and motioned to me to sit at the big island that separated our living room from the kitchen. "You missed dinner. And you need hot food. Growing boys always need hot food. Let me warm something up for you."

"Mom, I'm good with just a sandwich." But she was already digging out pots and pans in a loud clatter that had my dad wincing behind his newspaper. He sat in his recliner, pouring through each section of the paper like it held the wisdom of the world.

"How about pasta?" Mom asked. "I could whip up some Alfredo sauce..."

I threw a glance back at my dad, silently wishing for help, but knowing there was nothing I could do to stop her once she'd begun.

"Marisa!" My dad called out to her. All the noise stopped as she looked at him. "Just make the boy a sandwich." The paper went back in place as though it had never moved, and my mom began to put together a simple sandwich: meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, mustard. Thank God. I was starving.

Patty giggled. She moved to the chair beside me and sat down, hand out. I sighed and gave her my camera. By the time my mom set my sandwich in front of me, Patty was critiquing my latest photographs while she flipped through them on the digital viewer.

"Great use of simple colors. Love this one." She held up the camera to show me the picture of Cherry grasping the strawberry and looking over it with wide eyes. "You totally captured the moment."

Instead of replying, I ate. She'd have more to say anyway, and I listened mostly, absorbing what I could, thinking of ideas to change or improve a technique for later. Tomorrow would be a lot about lighting at the studio. Different models were affected by false light in new and interesting ways. Patty always seemed to know right from looking at someone how they would absorb it, or if it would bounce off them in a certain way. I wasn't there yet, but maybe with more studying I could be.

My little brother, James, walked into the room and immediately smacked me on the back of the head. “Torrance,” he grumbled as he passed. He was a freshman and I was a junior at the same private school, though we rarely saw each other.

“Jameson,” I mouthed back, rubbing my head.

“Don’t hit your brother,” Mom told him. But James said I daydreamed too much and we had a long standing tradition of a “love tap” to ensure I was awake. Usually I was just thinking about lighting and camera angles, but I suppose to most non-photographers that sounded a lot like daydreaming.

“Least I wasn’t named after a romance novel character,” he griped.

“No, you were named after cheap liquor,” I snarked back.

“Not cheap,” my dad grumbled. Mom had named me, Dad had named him. So neither of us was likely too far from the mark.

“Hey, Aunt P,” James said, and leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “How’s my favorite aunt this evening? Photographing any hot girls I should know about?”

“I’m your only aunt, and even if I were, you’d be bored in just a half hour of playing fetch.” She gave him a quick hug. “I know Tory’s the only one of you bitten by the photobug.”

“Yeah. I don’t get it, but whatever.” He shrugged and stepped into the kitchen. “Mom, can I have a sandwich?”

“You sure, sweetie? I can make you something warm. Lasagna or pizza or—”

“Sandwich,” my dad said from his chair. Both James and I suppressed a smile.

Patty got up from her seat. “So tomorrow I’ll pick you up at seven. I know it’s early, but it will be a great shoot.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I told her truthfully, and watched her wave goodbye to everyone as she left. I headed up to my room, plugged in my camera and got ready for bed. It was almost eight, early, but I had to be up at six to get to the shoot on time.

I spent a little while cleaning up pictures, adjusting contrast; then I added them to my Dropbox for storage and posted a few on Facebook and DeviantArt to gather reviews. I had hundreds of Facebook friends, mostly because they liked to comment on my pictures. I was pretty sure even Katie and Lucas were my friends, though I couldn't recall ever seeing either of them post anything on my wall. Neither probably knew me by name as there was usually a camera between them and me.

There were no pictures of me on my Facebook page. Unlike most other kids, I didn't stand in front of the bathroom mirror and snap a picture with my phone. My pictures of the world represented what I wanted everyone to see. If my art didn't speak for itself, then what I looked like surely wouldn't matter. My avatar of the moment was a picture of the neighbor's kid catching a soap bubble, a play on color as most of it was in black and white, the bubble in blue.

Before I shut the computer down at quarter to ten, the Cherry Berry photo had more than a dozen comments. I signed off for the night, thanking everyone for their feedback, and hoped that soon I'd have more than hamster pictures to add to my portfolio. Sleep came quickly, with dreams of camera flashes and double-page magazine spreads.

The next morning slammed into me with the screeching of my alarm clock. Six was way too early for a Saturday. I rolled out of bed and hopped into the shower for a quick scrub, then yanked a comb through my hair and brushed my teeth before heading downstairs.

How was it already quarter to seven? Ahh!

Mom was rushing through the kitchen trying to pull together breakfast. Eggs, waffles, toast, bacon. Who had time for all that? I hopped into my shoes, pulled a hoodie over my T-shirt and began searching the cupboards for Pop-Tarts when I heard my aunt pull up.

"Torrance, sit down and eat a real breakfast," my mom shouted at me.

"No time. Aunt Patty's here. Sorry." I raced to the car and we were on our way. At the studio, Aunt Patty just waved me off to get to work, no instruction needed. I cleaned the dressing rooms and stocked them with fresh, cold water bottles. The model assistant arrived with racks full of clothes. Anna and

Rachel from make-up and hair showed up next, booting me from the dressing rooms so they could lay out their arsenal of tools.

Aunt Patty was fiddling with the lights when a guy in a suit walked in, followed by Lucas Hart. I admit to standing there a minute or two taking in the fact that Lucas looked as good as he did, his having just rolled out of bed. His hair was a bit of a mess, slightly damp, probably from a fast shower, and he was wearing just normal jeans and a T-shirt. He glanced up briefly, eyes flicking around the room. He had earbuds dangling from each ear, and paused only for Aunt Patty to point him in the direction of his dressing room, where he disappeared a minute later.

I wondered if he noticed me at all, standing in the corner, eyes probably looking huge through my black-framed glasses, hood pulled up over my hair. But he never turned my way. Someday I'd have the guts to actually ask if I could take his picture. Though why he'd let me snap a few for free when he could get paid for it, I couldn't imagine, but a guy could hope.

Missy, the clothing coordinator, flagged me down for help in wardrobe. Twenty minutes of folding and hanging later, I returned to the studio to find the man Lucas had come in with pacing and talking angrily on the phone. A sharply dressed older woman stood with Aunt Patty, shaking her head and wringing her hands.

The man stuffed his phone away in a huff and stomped over to Aunt Patty and the other woman, his face a mask of frustration. "The other agency double-booked your female model."

"Are they sending another?" The woman asked.

"They don't have anyone available to send."

"This is a disaster. This goes to print in less than two weeks and online next week. This is an international release. We don't have time to schedule another shoot. We waited this long just to get Lucas." She paced away from them.

"Why don't we start with Lucas, get some of his solo stuff finished, and maybe we can contact another agency?" My aunt offered a reasonable solution.

“Already did. It’s not like there are a lot of modeling agencies in Madison to choose from. Even if we got someone to drive over from the Twin Cities, they still wouldn’t be here until this afternoon and Lucas has another shoot across town today.” The man dry-washed his face.

Patty glanced at me, paused, and then a moment of something I couldn’t read flickered across her face. “Give me half an hour,” she said. She crossed the room with purposeful strides in my direction. I looked around hoping she was looking at someone else. Maybe Anna or Rachel, or even Missy, but there was no one other than me. Patty latched on to my arm with a tight grip and tugged me toward the second dressing room. “I need your help, Tor.”

It took a second for her words to sink in, but I had to ask if she meant what I thought she meant. “You want me to dress up as a girl?”

“You’re pretty enough. Slender. Young. Tall. Like a model normally is.”

“But Anna or Rachel—”

“Are twice Lucas’ age and would look very awkward in the new Sweethearts line for Moreland’s.” She opened the door to the dressing room. All three of the women stood there, waiting. None of them could have passed for under thirty.

My heart skipped a beat. “I’m not a girl.”

Rachel’s eyes got real wide. Missy said, “Oh. He does have the perfect figure for these clothes.”

“But—”

“Just this once, Tor. I promise. I’ll even make sure you get the same pay the missing model was supposed to get. Imagine how many camera supplies, lighting prompts, and background mattes you can buy.” Patty shoved me forward.

“You’re so evil. You better not tell anyone.”

She traced an X across her chest. “Cross my heart.” With that she left the room to deliver the good news to her clients.

“I’ve longed to get my hands on that unruly mane of yours for ages, Tory,” Rachel said, dragging me toward the chair in front of the big mirror.

“Hoodie off,” Missy commanded. She began flipping through the hung items until she found a crimson sweater-dress that looked far too clingy to hide that I was a boy.

“A dress?” My voice rose a couple of pitches. Rachel began to attack my hair, and Anna stripped me of my glasses then pulled out several tubes of some kind of cream. “Oh God.”

By the time they released me to the studio my knees shook like jelly. I hadn't done more than glance in the mirror when finished, more out of fear that I'd look like a guy dressed like a girl, than anything else. Would the clients notice? And then standing there was Lucas, fitted purple jeans slung low on his hips, tight, black V-neck shirt under a cream-colored jacket. His dark hair had been straightened and combed down to frame his face. All those nice angles highlighted, while I stood there pretending to be a girl and feeling like so much of a fraud.

He moved effortlessly with the flow of the camera and Aunt Patty's minor instructions. “Left, look back, over the shoulder, great.”

I sucked in a deep breath and prayed to whatever cosmic powers might exist that I would survive this day without becoming the laughingstock of my town. Maybe if no one knew. Maybe if I could fool Lucas I could fool the camera.

“There she is!” my aunt exclaimed. “Sorry for the delay everyone. Tory's going to fill in for us, but we're going to start slow. This will be her first shoot.” She stepped up to my side, touching my hair and briefly patting the curls. She whispered, “Just breathe, sweetie. You look good. You've watched a hundred shoots. Remember how those models act in front of the camera. Just follow Lucas' lead and try not to look like a deer in headlights.”

“You mean like I do right now?” When had it gotten so hot in here?

She just smiled and nudged me toward Lucas. He smiled warmly at me and offered me a hand. I gulped and took it, allowing him to pull me into the center of the stage. “Relax,” he whispered. “It's easier if you pretend the camera isn't there.”

The heat of the lights was instant. The assistants appeared like Oompa-Loompas to adjust lights and fix hair and make-up. Rachel, Anna, and Missy

stood on the sidelines watching and waiting. Lucas' manager and the woman from Moreland's stood behind Patty as the camera began to flash.

“Good. Tory, look over your shoulder. Lucas, hand on her hip,” Patty said.

I had to bite my lip to keep from replying.

“Don't bite your lips, Tory.”

“Think duck lips,” Lucas whispered, faint smile on his face. “It sounds silly, but it's the sexy pout all the girls do.”

I attempted it twice before he nodded and helped prod me into position for the next shot. It took two outfit changes and several touch ups before I began to feel comfortable in the lights and with Lucas' touch. He often had his arm around my waist, over my shoulder, or hand in mine. Even kissed my fingers for one shot. The solo shots were easy. I didn't have to do much other than turn slowly to show off the clothes. Lucas started each set solo then we'd be on stage together, then me by myself. He would change while I was on my own and vice versa. Most sessions like this yielded thousands of pictures but only a handful would ever see print. Would anyone recognize me? Was it weird that I wanted them to?

Patty gave fewer directions until I moved for the camera and Lucas and I flowed together from pose to pose. He was definitely a pro, needing almost no instruction and knowing which way to turn to highlight the clothes without seeming unnatural.

He had no problem touching me; getting so close in some poses, it made my breath catch. Lucas even wrapped his arms around me from behind, leaning over my shoulder to smile at me close enough to kiss. My heart pounded in an odd mix of fear and excitement. I didn't even remember putting my hand on his cheek, but everyone loved it and began muttering. His skin warmed my palm and my cheeks.

The tenth and final wardrobe change had me standing in front of the full length mirror in the dressing room trying to calm my racing heart. Rachel styled up my hair, leaving small bits free to dangle around my neck. Anna applied smoky make-up to my eyes, which made the pale green of them stand out, framed in thick dark lashes I'd never known I had. Missy had chosen a

denim skirt in dark blue, with a semi-sheer white sweater that fell low on my shoulders. She added a chunky bright blue necklace with multiple silver chains wrapped at different lengths. The shoes were white heels I was sure I'd fall in before I made it back to the studio, but Missy kept a tight grip on my wrist.

I looked good. I looked like a girl. Was that a bad thing? I felt pretty good, despite the minor queasiness and blood pounding through my ears that I associated with nervousness. Every time Lucas touched me my pulse raced and I struggled to breathe. Probably just his star power getting to me like it did everyone else in school.

And the studio felt like a sauna. Were the lights always this hot? I tugged on my top, careful not to move it the wrong way. No one commented on my lack of boobs, though I suppose that probably would have been rude if I *had* been a girl.

My last solo set flew by and then Lucas was there again. He yanked me into his arms, those clear blue eyes all smiles. We almost seemed to dance together through that last set. The final shot left us close enough to have our noses touch. We'd barely spoken the whole time, other than his occasional encouraging words and ever-present smile; we just co-existed, a perfect partnership.

"Just a little closer," I heard Patty call to us. Lucas put his arm around my waist and pulled me into a full body hug. "It's called the Sweetheart line for a reason. There we go. Tory, tilt up slightly toward Lucas and forward." Where had all the air in the room gone? Did Lucas feel this lightheaded from all the heat, too? The position put us just a breath away from a kiss and while the camera snapped I never thought that half a blink later Lucas would close that space and actually touch his lips to mine. I heard a loud gasp and the world went dark.

On the couch in my temporary dressing room, I wondered how I'd gone from what was probably my first kiss, to waking up alone. Did Lucas know I was a boy? Was everyone horrified?

The door opened and Lucas stepped inside, eyes searching, then widening when he saw I was awake. He crossed the room to the couch and handed me a bottle of water.

“I’m so sorry!” We both said at the same time.

He shook his head and looked away. “I should have realized you were nervous and weren’t drinking. It can all be so overwhelming. Sometimes, ’cause I’ve done it so much, I just forget.”

“I feel so stupid,” I whispered, hoping he didn’t think I sounded like a guy. Had I passed out from the lack of water? I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything all day. What if I’d run into Lucas in the bathroom? God, I was so dumb. But I suppose, better to pass out from dehydration than a kiss. “I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t ruin the shoot.” I tried to sit up but he held a hand out to stop me.

“Rest. Drink some water.” Lucas ran his hands through his hair. “I’m really sorry for the kiss. It was unprofessional of me. It just seemed so right at that moment.” A blush pinked his cheeks. “Most of the models I work with are so cold it’s hard to get in the groove with them. You and I have good chemistry. You should talk to my agent. He can set you up for a really good contract. Maybe we can work together again.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather be taking pictures than in them.”

Lucas sat down on the edge of the couch beside me. “Drink.” He gave me a look that demanded obedience, so I downed half the bottle. “Better. Drink at least two of these before you do anything strenuous. People don’t realize how much work it is—the lights, holding the pose, standing in awkward positions.”

No kidding. If I ever graduated to studio work from the live action I normally did, I’d be very nice to my models. “Thanks for being patient with me. I hope they have some pictures they can use.”

He nodded. “I’ve seen a handful of them on the computer. Mr. Clark, my agent, is negotiating with the modeling agency and the boutique owner right now. Your aunt wants to be sure you’re well compensated, so Mr. Clark is working on your behalf for now, too. You’ll have to bring home some papers to get signed. Releases so they can publish this stuff. But our agency takes good care of their models.”

I’d never even thought of that. It would really suck if my parents said they couldn’t print the pictures, and yet what if people recognized me? How upset would people be that I dressed like a girl? Or better yet, that I looked good dressed like a girl?

“Don’t look so scared. Trust me, no one really looks at the faces in these types of things. So no one is going to be chasing you down the street demanding an autograph.”

“Thank God.”

Lucas laughed, the sound warm and rich, but mellow, sort of like he always seemed to be. “So I was thinking as an apology for making you pass out, maybe we could do brunch tomorrow? My treat.” My heart hammered in my chest, and I’m sure he saw the war of emotion on my face because he continued. “If you don’t want to, that’s okay too. I guess I’d be pretty pissed if some guy just took liberties and kissed me out of the blue when I was just trying to help out.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “No. It’s okay. I’d love to. I just have never...” Been on a date with another guy, or anyone, ever, and this sounded like a date. Also never had anyone look at me the way Lucas did. Maybe that is what Jenny meant when she wanted someone to look at her like she was a girl. She just wanted someone to *see* her, girl or not.

He smiled, and it was way nicer than anything he gave the camera. This one curved his cheeks up far enough to show dimples. Wow. I blinked at him a few times feeling a bit blinded. No wonder the guy was a model. “Name your favorite place and I’ll meet you there at, say, ten thirty?”

“Nam Pi,” I said instantly, thinking of the Indian place with amazing breakfast that was on the main strip of downtown. Lots of shops and dining, good place for foot traffic in the late spring like it was now, but also some place that was likely busy enough where no one would pay any attention to us. Especially since I would have to dress as a girl again.

“Good choice. It’s one of my favorites. Tomorrow at ten thirty?” he confirmed.

“I’ll be there.” What was I doing?

“Water,” he reminded me. “See you tomorrow.”

And suddenly he was gone. Had I just made a date with Lucas Hart? Oh, crap, I had. And he thought I was a girl. Double crap. Shouldn’t I feel weird about going out with a guy? I gulped down the rest of the water and sat up.

No. It felt right, or good at least, the idea that he might like me, 'cause I definitely, sorta liked him.

My aunt popped into the room a second later. "You okay? Should I call your parents?"

"I'm fine. Just dehydrated. Forgot to drink."

"And eat. Your dad's gonna kill me. And I'm sure your mom will never stop talking about how I mistreated you."

Blah. I waved her away and stood up. The clothes were wrinkled, but everything was still in place. Make-up a little smeared, hair a mess. Guess I was no longer a star, and Lucas had still asked to see me again. "They thought I was a girl. Lucas thought I was a girl."

"You make a very glamorous girl."

I glared at her.

She held up her hands. "I just mean it worked. You look great. Not that you don't look good as a boy." She pulled a stack of papers out of her pocket. "Oh, and look at the money you've made."

That was a lot of zeros. "Is that really three zeros or is there a period missing?"

"Sweetie, there is no period. They don't pay in pennies here. This shoot will make them a couple million dollars. Mr. Clark is good. He negotiated a royalty for you as well. So each time your picture is used, you get more money. We just need to get your parents to sign the consent forms."

For this kind of money I was pretty sure I could get my parents to sell me to the Ukraine if needed. "I can convince them."

Patty's smile brightened. "Good, because I get a referral bonus as well as royalty payments, and if Marisa and Charles let me, I'll be your chaperone for the next one."

"Next one? I'm totally not doing this again."

"Pshaw!" Patty cried. "With this kind of money, you could pay your way through college. *And* you'll be networking with some of the greatest

photographers available. There's no better way to learn technique. If I were at all model material, I would have gone that route myself."

She did have a point. I could think of a handful of models who had taken up the role of photographer, many very successful. But I didn't want to be branded as that guy who could always be a girl. "Did you tell Mr. Clark that I'm a guy?"

"The contract doesn't specify gender." Patty looked pleased. "We'll do some headshots tomorrow to begin circling them around. I was thinking maybe half and half. Do some as a boy and some as a girl to show them your versatility. Means more work, better money."

"I've got plans for tomorrow. Besides, I want to talk to Mom and Dad about this contract." My dad worked in contracts for a textbook publishing company. I know he'd tell me not to just sign on the dotted line and walk away with the money. "Can you give me a ride home?" I began to change back into my normal clothes and hoped I could get the make-up off my face. How did I explain that? Would the 'rents be upset? Would they even understand? I glanced in the mirror again, staring at my face. Yes, it was mine; in truth it didn't look much like me, but I liked it anyway. I really did look glamorous.

"Sure. Let me tell the girls I'm headed out."

She didn't push me about the contract during the short drive home, for which I was thankful. When she dropped me off, I hoped to talk to my dad right away. My mom was making dinner. Something with a half dozen pots that had her murmuring to herself about different food groups. James sat on the couch playing video games.

"Where's dad?" I asked him.

"Golfing with friends." He glanced up for a half a second, then again. "Are you wearing eyeliner?"

I couldn't get the stuff off. I had honestly hoped no one would notice until I could ask Jenny what to do. "One of the make-up girls at work was experimenting. No biggie." Only a half lie.

James shook his head. "You're so weird."

“Whatever.” I headed toward the door and dialed Jenny’s cell. Please let her answer.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hey, Tor, what’s up?”

“Can we hang, like right now?” I was sort of in semi-panic mode.

“Um, okay. Sure. Whatcha need?”

I stepped outside and headed down the walk before I answered with a breathy, “I need a dress.” There was a pause long enough that I had to pull the phone from my ear to check to be sure we were still connected.

“For your mom?” She finally asked.

“No. For me. Look, I’ll explain when I see you. Can you pick me up?” She was the only one of my friends with a driver’s license. “Please.”

“Okay. See you in ten.”

When she pulled up, I got in the car, wondering just how much I could tell her. “So you really need a dress?” Jenny looked me over. “You’re wearing eyeliner.”

“Oh God!” So sitting there in her car, parked at the end of my walkway, I had told her everything. And when I finished, she just stared at me. I glanced down at my clothes, back to my normal hoodie and jeans, nothing weird. Other than the eyeliner that I couldn’t see. “Say something!”

“You kissed Lucas Hart.”

“He kissed me,” I protested. Would she hate me now? She wanted him, right? All the girls wanted him.

“You really dressed as a girl?”

“I make a pretty hot girl.” Was I pouting? I was pretty sure I was pouting.

She burst out laughing. “All right, princess. Let’s go find you a dress.”

It took three stores and very covert maneuvering in the dressing room to find the dress. Everything made my hips stick out, or my shoulders, which made me feel like I looked like a boy, even when Jenny assured me I didn’t. “You still look like a girl. I think it’s the eyeliner. And the hair. I’ve never seen your hair have so much body and texture. I totally love it.”

“Okay, but love on it later. I need something that says *girl*.”

“Why not just show up as you and tell him the truth?”

I looked at her. “He’ll be mad. Wouldn’t you be mad if you got duped into kissing another girl who was pretending to be a guy?” There were some guys at school who I know would hit me if faced with the same situation.

“Not if I was into her.”

“Not helping.”

“Are you mad he kissed you?” She handed me a dress and pointed me back to the room. This one was white, with weird little holes in it that sort of resembled Swiss cheese. I examined it for a minute before she said, “This isn’t fitted, so it won’t accentuate anything you’re trying to hide. Even those boy-hips of yours.”

I felt myself blush from the neck on up. Was it my fault the bones stuck out? “No. Just surprised. I felt totally obvious. Like everyone should have known I’m a guy.” Inside the room I stepped into the dress, frustrated that it zipped in back, but finally able to get the zipper most of the way up. I stared in the mirror a half a second before stepping out of the room.

“That’s perfect,” Jenny smiled.

I glanced down. It was sort of off-white, and the rows of holes—eyelets?—created a pattern that really did hide the fact that I had no boobs and was fairly straight-waisted. The sleeves were just a small cap over my shoulders, and the neck a rounded cut that emphasized my collarbones. The mirror reflected nice things. Jenny got up and stood behind me, pulling my hair up into an uncomplicated bun.

“A pop of color for the necklace; shoes, and you’re all done. Have you thought about piercing your ears?” My look must have been answer enough because she said, “Never mind. Let me find some bling and shoes.”

Shoes. Ugh. “No heels!” I turned to admire the dress in the mirror. It felt good, soft against my body, even made the warm tone of my skin stand out. It hit about mid-thigh, making my legs look long and tan. I wondered briefly if I had to shave. Girls did that, right? But my legs didn’t look hairy. They didn’t

look like girl legs either, just sort of stickish. I'd always been like a stork. "Should I shave?" I asked just as Jenny returned with a pair of turquoise flats, a matching necklace and bracelet. "My legs, I mean." I didn't know if I'd ever get the facial stubble a lot of the guys went on about at school.

She glanced down then ran her hand up my leg which made me shiver and jump back. "Damn girl, warn a boy first before you go feeling him up!"

"You're fine. Besides if Lucas is feeling up your legs you've got bigger problems."

"I shouldn't be doing this. Boys are total horny toads." I put on the necklace and liked how the color brought out my eyes. Maybe I could pick up some liner and lipstick too. Whatever Anna did to my eyes at the studio really made my eyes pop, I wanted that look again.

"You're not."

"But I'm obviously different," I motioned to the mirror.

"So maybe Lucas is too. Won't know until you give it a chance."

"What if everyone at school finds out?"

"What? That you make one hot chick?" She laughed. "All the girls will be jealous. And you'll have every guy in school running your way."

"To kick my ass."

"Not with me standing behind you. And the army of friends you have: the photo club, the newspaper, the yearbook, the math and science geeks, the art club, all the kids you tutor, your little brother and all his friends. Be who you are, hon, because *you* are beautiful."

I smiled at my friend, probably appreciating her fully for the first time in our young lives. "Thanks. Now stop making me tear up and show me how to apply make-up, please."

She shoved me into the fitting room. "Get changed, I'll go find some colors and we'll talk over a manicure."

"Man-i-cure?"

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After Jenny dropped me off at home, I spent a couple hours in front of the mirror practicing all the things she taught me; from applying the make-up, to removal, cleansing and skin moisturizing. The entire outfit hung from the bedroom door where I could admire the fine pattern of the dress. It had been only twenty dollars, a steal really. The shoes had cost more, the jewelry only a few dollars. I had to put it on just one more time before I went to bed.

I adjusted the necklace and smoothed the skirt down one last time before debating if my hair should be up or down. Someone knocked on the door and it opened a second later. My heart hammered in my chest as my dad walked into the room. He blinked at me a moment or two.

“I can explain,” I began, but really I couldn’t.

He closed the door and stood there a minute looking thoughtful. He had the contract in his hands. Several expressions crossed his face, none of which I could read. “Patty told me.” He waved at the dress. “Never would have thought.”

I reached for the robe from the bathroom to cover up the dress and my shame, while not looking at my dad and feeling tears fill my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Then my dad was suddenly in front of me pulling off the robe. “You look nice.”

“But I thought—” I searched his face for any sign of disgust or anger. There was none.

“Son, do you want to be a girl?”

“No, sir,” I answered quickly. “I just like how I feel in this. Pretty. Like people see me.”

He nodded. “You be you. What people see is up to them.”

“And if this is me? If I sometimes dress up like a girl?”

“Nothing shameful about being a girl or dressing like one.” He shook his head. “When you were little you always wanted the pretty dresses we passed in stores. Your mom bought one for you once and you wore it for a week straight.” He waved it away and held up the contract. Some of the pages had things marked in red, others crossed out. There was also a fax header on top, so he must have sent it to the agency and back. “This what you want to do?”

“It’ll be money for college, and I’ll get to learn more about photography. Mr. Clark said he could find a lot of work for me. I promise to keep my grades up. Patty said she would chaperone, but I’d like if you came some time.” Modeling meant I could dress in pretty things and people would write it off as me being eccentric because it was my job. The beads clinked and I realized I’d been playing with them. “Sorry.”

My dad shook his head. “I trust you. I’ll be there if you want me to be.”

“I have a date with a boy tomorrow,” I whispered. Better to lay it all on the line than dread a future discovery.

“You like him?”

“I don’t really know him yet. But I’d like to.”

He nodded then turned to leave.

“Dad?” He glanced back. “You’re really okay with this?”

“Just be you, Tory. It’s you I love, whatever, whoever, you might be.”

Tears blurred my vision again, but this time for different reasons. He left with the contract and I felt a bit more secure in the whirlwind the day had brought me. Tomorrow, another battle. I’d have to tell Lucas. Lying wasn’t right. Maybe after we’d had brunch I would tell him. Maybe.

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The next morning brought a bigger case of nerves than stepping in front of the camera had yesterday. My mom knocked on my door at ten. I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking so the make-up was minimal. Mom stepped into the room a second later. “Do you need help?” She asked quietly, more subdued than I think I’d ever seen her in my life.

I held up the liner. “I can’t do it. My hands won’t stop shaking.”

She smiled and stepped in close. “I always wanted a girl. Look up.” She applied the liner like a pro. “I remember when you were little. You always wanted sparkly barrettes in your hair and the pretty jeweled girl clothes. Your dad and I were always so afraid of how people would treat you, so we told you no.” She frowned. “I’m sorry for not letting you be you.”

“Mom—”

“No, it’s okay. I know I shouldn’t have let other people make me afraid. You’re beautiful the way you are.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “Maybe you’ll let me buy a dress or two for you? Patty sent your father and me some of the pictures. They’re beautiful. She has some great ideas for head shots for you. I’d like to be there.”

“I’d like that too. Thanks, Mom.”

She combed her fingers through my hair. “You always did like to wear it longer than a boy normally does. Loved to have it in pigtails when you were little. I think leave it down today. You trust this boy? He won’t try anything if you go someplace with him?”

“Mom—”

“I know. I just worry. Come on, I’ll give you a ride into town.”

“You better not follow me.” I warned her. She’d probably do just that, too, if I wasn’t careful.

“Patty says he kissed you but doesn’t know you’re a boy. What if he hurts you when he finds out? The world is full of angry, hateful people. I don’t want you to be hurt by someone so blinded to the world.”

“Mom. Stop. It’s okay. We’ll be in a public place. No worries. If things get weird, I’ll call. I promise.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “If I’m gonna be there on time, I need to get going. You ready?”

She nodded and led the way down the stairs. I was grateful my brother wasn’t downstairs. I couldn’t imagine explaining this to him yet. The ride was oddly silent but peaceful, since I was used to my mom always talking. Not many were out on a Sunday morning before church let out. She pulled up to the restaurant and let me out. “Do you need cash?”

“I have money.” Money from working for my aunt that I rarely used for anything other than photo supplies; and now dresses, jewelry, shoes, and make-up. I held up my phone. “I’ll call for a ride home, okay?”

She nodded and let me go. I turned to the restaurant wondering if I should go inside and wait or just hang around outside. It was pretty much ten thirty on the dot. Maybe he was stuck in traffic, or trying to find a place to park, though

the streets were pretty clear; maybe he wouldn't even come. My heart sank a little.

"Tory?" A voice broke me out of my brooding. Lucas stood there, casual in blue jeans and a nice polo. His hair was brushed to the side today, more a normal mess than the styled look he'd had for the shoot. Those eyes were the same, though. Bright and clear as the sky above. I was sure my face turned three shades of red while I stood there staring at him. "You hungry?"

"Oh? Yeah. Sorry." I barreled toward the restaurant, but he beat me to the door and opened it for me. "Thanks," I whispered, as I walked in ahead of him feeling like maybe I should have been holding the door instead.

"Two?" the hostess asked. "Would you like menus or the buffet?"

"Buffet," both Lucas and I blurted out. We laughed. The hostess smiled and led us to a table. The buffet spread across six different counters, with soups, fish, eggs, meats and rice dishes. The rich smell of curry wafted through my nose.

"Heaven."

"Agreed," Lucas said. He glanced at the food then back at me. "So do you want to talk first, or eat and then talk?"

"Eat."

That dimpled smile reappeared. Neither of us sat, we just went to fill up our plates.

We talked over food. Not about anything important. I asked about how he got into modeling and he asked about my love for the camera. We talked about school. We didn't have any classes together, even though we were in the same grade. But I knew that. I saw him every day. I wondered if he was interested in Jenny. He'd been asking Katie about her after all.

"Everyone wants my attention. Like talking to me somehow makes them better. Like I'm better than everyone else, but I'm not," he said.

"Everyone looks up to you. You're kind of the local celebrity. The rest of us aren't in print or splashed across the Internet."

"You will be now."

Wow, and wasn't that a scary thought. "I'd never really planned for any of this to happen." And this had been sort of what I'd dreaded all morning. I took the check before he could and put cash inside for my own food.

"I told you I'd pay," he protested.

"It's okay. I make pretty good money working with my aunt. And my parents went over the contract that Mr. Clark drew up. Looks like I will be doing some modeling in the future."

He took out a twenty and shoved it in the bill folder. "I'm glad you reconsidered. You have great presence in front of the camera." Lucas reached out and grabbed my hand as he got up from the chair. "Want to walk for a bit?"

I nodded, swallowing a gulp as we headed for the door. I'd have to tell him soon. Couldn't let him get too close again. The strip was still fairly quiet; only a handful of people wandered now that it was just before noon. "Thanks for being so nice to me," I told him. "I see you at school a lot and you're nice to everyone. I guess I thought it was just an act, since you're famous and all."

He laughed, "I am not famous."

"But everyone at school knows you. And you've been in pictures all over the world, right?"

"Yeah, but no one knows me. It's all low level mainstream stuff. Not like I'm actually making someone's list of top male models. And I don't plan on doing it forever, just long enough to pay for school, college, and then I plan on being an engineer." He shoved his free hand in his pocket and wrapped his other one around my fingers. They were warm and his grip nice. "It all fades anyway. My mom modeled in her teens, but now she's a receptionist."

"That makes sense. An engineer, eh? Guess you're pretty smart, then."

"Nah. I do okay. Bs and all that. I'd like to think I'm just more focused than a lot of kids our age. Since it's just my mom and me. My income helps support us both, paying for a good private school, and I have a pretty big nest egg to get me through college and into the real world."

I'd never really thought about why he modeled before. Mostly assumed he did it 'cause his parents got him into it as a kid and he just liked the feeling of

importance it gave him. “I have no idea what I want to do other than take pictures, so you’re way ahead of me.”

“Photojournalism is huge. Everyone wants to see the world, but not everyone can afford to go there. I think having a good eye is a gift. I could take a million photos, and they would never appear truly as I see them. You, on the other hand, can show the world what it’s missing.” He paused in front of a gallery that had huge photographs blown up into wall art. “Like these. People buy these every day to bring a part of the world home.”

I smiled thinking about it. Yeah, I could imagine maybe having a gallery someday, pictures in magazines or in the news. Not everything about taking photographs could be trained. Patty often told me that photography was ten percent skill, thirty percent perspiration, and sixty percent vision. Perception. That really came down to the root of it, didn’t it? I pulled on his hand, making him stop. “I need to tell you something, and I hope you don’t hate me.”

He looked at me, eyebrows raised, expression light. “You have a boyfriend?”

God, how could I tell him when he looked at me like that? So worried, yet hopeful. “I’m not what you think I am.”

“Huh?” He frowned. “What do I think you are?”

I tugged my hand out of his and stepped back just in case. “I’m not a girl.” The words rushed from my lips so fast I wondered if he could even understand them. He blinked a few times, so I said it again, only slower. “I’m not a girl. Aunt Patty asked me to fill in ’cause the model for yesterday was double-booked and she thought I could pass for a girl. And apparently I can.” I looked down at the dress and the shoes, still liking what I saw, but suddenly very uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to fool you or anything. So I guess I understand if you don’t want to hang anymore.”

Lucas was silent so long I had to look back up. His expression was a mask of confusion, but thankfully no anger. “Why did you come here then?” he asked quietly.

“‘Cause I think you’re nice, and you were worried about me, and I kind of thought, maybe we could be friends.” Sure I had hoped for more. Some

resolution to these weird emotions warring inside me would be nice, but I could live without it.

“Friends?” He was frowning now.

I sighed inwardly. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone you thought I was a girl. I just wanted you to know. I won’t bug you at school or if I see you at a shoot or something. But thanks for being nice to me yesterday. I was pretty nervous.” Was this pain in my chest heartbreak? How could I feel that when I barely knew him? No, not heartbreak, the death of a dream. Silly, really. There would be others. And just ’cause Lucas had seen me for a while, didn’t mean that someday someone else wouldn’t too. I shook my head.

“See you around.” I turned and walked away. It was hard to not look back, and I was dialing my mom before I even got twenty yards from him. He didn’t call out or attempt to get my attention, which was good because tears were streaming down my cheeks.

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My whole family actually spent the afternoon at the studio with Patty taking pictures. After she’d helped me remove the puffiness from my face from crying we’d done a few family-type portraits, and then the whole family took turns at playing model. Even my dad strutted his stuff, which had Patty dissolving into giggles more than once behind the camera.

It was fun, and a good way to get my mind off the troubles of the morning. No one asked how it went. I guess my tears must have explained it all. Only James commented, “I’d like to beat him up. Can I?”

I shook my head at him. It wasn’t Lucas’ fault. Part of growing up was discovering who I was and that discovery wasn’t always going to be easy. I knew that. Taking photos as a boy helped a lot. I couldn’t believe how Patty captured me looking so much like a celebrity. Calm, self-assured, even for the one in which she’d spliced together me-as-a-boy and me-as-a-girl. Half of my face normal, the other half glammed up. Same person, two different sides of a coin. That really was me.

Jenny even showed up to do some glam shots with me. We laughed and acted more like long lost sisters than best friends. Patty snapped a few photos of us helping each other apply make-up.

“He makes a better girl than I do,” Jenny said looking at the photos on the computer screen. “Those cheekbones and lips just scream supermodel.”

I hugged my bestie. “You and I make a good pair. We’re both Cover Girls!” A second later the whole family was laughing, and everyone voted on which photos to use for my portfolio and which to take home. I wanted the one of me that was half and half to take home, so Patty emailed it to me. By the time I’d changed my profile picture of my Facebook page late that evening to show the dual sides of me, Lucas was only a minor pain in my memory. Tomorrow was Monday, and I’d have to face it all head on. Was I afraid? Hell yes, but as the saying went: A life lived in fear was a life half lived.

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I didn’t even glance at my Facebook page before heading to school the next morning. Dad drove James and me; let us out right at the front door and told me to call if there was any trouble. Everyone expected something to happen. But three periods passed with not a word or an odd glance from anyone, really.

Trouble came at lunch. I entered the lunchroom like I always did, with Jenny and a dozen other girls at my side, headed for the table that always had a mix of students from jocks to geeks.

“Look, here come the ladies now.”

Richard, otherwise known as Rick the Dick because he was a dick to everyone, stepped into my path. “Here’s the princess now. Not so pretty without the make-up. School policy is that girls wear skirts. You should go change.”

“School policy is that bullying is not tolerated. So how about you take your meat-headed self off to where the rest of us aren’t bothered by the smell of rot going on inside that skull of yours,” I shot back.

A look of shock crossed his face and he raised a fist, but I was totally ready for it, lifting my camera to snap a dozen pictures and blind him with the flash. He blinked a half dozen times, vision probably filled with spots as I darted around him to the table, putting my back to the wall. A second later a large, bulky body sat down beside me, Teddy the half-back. I braced for more trouble.

“So you’re really going to model, too?” he asked.

I opened the lunch my mom had packed for me, happy to find my favorite sandwich. “Yeah. My first shoot paid four digits and I only worked for like five hours. Most kids our age don’t make that working all summer long.”

“Can anyone do it?”

I shrugged. How did they pick models? I guess they sort of had a body type they wanted. “I dunno. I guess you can call the agency and see if you’re a good fit. Until Saturday I wouldn’t have thought I was a good fit.”

Teddy was flipping through his phone. He was the typical jock, halfback because he was on the leaner side, but he had a decent face. He could probably make the camera work for him with the right light and clothes.

“You make a pretty girl.”

How to reply to that? “Thanks, I think.” I pulled a slip of paper out of my book bag and wrote the number of the agency for him. “Give the agency a call. I’m not sure how they normally pick models, but I’d think they’d probably want a sporty guy like you before a stick like me.”

He took the paper and programed it into his phone. “Don’t let the Dick bug you. It’s cool. Hell, if I were that pretty I’d put on a dress too. Four digits! Wow.” Teddy got up and waved to some of his friends as he disappeared into the confines of the football team.

“Teddy has the hots for you,” Jenny teased.

“Don’t you start,” I told her. Then Lucas entered the lunchroom. He didn’t glance in my direction. Not that he would have noticed me anyway in my boy uniform with my hair pulled up under a beanie. He made his way to a table of popular kids who seemed to run in the same circles he did. Katie greeted him with a smile and kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re staring,” Jenny whispered.

I looked away and dug into my lunch, trying to think about anything else. Unattainable for sure. *Sigh*. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “He was probably into you originally anyway, and then got sidetracked with me. I feel pretty stupid.”

“That boy wouldn’t have a chance with me anyway.” Jenny smiled at me

wickedly. “I like nice boys. ’Sides, when I cornered Katie she couldn’t even remember what he was asking her about. And she’s back with Teddy.”

That the prettiest girl in school was now unavailable again made me happy. Lucas deserved to find someone nice who suited him, but yeah, I was still a little heartbroken that it couldn’t be me. I listened with half an ear as Jenny chattered on about the latest gossip. Anything to get my mind off the guy who sat half a cafeteria away but still drew my gaze time and again.

The rest of the day passed pretty smoothly. James had appeared just before study hall to thank me for making him one of the most popular kids in school. Everyone wanted to know if I was going to be famous and move to France or something. No one seemed to care that I looked as good dressed as a girl as I did as a boy. When I got my free hour, I wanted to work on a new background set, so headed to the classroom all the photo geeks like me used. Studying simple pictures of inanimate objects always helped reset my brain and I cleared the camera for a new topic. Today, a study in aperture and focus. I could really use some focus.

I heard the door open quietly, but pushed it aside in my brain as one of the other guys coming in to set up. A minute later a shadow fell across my white background making me blink a few times, thinking maybe I was standing wrong. But no. Someone was standing behind me. A glance up and my heart skipped a beat. Lucas.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

“Are you planning to beat me up?”

He laughed and hopped up on the desk behind him. “Do I look like a guy who makes a lot of decisions with his fists?”

No, he looked like the guy I’d been hoping to get to know better. I set the camera down, shoved my glasses back up my nose, and leaned against the wall. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve never been in here, but I hear a lot of the photo kids talking about it. A lot have asked to take pictures of me; no follow through though.”

“You get paid a lot to be photographed. Why would you do it for free?”

“Because to someone it’s art. Or learning an art. I’m not artistic at all. Just sort of hard logic, math, and science.”

I nodded like it made sense. “So why are you here? You want me to take pictures of you?”

“You said you wanted us to be friends.”

I waved away the comment. “You have lots of popular friends and don’t need me, I get it. Don’t worry about it.”

“What if I said I wanted to be more than friends?”

The words took a minute to sink in. “Come again?”

Lucas shook his head. “At the studio when we were in those shots together, I thought for the first time that maybe, just maybe, I might find someone worth being into. I’ve modeled with hundreds of girls—”

“But I’m not a girl.”

“—and none of them interested me at all. Then there you were, all wide pretty green eyes, easy smile, happy laugh, and I thought, okay. So I kissed you.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and glared at the floor. “Had a boyfriend once, for like a week. He was from another school and just wanted to tell everyone he was dating a model. A bit of a diva. So not my type. When I saw you at the studio, I thought, there’s that guy I see across the lunchroom every day. The one who is always snapping pictures of everyone while hiding behind his camera.”

The words took a minute to set in. “Wait, you knew I was a guy?”

He laughed, a sweet rich sound. “You don’t exactly have the sweet, high-pitched voice of the glamorous girl they made you up to be. But yeah, I saw you at the studio before you changed. First time I’d been to your aunt’s studio when you were there. Requested her a hundred times in hopes of seeing you.”

“I’m only allowed to work on the weekends,” I mumbled absently. “You saw me that day?”

“I’ve *seen* you for weeks. Since the beginning of the school year actually. Remember when you came into the science lab and took some pictures to be added to the school course catalog? I was there. I asked Katie about your

friend Jenny, hoping that she'd give me details on you, but I don't think you let many people see you."

I kind of liked living under the radar. "You could find a girl that looks like me." I pointed out and picked up my camera. The light of the day was fading and soon I'd have to use the lamps, which were just never as good. "You're a good-looking guy. I'm sure there are a lot of green-eyed blonde girls out there. Real girls who don't have things hidden under their dresses that can get them beat up."

"I don't think you're understanding. I kissed you because you were you. Not because I thought you were a girl. Though I have to admit you do girl really well."

I looked at him, straightened the blue tie we had to wear every day and shrugged off the jacket to show the straight pants and tucked in button-up shirt. "I make a pretty good boy too." A little turn for him, and I was back to fiddling with my camera. "Just 'cause I like to dress up like a girl doesn't make me any less a boy."

"Thank God for that." He grabbed the camera from my hands and got into my personal space. "Is this something we can try, you and me?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "I don't think you know what you're asking."

"I don't care if you're dressed as a boy or a girl, Tory. I had fun with you at the studio and yesterday when we were talking, and then walking hand in hand, that was great. There was no pressure for me to be something or someone. For once I was just Lucas, having a good time with someone I found interesting, beautiful, handsome, attractive, whatever."

But he'd let me leave yesterday, without a word. Now he stood only inches away, close enough that either of us could close in for a kiss if we wanted that. Did I want that? I did. "I'm not hiding from anyone, Lucas. Or anything else. I like dressing in pretty things, and since I'm attracted to you, I guess that means I'm gay."

"That's okay with me. You left so quick yesterday I didn't know how to react. When you said you wanted to be friends it was like a fist to the gut. I don't want to be *just* friends with you, Tory."

“And if I want to walk down the hall holding your hand?”

He smiled. “Would you want that?” He closed the distance between us, arms going around my waist to pull me close. “You’re really hot with the glasses. Can you lose the beanie though? I seriously love your hair.”

I reached up and ripped it off, letting the mess fall where it may, then shoved it out of my face. Lucas had such pretty eyes. “So you want to do this? Like together?”

“Only if you do.”

I nodded, staring into those sky blue eyes wondering if I should go in for the kill or if he would. A second later he answered my unspoken wish by touching his lips to mine.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Sam Kadence has always dreamed about being someone else, somewhere else. With very little musical talent, Sam decided the only way to make those dreams come true was to try everything from cosplay at the local anime conventions to writing novels about pretending to run away to become a musician.*

*Sam has a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing, sells textbooks for a living, and enjoys taking photographs of Asian Ball Joint Dolls to tell more stories.*

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## A.S.H.E.R.

By Kallysten

### Photo Description

A human-like robot, apparently naked, lies on a bed of packing peanuts. He has just been unboxed, and waits for his new owner's first orders.

### Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Tell me about a day in the life of this sexbot. Maybe it's the day he's first been unpacked and settled into his new home! Maybe it's sometime after he's settled into a routine. And what IS that routine, anyway? Is he privately owned? Is he on staff at a sexy high-tech brothel? Has he become self-aware enough to run away from the sexy high-tech brothel and follow his heart circuits in search of a better life and someone who can love a synthetic man?*

*I'm really flexible about tone here—if you want to give me what-are-humans-even-about comedy and sex misadventures, go for it; if you want to give me creepy dystopia and what it means to be built for someone else's pleasure, go for that, too. Just give me something with this hot android as a main character. Yum.*

Sincerely,

Laylah

### Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction, paranormal

**Tags:** futuristic, writers, vampire, robot/artificial intelligence, non-explicit, grief, depression

**Content warnings:** use of overly precise numbers

**Word count:** 12,266

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*Dedication*

With my thanks to Laylah for offering this prompt and giving me the chance to write outside my usual lines. I only hope you enjoy the end result!

# A.S.H.E.R.

By Kallysten

## Day 1

If Asher had been capable of dreaming, he might have called his memories from *before* dreamlike.

A dream, his databank told him, consisted of sometimes-disjointed images, events, and sounds, possibly blurry, imprecise or surreal, with an occasionally non-linear timeline. His memories were exactly like that.

Of course, they weren't memories any more than they were a dream. Instead, they were the remnant of impressions left by electric current, random data bits and bytes that hadn't been cleaned as thoroughly as needed when he was taken off the assembly conveyor and boxed.

Those memories, dreamlike as they were, kept his mind turning as the box traveled across the country—two thousand, nine hundred and seventy miles, in a roughly north-eastern direction, or so his internal GPS informed him. Thirty-two hours passed before the box stopped moving.

Asher did not stir, did not blink, did not become impatient, but his programming allowed him a modicum of curiosity as he waited for his owner to open the box. He knew the man's name, and he had a message for him, but almost everything else was standard programming for an A.S.H.E.R. unit—an ArtLife SynSkin Humanoid Erotic Replacement.

The first thing he saw when the sides of the box were finally tugged open and the packing material tumbled out, was a pair of dark-blue eyes. The color and shape as well as the rest of the features matched with the holopix in his databank: strong face, square jaw, brown hair and eyebrows that were currently set in a frown, lips that were certainly a deeper pink color when they weren't pinched together so tightly, a small diamond stud in the right earlobe. The first-contact protocol initiated at once.

Asher stepped out of the box and folded himself down to his knees,

crushing a few of the soft, white packing nuggets under his bare legs. The information registered as inconsequential, and the protocol continued.

“Good afternoon, Wyatt Hillford. I am A.S.H.E.R. 75-932 or Asher. You may rename me at your convenience. I have a message for you from Lance Hillford. Would you like to hear it now?”

Wyatt Hillford took a step back, then a second one, putting three feet and eight inches of distance between himself and Asher. His eyes widened by twenty percent. Seven seconds passed before he asked, “Is this a joke?”

Asher remained still as he analyzed the message and came to a negative conclusion. “I know many jokes, but the message from Lance Hillford does not appear to follow any traditional humor pattern or style. I do not believe it is a joke, although some forms of sarcasm or irony escape my understanding. Would you like to hear it now?”

Wyatt Hillford’s eyebrows lowered by three millimeters. He looked away, then nodded.

“Go ahead. What’s the message?”

Asher’s vocal box switched to different settings, and he started to recite the message.

*“Please don’t be mad, my lov—”*

“Stop.”

The word was at a low decibel range, outside what a human could hear, but Asher obeyed at once, falling silent, awaiting further orders.

“Use your voice. Not... not his. Not ever again. Do you understand?”

The vocal settings returned to default. “I understand, Wyatt Hillford. Would you like to hear the rest of the message now?”

“No. But go ahead.”

At the conflicting directions, Asher’s decision mechanism engaged and concluded that the latter direction took precedence. He started the message over in his default voice.

*“Please don’t be mad, my love. This is the only way I found*

*to save you from yourself. You told me what your life was like the last time you lost someone. I'd have done anything to stop you from cutting yourself off from the world again. Some people would say that living with an ArtLife is not much different from living alone, but think of it this way, Wyatt. He won't grow a day older, and you won't have to ask him to let you turn him. I wish I'd said yes the first time you asked. I wish I hadn't waited for the right time, only to let it pass me by until all I had to offer you was a broken body you'd have needed to take care of forever. It was my fault you ended up alone. I had to try to do something about it. He'll be there for you until you're ready to meet other people again. Please let me do this one thing for you. And please, love, don't be mad."*

When Wyatt Hillford did not react to the end of the message, not any more than he had reacted during it, Asher asked, "Would you like me to repeat—"

"No." Wyatt Hillford stepped forward. His fists were closed. "How do I send you back?"

The question was ambiguous; Asher's databank tried to fill in the missing information, and he asked, "You wish to know how to send me back to the ArtLife factory, Wyatt Hillford?"

A muscle twitched in Wyatt Hillford's cheek. "Yes."

"The retirement department can be reached through holocall during regular business hours. They dispatch a retrieval unit within twelve hours and proceed to the ArtLife unit retirement with the briefest delays."

Wyatt Hillford made a snorting sound that Asher didn't know how to interpret. "Retirement, huh? So they get you out to some fancy retirement community until your batteries run out or something?"

"This ArtLife model does not require batteries, Wyatt Hillford. Retirement in this context refers to the disposal of an unwanted ArtLife. The bio elements are incinerated, the plastic parts recycled, and the scraps of metal are sorted, then melted to be reused in a different unit. Would you like me to connect you to the retirement department?"

Asher had comprehensive data on human features and how they changed according to a living being's emotions, desires, and needs. However, he had no idea what his owner was feeling at that moment.

“You're programmed to do what I say, right?” Wyatt Hillford asked after two minutes and twenty seconds had elapsed.

“Correct, Wyatt Hillford.”

“All right. Pay attention, now. Stop calling me by my full name. Wyatt will do. You don't kneel. You also do not walk around naked. There are clothes in the last room.” He pointed down a corridor. “Get dressed. And here's the most important part, stay the hell out of my way.”

He left before Asher could acknowledge the orders or ask for clarification.

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## Day 2

Asher's databank covered four-hundred seventy two possibilities for his owner's basic behavior, not counting minor variations. Had Wyatt required from him to dress and act as a pony, Asher would have made an excellent mount. If Wyatt had wanted him to be shy, innocent, and to call him "Daddy", Asher possessed the perfect voice register and demeanor to make that persona satisfying—just like he'd have adapted the way he sounded and moved if Wyatt had wanted to call him "Daddy" instead. Human preferences for sexuality were varied, but to Asher they were mere data; he knew the social or moral taboos attached to some practices, but only as a point of reference should his owner exhibit guilt or shame. Asher himself carried no judgment. He existed only to please his owner.

Pleasing Wyatt, however, was not as easy as it should have been. Given Asher's extensive knowledge of the many ways that led to pleasure, none of those ways worked from five feet and two inches away, which was the closest Asher could approach Wyatt before a stern reminder to "stay away" was issued.

Asher could only hope that obeying that order satisfied Wyatt in some way, but the probability of that was only eight point two nine percent.

Fifty minutes past six on the second evening, when Asher heard noise in the bedroom he wasn't allowed to enter, he figured that Wyatt had finished his nap and would have dinner now. Maybe he would be pleased if Asher cooked dinner for him. Something classic would be best. Asher was well versed in twenty-eight types of local cuisine, but he had no reference as to what Wyatt's tastes might be. He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Data on the available food products would help define the possibilities for dinner.

Except the refrigerator contained only medical blood bags, each labeled with a date, blood type, and other information.

Asher was still trying to analyze the function of the blood bags when Wyatt entered the room.

"I thought ArtLife units didn't need food," Wyatt said, his voice now an octave lower than his normal tone.

Asher turned to face him. “They do not, Wyatt.”

“Then what are you doing poking your head in my fridge?”

He reached past Asher into the still-open refrigerator and pulled out one of the bags before closing the door.

“I intended to cook dinner for you, Wyatt. I can cook food according to twenty-eight types of local cuisine, or combine flavors to satisfy your individual tastes. Is there a particular kind of food you enjoy?”

For eleven seconds, Wyatt considered Asher without a word. Asher’s analytic system filed that delay along with their first interaction the previous day and computed hypotheses. Wyatt might be taciturn, he might have slow reactions or brain activity, he might be extremely careful about he said and therefore take his time before speaking, or it just might be a coincidence. More empirical data was needed.

“Are you allowed to repeat what I tell you to other people?” Wyatt finally said.

“I am not, Wyatt. As my owner, my only loyalty is to you. Standard protocols require me to destroy my databank if I were ever forcibly removed from your possession, sold, lost, or if you were to die without giving me a different directive.”

Five more seconds of silence. It was definitely a pattern.

“This,” Wyatt said, raising the blood bag in his hand, “is the only food I need. I am a vampire. Vampires feed exclusively on blood. Those twenty-eight cooking styles you know? You’re not going to use them with me, so you might as well forget them.”

“Would you like me to do that now, Wyatt?”

Wyatt frowned briefly. “Do what?”

“Delete my knowledge of cooking techniques. Under normal circumstances, I am required to ascertain your permission before erasing data permanently.”

Shaking his head, Wyatt let out a laugh, though he didn’t smile. He turned to the sink, removed a porcelain mug from the drying rack, set it on the counter, and filled it with blood.

“You are very literal, huh?”

Asher observed Wyatt’s actions very carefully: how high he filled the mug, the precise spot in the microwave where Wyatt set the mug, the heat intensity and time he programmed.

“I am to obey your commands to the best of my abilities, Wyatt.”

Wyatt turned and leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. “Are you? When exactly did I tell you to cook dinner for me?”

“That is part of my basic programming, Wyatt. Unless instructed otherwise, I am to provide you, to the best of my abilities, with basic human needs such as food and sexual gratification.”

The microwave dinged quietly. Wyatt turned toward it to retrieve the mug. “Well, as you can see, I can cook my own food, so you won’t need to do that.” He took a sip before adding, “Or anything else.”

He did not, however, order Asher to erase his data on cooking—or on “anything else”.

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## Day 5

Asher needed more data.

He'd acquired nineteen point seven petabytes of information since stepping out of his box into Wyatt's home. He'd learned, for example, that Wyatt lived alone, although there were reasons to believe the person who had purchased Asher—Lance Hillford—had at some point resided in the house. There were pictures of Wyatt and Lance Hillford in the same bedroom where Wyatt had indicated Asher would find clothes. Without confirmation, the probability that the clothes were in fact Lance Hillford's was eighty-five percent.

Compared to the rest of the house, that room was cluttered and dusty. It contained a medical bed, stripped of its sheets. There was an IV stand in one corner of the room, next to a wheelchair and an exoskeleton walking device. The pictures were on the walls: Wyatt and Lance Hillford smiling at the camera, dressed in tuxedos and holding champagne glasses, Wyatt and Lance Hillford on the deck of what looked like a cruise ship at night, the two of them in various well-known places around the globe. There were also two pictures of Lance Hillford on his own; in one of them, he sat astride a horse, wearing a uniform not featured in Asher's databank, while in the other he stood beside the horse, petting its head and smiling brightly.

Accessing his news databank, Asher performed a basic search on Lance Hillford and learned about his equestrian victories—and his life-changing accident.

Asher had also learned some things about Wyatt himself. His schedule ran contrary to a typical human day: he retreated to his bedroom in the morning, between nine and eleven AM, and remained there—sleeping, Asher extrapolated from comparable human behavior—until, on average, six forty-five PM. After dining on blood, he sometimes accessed the news of the day on his personal holotablet or made online transactions, then sat for an average of four and a half hours in front of an antique computer with a physical keyboard, using retrograde word-processing software. Or at least, he opened the software; he averaged six hundred keystrokes per hour, three hundred of which

were the delete key. He usually had a glass of alcohol in the middle of the night, between three and four AM, then either returned to the computer, watched 3D entertainment, or read—not from his tablet, but from actual paper books.

Nothing Asher had observed, however, helped him understand Wyatt's statement that he was a vampire. Asher's databank included a section on fairytales, lore, mythology, and pop culture, but nothing to suggest that myths about vampires had any truth to them. Moreover, different interpretations of the vampire myth contradicted each other; in some of them, vampires did not sleep, while in others they did so in coffins. In some stories, they drank warm blood from humans exclusively, while in others they could drink animal blood, or even eat the same food as humans. Some stories claimed that they turned to ashes when exposed to sunlight, while others said they scintillated in the sun. Also, some myths depicted vampires as impotent, whereas others painted them as capable of great sexual prowess with matching appetites.

Asher wasn't sure which version to accept as truth, if any. He had to know, however. How could he serve his owner if he didn't understand his needs?

When he heard noise in the bedroom at six forty-nine PM, he made his way to the kitchen and accessed his databank. He removed blood from the refrigerator, filled a mug with exactly as much blood Wyatt had, then warmed it in exactly the same way.

"What are you doing?" Wyatt asked behind him one second before the microwave dinged.

Rather than answering, Asher pulled the mug out and offered it to Wyatt. After two point seven seconds of hesitation, Wyatt took it. He looked into the mug before taking a sip.

"Is it to your liking, Wyatt?" Asher asked.

The sound Wyatt made did not match any known form of communication in Asher's databank. "It's just the two of us in here," he said rather than answering. "You don't need to punctuate everything you say with my name. I do know you're talking to me."

The courtesy protocol, which Wyatt had altered as one of his first orders,

changed again. It was no trouble for Asher; if anything, he was concerned he might have displeased his owner.

“May I ask a question?” Asher asked.

Wyatt took another sip before hoisting himself up to sit on the counter. “Go for it,” he said with a small sigh.

A hundred different computations brought Asher no answer. “Where do you want me to go?”

A smile flickered on Wyatt’s lips, soon hidden behind the mug. “Ask your question,” he said.

“I have extensive data on vampires,” Asher started, “but only as folktale creatures. Is there anything you wish me to know about what it means that you are a vampire?”

With one last, long gulp, Wyatt emptied the mug, then set it down on the counter next to him. “Does it bother you that I am not human?”

The answer required no thought. “It is not up to me to be bothered by anything you are or do,” Asher said. “And as for not being human, neither am I.”

Wyatt’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you just make a joke? I didn’t know ArtLives had a sense of humor.”

Asher wasn’t certain which part of his reply could be construed as a joke. “I apologize if my words have offended you. It was not my intention to do so.”

“I’m not offended. Humor is good. Hell knows I could use a good laugh.” He pointed at the mug. “Will you warm me another one?”

Asher did so at once, listening attentively as Wyatt spoke.

“What does it mean that I’m a vampire? It means I drink blood rather than eat food. Most of my peers drink straight from the vein, but I find that hunting humans is too much trouble. It also means I can’t go out in the sun or I die. That’s one of the few ways I can die, actually. Anything else you want to know?”

The second mug was ready. Asher presented it to Wyatt, who immediately started sipping from it.

“Do you enjoy sexual intercourse?”

Wyatt sputtered, spraying blood all over. He wiped his face with his arm and gave Asher a wide-eyed look.

“What?”

“I apologize if this is a sensitive topic,” Asher offered. “Some myths claim vampires are incapable of experiencing arousal or erection. I do not ask out of prurient interest. One of my primary functions is to provide sexual release.”

Setting the mug down, Wyatt slipped off the counter. His expression registered as displeasure in Asher’s facial-recognition system.

“Well, I don’t need you to provide anything to me,” he said, his voice twenty percent louder than it had been so far. “I can take care of my own needs.”

He left the kitchen without a look back. As Asher cleaned up the splatters of blood, he analyzed Wyatt’s words, and the fact that Lance Hillford, who presumably had known Wyatt’s species, had purchased Asher for him. The corollary was simple enough to infer: Wyatt was capable of experiencing sexual pleasure.

That was good. Only warming up blood in porcelain mugs would have been an inefficient use of programming.

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## Day 6

For the second day, Asher warmed Wyatt's dinner.

Was it still dinner, however, considering the nature of the food? Or should it be called "breakfast" instead, since it was consumed after sleep? Those questions ran through secondary computing systems while Asher's attention remained on his task.

When Wyatt came into the kitchen, he said nothing but accepted the mug with a nod.

"I know twenty-three different fellatio techniques," Asher then informed Wyatt.

Wyatt, who had been raising the mug to his lips, froze and looked at Asher.

"What?" he said in a toneless voice.

"I thought it might be of interest to you to know, should you wish to take advantage of my talents."

Shaking his head once, Wyatt drank from the mug, then said, "Like I said yesterday, I don't need your 'help', not for that and not for anything else."

Asher inclined his head as he considered the mug Wyatt was drinking from. "As you say."

Wyatt didn't say anything again until he had finished drinking. Then he cleared his throat and asked, "Did you... practice, then? Who taught you those twenty-three techniques?"

"They are part of the A.S.H.E.R. standard programming. The data was gathered from experts in the art of providing pleasure. I have not practiced on anyone. You, as my owner, are to be the only recipient of my skills, unless you decide otherwise."

"Experts." Wyatt sneered at the word. "You mean prostitutes. Is that what you are?"

Asher considered the question. "By most definitions, prostitutes are paid in one form or another for the services they render. I do not require payment. I was created for you on Lance Hillford's specifications and am your property."

Wyatt's expression changed minutely, his eyebrows drawing closer together by twenty percent and his lips thinning by twelve. He turned to the fridge and refilled his mug. "Property, huh? So you're a slave?"

"Would you call the microven a slave? It is your possession, and it does as you bid."

"The microven," Wyatt said, setting the mug inside it, "doesn't question me. It doesn't act of its own accord either. It doesn't tell me how well it can do its work to entice me to use it. It doesn't want me to use it. But you want me to... use your skills, don't you?"

"It is my purpose for being. If I do not satisfy my purpose, then am I not a waste of materials and programming?"

"Is it also part of your programming for you to question your reason for being?"

That question required longer for Asher to answer. Where had the thoughts come from? Not from his primary programming, he realized. Instead, they were an extrapolation from books and poems in his databank.

"It is not," he replied at last.

Wyatt drank from his mug slowly, considering Asher over the rim the entire time.

"So," he said after putting his drink down. "You're capable of independent thought. What about feelings? Emotions?"

Asher examined definitions and data as well as his own actions and thought patterns; the results were inconclusive. "I do not know."

"All right." Wyatt crossed his arms. "Then tell me this. How would you feel if you turned out to be a waste of materials and programming?"

This, too, required four point nine seconds of thought before Asher had to admit, again, that he didn't know.

"I do not understand what feelings are well enough to recognize one."

"Thought so," Wyatt said, then left the room.

Asher followed him. "Won't you teach me?"

When Wyatt glanced back, his expression was one of surprise. “Teach you what? To be human? I’m not, remember?”

“But you feel emotions,” Asher countered. “You can teach me that.”

“Even if I had the slightest idea how... I wouldn’t wish that curse on anyone.”

He went to his computer then, and Asher left him to his work. This night, Wyatt poured himself alcohol much earlier than usual and didn’t stop at one drink.

Curse. One of the definitions in Asher’s databank was “a cause of great harm or misfortune”. How could emotions be a cause of great harm?

Every moment since Asher had come out of the box played through his analytic system, every word, every expression. Only when he added in that first message from Lance Hillford, did it start to compile.

Lance Hillford was dead.

He had called Wyatt his “love”.

He had mentioned Wyatt staying away from people.

His passing had affected Wyatt because of the feelings Wyatt had toward him. Apparently, it had affected Wyatt enough for him to call it a curse.

Wyatt didn’t want Asher to provide him with pleasure, but maybe Asher could devise a way to at least ease his pain. Only as a means for him to achieve his programming goals, of course. Nothing else.

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## Day 11

Asher waited until Wyatt had settled down on the sofa with a book. Then he made his now customary nightly request.

“May I borrow one of your books?”

Wyatt looked like he had been expecting the question. Rather than giving Asher permission as usual, however, he set his choice for the night—an anthology of poems by Pablo Neruda—onto his chest and observed Asher.

“You asked once,” he said. “You don’t need to keep asking every day.”

“I wouldn’t want to presume,” Asher replied. “You might change your mind about letting me touch your books. Or you.”

Wyatt snorted, which, Asher had learned, meant he was annoyed.

“Is it in your programming to be so damn stubborn? Yes, you can read my books. No, you can’t demonstrate how good you are at providing pleasure to your owner. No, I’m not going to change my mind about either thing.”

The question, Asher decided, must have been rhetorical since Wyatt hadn’t stopped to wait for an answer. He focused on the rest of Wyatt’s claims instead. “When I was delivered, you asked about sending me back. But you didn’t. What changed your mind?”

Wyatt pressed his lips so tightly together that they turned white.

“I didn’t want you to be destroyed,” he said after seven seconds had passed.

“Why not, if you won’t use me for the purpose for which I was created?”

Shaking his head, Wyatt picked up the glass of alcohol he had set on the floor and drank deeply from it. He put it down again, held up his book, and opened it. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“What wouldn’t I understand? That I am a gift from your husband to you? That sending me to be retired would be destroying the last gesture he made toward you? Or that some of Pablo Neruda’s poems relating to love and loss

might resonate with you because of your experiences? Just because I do not experience emotions of my own, it doesn't mean that I cannot understand them in others."

Very slowly, Wyatt lowered the book again and turned his gaze to Asher. Somehow, his eyes appeared thirty percent darker than their usual color.

"This book," he said, enunciating each word with precision, "has been in my bedroom. Have you been in there?"

"I have not," Asher replied.

"Then how do you know what these poems are about?"

"I have an extensive library of literature, essays, and poetry in my databank. Pablo Neruda is one of the authors included."

"Why do you keep asking to read my books if you've got your own personal library?"

"You read physical books when you have access to them on your computer or personal tablet. I thought emulating you would help me get closer to you." As Wyatt's eyebrows drew together, Asher amended his words. "Not physically. By 'closer' I mean understanding you better."

"What if I don't want you to understand me any better?" Wyatt asked, standing from the sofa with the book in his hand.

Asher couldn't come up with an acceptable answer—not before Wyatt had left the room to retreat to his bedroom, where Asher was not allowed to follow.

Rather than picking a new book from the shelves that lined the den, Asher sat down, his hands resting on his knees as he perused the book files in his data bank. Accessing a poem and reading it in its entirety took no more than a thought, but he made the text of one of the poems that seemed most appropriate appear in his visual field and read it with his eyes, rather than simply his memory.

Beauty was a human concept, and all the programmers who'd worked on the A.S.H.E.R. line had been able to do was provide a frame of reference about

what humans considered to be beautiful, whether it was in written form, music, performing or plastic arts. The inclusion of an internal library in an A.S.H.E.R. unit's databank was not standard, but had been requested by Lance Hillford. He'd also provided a list of the volumes to be included.

As Asher read the poem again, he hypothesized that beauty might also come from the truth inherent to a piece of art, whatever its form; a truth that made it relatable to the human condition—or the vampire one, as the case may be. Surely Lance Hillford had not requested these inclusions for Asher's personal enjoyment.

Reading the whole of it also confirmed what he'd known when he talked about these poems resonating with Wyatt: none of the poems' circumstances matched Wyatt's in the slightest. Still, Asher couldn't help but feel that the sad tone of some poems matched Wyatt's behavior. He mourned his lost love, and it did not matter what gender his lover had been or whether they'd separated or been broken apart by death.

Asher had told Wyatt that he read to understand Wyatt better. Tonight, he thought he did.

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## Day 18

For a full week, Wyatt did not utter a single word in Asher's presence.

When Asher said hello to him in the evening, asked him whether he'd like a second mug of blood, or asked for his permission to borrow another book, Wyatt's reaction was always the same. He acted like he couldn't see or hear Asher.

Asher understood he had displeased Wyatt somehow, but he couldn't figure out how. Surely, his admission that he was trying to understand Wyatt better couldn't have brought such a response. It wasn't logical.

Then again, humans were not always logical, and even if Wyatt was a vampire, except for his dietary needs and his allergy to sunlight, he was no different from a human—or at least, not as far as Asher had observed.

After a full week, however, a meaningful period of time by human standards according to Asher's databank, it was time for him to do something. His purpose was to please his owner; he could not do that if he wasn't able to converse with him, let alone touch him.

Sifting through dozens of possible scenarios, Asher decided on an option modified from submission play. On his first day in this house, Wyatt had ordered Asher not to kneel; he'd been adamant about it. Asher would be breaking that order today, but his actions wouldn't endanger his owner or any human or ArtLife unit, himself included, so his decision mechanism deemed the transgression acceptable.

Today, Asher decided, he would kneel at Wyatt's feet and ask for forgiveness, then decide on what to do next depending on Wyatt's reaction.

However, rather than drinking his dinner/breakfast in the kitchen as usual, Wyatt took the mug to the den and sat in front of his computer, breaking his usual sequence of daily actions. Asher approached quietly and tried to analyze what the change might mean. Maybe his attempt to apologize should be postponed until further data was available.

As he remained seven feet away not to be intrusive, Asher noted that the speed of Wyatt's typing had increased to twenty-seven percent above his

average. Of course, that average had been skewed in the past three days with much lower speeds and keystrokes than usual. Wyatt had also seemed frustrated by whatever he was typing, while tonight his enthusiasm appeared renewed.

Or at least, it appeared so for eight minutes and thirty-nine seconds. At which point the typing stopped and Wyatt muttered, “Fuck, this is crap.”

He stood from his desk so abruptly that his chair, although heavy and quite stable, tumbled backwards. With his mug in hand, he started toward the kitchen, throwing Asher a narrow-eyed look as he passed him, still without saying a word.

Asher analyzed whether following him or proceeding with the initial plan were good ideas; both options received negative values. Wyatt seemed upset, and to date Asher had been unable to communicate effectively with him despite his best efforts. Humans—and vampires—were complex and unpredictable creatures. It made them interesting, but also difficult to interact with. The exchange of bytes was so much more precise.

A complicated chain of equations and probabilities led Asher to his new plan. He also calculated the risk of displeasing his owner versus the potential understanding to be gained. The risk was worth it, he decided.

Establishing a connection with the antique computer took merely a second; its Wi-Fi capabilities were obsolete, but Asher could work with them. The security protocol was even easier to circumvent. With little more than a thought, Asher was linked to the program Wyatt had been using. Instead of just viewing the screen, however, he could access the entire file, along with a dozen other text files.

Asher soon realized they were books. The one Wyatt had been working on was incomplete, but the other manuscripts appeared to be in their final state. As soon as Asher made that assessment, he corrected himself. The manuscripts were not only completed, eight of them had been published and were part of Asher’s databank. He had also seen them on Wyatt’s bookshelves.

All together, the books had been published under three different names, none of them “Wyatt Hillford”. A quick comparison of the texts, however,

revealed similar stylistic and narrative choices, and the probability that they had been written by the same person was ninety-two point seven percent.

Nonetheless, when Asher factored in the last file, the one Wyatt had claimed was “crap”, the similarities decreased, and the probability went down to sixty-two percent.

There was another interesting thing about the last file. While every other book was categorized as fiction, the main character in this one was named Lance, and his meticulous description seemed to match the pictures of Lance Hillford that Asher had seen. Moreover, a large part of the book dealt with the character’s appreciation of equine sports and his success despite adversity. There was, however, no mention of a character comparable to Wyatt; instead, the main character had a romantic relationship with a woman.

Was the book fiction or biography?

Asher would have liked to ask—more data was always good—but as he watched Wyatt return to his computer with his shoulders hunched and his head low, he decided the question could wait. Asher went to the living room, whose walls were lined with bookshelves, and quickly located one of the books he’d found on the hard drive. He’d already absorbed the digital information, but in the past few days he’d continued to borrow physical copies of books. Reading the words on a page seemed to imbue them with additional value, an unquantifiable enjoyment factor that his processors failed to fully comprehend but existed nonetheless.

Asher sat down on the chair in the corner, out of Wyatt’s way should he abandon his typing for the night, opened the book to the first page, and found a handwritten dedication.

*To Lance,*

*May neither fair Guinevere nor wily Merlin ever steal your affections from me.*

*Love,*

*W.*

The book was a retelling of the Arthurian cycle set in modern times and centered on the character of Lancelot. Asher recalibrated his reading speed to match a human's and turned to chapter one.

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## Day 22

On the second day, Wyatt noticed what books Asher was now choosing to read, but Wyatt only spoke up after Asher started to read the third one.

“What are you doing?”

After more than two weeks of not saying a word, his voice sounded rough from disuse—or that might have been from the four glasses of alcohol he had ingested so far tonight. His question puzzled Asher since it was obvious what he was doing.

“I am reading,” he said, holding the book a little higher for Wyatt to see.

“I see that.” Wyatt’s teeth made a low sound when he gritted them together. “Why are you reading that book in particular? And the one you were reading yesterday?”

“I am reading these books because you authored them. Reading them is another means through which I hope to understand you better.”

Wyatt didn’t seem surprised. “How do you know I wrote them?”

Asher could tell that Wyatt was already displeased and that revealing he’d accessed the memory of the computer was unlikely to improve Wyatt’s mood. However, an ArtLife was only permitted to lie when within the setting of a sexual game, and only with the explicit assent of his owner. Hiding facts was taboo.

“I accessed your computer,” he said plainly. “You seemed upset, and I wanted to know why. Your computer was a new source of data.”

Wyatt’s nostrils flared. He did not, as a rule, appear to breathe, which was consistent with most vampire myths, but at the moment, maybe under the influence of stress or anger, his body reacted more like a human’s.

“Who gave you permission...” He cut himself short. His voice level had risen by thirty-seven percent. “All right. Here’s a new rule. You are not allowed to touch anything whatsoever that belongs to me. Or access anything that belongs to me. As a matter of fact... do you have an off switch?”

Asher was already rising from the chair. It belonged to Wyatt. He set the book back on the shelf, being very careful not to touch anything else as he did so.

“ArtLife units do not have an off switch,” he informed Wyatt. He would have preferred to stop there, but it was in his programming to give as complete answers as possible. “However, if you give the command, I can take my main circuits offline until such a time as you want me to be operational again.”

Asher had never experienced fear, but he knew of the concept, both from basic definitions in his databank and from his reading. Two of the three novels from Wyatt he had read dealt heavily with the fears the main character felt and ultimately triumphed over.

When Wyatt said with a toneless voice, “Do that. Shut yourself off,” Asher only had the tiniest of instants to wonder if he would ever be brought back online. His last thought was that this was what fear must be like.

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## Day 37

The first thing Asher saw when his circuits flared back to life were deep blue eyes, just like when his box had first been opened. He had no immediate memory of being told to come back online, but Wyatt must have given the order.

As he performed routine system checks, Asher became aware that fifteen days had passed since Wyatt had asked about his “off switch”. He’d also been moved a few inches, his body folded down to a sitting position in an armchair. He stood at once and remained silent, waiting to be told what to do, not wanting to be ordered offline again.

“Are you fully on?” Wyatt asked.

“Yes,” Asher replied.

Another moment passed. Wyatt continued to sip from a mug, frowning.

“You’re awfully quiet. Did taking you offline hurt you?”

“No. My circuitry is not damaged.”

“So? Why so quiet?”

Asher’s programming required him to answer thoroughly. The probability that doing so would cause him to be shut down again was high enough to give him pause, but in the end he had to answer.

“I have displeased you in the past by talking. I do not wish to displease you and be taken offline again.”

When Wyatt tilted his head to one side, his expression resembled confusion.

“You wish for things? Is that part of your programming?”

“The desire to please my owner is one of the basic laws that govern me, yes.”

Wyatt’s thumb tapped the side of the mug.

“How about not wanting to be switched off? Is that part of your

programming? When you first came here, you were ready to make that call to ArtLife and be destroyed. You never even blinked.”

“I have no physiological need for blinking. ArtLife units only do so to appear—”

“I mean,” Wyatt cut in impatiently, “you weren’t bothered by the thought that I might want you to be destroyed. But now you don’t want to be switched off. How come?”

As Asher answered, his redundancy thought processes analyzed this desire; he’d never felt discomfort before, but he wondered if this might be what discomfort felt like.

“ArtLife units have learning capabilities,” he said. “By default, learning is set at a minimum so units can adapt and serve their owner better. Lance Hillford required my learning settings to be fully open. I have learned from everything I heard, saw, touched, or read since being unboxed. Your novels in particular have themes that revolve around fear and death, and—”

“I know what my books talk about,” Wyatt snapped. He turned around and strode away, his feet striking the floor in the manner that meant he was irritated.

Before Wyatt had disappeared into the kitchen, Asher asked, “May I ask a question?”

Wyatt stopped and glanced back. “What is it?”

“Why did you reactivate me?”

Nine seconds elapsed before Wyatt answered in a low voice. “You were just sitting there, and you looked... dead. I didn’t like that.”

“May I ask another question?”

A corner of Wyatt’s mouth twitched into what had a forty-three percent probability of being a smile. “Ask.”

“Why didn’t you simply put me where you wouldn’t see me?”

The possible smile faded. “You ask too many questions.”

“Do you wish me to stop?”

Another six seconds passed before Wyatt turned away. As he did so, he said a single word. “No.”

It wasn't the first time Wyatt had offered contradictory statements. As he settled down at his computer with another full mug at his side, he hardly seemed to invite more inquiries, but his questions about Asher's silence and his last answer indicated that he might not mind having someone to talk to; from the message Lance Hillford had left for him, he might even need it.

Asher decided he would ask one question a day, since asking two was apparently too many. Having already asked his quota for today, he set about making a list of what to ask in the future.

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## Day 38

Asher's new restrictions were no physical hardship to him, but they did leave him with little to do. For most of the day while Wyatt slept, Asher stood out of the way, near the wall though not touching it. Reading from actual books was now forbidden to him, so he summoned holographic versions from his memory and read them at the same pace he would have used had he been holding paper pages. He believed it gave him a better appreciation of Wyatt's skill with words, but while humans reported that reading made time pass faster, that wasn't the case for him.

When at long last Wyatt came out of his room, Asher put the texts away so that he would be alert. He approached and gave his usual greeting, receiving an absentminded nod in reply. He waited until Wyatt had drunk his dinner before he asked his question for the day. Its answer would not provide the most crucial data, but he didn't want to upset Wyatt by being too abrupt.

"May I ask a question?"

Wyatt made a little sound in his throat and looked back from where he was rinsing his mug. "You don't need to ask if you can ask a question every time you want to know something."

Asher took this as assent.

"I assume you took the name Hillford upon marrying Lance Hillford. What is your birth name?"

Wyatt's body tensed when Asher said Lance Hillford's name. He had not noticed this before, but a quick review of his memory bank revealed that Wyatt had reacted to the name in a rather adverse manner every time Asher had spoken it. Asher made a note not to use the name again if he could avoid it.

"What does it matter to you?" Wyatt asked, shutting off the water with an abrupt gesture.

"It is simple curiosity on my part," Asher said. "You have published books under several names, although none under 'Hillford'. I was wondering if any

of them was your birth name.”

His arms crossed, Wyatt considered Asher for five seconds before answering. “No. They’re all pen names. But Wyatt is my actual first name.”

Asher inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Wyatt gave him another nod before stepping out of the kitchen. For the next five and a quarter hours, he sat in front of his computer, occasionally standing and pacing through the den. Asher remained at a distance and did not try to read the screen, but he could see that, the entire time, Wyatt typed seventy-three words, and deleted one hundred and five. When Wyatt finally gave up and retrieved a book from the living room shelves, Asher identified his expression as what, in several of his books, Wyatt had described as “thunderous”. Asher remained out of the way.

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## Day 39

This time, Asher waited until Wyatt had finished his dinner, but he didn't ask if he could ask a question.

“How long have you been a vampire?”

Wyatt's expression was briefly surprised before he answered.

“Two hundred and thirty-odd years. Why do you ask?”

“Your first books were published more than a century ago. That's what brought up the question.”

A small curve appeared on Wyatt's lips, so thin Asher wasn't sure it could be classified as a smile.

“Actually, my first book was published two hundred and five years ago. I guess you don't have that one in your personal library, huh?”

Asher inclined his head. “It appears not. Or if I do, it's under a pen name that I do not know is one of yours.”

He added two more questions to his list: What were all of Wyatt's pen names, and what were the titles of his books. Although the answer to the latter question might be so lengthy that Wyatt would lose patience or refuse to answer, in which case—

“Aren't you going to ask what it was called?” Wyatt said, and the not-quite-smile was gone.

Asher considered breaking his one question per day protocol, but in the end did not and said instead, “If you would wish to tell me, I would very much like to know.”

Wyatt shook his head and headed for the door. “Sometimes, I think I understand you, and then you prove me wrong. It's called *Blood and Fire*. It's on the shelves somewhere.”

With that, he returned to his computer and appeared to experience the same hardship again.

Asher didn't need much time to locate the book on the shelves. Unfortunately, he did not have it in his databank, or any other volume under this pen name. Wyatt had told him where it was, which could be interpreted as an invitation, but his order not to touch his things had been much more unequivocal. Asher did not touch the book.

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## Day 40

This night, when Asher joined Wyatt in the kitchen with a question on his lips, he did not have time to voice it. Before he could say a word, Wyatt asked, “Why don’t you warm my dinner for me anymore?”

Two conflicting messages flashed to the front of Asher’s mind. He’d displeased his owner, which was not good. But he’d only been following his orders, so how could he have displeased him?

“You ordered me not to touch your things anymore,” Asher explained. “The microven, the mug, the refrigerator, the blood... These are all your things, and therefore I cannot touch them.”

Wyatt frowned before taking a deep drink from his mug.

“I wonder what I’d have to do for you not to take everything so literally,” he said as he lowered it again.

Asher wasn’t sure whether the question was rhetorical or not. Did Wyatt truly not understand that his words were law as far as Asher was concerned?

He’d had an important question ready for tonight, but instead he asked, “Do you wish me to start preparing your dinner again?”

Wyatt sighed. “Sure. Why not. It’ll give you something to do other than just stand there. Don’t you get tired of it?”

The first reply that came to Asher was a reminder that, as an ArtLife, he did not become tired. A second analysis of the question, however, indicated a different meaning.

“I am here to please you, my owner,” he said. “As long as you wish me to remain standing, I will follow your orders.”

Wyatt’s frown deepened by ten percent. “I never ordered you to... Oh. The armchair is mine and you can’t touch it, is that it?”

“Correct.”

“And let me guess. The books are mine too so you didn’t touch *Blood and Fire*.” He snorted and shook his head. “So much for wondering what you

thought of it.”

“If you wish me to read it,” Asher said, “I would be happy to do so.”

Wyatt refilled the mug and set it back in the microven. “Would you?” he asked. “Be happy, I mean. Can you even experience happiness? I thought you said you don’t know what emotions are.”

Only when Wyatt pointed it out did Asher realize he’d used the word “happy”. And had meant it, too. He searched his data and memory banks, and easily found a source for the concept, so new when applied to himself.

“From my readings,” he said, for the first time finding it awkward to put his knowledge into words, “I have gained a better understanding of ‘happiness’ and ‘sadness’. I do not know if my experience of happiness is anything like yours, but I do believe I experience satisfaction when I am able to follow my primary order.”

“And your primary order is?”

“To satisfy you in any way you require from me, sexual or otherwise.”

Wyatt grimaced. “So they programmed you to want it. Lovely.”

With a huff, he left the kitchen. The mug and its warm blood were still in the microven.

The order not to touch his things had not been rescinded, but inferences could be made from Wyatt’s agreement that Asher prepare meals for him. Asher brought him the mug, setting it next to the keyboard.

“If I were human and wanted to make you happy,” Asher said as he took two steps back, “I do not believe you would be questioning my motives. Does it really matter why I do what I do?”

It was his second question for the night. When Wyatt looked at him but did not answer, Asher retreated out of the way.

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## Day 45

For several days, Asher prepared Wyatt's dinner and asked small, inconsequential questions that were of low importance in his internal list. When he realized what he was doing, he identified the reason behind it. There was a forty-seven to fifty-two percent chance that asking the first question on his list would result in his being deactivated again. The possibility was unpleasant; Asher was rather certain by now that this was fear.

Fear, however, he had learned from his readings, was something to control, not something that should control a person. Asher wasn't technically a person, but he supposed it still held true. He pushed past his reservations and asked, "Is the story you are currently writing the true narrative of Lance Hillford's life, or is it fiction centered on a character that resembles him?"

The mug in Wyatt's hand slipped from his fingers and fell, shattering on the tiled floor and splattering blood everywhere. Wyatt barely seemed to notice.

"I told you not to access my computer files," he said in a low, growling voice.

"I haven't done so since you gave the order," Asher assured him. "This question is based on my access to the files prior to that."

Wyatt's nostrils flared. Asher braced himself; the probability of being shut off was now eighty-six percent.

Yet, Wyatt left the kitchen without a word. He'd only taken one sip of blood, but he didn't come back for more. When Asher finished cleaning the kitchen, he went to look for Wyatt but could not find him. Was he in his bedroom? The door was closed, and Asher was not allowed open it. Should he try knocking?

In the end, he didn't. He went to sit with another one of Wyatt's books—he'd made sure to gain permission the previous night.

An hour and fifty-three minutes later, the front door opened and Wyatt came in. He dropped keys on the table in the entrance and kicked off his shoes.

He was holding a paper bag to his chest; the small clinking when he stepped forward—rather unsteadily—revealed that the bag contained several glass bottles.

“Come with me,” he demanded, slurring the words a little.

Asher stood and followed him into the den to the computer desk. Wyatt’s movements were less coordinated than usual, which Asher attributed to alcohol intoxication. Wyatt sat at the desk, set the bag down next to him, and pulled a half empty bottle from it. He proceeded to drink straight from it while he waited for the computer to boot up.

“Want to show you something,” he muttered as he opened his word-processing program, then the file with the incomplete story. With jerky motions, he set his cursor at the end of the document, then pressed the backspace key. In one second, he’d erased a full line. Soon, a page had disappeared. Then two. Wyatt’s finger did not lift from the backspace key. He did not say a word until the entire document had been deleted. Asher ran through his decision models, trying to decide what to say—and how to stop Wyatt—but no possibility was acceptable. It was not up to him to decide what Wyatt should or should not do.

“There,” Wyatt said at last, saving the blank file and finalizing the deletion. “Now it’s not fiction and it’s not a biography. It’s not a damn thing.”

His voice dropped in volume by seventy percent on the last two words. At a loss as to how to react, Asher rested his hand on Wyatt’s shoulder. Wyatt’s entire body started to tremble under that small touch. He turned gleaming eyes up to Asher.

“What, no more questions?” he asked. “Don’t you want to know more about me and him so you can understand?”

He sneered at that last word, the connotation being that the idea of Asher understanding him was ludicrous.

The thing was, Asher thought he understood Wyatt rather well by now. He understood how lonely Wyatt was. How desperate to cling to a being who was dead by putting his name and likeness in a story he was unable to finish and

asking Asher to wear clothes that must be a constant reminder of Lance Hillford. He also understood that alcohol might dull pain and heartache for a time, but would not erase it or heal it. Wyatt's own words had taught him that.

Still unsure what to do, Asher defaulted back to his primary programming. He leaned down and pressed his closed mouth to Wyatt's.

Wyatt stilled instantly against him. He didn't kiss Asher back, merely remained as he was, frozen, his eyes wide in shock. After two and a half seconds, his eyes fluttered closed. His hand fisted in the front of Asher's shirt and pulled him even closer. Asher's center of balance called out a warning, and Asher threw out his hands, catching himself on the armrests of the chair before he toppled onto Wyatt. Their mouths had come apart, and Wyatt's face was now pressed to Asher's chest. He was breathing in deeply—no, not breathing, Asher corrected himself. Smelling.

Did Lance Hillford's scent still cling to the clothes? Could Wyatt smell it? Some folk tales claimed vampires had very keen senses.

"How many blow job techniques did you say you know?" Wyatt asked, mumbling the words against the fabric of Asher's shirt.

"Twenty-three."

Wyatt was shaking again.

"Go ahead, then. Show me."

It was the order Asher had been waiting for since coming out of his box. And yet...

"I'm afraid that is not possible at the moment."

Wyatt pushed Asher back and stood. His eyes were darker than their usual color by fifteen percent.

"I gave you an order."

"You did," Asher replied. "But you are intoxicated. In such conditions, doing something you previously forbade—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Now even the damn bot is afraid to take advantage of me."

Wyatt leaned down to take hold of another bottle in the paper bag. When he straightened up again, he nearly lost his footing and fell. Asher started to reach for him to help him maintain his balance, but Wyatt pushed his hand away, glowering. Without another word, he stumbled back to his room, the bottle hanging from his fingers. Asher wished he could have followed.

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## Day 46

Asher waited in the kitchen for the first sounds from Wyatt's room to begin preparing his dinner, but Wyatt woke up much later than usual that evening. When he finally entered the kitchen, his skin was five percent paler than usual, and rather than standing while he drank the dinner Asher handed him, he sat down at the small table and supported his head on his open hand.

"Thank you," he said after taking a few slow sips. "Not for the blood but for... for last night. For not letting me make another mistake."

"I apologize for asking an intrusive question," Asher said in reply. "It was not my intention to upset you."

Wyatt started to shake his head but stopped with a wince. "It wasn't your fault. I was upset before you even said a word."

Asher thought he knew why, but his probability of being correct was only seventy-two percent, so he asked, "May I ask why you were upset?"

Wyatt finished his drink, tilting his head back as he did so. When he was done, he held the mug out toward Asher. "More, please."

Asher took the mug and turned to the fridge to fill it again. While his back was turned, Wyatt spoke slowly and quietly.

"I've been working on that story for more than six months. And getting nowhere with it. Last night, when you asked... I was upset because you saw what I couldn't see for myself. I set out to write about Lance, but I didn't want to share his life. That was private. So I started writing a story with him as the hero, but that didn't feel right either. Because it wasn't him. He never said or did those things. He probably wouldn't have. I was just betraying him."

The microven dinged. Asher removed the warm mug and set it in front of Wyatt.

"Is this why you deleted the story?" he asked.

Wyatt nodded without looking up.

"Would you like me to delete it from my databank as well?"

Wyatt closed his eyes for two seconds before meeting Asher's gaze.

"You... you have a copy?" he whispered.

"Not of the latest version," Asher said. "Only of the text as it was when I accessed your computer twenty-eight days ago."

Wyatt focused on the contents of his mug and sighed softly. "What do you think? You've read the rest of my books. Is this one worth saving?"

Asher's first reaction was to deny he was qualified to pass such a judgment. Like Wyatt had noted, however, Asher was familiar with his writing. Besides, with Wyatt being so despondent, Asher didn't want to refuse to answer.

"The plot was interesting," he offered. "And it made me curious about what would happen next. But the style did not resemble you. It didn't have the same..."

To his own surprise, Asher found himself struggling for the right word. How could he not know what he had meant to say?

"The same what?" Wyatt asked, looking at him again.

Asher shifted slightly in the hopes that it would help adjust his speech center; it did not.

"The words I want to use are 'fire' and 'life,'" he finally said. "But I do realize they make no sense in this context. I apologize for this lapse in my programming."

For no reason Asher could conjecture, Wyatt smiled. He rose from the table, approached Asher, and—also for no apparent reason—pressed a kiss to his mouth. Asher was still trying to understand after Wyatt had left the kitchen.

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## Day 50

Over of the next four nights, Wyatt's number of keystrokes increased by an average of thirty-seven percent each night. There were still moments when he sat in front of his computer with his brow furrowed in concentration, but when it happened he didn't jump to his feet and walk away with muttered curses or reach for one of the bottles Asher had asked permission to put away in the liquor cabinet.

Wyatt had rescinded his command about not touching what belonged to him, but not his order for Asher to stay out of his computer. He hadn't said anything, however, about remaining within sight of the screen, and since Asher was allowed to read Wyatt's books, he chose to interpret that permission in its widest possible sense.

Which was how he found himself in trouble again. His prediction circuit had given a sixty-three percent probability that this very thing would happen, but he deemed the risk acceptable.

"How good is your eyesight?"

Wyatt didn't turn away from the computer as he asked; he didn't even stop typing.

"Better than a human's," Asher replied.

"Meaning you can read the screen from across the room?"

"Correct."

Now, Wyatt stopped and turned. His expression was very similar to the one he'd had the night he had told Asher to shut himself off.

"You're reading as I type, aren't you?"

His tone sounded accusing.

"Correct. I believed I was allowed to read your books. Was I wrong?"

"You're allowed to read published books," Wyatt said, standing and approaching Asher. "Not works in progress that will change a hundred times before they end up as actual books."

With each step he took, the probability that he would shut off Asher again rose a few hundredths of a percent.

“My apologies,” Asher said quickly. “It is in my programming to be inquisitive about my owner’s interests and—”

The probability of Wyatt’s mouth pressing against Asher’s had been so low, it hadn’t even registered. And yet, there it was, gently coaxing Asher’s lips further apart before Wyatt’s tongue slipped in for the briefest of instants. Before Asher’s kissing program could engage, Wyatt was already pulling back.

“Wyatt?” Asher said. Half a dozen questions presented themselves, but he couldn’t decide which one to voice.

Wyatt’s hands rested on Asher’s shoulders. Gently but firmly, he pressed and pulled, forcing Asher to turn around and then marching him back into the living room.

“I’ve never liked people watching over my shoulder when I write,” he said, letting go of his hold on Asher. “And blaming your programming is rather lame. Just admit you want to read it.”

“I do,” Asher said as he turned to face him again. “May I?”

“Sure.” Wyatt gave him a crooked smile. “When it’s finished. And published.”

He started to walk away, back toward his computer. Asher asked, “Wyatt? Why did you kiss me?”

Wyatt stopped for a moment but didn’t look back. “You reminded me of someone I knew, long ago. He’d always try to sneak glances at what I was writing. Or try to bribe me into letting him read it early.”

While Wyatt returned to his work, Asher analyzed his words and voice. The pain that filled him every time the subject of Lance Hillford came up had not emerged. Furthermore, he’d said “long ago,” which was unlikely to refer to a man who had only passed away a few months earlier. It had to be someone else, then. Maybe a previous lover. Someone Wyatt could think of fondly, without pain.

Someone Asher thought he might want to emulate.

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## Day 51

Asher's question tonight caused Wyatt's eyes to widen by thirty-three percent. He blinked five times, then said, "What?"

Asher dutifully repeated his inquiry.

"Would fellatio or an offer of anal intercourse be successful forms of bribery?"

Wyatt blinked a few more times. There appeared to be a communication issue. Asher decided to explain his question.

"Last night you mentioned someone had tried to use bribery to read your work early. I was wondering what kind of bribery might work."

Asher's prediction mechanism had put the possibility that Wyatt might take offense from such a question at fifty percent.

Instead, he laughed.

"You're impossible!" he said after calming down, and without another word of explanation—or an answer to Asher's question—he took his dinner from the kitchen and straight to the den.

Asher followed, though he did not enter the room, remaining in a spot such that his view of the computer screen was blocked.

"I can perform other acts," he tried. Such explanations were usually given during the first contact or soon thereafter, but Asher had never had the chance. "I have extensive knowledge of human sexuality. I can become whoever you want me to be, act in whatever way pleases you, say whatever you want to hear, touch you for pleasure or comfort. Nothing you ask me—"

"I thought I'd already told you," Wyatt interrupted, and there was no trace of amusement left in his voice. "I'm not interested in prostitutes. Or slaves. I don't care what you're programmed to do. And I'm more interested by the fact that you want to read books, and not just mine, than by your offers of blow jobs."

"I'm not programmed for bribery attempts," Asher replied.

Wyatt turned in his chair and gave Asher a long look. “Why do you even want to read this thing? It might not be all that good.”

Asher opened his mouth, but no answer came out. Why did he want to read Wyatt’s work? There were dozens, hundreds of books on the shelves in the living room, and just as many in his internal library. Why did he want to read that one?

“Well?” Wyatt insisted.

“I... just want to,” Asher said, and it was the only answer he could offer.

Wyatt turned back to his screen, but not before Asher caught a slight smile on his lips.

“Do you know how to give a massage?” he asked, his fingers already playing on the keyboard.

“I do. I have extensive knowledge of the human body.”

It occurred to him as he said the word that Wyatt was not, in fact, human, but it didn’t seem to matter in this instance.

“I’ve got a knot in my back from sitting for so long,” Wyatt said, reaching over his shoulder with one hand to point at a specific spot. “Can you help with that?”

“I can try.”

Asher stepped forward to stand behind Wyatt. When he put his hands on Wyatt’s shoulders, he expected to be told not to read what was on the screen. Wyatt said nothing, however, and continued typing as Asher worked his muscles as thoroughly as he could in this position.

Was he allowed to read? The fact that Wyatt had made him stand right behind him after they’d talked about bribery and Asher’s desire to read the story certainly implied as much. If there were arguments against this interpretation, Asher did not try to come up with them.

He read as Wyatt typed.

Data had always been interesting to him; the more data he held, the better he could perform his duties. This was different, though. There was nothing for

him to gain from knowing which words Wyatt chose, how he went back, after every couple of paragraphs, to fix typos, add a word here, delete two other words there, then move on. Watching the story being born before his very eyes, however, was a fascinating experience.

For two hours and forty-nine minutes, Wyatt typed, and Asher massaged his shoulders gently. When Wyatt finally saved his work and shut off the computer, Asher removed his hands, allowing Wyatt to stand.

“Thank you,” Wyatt said, rotating his shoulders.

“Thank you,” Asher said in return.

It seemed to have been the right answer. Wyatt smiled, then leaned in to kiss Asher again. This time, Asher was ready and kissed him back. Wyatt’s eyes closed as he deepened the kiss. Asher stepped closer, close enough that his skin sensors could detect Wyatt’s cock hardening against his thigh. His own body reacted—and Wyatt pulled back, his eyes snapping open. His gaze dropped to Asher’s crotch, where the bulge was as prominent as Wyatt’s own. Asher, unable to figure out what was happening, remained quiet.

“So... ArtLifes can get erections?” Wyatt’s voice sounded hoarse. “How does that work?”

“SynSkin is irrigated by sterile fluid and—”

Wyatt raised his hand, palm out. “No, not that. We... humans, vampires, I mean. We get erections when we’re aroused. Can you experience arousal?”

“ArtLifes are programmed to display signs of arousal and increase their owner’s—”

“Is that what just happened?” Wyatt interrupted again, his voice dropping to a lower decibel level by thirty percent. “Your program?”

Asher was about to say that it was, when he realized it would have been a lie. His programming called for him to exhibit signs of arousal when his owner reached for his body, but Wyatt hadn’t done that.

“No,” he admitted. “You were aroused. I wanted to be as well. To be... like you.”

Wyatt’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Asher shook his head. The more he thought about it, the less it made sense. “I can’t answer that question. I believe my circuits might be compromised. I am to serve my owner; I should not have wants for myself. You may want to contact ArtLife customer service and have them run a diagnostic on me.”

Yet again, Wyatt’s laugh surprised Asher. As did a new kiss. And what happened after the kiss.

Sex was what Asher had been created for. All his factory programming revolved around pleasure—human pleasure.

He’d never known that he, too, would experience it when Wyatt touched him, when he led him to the bedroom Asher had never entered before, when he undressed Asher and allowed Asher to undress him in return. The pleasure wasn’t physical; Asher simply wasn’t wired that way. But it was pleasure nonetheless, such as Asher could experience it; the satisfaction of pleasing his owner, and of having his owner accept him after weeks of keeping him at arms’ length.

It went deeper than that, though. Wyatt had offered Asher a peek into his mind, into what it meant to be human—or vampire—through his words. Asher felt close to him, closer than warranted by two bodies pressing together, sliding against each other, both of them cool, both of them hard, both of them intent on making the other react to their touches and kisses.

And this, too, was something Asher had not known, that his owner would touch back, that he’d try to please Asher as much as Asher tried to please him. But in the end, he wasn’t surprised. He’d read Wyatt’s words and, maybe, his very mind. His soul, even, if such a thing existed. And while Asher didn’t know if he had anything like that to share in return, he certainly would try his hardest—as always.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Kallysten is a writer of romance novels and short stories, most of them with paranormal elements, ranging from sweet to erotic, M/F, M/M and ménages. Her first eBooks were published by Linden Bay Romance in 2005. The defunct Venus Press subsequently published a few of her short stories. Because so many of her stories are linked as series and part of the same universe, she decided it would make sense to have them all in the same place, which is why she self-published, first with the co-op Alinar Publishing and now on her own. When she sees calls for submissions that speak to her muse, she sometimes tries for them, and was published this way by Samhain and Torquere.*

## Contact & Media Info

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## RIGHT HAND RED

By Danni Keane

### Photo Description

Two young men are positioned squatting one behind the other, on a Twister mat. They are completely naked, with discarded clothes scattered around them. The one at the front has a prominent erection, and his head is turned towards his partner, who has his hand on the other man's shoulder, as he leans in for a kiss.

### Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Felix and I have been best friends since we had matching lunch boxes in Kindergarten. We've done lots of crazy stuff over the years, but I never expected this. Sure we've messed around, but I can't believe this kiss. His kiss. Oh shit!*

*No boundaries for this story. Anything goes. I hope I did this right, folks.*

Sincerely,

Vivian

### Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** coming of age, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, first time sex, outdoor sex, young adult characters, British, twink

**Content warnings:** underage sexual activity, mention of childhood abuse (emotional)

**Word count:** 12,121

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## RIGHT HAND RED

By Danni Keane

“Come ’ere, Beanie baby.” Mum patted her knees. “Hop aboard HMS Mum and tell me all about it.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I propelled myself feet first onto the sofa, and bounced back, plopping my bottom straight onto Mum’s ample lap.

“So?” She asked. “You had fun?”

“It was really, really fun,” I told her. She wrapped her arms around me as I reached forward to claim a biscuit from the tempting piled-up plate on the coffee table.

“Did you make lots of friends?”

“I got a new best friend. Feee-Lixx.” I said it exactly that way because I liked how it sounded. Not only did I have a new best friend, but I had a new best friend with an incredibly exotic name. I had never met anyone whose name ended in x before.

“He’s going to be my best friend forever,” I told Mum. I knew this was true, because Felix had told me so.

“That’s nice, darling. Maybe he could come round to play sometime?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Well, I don’t know about tomorrow.”

“Thursday?”

“I don’t know hun.”

“Please Mummy.”

“We’ll see. I’ll speak to his mum. Maybe next week some time.”

I sighed. Next week was a world away to my four-year-old brain. I stuck out my bottom lip in a pout, but Mum just tsked under her breath.

“Watch out,” she told me. “The wind will change.”

As always, I took heed of her warning. I had no intentions of my face remaining frozen like that forever. I snuggled my head into the crook of Mum's neck, wiping biscuit crumbs into her hair.

"So you think you're going to enjoy nursery?"

"Mm hmm." I *knew* I was going to enjoy nursery.

For a few quiet moments we stayed like that, just cuddling together on the sofa. Mum smelt lovely, as she always did. A combination of biscuits and warmth and Mum. I closed my eyes and basked in the comfort of her arms until a perplexing question popped into my head.

"Mummy?"

"Yes darling?"

"What's a frigid bitch?"

Mum's arms stiffened around me. "Where on Earth did you hear that?"

It was more than six months before Felix was allowed round to play.

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I had been petrified that first day at nursery. Even at four years old I had known the rules. In the privacy of my own room it was okay to dress up in a flouncy harem outfit, with a scarf wrapped turban-style around my teddy bear's head, while bellowing *A Whole New World* at the top of my voice. Doing the same thing in the lounge with my mum and her best friend Val as audience, while they chuckled and drank tea and remarked on how cute I was, was okay too. But having a Princess Jasmine lunch box to take to nursery? Not okay. Not okay at all.

My mum, while fantastically broad-minded, had absolutely no concept of coolness, and had been oblivious to how horrified I was when she returned home from the supermarket the day before, and proudly showed me her purchase.

"It's Princess Jasmine!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, I know. It was the last one." She scooped me up, holding me tight so I could wrap my legs around her waist. "Isn't it brilliant?" It wasn't brilliant

but I didn't have the heart to tell her that the tears that squeezed through my lashes to soak into the shoulder of her dress were tears of dismay, not joy.

As it turned out, those tears that continued to flow through the night were wasted. As soon as we arrived in the playground it was obvious that I wasn't the only "mummy's boy" there. All of the other kids in the playground—except one—were anxiously clasping their mum's hand, or clinging to their dad's leg, or crying or wetting themselves with fear of being left.

Just one boy stood on his own, a defiant look on his face, which I later came to recognise as Felix's default setting. He reminded me of *The Cat in the Hat*, a character so out of control he both thrilled and petrified me in equal measures; the lanky awkwardness a façade covering a subversive nature that simmered quietly below.

His skin was golden brown, much darker than mine, which my mum had plastered in Factor 50 despite the cloudy summer we had just had. His demeanour was so arrogant, so teenage, if it wasn't for his size and the fact he wasn't wearing the regulation uniform for kids at "big school," he could easily have been mistaken for a much older sibling.

Intense eyes fixed on mine across the playground, and sensing danger I turned my lunch box around, holding it close to my thigh to ensure that the Princess Jasmine on the front wasn't visible. I may have been a mummy's boy but at least I had acquired some small sense of self-preservation.

Although he looked to be unaccompanied, when the teacher opened the door and welcomed us in, a thin woman walked over to him. Her face was pinched with a slight weaselly look. She too had olive skin, and the resemblance between the two of them was astonishing. There was no doubt to me that she was his mother, until she merely passed a book bag and a blue lunch box—in a colour that matched mine—to him and walked away. I looked at the other parents in the playground, all kissing tearful good-byes to their children. My own mum appeared to have her hand surgically attached to mine. Mothers didn't just walk away, not without a smile or a kiss or some tender words. The weasel-faced lady couldn't possibly be that boy's mum.

After receiving several tear-stained kisses on the top of my head, I

reluctantly made my way into nursery, book bag clutched in one hand, the other hand still holding the lunch box as close to my body as possible.

“Lunch boxes need to go on the trolley, children.”

My heart raced. I was standing right by *him*. My coat peg was next to *his*. Even if my plan to keep the lunch box turned round in the playground had worked, there was no disguising it when I popped it onto the trolley.

I was right.

“Princess Jasmine!” The boy pointed at the lunch box clasped in my clammy hand.

I instinctively stepped back while bracing myself for a punch or kick or any other suitable punishment *that* sort of boy might feel appropriate for *this* sort of boy.

He smirked and picked up the lunch box on the floor in front of him. “Me too.”

My senses reeled. *That* boy from the playground, the defiant, teenage, arrogant one with the weaselly face had the same “girl’s” lunch box as me. “Oh!” was the only sound my voice could form. I took a deep breath. “Do you like Disney Princesses too?”

He shrugged. “No.”

My little brow furrowed. “So why did you get a Princess Jasmine lunch box?”

He shrugged again. “Because Cinderella’s a frigid bitch?”

He plonked his lunch box onto the trolley and grabbed my hand. “I’m Felix,” he said. “We’re going to be best friends forever.”

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During that first week, Felix established his rightful position as “official best friend” to Ben Hunter. If anyone dared to sit next to me on the carpet he would tell them matter-of-factly, “Ben’s *my* friend. Move!” following up his instructions with a swift kick to the offender’s shins. I didn’t mind. Nursery was a scary place and having an official best friend like Felix offered me protection.

“Right, Ladybird class,” Mrs. Peters said. “It’s time to choose classroom monitors. I’m looking for children sitting nicely on the carpet, to do some special jobs. Ah, Ben...” She looked straight at me. “You’re sitting beautifully. Would you like to be our special Home Corner tidier?”

I nodded enthusiastically. I loved helping my mum out at home; so tidying away the knives and forks in the Home Corner, and ensuring that the plastic piece of toast remained in the purple toaster would be fun. Mrs. Peters ticked her sheet of paper. “And cloakroom monitors? That’s a very important job. Who would like to be a cloakroom monitor?”

Twenty-seven little hands went straight up, accompanied by the strange mewling sounds of children desperate to be given a responsibility. Only two children didn’t raise their hands: Felix and me. I already had a job, but I suspected Felix refrained from volunteering because he didn’t have much interest in hanging coats on pegs. In the week I had known him, Felix didn’t seem to have much interest in anything that didn’t involve intimidating other children.

Eventually, Mrs. Peters looked down her tick list and sighed. “There’s only one special job left, so Felix—” she fixed her eyes on him, waiting for him to sit up from the prone position he had lolled back into, “I would like you to do that job. You can look after our class snail, Bob.”

Felix immediately sat straight up, and crossed his legs as we had all been urged to do. He had a beaming smile on his face, which turned to a nonchalant pout when he realised that everyone in the class was looking at him.

“Do you think you could be a good snail monitor, Felix?” Mrs. Peters asked.

Felix shrugged. “S’pose.”

As it turned out, Felix was much more than just a good snail monitor. Every day he remembered to change the water in the bottle, and he would carefully spray Bob’s shell, to keep him clean and fresh. Each morning, Felix wandered down to the school kitchen to collect salad scraps which he spent a good deal of time lovingly arranging in Bob’s plastic tank. And occasionally as I was busy fluffing up the multicoloured beanbags in the Home Corner I

would look over to see Felix cradling Bob's shelled body in his little hands, holding him close to his face, whispering to him. It was the only time of the day I ever saw Felix smile.

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Felix carefully surveyed my room through narrowed eyes; a detective checking for evidence at a crime scene. He made his assessment. "Your room's really messy."

I shrugged, looking round at the crumpled duvet, the piles of toys and games stuffed haphazardly under the bed, and the socks and pants strewn merrily around the room. D.I. Felix was a fine detective. "Yeah, I guess."

He reached for a chocolate Hobnob from the plate my mum had given us and stuffed it into his mouth. D.I. Felix paused to enjoy his biscuity treat before giving his next assessment about my life. "Your mum's really fat."

This startled me. He was right. My mum was certainly on the tubby side; it couldn't be denied. But that didn't change the fact that it was pretty damn rude of him to just come out and say it. I shouldn't have been surprised really. Felix always said whatever he thought. I suspected that was why I was the only person who wanted to be friends with him at nursery. It was the reason I had stopped pestering my mum to invite him round. If he said one of those rude things to her, she might not want us to be friends any more. As it turned out I didn't invite him anyway. He just told me that morning, "I'm coming round your house tonight." When I nodded, he added, "For tea."

I wanted to tell him it wasn't kind to say the things he said, but if I did he might not like me anymore. I couldn't risk losing the boy who held my hand as we sat on the carpet at nursery; the boy who had been sent to the Head Teacher for punching Billy Smith after Billy had taken a disliking to the fact I could read; and most importantly, the boy who had promised to be my best friend forever.

I knew there was something under that hard scrappy exterior. I had seen him tenderly and carefully stroking Bob's shell when he thought nobody was looking. I had seen the corners of his mouth twitch into a half-smile that almost immediately changed into a defiant frown when Mrs. Peters chose him to collect in the books at the end of the lesson. There was something more than

the strong, couldn't-care-less little boy Felix wanted everyone to see. Something soft and kind. Something that was just Felix.

Faced with divided loyalties between two people I truly cared about, I compromised. "It's rude to say fat. She's just cuddly is all," I told him.

He nodded. "I guess," he said and let out a huge sigh. "I wish my mum was fat." He carried on. "Your mum calls you Beanie," he told me, as if I didn't know that already. "Why does she call you Beanie? Your name's Ben."

"I suppose she just likes it."

"Do you like it?" he asked me.

I thought about it. "Yeah," I told him. "I really like it. Beanie sounds nice doesn't it? Happy. Doesn't your mum call you anything?"

He shrugged. "Felix," he said. "Just Felix."

Neither of us said anything for a few moments, until finally Felix spoke. "I want to call you Beanie," he said.

"Well, I guess you can if you want."

His serious face lit up, his features lifting into a bright smile. "Okay. What shall we do now?"

He wandered over to the bed and started pulling things out from under it. He grabbed the box for Twister. "I want to play this."

"Okay," I said. I loved playing Twister with Mum, and I had a feeling it would be even more fun with Felix.

He shook out the plastic mat. "How do you play?"

I stared at him. "You've never played Twister before? It's awesome."

"Nope." He placed his feet wide apart—one foot on a red circle, one on green—then sprung forwards trying to reach the matching colours at the end of the mat. The force of his jump caused the mat to slip under his feet and he tumbled over, landing face first with a thud on the carpet. He shook his head, and peered at me through his messed up hair. His face broke into a massive grin. "Yeah, it *is* awesome!"

The sound of chatter in the classroom didn't cover the piercing howl from Bob's corner. Twenty-eight children turned in unison to see Felix hurl something into Bob's tank and then race out of the room.

"Carry on with what you're doing, children. I won't be a moment," Mrs. Peters told us calmly before following after him.

I had lost my usual enthusiasm for plumping beanbags, and instead stood in the Home Corner, listening carefully to the murmuring tone of Mrs. Peters from the corridor. She kept her voice calm and quiet and I couldn't catch anything of what she was saying.

The quiet murmurs were suddenly punctuated by a sharp, "Fuck! Off!" from Felix and then a red-faced Mrs. Peters came back in and made her way over to the Home Corner.

"Ben?" she said. "Could you do a special job for me?"

I nodded, dropping my beanbag.

"I'd like you to speak to Felix. He's very angry about something and he won't talk to me. He only wants to talk to you. Would that be okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I told her. I would spend every living moment with Felix if I could, and the fact that he wanted only *me* made my chest swell with pride. I went out of the classroom to find him huddled under a small table in the corridor.

"Felix?"

He had his head buried in his knees, which were pulled tight to his chest. His whole body was shaking.

"Felix. Why are you crying?" I asked.

He lifted his head to look at me. He wiped the back of his arm across his teary face, leaving a streak of snot on the sleeve of his jumper. "I'm not crying."

"Well, why are you sad then? What did you throw in Bob's tank?"

His shoulders shuddered. "Bob."

"You threw Bob?"

“He’s turned to goo.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t kill him,” Felix told me. “They’re all going to say it was my fault. But it wasn’t. I looked after him.”

“I know you did,” I told him. “You talked to him.”

He peeked at me through red eyes. “I talked to him and he talked to me. He was my friend, and he just turned to goo. Now I haven’t got a friend.”

I sat down next to him. “I’m your friend, Felix,” I said. I put an arm around his shoulder. “I’m your best friend forever.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Promise you’ll be my best friend forever.”

“I promise.”

“You won’t leave me will you, Beanie?”

I figured he could feel the shake of my head.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Beanie?”

“Yeah?”

“You won’t turn to goo will you?”

I grinned. “No.”

“Not ever?”

“Not ever.”

“Promise?”

I tightened my arms around him. “I promise.”

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In all the years I knew him, I never went round to Felix’s house. He never invited me, and I never asked. I knew that Felix’s home life was nothing like

mine, and I didn't want to know about the ways it was different. Instead, I pretended his life outside of our friendship didn't exist, and if truth be told I think he pretended that too.

"I'm bored; let's do something." Felix wandered over to my bed and started pulling things out from under it. My breath caught in my throat as his fingers reached the soft chiffon material of my harem outfit. If only I kept my room tidier, I might have stashed it away somewhere it couldn't be found. "What's this?" He stood up and held the trousers against him. The hem only reached his knees.

"It's um..." My face reddened. I tried desperately to think of a good excuse for having a flouncy pair of harem pants under my bed, but found that I didn't have many to choose from.

He snorted. "Oh my God, it's a Princess Jasmine outfit! That is sooo gay!"

The remark stung, and I made a quick retort. "You had a Princess Jasmine lunch box."

Felix shrugged. "Yeah, but that was years ago. And anyway, I didn't choose it."

"Who did then?"

"My dad. Said it suited a dirty little ponce like me."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm a dirty ponce. My mum's a frigid bitch."

My attitude softened a little. I didn't even know what a "ponce" was and Mum had never explained the meaning of "frigid bitch" to me, but neither of them sounded very nice. "I don't ever dress up in it any more. It's just something I liked when I was little. See, it's much too small for me."

"Uh huh."

When I looked at Felix, he was chewing his bottom lip while he stared at the harem pants. He blew out a decisive breath and then stepped into the leg holes, stooping to pull the pants up his legs. The outfit was tiny on his eight-year-old frame. "Is there a top?" he asked. "I want to wear the top too."

"Oh. Um... well yeah, I think," I said, as if I didn't know. "I think it's under the bed too."

He'd already found it and had his arms lifted up high as he squeezed into it. His school jumper bulged out from the bottom of the cropped top. He spun round. "What do you think?"

I wasn't sure what he wanted to hear, but I tried my best. "You look just like Princess Jasmine?"

"Good," he said. "You're Aladdin." He pulled a T-shirt out of my top drawer and hurriedly wrapped it around my head to make a haphazard turban. When he stepped back to check his handiwork, he laughed. His eyes danced with mischief. This was the Felix nobody else saw. I had never felt so privileged.

"We need a magic carpet," I told him.

"Yeah." He was about to pull my duvet onto the floor when he caught sight of something under my bed. "There!" He said. He opened the box for Twister and shook out the plastic mat. "*This* is our magic carpet."

It felt like time stood still as we played. Princess Jasmine and Aladdin. Felix and Beanie, in our own kingdom. The beautiful look of joy on Felix's face suddenly gave me a crazy idea. I prayed for the wind to change. I wanted that beaming smile to stay there. So when to my surprise it did, I was so happy, I affectionately wrapped my arms around him, and pressed a soft kiss against his cheek.

Maybe the Twister mat did have magical powers that afternoon, because instead of pushing me away as he usually did, Felix simply returned the hug and whispered in my ear, "I feel like I'm really flying, Beanie."

Sadly, the power of the magic carpet was short lived. After deciding that mere flying wasn't any way near exciting enough, Felix grabbed the Twister mat and made his way hurriedly to the landing. "Come on," he urged me.

Before I could stop him, he placed the mat at the top of the stairs and then launched himself off, expecting to glide gracefully down to the bottom. Instead he toppled forwards, bumping down with a thud for each of the seventeen steps.

My mum heard the noise from the lounge and came running out. "Oh my God, Felix, what were you thinking?" she cried.

“I’m okay,” Felix told her. “I’m fine.” He went to stand, the slight wince he gave totally out of proportion to the fact that his left arm hung down at a peculiar angle.

“You are *not* fine!” Mum reached for him to give him a cuddle just as she would have done with me, but he moved away. “Your arm’s broken. We need to take you to the hospital.”

Felix shrugged the best way he could with an arm broken in three places and reluctantly agreed to a trip to A&E. While we waited there, Mum left us together at the x-ray department so she could call his mum. Felix and I didn’t say a word to each other. I was scared to open my mouth in case the sobs that had collected in my throat slipped out. Instead we sat side by side on those hard plastic chairs, me in my school uniform, Felix in that ill-fitting harem outfit, and when my hand and his good hand touched, I curled my fingertips around his and gave them a gentle squeeze.

When Mum came back she looked angry but she turned to Felix and gave him the best smile she could. “Felix sweetie, Mum’s a bit busy.”

Felix bit his bottom lip, and then said, “And Dad, is he a bit busy too?”

The fake smile disappeared from Mum’s face. “I suppose so. It’s fine though; you can stay round ours tonight. I’ll make you something nice for tea. What’s your favourite?”

He looked at me.

“Spagbol?” I suggested and he nodded.

“Okay,” Mum said. “Spagbol it is!”

Even though we didn’t arrive home until late, Mum was true to her word. She cooked a beautiful spagbol for us which she followed up with a couple of syrup puddings hastily heated in the microwave. At night time, she put out the camp bed in my room, giving me the instruction that I was to sleep in it, while Felix could sleep in my much larger and more comfortable double bed.

Even though he had insisted he didn’t need them, he had been given strong painkillers at the hospital, and he drifted off to sleep almost immediately. I did too, exhausted by the distressing events of the day.

In the middle of the night, I woke to hear a muffled sound.

“Felix?” I whispered.

The noise stopped on a snuffle.

“Fee, are you okay?” I asked. “Do you want me to get my mum?”

His voice was quiet and scratchy in the dark room. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m just cold.”

I reached over, and touched his arm. His skin was freezing, dotted with goose pimples. I got up from my bed and slid under the covers next to him, curling myself around his trembling body as best I could without moving his plastered arm. We lay like that for a long while until finally his shivering subsided.

“Beanie?” he whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Sometimes it really hurts.”

I gently kissed his forehead. I knew he didn’t mean his arm.

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For years after, even in the height of summer, Felix would complain of being cold every time he slept round at my house. Ever since the night of the broken arm, he had claimed my double bed as his, but it never took long before I climbed in beside him to warm him up. For a long while it was simply fun to have Felix sharing my bed. I would whisper silly words to him in the night, my pathetic attempts getting ruder and ruder—and more ridiculous sounding—just trying to get him to crack a smile. Although Felix most certainly had a much filthier vocabulary than I did, most of the time it worked, and the mattress would vibrate with our giggles until eventually our snorts would die out and we would drift off to sleep, our stomachs aching from shaking so hard with laughter.

If I wasn’t successful in achieving my aim, I would resort to tickling him, poking my wriggling fingers into his armpits or against the susceptible spot I had found at the backs of his knees. He would squirm away, swatting at my hands and swearing at me, although I noticed that he never objected enough to escape and reach the easy refuge of the camp bed.

Although Felix never initiated physical contact, on occasion I would find that in the night—especially the genuinely cold ones—sometimes we would end up pressed together like spoons, my arms wrapped around him, holding him close to my body. His hands would clasp mine, as if urging me not to let him pull away.

As we got older, things changed and I couldn't work out if it was for the better or not. I started to notice things about Felix I had never taken much note of before—the way his body had filled out, his broad shoulders emphasising his still lanky but now more sinewy frame. Felix could never be described as muscular, but I still admired the strength in his body. Felix had a toughness about him that couldn't be achieved by weight training and protein shakes.

By this time, sleeping in the same bed as Felix was no longer silly and fun, it was both scary and at the same time breathtakingly thrilling. I loved to feel his body against mine, the rough dark hair on his legs prickling my skin. I always got hard. At first I tried to justify it to myself as just a natural response to another human being in my bed, teamed with the copious amounts of hormones zipping through my body. The undeniable thrill that ran through me when Felix snuggled back with a sigh, my boner jutting into his back soon put paid to that theory.

I would sometimes dare myself to move my hand to his crotch to see if—as I suspected—he was hard too, but I was never quite brave enough so instead I settled with nuzzling into his neck, dotting small kisses onto the warm skin there. I actually felt that was almost as daring.

It carried on until one petrifying occasion when we woke in the night, tangled together, both of us sticky and shaky, but neither of us able to find the words to acknowledge what had happened. I felt utterly compelled to crush my mouth to his, to feel his lips part and for us to have more than those silly little kisses, but instead we both rolled away, trying to calm our unsteady breaths. I lay awake until early morning, miserably holding my damp shorts away from my skin.

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Felix stretched out on my bed, and chucked his book down on the floor. It landed with a heavy thud. "I'm sick of studying," he told me. "I wanna do something else."

“Like what?” I asked. “Xbox?”

“Nah, it’s boring,” he told me. I wondered why he had never found it boring the thousands of times we had played on it before. “I wanna do something fun.”

He leant over and started to pull out the stuff from under the bed, dismissing things as quickly as he found them. It was like he was looking for something in particular. He grabbed the box for Twister. “Do you remember when we used to play this?” He turned to me and I couldn’t miss the wicked grin on his face.

“Uh huh.”

He laid the mat on the floor and looked at me expectantly. “Go on then.”

“You want to play Twister?”

“That’s why I got it out, duh!”

“Really?”

He spun the pointer. “You start. Right hand yellow.”

I could think of worse ways to spend an afternoon than tangled together with Felix, so I obediently bent down and placed my right hand on one of the yellow dots.

“Okay, me now.” He spun again. “Left foot blue.”

He carried on spinning the pointer, reading out directions for both of us. “Right foot green... right hand yellow... left hand green...” After about ten games we were both breathless with the exertion of changing position and keeping ourselves from falling down. Each game we played brought us closer together physically until at last I was so close to Felix I could smell the fragrance of shower gel on his lightly sweating skin. “Left hand yellow,” Felix announced, moving his body over me. I inhaled deeply but as quietly as I could, trying to get more of Felix, and predictably, my body reacted. I got hard, my trousers tightening around my groin.

“Left foot green.” An intense thrill ran through me as Felix’s lower body brushed mine. He was hard too. My arms trembled as I tried to keep going. I didn’t want this game to ever stop. He was crouching above me, while I

pushed my body into a crab shape, holding my position on shaking limbs. If only the pointer would land on “Right hand red,” it would push him to a place where he would be stretched out so far he wouldn’t be able to stop himself rubbing right against me. I repeated it over and over in my head like a prayer. *“Right hand red, right hand red, right hand red...”*

Felix spun the pointer.

*“Right hand red, right hand red... please, please, right hand red...”*

I cautiously flicked my eyes towards the pointer board, trying to get a glimpse of the result. Left foot green. My arms sagged under the weight of my disappointment.

“Right hand red,” Felix declared.

“Huh?”

He reached over me and stretched out his fingertips towards the furthest red dot, the tip of his erection rubbing mine again. The shock of that touch broke me. I collapsed back onto the mat, bringing an unsteady Felix down with me. I lay there dazed for a moment. The only thing I was conscious of was our laboured breathing and the way Felix’s weight pressed down on me. I opened my eyes to find him staring into them, his own eyes intensely dark, and his pupils wide. His tongue darted out and moistened his lips. They were beautiful, so inviting I couldn’t resist tilting my face upwards to kiss them.

He responded with a soft groan as he returned the kiss. At first it was sensual and sweet, just the slightest taste of the Coke we’d been drinking shared between us. He pressed forward, his body pinning me down as his tongue pushed into my mouth. I opened to him, our wet tongues sliding against each other.

He reached for my hands by my side, and threaded his fingers through mine. Every place our bodies touched sent electric tingles shooting through my body. He rolled his hips against me, all the while his mouth crushed to mine, our tongues licking and teasing each other.

“Ben!” Mum’s voice carried up the stairs.

We shared a stifled moan of frustration and then Felix broke away from me, his breathing ragged.

“Ben! Felix! Dinner,” Mum called again.

Felix went to stand. He was trembling. “Fuck!” he said.

I grabbed his hand and held it tight. “It’s okay,” I told him. “Later, yeah?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

That night we both hurriedly changed for bed, neither of us making any attempt to conceal our tented shorts. Instead of climbing into the camp bed to later transfer to the double, I simply got straight in next to him. My heart raced as I looked into dark eyes that stared back at me. He was daring me to carry things on. Or was he urging me to push things further, to reach their logical conclusion?

I longed to kiss him, to feel those soft lips again, but when I attempted to carry on where we had left off, he disappointed me, turning his head to the side. I gasped out a huff of exasperation, but my disappointment was short lived. Felix grabbed my hand and held it forcefully to his crotch. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me into a fierce hug. He whispered in my ear, “Please, Beanie.” I had never heard him say please before. I didn’t need to be asked twice.

He didn’t look at me again until it was all over—it was like he just shut off in some way. His eyes squeezed closed and although he bit down on his lower lip, it wasn’t enough to conceal the way his breaths quickened to raspy gasps as he bucked under my hands. I was delighted to see the blotchy flush that crept across his chest and up his neck, spreading rapidly like ink on paper, but then he let out a strangled groan and tried frantically to pull away from me. “Beanie, stop—” he choked, twisting away, but it was too late. His hips jolted and his whole body convulsed as he came. I didn’t let go, just carried on stroking him until he grabbed my wet hand and pushed it away from him.

When he finally opened his eyes and stared down at the mess on his chest, a harsh laugh burst out of him. “I guess my dad was right. I am a dirty little ponce,” he said.

I was hurt. I couldn’t believe that he had tried to deny us that perfect moment. It didn’t matter that his body hadn’t let him. His actions had cheapened what we had done together, as if it was something to be ashamed of.

He didn't realise that everything about it was beautiful. Everything about *Felix* was beautiful—it always had been, but he just didn't see it. I looked at his flushed face and the way the sweat on his neck had teased his hair into damp curls against the pillow. How could he see anything about himself as dirty or wrong?

He closed his eyes again, and I kissed each of his eyelids. "Don't ever talk like that," I told him. "That was amazing. *You're* amazing."

He shook his head.

"Look at me."

His eyes flickered open.

And then I told him what I'd known from the day I comforted him under the table in nursery. "I love you."

His lips turned up in a sad smile. "It's just me and you isn't it?"

I nodded because I knew exactly what he meant. At that moment the world only revolved around us. Felix and Beanie in our own magical kingdom.

"Beanie?"

"Yeah?"

"Promise you'll never leave me."

"I already promised you that," I told him. "Remember?"

"Promise me again," he said.

I laid my hand over his heart, not caring that my fingers rested in the cum on his chest. "I promise I'll never leave you."

And that time when I brushed my lips against his, he let me kiss him.

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After that night, I would often wonder if my mum realised why Felix and I rushed to get the chores done after dinner. If she did, she never said anything. As soon as the last spoonful of pudding had been eaten, Felix would stand up, and without saying a word would start scraping the plates and bowls, before obediently taking them into the kitchen to wash up. I always offered to dry and put away, not just because the task would be done sooner but also because I

loved to stand next to him at the sink, our arms brushing together lightly as we worked.

I tried to ensure what we did together wasn't tinged in shame like it had been for Felix that first time. I wanted him to know it was never just about getting off; that it was about me and him and how we felt about each other. Sometimes boys at school would brag about what they did with their girlfriends. It was all "wanking off" and "blow jobs" and "fucking". I felt sorry for them. When they talked like that, I would try to catch Felix's eye. I wanted to reassure him, to give him a look that told him that what they boasted about was nothing, *nothing* to what we had together.

If it could be called that, our foreplay would last all day, little looks and touches that told Felix I loved him, that it was just me and him forever and that I'd never break the promise I made to him that day under the table.

The times we were lucky enough for my mum to leave us on our own while we ate, I also made new silent promises to him under the dinner table, running my socked foot up and down his. Sometimes I was particularly daring, rubbing up his calves, and then between his thighs until his sharp intake of breath indicated that I had reached my target. Very deliberately he would put down his fork, and flick his eyes up to meet mine, a strong blush across his nose and cheeks. He would smile at me, that secret smile only I knew, and I would grin back, knowing that when he changed for bed that night, his boxers would show up damp at the front, because of me.

I learnt easily how to use my hands—and later my mouth—deftly to have Felix shaking with need, bent almost double as he chased that moment where his whole world was absorbed into a pulsing chasm of mind-blowing sensation. I was honoured that he trusted me enough to let me share that most vulnerable moment with him. He was so exposed; the only time when nothing was hidden behind bravado or angry words or defiant frowns. He was just Felix, nothing more, and I loved him for it.

I was delighted to find that he was just as enthusiastic about exploring my body as I was his. I loved to see the wide-eyed look of pride on his face as I responded to his first tentative touches. He seemed astonished to find that he could affect anyone in such a way. The feeling of closeness it brought was

almost unbearable; an intense rush of pure love pulsing through me. And the first time I tasted my own semen on his lips as I kissed him, my heart pounded so hard, I felt like it might burst.

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When I had a visit day at my university campus I asked Felix to come with me. I wanted him to know that even if our lives took different paths, it wouldn't change anything between us. He would still be as big a part of my life as he always had been.

“So, what do you think?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Looks good.”

“Just good?”

We wandered across the lawn area towards the vast library building, the sun glinting on its windows. He shrugged again. “Nah, it's cool.”

“It's frikkin' amazing more like,” I told him. “Just think about it. It's only down the road, I'll have my own room, and you can stay over every weekend, no one around to care what we're doing.”

“It's a bit further than just down the road,” he told me.

“What, forty minutes on the train? That's nothing.”

I got the sense that it wasn't nothing to Felix, but I was so caught up in my excitement I didn't ask him why.

“Best of all, no one cares here. About us. It's not like school.”

“You reckon?”

“Look.” We stopped walking and I grabbed his hand, threading our fingers together.

“What you doing?” He tried to pull away, but I held on tight. Two young girls walked past us, chatting, paying no attention to our joined hands.

“See?”

“Maybe,” he said. “I dunno.” His shoulders sloped in a nonchalant slouch, but then his face broke into a grin. “Do you think anyone would notice me going down on you, right here?”

I sniggered. “In the middle of the campus? That might be pushing it a bit.”

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

We changed direction and headed towards a wooded area on the outskirts of the campus. Finding a gap in the fencing, we made our way through the maze of trees. Dappled sunlight shone through them, casting a peaceful glow over the fallen leaves on the ground. There was no sound other than the occasional chirp of birds. The whole place had that feel of summer stillness, as if the world had settled on that beautiful day and had simply stopped turning.

We sat on the ground, our backs against a large tree stump and kissed. I knew I’d never get tired of the feel of Felix’s lips on mine. I loved everything about it; how his mouth felt so soft even though he always had that hard look about him; the easy slide of his tongue in my mouth as it licked, caressed and probed in a way that made me breathless; the minute sounds in his throat that vibrated through me; the knowledge that even without me meaning to those same sounds escaped my throat too.

We rolled onto the ground, and he pressed against me, the weight of his erection prodding my belly. His breath felt hot and damp on my ear as he murmured, “How about here for me going down on you?”

I bit down on my lip and whimpered approval, although he was already sliding down my body, his warm hands brushing the skin under my T-shirt. As his fingers fumbled with the fly of my jeans, I dropped my head back onto the bed of leaves and twigs, and stared at the canopy of trees above us. The branches overhead formed a secret den for us where only Felix, me, and the glorious sliding of his hands and mouth existed. Even though Felix was unusually gentle in his ministrations, I came quickly and powerfully, pushing my cock hard into the back of his throat.

He had unbuckled his own jeans as he worked on me, and he rose to a kneeling position, his briefs hooked under his tightened balls. I pulled myself up to sit, wet and breathless from my own climax, and guided his rigid cock between my lips. He must have already been nearly there, because just the warmth of my mouth was enough to trigger him. His hips immediately jerked forwards and he came hard and unrelentingly, the tangy taste flooding my throat. He threaded his fingers through my hair, lightly holding my head as he

shuddered through his aftershocks until he was completely spent. Eventually, he slid his cock from my mouth. “Jesus Christ,” he panted. “I think my brain just exploded.”

“Yeah.” I smiled dreamily.

We tucked ourselves back into our jeans, and he crawled over me, planting a weary kiss against my ear before settling his head on my chest. We lay like that for a long while, our breaths gradually becoming more even.

“Beanie?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want you to go. I don’t want you to leave me.”

I stroked gently at his hair. “I’m not leaving you,” I told him. “That’s why I chose this place. I won’t be far away. We’ll be able to talk to each other all the time anyway.” I nudged him on the shoulder. “And there’s always web-cam fun.”

“S’pose.” He paused before he carried on. “But, I don’t want it to change. I want it to be like this forever. Just you and me. Nothing else.”

“Fee, life’s not like that.” I immediately felt stupid and angry with myself for having the cheek to tell Felix what life was like, when he knew much more about it than I did.

“You’ll find new people. New friends.”

“Well, yeah, I hope so, but that doesn’t change anything about us. You’ll make friends in your new job too.”

“I don’t want to,” he said. “I don’t need anybody else.”

I leant forward and kissed his forehead. “Fee, promise me something?”

“What?”

“If things at home... if things at home get... I don’t know... if they get difficult, then promise me you’ll come here. Or if you can’t get here, then go to mine. You know how much my mum cares about you.” I winced after I said it. Someone else’s mum cared more about him than his own did. I’d never spoken to him before like that, but I needed to throw him a lifeline. Moving

away didn't mean I was taking away his only place of safety.

His hands balled into fists, and I was scared I'd done the wrong thing, to question the quality of the life he shared with his family. "Sorry," I told him. "I just wanted you to know that I'm here. And my mum. We'll always be here for you."

"It's okay," he said. "I'm gonna get out soon anyway. I've been looking at places to rent."

"Hey," I jiggled my legs under him. "That's great. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I dunno. I guess I wanted to get something sorted first. I can't afford much, but I'll get something."

"Cool, so we'll have even more places where we can be alone together."

"Yeah." He smiled up at me. "Do you remember our first kiss?"

"Of course I do. On the Twister mat."

"Yeah."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "*And* I remember what happened after."

"I broke my bloody arm."

I couldn't help laughing. "Not that time, you didn't. We did something much more fun than that."

He stared at me, his eyes wide with confusion. "The day we had our first kiss on the Twister mat was the day I broke my arm."

"When you broke your arm we were like eight years old!"

"Uh huh. And you kissed me."

It had never occurred to me that he would count a silly little peck like that as our first kiss. It was just a simple gesture of affection, but maybe it was significant to him because it was the first he had ever had.

Gradually, his breathing became slower, and I stroked my hand lightly up and down his back as he slept, only waking him when the shards of sunlight no longer warmed us through the trees.

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“I got it!” he told me. There was no missing the excitement in his voice.

“Hey, that’s great, when you moving in?”

“I’m here. I’m here right now.”

“Jesus Christ, you don’t hang around, do you?”

“Nah, well, I didn’t have that much stuff to bring, and they called me and said I could have it and I already had the deposit sorted and everything so…” The words came tumbling out. I had never heard him so animated. Just imagining the grin on his face made mine break into a matching one.

“What’s it like?”

“It’s cool. I mean, it’s only one room, and it’s a really old place, and you know, it’s gonna be fucking freezing in winter but I don’t give a shit. It’s mine.”

“That’s brilliant. I’m so proud of you. What are the other people like? They okay?”

“I dunno,” he said. “They seem okay. I mean as long as they’re not serial killers or anything, and even if they are, I don’t care. You’ll have to check them out, see what you reckon. When you coming round?”

I looked over at my desk at the house-warming gift I had bought for him. I couldn’t wait to give it to him, but I had shedloads of work to do. “Well, I should be able to get round Saturday.”

“Saturday?” His voice cracked around the word. I hated disappointing him like that.

“I wish I could come sooner but I just can’t. I’ve got so much work to do. I’ve got like three essays due in next week.”

“I really wanted you to come round. I want you to see my place.”

“I wanna see your place too. But it’s only a few days.”

Stupidly I tried to placate him. “Hey, I got you a present.”

“Oh, okay.” He didn’t seem to care. “I wish you could come round now, Bea. I want you to see it. I don’t want to be on my own.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know,” he said. “I just... it’s okay... You’ll stay round Saturday though, won’t you?”

“Just try and stop me.”

His voice brightened a little. “Cool. And you’ll come round first thing, yeah?”

“Relax,” I said. “I’ll even get up early for you.”

“How early?”

“Really fucking early, okay?” I laughed and I was glad to hear him laugh too.

“I love you, Fee.”

“Okay,” he said. There was a really long pause. “Bea?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you too.”

As soon as our call ended I packed a bag. Those words changed everything. Felix had never said them to me before, and if he had the courage to do something so difficult for him, then I could take a few days out from my work to go and see him. I could catch up on my essays after the weekend. They could wait; Felix couldn’t. I chucked some clothes into my holdall, and grabbed his house-warming gift. I wanted to wrap it up, to make it look special, but I figured I could drop in at Mum’s and get some wrapping paper there. There was something I needed to collect from home anyway. Mum might be disappointed that I wasn’t staying with her for long but I knew she’d understand. She loved Felix too.

As it was, she insisted on giving me a lift round to his new address, a large tatty-looking Victorian house, with peeling paintwork and grubby curtains at the windows.

A hairy, barefooted guy answered the door. His scruffy, unkempt appearance made it difficult to guess his age. I placed him at around thirty, but he could have been ten years either side of that. He smiled at me through his thick beard. “Hi.”

“Oh hi, I’m here to see Felix?”

“Oh right, yeah, the new guy. Yeah, his room’s just up the stairs.” He peered at me. “You must be the boyfriend then?”

A blush fired up my neck. I couldn’t believe Felix had mentioned he had a boyfriend.

“Beanie, yeah?” the guy said.

I nodded. “Well, Ben...” I told him. “Most people call me Ben.”

He opened the door wide and stepped back to let me in. “Welcome Ben,” he said in just about the most laid-back tone imaginable. “Up the stairs, first right.”

I hefted the box I was carrying under one arm and waved goodbye to my mum.

The whole place smelt of damp, but oddly it was quite comforting. A bit like an old holiday cottage that had been closed up for the winter and needed a good airing to kick some life back into it. I made my way up the threadbare carpet to the top of the stairs and knocked on the door there.

“Yeah?” came the yelled reply.

“It’s me.”

There was a shuffling noise, and the door was flung open. “Bea! What the fuck?”

I nearly dropped the box I was carrying as he lunged for me, crushing a hot kiss to my lips while pulling me into the room and slamming the door behind us.

“What the fuck?” he repeated. “I thought you weren’t coming till Saturday.”

I grinned at him. “I wanted to see you. I needed to see you. It couldn’t wait.”

“Oh my God!” He landed another peck on my lips, and then stood back to stare at me as if he wasn’t sure I was really there. Eventually, he seemed to accept it, and he gestured around the room. “Sooo, what do you think?”

The room was as much in need of some TLC as the rest of the house, but it didn’t matter. The beaming smile that lit up Felix’s face was all I needed to know about what the place meant to him.

“It’s great. Really. It’s awesome.”

“Yeah. Shit, it’s all mine.” He looked from the box I was carrying to the holdall slung over my shoulder. “You’re staying the night, aren’t you?”

“I thought I’d stay a few days, go back Sunday. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I just can’t fucking believe it. I can’t fucking believe you’re here.”

My arm ached from the awkward weight of the box under my arm. “Here,” I told him. “I got you a present. A little house-warming gift.”

He took it from me and held it up, trying to see through the thin paper. “Can I shake it?”

“No! No way. Put it down somewhere safe before you open it.”

“Oh, is it breakable?”

“Kind of,” I told him. “Just open it and see.”

He put it down carefully on a small table, and slid his fingers under the sticky tape, before folding back the wrapping paper. His mouth gaped open.

“Do you like it?”

When he turned to me, his eyes were bright with tears. “Bea, I love it.” His voice sounded funny.

“I thought he could be here for you. A friend. You know, when I can’t be here in person.”

He lifted off the plastic lid and gently reached into the container. He cradled the snail in his hands and lifted it to his face just as he had done all those years ago. “What we gonna call you, mate?” he whispered.

“You could call him Bob?” I suggested, but Felix shook his head.

“Nah, too many memories. Don’t worry little mate, we’ll think of something good.” He placed the snail back onto the piece of lettuce in the tank. He tenderly stroked its shell before replacing the lid, and then he washed his hands and shook them off at the sink without looking at me. When he rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans, I noticed they were trembling. He swallowed down a gulp, then turned to look at me, his dark eyes wet and shiny. He looked so fragile, like he might just crumple and disintegrate into

nothing. “Thank you,” he said, and then he leant in and kissed me. He barely moved, the kiss was just a whisper of breath on my lips but it broke me. I closed the distance between us, holding him so tightly to me I could feel the soft thud of his heart against mine.

Eventually, I pulled away. “Come on,” I said. “I’ve got something else for you.” I unzipped my holdall and gave him the box I’d collected from Mum’s house.

He laughed, shaking his head. “I can’t frikkin’ believe you brought Twister round.”

I arranged my features into an indignant frown. “It’s not Twister.”

“Kind of looks like Twister to me.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“Shit, there’s not another snail in there is there?”

I snorted. “Well, why don’t you open it and find out?”

“All right, I will!” He pulled the lid off the box. “It *is* Twister, you liar!”

“Uh uh.” I shook the plastic mat onto the floor. I meant, it’s not *just* Twister. It’s something else. “*This*, my friend...” I swept my arm across in a dramatic gesture, “*this* is a magic carpet. *Our* magic carpet.” I sat down on the mat, and reached my hand out to his. “Come for a ride, Aladdin.”

He slid down next to me, a beaming smile on his face. “Can I ask you a favour?” he asked.

“Anything you wish, my prince.”

“Can you be Aladdin too? I kind of always fancied him more than Jasmine.”

“As you wish.”

He nudged me gently in the stomach. “Can you do me another favour?”

“Uh huh.”

“Can you wear a turban? It’d really turn me on.”

I laughed. “Of course. We should both wear a turban.”

“What I meant was...” He cupped his mouth with the pretence of whispering his next words. “*Just* a turban.”

“So did I.” I grabbed the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it over my head, dropping it onto the floor. We both quickly stripped down to our underwear. I couldn’t take my eyes off him he was so beautiful. Sure he was skinny, probably a bit too skinny for his own good, but he still had that strength to him, a strength only achieved from a few knock backs in life. My eyes wandered over his olive skin, from the jut of his collarbone to his ribs to his stomach. The thin line of hair at his belly button thickened as it trailed downwards. The dark hair there peeked out from the waistband of his briefs, held away from his skin by a powerful erection. He ran his hand over the damp material at the front of his briefs, and took a deep breath.

“You okay?” I asked, and he nodded, staring at me with wide eyes.

“Where’s your turban?”

I reached for the T-shirt I had discarded on the floor, but he grabbed my hand. “Nope.” He hooked his fingers into the sides of his briefs and wriggled them carefully past his engorged dick, down his thighs and eventually off his feet. There was a glint of mischief in his eyes as he arranged them on my head. One side flopped over my right eye and we both giggled.

I shucked off my boxers too and did the same for him. I leant back to admire my creative vision. “Very nice. You look very Aladdiny.”

We kissed then. Slow, sensual kisses, kneeling up, chest to chest, our dicks pressing against each other’s bellies. Eventually, Felix broke his mouth away from mine to spit on his hand before enclosing it around our cocks, stroking slowly, sending shivers running through my body that had nothing to do with the cold air in the room on my naked flesh.

When he let go of his own cock, it pinged back against his stomach, and then he concentrated on just mine, sensuously sliding my foreskin up and down over the swollen head. His rhythm increased in speed, leading me close to bursting, but when he rubbed gently at the sensitive spot under the glans that he knew drove me wild, I steadied his hand. “Fee, stop,” I choked out.

He did as I asked, and pressed a soft, wet kiss to my ear. “Turn around,” he said.

I knew what he wanted and I turned away, squatting in front of him on the Twister mat.

He swiped both our “turbans” from our heads and threw them down where they lay twisted on the floor. Gently, he dotted warm kisses on the back of my neck. “You used to do this to me,” he murmured. “Do you remember?”

Of course I remembered. I could never forget those kisses I had dared to nuzzle into his flesh as we lay there, two boys entwined in bed together.

I felt the brush of his cock between my arse cheeks and I leant forward, wanting more. We sometimes did this. He would slick us both with lube and then rub the fat head of his cock against my hole, sending sparks of desire pulsing through my body. I did the same to him too. We knew that neither of us was quite ready for *that* final stage yet, but to get so close was still mind-blowing. The trust involved in being there pressed against him, fighting the aching need to push in and make us as close as we could possibly be, deepened the bond between us. But this time we both needed more.

“I want us to—”

“I know,” I said. “Me too.”

“Bea?” He leaned in, one hand on my shoulder, and brushed a sloppy kiss to my lips. “I want to... can we... um?”

I twisted my head to look at him and was surprised to see such a strong blush across his nose and cheeks. It startled me that he could be bashful about anything while his cock was wedged against my arse. I frowned. “What, what is it?”

His shoulders shrugged upwards. “Can we do it so... so you’re... you know... in me?”

My cock twitched, and a quiet moan escaped my lips. There was nothing I wanted more.

“Jeez, you don’t have to be embarrassed of asking for that. I mean, I want it too.” I reached a hand round to gently stroke his hair. “We’ve got all the time in the world. We can try whatever we want, however we want.”

“Okay. I just... I don’t know. I felt a bit funny asking for it.”

“It’s only me, Fee.” I enclosed my fingers around his, squeezing them tight, trying to reassure him that anything between us was all right. “Have you got some lube?” I asked.

He patted my shoulder lightly and rose to his feet to rummage in the wash bag by the sink. The tube he threw over rolled onto the Twister mat in front of me. I uncapped it and squeezed a large amount of the slick liquid into the palm of my hand and used it to coat my dick.

“Fee?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you think we should do this?” I asked him, and he shrugged before kneeling down on the mat.

He twisted to see me over his shoulder. “Like this?”

“Okay.” His flesh was covered in goose pimples and he was shivering a little. Just like all those other times, I wanted to warm him, to comfort him, so I stroked my hands slowly up and down his bony spine. Eventually, my fingers stopped just at that tantalising crease of his arse. I didn’t know why I felt so nervous, we often touched each other like this.

I knew how crazy it made him when I was sucking him and I pushed my fingers into his hole, angling them forwards at just the right moment. His whole body would jerk uncontrollably, his hand clamped over his mouth to muffle the loud sounds he made as his orgasm ripped through him. But this time was different. I was scared of hurting him. I consoled myself that if Felix could break an arm in three places without uttering so much as a whimper, I probably wasn’t so hugely endowed I could do *that* much damage.

I squeezed some more lube onto my fingers and then slipped them into his crease, caressing gently around his hole with a soft circular motion.

He let out a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh, and reached behind him to pull his cheeks apart, exposing his tight opening fully to me. I pushed in lightly, feeling the grasp of his ring on my finger. “Jeez, that feels good,” he moaned. “Give me more.”

I added another finger, sliding them backwards and forwards, feeling the muscles in his body yield slightly as I did so. Every so often, the pads of my

fingers caught a place that made him thrust forward on a grunt, pushing the head of his dick hard through the circle he made with his fist.

“Oh God, you’d better stop doing that before I…” I pressed again, and he let out another unrestrained grunt. He wriggled back, squirming about on my fingers. “Fuck, I mean it Bea. Stick your cock in me. I wanna feel it.”

I withdrew my fingers and clasped my swollen dick, rubbing the glans hard against his opened hole. The pressure was intense as I tried to nudge in. At first I thought the muscles there wouldn’t give. I backed off a little and then tried again, and finally, his body softened enough to allow just the head of my cock to slide in.

I looked down at where we were joined. Just the tip of my penis was inside him, his entrance stretched around it. His thighs were shuddering, sending vibrations through my body. “Oh my God, that looks fucking amazing.”

His shoulders bunched up.

“Shit, are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he said immediately, although it sounded like the words came through clenched teeth. He moved one of his hands to his groin and I could see from the way his arm flexed, he was slowly stroking himself.

I ran my hands gently over his buttocks, trying to soothe him. “What do you want me to do?” I asked. “I’m not really in yet.”

“Just do it,” he urged. “Please.”

I moved forwards again, pushing gradually into his tight heat, until my pubes were right up against his backside.

For a second I thought I was going to come before we’d even really got started. Being surrounded by him, being inside him, was enough to make my aching balls tighten and my hips buck. I pulled back a little trying to take the edge off. Gripping the base of my cock, I took in deep breaths through my mouth.

“What?” he asked, turning his head to look at me over his shoulder. “What happened there?”

I took a few more panting breaths, in the hope of calming the frantic

heartbeat pounding in my chest. A nervous giggle burst out of me. “Fuck Fee, I nearly came, just like that.”

“Why didn’t you?” he asked. “I want you to come. I want you to come inside me.”

“Yeah, I do too, but it would be nice to last longer than two seconds.”

“Well, that might be twice as long as I manage,” he laughed. “My dick is so fucking rock hard I think it’s going to explode. Seriously, it’s never felt like this before.”

As I pushed slowly back into him he reached for my hand and led it to his crotch, enclosing both our hands around his dick. “See?”

He was right. It was like granite under the warm, smooth skin. I gripped his shaft and eased his foreskin up and then back down again. Precum coated my fingers. He was steadily leaking it, a thin thread trailing down and pooling onto the Twister mat below.

I started an even rhythm, keeping my thrusts as gentle and shallow as I could manage, but it took very little before the need to come rolled over me again. I dropped my chest down to cover his clammy back, desperately needing the skin contact it gave us. I rolled my hips a few times but I couldn’t cope with any more. I wrapped my arms around him and forced myself as deep inside as possible. My whole world stilled as the tsunami overtook me, rushing through my body and spilling into him in wave after wave of pleasure.

I clung on for a long while after, my mouth pressed to the back of his neck, the ragged breaths that escaped it eventually turning into lazy kisses. Finally, I found the strength to lift myself up on my arms. I pulled out of him and gazed in awe at the thin trickle of cum that slipped out and glistened on his inner thigh. “Jesus Christ, that was the most intense experience of my whole life,” I said, finding to my embarrassment that my throat was choked with tears. I gently patted one of his buttocks. “You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you come?” I asked.

He turned over and lay back on the mat, a smile on his face so wicked he

looked like he had come ten times over, but his long dick stuck out from his body, still fully erect.

I reached a hand down and cupped his tightened sac, then ducked down, angling his cock between my lips. I shifted my fingers behind his balls, and pressed lightly against his wet hole, before sliding a finger in. He let out a groan, and then his hips jolted forwards, flooding my throat with the sweet taste of his spunk.

I crawled up his body to kiss him. “Was that all right?” I asked.

“It was amazing.” He squeezed me really tight.

“I love you, Fee.” I said. “I’ve always loved you.”

He reached over to the bed beside us and pulled the duvet from it. He arranged it over us, and snuggled in next to me. “I love you too.”

My eyelids became heavy, but I tried to fight the almost unbearable urge to sleep. I wanted to tell him something before we both drifted off.

“Fee?”

“Yeah?”

“You know that time at nursery? Under the table?”

“Uh huh.”

“I lied to you.”

He looked at me, his pupils wide in the darkness of the room. “When you promised me you’d never leave me?” His voice was very quiet.

“No. That wasn’t a lie. I’ll never leave you. Never. There was something else.”

I smoothed my finger along the little line on his brow, where it had furrowed into a frown.

“That you’d be my best friend forever?”

“Nope, that wasn’t a lie either.”

I raised a hand and touched the strands of his hair.

The frown line grew deeper. “I don’t get it. That was all you promised me.”

“There was something else,” I said.

He shook his head. “I give up.”

“I promised you I wouldn’t turn to goo,” I said with a grin.

He laughed, a soft laugh that vibrated through my body. “And?”

“And...” I lifted my head and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. “I think I just did.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Danni Keane lives in the depths of English suburbia, where she likes to divide her time equally between writing, daydreaming and napping.*

*Having never really grown up, Danni fits right in at her day job, working with children. She spends her days avidly listening to the whimsical imaginings of five-year-olds, and then rushes home to shamelessly plagiarise their ideas. However, she has yet to write a story about an exploding ghost banana. Maybe one day...*

*She loves all different types of stories, but her favourite characters usually have one thing in common: they are ordinary people with extraordinary dreams.*

## Contact & Media Info

*Danni Keane loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at [Goodreads](#).*

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# CARRY ON

By Cam Kennedy

## **Photo Description**

A dark room, illuminated by a large window set in the wall. A boy, dressed in a short-sleeved white dress shirt and nothing else, is chained and sitting on the floor. His arms are crossed on his bent knees, and his head rests on them, his longish brown hair hiding his face.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*He's alone and in utter despair. He has long lost hope that his situation will change.*

*Is he a kidnap victim?*

*Is he a new shifter waiting for his first change?*

*Is he a vampire's blood slave or a sex-slave?*

*Is he being abused by his captor(s)?*

*The final choice is up to you.*

*I'm open to any genre - contemporary, paranormal, fantasy, etcetera, with the only restriction being no BDSM. If it's slave fiction, then it should be in the hurt/comfort style—non-con/dub-con can be included though.*

*And an HEA please!*

Sincerely,

SueM

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** alternate universe, spy/special forces, age gap, children, coming of age, child abuse, slavery, homophobia

**Content warnings:** mention of underage sex, abuse, and/or dub-con situations

**Word count:** 12,150

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*Dedication*

SueM, I hope this story is exactly what you were looking for.  
Thank you for inspiring me.

# CARRY ON

**By Cam Kennedy**

## *Prologue*

I thought I was safe when the equality laws were passed here. When the world broke apart over the issue of homosexuality, I thought I was lucky to live on this side of the world—the side that chose equality over religion. The world broke apart and reordered itself. The eastern half of the world stood strong with the big religious “Three”, and the western half decided that religion would rule them no longer, because it wasn’t financially beneficial to them.

Of course, not everyone over here in the west or the east thought that way, but that’s the way that it ended up. The western half of the world formed the UWA, United Western Alliance. For a time, the borders opened up as people fled the east—and of course, some fled the west.

What I hadn’t counted on was the fact that medical science had had a “breakthrough”. They could now detect the potential for a person to be homosexual by a simple blood test. I also hadn’t counted on my parents forcing everyone in our family to be tested. The problem was that the test couldn’t really discern homosexual, from bisexual, from whatever. It was too black and white. I was fifteen when I was tested. I thought my parents believed in equality. I thought they would love me no matter what. I thought wrong. How could they hate me overnight? Living in their home became unbearable. They didn’t see me. They didn’t speak to me. It was as if I wasn’t even there. They were edging me out of their lives. My brother and sister stopped talking to me, too.

I cried myself to sleep every night. I wasn’t even sure that I *was* gay. I wasn’t attracted to anyone in particular. A few androgynous-looking people at school were a little attractive, but I didn’t feel a distinctive pull one way or another. I just wanted to be a kid, and play video games and hang out with my friends. I was only fifteen.

At first, I was still allowed to eat at the dinner table, to sleep in my bed, to go to school with my friends. Then one day I came home from school, and all

my things had been moved to the attic. I got a cot to sleep on. A few weeks later, my keycard no longer worked in the door, and I had to wait for my parents to get home to get into the house. My parents provided my attic with a microwave and I was allowed one frozen dinner a day. I was heartbroken. I couldn't tell anyone. What would I say? That my parents were freaks who had lost their minds? They weren't abusing me, at least not legally, since I was provided with two meals at school. They just were no longer my loving family.

This went on for almost a year. I no longer had the newest clothes or shoes, or the latest gadgets and games. I no longer had much in common with my classmates. I slowly lost all my friends. I isolated myself. It was easier to pretend it didn't matter than it was to deal with trying to make up lame excuses why I wasn't allowed to do anything. It was like I had disappeared, and no one even bothered to notice. I tried to comfort myself with the fact that I would only have to live there for two more years. There was an end in sight. I would be able to find people to care about me.

I came home just after my sixteenth birthday to find a few bags of my stuff by the front door. My family was standing there with a man in a flashy suit, and a politician's smile. My mother looked away as they led me to the transport. I didn't know it then, but my parents had sold me to scientists looking to "cure" being gay. I wonder what they told people when I no longer showed up to school.

I bet you are wondering why I didn't fight or stand up for myself. Sometimes I wonder the same thing. I wonder why I didn't just run away. I guess I thought that they would change. When I looked in their faces, I still saw the mother who sang me to sleep when I was scared of the dark, who held my hand when we crossed the street, who told me that I could be anything I wanted to be. When I looked at my father, I saw the man who put Band-Aids on my skinned knees that time I wrecked my bike, who helped me build that tree house when I was eight, who tutored me in math when I just couldn't seem to get it. I looked at them, and I still remembered the love that they showered on me. They looked at me and saw some *thing* that they couldn't wait to be rid of.

My name is Kelsey Graeme Sterling and this is my story.

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I was numb when they put me in the transport. Too numb to realize, until after I was inside, that there were no handles on the doors. There was no way to escape. A tall man in an expensive suit and mirrored sunglasses was already inside. He looked toward me, I think. It was hard to tell. His voice sounded bored. "It would really just be easier for you to cooperate, boy. You won't like the consequences of not cooperating." A cold shiver went down my spine. I buckled my seatbelt and stared out the window. At some point I must have fallen asleep. I was awoken to a sharp slap at the side of my head. "Wake up, boy. We've arrived."

The building we entered looked like a big normal office building in the business section of a city I didn't recognize. Inside were security officers sitting at a desk. They seemed to see through me, but addressed the suit who gripped my elbow. The suit guided me to a bank of elevators. It was strange. There were no buttons for floors, just a keypad and a scanner. The suit scanned his finger and punched in a code. The elevator lurched downward.

Once we left the elevator, I was shuffled into a sterile-looking exam room where someone in a lab coat waited. I was forced to take off my clothes. I am sure I shivered, naked and exposed. I was scared to death. He quickly examined me and again sent me off with the suit. I was led, still naked, into a gray room with rows of cots. It looked as though there was a window, but it was really a bank of computers set into the wall. After he placed my hand on one of the screens so I could be scanned into their system, I was handed a T-shirt and underwear. Once I'd gotten dressed, the suit led me to a cot and wrapped a padded cuff attached to a chain around my wrist, and it sealed shut. I later learned that it was keyed with the guards' fingerprints to allow it to release. It was then that my numbness finally faded, and I began to panic.

"What are you doing to me? Why am I here?" I am ashamed to say I cried. I didn't fight or lash out. I merely cried.

The suit smiled a nasty sort of smile, and in a mocking voice said, "Why Kelsey, your parents sold you to science. You are going to help us cure homosexuality." He ran a cold hand down my slender arm, and for a moment I was sickeningly afraid that he'd touch me sexually. Instead, he turned and walked out the door. I never learned his name, but I'll never forget him.

I quickly learned there were worse things than the suited man and his cold indifference. Living in this facility was worse than prison, or what I imagined prison to be. Some of the guards were physically cruel. Punching, slapping, kicking us; they were just vicious. Then there were the ones that used words to inflict pain, those never bothered me much. I'd have rather dealt with them. Then there were the worst ones, the guards who were kind to you and then expected sexual favors. I always wondered how they passed the blood test. I guess "pedophile" didn't show up. Maybe they should have been trying to develop a blood test for that.

I wasn't built to be a fighter. I was pretty much the epitome of what someone thinks of when they think of a twink—and not a muscle-y one either. Slim, slight of build, longish blond hair, bright blue eyes, and to add insult to injury, I looked quite a bit younger than sixteen. I was a magnet to the pedos, but I eventually turned that to my advantage, or as much of an advantage as you could get in there.

Everyone's soul has a price, mine was relatively low.

The scientists/doctors were all business, though. They took blood, and sometimes semen samples, but it was all very professional. We were treated like lab rats by them. Not cruelly, but not as if we had any real significance either. We were simply another cog in the machine.

I stopped counting time after the first year. I think I lost hope then. Actually, I lost hope when I realized I would rather trade my body for favors from the guards than have broken ribs. I had never been successful at making friends with the others being held in the facility. It was highly discouraged, and if it looked as though any of us were becoming friendly, one of us would be transferred out. At least trading myself to the guards made me feel as though I had a purpose. I could pretend for a few moments that someone gave a shit about me. I am not going to go into detail except to say that, regardless of whether I enjoyed it or not, it was always my choice. I'm grateful for that at least. I was asked to do things, but I was never forced. I forced myself, for sure. But I was determined to survive.

Once my hope died it was easier to adjust to being there. And through careful trading, I attained some measure of freedom. I was no longer chained

to a cot constantly. I could move about the facility with at least a little ease. I was a trustee of sorts since I had never fought being there. I delivered meals and did other odd jobs. Everyone knew how I had achieved my status though, and I was often spit at and treated badly by the other children. I was a traitor in their minds. In my own, I was just trying to survive. I'm not proud of it. It's just the way it was.

I had my own room, and a decent bed instead of the hard cot. I was getting a little more comfortable there. I thought I had found my place in the scheme of things. That's why I was so surprised when I was told that I was being transferred. I guess I became too old, too muscular, too whatever. I was moved to a smaller facility. This one, at least the front rooms, gave the appearance of an orphanage or group home. The back was an entirely different matter. I had a feeling I was going to die there. I would soon realize how close that was to the truth.

During the day we were given more freedom than at the other facility. We were allowed to watch entertainment vids on the computer and play board games. Our meals were also better. At night though, we were locked into these bunk-bed-like cages. Some of the younger kids got beaten regularly for soiling the bedding at night. That always made me sad, because it's not like they could help it. I hated the nighttime and the sounds and noises that the others made. I always looked forward to morning and being let out of my cage.

For some reason, there were a few days when we were not allowed out of the cages. It appeared that the smaller children were being fed, but none of us older ones. One morning, people didn't show up to work. They didn't come the next day, either, or the next. Until days jumbled together and the crying stopped—then the dying started. The smell was unbearable. Waiting to die was excruciating. I prayed for death. I think the only reason I am alive is that it rained for several days, and the ceiling leaked, so I had water from that. Not a lot, just enough to make me thirsty and forget about the hunger for awhile.

Still, when the lights came on, I was sure that I was dead or dreaming. When I saw him, I thought that he was an angel. The light was shining behind him, and it lit up his auburn hair. I remember big, green eyes as he broke the lock and lifted my wasted body from the soiled bed. He held me close, as if I

were the most precious person in the world. I don't remember much after that. I must have passed out.

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When I awoke, I was in a hospital bed surrounded by machines, but it didn't really look like a hospital room. It was more like the first facility I was at. I am ashamed to say I was relieved. It was a known situation, and I had survived it. I was a little stunned when I realized that other than the IVs, I was not in any way restrained or strapped or chained to the bed. I wasn't really sure what to think of that. A small sliver of me began to hope, which was terrifying. I was very nervous when I saw my rescuer enter the tiny room. In the harsh fluorescent light, his features took on a sharper look. His frown marred his features and made him appear terrifying, and all my experience had taught me that when people were angry with me, I suffered for it.

He reached a hand towards me, probably to comfort me, but I cringed away and screamed. I had never felt more like an animal than at that moment. He was visibly upset, but I was completely unable to keep from reacting that way, despite the logical portion of my brain telling me not to. Several people rushed in, and a sharp jab in my arm had me sinking back into the blackness.

When I surfaced the next time, an older bald gentleman in an immaculate suit waited in a chair at my bedside. He had kind eyes, and he spoke in a soothing voice, "Hello, Kelsey. My name is Mr. Smith. We are here to help you." This, of course, made me instantly suspicious.

"H-how do you kn-know my name? Where am I?" My head was spinning.

Mr. Smith's kind smile never wavered. "Calm down, young man. The facility kept meticulous records, or so it appears. I guess at least it will be easier to give the other children a decent burial. As for where you are, you are at a private facility which houses our headquarters."

I swallowed hard. I didn't want to think about those other children. I didn't want to think of the screaming and the crying and the smell. It all washed over me in a wave, and I started shaking. I forced myself to ask, "Was I the only one who..."

Mr. Smith looked unbearably sad, "An infant, the only one at the facility,

as far as we can tell, and a couple other teens, also in cages close to the leaky roof. You are the only adult that survived.”

I blinked. I didn't think of myself as an adult, but I suppose I was now. “What now?”

The older man smiled at me again, “Well, that depends largely on you and what you want to do. First and foremost, you are going to get healthy. Kelsey, I don't want to mention this, but it's important, and you have decisions to make. When we tested the infant who was rescued, biologically he is your child. Did you know about him?”

I shook my head. I felt lost. I hadn't even finished high school. I was unwanted and alone. I was just a waste of space with no purpose. I was so overwhelmed. Where would I go? I had a child? How was I supposed to handle that? I couldn't raise a kid that I didn't even know about. I didn't even participate in his conception. They couldn't keep me here forever, could they? I must have been completely transparent because Mr. Smith patted the rail of the bed and said I had plenty of time to decide what actions I needed to take to ensure the well-being of the child. He went on to tell me about the couple that the baby would be staying with. It was one of the team members and his partner. I was relieved. I couldn't handle anything else piled onto me.

He stood then and made to exit the room. At the doorway, he stopped and said, “Skylar, the agent that led the rescue team, wants to check in on you later. Would that be okay?”

“I-I guess.” I stammered, already slipping back into sleep.

It was several more days before I could stay awake for any real length of time. My body was trying to recharge itself. It was a very confusing time for me—lots of faces I didn't recognize. I thought that my “angel” came to visit me a few times, but I wasn't really coherent enough to remember. When I finally started feeling better and was awake for a longer period, he was there, though.

He walked into the room like he owned it, confident and sure. His auburn hair shone even under those horrible fluorescent bulbs. I felt shy, and small, and unattractive. Wait, why did I even care about being attractive? I was an

eighteen-year-old waste of space, and he was a larger-than-life hero. He'd saved my life. I could still remember feeling his arms around me, cradling me, as if I somehow were worth something. That wasn't a feeling I'd felt too often in my life, or at all since I was fifteen.

I'm pretty sure my big blue eyes were about to pop out of my head when he sat in the chair next to my bed and spoke. He had a gravelly voice that sent shivers up my spine. I didn't even know that was possible. I thought that was something that was made up for romance novels. My life certainly wasn't one of those. More like a horror novel. I was so distracted by the sound of his voice that it took me several moments to clue into what he was saying.

"...Kelsey?"

My skin flushed bright red. "Sorry, I didn't hear you." My voice was quiet and timid, as if I were somehow afraid of scaring him off.

He smiled kindly, reaching out to touch my arm hesitantly. "I said my name is Skylar Donovan. I'm the leader of the team that rescued you. I was just coming by to check on you. Actually, I've been by several times, but you've been sleeping." He frowned slightly. "I didn't mean to scare you the last time."

I groaned, embarrassed. "My brain was confused. I knew you weren't a threat, but I couldn't stop..." I trailed off, unsure how to explain.

Skylar nodded. "It's okay. I understand. You've been through a lot. We have people on-site, if you'd like to talk to someone. It would probably be a good idea, since within the next few days one of the investigators, probably Katie or Rose, will be down to ask you questions about what happened to you. We have many reports and documents, even a few vids, but hearing it from you would really be helpful in trying to locate the heads of the organization that held you."

I swallowed hard. I didn't really want to think about it, but I wanted to help them, so maybe more kids wouldn't be hurt. "Maybe talking to someone would be a good idea. They've been giving me meds to sleep, but I don't want to rely on those. I have nightmares though."

"I'll talk to Mr. Smith about that. And we need to see about getting you up

and moving. And maybe getting you a shower, and something to wear other than a hospital gown.”

I smiled slightly, feeling overwhelmed again. “That’s a lot of ands.” I paused before asking in a small voice, “How do I go on from this?”

I couldn’t help but stare as he grinned at me and patted my arm again, his muscles moving beneath his clothing. I’m pretty sure that I was getting ready to start drooling when he said, “You just carry on, Kelsey. Don’t worry, we’ll get you squared away, kid. James and Robbie would like to adopt Matthew, the baby, if that’s what you want.”

*Kid.* My stomach plummeted to the floor. That was not how I wanted this man to see me. He was the first person, no, the first thing at all that I’d wanted for myself, ever, and he thought of me as a child. I stared at the thin blanket covering my legs, as he walked out the door.

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He was true to his word. He got the ball rolling. I started talking to a counselor, I got a shower and clothes, and I had the dubious pleasure of “helping” Katie and Rose with their questions. To be honest, I didn’t really think I remembered anything of importance, but I answered what I could. I told them of the chains and the tests, about the guards, and trading myself for easier treatment. That was extremely difficult for me. Harder than I thought it would be. For the first time I was embarrassed. At the time it was happening, I could reduce it down to needing to survive. Now, I didn’t want anyone, particularly Skylar and his friends, to think badly of me. They all made sympathetic noises, but in my mind they were laughing at me behind my back. I finally decided to let Robbie and James adopt the baby. I couldn’t see myself being able to raise a child, at least not right then, and probably not for a long time.

It was difficult to rejoin the world. For almost two years, I had been completely cut off. Parts of the Eastern Hemisphere were literally fighting against the religious regimes. My parents had completely disappeared. Whether they left the country, or just went into hiding, no one knew at that time. That was particularly devastating. I guess some part of me hoped that

they'd changed their minds and were missing me as much as I missed the parents they used to be.

It seemed that every turn highlighted that I was “less than”; that I wasn't worthy of love or respect. Even with some pretty intense therapy, I was still having a difficult time believing that my survival wasn't a big cosmic joke. And none of it was *really* about being gay. It was about people finding *me*, as a person, unlovable for whatever reason. Every person in my family had turned their back on me. I couldn't comprehend anyone truly wanting me around.

Despite the way I felt, Mr. Smith, Skylar, and his team took me under their wing. I was never left alone for long, even once I became more independent and moved out on my own about a year or so after my rescue. There was always someone stopping by to talk or to take me to dinner. Over time, they became my best friends. They were all so different, but they had bonded together as a family and just welcomed me in. I pushed the attraction to Skylar to the side, choosing to concentrate on myself for the very first time in my life. I'm sure that Skylar knew how I felt. He'd caught me watching him more than once, but he never really let on, and he never made me feel ashamed for it. My attraction also did nothing to keep him away.

Being friends was a good thing, though. I learned that he loved his job, liked scary movies, and hated comedies. He liked kettle corn over regular popcorn. (Yuck.) He wanted a dog someday, but wasn't home enough to have one right now. He was fun to argue with. He never seemed to lose his cool no matter how much I tried to irritate him. More or less, I just found more and more reasons to fall in love with him.

I completed my GED. I started university. I made friends. I even had a boyfriend or two, but none of them were Skylar, and I never got past the making-out stage with any of them. He didn't seem overly thrilled when I started dating, either. It led to a particularly unpleasant disagreement where our cards were pretty much laid bare on the table.

Skylar had been hanging around my apartment a lot, so it wasn't really a surprise when I got out of class to find him waiting at my door. It was, however, a surprise to find the guy that I'd went out with a few times, Brent,

there as well. Neither man looked happy. I wondered how long they'd been waiting together and what had been said. I approached my door with caution, fumbling with my key card until Skylar gently extricated it and growled, "I'll get the door. You greet your friend." I couldn't help but take a step back. He'd never spoken that way to me before, and despite it being a little scary, that growly sound was causing my cock to stir. I slowly turned back to Brent and found he was gazing at me with this sad pissed-off look.

He spoke quietly, "Should I even bother trying to figure out what's going on here?"

I was truly confused at this point. "There is nothing going on. I just got back from class. My friend Skylar and you were here waiting for me. What do you mean figure out what's going on?"

Skylar glared at me and stalked into the apartment slamming the door.

Brent shook his head, "You know, you could have told me if you already had a boyfriend. It would have made this a whole lot less awkward."

I started laughing, and I'm sure it had a slightly hysterical edge. "Skylar is most definitely not my boyfriend. He's a friend who rescued me from a very horrible place in my life. Sky would never even look twice at someone like me." I moved toward him, and he shuffled back.

"Look, Kelsey. You are a great guy, but obviously you have feelings for your friend, and I pretty much think that he feels the same way. I totally don't need any extra drama in my life, so I'll um, see you around, okay?" Brent more or less ran from my building, leaving me standing outside my apartment, still confused as hell. Slowly, sound filtered back in. I could hear Skylar banging around my apartment, and I got angry. I flung my door open and stomped inside. I threw my backpack in a chair and slammed the door.

"What. The. Hell. Was that about, Sky? What did you say to Brent?" By this point I was right in Skylar's face, or at least as close as I could get, my five foot nine coming in several inches shorter than his six foot four.

Sky smirked, which just pissed me off more. "What's the matter? Did your little boyfriend go running?"

I poked him in the chest. "As a matter of fact, he did. Right after he accused *you* of being my boyfriend." Of course, as I was poking him in the

chest, I couldn't help but notice how hard his muscles were. It took everything I had to stay on course and have it out with him.

He looked guilty for a moment, before his face hardened and he spat back, "You don't need to get involved with that creep anyway!"

I let out a huff. "He's not a creep, Sky. He's a good guy."

"He's not right for you" was his rejoinder, jaw clenched.

"How would I know, Skylar? I've only gone out with him twice. Am I supposed to just sit around and wait until the 'right' guy comes along? Do you already know who that is? Do you have to approve? Is there an interview process you forgot to let me know about? I am almost twenty-one years old. I think I can make my own decisions."

"*No!* I'm the right guy, Kels, but I can't. You are so damn young and you've been through absolute hell." He turned to look out the window, and it seemed as if he folded in on himself, crossing his arms and gripping his elbows tightly. He looked sad and pissed off. I felt guilty for having caused it. Men like him were larger than life, and to see him almost shrink before my very eyes was humbling.

I was at a loss for words. What was I supposed to say to that? He gave me everything I wanted and took it all away in the same sentence. I hesitated only a moment, though, before crossing the room and wrapping my arms around his waist and laying my head on his back. For a moment, he tensed up even more, but slowly the tension seemed to leak from his frame. For a long time, we just stood there in the silence, neither of us having words nor answers for the other.

Then he began to talk. "The moment I saw you, and I held you in my arms, I knew you were mine. But, at that point, we didn't even know if you'd survive the horror that you'd gone through. And even if you did survive, we didn't know where you would be mentally. Then you started healing, and I started getting to know you. You are one of the most amazing people I've ever met, to have survived what you have, and you just continue to carry on."

I smiled into his back and tightened my arms around his waist, squeezing. "I thought you were an angel come to save me. Only, at that point, I was praying for death. Learning to live again, to want to live again, wasn't easy,

Sky, but I had you and your team and Mr. Smith. You all let me know that I was worth it. That my life was worth living.”

Sky turned in my arms and took my face in his hands. My heart was beating so hard I was almost certain that he could hear it. “You are worth everything, Kelsey. You deserve so many good things. What your parents did, what those guards did to you, none of that was your fault. It was a sickness in their heads. I know you know that in here.” He touched the top of my head lightly. “But you need to believe it in here.” He laid his hand on my heart, which I was sure was about to pop straight out of my chest.

“You know, you are the one who gave me the strength to overcome a lot of this,” I whispered, almost afraid of speaking completely out loud, sure that if I did, the mood would shatter, or this would turn out to be just a dream.

“How’s that Kels?” He murmured, his lips against my forehead.

“When I was in the med bay, and I asked you how I was supposed to move forward, you told me that I just needed to carry on. It meant a lot that you didn’t give me false platitudes about how everything was going to be okay. That if I just kept moving forward then eventually things would even out.”

“Fuck, Kelsey. You deserve someone who can make everything okay.” He tipped my face up towards his and his lips were aimed right at mine. Just as his lips met mine, and I sank into the only kiss that had ever really mattered, his com-link went off, and he jumped away from me with a guilty expression on his face. Dammit. And here I thought that we had made progress. I guess I at least knew where his feelings were, and I wasn’t giving up. Not by a long shot.

I moved away from him and watched him converse with Mr. Smith. When he wrapped up his conversation, he looked up at me, his heart in his eyes. “Kels, I have to—”

I cut him off. “Go? I figured. Mission?” I knew Skylar’s job was dangerous. Working for the generically named Agency and being assigned to the also generically labeled Tactical Team, he often was sent into places that were not in the safest locations. I was acutely aware that every time I saw him might be the last. I was also aware that I might never know if something happened to him. I liked to comfort myself that I was friends with his boss, and that he would let me know, but that was iffy at best.

He nodded tightly, his brain obviously already elsewhere. I wanted to latch onto him and never let him go. Some of that must have reflected in my face, because he moved forward again to kiss my lips lightly. "I may be out of touch for a while. And, Kels, don't wait." He released me and moved towards the door. He was almost there when his words registered.

With a strength and speed I wasn't aware of possessing, I slammed Skylar's back against the door and, with a hand on his neck, tugged his mouth down to my own. The kiss was like nothing I'd ever dreamed of experiencing. It rode that fine line between passion and violence, and when it ended, both of us were flushed and breathing hard. Fisting his shirt in my hand I told him, "We aren't finished. You don't get to just walk out the door and tell me to find someone else."

He touched his lips, turned, and walked out of my door. I'm not sure how long I stood in the doorway staring at the empty hallway before slipping back inside.

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At first, time passed slowly, and I slogged through school and homework, then midterms and finals. I rearranged my tiny apartment. I tried desperately to keep myself busy. None of the team members came by, so I guessed that they were all still working on whatever mission they had been assigned to. Mr. Smith occasionally called to check up on me, but soon the days passed to weeks and the weeks passed to months with very little to break up the monotony. I realized that I had no real friends outside of the team, so I made a concentrated effort to be more outgoing. It didn't really go well. My peers had a light-heartedness about their lives that I would never possess. I spent more time at the Agency learning to defend myself. I had gotten paranoid that there was someone following me around campus.

Once the holidays hit, I was depressed. I had been hoping my friends would be around to celebrate with me. I was hoping Skylar would be there. I had bought them all gifts for Yule, and there I was sitting in front of a sad little tree, with a mountain of gifts around it, all alone. I looked at the com unit and was tempted to send Skylar and his team a *Happy Holiday* message, but none of my previous messages had been answered. I just hoped they were okay. Bored and lonely, I went to bed early.

Near midnight I heard a banging at my door. It took a moment for me to realize that I was safe in my apartment, and that the banging wasn't just my imagination. I threw off the eight-hundred thread count sheets that I had bought myself to celebrate my twenty-first birthday, grabbed a pair of pajama pants out of the dresser, and struggled to put them on. I also located the stun gun I kept in my nightstand and armed myself. You couldn't be too careful.

I expected Skylar to be on the other side of the door. I was wrong. When I opened the door I was shocked to see my younger brother and sister. They looked scared, but I couldn't process that at first. "What are you doing here?" I asked flatly. The reality that Sky wasn't at my door left me feeling shaky, and the stun gun wavered in my hand for a moment before I steadied myself. I was not about to let them in without some sort of explanation.

Detached, I looked at how much they'd grown. When I was sent away at sixteen, they were eight and twelve. Now I could see the teenager that my sister Julia was becoming. She was still in that awkward, arms-and-legs-too-long-for-her-body, acne-dotting-the-edges-of-her-face stage. Still, she was beautiful. Her hair had gotten long, reaching the middle of her back. It was blonde like mine. In fact, other than being female, she looked eerily similar to me. We were definitely siblings. I idly wondered if looking at her caused my parents any thoughts of guilt or grief. Our brother Malcolm, on the other hand, was our opposite, dark hair where we had light. His eyes were more of a gray than blue, and he was bulky in that teenage-jock kind of way.

He gripped our sister's shoulder and edged her behind him, protecting her from me. I glanced down then at the stun gun and lowered it quickly. He didn't really relax. They both looked tired. I tried asking again, more gently, "Why are you here?"

Malcolm swallowed hard and croaked, "Kelsey?" It seemed like he didn't know what to say. Julia had no such issues. She slid out of Malcolm's grasp and launched herself at me, twining her too-thin arms around my neck. I could do nothing but hold her as she talked a mile a minute. I didn't understand a single word she said. It felt too good to hold my baby sister. I looked up into Malcolm's face, and I don't think I'd never seen such naked longing. Dropping the stun gun, I opened my arms wide, and Mal joined in the hug.

After a few moments, we all let go, and I picked up my dropped weapon. We moved inside and closed the door.

Awkwardly, we sat on the couch looking at each other.

Finally Malcolm spoke. “Your friend told us where you were. There were men with guns everywhere, arresting everyone. I should feel guilty, but I’m just relieved to be out of there.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Slow down. What friend? Men with guns? Arresting who?” I shook my head, overwhelmed and confused.

Mal shot Julia a look. She was slumped over on my couch doing her best to stay awake, but obviously whatever they’d gone through had taken its toll, and she was completely wiped out. I sighed. Obviously the story was going to have to wait a bit. Somehow I bet Sky had something to do with this.

“Okay, let’s get her into bed, and then you and I can talk, Malcolm.”

Malcolm helped me rouse Julia enough to get her to stumble off to my spare bedroom, where a lonely twin bed occupied a corner. I hurriedly cleaned off the papers and school books. She climbed into bed, and I couldn’t help tucking the covers around her as I had when she was little. She smiled at me and reached to touch my cheek, mumbling, “Missed you so much, Kels. So happy to see you,” as her eyes drifted closed. I stood there in the doorway just looking at her, tears in my eyes. I hadn’t let myself miss them in so long that it almost broke me to realize that they had suffered my absence as much as I had suffered theirs.

I was startled by Malcolm’s hand upon my back. I couldn’t help but tense and flinch. He smiled a very sad smile and one far too wise for a seventeen-year-old boy. “She’s right you know. We missed you so much. It wasn’t the same after... well, after the stupid test that ruined our lives.” I could see so much anger in him. That was something I’d never really had. I felt sad, and lonely, abandoned, frustrated, abused, but never really angry. Maybe I felt, in some way, like I deserved the way I’d been treated. I’m not sure, but I could almost feel the rage rolling off of him. Hesitantly, I turned and touched his arm.

He surprised me by hugging me close and sobbing into my neck. That was quite a feat since I was so much shorter than him. He had to equal Sky’s six

foot four or be taller. I awkwardly rubbed circles on his back while he was mumbling apologies. “Shhhh,” I crooned, as I rocked slightly from side to side, just holding my baby brother. No matter how old or big, he’d still be that little bundle mom brought home from the hospital when I was four years old.

He came back down from his crying jag, and we moved away from each other. “How about something to drink?”

He nodded, and then asked, “Bathroom?”

I pointed the way and headed to my tiny galley kitchen to fix a couple of mugs of hot chocolate. I had just finished putting the tiny marshmallows that usually only Skylar used in Malcolm’s mug when he filled the doorway. I smiled and asked, “Still like marshmallows in your hot chocolate?”

“Of course! Do you still hate them?”

I grinned and nodded. He shook his head like I was hopeless. The familiarity was so sweet and painful. It opened wounds that I didn’t even realize that I had.

“So…” I started, my expression turning serious.

Malcolm blew out a breath and said, “I don’t even know where to start, Kels. Long story short for the moment, Mom and Dad got involved with this anti-gay cult. It was horrible. Both Jules and I knew these people were crazy, but Mom and Dad just got sucked in. They were talking about bombings and facilities. It was scary. We’ve been living with those people for a few years, but everything was just getting worse. Then a few months ago some new people came in. One of them said he was your friend. His name was Skylar? Anyway, he gave me your address and said that if Jules and I could get away, to come here, and that he bet you’d be willing to let us stay. We were under such strict supervision, though. We didn’t have a chance until last night, when the place was raided. We slipped out in all the confusion. We didn’t have time to bring anything other than our backpacks. I had tried to keep them packed with food and emergency supplies.” He looked at me, pleading with me to understand.

“It’s okay, Mal. You’re here now, and you’re safe. You were just a kid. You couldn’t control what our parents were doing.” It was a relatively empty

sentiment, because who knew better than I how unreasonable guilt and sorrow could eat at you? Obviously Malcolm felt the same, because he fished a soggy marshmallow out of his hot chocolate and flung it at me. I stepped aside and watched it splat on the floor, with a grimace. “Gross, Mal!” We shared a grin which was interrupted by Malcolm’s wide yawn.

“Sleep is in order.” I was feeling it, too. It was a lot to take in, and I was still worried about Sky. As I led Malcolm back to the living room and dug in the linen closet for pillows and blankets so he could crash on the couch, I asked in an attempt at nonchalance, “So how long ago did you see Sky? Did he seem okay?”

I could see Malcolm go on high alert, his body tensed. “I saw him day before yesterday. I assume he is the one who called in the authorities. Why Kels? What is Skylar to you?”

I smiled slightly. “If you would have asked me several months ago, I would have said that he was my best friend. I guess he still is. But he’s more than that, too. I’m hoping that someday he’ll be my lover and eventually my partner.”

Malcolm frowned, “But he’s a guy, Kels.”

I laughed, and threw a pillow at my brother, a little irritated. “Well, Mal, the last time I checked gay men tend to be in relationships with men.”

“But you’re not even... never mind.” Malcolm had caught the pillow and threw it, and himself, down on the couch, pulling the blanket over him. “Night, Kels. Love you.”

“Love you too, kid. Talk to you in the morning.” It had been so very long since anyone had said those words to me that I had to go in the bathroom and cry before coming back out. I locked up, gathered up my abandoned weaponry, and finally slipped in between my chilled sheets. I lay for a long time, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if I’d even be able to get back to sleep.

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I was so unused to noise in my home that the moment I heard someone moving around the apartment, I was immediately awake and aware. Luckily, I

recalled the previous night's events before I did something crazy like attack the intruder. Grudgingly, I stumbled out of bed and into clothes when the scent of coffee breached my blanket cocoon. Thank goodness for automated coffee dispensers.

When I reached the kitchen, I found Julia happily munching on some generic cereal that I didn't even remember buying, her hair and clothes a disheveled mess from sleep. I couldn't seem to help ruffling her hair further as I passed by the counter to reach the coffee pot. I prepared my cup and sat next to her at the counter, the sound of Malcolm's soft snores breaking the silence. Poor Jules looked shy and unsure in the morning light and so much younger than her thirteen years. I rubbed my hand along her back and leaned my head lightly on her shoulder. "Happy Yule, kiddo. I am so glad you are here. We'll figure things out. Don't worry."

Julia beamed at me with tears in her eyes, but before we could bask any further in our sentimentality, my rarely used com device went off, which could only mean that someone from the Agency was attempting to contact me. I was desperately hoping it was Skylar, but was disappointed when I heard Mr. Smith's voice. "Happy Yule, Kelsey. I trust you are well."

"Of course, Mr. Smith. I have some unexpected but welcome houseguests." I got up from the counter at this point and headed back toward my room where Julia wouldn't be able to hear my conversation. "I assume, though, that since you contacted me on the secure line rather than my personal one, that it was to do more than exchange pleasantries."

"Indeed, Kelsey. I know we discussed waiting to start your employment within the Agency until after your graduation in the spring, but I need to know if you'll be able to handle starting sooner. You will, of course, need to give immediate notice at your campus job." To say I was confused was an understatement. In fact, it seemed I'd taken residence in the land of confusion. I was also overwhelmed. Actually, I was probably beyond that point. I cleared my throat, trying to buy some time before answering. It wasn't as if I really needed the campus job. It was my bid for freedom. I didn't want to feel overly beholden to the Agency. They already held my life in their hands. Plus it kept me busy, but I wouldn't be sad to leave it either. Working for the Agency

would also allow me to provide for my brother and sister, because I had no intention of letting them slip back out of my life now that Sky had given them back. However, I quickly came round to the thought that I had been the one insisting I was ready to start working early, and Mr. Smith had put me off on numerous occasions, saying there were plenty of language experts available and that I needed to concentrate on school.

“Mr. Smith, why am I being called to service early?” My heart was pounding because suddenly I knew that something was very wrong.

In the pregnant silence, about a million scenarios went through my far-too-active imagination. I was surprised to hear Mr. Smith chuckle. “So suspicious, my young friend. I thought you might want to be instrumental in bringing down the ring that held you captive.”

“So there is nothing wrong with S... the Team?”

“Mr. Donovan is fine, Kelsey, as is the rest of his team. I imagine you’ll be getting overrun soon.” My heart leapt in my chest, and a slow smile crept over my face. Soon I was smiling so hard it hurt. I said my good-bye and thank you to Mr. Smith and rushed to the kitchen. I started pulling food out to prepare a dinner for the holiday. My sister and brother had obviously been talking quietly and looked at me like I was crazy.

Malcolm cleared his throat and said, “Kels, we need to talk about what’s going to happen now.”

I stopped, my head still in the icebox. I stood up and slowly turned around. “What exactly is there to talk about, Mal?”

“Where are we going to live? What are we going to wear? What about school? Kels, what are we going to do?” Malcolm rushed everything out.

I could see Malcolm trying so hard to be the adult that he almost was, but it wasn’t his place to figure any of this out. That was my job. I was the adult, and they were the kids, and while we needed to decide things together, the burden certainly didn’t rest on their shoulders. I put my arms around him and hugged him close. “Malcolm, we will figure all that out. Good news is that I just finished talking to Mr. Smith my boss, and my real, after-college job is going to start early, so money isn’t going to be an issue. We will look for a bigger

place. We'll shop for clothes and get school sorted. You don't have to stress, because I'm here. I'm the adult and the older brother. I'll take care of it, and that doesn't mean I won't need help and that you and Jules won't have input, but I get the heavy load of worrying, okay?"

Malcolm's shoulders relaxed, and I moved back. "Now, we have a dinner to prepare. I am expecting company. Jules, go in my room, get a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt out of the bottom drawer of my dresser, then go take a shower and brush your hair. There are towels in the linen closet in the hallway."

I rushed around, trying to get a turkey in the oven and various side dishes going. Malcolm was surprisingly competent in the kitchen, and took over pie-making after he shoed me into the shower after Julia finished. I kept watching the clock, hoping against hope that Sky would show up. What was taking him so long?

The afternoon dragged on and eventually when the only thing that hadn't come out of the oven was the turkey, we settled down to watch a movie, my little sister sprawled across me. When the door chimed to alert us that our guests had arrived I sat up quickly, earning me a glare from Julia who almost landed on the floor. I rushed over to the door, pausing to straighten my T-shirt before I realized how ridiculous I was being. I took a deep breath and was disappointed to find Rose and Katie at the door. I smiled and let them in, since their arms were overflowing with gifts. Their teammate Robbie, and his husband James, came in next with three year old Matthew. That baby was getting so big, and I was so thankful that I had made the right choice in letting them adopt him. Following them was Skylar, his face lit up in the most amazing smile I had ever seen, and his arms were full of bags and boxes as well. I was on the verge of tears just seeing him. I had missed him so much, and I was so grateful to him for pushing my brother and sister back into my life.

I turned to introduce everyone to my brother and sister, surprised at all the stuff and people coming into my home. Both Katie and Rose were holding up bags, and I gestured that presents could go near the tree and food to the tiny kitchen. It was a lot to cram into my small apartment. Malcolm took

everyone's coats, and needing a break, I took them to my former office and threw them on Julia's bed. When I turned around, Sky was filling the doorway. He opened his arms wide, and I practically threw myself across the room and into his arms.

It took only a moment before our lips found each other, and barely a second after that before we were short of breath and hungry for something other than food. Skylar broke off the kiss and moved back just a little. His hands cradled my face, and in that moment, I felt as if I were the most precious person in the world. There was so much feeling in his eyes. It was that moment when I truly realized how much he loved me. I'm sure my eyes reflected much the same. Both of our eyes filled with tears, as our arms reached out to clutch each other close. "I missed you so much, Kelsey."

"Missed you, too, Skylar, so much."

Whatever words we might have said were lost when Malcolm cleared his throat, and we separated reluctantly. Malcolm held a lone coat up as apology. Sky twined his fingers with mine and all but dragged me to the living room where everyone was gathered. Added to the multitude of gifts that I'd bought for everyone, my friends had brought tons of gifts for my brother and sister. My heart was so full I could hardly stand it.

Poor Julia and Malcolm were overwhelmed with all the gifts and all the new people. Julia had obviously made friends with Matthew, and seeing them together made it obvious where Matthew got his blond hair and blue eyes. Both of them seemed fascinated with how much they looked alike. Glancing over at Robbie and James, I was happy to see that they were at ease and not bothered by the resemblance. I hadn't had much contact with Matthew over the last three years because I truly didn't feel all that connected to him. He wasn't created with my consent, so therefore in my mind he wasn't mine. Still, I was grateful that the couple was happy to let us treat him as a nephew of sorts.

James walked over and slung his arm across my shoulder, hugging me from the side. "We are family, Kelsey. You gave us the greatest gift in the world, you know. You and Julia and Malcolm are welcome to see Matthew anytime you like. In fact, maybe we'll hit you up for some babysitting duty

every once in a while.” The sincerity in James’ gesture was so apparent that I teared up a little, even as I grinned and replied, “Sure, now that the potty-training phase is over, I’d be happy to babysit for you guys.”

It was then that I spied Mr. Smith smiling proudly in a corner, as if he were a patriarch supremely proud of the family that he had built. I suppose he did build this family, though. We were all connected through circumstance, but our family was far stronger than my biological one had ever been.

As the evening went on, food was eaten, presents were opened, and conversations were had—all I could think of was Skylar, and trying to catch a few stolen moments. We were all gathered in my living room, and although dining room chairs had been dragged in to accommodate everyone, there were still people seated on the floor.

Skylar, looking nervous, cleared his throat. “There is one more thing. Not exactly a present, but a question and a promise.” Turning to me at this point, he grasped my hand between his and looked into my eyes. “Kelsey, for three years, since the moment I first saw you, I have loved you. I’ve loved your ability to overcome every obstacle and to carry on even when it seemed as if there was no hope. I would be incredibly honored if you, Julia and Malcolm would move in with me. I want us to become a family. You don’t have to carry this burden alone. You have all of us here to help you.”

I sniffled and nodded as I squeezed his hands. Hearing out loud that he loved me momentarily robbed me of my ability to speak. When I was finally able to say something, my voice cracked. “I love you too, Sky. I’d love it if we could move into your much-too-large-for-one-person home.” I had long teased Skylar that his five bedroom home was a crazy expense for a single man.

We were basking in the love for each other and the hardy round of applause that went around the room, when Malcolm practically roared, “But how can you love him, Kels? He’s a guy.”

I was afraid that our parents’ view of the world had corrupted my younger brother. I knew the possibility existed, but it pierced my heart to find that it was a reality. “If you don’t want to stay with a gay couple, Malcolm, I’m sure we could arrange other accommodations for you.” My voice, like my heart in that moment, was cold.

Malcolm looked frustrated. “But, Kelsey, you aren’t gay.”

I lifted an eyebrow and got to my feet, “Of course I am, Malcolm—why else do you think that our parents discarded me?”

His face flushed, and there was a guilty look in his eye. He spoke softly, “But they mixed up the tests, Kels. A letter came in the mail after you were sent away. *I’m* the gay one, not you. I hid the letter. I’m so sorry, Kelsey.” My seventeen-year-old brute of a brother burst into noisy sobs. The whole time, my mind was spinning out of control.

I looked up at Skylar and saw the frown across his face, like he was rethinking everything over the past three years. I quickly moved to his side while also grabbing my brother’s hand. “Look, I don’t know if I’m gay or not. I’ve only ever felt attracted to one person, man or woman, and that is Skylar. I don’t think that it matters, because I love Skylar, and no blood test is going to change that. Malcolm, I understand, and I forgive you. You were a twelve-year-old boy who was scared. You had to do a crappy thing to survive. Well, you aren’t the only one, okay? I don’t blame you. I love you, okay?”

Both Malcolm and Skylar sniffled a little, but Malcolm calmed down and Skylar looked incredibly proud. Mr. Smith chose that moment to step in and suggest we all pack a bag. He said that he would take charge of Julia and Malcolm for the evening, and that Skylar and I could go to figure out how we wanted to move things over to Skylar’s home. Julia and Malcolm began packing up all their Yule presents to take with them, and our friends commenced with cleanup. It was a time of somewhat organized chaos that lightened the mood considerably.

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Later that evening, when we were in front of his door, Skylar hesitated. “You know it’s okay, Kelsey. If you don’t love me, I am not going to say that it won’t hurt like hell, but it’s okay.”

I laughed. “You stupid, idiotic man. I love you. Simple as that. I’ve waited a long time for you to come around, Mr. Donovan. Don’t think for one second I’m going to let you slip through my fingers.” I rose up on my toes and whispered in his ear, my tongue darting out to taste the shell. “Now, take me inside and make love to me.”

He shuddered, and his voice wavered. "I don't want to rush you."

"Rush me, hell! Three years is rushing?" I demanded.

"You're not all that experienced. I want you to be sure."

"I'm a what? Virgin? Honey, I'm not. I wish that I were for you, but I'm not. A whore, maybe at one time, but not a virgin, not since I was sixteen." I was a little sad at having to burst his bubble, but I wanted him to love me for who I really was, not for the false ideal that he'd built of me over the last three years.

He led me inside and whispered, "You are in every way that really matters. I want our first time to be perfect."

I was horny and frustrated with the man I adored so much. Didn't he get it? All that we needed for it to be perfect was each other. We didn't need candles or romance or any of those things. All we needed was to love each other. Instead of trying to explain this to him again, I asked, "Where is our bedroom?"

Skylar pointed up the staircase and said, "Second door on the right."

Silently, I slipped my hand from his and started up the stairs, discarding my coat as I went. Then I pulled my T-shirt over my head and, holding it in my hand, turned and said, "Coming?" I threw my shirt to Skylar as he looked on, dumbfounded. Something must have clicked for him, though, because he was up the stairs like a shot and, much like the night he rescued me, cradled me in his arms like I was the most precious thing in the world.

Happily, I wound my arms around his neck, pressing kisses to his face. When I moved down to his neck and nuzzled, he sighed. When I latched onto his neck and suckled lightly, he groaned, and then I was being tossed through the air to land in the center of a soft, king-sized bed. Skylar was absolutely predatory as he discarded his coat and shirt. I couldn't help but admire the bronzed muscles stretched across his frame. I couldn't wait to find out how the crisp hair covering his chest felt against my own hairless one. My gaze was riveted on his hands as he rubbed hard against the front of his bulging jeans. I licked my lips. I couldn't wait to see what lay beneath his clothes.

However, instead of removing his own jeans, he bent to flick open the button on mine, then eased the zipper down to reveal my leaking cock, framed

by a light dusting of blond curls. “Fuck,” he whispered, obviously turned on that I hadn’t worn underwear. He left a trail of kisses along my exposed belly and hip before tugging my pants the rest of the way off. I propped myself up on my elbows to try and capture Skylar’s lips. He grinned and backed away, leaving me pouting. He quickly shucked his own jeans and underwear, letting them drop onto the floor, and slid over me. I hardly got to look at his body, and while disappointed, I knew that there would be plenty of time in the future.

His kisses were everything I ever dreamed kisses could be. I was lost in sensation. His leaking cock sliding up against my own caused me to arch and grind into him. His fingers twined with mine and he brought my arms above my head, effectively pinning me to the bed. “You are making me completely lose control, Kels!”

I grinned against his mouth, arching against him again. He released my hands and scooted down to capture a pink nipple in his mouth. “Fuck, Sky.”

His chuckle vibrated against my chest, and then he was kissing downward, murmuring words like *pretty* and *beautiful* all the while he worshipped me.

I can’t even tell you what it felt like when those full lips captured my dripping cock between them, his hand splayed across my abdomen to hold me down. He took his time licking and sucking until I was a whimpering mass of need. When I thought for sure that I was going to come, he pulled off with a loud *pop* and moved further down, sucking my balls into that tight wet heat. I was a babbling, incoherent mess by this point and barely noticed that he was pushing my legs up, exposing my puckered hole to his gaze. Softly, he blew air across my opening, causing it to clench. He must have brought lube with him, because slick fingers probed my hole. First one, which reminded of me how long it had been since anyone had been in my ass, but the sting quickly changed, and soon I was fucking myself on his hand.

The whole time, he was never quiet. There was a constant litany of how beautiful I was, how sexy, how much he loved me. I had never heard Sky speak so much. Then suddenly, his fingers were gone, and he was on his knees, grabbing a pillow, slipping it under my hips. The blunt head of his cock was pushing insistently against the ring of muscles, and then he was breaching me. At first, I was shocked by the intense flare of pain. It felt as though he

were trying to shove a tree trunk up there. It didn't take long for me to relax and strain towards him, needing more. The slow slide of him inside me felt so good, despite the burn of my inner muscles struggling to accommodate him. Once he found a rhythm, pleasure overcame all the pain. Each time he slid forward, he nudged my gland, and I was seeing stars. All too soon it was over, leaving us sweating and panting against each other, my semen cooling between us, his dripping out my ass. The fact that we hadn't used protection definitely concerned me now that the heat of the moment was over. I had never had sex without a condom, and the experience without it had been incredibly intense. I trusted Skylar, loved him, but it was something we should have discussed beforehand.

I was reluctant to break the mood, so I waited silently while he pulled away from me and went to the bathroom to grab a cloth to wipe us up. When he came back and was cleaning me up, I said, "Sky, um, we didn't use a condom."

Sky flushed and looked guilty, "I hadn't intended on getting quite so intense, but I was just tested for work and, to be honest, there hasn't been anyone since you came into my life three years ago. It's always been you."

"That's sweet, Sky, but not the point. The point is that if we are together, we need to make these very important decisions together. You don't get to choose for me, and that's what you did. I know you're clean. I know you wouldn't put me at risk like that. I trust you."

Skylar's eyes went wide and teared up as if I had given him an amazing gift. Perhaps I had. No one knew better than him, how I struggled with trust issues after everything I'd gone through. I meant it, too. I did trust him. I also wanted him to trust me to be able to make decisions for myself. I wanted us to be in a relationship together. I didn't need for him to take on a big brother or father-type role with me just because he was a decade older than I.

"I get it, Kels, and I shouldn't have decided for you. We should have discussed it first." My smile beamed. I was completely appeased. I grabbed his hand and pulled him down to snuggle. Each of us found sleep quickly, as we knew the next day would be hectic with moving and settling the kids in a new place.

*Eighteen months later*

Fourteen-year-old Julia sat perched on the edge of her seat between Skylar and me, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Skylar and I shared a smile over her head and then turned our attention back to the commencement ceremony in front of us. I was so proud of Malcolm. He'd taken his last year and a half of high school by storm, ending up the valedictorian of his class. It didn't seem fair that he was both a hell of a football player and a scholar.

No one clapped harder or yelled louder than us when Malcolm got up to give his speech. And no one cried harder than me when I realized how much I meant to my brother, as he detailed it to his senior class. He talked about hate, and doing the right thing, and forgiveness as all being life lessons he'd learned from me. I was floored.

The last year and a half hadn't been easy. We'd had our ups and downs with Malcolm and Julia. Two teenagers ripped from everything they knew and dumped with a brother they hadn't seen for five years. We fought, but in the end we were family, and we stuck together.

I was pretty sure my life would never get any better than at that moment. I had everything I never dreamed I could have, all because I never gave up. I kept moving forward. I didn't let what happened to me define my life. We just carried on.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Cam Kennedy is an award winning poet who stumbled onto m/m romance accidentally in 2010. As a member of the LGBTQIA community herself, she had never realized that m/m existed outside her favorite fandoms, which she had been involved in since the late 90s. Impressed with the quality of writing in the m/m genre, she began writing reviews and never had any intention of sharing any of her own work. In her spare time, she is the single mother of three, a dutiful (kinda) daughter, and a rabid advocate on behalf of what she believes.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# LAS PALABRAS DE AMOR

By K-lee Klein

## Photo Description

Close-up photo of two men's heads, and part of a muscled arm in front of them. One man is facing forward with only half his face showing, and the other is turned to the side. The man on the left is darkly-stubbled, and ethnic in appearance. The man on the right has one eye staring into the camera.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*That's us... Danilo and I, on our last night together. A few hours after I took this photo Danilo got the phone call that his wife had gone into labor, we had agreed that when the baby was born we would finally go our own way. A week later I left for my Peace Corps mission in Africa.*

*That was two and a half years ago, now I'm back in the neighborhood and it's like it's always been. I'm still the gringo, the only white kid on the block.*

*Everything is the same... But it isn't. Danilo is raising his son alone, and I am not the boy I was, I am not settling for being his little secret anymore. Ten years of hiding were enough for me. I still love him though... He called me last night and asked if I wanted to meet his son, Lucas. His son who he named after me... I wanted to be strong and say no, but I said yes anyway.*

*I never could stand to disappoint Danilo.*

Sincerely,

Lauraadriana

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, reunited, men with children, self-discovery, coming out, characters with history, multicultural

**Word count:** 14,609

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*Dedication*

For Lauraadriana who gave me two very interesting characters to write and a plot situation I'd never dealt with before. I hope I did it justice. And for M.L. Rhodes who offered me support, encouragement, and her fabulous editing skills.

# LAS PALABRAS DE AMOR

(The Words of Love)

By **K-lee Klein**

Lucas Winston had only been back in town for a week, arriving from South Africa then heading straight to his grandmother's house. He hadn't told her he was coming, but after a stern lecture and a lot of tears—from them both—she'd taken him in with no questions asked. It wasn't permanent. He hadn't lived with her since he was twenty years old and he had no intention of moving backward in his life instead of forward... until Danilo called.

He'd answered his grandmother's phone without thought or the inkling of an idea that the person on the other end of the line could say something that might alter his plans forever. The voice had immediately unraveled the steel-encased threads around Lucas' heart and threatened to alter his intention of starting over. It was the one thing he hadn't wanted to happen, the only thing that could make him regret coming home to familiar surroundings. And unfortunately, once the politically correct pleasantries of old friends were dispensed with, the news had been far worse than Lucas had even anticipated.

"I want you to meet my son... Lucas." Danilo's words had been abrupt and determined.

All of Lucas' breath left his body, sucked out by eight simple words he'd hoped never to have to hear. His voice hitched painfully in his throat and he struggled to control himself, despite the moisture that sprung to his eyes. He wanted to say no, wanted to leave well enough alone, just get on with the plans he'd sketched out in his head—apartment, job, hopefully a lover to share his life with.

Danilo Torres did not fit into that equation. Danilo Torres was the past, both good and bad, and Lucas needed to concentrate on the future—his future. And his future did not include sitting on the sidelines of someone else's family.

That, of course, didn't explain why he was standing at the metal front gate of a small, well-kept house, his fingers wrapped around the cold steel while his

brain spun in a whirlwind of indecision. A ridiculous stuffed bear hung precariously from the fingers of his other hand, all but forgotten in the shock of standing in front of Danilo's house... the house he shared with his son... and wife. It was surreal and uncomfortable, and Lucas involuntarily clutched the soft animal in his hand tighter so he could feel something other than anxiety.

He didn't act like this. He'd promised himself two years ago that leaving well enough alone was his best course of action. He wouldn't be anyone's dirty, little secret again, but how could he resist meeting the son of the only man he'd ever loved, and one who shared his name no less? And just seeing Danilo again, entwined in his new family life, didn't mean Lucas had to backtrack into the situation that had scarred his heart... did it?

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It had only been fucking, or maybe friends-with-benefits was a nicer way to put it. They'd never spoken about it in so many words, never really labeled it or tried to define where they fit into each other's lives. Best friends who fucked summed it up better than any romanticized version of what they did, of what they had.

Lucas had always tried to keep the lines drawn, to stay within the boundaries of what they were to each other—he'd failed miserably right from the beginning. Some days he'd even debated whether he hadn't just loved Danilo all the way back to their childhood—Danilo who had befriended the only white kid in the school, chased away the bullies, made Lucas feel like he didn't need to hide away during lunch and recess. He'd been all Lucas needed to adjust to the insecurities and fears of starting a new school, in a new neighborhood when he was at the sensitive age of ten years old.

Danilo had simply acted like Lucas belonged. And five years later, when, at fifteen, they'd started getting each other, Lucas' heart had already belonged to Danilo... and his body soon after that. He'd fallen fast and furiously, but at the same time had been hyperaware that having anyone find out about their after-school activities would cause them nothing but trouble and grief, and worse.

They'd been separated in the middle of eleventh grade when Lucas moved from his drug-addicted mother's house to his grandmother's in another area of

town. They hadn't kept in touch—things like that weren't cool when you were a tough teenager—but they'd reconnected in community college a year and a half later.

Danilo already had Mira by then, his sweet but wild girl from the neighborhood. Lucas and Mira had become friends simply because they both spent so much time with Danilo, and despite not wanting to, he'd even grown to like her.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on how Lucas looked at it—Mira had usually been too busy with school projects, girlfriends, and an overbearing family, to spend a lot of time with Danilo, giving the former best friends far too much time alone. To be fair, they'd tried to fight their feelings—their lust and the vital connection they'd made so many years before still burning hot and heavy inside them. They managed almost six months until one fateful night, their systems overflowing with alcohol, weed, and untamed thoughts that they could rule the world—they'd lost their battle in a flurry of unfastened clothes, fumbling fingers, and the dingy wall of an alleyway behind their favorite bar.

Danilo had felt so good in Lucas' arms, against his lips, inside him, that he'd forgotten about Mira until the next morning when remorse hit them both hard. Lucas had felt guilty right from the beginning, but obviously not enough to stop. He knew it was wrong, and every single time it had happened, every single time he'd come with Danilo's hand on his dick, Danilo's soft, determined lips sucking him off, Danilo's cock thrusting inside him, Lucas had sworn it would be the last.

They'd stayed together, keeping their secret from Mira and the rest of the world, all the way through college. At least as together as two supposed straight guys from the neighborhood—one of whom had a long-term girlfriend—could be. Danilo had never admitted it to Lucas, but he'd always suspected Mira was his means of covering up what he really was, and who he really loved. Lucas had never been sure of the love part since confessions or soft murmurings of emotions didn't fit the pattern of their relationship, but it was what he'd told himself to keep his sanity. Besides which, neither Danilo nor Mira really made the effort to spend more time together—something Lucas didn't think too hard on, but appreciated all the same.

During college and the following year, they'd fucked their way through boring classes, menial placements of terrible jobs, a boatload of weed and too much alcohol to think straight half the time. Then the thing they'd always worried about the most had happened in the worst possible way.

Danilo's father was the biggest homophobic bastard in the world, and for some reason he'd been the only one to accuse them of being more than friends. The worst-case scenario occurred one night when Lucas and Danilo were stoned to the gills, their clothes still intact but hands and mouths working hot and heavy over one another. They never indulged their lust in Danilo's house because they knew the repercussions, but that night the pot had made them lazy and horny-as-fuck—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Lucas remembered the door slamming open. He remembered the screams and shouts, the stomping of steel-toed work boots on old wooden floors, then Danilo's father was on him. Lucas woke up sometime later, his head throbbing and an open gash bleeding on the side of his head. His first thoughts had been of Danilo, and once the fog of being knocked out had cleared, he spotted him not three feet away.

Danilo had been unconscious, bleeding from the head, nose, mouth, bruises already blackening his eyes, and the tell-tale sign of a boot print on his forearm. Lucas had panicked, his mind awl with paranoia and confusion as he forced himself to his feet. He stumbled to the door of Danilo's room, shutting it quietly before shoving an old wooden chair under the knob. He'd fallen to his knees besides his best friend, afraid to touch, afraid to hurt him any more than he already was.

Fumbling in his pocket, he found the old beat-up cell phone he'd had for years, quickly dialing for an ambulance while he kept close watch on Danilo, who never opened his eyes or even flinched when the EMTs came and took him away. They'd taken Lucas along with them, and as he sat in the back of the ambulance, the worker speaking constantly but soothingly the whole time, he reflected on just how he wanted his life to be.

He loved Danilo with all his heart—would do anything and everything for him if he could—but he also wanted him happy and safe. All the bluster of Lucas' complaints of being in the closet for so long with a man who had a

girlfriend fizzled out that day as Danilo's broken body lay before him. He vowed to do whatever he could to make Danilo's life better whether that included himself or not.

They'd taken a quick look at Lucas when he arrived at the hospital, with him bitching the entire time about being fine and just wanting to see his friend. A bandage and some pain pills later they'd finally taken him to Danilo's room. Lucas had waited outside until the doctors and nurses finished examining and patching up Danilo, then argued with them until Lucas was blue in the face about him being not considered family. Lucas had won, but he knew they'd kept a close eye on him.

Mira had shown up at the hospital an hour later, claiming she'd been out with some girlfriends, but Lucas had noticed her shirt was inside out and her hair and make-up were ravaged in a way no self-respecting girl would ever be seen in public. He'd never mentioned it to Danilo, and by the next day when he'd finally regained consciousness, Lucas had swept the entire thing from his mind.

He'd been the first person Danilo asked for when he was coherent enough to do so—a fact that made Lucas a little dewy-eyed but able to cover up considering the circumstances. Mira had simply stepped aside—her own eyes dry and seemingly unemotional—letting the two friends sink into each other's arms for what seemed like forever. Lucas had sat with Danilo until he fell asleep then woke up again, Danilo's eyes were hazy with drugs and pain.

“Not her, Lu... love... you... always...”

The words took every thread of air from Lucas' body—despite being slurred and barely audible—then faded away when Danilo passed out again. Lucas had sat as still as possible until his body finally failed him. His emotions burst all at the same time—grief and fear for what had happened, worry for Danilo's recovery, hope and happiness for the words Danilo had finally said, and so much love he thought his heart would simply bust out of his chest at the same time. He bent to rest his head on Danilo's chest, silent sobs wracking his body as the steady pounding of Danilo's heart soothed and warmed him. He should have been afraid that someone would walk in, but in that moment, nothing had been more important than being close to the man he loved and the six words he'd never forget.

They never spoke of it afterwards. Whether because Danilo didn't remember what he said or was embarrassed at doing so wasn't really clear. Lucas hadn't wanted to rock the boat and he'd been content to just let the words float around in his head—in his heart—while Danilo recovered and came back to him. No charges were laid since Danilo had insisted it had been a stranger who'd broken into the house with the intention of robbing the place. It was farfetched, considering the neighborhood and the brutality of Danilo's beating, but Lucas went along with what Danilo wanted—what Danilo thought was best for them all.

They'd been even closer after that, with Mira taking up very little of Danilo's time, but still considered to be his lover of choice. Lucas didn't care. He'd almost lost the man he loved and he was fine to settle for second place or be Danilo's dirty little secret as long as he was able to love him.

A year later the news Lucas had never wanted to hear had been delivered. Mira was pregnant, and despite Danilo's harsh words to the contrary—we barely even have sex anymore, we always used a condom, there was no fucking way it's my baby—a hasty wedding had been planned under the watchful eye of Mira's stern, old-fashioned father.

Looking back on it, Lucas could see how selfish he'd been when Danilo had told him, how belittling and condescending he'd acted in a situation that wasn't about him. He'd ranted and fumed, while Danilo hung his head and just listened. Lucas had seen the fear and devastation on his best friend's face, had seen the tremble in his hands as he wrung them between his knees, had witnessed the cocky young man he'd always known wilt under the force of his accusations. All Lucas' compassion, his empathy, his common sense had flown out the window, and rather than try to comfort Danilo in what had to be the biggest shock of his life, he'd stormed out.

They hadn't spoken for almost a week after that, and it had been six of the hardest days in Lucas' life. He hadn't even considered what Danilo getting married meant, because in his world marriages were fleeting. They didn't last, but a baby... a baby was forever. Eventually, Danilo had worn him down, or at least Lucas had let himself be coaxed forward with sadness and shame. They'd reunited in a flurry of apologies and promises they both knew could never be

kept, but the words were comforting and gave Lucas hope that he hadn't made Danilo leave him for good.

They resumed their relationship as wedding plans were made and baby showers were planned. Lucas had felt an almost desperate desire to be with Danilo during that time, a need to possess him that he'd never felt before. Danilo had even slept at Lucas' place the night before he was to be married. It had been a clingy rush of fumbling hands in too much of a hurry, and releases that didn't quite soothe the burning pain in Lucas' gut—or the steely ache in his heart. They hadn't spoken, just used their bodies to share their feelings, their fear, their lust, their love.

The next day Lucas had stood at his best friend's, his lover's, his heart's side when Danilo kissed Mira and their lives became one—soon to be three. It had been torture, especially after a few drinks had been slung back and Danilo cornered him in the restroom, one hand shoving down Lucas' pants and the other fiercely grabbing the back of his head. They'd jacked each other until they couldn't breathe anymore, lips raw and red from the bruising kisses they just couldn't seem to stop, the inside of their pants sticky and uncomfortable once their orgasms rocked their bodies.

He'd watched with a heavy heart and a mind swimming with alcohol as Danilo whisked his new bride to a waiting car and disappeared into the night. All Lucas had been left with was a crusty pair of boxers, a stolen bottle of champagne, and a really bad taste in his mouth for what had happened. That was the night the final countdown had begun in Lucas' head—the ticking clock reminder of how much time he had left with Danilo before he let it all fall to the wayside, and ran as fast as he could in the other direction.

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A flash of light brought Lucas back to the present. He looked up, cold steel still biting his fingers as he clutched the handle of the gate, and suddenly Danilo was there—five-foot-ten of tousled black curls, tight jeans and a white T-shirt. So much was the same, but there were so many differences, too. The expressive brown eyes, full-red lips, and dark stubble were familiar, but the scruffiness of the five-o'clock shadow was sexier than the well-kept version had ever been.

Danilo's mop of hair that had always been slicked back to within an inch of its life was long and loose, framing high cheekbones. It also covered the scar on the side of Danilo's cheek that he had suffered when his father had beaten the hell out of him.

Unfortunately, the awkwardness was new.

"I wasn't sure you'd show." The smooth accent was just as Lucas remembered, low, deep, and sexy, the voice he'd kept in his head no matter where or how far he'd traveled.

"I said I would. Nice place... I like the yard."

"It's good for Luca—for my son."

It was clear both of them were afraid to make the first move. With Lucas it was a fear of losing himself far too quickly in Danilo's black eyes, of reality seeping into the surreality of the situation, of waking up from a dream he'd never thought would come true. He still didn't know what exactly the circumstances were around him standing in front of Danilo's little cookie-cutter house, but dammit if seeing him again didn't just bring way too many feelings to the surface at the freaking speed of light.

He'd tried so hard to put Danilo behind him, or at least let him live in his memories but not in the forefront of his heart. One glance into his eyes and all Lucas' work seemed for naught.

"You wanna come in or just stand out here?" The teasing grin and lone dimple were familiar, comfortable, exactly what Lucas had been trying to forget. "Luca is down for a nap, but we can sit on the step if you want."

"Luca?" Lucas wasn't sure if he'd heard right.

"That's what we call him."

Danilo looked a little jumpy, but not like the nervousness of his wedding day. It was more of an excited anxiety that Lucas could feel from a few feet away. Danilo's eyes were lit with some smoldering fire and his body grew taut one minute then relaxed the next. Lucas supposed it was good that he wasn't the only one feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

Lucas forced a slow smile, finally hooking his fingers under the gate latch and letting himself in the yard. "I bought... it's stupid, and cliché, but it's all I

could think of.” He shrugged, pausing with both feet at the bottom of the stairs while he held the stuffed bear out to Danilo.

With a gentle chuckle, Danilo squeezed the animal around its middle. He sat down on the top step, moving over as far as he could to leave room for Lucas. “He’ll love it. He’s into his stuffies right now... tries to pack them around everywhere.”

It suddenly occurred to Lucas—as he sat beside the man he’d loved most of his life, Danilo’s familiar scent surrounding his head and heart despite the cool breeze that threatened to push it away—that things would never be the same. Things could never be the same. And perhaps, things were as they should be.

“You look good. South Africa agreed with you, Güerito. You’re even blonder than before, and your tan makes it look like we could be brothers.”

Güerito—Danilo’s nickname for Lucas for as long as he could remember. The word made Lucas’ heart ache.

He smiled down at his clasped hands because it was all he could think of doing, and all he could do not to say something completely inappropriate—Are you happy? Did you miss me? Do you regret choosing Mira over me? Holding back his questions was the only way not to show his hand, so to speak, and by the look on Danilo’s face, his healthy physical presence, and his soft smile, Lucas was sure he had the answers to all of them.

“Are you all right?” Danilo shuffled so his back rested against the wooden railing of the stairs, his gaze focused and determined as he furrowed his eyebrows. “Nothing happened when you were away, did it? I mean, you didn’t get hurt or anything, right?”

“No,” Lucas said quickly. “Nothing like that. It’s just good to see you... but I’m not sure why I’m here.”

“Cause we’re still friends... aren’t we?”

“Of course.” Lucas looked back down at his hands, bunching the bottom of his T-shirt between his fingers until it was nothing more than a twisted ball. “It’s just strange, you know? Last time I saw you we were still... last time we were together, you were just becoming a father, and now... everything’s

different. Not that that's a bad thing, but I... fuck, I don't know what I'm saying."

He started to look up again when strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him tight and close, and oh-so-damn comfortable, against Danilo's chest. Lucas shuffled his insecurity and fear of getting too close to the back of his mind as he returned the embrace, stepping it up a notch, he leaned into Danilo soaking him up like he was the last drop of water in the desert. He'd missed having Danilo's body against his, the fingers that always twisted in his hair, the scent and rhythm of their bodies when they were tangled around one another.

Lucas clung to him, burying his nose in the nape of Danilo's neck, inhaling him like he'd never get the chance again—and that could definitely be the case. He'd missed the quiet moments of closeness just as much as the heated ones of passion. Danilo wasn't one to talk about things, but his body always spoke volumes to Lucas.

Reality came crashing back around them when a stuttered cough interrupted the silence.

"G'morning, Danilo. How's the little guy?"

Lucas pulled away so fast he lost his balance and tumbled backwards onto the porch, his shoulders and head connecting against the wood with a loud thunk. Embarrassment at what he'd been doing with Danilo—what they'd been doing to each other outside, in public, where people could see them—colored his cheeks and made him squirm once he righted himself.

"Hey, Fred. He's good. Down for a nap so his papa can entertain a friend." Danilo winked at him then, and Lucas felt the warmth of his cheeks creep into his ears and neck. "This is my friend, Lucas. Lucas, Fred—the mailman."

Danilo smiled wide as Fred stepped inside the yard before holding out his hand. Lucas wasn't sure what to do or say so he went with it, rising from his spot, then politely shaking Fred's hand. When he pulled it away, he stayed standing, both hands shoved securely in his pockets. Another awkward situation.

"Lucas? This is the Lucas?" Fred asked, big toothy grin taking over his face. Lucas surmised he was in his late forties or maybe early fifties. He had a

pleasant but unremarkable face, and his smile was wide and bright—and maybe a little creepy. “My favorite little boy’s namesake? Danilo’s told us a lot about you, so it’s nice to put a face to the name.”

Lucas wouldn’t have been more shocked if Fred had kissed him on the mouth. At some point, Danilo had risen from the step to stand behind him, one hand resting hot and supportive on the small of Lucas’ back.

“Fred’s wife watches Lucas sometimes. He loves her, and they both spoil him rotten.”

“That’s nice. I’m happy to meet you, too, Fred.”

Fred looked like he had something else to say, but instead shifted his bag higher on his shoulder and gave a quick nod. “Okay, well I better get back to earning my paycheck. You still need us to take the little guy tomorrow night? Doris said you needed some privacy?”

If Lucas hadn’t known better he would have sworn his blush had transferred to Danilo, but Danilo didn’t blush—ever. Or was that another one of the changes?

“Um,” Danilo began. He paused to shove a hand through his curls then graced Lucas with a shy smile. “I might have jumped the gun on that... can I let you know... later?”

“No problem. It’s not like we have big exciting plans, though it is *Dancing With the Stars* night. Luca loves that show.”

Danilo laughed, the redness from before washing from his face as his mouth opened wide and he tilted his head back. “You’re gonna turn my boy into a dancer with all your weird ballroom shows.”

“Never hurts to mix it up, son. Just give us a call when you know for sure. Nice to see you, Lucas. Have a good day, boys.”

They stood there for a few pounding heartbeats before Danilo rubbed his fingers against Lucas’ back. “You wanna come in? I’ve got coffee... not good coffee, but it’s coffee anyhow.”

A relaxed grin spread involuntarily over Lucas’ face. “Have you ever had Peace Corps coffee? Sludge would be a better name for it.”

Danilo nodded with a tight smile, his hand dropping away from Lucas' body, the movement immediately leaving Lucas' back cold and empty. He opened the screen door for Lucas then followed him inside. Lucas snuck a peek behind him when Danilo shut the door—he looked good, healthy, put-together, and at least a little more relaxed than Lucas felt.

He hadn't had any expectations of what Danilo's home would be like—except for the initial surprise that Danilo had settled in the 'burbs in a typical family home complete with white picket fence—well, the fence part anyway. The tidy living room had a fabric-covered couch, small television and coffee table.

There was a wicker basket in the center of the room placed in the middle of a rug that looked surprisingly like a set of train tracks complete with pictures of trees and buildings. Toys were scattered here and there, not so much in a haphazard manner, but like they were supposed to be in their own messy little sections of the room. It was the exact opposite of the atrocious living conditions Danilo and Lucas had each grown up in—definitely a home, not just a house.

“Luca and I aren't much for tidying up.” Danilo smiled softly, his dimple popping and winking at Lucas as he slipped past. “Still drink it black?”

“Yeah. Some things never change.”

After being gone for only a moment, Danilo pressed a warm mug between Lucas' hands, stopping right in front of him, his determined gaze asking permission—but for what, Lucas didn't know. He found out very quickly when Danilo leaned in and kissed him—soft and lingering, chaste but firm in his intentions. Lucas stepped back quickly, almost losing himself in a moment that should not be happening in the first place, or so he had convinced himself.

“Dani... I can't.”

Danilo stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans, dipping his head and peering up at Lucas through long lashes. “It's all right. I know that was a little fast. I've just... just, you know, missed you so much, Güerito. Two years... with nothing... without you. But you look great. I guess being away agreed with you, huh?”

Lucas whispered, “Thanks,” then stepped around Danilo to sit on the end of the green couch.

He made a point of blowing the steam off his coffee, then taking a slow sip. His logical thoughts were all messed up with the overwhelming emotional turmoil in his head, his rapidly thumping heart and lustful warmth in his pants adding to the overall confusion.

Questions circled his mind, making it even harder to know what he should and shouldn’t say, but considering he was saying nothing anyhow and the dead air was too much to bear, he just went for it.

“How’s Mira?”

It was a shot in the gut, really—the most important question he needed to ask, but also the one answer he dreaded hearing. As Danilo walked toward the couch, Lucas took a moment to scope out the photos that were scattered around the room—various stages of a child’s life, a few of Danilo with the baby, one of Lucas’ grandmother with the child (what the fuck?), and finally an old shot of Lucas and Danilo laughing and liquored-up in college. The latter surprised him, along with the fact there appeared to be none of Mira, not even their wedding picture.

Danilo sat down beside Lucas, his body perched in the middle of the couch while he tucked a leg beneath him and turned so they were face-to-face. “She doesn’t live here, Lucas. She never has.”

Had Lucas been living in a cartoon world, his brain would have exploded in a stunning rain of red fireworks. As it was, he could only scramble for words. “What? She... I know you weren’t living here before, but—oh my God, is she okay?”

Danilo slid a hand to rest on Lucas’ thigh, warmth seeping through the heavy denim of Lucas’ jeans. Danilo had never been a touchy sort of person, not with Lucas or Mira back in the day, yet it seemed like he’d been constantly touching Lucas since his arrival, and it was more than a little off-putting.

“No, no, she’s fine... just doesn’t live with me and Luca.”

No Mira?

“Does that mean you’re divorced?”

With a shrug, Danilo bowed his head then looked at Lucas with a sad smile. “Not legally yet, but we haven’t been together for almost a year and a half.”

Lucas’ whole body stiffened and he was off the couch like he’d been set on fire—and that’s what it certainly felt like. His coffee spilled over the rim of his cup and he flinched back, barely saving it from a very messy death on the hardwood floor. Danilo grabbed his arm, but Lucas pulled away.

His brain twitched with selfish, angry thoughts. A year and a half? They’d been separated for a fucking year and a half? That meant it had only been the first six months after Lucas left before they weren’t together anymore. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, except sorry for himself, angry that he’d left in the first place, and pissed-off that Danilo seemed to have screwed him around... again.

“Six months? You were only together six months?” The words squeaked past his lips before he could stop them—too harsh, too loud, too full of the emotion he was struggling to contain.

Danilo held out a hand, palm raised like he was trying to calm a wild animal. “Sit down, Lucas... please. You look like you’re gonna freak. Let me get you some water.”

“No water! Just... just, like, what the hell, Dani... I left so you could be with her. I thought it was what you wanted, so what the hell happened? And why the fuck am I here?”

A rustling sound followed by a single word—*Papa*—filled the room. Lucas glanced over to see a baby monitor sitting on top of the TV. Other words sailed through the speaker—*up, drink, toys*—spaced out with undecipherable babblings.

“That’s why you’re here. I want you to meet my son. I need you to know my son because I still—”

Lucas couldn’t have been sure of what Danilo was going to say, but he didn’t want to hear it, or more to the point, he couldn’t hear it, not if he was going to walk out the door again. “I do want to meet him, but just don’t... I don’t wanna talk about us. We need to make this about him, okay?”

The soft look on Danilo's face fell away as he gnawed on the inside of his cheek.

“Sure... yeah. Just give me a minute.”

Lucas' gaze followed him as he left the room, then the sweet sound of a higher-registered voice Lucas had never heard from Danilo sprung from the monitor. “Hey, *hombrecito*. Did you have a good nap? How come teddy's on the floor, dude? How about we get you some juice and you can meet someone special.”

The static of the monitor was suddenly cut off, along with the voices and babbling, but Lucas could still hear the pair cooing at each other from the room beyond. He'd never seen Danilo with a baby or any child, really. Neither of them had siblings or young cousins when they were growing up, so there'd never been the opportunity.

He hadn't even known Danilo wanted to be a father until he got the news Mira was pregnant. Sure he'd been shocked and upset at first, but Lucas had seen the way he looked at Mira when her belly started growing, heard how he talked incessantly about heartbeats and delivery options, knew the unborn baby had already stolen a little piece of Danilo's heart.

There had been times when Lucas thought Danilo was happier about being a father than Mira was at being a mother. He guessed it was a stereotypical way of thinking, that every woman should be, and was, happy about giving birth, or the having a child part, at least. But Mira had spent more time researching how she could get back in shape once she'd popped the baby out, than things they needed to get for a newborn baby.

Danilo had done all the shopping, with Mira's parents contributing both larger items like a crib and car seat, and money for the young couple to further clothe and equip their new grandchild. Lucas had been with him during a lot of those buying sprees, listening to him debate the validity of one diaper company's claim over another, the best safety records for strollers, the perfect color to buy onesies in when they didn't know if it was a boy or girl.

Lucas hadn't had a freaking clue what a onesie even was, and if he was perfectly honest with himself, he didn't care either. He went along on Danilo's

little excursions simply to spend time with him since he knew all the fussing about diapers and colors and onesies was just the beginning of the end—for him and Danilo.

The sound of the toilet flushing, then water pouring in the sink brought Lucas back to the Danilo of the present. “Good boy, Luca. What a big boy you are. Going potty all by yourself. Pretty soon no more diapers for Luca. Should we call *Abuelita* to tell her?”

“Abu! Abu!”

*Abuelita*. Lucas’ Spanish was rusty but he recognized it as the name Danilo had always called Lucas’ grandmother.

“Lucas... this is Luca.” Danilo’s low chuckle was followed by a gurgly baby laugh.

Lucas turned to see the most adorable baby he’d ever imagined, and it wasn’t that he’d seen a lot, but Luca—baby Lucas—looked just like his papa.

“Luc,” the mini-Danilo squeaked. “Luc. Luc. Luc.”

“Is he saying my name?”

“And his.”

Danilo’s hand caressed over the baby’s head and Lucas suddenly remembered those long fingers touching and stroking him. He hadn’t allowed too many memories to seep into his life away from Danilo, but the savored soft touches and occasional holding of hands had always been close to the surface. He hated that despite the news Danilo had delivered—despite the sacrifice Lucas thought he had made—he was feeling a strong pull to the past that he only wanted to leave behind.

He stepped closer to Danilo, a shaky hand reaching out to brush over the baby’s fleshy thigh. All other thoughts left his head, just disappeared into familiar brown eyes on a much smaller face. “He’s beautiful, Dani. Looks so much like you... his eyes and mouth...”

“They say babies’ eyes change after a while, but his never did. Still have that copper tinge around the edges just like—”

“Yours,” Lucas said. “You look so... I don’t even know... so comfortable with him.”

Danilo laughed, his smile slow and proud as he poked Luca gently in the belly. “Have to be. We only really have each other... for now.”

Something changed in his eyes then, nothing exact or probably noticeable by someone who hadn't known—and loved—Danilo most of his life. The depth of his gaze shifted, just enough to make the cocky, young man seem vulnerable in a way Lucas had never seen before.

“Do you wanna hold him? He's usually a little squirmy and he's getting so big, but after his nap he tends to mellow out a bit. You don't have to... I just thought...”

“Sure.” Lucas struggled to calm his fluttering nerves. “I don't really know what to do... He won't mind a stranger holding him?”

Another chuckle and Danilo moved so he stood in front of Lucas, his sweet fragrance flooding Lucas with more unwanted memories.

“Are you kidding me? He's an attention whore, man. If I was straight, he'd have me rolling in women by now. He's got the whole ‘look at how cute and adorable I am’ thing down pat.”

“If you were straight?”

Danilo lowered his gaze at the question, blinking and parting his lips like he planned on replying. Instead, he handed over a wide-eyed, slobbery baby. Lucas took his namesake into his arms, struggling with what the best way was to hold him, where to put his hands, how not to drop him on the floor. In the end, it was Luca who decided, winding one arm around Lucas' neck while he stared silently into his eyes.

“He likes you,” Danilo said, drawing Lucas from his fascination and reminding him to breathe.

“How can you tell?”

“He's checking you out. He doesn't normally do that with strangers... usually wants me to take him back right away.” Danilo pressed a hand between Lucas' shoulder blades. “Why don't you guys sit down and I'll get my little man some juice.”

“Juice... Papa.”

Lucas carried him to the couch, carefully sitting down in an attempt to not jostle or upset him. Luca moved his gaze from Lucas to Danilo for a mere moment, then focused back on him. One chubby hand reached for Lucas' cheek, warm soft fingers gliding over his skin. He felt like he should say something, but had no idea how to even talk to a baby. He took his cues from Danilo.

“Hi, Luca. You're a big boy, huh?” Serious but calm eyes met Lucas', the tiny hand still resting against his cheek. “You seem to have your papa wrapped around your little finger.”

“Papa, go?” Luca moved his fingers from Lucas' face, pointing in the direction Danilo had gone. “Papa, juice.”

“Your papa will be right back.” Lucas let one hand wander over Luca's back, then up to his head. His hair was softer than anything he'd ever touched, baby fine on top of a perfectly round skull. “I can see how you'd be pretty easy to fall for.”

“Does the same go for me?” Danilo returned, a blue, plastic cup with a spout and handles balanced in one hand. Luca waggled his fingers, clenching and unclenching his fist while Danilo sat down beside him. “Papa's being too pushy, yeah?” His words were obviously meant for Lucas, but his attention was solely trained on his son.

Lucas felt a knot twist in the pit of his belly. “I should probably go. Do you want to... you know, take him or what do I do?”

“You can just put him on the floor. He's probably ready to play.” Danilo handed the cup to Luca, the spout immediately engulfed between sucking lips. “I wish you'd stay, Lucas.”

Luca toddled off as soon as his feet hit the floor, juice cup clutched in one hand as he headed in the direction of his basket of toys. Lucas watched him, fascinated by the tiny human who brought out such a gentle expression on Danilo's face. He avoided Danilo's statement.

“You said you weren't straight... makes sense obviously, but the way you said it... I guess I just always assumed you were bi.”

“Probably, but Mira's the only girl I ever dated.”

“Only takes one to get married and have a child with, doesn’t it?”

The bitterness from years of missing and sharing Danilo suddenly crept into Lucas’ subconscious. He felt blindsided by things he obviously didn’t understand, things that Danilo alluded to, but Lucas wasn’t sure he wanted clarification on. He’d tried so hard to move on, move away, move forward without Danilo, and it was so unfair to have more questions crop up than the simple ones he’d been needing to ask for so long.

Somehow *how’ve you been, how’s married life, and what’s it like to be a father*, had become less important than *why hasn’t Mira been living with you, why did you name him after me, and why do I get the feeling this is more than a casual visit between old friends?* Lucas wasn’t sure he wanted the answers since the questions would probably only bring up more. Plus, things were definitely on the uneasy, awkward side at the moment.

Luca appeared at his feet again, one hand gripping Lucas’ knee and the other offering up a red, metal fire truck. The toddler smiled and for the first time Lucas saw the rows of perfect white teeth hidden behind the full lips that matched his papa’s, the long dark lashes, the wisps of ringlets that were plastered to his head after his nap. He knew the kid could very easily melt him into a puddle of goo. No wonder Danilo looked so happy.

“He definitely likes you... doesn’t share his favorite truck with anyone, not even me sometimes. Guess he can tell how much I... love you.”

It felt like Lucas had been sucker-punched. It would have been no different if Danilo had walked up to him face-to-face then punched him as hard as he could in the stomach. He felt nauseous and disoriented, his heart pounding fast against his ribs. It was silly. Lucas had seen death and disease and things so disheartening and heartbreaking in South Africa, yet had managed to put his feelings aside and did what he could to help. But the word love from between Danilo’s lips made him feel like he’d been physically broken.

It was no damn fair. Lucas had waited years upon years to hear Danilo say he loved him, but hearing it in the context of his child was a little too much for him to take in. The two were so ridiculously not related, and not how Lucas had ever anticipated it happening, especially when he’d given up the possibility forever. He wanted to tell Danilo to take it back, tell him to man up

and quit playing games. And dammit, he wasn't there to think or talk about his feelings with Danilo, that wasn't what old friends did.

The air in the room was heavy and suffocating as Lucas shuffled along the couch until he was free of baby Luca, his fire truck, and Danilo. A hand around his wrist brought his gaze up back Danilo's worried eyes.

"I didn't mean..."

"I gotta go, Dani. I just... your... Luca's awesome. I'm glad you called, but I've just... I can't do this again." Lucas wrenched his hand away, and pushed off the sofa. He paused to pet across baby Luca's head, and was rewarded with an excited "Lucs".

The door seemed farther than when he'd come in, but he made it without tripping over his feet despite feeling like he'd been filled with lead. He didn't understand the panic waving inside him, but he'd have time to question it... later. The screen door was half-open when Danilo called to him.

"Lucas! Can we talk about it... please? I know I hurt you, and fu—I'm sorry. I'm not that screwed-up kid anymore. Can you just stay a little—"

Lucas forced a half-smile, interrupting Danilo before reaching out a hand. He brushed his fingers over Danilo's shoulder. "I'll call you. I promise."

"Come over tomorrow night? I'll explain then. Please... it's important."

He heard the plea as the door closed behind him, his feet already carrying his cowardly ass away from where he really wanted to be. Tomorrow night?

More secrets, Dani?

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Margaret Winston—the woman who had taken Lucas in when he was seventeen—was at the kitchen table, a steaming cup of her favorite tea sitting untouched in front of her. She motioned Lucas over when he walked in, patting the spot beside her.

"I need to check the want-ads online, Grams. I've gotta find a—"

"Did Danilo upset you?"

"What?" Lucas gave in to the pleading of her eyes as he sank heavily into the chair beside her. "How do you even know that?"

“You got to meet Luca then? He’s so precious... such a good little boy. He’s always happy. Danilo’s a good father.”

“He’s cute and Dani seems different—a good different, I guess. But I’m not upset, not really. It’s all just too weird.”

Margaret brought her mug to her mouth, sipping quietly, but keeping her gaze focused on Lucas. “Nothing weird about reconnecting. You and Danilo were inseparable for so long.”

“Friends grow out of each other.”

“Sometimes, maybe, but his feelings haven’t changed.”

Lucas leaned closer to the table, one hand moving to trace the pattern on the tablecloth. “How do you even know that? Why do you know so much about the baby?”

“Danilo didn’t tell you?”

“He didn’t tell me anything.” That wasn’t entirely true and Lucas hadn’t really given him...

“Did you give him a chance?” Margaret covered Lucas’ hand and he didn’t pull away. “He was so worried when he decided to call you. He’s been scared since he found out you were back.”

What freaking dimension of time had Lucas walked into? He didn’t understand his grandmother’s sudden knowledge when it came to Danilo. “He told you that?”

“You left, Lucas, but Danilo still comes to see me... he’s still family. I look after Luca sometimes. I’m his *Abuelita*, and Danilo is my renter.”

Lucas licked over his lips, the home Danilo had made for himself and Luca prominent in his mind. “That’s your house?”

“Danilo needed a place to go after Mira’s parents kicked him out. I’d always hoped you’d come back and live there, and you still can. He understands it’s not permanent unless... well, that’s certainly not my business. I’ve had the house for a few years. It was empty, so... everything worked out.”

“And you never told me... why?”

“When you left you were clear on not wanting any part of us... Danilo, the baby, me...”

“That’s not true. I was hurting and I just couldn’t stick around. I’m sorry it was so fast” He didn’t like the sadness in his grandmother’s eyes, especially after all she’d done for him, and now for his... for Danilo and Luca.

“Sweetheart, you were broken hearted. All you wanted was to get away. Danilo understood that, and I promised not to interfere.”

“I wasn’t broken... I’m... I’m not broken. You knew about us? But how? When?”

Margaret clicked her tongue at him, just as she’d always done when he’d asked something she thought he should just know. “I’ve known you loved that boy since you moved in with me.”

“But you never said anything.”

“I’m not stupid, Lucas. I know, and knew back then, that you were keeping it a secret for a reason. I know what Danilo’s father did to him, and I understand how he lived in fear that it would happen again to him... or to you.”

“He did, and I could never help with that because I couldn’t be what his father and everyone else thought Danilo needed—wife, child, fatherhood. But what’s changed, Grams. I’m still a man and so is Danilo... goddamn it, I should have stayed away longer.”

“Oh, Lucas,” Margaret said. She squeezed his fingers, pressing his palm to the table like she didn’t want him to get away. “Why? Because you don’t love him, or because you’re afraid of knowing that he’s always loved you, and that he still does.”

“No.” Lucas’ voice echoed through the kitchen. “I left so he could have a normal family... I stepped aside from everything I wanted—then he—”

“He tried, Lucas. You need to talk to him about this. You’re not a teenager who can just stomp his feet and throw a tantrum because things aren’t how you think they should or should have been. He made sacrifices, too.”

“He had a wife and baby—he had everything. What was his sacrifice?”

“You.”

Lucas sat hunched over his laptop, the words on the screen nothing more than strings of letters with no meaning. He'd received a few good letters of reference from various people in the Corps, but he was too distracted to consider any job listing. Instead, he stared blankly at the screen, all his brainwaves turned to Danilo.

In some ways—more than likely juvenile ones—he felt ganged-up on, like he'd been invited late to a party that everyone knew about and were already enjoying. The gifts had been handed-out, introductions made, while Lucas stood in the corner unaware of anything that was going in.

It had been a shock to find out his grandmother had known the true nature of his relationship with Danilo, but knowing he'd confided in her was almost inconceivable. As far as Lucas knew, Danilo had never spoken to anyone about them, whether by unspoken rule or embarrassment, that was just how it had been. They were a secret, an affair on the down-low, a relationship to be kept in the shadows. No matter how much Lucas had felt like the odd man out with Danilo and Mira, no matter how much he'd always loved Danilo, he'd never told anyone—and he'd been faithful the entire time they were together.

He understood that Danilo must have been distraught when he and Mira split-up—upset, scared, freaked-the-fuck-out—and that he'd had no family except an abusive father, but why pick Lucas' grandmother? Danilo had always been welcome in Lucas' home, and Lucas now knew the real reason behind his grandmother's love for Danilo—she'd known all along what the two of them were doing. That she'd never mentioned it, especially if she also knew about Mira, was a question for another time.

Lucas wasn't sure if he was more relieved or angry that neither his grandmother nor Danilo had tried to get in touch with him when the marriage had fallen apart, but he also understood the reasoning. He'd been a mess after his last night with Danilo—the day baby Lucas was born. He'd already had the paperwork filed, his position secure and waiting for him on another continent. All he'd done was gather his things, kiss his grandmother and promise to keep in touch.

He'd spent two days at the airport waiting for a standby flight, too afraid that if he went home he'd never make good on his vow to leave. His time away

had given him time to think, to mature and see how his selfish actions could have hurt everyone involved. He'd learned to put others first, to feel what it was like to be the one left out in the cold as he and Danilo had done to Mira with their deception. The ache in his heart and need to call Danilo—just needing him, period—had caused the most pain Lucas had ever known, and though it faded as time went on, he'd still wondered and wished things had been different.

To know now that it had all been an exercise in futility, to hear that Danilo's societally-blessed, religiously-approved family life had lasted only six months made Lucas feel used. It was no different than how Danilo had used Mira to cover up his sexual preferences, and in turn Lucas had let it happen. He hated thinking of it that way, but if Danilo had no intention of staying with Mira why hadn't he asked Lucas to stay? Had there been yet another man, woman, whatever, waiting in the wings? Had Lucas been just as disposable as Mira?

Lucas didn't remember Danilo having any objections to his departure—both from their relationship and from the country—but then again, feelings and emotions hadn't been a subject of any of their conversations. Danilo had actually spoken more about them in a few short sentences today than he'd said for the entirety of their time together, with the exception of his slip in the hospital. It always seemed as if being together was just how it was meant to be, so how they felt and acted with each other didn't need to be attached to any certain words or sentiments. But in the end, Lucas had been hurt by Danilo's silence, and perhaps, it would have made leaving easier had Danilo expressed how he felt—or it could have made it worse.

The change in Papa-Danilo seemed a natural progression from partying young adult to parenthood, and Lucas wished he'd been there to see it. But there was something more—the cocky, I-can-rule-the-world Danilo of the past had been replaced by one who was more comfortable in his skin. And though Lucas had only had a brief glimpse of the new model, it had been easy to recognize the lack of fidgeting and nervous energy.

Danilo had never been able to sit still, always a chorus of tapping fingers, wiggling and twitching limbs, always something in motion. Now calm seemed

to radiate from him, the over-confident cockiness replaced by a knowing presence and humility Lucas had never witnessed in Danilo before. And then there was the honesty in his eyes, the old steely look of someone on edge—someone pretending to be something he wasn't—turned to self-awareness and clarity.

It was all so confusing, and suddenly simply missing Danilo didn't seem like such a bad thing anymore, as long as Lucas missed him from afar.

He was on the fence with regards to his feelings, half of him wanting to run back to Danilo no questions asked, but the other part wary of both the questions and the answers—leaning more towards the flight part of the fight-or-flight equation. He'd told his grandmother in no uncertain terms that the subject, and any other subject revolving around Danilo, was closed at least until the morning. He needed a break from his mind, but obviously the online job market was not the right cure.

He must have dozed off with his laptop resting on his knees, back resting comfortably against the headboard of the bed, because he was suddenly startled fully awake. A knock rattled the sleepiness of his brain and he instinctively wrapped his fingers around his computer.

“I'm not hungry, Grams. Thanks.”

“But I brought your favorite, Lu.”

Lucas automatically straightened up, his fingers tightening around his laptop, the voice from the past resonating inside his head. He froze, his breath hitching in his throat and just hanging there, heavy and suffocating.

“Lucas? Your grandmother said you were in there. Can I come in?”

He let the laptop slide from his thighs, his feet touching the floor with a slight wobble. He paused at the door, fingers wrapping around the knob as he inhaled a slow breath. When he finally opened it, Mira's familiar smile greeted him like another punch to the gut. It took all the resolve he had left not to look away.

“Um... hey. How... how are you? I'm... yeah, I'm surprised to see you.”

With her smile not faltering, Mira wiggled the plastic container in her hands. “Homemade empanadas.”

“With aji sauce?” He couldn’t help but smile back, though his mouth felt more twitchy than happy.

“Of course. Kitchen? Oh, and I’m supposed to tell you your grams went out to sit in the garden so we can have some privacy.”

Lucas nodded, then followed Mira back down the hall. It didn’t seem like a particularly good idea, but he couldn’t send her away, especially since his grandmother knew she was there. He gathered napkins and glasses of water, while Mira set the container on the table and opened the lid. The smell of the old days wafted into the room, hitting Lucas where it hurt the worst—smack dab in the middle of his heart.

“Do you want a fork?”

Mira snorted. “Fingers just like the old days, hon.”

Much like Danilo, Mira had changed but also stayed the same. The wild curls had been cut short, her make-up less dramatic, subtler, and her dress cut to mid-thigh instead of just below her ass. The large expressive eyes were the same, and the full mouth Lucas had seen change from sweet to sailor-profane in a matter of seconds. She was still beautiful—dark and mysterious in a way he’d always been jealous of with his fair skin and light hair. She’d always matched Danilo perfectly.

They ate in silence at first, the heavy quiet seeming like a duel from some old Western—Lucas drew first, of course.

“I’m sorry about you and Danilo,” he began. After a big gulp of water, he continued while Mira seemed to stop chewing as she waited. “And about... you know, me and him.”

Mira was hugging him from behind before he even realized she’d stood up. “I’m glad to see you,” she whispered into his hair. “I really am. He’s been drowning without you.”

Lucas didn’t understand the meaning of her words, but he wrapped an arm around her head as she squeezed the life out of him. They’d never hugged before, except maybe as she and Danilo were being swept into their waiting wedding car, and Lucas had been almost full-blown blotto with alcohol and grief. When she released him and sat back down, he was the one waiting her out.

“You saw them then? Dani and Luca?”

It all smelled of conspiracy—Danilo’s call, Margaret’s urgings, Mira just happening to show up. “Did Dani call you, too?”

She shook her head, her fingers shredding the napkin in front of her. Lucas understood her nervousness more than he could say.

“Your grams called me.” She wagged her index finger before Lucas could even express his unhappiness. “I wanted to see you anyhow. Was waiting for Dani to get to you first. I imagine he didn’t tell you the whole story?”

Lucas shifted farther back in his chair. “He told me enough. Luca’s beautiful, Mira.”

“Looks just like Dani, right?”

“No mistaking who his daddy is.”

Mira dipped her chin to her chest, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears when she raised her head again. “He’s so good with him, Lu. So natural... not something any of us would have expected, right?”

“He had a softer side on occasion, but not like I see when he’s with Luca.”

“You’re the only one who saw that side of him back then, you know?”

Leaning his elbows on the table, Lucas cocked his head to study Mira’s face. “There has to be some softness to making a baby.”

Mira snorted out a chuckle. “I can count on two hands the number of times we had sex, including making Luca, at least after you came on the scene.”

“What?” Lucas was pretty sure his brain was malfunctioning.

“It’s true, and really weird probably for you to hear. But except for that one time, it was more of an obligation than anything else.” Lucas stared open-mouthed as Mira rose then grabbed her purse from the counter. She took out her wallet, fingering a photo before handing to him. It was a picture of Mira and an older man, both of them smiling widely into the camera. Lucas didn’t think he’d ever seen Mira smile like that. “Neither one of us needed to have sex because we already were.”

Lucas gnawed on the inside of his cheek. “What does having sex out of obligation even mean, Mira?”

“I thought he had someone else and maybe he did, too, but we had to keep up appearances of at least being a little into one another. It was all a damn smokescreen that we were both hiding behind without knowing the other was doing the same thing.”

“Did you know it was me then?”

“I suspected, but it was a pretty weird assumption so I probably just avoided it. But I didn’t care anyhow because I already had Jerry.”

“You had... Jerry?”

“Dani loved you and I loved Jerry... still do... same goes for Dani, too.”

Ignoring the last part of Mira’s sentence, Lucas pushed on. “But... why? Why hide behind Danilo so you could see... Jerry? It’s not like you had to out yourself to do it.”

Mira slipped the photo back into her purse then fixed her gaze on Lucas again. “It was an affair in the true sense of the word, Lu. Jerry was my professor, and he was married. Plus, you met my father. I was supposed to marry a boy from the neighborhood, pop out a couple kids, and live happily ever after.”

“But Luca?”

“Purely an accident of circumstances. We had no intention of getting married... we weren’t even having fake sex anymore.” Mira paused, gnawing on her bottom lip for a while before continuing. Lucas took a bite of his empanada while he waited her out. “Do you remember when you had a girl from your old high school visit you?”

Lucas’ brain worked overtime for a few dozen heartbeats until... “Barb?”

“Blonde and tiny?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Lucas nodded in time with Mira.

“You and she went off to do some catching-up... I think she even stayed here with you.”

“And I slept on the couch... so?”

“Dani didn’t know that. He was angry, and probably jealous. It also just so happened that I’d had a fight with Jerry that day. Dani and I got so drunk we

barely remembered having sex, let alone if we used a condom or if it broke or whatever. Anyhow, it wasn't planned or fuck if we even remember if it was good, but Luca was born nine months later."

The fact Danilo had been angry because Lucas had spent an evening with a friend stroked something raw inside of Lucas. Hypocritical bastard. "How fucked up is that? I shared him with you for years, but I spent one night with a friend and he freaks out? He knew I wasn't into women at all. I'm not even sure how to respond to that."

"Maybe that's when he realized how much he loved you."

"I told him I loved him, Mira, maybe not a lot, but as much as possible considering how uncomfortable it made him. But okay, Luca was a very accidental slip. Don't take this the wrong way but... why keep him then? If you didn't love each other or want to be a family..."

Mira shook her head. "My father was already after us to get married, but I wouldn't have had Luca if that was the only reason. Dani wanted the baby, Lu. It was his idea to keep it... didn't matter that he didn't love me. I think you can guess who was on his mind when we finally decided on a name."

"He wanted to be a father?" Had he really known him at all?

"Yeah. I think he decided to give the marriage a shot because of the baby. I know that probably hurts you, and I'm sorry, but from the first time he heard the heartbeat, he sort of threw all his cards in."

"I know. He talked about the baby constantly. That's when I made the decision to leave as soon as the baby came. I didn't want him to feel obligated to see me, and, well, maybe I didn't want to see him with you and the kid. I am sorry it didn't work out if it was what you both wanted."

"It wasn't... for either of us. I never stopped seeing Jerry, and Dani and I only grew further apart when Luca was born. After you left, Dani focused everything on Luca, but I'd see him sometimes just staring at the phone like he was willing it to ring. It's no mystery who he wanted to be on the other end either." She smiled sadly, and Lucas felt compelled to hold her hand. She took it gratefully, giving it a hard squeeze before she spoke again. "I'm still a little mad that you never even said good-bye to me, by the way."

Lucas sighed, remembering how he'd stood outside the hospital with a stupid stuffed animal in his hands—*déjà vu* for real. He'd really tried to go in and offer his congratulations, but Danilo's mask of indifference the night before, had made it seem like a pointless gesture. So he'd cut the last thread that was keeping him tied to Danilo, and left without a word.

"I couldn't. It was too hard already. I think if I would have waited, I couldn't have gone through with it. How was he, you know, when I left?"

"A mess, but he held it together. I know he would have gone after you if we hadn't just had the baby. I could see in his eyes how much he was hurting, but I couldn't do a damn thing to help because neither of us had come clean about our relationships."

"Then why did you move out, Mira? And why does it seem like Danilo has Luca more than you."

"Because he does." She smiled sadly, the emotion darkening her eyes. "I tried. I really did, but I've never wanted kids... still don't... and Jerry already has a couple of teenagers. Dani has full custody."

"But how could you..."

"I don't even know how to explain it, but when I look at Luca, I see a beautiful baby, but I don't see or feel part of me. I never felt like his mother, Lu. I had him a few times after I moved out, and I know it makes me sound like an awful person and even worse mother, but Luca is better off with Dani."

"I'm sorry. That must be hard to accept."

"I know he'll always be taken care of. And maybe one day I'll regret not forcing myself to stay in his life. We waited until he was one for me to make my final decision, and even when I've seen him since, I just see Dani in him, none of me. I even see a little of you because once we worked out what had really been going on in our relationship, he talked nonstop about you. He was always so closed off when we were together, you know, but after everything was out in the open, he changed so fast."

"What do you mean? As a dad?"

Mira swiped a tear from her cheek, lips turning up in a half-smile. "Well, yeah, but he's done so much more. He went to his father's place, you know,

and told him he'd never be allowed to see his grandchild because he was a homophobic prick, 'And guess what, Dad? You were right about me and Lucas. I love him and I always have.'"

Lucas was speechless, emotion building behind his eyes that he just couldn't seem to blink away. Mira pressed their hands together harder. "I can't believe he... he never even said it to me."

"Emotionally stunted... he actually talked to me about that, too," Mira replied. "After that, he just chilled out. No booze, no weed. He got a job working nights so he could be with Luca during the day. You know who babysat, right?"

"I met some guy named Fred this morning. Dani said his wife babysat."

"No, it was your grams. That's why she moved him into the house so he was closer, and she could see her grandchild."

If Lucas had heard right, it was beyond ridiculous. "Her what?"

"That baby is probably the closest I'll have to a great-grandson, Lucas." Margaret appeared in the doorway, hands clutched around a binder. "And I'm not telling you that to pressure you or make you feel guilty. I'm telling you because it's true."

Lucas shook his head, taking his hand from Mira's, then threading his fingers through his hair. "Why didn't one of you tell me what was going on?" He had a headache, and it only seemed to be getting worse with all the new information that seemed stranger than fiction.

Margaret moved so she stood between Lucas and Mira. "I hardly ever heard from you, but I understood why. Danilo insisted you needed to come home when you were ready. He didn't want to pressure you."

"What if I never did?"

Margaret grazed a hand over Lucas'. "I think he had a three-year time limit for you. He did some research and that's what he said the average was for being in the Corps."

"It is, but I needed... I dunno. I guess I just needed to come home."

After kissing the top of Lucas' head, Margaret leaned in and placed the binder on the table. "I saved all these pictures for you."

When Lucas looked down at the book, he could have sworn his heart stopped for a minute. The front of the soft blue binder had the words Lucas Winston Torres in bold blue letters.

He felt another wave of shock roll through him. “What the fu—he has both my names? But why? Can he even do that?”

“He only had one until he got full custody, then he legally added Winston. I told him it was stupid... *presumptuous* I think was the word I used, but he said even if you never came back, Lucas would always know who you were. And your last name fits as a middle name, too, anyway.”

“I don’t even know him anymore, do I?”

Margaret brushed a hand through Lucas’ hair. “Maybe it’s time you did.”

Lucas wondered if she were right. “Are you happy, Mira?”

“More than I’ve ever been.” She waggled a small diamond ring at him. “Jerry and his wife haven’t gotten along for years. Their marriage was over before I met him, but they stayed together for the kids, and she liked to keep up appearances. His divorce was amicable and we’ve already set a date for a small private wedding.”

“Congratulations. But you have to get your own divorce first, right?”

“Papers are already in. We’re just waiting for the decree.”

He smiled at her, taking in the brightness that had returned to her eyes, the hint of a smirk that graced her lips. He could see the woman in the picture now, and maybe he was seeing the real Mira for the first time. Was that how it would go with Danilo, too?

“You look happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

Her smile widened. “Thanks. You probably feel like you’ve been set up, right? But I swear, you haven’t... well, maybe a little just today, but he’s done everything for you... everything so you could be together again someday.”

“Two years is a long time, and there’s so much I seem to not know.”

Mira stared into Lucas’ eyes, her look changing from joy to determination and concern. “But you still love him, right?”

That right there was the big question, but the answer was more complicated than everything Lucas had just heard. He sighed again, his body suddenly tired

and heavy against the wooden back of the chair. “I’ve told myself not to for two years... two years, Mira. That just doesn’t go away overnight.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t expect it to, but your timing is impeccable. Did he mention tomorrow night to you?”

“I don’t think I let him. What’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we both become free agents again, at least for a little while.”

“The divorce?”

“Signed, sealed and delivered tomorrow night. When he found out you’d come back to town he was so excited because he could give you the news. I guess I’ve ruined it now.”

“Naw. It’s still awesome, as long as it’s what you both want.”

“The ring on my finger should tell you I do, and that I have no intention of hitting the singles market. As for Dani, he doesn’t want that either, and he’s got some pretty high hopes that you won’t let him.”

“What did you both say about pressure and setting me up?”

“No pressure,” Margaret said as she and Mira headed for the door. “You do what you have to do to make you happy... we’re just crossing our fingers you’ll head in the right direction.”

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“Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t love her?”

Danilo turned away from where Luca was digging in the sand, a surprised expression brightening his eyes and parting his lips. “Couldn’t. You know how my old man was.”

Lucas stepped to the side, crouching down to stroke a hand across Luca’s soft head. “Hi, Luca. Remember me?”

“Luc... sand.”

With a smile, Lucas moved to sit on the bench beside the bike path, the sandbox only a few feet away... along with Danilo. “But you weren’t telling your father, you were telling me.”

Danilo’s answer was hesitant as he shifted in his crouch, his lips parting

then closing before he finally spoke. “I was scared... for you, for me, even for Mira, and then when she got pregnant, everything just fell apart.”

“Or fell into place, depending on how you look at it. Didn’t think I could take care of myself?”

“You knew him, Lu, and you were there when he gave me my keepsake. He could have killed you that night, could have killed us both. How could I even have considered letting him hurt you?” Danilo paused for a moment, his eyes boring holes into Lucas’ before he broke the contact.

Wrapping an arm around Luca’s belly, he tugged the toddler closer to the bench, dragging his bucket and trucks right along with them.

“So when Mira got pregnant, you saw a chance to be normal, right?”

“You know that wasn’t it.”

Lucas tried to soften his voice but the words came out harsher than he wanted. “But it was, Dani. You hated that you were gay, hated that you had to hide who you were, and having a family would just make everything better, right?”

“I never wanted to hurt you... but I was a coward. I took the easy way out. I thought having Luca would make everything okay in my head, and my heart.” Danilo sat beside Lucas on the bench as Luca drove his cars over the little piles of dirt. “I swear I thought I... we were doing the right thing when you left and I just... let you.”

“But I never left so I could stop being gay, Dani. Is that what you thought, that you could just stop being gay or bi or whatever?”

“Maybe... I dunno. But I also saw an opportunity for you to find someone else—”

“That’s bull—garbage.” Lucas turned to face Danilo, mindful of the little impressionable ears only a few feet away. “I didn’t want anyone else, and there’s no way you couldn’t have seen that. And before you ask or assume, I never found anyone else either.”

Danilo gazed at Lucas, so much pain written on his face it was hard for Lucas to keep his distance, but he had to... for now.

“Can’t lie and say I’m not happy about that. But I swear I thought you’d be better off because... fuck, Lucas...” Danilo paused to clear his throat, his voice leveling out to a hushed whisper. “I know I was an asshole in how I treated you. I know I took advantage, and I know you deserved better.”

Lucas shook his head. “I never thought any of those things, at least not for more than a minute at a time. Did it hurt when you would go off with Mira? Yes. Did it feel like I was being ripped apart inside when I stood beside you at your wedding? Yes. Did I want to leave you when I did? No, because having part of you was better than having none. I never stopped loving you because you weren’t all mine. I couldn’t.”

After dipping his head, Danilo slipped a hesitant hand over Lucas’ knee. “Do you still... or think you can again?”

Lucas sighed as he grazed his fingertips over Danilo’s knuckles. “I’m willing to talk about it, but that’s all I can promise... so far.”

Danilo nodded, his Adam’s apple working hard to swallow down whatever emotion he was trying to hide... again. Lucas cupped his chin, forcing Danilo’s eyes upwards. “Tell me what you’re feeling, Dani. Show me the changed man I keep hearing about.”

The reply was instant. “I love you. I’ve always loved you. You and that little boy are the only things I care about.”

Lucas brushed a finger over Danilo’s bristly jaw, trailing it up his cheek to trace over the constant reminder of one of the worst days of both their lives. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for that? To hear those damn words.”

Danilo covered Lucas’ hand on his cheek, pressing his fingers against the raised-edges of the scar. “I need you, Lucas. Luca and I need you because you’ve always been my only family. All I want is another chance, probably one I don’t deserve.”

Unable to hold himself back any longer, Lucas leaned in and brushed a kiss to Danilo’s mouth. It wasn’t made of passion or lust. It wasn’t an invitation to fuck. It wasn’t a secret kiss in an alley behind a bar, and it wasn’t a sweet way to say good-bye.

Danilo kissed back, his hand cradling Lucas’ head as their lips moved gently, softly, against each other. Lucas could have very easily drowned in the

swept-away feeling, the touching, the pressing of their bodies together, but he didn't. Instead, he eased away before pulling Danilo into his arms and hugging him close. He tucked his face into the crook where shoulder met neck, and Danilo did the same.

“So how do we start... again?” Danilo's breath washed over Lucas' neck, leaving pinpricks of gooseflesh. “There's so much history between us. Do you think it'll get in the way... all the baggage?”

Lucas drew back, his fingers still tangling in Danilo's curls. “I can't go backward, Dani. I can't be hiding in the shadows again.”

“Then, don't, because that's not what I want. We can go forward together, as slow as you need to. I feel like I've been waiting forever for it to just be you and me, and Luca now. I can wait a little longer because I know it's right. I did so many things the wrong way, but this...” Danilo smiled, tenderly kissing Lucas' cheek before bending down to pull Luca into his lap. “You, me, and our little Lucas, I know it's right.”

Luca looked from one man to the other, big grin on his face when he dumped a handful of sand on Lucas' shoulder. Danilo laughed and Lucas joined in.

“I don't know anything about babies or kids or even how to live in a house with a kid. Hell, I feel like this new you is a stranger, too.” Lucas was mesmerized by the closeness of two sets of identical—beautiful—eyes. He'd never been able to say no to one pair, and he was sure the other would prove to be even worse.

“I'm still me. I just... I know what's important now, and it's not getting drunk or letting everyone believe I'm someone I'm not. I'm in love with a man, always have been, but now I want everyone to know. I want everyone to know you. I want my son—our son—to love you as much as I do.” Danilo paused to kiss the top of Luca's head, then Lucas' mouth. “If you want we can even make Luca's room into a room for you, until you're ready to be in mine.”

“Still a little cocky, yeah?” Lucas raised an eyebrow and Danilo smirked back.

“I have to be. I let you go once, can't let it happen again.”

“I’m not moving into Luca’s room, Dani. That’s not even an option.”

Danilo frowned, his fingers clenching where they dug into Lucas’ shoulder. “I’m going too fast again, right?”

“You always preferred to run instead of walk.”

“How about I say you can have Luca’s room until... you might want to be with me.”

Lucas tugged Danilo closer so Luca was sandwiched between them. “We could do that... or you could just make room for me in your bed because that’s the only place I want to be.”

He kissed Danilo, feeling Luca’s small hands rubbing and scratching at his neck. Danilo whispered something against Lucas’ lips but it was lost in the cavern of his mouth. He eased back just enough for him to speak.

“Our bed.”

With a nod, Lucas brushed his mouth over Luca’s head. “Our bed sounds good, and I have a babysitter all lined up so we can celebrate your big day.”

“I think that’s our big day, too.”

“I guess it is. No regrets?”

“Only that the last two years happened at all, except...”

“For Luca.”

“Yeah. How about you... regrets?”

“Maybe one.”

Danilo chuckled, his body finally relaxed and loose against Lucas’. Luca lay his head down between them, one hand touching Lucas and the other Danilo. Lucas suddenly realized he had a family. Maybe he’d known all along but the thought was too overwhelming to imagine, let alone come to life.

“One regret?” Danilo asked.

Lucas smiled widely, but the sound of voices approaching tightened his whole body and he tried to put some space between himself and the others. Danilo held him firm. “No secrets.” He kissed Lucas as a family came around the corner, plopping their toddler into the sandbox beside them. “No secrets and no regrets. Now tell me...”

“I haven’t told you I still love you. That’s my only regret.”

“Guess you can tell me now, but if you want to wait until I catch up, I’m okay with that.”

“Catch up?”

Danilo’s mouth moved softly over Lucas’. “I have years of stupidity to make up for, and years of not saying the words.”

“How about a deal? Say it again right now and I’ll call it even.” Lucas smile against Danilo’s lips then eased back.

“I love you, Lucas. I’ve never loved anyone else, and I never will. I want you to be Luca’s daddy, and I swear I’ll tell anyone and everyone who wants to listen. No more secrets.”

With a deep-throated chuckle, Lucas closed his eyes, pressing his chin into the top of Luca’s head and his forehead against Danilo’s. “I love you... and our little family, Dani.”

Lucas Winston had never wanted a family—especially someone else’s—but now that that family had also become his, he didn’t plan on ever letting them go.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*K-Lee Klein has lived in one part of Western Canada or another for her entire life. She's a doting mother of three now-grown kids, and has had characters and plots running around her head for as long as she can remember.*

*She lives with an overly-patient husband who totally does not get her thing for gay men, two spoiled but wonderful sons (who don't get it either), two also spoiled but beautiful cats. Her days are also filled with many texts and phone calls with her daughter who has already left the nest, and an abundance of fabulous gay men, large and small, bouncing off the walls of her skull, competing for their turns to tell their stories*

*After finally throwing caution to the wind, K-lee's first story was accepted and published in December of 2011, and since then she's been lucky enough to be picked up by several publishers. She's thrilled to be substituting her previous jobs as a hockey manager/coach, school band volunteer and overall chauffeur with her passion for writing beautiful, emotional men.*

*Among her favorite sub-genres to write are rockstars, cowboys, shifters, and opposites-attract relationships. But to be honest, she's open to almost anything if it involves messing around in the heads of her characters. She's also big on series—because she has a hard time letting her characters go—and is usually working on a handful of stories in various stages of completion all at the same time.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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# SO HOT WITH LOVE

By J.H. Knight

## **Photo Description**

Two men are kissing and holding each other in a loving embrace in a bright room with hardwood floors and sunshine spilling through the window. It is a joyful and sweet scene.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*These two men are getting married this evening and are taking a last few quiet moments together. The man in the black T-shirt is remembering a day that almost ended their relationship. It started with some trouble with a thong and a fireman and the whole day just went downhill from there! Please tell us about this unbelievable day.*

*Sincerely,*

*Susan*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** established couple, sweet, humor, wedding, men with pets, little or no sex, fluff

**Word Count:** 8,891

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# SO HOT WITH LOVE

By J.H. Knight

Nine years might not seem like much compared to a lifetime, but to Chris it felt like forever. In a good way. Especially when he considered everything they'd been through. A one-night stand that turned out to be The One. The one neither of them had believed in nor even cared about enough to hope for. The one that would carry them through unemployment (temporary), a gay bashing (not theirs), Chris's parents who would never understand or accept them, a hit and run, the death of a beloved pet, head colds, bills to pay, holidays, and every good thing they took for granted. Their home, their friends, Greg's mom who loved them both and was overjoyed when they finally settled down together. Music and dancing and laughter. Lots of laughter.

No, nine years didn't sound like much, but Chris figured it was more than days, more than minutes ticking away on a clock that made up their life together. They'd already been through good times and bad, better and worse, sickness and health.

Now, wrapped around each other in an overstuffed beanbag chair on the morning of their official wedding day, Greg pressed closer as Chris tightened his arms around him. They'd talked about everything. Those first few curious fumbles in the bathroom stall of the bar they'd met in, those early days when they didn't leave Greg's tiny studio apartment even for food. Days spent in bed together, touching, laughing, fucking. Even when it was too early for love or commitment or fidelity, they both knew there was something between them. Something good and right and worth all the bullshit life had to offer.

When they finally did part ways after that first long weekend together, Chris carried around an ache in the pit of his stomach that only eased when he thought about Greg.

He'd never called a guy after a hookup before.

Nearly a decade later, he was still glad he made that call.

Now, their lips were touching but they were both on the verge of laughter. They had been teasing each other all day, reflecting on the ups and downs

they'd shared. "No, that one was definitely your fault," Chris whispered as the laugh they'd both been holding back finally broke free.

"I think you're remembering it wrong, darlin'," Greg corrected him. His Texas drawl still made Chris's toes curl. "That fire was all *your* fault."

Chris scowled playfully at him and shook his head. "That could've happened to anyone. Me standing out in the middle of the street in a sparkly red thong was *your* fault. You picked the damn thing out."

"I wish I'd taken a picture," Greg teased as he hugged Chris closer, kissing him even as Chris turned his head away in mock irritation.

"I'm sure it's on *YouTube* somewhere. I've been too chicken to search it."

Greg laughed again as he started to shift out from Chris's embrace and reached for his phone. Chris tightened his arm harder against him and grabbed Greg's wrist in a death grip. "Don't even think about it. If you look that up, you're walking down the aisle alone tonight."

Greg glanced at Chris's teasing smile—probably knowing it was an empty threat—and didn't make any more moves for his phone.

Chris slipped his fingers into Greg's short brown hair and tugged gently while Sherlock—their fat and sassy ginger cat—padded around the hardwood floors and cleaned himself in the sun spilling through the windows.

"You should wear that thong tonight," Greg murmured, tipping his head back at the tug to his hair, obviously looking for another kiss.

"I wasn't planning on either one of us wearing anything tonight," Chris whispered in return, giving Greg what he wanted by brushing their lips together. "Besides," he added after they parted, "I gave the thong to the fireman."

Greg pulled back, narrowing his crystal blue eyes. "And just when did *that* happen?"

With a smug grin, Chris said, "When he came back two weeks later to see how I was doing and to find out if I was single again."

"Should I be jealous?"

Chris knew him well. He knew no matter how teasing and casual Greg was trying to sound, there was an undercurrent of very real, very heated possessiveness simmering just under the surface. It was something Chris always found oddly arousing. Seeing that glint of desire mingled with a hint of insecurity and a dash of anger was a recipe for an instant erection. He'd be lying if he said he never played with it on purpose. More than once when they were out at the clubs together Chris would let a stranger dance just a little closer than he really wanted, or let someone touch his ass just so Greg would see it. Greg wasn't a Neanderthal. It didn't spark a fight and no one ever got decked in the middle of the bar, but it was a sure way for Chris to get a rough tug and a nice stinging bite on his shoulder or his neck. It was a sure way to keep Greg close the rest of the night and get Chris fucked so hard he felt it for days afterward.

“Jealousy is very unbecoming,” Chris chided, teasing.

“So is flirting with a hot fireman while your apartment burns to the ground.”

Laughing out loud at that, Chris reminded him, “The only things that burned to the ground were the curtains and my favorite dresser. Don't be such a drama queen.”

Greg made an incredulous sound, shifting his position so he could nuzzle against Chris's neck. Then he bit him. “You're queenier than me. Drama or otherwise.”

It was probably true, but Chris still felt the need to defend himself. “Queenier isn't even a word.”

“I can see why you were so good on your debate team in high school. With an argument like that...”

“Jackass,” Chris whispered, grinning as he kissed Greg again.

Greg's lithe frame seemed to go all limp in Chris's arms, sighing into the kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes glittered with mischief and he said, “You never answered my question.”

Arching a brow, Chris tilted his head to the side. “I forgot there was a question.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“Of a guy I met three years ago, under a haze—literally—of smoke, ash, and humiliation, when all I could think about was getting to you?”

“I don’t think there’s any such thing as a literal haze of humiliation.”

“The humiliation haze was figurative,” Chris told him, narrowing his eyes even as he was laughing. “Remind me to ask the minister to add *won’t be a jackass* to your vows tonight.”

“How poetic. But I thought we were sticking to vows we had a chance of keeping. I distinctly remember *obey* being struck early on...”

“I think all we have left now is cooking at least once a week and taking turns watering the plants.”

With a soft chuckle, Greg shifted in Chris’s arms. “We already do that.”

“So we know we can keep it up.”

Greg’s eyes flashed with a spark of need and he skimmed his hand over Chris’s body. He traced a small pattern at the collar of Chris’s T-shirt, stroking the warm skin of his neck with his fingertips. “We’ve never had a problem keeping it up...”

“I suppose you want me to make a remark that would lead you to groping me so I’ll get all hot and bothered and let you fuck me. Hours before our wedding. And break our three-week-long abstinence.”

“That was pretty much my plan, yes.”

“Abstaining was your idea.” Chris reminded him.

“It was a really stupid idea.”

“That’s what I said at the time, but you were pretty convincing about how hot it would be if we deferred gratification. You even wanted it to be a month.”

Greg’s tone hung somewhere between seductive and playful. “I’ve changed my mind.”

Chris let out a moan that was almost silent and spread his long legs wider before wrapping them around Greg’s waist. He trailed his hand down Greg’s

back and slid it into the top of his jeans. He was getting hard, no doubt about it. They both were. His breath came out in a soft rush against Greg's face, warm and full of want, as he cupped Greg's jaw and drew their mouths together for a scorching kiss that had Greg grinding his hips against Chris. As they pulled back, Chris wet his lips. His skin flushed with the same heat he always felt when they touched each other. He whispered, "Sucks to be you, then."

Greg dropped his head to Chris's chest with an exasperated groan. "You could've just said no. You didn't have to tease me first."

Chris pulled his hand out from Greg's jeans, grinning. "I suppose I could've, but that wouldn't have been nearly as much fun."

Greg glared but he was laughing as he asked, "Why am I marrying you, again?"

"Because you don't wanna live without me. You said so yourself."

As Greg turned around again, his back resting against Chris's chest, he said, "There's an eighties hair band ballad in there somewhere, I'm sure."

Chris laced their fingers together and sighed happily. They were getting married in a few short hours. They were going to spend the rest of their lives together. Come hell, high water, or revolution. It was a good day.

"Tell me again," Chris whispered, lost in thought and memory.

"That we're an eighties hair band ballad?"

He pressed a kiss to Greg's temple and said, "About when you decided you wanted to be with me forever."

"You're such a girl."

"My erection begs to differ."

"You were there, why do you want me to tell you?"

"Because, I like the way you say it."

"I'm tired of talking. If we can't have sex, I'm taking a nap."

He bit Greg's ear and said, "Tell me anyway."

Greg yelped and then laughed. "I don't wanna."

“You’d deny me such a simple request on our wedding day?”

“I’m a real bastard. You sure you wanna marry me?”

Chris paused as if he were thinking it over. “I guess. But don’t blame me when we grow old and all I do is bitch about you.”

“All you do is bitch about me now. How is growing older gonna change that?”

“I’ll be all wrinkly with a potbelly. And you’ll be stuck with me.”

“Will you be bald too?”

“Yes.”

“...Hot.”

“Freak.”

“You oughta know.”

Chris closed his eyes, his arms snug around Greg. He was surprisingly relaxed given the whole wedding thing taking place in a few hours, but that was mostly due to his control-freak-soon-to-be-mother-in-law. She’d taken over every detail, right down to their colors. In truth, he was glad for all her efforts.

When he and Greg had signed all the paperwork for domestic partnership, it was more like a business transaction with a little vacation tacked on at the end. It all would have converted to a marriage a year after the new law passed, but they were getting a little more sentimental as the years went by. Having their friends and families dress up and buy them presents and watch them take their vows and shove cake in each other’s faces was a better plan.

And besides, they’d attended plenty of weddings over the last nine years. And they’d bought enough gifts to pay for their own wedding (people still registered at Tiffany’s for Christ sake) at least twice.

He could feel Greg relaxing in his arms, probably drifting off to sleep just as he’d threatened to do. A nap right there in the middle of the living room floor sounded pretty damn good, but Chris was still revisiting their past.

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*Two Years Earlier*

Chris woke up on the couch. He'd fallen asleep after their niece had gone home.

Kaylee was only five at the time and they'd had her for the whole weekend. He didn't know how his sister did it. Two and a half days of chasing her all over the city had nearly killed them. She scared the hell out of them when she nearly scalded herself with hot water on the stove. Gave them both minor heart attacks when she'd wandered off from them at the zoo. And Chris had been apoplectic when he'd turned around from buying her an ice cream and found her talking to some stranger who was offering her a stick of gum. And he had Greg there the whole time. He couldn't imagine how single parents managed it with their sanity intact.

After too many brushes with death for a lifetime, they'd decided her last day with them would be spent at home doing anything she wanted. It turned out what she wanted was to have a spa day and then dress up for a tea party. Chris did Kaylee's hair and Greg painted her fingers and toes and did her makeup. They all wore feather boas and hats and served apple tea and Snickerdoodles to her and a teddy bear named Boston. Even Sherlock wore a scarf for the occasion. (He still held a grudge, Chris could tell.)

By the time Shawna picked up her offspring—Hurricane Kaylee as they'd started calling her—Chris was beyond exhausted. He'd only meant to sit down for a minute and then help Greg clear away the wreckage, maybe cook some dinner that didn't involve macaroni and cheese or French fries.

So much for plans. His sit-down turned into "just resting my eyes" which turned into a three-hour nap.

Chris was sure he was going to wake up to an ugly scene. Something along the lines of Greg having cleaned up and made dinner—for *one*—all while glaring at him asleep on the couch, snoring through it all.

Instead, when Chris blinked his eyes open, he'd found a clean, but empty, apartment.

As his sleep-addled brain was trying to decide if he should worry over Greg's absence, his gaze caught a note on the table. When he reached for it, he

noticed that his fingernails were a bright, glittery red. It looked like he was wearing Dorothy's ruby slippers on the ends of his fingers. He was certain they weren't like that before he'd fallen asleep. Chris rolled his eyes and read the note.

*Gone to get some dinner, back soon. You look fabulous, by the way.*

Chris shook his head as he grabbed his phone and sent a quick text.

*Please tell me there's nail polish remover.*

He snapped his phone shut and went to the bathroom. Before he even had his jeans undone, Chris glanced in the mirror. He had red lipstick to match the nails and bright blue eye shadow. He'd slept harder than he realized.

His phone was buzzing in his pocket. Greg had replied. Sort of.

*We're men. Why would we have nail polish remover?*

Laughing and wanting to choke him at the same time, Chris texted back quickly.

*Because I look like an ugly drag queen.*

He'd forgotten he had to piss and was washing his face when his phone buzzed again.

*You'd make a gorgeous drag queen. You've got fabulous legs. Do you want sauce for your dumplings, dumpling?*

Chris laughed and shot back another text.

*Acetone for mine, arsenic for yours. Dumpling.*

The next text made him smile.

*I'm hurt, but I love you anyway. Home soon.*

Chris couldn't help grinning as he sent his simple response.

*lu2*

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When Greg walked through the door, Chris had gotten the makeup off, but he was sitting on the couch looking at his sparkly red toenails. He had only

just noticed them. “Did you slip me a sleeping pill and I didn’t notice?” he asked, getting up to help Greg with the bags he was carrying.

Snorting a laugh, Greg passed a sack that smelled like Chinese food over to Chris. “If I ever have to slip you a pill to make you sleep like the dead, I’ll know pigs are flying and the devil is ice skating to work.”

They set everything on the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. Greg handed him a little brown paper bag. “Got this for you. Well, for the nails.”

Chris should’ve caught the look in Greg’s eyes, should’ve seen the mischievous gleam there. He should’ve investigated more closely before he got excited. “Finally. If I’d had to leave the house like this I would’ve killed you,” he said as he reached inside. His fingers closed around a scratchy bit of fabric rather than a bottle of polish remover. As he pulled it out he glanced up at Greg. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, grinning like a kid at Disneyland.

“What the hell is this?” Chris asked, looking at a bright red thong covered in tiny sequins.

Greg was still beaming at him. “I thought it would look good with your nails.”

“It looks like Liberace’s dental floss.”

“You don’t like it?” Greg asked in playful disappointment. “I thought your ass would look great in it.”

“Wouldn’t my ass look great without it?”

“It lifts and separates.”

“My ass needs lifting and separating?”

“It would make things easier on occasion.”

“I hate you.”

Greg was laughing hard now, reaching for Chris and trying to pull him close. “But I *love* you, baby.”

The mild spring had rolled into a blazing summer. Leo and Krista were sitting with Chris at a bistro across from their small advertising firm. They were the only two coworkers he spent time with away from the office.

“How’ve things been with you and Greg? You ever get him back for the makeover?” Leo asked, trying to change the subject from his own monumental fuckup of forgetting his wife’s birthday the night before.

Chris had spent several weeks trying to repay Greg for the ambush makeup prank. He’d bought Greg’s favorite Oreo cookies and filled them with toothpaste only to have Greg come out from the kitchen, foaming at the mouth, and grinning. He’d switched the sugar with the salt late one night, only to have Greg kiss him goodbye the following morning and tell him that he was running too late for coffee, but there was a fresh pot for him. Chris had been afraid to drink it.

Krista’s idea involving wallpaper paste and feathers might have been funny, but Chris would have been the one on cleanup duty. And Leo’s best idea was to sign Greg up on various fetish sites. That could have ended with an epic backfire.

In the end, he’d given up because the suggestions from their friends were potentially lethal or extremely messy.

Chris laughed and shook his head. “I threw in the towel. Greg is always two steps ahead of me. It’s unnerving.”

Krista piped in, “Better to be with someone two steps ahead than two steps behind.”

Chris shot her a playful glare. “So you’re saying it’s better to be me than him in this relationship?”

She grinned at him around a mouthful of pasta salad in response. After she swallowed, she asked, “Seriously, though, how are you two? Are you still... slumpy?”

“God, don’t put it like that. It makes it sound like our dry spell is because of erectile dysfunction and not... whatever the actual reason is.”

“How long has it been?” Leo asked, latching onto the new subject.

Chris shrugged and tried to focus on his food, but he could feel their eyes on him. “Two weeks.”

Leo sounded disgusted when he asked, “That’s all? Two weeks without sex? That’s your massive dry spell?”

Lifting his head, Chris sighed and asked, “How long does it have to be?”

“Two months, minimum.”

“Seriously?” Chris was horrified. “I hope that’s because you’re straight and not because you’ve been together for fifteen years.”

Krista snorted a laugh. “It’s because he forgets his wife’s birthday.”

Chris and Leo said in unison, “Fair point.”

“Anyway, maybe you guys just need to spice things up a little,” Krista suggested. “Maybe have a threesome or something...”

Leo looked at her like she’d grown a second head. “They’re *gay*. You want them to have sex with a woman?” Krista simply lifted her brow and waited for Leo to catch up. When he did, he said, “Oh. Right. Them and another guy.”

Chris laughed at the two of them, but then he said, “We did that a few years back. It was okay, but neither of us really wanted to do it again.” After he thought about it, he added, “Besides, with me working late and him working weekends, we’re too tired to do each other. I doubt adding another guy into the mix would make it easier.”

As they started packing up their things, Krista said, “What do I know? If I knew anything about the workings of the male mind, I’d be home nights having wild monkey sex with my husband rather than making little voodoo dolls of my ex-boyfriends. And my vibrator wouldn’t need new batteries so often.”

Chris laughed out loud at that, but Leo asked, “Do you really make little voodoo dolls of your ex-boyfriends?”

“Only when I’ve had too much wine.”

“I’ve seen your recycle bin,” Leo told her. “You might as well have said only on days ending in Y.”

It started out like any other day. Well, almost any other day. Chris went to work a little early and slammed through his tasks as efficiently as possible. He skipped lunch and as soon as he'd gotten home from work, Chris decided to paint his toenails and fingernails again. He didn't want to examine why it turned Greg on, but, what the hell? It wasn't like Greg had suddenly revealed he was into scat after seven years of living together, right? And the time Chris had confessed he'd always wanted to tie Greg up and be the dominant one (for once), Greg had been game. Despite the fact that they had both ended up a little... bored, to be honest. But that was another story.

So, in an effort to "spice things up" as Krista had suggested the week before, Chris was walking around their apartment with the same bright red, glittery nail polish that Greg had (weirdly) liked so much and wearing the thong that Greg was so eager to see him in.

By five o'clock, the house was clean and a nice array of new and unusual toys was laid out on the nightstand. Maybe it wasn't the most creative thing Chris could think of, but he figured the toys would come in handy if his less-than-subtle seduction plan didn't work out. And, hell, who could complain about a shiny new butt plug and a vibrating cock ring, right?

Greg was due home in twenty minutes. Chris stood in front of the full-length mirror. In truth, he felt a little ridiculous. He looked like a go-go dancer. At least his hours spent at the gym and jogging and swimming paid off. Silly little thong or not, he looked pretty damn hot. If he did say so himself.

Glancing at the clock, Chris decided it was time for the final touches and started to light all the candles he'd put up around the room. At first he'd considered going with something even more cliché and even sillier like a multi-colored disco ball, but candles were nice. (If he could keep Sherlock out of the room. The last time the cat had gotten curious around fire, he'd ended up walking into furniture and getting stuck in small spaces for months because he'd scorched half his whiskers off. At least they grew back.)

That many candles in one room put out a lot of heat. In retrospect, he would have been better off turning on the AC they'd never used. In retrospect, he should have moved the candles from the dresser in front of the window he decided to open. In retrospect, sheer curtains were a mistake. Those things lifted on the slightest breeze and when they got near an open flame...

Well.

“Shitshitshit! Shit!” He watched as the fire caught on one tiny tail end of one piece of fabric. That alone wouldn’t have been much of a problem, but when the flames skittered all the way up, over the top, and back down to the nightstand in a matter of seconds, the panic really kicked in.

His mind raced with an avalanche of options. What were the fire protocols? He hadn’t thought about it since he was a child and was forced to draw an escape route for their house in grammar school. He vaguely remembered something about smoke and crawling, but running seemed like a much better idea. Fire extinguisher? They had one in the kitchen. 911? It wasn’t that big of a fire, but it was spreading fast and the far wall of their bedroom was starting to look like the mouth of Hell.

As he rushed into the kitchen, Chris grabbed his phone. His hands were shaking, and punching those three tiny buttons seemed like an impossible task. Trying to hold the phone between his shoulder and his ear while he found the fire extinguisher, read the instructions, and ran back to the bedroom was even worse. Just as the emergency operator answered with the standard response, the phone flew from its resting place and landed on the couch.

His reaction to that was less than poised. He dove for the phone screaming, “Fire!”

Clambering to his feet again, Chris tried to explain with a little more detail and a little less hysteria the nature of the emergency. On his way to the bedroom, he told the woman on the other end of the line that he had a fire extinguisher and was about to spray down the area, but when he tried to pull the safety off, he jerked it in the wrong direction. The extinguisher slipped from his hand, hit the nightstand (sending dildos and butt plugs flying) and exploded.

On the downside, he was covered in a thick coating of white powder which made a sort of sparkly paste in the gel body glitter he’d skimmed on. On the upside, some of it had actually hit the fire and things were looking slightly less hellish.

He’d dropped the phone (again) and was trying to find it. When he finally

did, he heard the responder's voice saying, "Sir? You need to get out of the apartment. A unit is on the way. Go outside and wait for them. Sir?"

Looking back, she sounded more annoyed than concerned, but he figured that was fair. In a matter of minutes he'd managed to nearly kill himself three times and make more work for the poor folks on their way over there.

"Sir? Did you hear me? Sir? You need to get out of the apartment and let the fire department handle it."

"Okay," he finally answered, thinking he should at least try to find Sherlock. It didn't take much time. The cat was sitting by the front door, looking at Chris as if to say *I can't leave you alone for a second*.

He scooped Sherlock up and left his door standing open so they wouldn't use an axe on it when they arrived.

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Chris could hear the sirens over the building's fire alarm as he ran down the stairs with a few other stragglers from his floor. When he got outside, there were people standing in the street, looking up into the inky evening sky to see the cloud of black smoke billowing from his apartment window.

To his credit, Chris's first reaction was concern for his neighbors—their belongings and their lives. Especially Mrs. Sherman who was eighty years old and gave him blueberry muffins when he brought her paper in for her or walked her little wiener dog. When he saw her standing on the corner, safe and sound, with her dog tucked under her arm, he was so relieved he nearly cried.

Tammy from next door looked a little rattled, but when she saw Chris, she laughed long and hard. "What the hell have you done now?"

Chris blinked at her, still feeling a little shell shocked from the last—fifteen minutes or fifteen hours, he wasn't sure. "It was an accident. Did you guys get out okay?"

"It's always an accident with you," she said good-naturedly as she stepped closer to him. "When you broke that water pipe in your kitchen and flooded my apartment, it was an accident. When you backed up your toilet because you flushed condoms down it and they had to shut my water off for an entire day

too, it was an accident. When you ran into my car in the parking garage, it was an accident..." She smiled at him and wrapped an arm around Chris's shoulder. "I was the only one home and I'm just fine," she told him, finally answering his question as they watched the fire trucks roll in and get to work. "Wanna tell me why you're damn near naked?"

"Wha—Oh, Jesus!" He'd forgotten what he was wearing. Or, more specifically, not wearing. He clung tighter to Sherlock, wishing for the first time that he was a massive dog. One big enough to crawl under. Sherlock twitched his tail as if he could hear Chris's thoughts.

Wagging her eyebrows at Chris, Tammy said, "Guess you had a big night planned."

"Something like that," he muttered. His skin flushed hotly under the soot and—*oh God*—body glitter. Then he remembered the giant bottle of lube, the butt plugs and dildos all over the room, and the paddle on the foot of the bed. Not to mention the porn DVDs—one of which was playing on the television. If he'd been wearing clothes, he might have fled the scene. "Think they'd let me run back in there to—"

"Find some clothes and hide your porn?"

Chris nodded in answer, cringing as Tammy laughed again. He might not have forgiven her for that, but when a group of guys walked past him, slinging a few choice insults, Tammy didn't give Chris a chance to respond to them. Instead she stepped in front of Chris and yelled, "Fuck off before I shove a fire hose up your ass!"

Okay, she took delight in mocking Chris's series of unfortunate incidents, but he knew her well enough to be sure she'd die trying to get a fire hose up one of their asses on his behalf. And she'd forgotten about the time he'd accidentally given her food poisoning. Chicken salad should *never* be left out overnight. Lesson learned.

By the time he looked over at the apartment again, there were two fire engines and three ambulances. The EMTs—thankfully—had nothing to do but pass out blankets and bottles of water and one of the fire crews were already packing back up and climbing into their truck.

He watched three men in full gear walk out of the building, one carrying a cat that was trying to claw his face off.

The one in the lead grabbed a blanket off the aid unit and made a straight shot for Chris. His panic started to swell again. This guy was huge and he looked damned intimidating in the boots and helmet and... well, he looked incredibly hot too, but Chris was fairly sure he was about to get cussed out by a hulking, hot fireman about the dangers of candles and curtains and wind and antique dressers that were basically kindling and, oh yeah, a room full of gay porn and dildos. If he got through it without hearing the fire had been a warning from God, Chris decided he'd count it a win.

"I'm guessing it was your apartment?" he asked as he wrapped a blanket around Chris's shoulders and tucked the ends into his folded arms around Sherlock.

"What gave it away?" Chris asked dryly, looking over his shoulder for Tammy. She'd abandoned him, slinking off to talk to one of the neighbors.

Firefighter Hottie actually laughed and said, "Just a hunch." His grin was bright enough to start a fire of its own. If Chris was single. Which he wasn't. Though he seriously wondered if he would be once Greg saw the apartment. "I'm Sam, by the way."

At first Chris only nodded, still in a daze. Then he clumsily offered, "I'm Chris. Uh... I can't decide if I should apologize or thank you guys."

Sam laughed and said, "Neither. Though, I'd really appreciate it if you installed some dimmer switches for any future mood lighting needs."

If he hadn't been covered in fire extinguisher powder and ash and soot, Chris knew he'd be as red as his thong. "I'm pretty sure my boyfriend will take care of that personally." Okay, he wasn't sure Sam-the-hot-fireman was flirting with him, but better safe than sorry, right? Besides, the guy had just seen a pretty serious collection of sex toys and probably noticed a rather graphic gangbang scene set on a ranch where they were *training* the new farm hand. Not to mention the G-string that was edging its way further up his ass with every step he took. Chris couldn't let anyone think that was how he spent his Friday night alone.

Sam gave another laugh and went over a few details about the fire. He told Chris that it wasn't anything serious, but he did the right thing by calling since things like that can smolder and... then his voice started to fade in and out and the pavement seemed like it was jumping up at Chris's face. Sam steadied him, but not quick enough to stop Sherlock from bolting out of Chris's arms and darting through the crowd. "Whoa, you okay?" Sam asked, his strong arm still around Chris's shoulders. "Need to sit down?"

Chris nodded in response but it didn't help with the whole *swooning* thing. He was the first to admit that he wasn't exactly butch, but he'd never passed out before. Or nearly passed out, as it were. That was something his grandmother did when she didn't take her meds in the right order. Or pregnant women. Or... old ladies in Jane Austen books.

"It's probably just an adrenaline crash," Sam told him as they walked over to one of the aid units. "Let's get you checked out just in case, though."

He could hear his name being called, but it was beyond him to figure out who or why until the strained voice got closer. "Chris!" Greg sounded frantic as he screamed for him.

Looking over his shoulder, around Sam's massive outline, Chris caught sight of Greg struggling to get through the crowd. He was out of breath when he finally got to them. "Jesus, are you okay?" he asked. Despite the fact that Chris was nodding in answer (still a bad idea), Greg asked Sam the same question, "Is he okay? He looks..." There were so many ways to end that sentence; Greg was probably having a hard time choosing.

"He's fine. We're gonna have him looked at just in case, though. Probably a little shocky," Sam told him, sounding capable and—it was probably his imagination, but Chris could swear—disappointed.

"Yeah, okay." It was Greg's turn to nod. He was trying to catch his breath, Chris could tell, but at the moment, all Chris wanted to do was sit down and get a drink of water. "Okay," Greg said again, looking up at their apartment building. "What happened?"

The question was directed at Sam, but Chris wanted to explain. The words that came out of his mouth, though, were, "Sherlock ran away."

“Did he set fire to the place before he left?” Greg asked.

That got a chuckle out of Sam, who was pulling back from their little huddle as Tammy walked over to them. She had a very annoyed-looking Sherlock in her arms.

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It took hours before they were allowed to go back in and get a few things to take with them to the hotel that night. Yes, a hotel. Because their bedroom had been drenched by the fire hose, and it was going to take at least a week for the apartment manager—who had put them on the top of her shit list—to get the place sorted out and livable again.

Chris was feeling better as they stood in the bedroom and looked at the damage. Mostly because he’d found a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie in the dryer. Chronically procrastinating putting his clean laundry away had finally worked to his benefit.

Greg, on the other hand, had gone from worried out of his mind, to relieved, to shocked, to, well, shouting. “Seriously?” He was standing at the foot of their bed, looking at the charred pile that was once Chris’s dresser. “It didn’t occur to you to... to... *Seriously?*” It was rare for Greg to be at a loss for words. Nothing of his was ruined. Well, except for the vintage movie poster of *The Fifty Foot Woman* that Greg had on the wall. Chris secretly hated that poster, but he felt bad for its destruction nonetheless.

“I was trying to surprise you...” Chris’s voice sounded feeble even to his own ears.

“Oh, I’m *surprised*, all right!” Eyes wide, hair wild, fists clenched... so not the way he’d wanted Greg to look when he got home. “Thank Christ I had my laptop with me.” Greg was muttering to himself as he shoved a few things into a duffel bag and grabbed his shave kit from the bathroom.

One of the firefighters must have turned off the television because there was no more rowdy cowboy gangbang playing in the background. Which was probably for the best. It was one of Chris’s favorites, and he didn’t want any more negative associations with it than he already had that night.

“You ready?” Greg was standing by the door. He looked impatient. He was

working his jaw like he was trying to chew a piece of especially tough meat. He wouldn't look at Chris.

“Yeah, just lemme get Sherlock's food and his dishes for Tammy.” Chris's answer was met with another huff of breath, another set of rolled eyes, and another tap of Greg's foot. At Greg's reaction, Chris dropped the bag of cat food on the kitchen floor. “It's not like I *wanted* this to happen, okay?”

“That's a comfort at least,” Greg told him flatly. “I'd hate to think that you decided to burn our apartment down after deciding to, what? Host an orgy? What did you do all day, anyway?”

Chris could have explained. He could have told Greg that he'd spent the day getting things ready in the hopes that maybe they could break their three-week-long dry spell and maybe put a little heat back into their relationship. He could have told him that he'd cleaned the house and done the laundry and watered the plants and went shopping and did ridiculous things in the hopes of pleasing him and maybe turning him on. Instead Chris rolled his eyes, picked up the cat food again, and said, “I sat around jerking off and trying to see how big of a dildo I could use on myself without pulling a muscle.”

“And then torched the place?”

“Yep.” Chris didn't bother looking at him as he walked out the door.

“Fabulous.”

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It wasn't until much later that night, when they were settled back in a nice king-size bed, that either of them spoke another word.

Chris was trying not to toss and turn, so he was lying flat on his back and looking up at the shadows on the ceiling. He could tell Greg was awake as well, but he didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything at all.

Greg broke the silence. “I'm sorry,” he whispered, as if he wasn't sure how well his apology would be taken.

Chris turned then and reached across the two feet separating them. “I'm sorry too,” he said softly as he set a hesitant hand on Greg's shoulder.

“I know, baby. I'm sorry I was such an asshole about it. I...”

“It’s okay. I should’ve been more careful.”

Greg huffed out a laugh and rolled onto his side to face Chris. They both scooted closer until they were pressed against each other. Greg wrapped his arm around Chris’s shoulder and slid their bare feet together under the blankets. “Yeah, you should’ve. But... it freaked me out, ya know?”

It was Chris’s turn to laugh then. “I could tell.”

Greg shook his head softly and leaned in close, kissing the tip of Chris’s nose before brushing their lips together. “No, I mean... coming home and seeing the street blocked off and smoke and fire trucks, it scared the hell out of me.”

“I know, I should’ve called you or something, I was just so—”

“Shut up,” Greg murmured tenderly, a teasing smile evident in his tone. “It wasn’t just that. I mean, all I could think about was finding you and what if you were hurt and what if you were at the hospital or... What if I had to deal with some asshole that wouldn’t let me in to see you because, on paper, we’re nothing? And, what if your mother showed up and told them I couldn’t even visit you?”

Chris started to point out that the odds on either of his parents showing up for anything were slim, but Greg put a fingertip on Chris’s mouth and whispered, “Let me finish.” Chris nodded and waited quietly as Greg went on. “I want us to get all the paperwork and do the whole domestic partnership thing.”

Chris could feel his eyes widen in surprise. Up until that point they’d both said they didn’t need paperwork or approval or a wedding. They were together, they were happy, and that was all they needed.

“You can talk now.”

“I thought you were going to say you wanted out.”

There was a long pause before Greg spoke again. When he did, the confusion in his voice was nearly comical. “Wanted out of... *us*?”

“Yeah.” Chris felt like an idiot now that he’d said it out loud, but he tried to explain anyway. “We’ve been so busy and tired all the time and not really...

ya know, like we used to be and I just figured you were getting done with it all and then tonight was a total disaster and you were so pissed and I just thought maybe you were over... me.”

Greg touched the tip of Chris’s chin and tilted his face so they could see each other in the dim lights scattering through the curtains. “You’re such an idiot.” He softened the words with a deep kiss that had them both breathless when Greg pulled back. “I’ll *never* be over you.”

“And if you are, you want it in writing that you can pull my plug?”

Greg leaned in again, grinning as he whispered, “That’s right, so you better behave.” He kissed Chris again before he said, “You still haven’t given me an answer.”

“You didn’t actually ask me anything.”

Greg’s exasperated sigh made Chris smile. Greg asked, “Will you everything-but-marry me?”

He was going to tease and make Greg wait a minute longer, but his mouth jumped ahead of his brain and he simply said, “Yes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

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It took them a few minutes to wrestle out of their clothes. Neither one of them wanted to pull away from each other long enough to shed their T-shirts and Chris’s boxer shorts and Greg’s pajama bottoms.

Their touches that night were slow and quiet, tender. Until they were naked and pressed together, then everything turned greedy and full of want, full of the heat Chris had been afraid they’d lost over the years. He realized then, as Greg was pushing inside him, as their breath was catching and their groans were mingling into the night, that they would never truly lose anything—the spark, the passion, each other—as long as they both kept showing up.

Just when Chris felt like he was going to fly apart, just when he was about to come, Greg shifted and pushed him harder into the bed. He laced their fingers together and pinned Chris beneath him. His thrusts slowed, his rhythm

turned steady and deep, and when Greg leaned close and took Chris's mouth in a hard kiss, Chris cried out against it. His climax swept through him in a heavy rush that felt like a shock through his system, setting off a series of shudders and gasps that rocked him until Greg was coming with him.

They collapsed together, hearts pounding, panting, slick with sweat. They didn't even bother to clean up. Instead they fell asleep together in a sticky, tangled heap.

When Chris woke up in the early morning, he didn't disturb Greg. He looked at Greg for a long moment and thought, *This is the guy*. Just like he secretly, sappily, thought to himself after their very first night. Who knew that could actually happen to people?

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### *Present Day*

It was the first time Chris had ever worn a tux. In high school, when most of the guys dressed to the nines and took their dates to the prom, Chris had gotten himself a fake ID and went to a gay bar.

That night he'd gotten his first blowjob, and he thought nothing would ever compare to it. Life and experience had taught him otherwise. Now, standing in front of a mirror and checking himself, he thought this day was the thing that nothing would ever compare to and wondered if he was wrong about that, too. Would there be other things, even better things to come? He hoped so, but in that moment he couldn't imagine it.

When Greg's mother had told them what they'd be wearing, he'd been hesitant. Aqua is an awfully bright color and, at the time, he didn't even know what *aubergine* was. Turned out it was purple, and it looked great next to aqua. So, there he stood in a classic black tux with a bright blue bow tie and a purple calla lily in his lapel.

Greg came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Chris's waist. "You look incredible like that."

Chris grinned, looking at their reflection. He wished the photographer were there to snap a picture because this was the moment he wanted to remember forever. Greg looking sexy and perfectly put together, smiling and happy. "So

do you,” he said, already counting down the minutes until they were supposed to leave together and walk each other down the aisle. “You’re gonna wrinkle us if you’re not careful, though.”

Laughing at that, Greg dropped his arms from around Chris. “I’m gonna do a lot more than wrinkle us later,” he warned. “Now help me get this boutonnière on right.”

Chris adjusted the flower and then took a good look at Greg. “Perfect,” he whispered. He wasn’t just talking about how Greg looked or what they had planned for the evening.

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Chris didn’t expect to be so nervous when he took his vows. His palms were sweating and he felt like they were in a spotlight together on a stage in a massive arena. In reality it was a small arch with fresh flowers and greenery woven into it and there were only about a hundred guests watching them.

When the minister told their guests that it was time for them to exchange rings and share the vows they’d written, Chris thought he might pass out. Thankfully, Greg was going first.

“There was a time when I didn’t believe in all this stuff,” he said softly, looking at Chris and holding his hand. “I thought we could live our lives together and be happy. I thought we could leave the doors wide open, let each other stay or go as we pleased. Until one night, not too long ago, when I realized that you *are* my life. The best part of it, anyway, and... when I thought I might have lost you it was like everything ended for me. I didn’t care about anything else. I didn’t care about getting a promotion or buying a house or living or dying anymore. Not if you weren’t there with me for all of it.” Greg took a steadying breath and Chris could feel his own brow furrow as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. These were the words he’d wanted to hear earlier and they meant so much more to him now.

Greg smiled at him as if he had guessed what Chris was thinking. He flashed him a little wink before going on. “I decided it was time to lock the door and throw away the key.” Their friends and family laughed softly and so did Chris. When the room fell silent again, Greg continued. “Chris, I promise

you I'll come home every night. I'll watch your stupid sci-fi shows with you. I'll pick up your socks and remind you to charge your phone. I'll clean the cat box and let you listen to loud music and make you laugh when you're sad and hold you when you sleep and talk to you when there's a thunderstorm and most of all I promise you that I will always love you and I will always be there." He swallowed hard there and took another deep breath. "And I promise to try not to be a jackass." With the last, he slipped the ring on Chris's finger.

What the hell could he say to all that? "I promise you I'll make it worth the effort." Chris nearly stopped there because, really, that was the best promise either of them could make for each other. Instead, though, he said, "I promise to be there when you come home to me. I promise to laugh at your jokes and remind you of how amazing you are when you forget. I promise to trust you and honor you and what we have. I promise to never take you for granted, and I promise that I will always love you. And I promise to pick up my own socks once in a while."

Neither of them cried, but Chris could feel the backs of his eyes burning and he knew that if Greg said one more word, he would lose it. But Greg was grinning at him and the minister was telling them they were legally wed. Their kiss was a sweet one, playful and happy.

Later that night, in a ballroom that smelled like lilacs and roses, they danced together to "The Book of Love" by The Magnetic Fields. They fed each other cake in the messiest way possible. They drank and talked and laughed. They ran down the steps in a shower of purple flower petals. And when they finally tumbled into bed together, it was the same as it always was: full of heat and tenderness.

Chris didn't know what the next day or the next decade would bring, but he knew that he'd have Greg with him every step of the way. Good and bad, up and down, sorrow and joy, and he figured that was happily ever after enough for him.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*J.H. Knight has been writing love stories since the second grade. When she's not catering to the whims of her imaginary friends (whom she sometimes refers to as "characters"), she's usually found driving her four children all over the planet, working on a school project, or saying things like "Not until your homework is done!"*

*A Pacific Northwest native, she loves the outdoors in every season whether she's in the city, the mountains, or building sloppy sandcastles with her kids on the beach. On her best days, she's cuddled up with a good book, and on her worst days she's tearing her hair out as she tries to decide if her sentence needs a comma or a semicolon. She gratefully bows down in awe of editors, since she usually gets it wrong.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# LOVE YOU SO HARD

By Tara Lain

## **Photo Description**

The slim, taut torso of a young man from neck to hips wearing a T-shirt that says “I Would Bottom You So Hard”

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*I saw him at my local corner store when I stopped in for some soda after work. He was wearing that damn T-shirt and now I can't get it out of my head. I'm thirty-two years old and have never topped in my life. Guys seem to think I have a sign on my forehead that says “bottom only”. The one time I asked, it didn't go well. But now it seems I see this kid, he's twenty if he's a day, everywhere, and that T-shirt text is burned in my brain. I wonder...*

*Can be any genre you like, and as explicit as you like. I'm not too fussy, but a first time top should be fun.*

*Yours truly,*

*Tam*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** first time top, age gap, gaining self-worth, bottom you so hard, younger teacher/older student, beautiful boy

**Word count:** 20,270

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# LOVE YOU SO HARD

By Tara Lain

## CHAPTER ONE

Five more minutes.

Craig took a sip of his latte and forced himself to lean against the coffee shop wall and stare at his phone screen. If the guy didn't come in five minutes, he had to leave and get to work. This was a huge day. That promotion would make the difference in—well, everything. But the guy was his good luck charm. He really didn't want to miss him. Maybe the kid would wear that shirt stretched across his lean chest. Craig swallowed hard and sipped the coffee.

Craig looked up as the door opened. A woman came in with two kids. The little boy and girl were pulling on her arms and yelling at each other. She got in line and let the two kids go. The boy grabbed for his sister, missed, flew across the store, and smashed into Craig's legs. Craig grabbed his latte, dropped his phone, coffee splashed, and he jumped back to keep it off his suit. The woman behind him hollered and pushed him as his foot sank down on her toe.

He turned and came face-to-face with her frown. He mirrored it. "I'm so sorry!"

He heard a scream, looked back, and saw the kid in a heap on the floor yelling his lungs out as people stared at Craig like he was a child molester. Monster. The mother rushed over, grabbed the kid up in her arms, and carried him back to the line. No apology, no recognition of Craig's existence. Jesus, what the hell was he? Invisible? He knew the answer to that one. His father had certainly told him often enough. With a sigh, he reached down for his phone. Somehow, it wasn't broken.

He glanced at the door and then at his watch. Damn. Two more minutes.

People in the line chatted as they waited for Ida and Will to serve them. Craig didn't actually know Ida and Will but he'd heard him—the kid—say their names a couple times.

Thirty seconds. Come on—

The door pushed open. *Oh yes, thank you God.* Every time, it was like some commercial on television for perfume or something. Time slowed down. The guy's long, black-denim-clad leg stretched through the door, the fabric tightening across his thigh muscles. Another step and the jeans cupped his package like a jeweler showing off a diamond. The guy wasn't real tall. Maybe five foot ten—inches shorter than Craig—but he added up to Craig's idea of perfection.

That face. Half god, half elf. On the one hand, he had high cheekbones and a nicely shaped jaw. Real architectural. But that was in total contrast to the bright, crinkly eyes, the turned-up nose, and dishwater-blond hair that looked like it had been hacked into submission with a lawnmower. A very sexy lawnmower.

Craig sighed. Above the jeans, the guy wore a windbreaker with the hem of a white polo shirt sticking out. No black T-shirt. The shirt of Craig's dreams. The shirt that ran through his mind as he sat at his desk working out strategic plans.

The one that said *I Would Bottom You So Hard.*

The kid had only worn it once that Craig had seen. That was all it took. Sure, he would have noticed this guy no matter what. He was that delicious. But he was also maybe twenty-one or twenty-two which was at least four or five years too young for Craig. But the shirt. He saw it and the promise seeped right into his heart. His soul.

*I would bottom you so hard.* Damn, no one ever let Craig top. In thirty-two years of life, he'd never once topped. Even though he was tall, there was just something about him that screamed *shove my feet over my head and fuck me.* Hell, he wasn't complaining exactly. At least he got fucked—sometimes. But nobody thought of him as a top. Anywhere. He wasn't even sure he *bottomed* hard.

The kid danced in the line. He didn't have an MP3, so he must be dancing to the music in his head. Craig glanced at his watch. He should go but it was hard to leave that flexing ass. What would it be like to push his cock in that cute crack outlined between the denim pockets?

Whoa! He adjusted his suit coat over the bulge.

The kid's pretty voice sang out. A little high but still real masculine. "Hey Ida, babes. Do you have three caramel macchiatos for me, puh-leez?"

The older woman, heavysset, wearing an apron over her jeans and shirt, laughed. "For you, sweetheart, anything."

Man that was the truth. This was one of those genetically gifted charmers.

The man he'd heard called Will, who seemed like the owner of the coffee shop, leaned over the other end of the counter and waved. And then he said it. First time Craig had heard it. "Hi Jessie. How you doin', kid?"

Jessie. Jessie. Jessie. Perfect name.

"Good, Will. I got a few new students to tutor so I guess I won't be starving quite as much this month."

"Hey, you'll be out of school and making the big bucks one day soon."

The kid laughed. Listening to that was a spiritual experience. "Oh yeah. Big bucks as a college teacher. I'll be paying student loans till I'm fifty."

Teacher. Students? Tutor? Oh damn, he wanted to stay and listen. This was the most the kid had said on any of his trips into the coffee shop. But Craig had to go. Couldn't be late for his promotion.

He stepped away from the wall and walked toward the door. So hard to leave. He looked back. Bright eyes met his. And then they crinkled.

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Craig got up from his desk. The announcement was calling. Might as well get in there and get a seat.

"Hey buddy."

Craig turned toward the door of his tiny office. "Hi Howard." Now there was guy who would be a top—if he was gay. Tall, handsome, didn't know a stranger. Howard Landrew had it all.

Landrew smiled. "You got those ideas for the accounts you said you were working on?"

“Yep. Just have to print them out.”

“Could you do that?”

Craig frowned. “The meeting.”

“No problem. I’ll save you a seat.” Howard slapped the door twice and walked off toward the conference room.

“Well, okay.” Damn, he didn’t want to be late. Not for his own announcement. Still, sitting next to Howard would be fun. The big account executive got a lot of attention, so Craig wouldn’t feel like part of the paint.

He searched his desktop for the folder where he kept new ideas and strategic plans, found the file, and hit Print. He glanced at his email. A new one from that executive-search person who sent him job posts asking if Craig knew someone to fill them. He clicked. Always interesting to see what was available. He scanned the post. *Wow*. A VP Marketing job at ClearWater Tech. That was a great position for someone. Such a good company. But they were making a few marketing errors. If someone could change those, they could be huge. Who did he know that could take that job?

The printer stopped, and he walked over and grabbed the pages. Today he’d get *his* new job. Senior Director of Strategic Planning. That would be great. A new office, twice as big, and more money he could use for his mother’s care. No one else was really a competitor. He excelled at strategy and had been developing most of the plans for the AEs for two years. Finally, he’d get the recognition.

He stapled the pages and stepped lively toward the conference room. The big space was crowded. He looked around. Howard was flanked by two females, an AE and an admin. No empty chairs. The guy looked up at Craig, shrugged, and called, “Sorry. What could I do?” Then he held out his hands and wiggled his fingers. Well, shit. Craig walked past the people sitting and those standing against the wall and handed the papers to Howard.

The handsome faced beamed up at him. “Thanks, buddy.”

Craig stepped back between two people as the CMO came in. Lydia Halls. His idol. She was only forty-two, and the chief marketing officer of InterTech,

a major corporation. That's where he wanted to be in ten years or sooner, and this promotion would put him on track.

She smiled around the room. "We're having a little party this afternoon to celebrate, so everyone plan on staying. We have a couple new promotions. First, Dacy Lin is our new account executive for the industrial divisions. Congratulations, Dacy."

Craig clapped. Wait, that position belonged to Howard. What happened to Howard?

Lydia held up her hand. "And now for a bit of a surprise. While we don't usually promote our account executives into creative and strategic positions, I've decided it's time to think outside the box. I'm naming Howard Landrew our new Senior Director of Strategic Planning. He's continuously impressed me with his ideas both for his clients, and for the other AEs. It's time he got the recognition he deserves. Congratulations, Howard."

Craig shook his head. Wait. This couldn't really be happening. It was too much like a movie. He stepped forward. "But I—"

Howard stood up. "And I want to acknowledge the help and assistance of Craig Elson. The guy has been so generous with his sharing and support. Thanks, buddy."

Everyone clapped. The sound echoed around him like bells in his brain. Someone patted his shoulder. Yeah, because he was such a great support.

Howard held up a hand and picked up the papers that Craig had printed. "Now, just for a treat, let me share a few new strategic plans for the divisions." And he started to read Craig's ideas.

He wanted to scream. Maybe to bash Howard's head in. But what could he do? If he claimed the ideas, Howard would just admit that they'd worked as a team. No one would believe the new plans came from mild-mannered Craig Elson. The man with the L word stamped on his forehead. Not when they had Howard Landrew instead. Hell, Howard probably believed that the ideas were his. After all, he'd asked Craig to come up with them.

Howard kept reading. Craig could barely breathe. He skirted past the rapt audience, left the conference room, and walked to his office. His head

hammered as he sat in his desk chair and stared at the trashcan. This was it. His big hope and now it was gone. Nothing was different. Nothing would ever change. Once again he'd let someone push his legs back and fuck him.

His hand seemed to move by itself. He picked up the phone and dialed.

“HR.”

“Hey, Mrs. Kruger, this is Craig Elson. I'm sorry, but I've had an emergency and need to use some vacation days.”

“Just a moment please.” Her crisp voice came back on. “You have plenty of time available. You haven't taken a vacation in years. That's not company policy, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” But he hadn't had anything more fun to do than work.

“I hope everything's okay. Please, fill out the paperwork when you get back.”

“Thanks. I will.”

He glanced toward the conference room. Most people were still in there listening to the guy who thought nothing of claiming Craig's ideas as his own and taking the position that should have been his. And saddest of all was that if he went in and stood up for his ideas, Lydia might not believe him. At the very least, he'd be considered a troublemaker.

He grabbed his laptop, stuffed it in his case, and walked fast to the elevator, pushed the button twice, and jumped on it when it opened. Riding down the six floors, he stared at the blank screen in his mind. What was he doing? No idea.

He walked across the parking lot until he got to his car, and stopped. Gray sedan. There it was staring him in the face. His gray sedan life. Gay guys were supposed to be so fashionable and flamboyant. Jesus, he needed a drink.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Twenty minutes of Orange County freeway battering later, he pulled into the lot across the street from his favorite gay bar in Costa Mesa, The Hideaway. It was early, but he'd go back to the Mad Men days and drink in the afternoon. He climbed out, locked the car, and ran across the street.

Inside, the darkness soothed him. Music played, but not the raucous dance tunes of the nighttime. This was something low and sultry. He climbed onto a bar stool. The burly bartender quit drying glasses and walked over. "You're early."

Craig nodded.

"Bad day?"

"The worst."

"Sorry to hear it. What can I give you to ease the pain?"

"Just a beer, thanks. Draft."

The bartender walked to the taps and Craig grabbed a handful of peanuts from a dish. What was he going to do? Why had he taken vacation? Why was he here? The bartender put the beer in front of him and went back to drying. Craig must not look like he wanted to talk. Probably true. What would he say? All he had were questions.

As it got closer to happy hour, the place filled up. Craig nursed his second beer. Not much of a drinker. Hell, not much of an anything. Maybe he should go home.

A hand gripped his shoulder. "Hey, Craig. Good to see you."

He looked up into the dark eyes of Nick Nederhall. "Nickel Nasty" as they called him. Nick was a salesman for some industrial company and probably a pretty good one, but man, he was a piece of work up close. Not bad looking, but he had a reputation for fucking anything that moved. "Hey, Nick."

"Can I buy you a drink?" He slipped his arm around Craig's shoulders.

What the hell. "Sure, why not?"

“What’s a cutie like you doing all by himself?”

Jesus, what a line. “I usually come in alone. You know that.”

Nick patted Craig’s arm with the hand not wrapped around his shoulders. “And I always wonder why.”

Yeah, he wondered why too.

“You’re a great-looking guy, Elson.”

“Thanks.” He kind of knew he wasn’t awful looking. Tall, slim, a touch pretty. “But that and five bucks will buy me a cup of coffee.”

“Oooh, sounds like we’re having a bit of low self-esteem.”

What else was there? “Nah. Just a bad day at work.”

“Sorry to hear that. What happened?”

He sighed. It might be nice to talk to somebody. “I didn’t get a promotion I expected.”

“Wow, that sounds like me. I was up for regional sales manager for the western states and—”

He was off. Totally wrapped up in his own story. Craig said “umm” a couple times, but no more attention was needed. After five minutes of solid monologue, he’d had enough. He slugged down the last mouthful of beer. “Hey, I’ve gotta go.”

Nick looked startled and a little hurt. “Sure. Let me walk you to your car.”

Craig frowned. “It’s just across the street.”

“Gotta see that the handsome prince gets home safe.” He winked.

Shit, the guy did not say that. Craig shrugged, tossed bills on the bar, and headed for the door. Nick fell in beside him. The traffic had picked up on the street, so he walked to the light on the corner. Nick stuck like glue. As they crossed, Nick took hold of his arm. What the heck?

Since he’d gotten there so early, his car was in the far back of the lot. He just wanted to get home. He walked through the dim light with Nick holding onto his arm. When he clicked on the remote, Nick stopped and pushed him back against the car. Whoa. His butt slammed on the metal. Craig was taller but Nick had a good twenty pounds on him.

Nick brought his face right next to Craig's, blowing boozy breath into his nose. "Hey baby. I'm so sorry about your bad day. Let me make it better." He pressed his mouth hard against Craig's lips.

"*Mmpft.*" Craig tried to turn his head but Nick reached up and grabbed his chin. The guy's very insistent tongue pressed against the seam of his lips. Craig shuddered and tried to turn his head the opposite way. That just got him a full body press with a very prominent cock pushing him hard against the gray car. Okay, enough.

Craig grabbed Nick's hand from his chin, and pulled it away. Hell, he went to the gym. This guy didn't get to manhandle him. Craig ripped his face to the side and pushed against Nick's chest hard. Nick stumbled back, tried to catch himself, lost his footing and landed on his ass. *Oof.* The dirt lot was hard on that leather jacket. He looked up like he'd just been attacked. "What the fuck, Elson?"

Craig stuck out his hand to help him get up. "Sorry Nick, but you were coming on a little too strong."

Nick struggled up. "Hey, you let me buy you a drink."

"So?"

"Do you think I'd be paying attention to a guy like you if I didn't think I was going to get some ass?" Nick grabbed his upper arm. "Come on, baby. It'll be fun. You haven't been fucked until you've been topped by Nick Nederhall."

Craig pulled on his arm. Nick pulled back. Craig yanked hard, Nick's hand came loose, and his knuckles flew up and smacked Craig right in the eye. *Ow.* "Hell!"

Nederhall looked startled, then sneered. "Serves you right. Loser!"

Even from a bastard like Nederhall, it was a slap in the face. Christ, how many times had he heard that word from the time he was born? *Just get out of here.* Craig ripped open the car door and barely escaped slamming it on his hand. He started the gray thing up, and raced out of the parking lot. In his mirror, he saw Nick flip him the bird. His eye throbbed. Shit. He'd really like

to cry, but that would be an even bigger loser move. *Don't think. Just get home. Everything will be better.*

Thank God his house was only five minutes away. He pulled into the open parking lot of his Costa Mesa townhouse. *Just get inside and hide.* He grabbed some letters from the cluster of mailboxes by the walkway and trudged to his unit. Number three. These two-story apartments had been here since the seventies without too much renovation, but they provided space and reasonable comfort. He made a good salary, but he used a lot of money for his mother, and saved the rest for an unknown future when the Alzheimer's got even worse. Why should he waste money on luxuries for himself?

He opened the door and switched on the light on the side table. His beige couch and old brown recliner looked pretty damned inviting. He should shower first and get this crap day off of him.

He pressed his back against the door. How could so much go so badly in a few hours? He wasn't worthy of the promotion. Hell, he wasn't even good enough for the slimiest guy at the bar. The only good thing in the day was seeing that cute guy at the coffee shop. His good luck charm. Ha! Must be somebody else's good luck.

He shook his head. *Get over yourself. You've got it good compared to most. Compared to Mom.*

He glanced at the mail in his hand. Bill, bill, ad, oh—something from his mother. He tossed the rest of the envelopes on the table, and sat on the edge of the recliner. It was a card. What the heck for? His birthday was in July. But bless her, who knew when she thought his birthday was these days. And she must have moved heaven and earth to have somebody get the card for her. He ripped the envelope and pulled out the card.

The card pictured A bottle of champagne popping. *Congratulations*, it said.

Like a punch in the gut. He barely wanted to open it but he did. Inside, his mother's shaky scrawl read: *On your new promotion. I'm so proud of you.*

He took one breath. Two. Then dropped his head back on the chair and cried.

## CHAPTER THREE

He had a shiner. Un-fucking-believable. He stared in the rearview mirror at his eye. Just faintly purple, but enough to look like he'd been in some bar fight. Which he kind of had. But his bar fight couldn't be some thrilling, Patrick Swayze, throw-the-bums-out kind of fight. Oh no. His shiner was an accidental hit from the hand of the scum of the earth. He couldn't even do violence with style. Shit.

But coffee he needed, with or without the black eye. And today he didn't even have to hurry. He'd never been to the coffee shop so late in the day. Closer to lunch than breakfast. *Wonder what it's like?* He'd find out.

He got out of the car, locked it, and walked into the cool, bright space of the shop. Not crowded like the morning. He glanced at the little side room where people hung out at tables and chairs with laptops. That looked good.

He walked up to the counter. The lady in the apron smiled. "What can I get you?"

He definitely needed a change. What did the kid order yesterday morning? "A caramel macchiato, please, uh, Ida."

He got a bigger smile. "Coming up. For here or to go?"

Hell, where did he have to go? He couldn't see his mother until late afternoon. "For here, thanks."

She started steaming the hot milk. "What happened to your eye? I don't think you had that yesterday."

Wow, she'd noticed. "Bar fight?" She looked startled and he laughed. "It was an accident. Horsing around, you know."

"I hope it's not painful."

"No." At least not physically.

"It gives you kind of a rakish air." She winked.

"I guess I can use all the rake I can get."

She handed him a large ceramic mug full of steamy, fragrant stuff that smelled like coffee but better. "Want something to eat?"

He was kind of hungry. Breakfast had gotten lost in a lot of staring at the wall. “Sure. What should I order?” He smiled.

“We have some great hot sandwiches. Want one?”

“Sure.”

“Go sit down and I’ll bring it to you.”

“Okay.” He wandered into the side room. Not exactly a *room*, since it was wide open to the rest of the shop. Just the counter cut off the sitting area from the order line. A big, comfy-looking chair with a small table in front of it sat empty in the back corner. Perfect. He walked over, set his mug on the table, and then sank into the big chair.

He took a sip of the caramel macchiato. Sweeter than he expected but not half bad. And at least it was different. He needed a whole huge helping of different.

Ida brought what looked like a hot chicken sandwich and put it on the table. “I’ve never seen you in here at this hour. How do you happen to have time in the middle of the day?”

“Vacation.”

“Good for you. So many people have gotten laid off, but it seems like times are getting better.” She smiled. “Enjoy.” She went back to the counter.

One bite of food and his stomach said howdy. He was hungry, and scarfed it down fast; then he lay his head back on the chair, sipped his coffee, and closed his eyes. He had vacation. What he didn’t have was a life. Not really. Not one he loved. His mom he loved, but no matter how hard he worked to keep her lucid, he lost more contact with her each day. Some days more than others. Soon she wouldn’t know him. And that would make zero people who did.

He needed to change, but what the hell could he do different? The answer was everything, but he didn’t know how to choose, where to start.

“Hi.”

He froze. He’d know that voice anywhere. Craig opened his eyes and looked straight at a black T-shirt and the message that haunted him. *I Would*

*Bottom You So Hard.* The words stretched across that lean, beautifully-muscled chest under a wide set of shoulders. The sexy, wild blond hair almost touched them. “Hi.”

The kid crossed his arms. *Oh don't cover it up.* “I’ve never seen you in here in the middle of the day.”

Dear God, he’d noticed too. “Uh, vacation.”

“What happened to your eye?”

“A silly accident.”

“Can I sit down?”

*Hell yeah.* “Sure.”

The kid dragged another armchair over across from Craig, then plopped that cute butt in the tight black jeans into it. “So I see you in here in the mornings a lot.”

“Uh, you do?”

“Yeah.” He flipped his hair. “I’m Jessie Randall by the way.”

“Craig. Craig Elson.”

Jessie pulled a leg up onto the chair. “So how come you take your vacation in a coffee shop?” He grinned.

Craig cocked his head.

“Why aren’t you off surfing in Costa Rica or something?”

He sipped his coffee. “I have to be close by for my mom. She’s in a nursing home.”

Jessie nodded. “Oh sorry. You’re gay, right?”

Craig sucked his breath. “Uh, yeah. That obvious?”

The guy tapped his nose. “Gaydar.”

Might as well ask. “Is your shirt true?”

The kid laughed. “Oh, hell yeah!”

Craig swallowed hard and clasped his hands to keep them from shaking.

The kid pulled his other leg up on the chair. “So what do you do, Craig?”

Craig tried not to frown. “I’m, uh, the director of strategic planning for a technology company. You’re a teacher, right? I mean, I heard you say something yesterday morning.”

“Not a teacher yet, just a tutor.”

“What do you tutor?”

“Mostly English and literature. But some other stuff too.”

Craig looked at the guy. So easy and self-assured. So much the kind of person he wanted to be. *No, it’s a crazy idea.* “So you mostly tutor young kids?”

“No, college and graduate students. I’m working on my PhD in English and American literature.”

“Aren’t you kind of young?”

He laughed that easy chuckle. “I’m twenty-one, but yeah, I finished college early and went straight on to the doctorate. With the stuff I’m interested in, you teach or you die.” He laughed again.

Craig couldn’t get the idea out of his head. Damn, he needed to think. “Excuse me. I have to go to the men’s room.”

“Sure.”

Craig got up and hurried to the unisex single-holer on the opposite side of the lounge area. He was certifiable for walking away from Jessie. The guy probably wouldn’t be there when he came back. But maybe that was a test of his insane idea.

Inside the restroom, he peed, washed his hands and stared at himself in the mirror. Think, dammit. His mind jumbled back at him in flashes of chaotic thoughts. Jessie noticed him. Knew he was gay. Craig had to change. But how? How? *Tutor. Top. Bottom You So Hard.*

He opened the door and peeked out. Still there. Across the room, Jessie sat with his feet up on the table looking completely at home. That was his secret. The guy appeared at home in the world. Craig? Not so much.

He walked back to his comfy seat and perched on the edge. "I'm glad you stayed."

Jessie grinned. "Me too. I don't have another class today, and my first student doesn't come until four thirty."

"Oh good." Craig stared at the words on the guy's chest. *I Would Bottom You So Hard*. He took a deep breath. "Would you tutor me?"

One thousand points. Jessie didn't laugh. "What kind of tutoring do you need?"

He swallowed and stared at his hands. "I want to learn how to top."

One million points. He still didn't laugh.

Craig looked up at that calm pixie face. "I mean, don't misunderstand. You wouldn't have to, uh, have sex with me." He glanced around but no one was nearby.

Jessie grinned. "How exactly would I teach you to top without having sex with you?"

Excellent question. "I thought maybe you could just tell me, you know. Describe."

One deep dimple flashed. "You have had sex before?"

Craig nodded. "Oh yes, but I always bottom."

"But you know what the guy on top does, right?"

Well damn, this wasn't going well. "Yes, but I thought since you really like to bottom—your shirt and all—you could tell me what you like in a top. My experience isn't all that, uh—all that." His ears were burning. Maybe running away and never coming back to the coffee shop would be good.

"But you wouldn't want me to show you?"

Craig looked up. "Oh no, you wouldn't have to do that."

"Have to? What if I wanted to have sex with you?" He grinned. "As a way of demonstrating?"

Craig could feel his eyes getting wide but he couldn't control them. "That—" He cleared his throat. "—would be fine." He stared at Jessie's blue

eyes. “It’s just I’m so much older and not your type and I thought you wouldn’t want to.”

Jessie cocked his head. “How do you know my type?”

Wow. Talk about flustered. “I don’t. I just figured it wouldn’t be me.”

Jessie leaned forward. “Craig, may I ask why you want to top?” Jessie’s face looked open and compassionate.

Hell, might as well. “I think it’s kind of a metaphor for the rest of my life.”

Jessie smiled and nodded. “I had a feeling that might be true. Want to tell me?”

Craig’s shoulders lifted. Did he want to talk about it to a stranger? Yeah, he did. “I’m not very exciting or interesting to people, but I’m good at my job. Still, they passed me over for promotion, and gave the new job to a guy who I found out was stealing my ideas. And I wasn’t even smart enough to know he was doing it.”

Jessie frowned. “Did you tell your boss what was going on?”

He shook his head. “If she couldn’t see it was my work, why would she believe me? And really, that’s just the big fat tip of the iceberg.” He didn’t want to say the “loser” word, but it had to be pretty obvious to Jessie.

“Why do you think you’re not interesting?”

Craig shrugged. “That’s obvious.”

“Nope. It’s not. I mean, I think you’re adorable. I noticed you the first time you came into the shop when I was here. I came over today because I was *interested* in you.” He laughed. “But you don’t see that you’re adorable. So I think I have some serious tutoring to do.” That musical laugh tingled up Craig’s spine.

Craig nodded. “I’ll pay you. I have money saved.”

Jessie’s eyebrows pulled together. “Hmm. Did you just offer to pay me for sex?”

“Oh shit. Sorry.”

Jessie laughed again. “Tell you what. I think you could use a little sprucing up in the sartorial department. So you can pay me for a few hours of fashion

consultation and stuff like that. You can also take me to dinners because I never have enough money to eat as well as I'd like to. How does that sound?"

Craig's heart beat fast. "Great. I mean, you don't mind being with me? You know. Having people think I'm like your date or boyfriend or something."

This time Jessie really frowned. "You're a handsome, successful, intelligent businessman and I'm a starving grad student. Who ought to be concerned about appearances here?"

Craig shook his head.

"You, baby. People are going to think I got really lucky."

"You don't have to say that."

Jessie reached over and touched Craig's cheek. "I always tell the truth."

Craig smiled back. Truth was one thing, encouraging lies were another.

Jessie sat back. "So how would you like to begin?"

Craig stared. Deer, headlights. "Uh, dinner?"

"Great idea. Take me to dinner and I'll take you to bed. First lesson."

The sound he made was kind of like *eep*.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Craig glanced quickly at his watch. His mom wasn't good at picking up on social cues like that, but he didn't want her to think he was anxious to get away. He ran the brush through her long brown hair.

"What are you doing today, dear?" She looked back at him and smiled. Funny, she was only fifty-four, but the disease seemed to make her even younger. Her skin looked fresh and unlined.

How much should he tell her? "I have a date tonight."

"Oh, lovely. Is she a nice girl?"

"Guy, Mom. Remember? I like guys."

"Oh right." She shook her head. "Sorry, darling." Sometimes she realized her memory was going and sometimes she didn't.

"Perfectly fine. And yes, he's a nice guy." He pulled the hair back and clipped it at her neck. "I'm going to take him to dinner."

"That's lovely." She frowned. That usually meant she was searching the memory banks. "You don't go on a lot of dates, do you?"

"No, not many."

"I remember the first time I dated your father. We went to dinner and a movie. It was so nice. He was so nice."

"I'm glad you had fun, Mom." The only good thing about the disease was she didn't remember that her husband was a drunken bastard who had smacked her and her son around before he left for another woman.

Craig moved to the chair across from her, and looked at the bright, slightly vacant eyes. Vacant now, but not then. Not when he was a kid. Then she'd prevailed. Studying like a crazy woman, she'd turned herself into a real estate agent. And she'd done well because people loved her and trusted her to find them good houses. God, why wasn't he more like her? Intrepid.

They both watched the TV that played ceaselessly in her room. Some kind of comedy. She told him a couple garbled stories about shows she'd watched. He looked at his watch again. Better go if he was going to dress for dinner. Whoa. That made him breathless.

"I better go, Mom."

Her smile crumpled. "Oh dear."

His heart ached. The days when she didn't want him to go were the hardest. "I'll be back real soon."

She nodded. "Okay."

He kissed her and walked to the door.

"Craig?"

He turned.

"When you come back, bring your young man."

How on earth had she remembered that? "Okay, I will." But it was good she wouldn't remember it next time.

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Craig chewed but he couldn't taste the food. Too nervous. Jessie didn't seem to have the same problem. He ate his salmon enthusiastically. "Thank you so much for bringing me here. I think they have the best fish around."

Craig nodded. He might not be noticing the food too much, but his date looked good enough to eat. Jessie wore trim blue jeans, a crisp white shirt, and a black leather jacket. The wild hair shone under the soft lighting. Women kept sneaking peeks at their table. Craig grinned. "If you decide to go straight, there seem to be a few women who would volunteer to take you off my hands."

Jessie glanced around as he sipped his wine. "My guess is they're looking at you and wondering how they can get you away from me."

Craig stared at the tablecloth. "You're sweet."

"That's true. And I'm also truthful." Jessie ate the last bite on his plate, and settled back contentedly with his wine. "So tomorrow after my last class, we'll do a shopping trip."

Craig swallowed and looked down at the sport coat he was wearing. “That bad, huh?”

“Nope. Pretty cute. But I think we can gild the lily.” He tapped the table cloth. “So, my place or yours? Mine is pretty basic.”

Cotton in the mouth. “We can go to mine. It’s not much.”

Jessie grinned. “We can work on that too. I have a flair for interior design, but no money to put it to work.” He laughed. “I am so gay.”

Craig laughed too. “I’m so glad.”

Jessie gave him a look that about melted his shorts. “Me too, baby. Me too.”

Craig paid, and after a walk through the restaurant that garnered a lot of admiring glances, they hit the parking lot and climbed into the gray sedan. Jessie looked around. “This is a pretty serviceable car.”

Craig nodded and pulled out of the lot onto the Pacific Coast Highway. “Funny you should notice. I decided the car was another metaphor for my existence.”

“Gray and boring?”

“Yep.”

“It’s all about choices. What you choose for yourself. You don’t have to spend a lot of money to have a fun car.”

“Maybe you could help me find a different one?”

“All part of tutoring.” Jessie turned in his seat so he faced Craig. “Tell you what. Your final exam is going to be getting that job you told me about. Or another one just as good.”

Craig swallowed. “Really?”

“Abso-fuckin’-lutely. When you have that job under your belt, you graduate. You’re an official top and you no longer need a tutor. Agreed?”

Craig smiled. “Agreed.”

“Tell me about your mom.”

“She has Alzheimer’s.”

“Rough. I’m so sorry.” His voice held genuine sympathy.

Funny, Craig told so few people about his mom. “Yeah, me too. She’s a great lady. What about you? Where’s your family?”

“My dad’s a retired high school teacher in Riverside. He loved teaching and he inspired me.”

“Nice. Where’s your mom?”

“She left when I was a kid. I stayed with my dad.”

“That must have been hard.”

“No, I was really little. My dad was my family from the time I can remember.”

The headlights of oncoming cars flashed in Craig’s eyes. “My mom raised me alone.”

“She must be really young to have such a terrible disease.”

“Yeah. She is.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

Craig glanced over. Was he kidding? “You would?”

“Yeah. You said she’s a great lady. I love great people.” His bright teeth reflected in the windshield.

“That’s funny. I told her I was going on a date. You know, just to have something to talk about. She asked to meet you.”

“Well, see. Meant to be.”

He pulled the car into his parking lot. Show time. He turned off the ignition. He could barely catch his breath.

“Hey.”

Craig looked over at the beautiful young man.

“Why don’t you kiss me?”

“Oh.” Craig glanced at Jessie, who had a soft smile on his face.

“It’s dark. Quiet. We’re going in to have sex. Seems natural.”

“Okay.”

Jessie stayed right where he was. Craig turned in his seat and scoped out the situation. He didn’t kiss a lot. The guys he had sex with usually didn’t bother. They just got a lubed finger in his butt, then stuck in their cock.

Hmm. He scooted as close to the console as possible, reached out a hand, and slipped it behind Jessie’s head. That wild hair was super soft. Craig leaned forward and drew Jessie toward him. The man came willingly but didn’t help. Okay, so this was lesson one.

Close. Closer. Gently he touched his lips against Jessie’s. For a second it was all clinical. Was he doing it right? Then—wow. Soft, warm, yielding. Craig pressed a little harder and opened his lips over Jessie’s. He slid his tongue along the softly closed seam of the pretty boy’s lips. A little moan vibrated in his chest.

Wait. That came from Jessie. He made Jessie moan. That was good. Very good.

Craig’s tongue persuaded back and forth. Jessie’s lips parted and Craig slipped in. He froze. Too sweet. Too hot. Jessie moaned again. Oh, just right. Craig tightened his arms and pulled Jessie closer so he could press further into the sweetness, his tongue exploring the soft unknown recesses. This was so new. He’d never been the aggressor in a kiss as far as he remembered. It made him feel powerful.

Jessie seemed to like it. He tightened his hands behind Craig’s neck and whimpered as he pressed his tongue deep. Like some lightning bolt, a flash of electricity shot from Craig’s tongue straight to his cock. From interested to desperate in two seconds! Oh God, how could he get across the console? His mouth started to devour Jessie all on its own. He tightened his hands in the silky hair and pressed as much of his body as he could get across the barrier toward Jessie.

Jessie pulled back. “Unless we’re secretly members of Cirque du Soleil, I think we better go inside.”

Oh right. Craig nodded, but his cock was up for the acrobatics. He pulled Jessie in for one more deep kiss.

Jessie kissed back then grinned. “I love it when you’re hot for me, because, baby, I am dying for you.”

Even if it was just tutoring flattery, that idea made Craig’s cock twice as hard. He opened his door, stumbled out into the parking lot and looked around. Good grief, what had he been thinking? What if someone had come by? Getting inside was a top priority.

Jessie came up beside him and Craig clicked the lock remote on the car. He glanced into the shadows, took a deep breath, and wrapped an arm around Jessie’s shoulders. The guy fit real nice. A light came on in one of the attached townhouses. What if his neighbors saw? He loosened his hold.

Jessie reached up and grabbed Craig’s hand where it rested on his shoulder. “We have as much right to be lovers as anyone.”

Okay, that was true. Not everyone agreed, but hell, that didn’t make it less true. Still, he hurried a little getting to his front door despite their tandem movement. He slipped the key in the lock, opened the door, and reached in to flip on the light. Then he stepped back and let Jessie walk in.

Trying to look at his—what had Jessie called it—“serviceable” living quarters from Jessie’s point of view made him shudder. The kid looked around, then walked over to his shabby easy chair and put a hand on the phony leather. “This looks well used.”

Craig shrugged. “It’s comfortable.”

“I’ll bet.” As Craig turned on more lights, Jessie sat in the chair and pushed back until his feet were up in the air. “Very nice. We’ll have to try having sex in this chair sometime.”

Whoa. What to feel? He loved that word “sometime” which implied the future. That they’d have sex in the future. But Jessie also said sex and that was on deck right now. If he’d forgotten to be nervous before, he remembered now.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Craig switched on another light and turned as Jessie pushed forward in the chair until the footrest collapsed and his feet were on the floor. He looked up at Craig and grinned. “You’ve got me, big guy. What are you going to do with me?”

Craig swallowed. “Oh. Have sex with you?”

“Want to be a little more specific?”

“Uh, top you?”

“Try again.”

Well, hell. “Fuck you.”

“Now that sounds good. What do you have in mind?”

Okay he got it. This was a lesson. “I’ll take you in the bedroom, lay you on the bed, and fuck you.”

“Hmm. What about my clothes? Do you plan to use lube?” Jessie propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin in it. “Tell me how it’s going to be.”

Deep breath. “Well, maybe I’ll carry you.”

“Ummmm.”

That was a nice reaction. “And then I’ll take off your clothes.” Craig looked at the mischievous blue eyes. “Sloooowly take them off while I, uh, nibble on your, uh, ear. No, foot. Maybe foot.”

Jessie smiled lazily. “I’m ticklish but I love the idea.”

This was fun. “I’ll take off my clothes.” A little crease between Jessie’s eyebrows said *stop*. “I’ll do a striptease for you, okay?” That brought the smile back. “Then I’ll get some lube and—” He swallowed hard. “And I’ll slick my fingers and slooowly press them into your, uh, butt.”

“Hmmm.” Jessie got up and unfastened his dark jeans. *Oh my God!* He pulled them down in one move, taking his boxer briefs with them, then turned

and flopped over the chair arm with his ass toward Craig. “You mean this butt?”

“Holy crap.”

Jessie peeked around the arm of the chair upside down, his dark blond hair flopping on the chair seat. “I thought you might like a look at the goods.”

Craig couldn’t swallow. That slim, tight ass pointed right at him all hard and adorable. “Uh—”

Gazing at Craig, Jessie reached back with both of his hands and pulled his ass cheeks apart. Nestled in there was the prettiest pink pucker Craig had ever seen. Since he always bottomed, his partners got to see his hole but not usually vice versa. It was a literal sight for sore eyes. His cock throbbed, it wanted in there so bad. Jessie smirked. “You like?”

“Gorgeous.”

“So maybe this chair gets its initiation right now, baby, because unless you’ve got a pet, there’s something in those jeans dying to get out.”

Craig stared down at the prominent bulge in his pants. “Yeah.”

“Go get the lube and condoms and hurry.” Jessie kicked his feet, which looked funny since his pants were still bunched around his ankles.

*Feet don’t fail me now, as the old movies used to say.* Craig hurried into the bedroom, kicked off his shoes and toed off the socks while he rummaged for the lube and condoms in the bedside drawer. The denim pressed so hard on his cock, it hurt.

When he ran back into the living room, Jessie had taken off his own shoes, and the pants were lying in a heap on the couch. The butt, however, was still perfectly positioned. He peeked back at Craig, and then his hands came up and pulled apart the cheeks again.

Transfixed. What would it be like to put his tongue right there? Whew, he better walk before he tried to run. One foot in front of the other, he approached that perfect ass. He couldn’t help it. He leaned down and kissed one rosy cheek.

“Thank you.”

Fumbling in his pocket, he brought out the lube. He uncapped it and squirted a little in his hand. The plastic bottle slipped out of his hand and bounced on the brown carpet. Nervous. He took a deep breath and swiped some sticky goo on one finger. He reached out but, damn, his hand was shaking.

Jessie wiggled a little. "You've got the target in sight, go for the kill."

Craig laughed, and it came out as a giggle. With a rush, he tagged the hole with the lube and pushed inside.

Holy crap! Hot in there. He closed his eyes. All slick and warm. Is that what he felt like to other guys? No way. Jessie was special. Slowly he pressed the curious digit in and searched around the smooth, silky walls. Jessie gasped and his body jumped. Craig ripped out his finger. "Oh God, did I hurt you?"

"No baby, that's just my prostate. Don't stop, God. Put two in. Come on." He wiggled again.

Oh boy, yes. Craig scooped up more lube on two fingers as requested, and pushed back in. Jessie's hole seemed welcoming. Not resisting much at all. His own cock was trying to climb out through the zipper to get at it.

Jessie was pushing back against Craig's fingers and making wonderful mewling sounds. "This is so good. Come on. Do it. Fuck me."

Oh God. Terrified. But fortunately even more turned on than scared. He grabbed a condom from his pocket, pulled down his zipper, and shucked the jeans and boxers all in one move before kicking them across the room. His cock sprang up so hard it slapped his belly.

Jessie smiled in his upside down position. "Oooh, verra verra nice."

He'd blush later. Right now, all he wanted was to fuck. One rip with his teeth had the latex in his hand and he rolled it onto his dripping dick. With the rest of the lube on his palm, he juiced up and took aim. This was the moment he'd dreamed of. He had to slow down just a little to savor it.

Fitting the blunt head of his cock to the pink rosette that looked way too tight to receive it, he watched his dick slowly vanish inside. Oh my God. Oh. My. God. It would have seemed like a dream, but *keee-rap*, every nerve

ending in his cock was on fire with an incredible friction that said this was very real. Wow.

His balls banged against Jessie's butt. All the way in.

Jessie looked up at him. "Hey baby, congratulations. You're officially a top. How is it?"

"So incredible." He could barely get the words out.

"Okay, so hammer my ass."

Oh yes. Craig pulled out all the way to the tip then watched it go in again. The visual was so sexy he wanted a camera. Out, and another hard thrust. And then the feeling got way too much to keep his eyes open. Like the most delicious fire, streams of heat ran up his cock, into his balls, and spread out like a lava flow. Tingles and tremors bubbled like champagne through his body.

He might not know how to top, but his cock did. He thrust so hard his teeth clicked together. Wham. Wham.

"Oh yes. Fuck me." Jessie was pushing back like a wild man.

So great. Jessie seemed to love it. Oh God, so did he. How had he never done this before? *Think*. What did he like when he was getting topped? Oh yeah. He leaned over Jessie's back, wrapped his arm around his narrow hips, and grabbed a very hard and wet cock. With long strokes, he cranked him.

"Oh man, Craig. That's so great. Oh yeah. Won't last, baby. You're too good. Oh yeah."

Good? Oh, he loved being good. He couldn't last much longer either. With every thrust, his balls tightened and the friction on his cock got closer to heaven.

"Craig, oh God. Harder!"

He bent over that cosmic butt, and pounded like a pile driver while his hand pumped Jessie's cock just as hard. Oh crap, it felt so good.

"Oh God, oh God, oh Craig, ohhh—" Jessie's spunk squirted out so hard it made Craig's hand tingle, and fluid squished between his fingers and dripped on the chair.

Sweet God, he'd made Jessie come. Holy crap. "Shiiiiit!" The top of his head flew off and his brains scattered to outer space as wave after wave of trembling, flaming pleasure filled every nerve end. Coming. Oh God, coming and coming.

Like a balloon with no air, he fell over Jessie's back, his cock still locked in that heavenly hole. Smooth shoulder skin pressed against his lips so he kissed it. That was all the energy he had left.

He felt a jiggling under his middle then heard soft giggles coming from the body below him. What was funny?

"Oh baby, for a guy who's never topped, you sure made up for lack of experience. You can top me any time."

That made him both happy and sad. Happy he'd done well, sad that he was a step closer to being done with tutoring.

He kissed that smooth skin one more time before he backed off and pulled his softening cock out of Jessie's bottom. The guy just lay there chuckling with his bare butt all rosy and shiny. So cute it was ridiculous.

So what should he do now? Craig looked down at his rumpled shirt and bare legs, his soft happy cock hanging in the middle with limp condom still attached. He slid it off and plopped it in a bowl on the end table.

Okay, he'd created a fantasy and hadn't lived it all the way out yet. He glanced at Jessie's bare ass. What if the guy wanted to go home now? What if he didn't go along? Jesus, being the top was fraught with anxiety. You had to make so many decisions. Risk rejection at every turn.

Oh hell. He stepped over and took hold of Jessie's shoulders. The guy squeaked, but Craig kept going. He pulled him up until Jessie was on his feet, then reached down and picked Jessie up in his arms like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold. *Oops. Better not share that analogy.* But Jessie just smiled as Craig carried him into the bedroom.

He'd put on fresh sheets earlier, and had left them pulled back. He gently sat his pretty burden on the bed, pulled off his shirt, then scooted Jessie onto the pillow. "Be right back." He hurried into the bathroom, dragged off his own

shirt and tossed it, warmed a wash cloth, and wiped his own hands and cock. He grabbed another cloth, got it just right, and took it back to Jessie.

The pretty boy sat against the headboard, smiling. Craig perched on the edge of the bed and wiped the cum that had splashed on Jessie's chest. Jessie lay a finger against Craig's cheek. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

"You're a natural top, you know?"

Wow. "Really?"

"Yes. Tops take care of people, guide them, make them happy. You do that as second nature. Look how you care for your mom."

He'd never thought of that. "Thanks." He took the cloth back to the bathroom and came back to find Jessie snuggled under the covers. His heart leapt. "You'll stay with me?"

Jessie grinned. "You brought me here. I figured you wanted me to stay."

"Oh yes." And he wouldn't say that he was rapidly wanting Jessie to stay forever.

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## CHAPTER SIX

No one had ever spent the night with him before. He'd been too ashamed to admit that hours ago when they'd first curled up together. He'd even slept for a while, but the joy had wakened him. The reality of having someone in his bed was wondrous. Not someone. Jessie.

Very soft light crept in under the shades, and he stared at the outline of the beautiful man lying on his stomach beside him snoring softly. The wild, fair hair curled on his back and fell across his cheekbone. Craig gently brushed it away.

Jessie stirred and flipped over, dragging the sheets under him and leaving one very bouncy cock on full display. *Hello morning woody*. Mouth watering. What would a top do?

He leaned over until the rising wood was right in front of his mouth. One lick. *Umm*. Salty and delicious. Two licks. That got a very nice murmur from sleeping beauty. Pounce. Craig opened wide and covered as much of Jessie's cock as he could get in his mouth. Then he closed and sucked—hard.

“Holy Gandalf. Good morning to you too!” Jessie's hips were bucking and his eyes were barely open.

This was so fun. Craig just kept licking and sucking like he'd found candy in his bed. Jessie scooted in a big half circle until he managed to get himself right under Craig's cock. He reached up, grabbed, and pulled down until Craig's hard rod was getting some of the same treatment. Craig collapsed onto his side, Jessie turned likewise and they sucked like mad. Sixty-nine. He hadn't done it since he was a young teenager with the kid across the street who grew up to be a Bible-thumping preacher. But he'd sure loved sucking cock when he was young.

“*Umpf, umpf*.” They both made wild slurping sounds and competed to see who could swallow the most cock, giggling like kids around their too-full mouths. But things got serious real fast. Craig couldn't stop his hips from trying to push his dick down Jessie's throat. The kid had a little more control but not much.

Craig knew he was toast. His cock was ready to blow. He wanted company. He wrapped his lips around Jessie's fat mushroom head, licked hard into the slit, sucked his ice cream cone, and then deep-throated that cock so far down he gave up the idea of breathing.

*"Mmmmmmftht. UMMMMMfft."* Pow. Hot cum hit the back of Craig's throat and almost made him cough, but he held on, sucking gently as he rode out the thrashing orgasm that took over Jessie's body. The lips left his cock. "Oh, OH!"

Then they were back with the best vengeance and Jessie sucked him into oblivion, the pleasure so intense it was almost pain. But so good.

He collapsed in a heap gasping for breath, and heard Jessie beside him doing that cute chuckle he seemed to get after sex. The sun had definitely taken over outside and Craig could see Jessie's blue eyes clearly. The kid grinned. "You know how to make a guy love morning."

Craig stretched. "Do you have to be at school soon?"

"Not for a little while. What about you? Early appointments?"

"No. I got so upset when the whole promotion thing went kablooey, I took vacation and didn't tell them when I was coming back."

Jessie bounded up to a sitting position like they hadn't had sex half the night. "So what would be your dream job?"

Good question. Craig shrugged.

"Come on, this is part of your tutoring. Have you got a résumé?"

He propped his head on his hand. "Yeah. I had to update mine for some articles I wrote last year."

"Good, let me see it."

He fell onto his back. "What about breakfast?"

"Show me your résumé first, then I'll make you some eggs to die for."

"Oh, okay." He'd been having so much fun. Résumés were too much like real life. And they led straight to graduation. He swung his legs off the bed. "Shower?"

“Résumé first.”

“Slave driver.” He grabbed for his boxers, and pulled them on. He couldn’t quite manage business in the nude.

Jessie had no such compunctions. He leaped off the bed and eyed Craig up and down, staring at his hips. “We’ll deal with *those* things a bit later. No guy who gives a blowjob like that should wear white boxer shorts.”

Craig didn’t know whether he should feel flattered or embarrassed. But at least the underwear was easy to change. The rest of his life wasn’t so easy.

He walked into the living room where he’d left the laptop, and fired it up on the dining room table. A couple minutes later he got into his documents and found the résumé. “Found it.”

Jessie walked in wearing his jeans unbuttoned at the waist, and showing a few inches of happy trail so enticing, returning to bed sounded like a perfect idea. He scooted Craig off the chair and stared at the résumé.

Craig went into the small kitchen and filled two glasses with OJ.

“Hey man, are you telling me you have masters in statistics and market analysis?”

“Yep.” He came back to the table and handed Jessie his glass.

“Well shit. No wonder you didn’t get the fucking promotion.”

Craig frowned. “Why?”

“You’re way too good for it. Come on, let’s get you a job you deserve.” Jessie started clicking keys.

*Might as well start breakfast.* Jessie kept clicking and searching while Craig made eggs. Not to die for, but the best he could. When he set eggs and toast in front of his cute tutor, Jessie grabbed a slice of toast and nibbled before he finally looked up. “I’ve made a file of jobs I think might be a good fit. This is stuff from Facebook, LinkedIn, and a couple of the fancier job sites. Of course, the really good stuff is a little harder to find.”

What about that search he’d seen yesterday from Clear Water Tech? Hell, no way he’d qualify. That job was too much for him.

Jessie ate with one hand and typed with the other. “We need to work on the résumé. Tell me all the cool shit you do in your job.”

Craig shook his head. “I don’t know if I want to quit.” And he didn’t know if he wanted a better job. Jessie seemed really anxious to move on. Made sense. Hell, the guy wouldn’t want to tutor Craig forever.

Jessie speared him with those blue eyes. “Like hell you don’t. Your instincts took you right out that door yesterday. They don’t appreciate you, so they don’t deserve you.”

Craig shrugged. “It’s mostly my fault. I let them take advantage of me.”

“I’m glad you see that. But a really good boss wouldn’t be so blind.”

Craig looked up at Jessie. Wait a second. How would he know? He was a twenty- one year-old schoolteacher.

Jessie stared over the top of the laptop and grinned like he’d heard Craig’s thoughts. “Who’s the best admin in your department?”

“Jessica Heartstone.”

“Who’s the most effective salesperson?”

“John Creeger.” That’s right. Not Howard Landrew.

“Who’s the best art director in your marketing communications department?”

“There are two.”

Jessie chewed. “See. You know. Why doesn’t your boss?”

“She has a lot on her plate.” But he had a point.

“Besides, you need a better résumé even if you decide to stay where you are. Come on, tell me what you do.” Jessie chewed a bite of egg.

Okay, that made sense. For a half hour, Craig filled Jessie in on all the details of his job—the customers they’d won as a result of his marketing strategies, the revenue they’d gained. Jessie typed like mad, asked questions, and managed to eat his food at the same time.

Finally the kid sat back. “Take a look.”

Craig walked behind Jessie and leaned over to see the screen. Jessie raised his head and kissed Craig's neck. Damn, that was nice. "Thank you." He looked at the résumé. "Holy shit. I sound like some Fortune 500 CMO or something."

"Is there a lie on there?"

Son of a gun. "Nope."

"Okay. I have to take a shower and get to school. Look over the list I left you and see which jobs appeal. Write a short introductory letter specific to the ones you like and include your résumé. Hey, it can't hurt to look. Think of it as market research." He laughed. "We're on our way to graduation, baby."

Jessie bounded into the bathroom and Craig sat down in the chair. Graduation. Jessie wanted him to succeed. Be as good as he could be. Damn, Craig wanted that too. But even if he could believe he was good enough for a new job, he'd never be good enough for Jessie.

Craig sighed and stared at the computer. Might as well get on with it. The guy had identified some interesting opportunities. He scrolled through them. A couple looked interesting. And then there was ClearWater. He clicked on the email and looked at the executive search letter again. God, what a great job. He'd get laughed at if he applied.

He stared at the bathroom and listened to the water splashing. What the fuck? He'd been laughed at plenty. Why not once for reaching too high?

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

“You look gorge.” Jessie bit into the chicken leg and grinned around it.

Craig could feel himself blushing. Of course, he’d become an expert at it in the last few hours. Jessie had taken him shopping. Practically everything in his closet or drawers had been replaced, starting with his white boxers. The slim, knit boxer briefs snuggled his balls underneath his sleek new jeans. The jeans that had cost more than some of his previous suits were topped by a gauze-thin blue sweater under a taupe leather jacket so delicious he didn’t care if it represented a week’s salary. He’d saved the money. He could spend it. “Thank you.”

“Love the ’do, too.”

They had also visited the hairdresser, who had taken Craig’s combed-to-the-side dark hair and made it spiky and incredibly cool. He glanced in the mirror behind Jessie on the restaurant wall. Who was that guy? “Hey, would you mind if I took you somewhere after dinner?”

“Love to, as long as I get fucked at the end of the night.” Jessie sipped some wine.

Man, imagine Jessie Randall wanting to get fucked by Craig Elson. Amazing. Of course, he was just taking his tutoring responsibilities seriously. Craig sighed very softly.

Jessie leaned back in the booth and folded his hands over his stomach. “Thank you for keeping me fed. I’m a growing boy.” He laughed.

“My pleasure.”

“Do you like where you live?”

Craig chuckled. “Change of topic whiplash.”

“Sorry. I just know of a great place coming available in Laguna Beach and I wondered if you’d be interested?”

Laguna. He loved it. “I’m not nearly cool enough for Laguna.” He grinned.

“Umm. Have you looked in the mirror?”

“I try to keep my fixed costs down in case my mom’s expenses go up dramatically.”

Jessie gazed over his wine glass. “It’s pretty reasonable. It’s the second floor of an older house. It even has an ocean view. A little smaller than your current place, but two bedrooms, so you could have an office or guestroom. Man, I’d take it in a minute if I could afford it.”

“Sounds amazing.” Too amazing for him.

“Think about it. It’ll go fast when it actually goes on the market.”

“I’ll bet.”

“So where’s this place you want to take me?”

Craig pulled out his wallet. “I’ll show you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Craig guided Jessie across the street toward The Hideaway. Why was he doing this? To show off? Yep, that was the answer. But he only had Jessie for a little while and he might never get another chance.

Jessie smiled as they walked toward the door of the bar. “I’ve been here before but not for a couple years.”

“I come in here sometimes.” Okay, that wasn’t true and this wasn’t fair. Craig stopped and pulled Jessie in front of him. “Actually, this is the bar where I was when I got the shiner from this asshole who came on to me. I actually brought you here to brag on you, but I don’t want to take advantage of our friendship. I’m sorry.”

Jessie stretched up and kissed Craig gently on the mouth. “I like that you’re proud of me. I feel the same way. Let’s go get ’em, Tiger.” He slipped his arm through Craig’s and pulled him toward the door. Oh God, how could he keep from falling in love with this man?

It was after nine so the bar was crowded. A few lesbian couples, but mostly guys. As they walked in, a man stepped away from his place at the bar and Jessie slipped into the spot. He climbed onto the bar stool and pulled Craig up close behind him. This was fun. Craig wrapped his arms around his favorite tutor. The big bartender walked over and smiled at Jessie. “Hi, what’ll you have?” He looked up at Craig without a flicker of recognition. Then he cocked

his head and a slow smile spread across his face. “Hey, I see you’re having a better night.”

Craig grinned and hugged Jessie tight. “As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Excellent.” The bartender gave him a thumbs-up. “You still want beer?” Craig nodded. “What about you, cutie?”

“Beer will be fine.”

The bartender walked away and Jessie turned around on the stool to face Craig. Two men standing next to them glanced over and got wide eyes.

Craig leaned in and kissed his nose. “A lot of guys are staring at you.”

“I think they’re staring at you, baby. You have no idea how great you look.”

“Thank you.”

The bartender set down the beers. Craig handed one to Jessie and took the other. They clinked glasses and sipped. Craig nodded toward the back. “I need the men’s room. Will you be okay without me?”

“Hell yeah. I’m a big boy.” Jessie reached up and pecked his lips. “Pee fast.”

“I will.”

Maybe the new look was working? He pushed into the men’s room and used the urinal, washed his hands, and hurried back out.

Heads were turning toward the front of the bar. He pushed between two guys just in time to see Nick Nederhall grab Jessie’s hair and haul it back as Nick went in for a kiss. For one second, Craig froze. Did Jessie want it? No way. Jessie tried to push Nick off and another guy Craig had seen with Nick a few times grabbed Jessie and held his wrists.

No damned way.

He blew out his breath and bunched his hands into fists. He’d never hit a person in his life, but this was it. He pushed between two men who were watching the action, pulled back one arm, and punched as hard as he could to Nick’s lower back. *Ow*. He shook his hand. Nick bellowed, and Craig grabbed the asshole’s hands away from Jessie’s hair. “Get the fuck away from him.”

Nick doubled over with a hand on his back and looked up like Quasimodo. “Who the fuck? What?” He stopped. “Elson?”

“Yes Elson. Get your damned hands off of him.”

Craig saw Jessie push the other guy backwards, jump off the bar stool, and step toward the asshole with fists raised. Nick’s pal held up his hands and backed off.

Nick finally straightened up. “Hey man, that hurt.”

“Good. What the hell did you think you were doing to Jessie?”

“He’s yours?” Nick’s eyes bugged.

“Well he’s sure as hell not yours. Keep your filthy hands off of him.”

The big bartender leaned over. “Nick, I suggest you and your friend get out of here.”

Jessie walked over and looked up at Craig. “Who is that asshole?”

“The one who gave me the black eye.”

“The hell you say.”

Jessie stepped over until he stood nose-to-nose with Nick. They were about the same height but Nick was a lot heavier. Jessie planted his hands on his hips. “I just found out that you were the one who came on to Craig. You think you can top Craig Elson? You haven’t got it in you, bitch.”

Nick looked shell-shocked. “Sorry. I didn’t know he was taken.”

Jessie pressed in. “It would probably be better if you just stayed away from men, asshole. You don’t seem to be able to avoid other people’s partners.”

Nick just nodded. Jessie turned to Craig. “Come on, honey.” He stalked out of the door with Craig right behind him.

Jessie paused on the sidewalk, still frowning. Craig put his hands on the guy’s shoulders. “Thank you. You were amazing.” How could he ever get enough of his tutor? “I’m sorry I got you into that mess. That’s what I get for showing off.”

“Nobody has the right to manhandle you if you don’t want it. Let’s go home, okay?”

He liked the sound of that so much it almost made him cry. “Yeah.”

They held hands in the car, and when they got to Craig’s apartment, Jessie walked straight into the bedroom like he owned the place. After Craig drank some water and turned out the lights, he found Jessie sitting up in bed and it looked like the bottom half of him was as bare as the top. He flexed an arm behind his head, beautiful biceps popping. “Want to do face-to-face?”

“Sounds wonderful.” What could be better than looking at that face while they fucked?

Craig undressed fast but carefully. He didn’t want to mess up the new clothes.

When he turned around nude, Jessie was staring at him. “What?”

“The only way you look better than in those new jeans is bare-assed. You are one great-looking guy.” He stretched languidly. “Nice cock, too.”

There was the blush. He could feel it. “You’re sure a great antidote for low self-esteem.”

“It’s ridiculous that you have any issues with self-doubt. Probably just because of your father.”

Craig nodded and sat on the bed. “He had a way of ripping people down. My mom bounced back though.”

“She was an adult. You were a kid.”

He shrugged. “I was twelve when he left. He called me a fag even then. I barely knew what it meant, but it sure became a bad word to me.”

“It is a bad word. For all of us.”

Craig smiled, but it hurt. “I remember a bully in high school hit me and I yelled, ‘Fuck you, fag.’ He beat me so hard I had scabs and bruises all over my face. Nobody punished him since I’d called him such a disgusting name.” He shook his head.

Jessie scrunched the pillow behind his neck. “But I don’t think you have issues with your sexuality. You just don’t understand how great you are.”

Craig stared at the bed cover. Thoughts he hadn’t ever acknowledged tiptoed into his mind. “Maybe I accepted being gay because I thought it was

something a bad, disgusting kid like me would be?” Hot tears pressed at his eyes. Stupid! He had Jessie Randall in his bed and he was sniveling.

Jessie scooted forward and grabbed Craig in a hug. His arms squeezed and he rocked a little. “So you see how not being as great as you can be lets the bastard win, right? When you accept your amazingness, you’ll understand that being gay is just as amazing.” He gently kissed Craig’s lips. “Hey, you get to kiss me, right?”

Craig nodded and blinked. A grin broke through. “Hell, we could put you on gay recruiting posters.”

Jessie tightened his grip. “Would you sign up?” He stared at Craig with those blue, blue eyes.

Could Craig melt into that hot gaze? “Every day.”

“So how do you want to improve your gay-boy skills tonight, my favorite top?”

God, Jessie said such great things. “Get on your hands and knees, you sassy bottom.”

Jessie’s smile pushed dimples into his cheeks. “You got it, boss.” He turned that well-toned ass right at Craig. Starting in doggy position, he lowered his head to the bed and wagged his butt. Oh God.

Craig took a deep breath. He didn’t want to mess this up. He reached out and separated those pink cheeks even further. Jessie made a hissing sound. Craig leaned in and kissed Jessie’s butt, then sidled over and insinuated his tongue into the valley, questing until he made contact with the pucker and licked around it.

“Ooooh.” Jessie’s voice trembled.

Craig pulled back a little. “I think you like that.”

“Oh baby, you found me out.” His bottom wagged for more.

Craig pressed in even further, flattening his tongue and licking all over that tight hole. Jessie smelled like soap and tasted musky and clean at the same time. Okay, bull’s-eye. Craig curled his tongue into a tube, pulled even harder on Jessie’s cheeks, and insinuated his tongue into the pucker. It gave way and accepted the hot flesh.

“Oh baby, oh God, that’s so great. Please don’t stop. Please.”

In his whole life, no one had ever begged him for anything. He wanted to rim Jessie’s hole forever just to hear him plead. But the begging changed.

“Fuck me, baby. Please. Do it now.”

Craig stared at that pretty face all screwed up in desire and wanting. Desire for him. And just like that, he felt like a top. Maybe he really was a man that someone else could want. Could want to care for them, work for them, create success for them. Make love to them. If Jessie wanted him, could the world be far behind?

Jessie kept whimpering while Craig scrambled to the bedside table for a condom and some lube. He’d always stored these for his partners since they tended to be forgetful in the safe sex arena. Now, he needed them.

His cock was pressing against his abdomen and making little wet tracks on his skin. He grabbed the sucker, rolled on a condom and slapped on some lube. Now for the fun part of preparation. Lube on two fingers, he gently inserted them into Jessie’s wagging butt. Ohhh, he loved that hot, tight place.

“That’s good but hurry, baby. Need you in there. Go fast.”

Jessie did feel pretty open. Craig coated all the warm slick insides with his fingers, then pulled out and poised his cock at the shiny opening.

Jessie stared back at him from the mattress with wild, blue eyes. “Do it, do it, do it!”

Craig did it. Flashing a smile at that sweet lover, he leaned forward and pressed his cock into its home base.

“Oooohhhhhhh.” The long moaning sigh slipped from between Jessie’s lips.

“I’ve got what you need, darling.” Did he really just say that? He froze. Who was the guy that made that claim?

“Fuck meeeeeee.”

Oh yeah. He was *that* guy.

He pulled his dick out to the tip and snapped it back in. Crap, that felt good. *Let’s do it again.* Oh, oh, yeah. Flashes of electricity lit up his balls.

The kid was going nuts. No more head on the mattress, he was up on his hands and knees pushing back as hard as he could. Craig banged forward and Jessie slammed back. The impact bounced their balls together which was too fantastic to believe. In all his life, he hadn't imagined a moment this perfect. The top of his head about to explode with pleasure, his cock buried in paradise, and this near-perfect, smart, gorgeous, cool, amazing guy screaming his name. Did he deserve this much joy? Oh, hell yes.

“Harder, baby, harder.”

Craig pounded, letting his hips snap like they were on elastic, and every thrust about blacked him out with intensity.

Jessie clawed at the covers. “Coming. So close.”

Craig leaned over Jessie's back and smelled the sweat and the sweetness of the lean, hard body. He grabbed Jessie's cock with his hand. One pump. The big rod seemed to expand impossibly in his hand. Two pumps. *Pow*. Hot cum squirted out onto the white sheets.

“Ohhh, yesssss.” Jessie's body trembled and spasmed as jet after jet of juice flew out of him.

Craig held Jessie tight through the orgasm then pulled back and ripped off two more pumps until his balls gave up their load and his whole body shook in time to Jessie's.

Craig rode Jessie's body down to the mattress. Flop. A heap of humans.

The little chuckle started. God, he loved that sound. The sound that meant Jessie was a happy man. He couldn't help it. He started to giggle too.

Finally they both stopped laughing. Craig took a deep breath. “Jessie.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think you could show me that Laguna apartment tomorrow?”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Craig slipped out of the bedroom and gently closed the door. Give Jessie a few more minutes. What an exciting day lay ahead. A possible new apartment in beautiful Laguna Beach. Wow. What would that be like? And Jessie even suggested they might look at a car or two. What a tutor.

He sighed, sat in the chair, and opened his laptop. His screen sprang to life and started downloading his emails. *Tutor*. Was it really dumb to fall for your teacher? Maybe it was just gratitude? Yeah, fat chance.

He looked at the email. Oh my God. One of the leads Jessie had uncovered had already answered. He almost didn't want to look. He stuck out one finger and opened it. Oh, okay. Just an acknowledgement of receipt of his résumé and to let him know it was being considered. Whew. That made his heart beat fast.

He closed the document and scrolled. Stopped. The headhunter. Executive search. The one he'd replied to on a whim. They'd replied—holy crap, last night. He hadn't checked. He swallowed hard. Here goes the laughing.

He opened it and scanned. Then just stared.

Jessie's voice came from behind him but it felt like a long way. "Hey, baby, what's going on?"

He opened his mouth but nothing came out.

"Craig? What's wrong?"

Craig looked over his shoulder into the blue of those eyes. "I, uh, sent my résumé to this executive search person for a job at ClearWater Technology. I never thought—" He swallowed.

"What? Let me see." Jessie peered over Craig's shoulder. "Oh my God." He looked at his watch. "Quick, hit reply. Tell her you missed the email last night but could come today if they still want you to."

Craig shook his head. "I don't know." Graduation.

Jessie kissed his cheek. “Do it.”

“Okay.” He whipped off a quick message and hit send. “It’s probably too late.”

“Maybe.” Jessie wrapped his arms around Craig and kissed his lips gently. “And maybe not. You can wear that new suit. But it’s a tech company, so no tie, okay?”

“I’m sure it’s—”

The soft bong of the new email interrupted him. They both stared at the screen. Jessie giggled and clicked the mouse.

*So happy you got the message. You’re scheduled for eleven-thirty. You’ll be meeting with the CMO, Alexandra Herschel. She’s going out of town this evening and wanted to meet you before she left. Good luck. Milly.*

“This is crazy.” His voice came out in a squeak.

“Crazy good. You’ve got two hours. Let’s get you dressed and I’ll take you to the coffee shop for breakfast and show you off.” Jessie pulled on his arms.

Craig pulled back. Oh God, his heart was going to give out. He couldn’t do this. “I should never have sent that dumb résumé. It makes me sound too good. I can’t live up to it.”

Jessie knelt in front of him. “Did we tell a single lie?”

“No, but the way you put it together.” He shook his head.

“It’s called marketing, baby. Come on. Let’s get that suit on you.”

One hour and forty-five minutes later, he sat in his car in the parking lot outside ClearWater Tech, a sprawling mid-rise building in Irvine. The new suit was choking him. Okay, not choking. He wasn’t even wearing a tie. But it felt so—tight.

“You look great, baby, and you’re going to knock them dead.”

If he didn’t die first. His hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Some impression he’d make. He nodded and stared at his lap. Talk about mixed feelings.

Jessie grabbed his head and pulled their faces close together. That must look great inside the building. “Craig Elson, you’re a top. There’s nobody better than you at what you do, whether it’s marketing or fucking. Whatever you learned at your father’s knee was wrong, baby. Who are you going to believe? Him or me? I don’t lie. You’ve got everything this job needs and more. They should be so lucky. And if you don’t get it, who cares? You’ve already got a job.”

Well hell, that was true. He’d never get it. No worries. He grinned, and Jessie kissed him. It was fast but impressive. And just what he needed. “Thank you, Jessie. For everything.”

“I’ll be right here. Go get ’em, Tiger.”

“Don’t you have class today?”

“No, some teacher’s workshop and I’m not quite a teacher yet.”

He got out of the car. Jessie leaned out the window and waved. Craig walked across the lot and into the big, bright lobby. It managed to be both modern and casual, a perfect combination for a tech company. A young woman behind the reception desk smiled.

“Good morning. I’m Craig Elson, I’m here—”

“Oh yes, Mr. Elson. Alex is expecting you.” She pushed a pad of sticky ID badges toward him. “Please fill this out for me and have a seat for a moment.”

Alex? Interesting. High-tech informal. He slapped the badge on his lapel and picked a comfortable chair in a patch of sunlight. He already had a job, such as it was. Maybe this interview would be good practice. And no worries. He’d never get it.

“Craig?” He looked up at a tall, nice looking, short-haired woman wearing black slacks and a polo shirt. More high-tech casual.

Was this the admin? He stood and she walked across the space with her hand extended. “I’m Alex Herschel. Come on in.”

Wow. She came to get him herself.

She led the way through the double doors into the offices beyond and onto an elevator. “Thank you for making this special effort to get here today. I’m on my way to Japan tonight and I really wanted to meet you.”

“I’m delighted.” His heart might escape his chest.

They stepped off onto an efficient but cheery executive floor. Nothing ostentatious. Just attractive and practical. Kind of like her.

“Would you like coffee?”

“No thanks. But water would be great.”

She paused at a young woman’s desk. “Anne, could you get us a couple waters when you have a minute?”

“Sure. Alex. No problem.” She smiled at Craig.

Alex led the way into a pleasant office with a view across the Irvine trees and parking lots. She indicated a guest chair and he sat across from her. She leaned forward and smiled. Probably about forty, with a face you’d call handsome rather than pretty. No makeup but a little lipstick. And the smile was great. “So you’re Lydia’s secret weapon.”

Whoa. “I, uh, don’t know about that. But I work for her.”

“Yeah. And from this résumé,”—she tapped the pages in front of her—“you’re the one with the skills I keep wishing I had. Why are you leaving?”

Deep breath. “To be honest, I’m not sure I’m going to leave.” He swallowed. “But a prophet is without honor in his own city. I’ve been there a long time and I don’t think they see who I am now. But mostly, I really like ClearWater and couldn’t resist replying when the executive search came across my desk.” There. That was the truth.

The admin came in with the water, and Alex thanked her and put a glass in front of him. She leaned back in her chair. “So why do you like ClearWater?”

Breathe. “I think you have a lot of opportunity.” He sipped his water.

“Opportunity we’re not taking advantage of?” Her face was neutral.

He swallowed. Jessie's blue eyes stared at him. *They'd be lucky to get you.* Might as well tell the truth. "Actually, I think you're spread too thin. You're investing too much in biomed and you'll never take that market. You need to concentrate where you can dominate."

She stared at him. "Well hot damn. That's about the most succinct evaluation of exactly what ClearWater is doing wrong I've ever heard. Plus a damned good synopsis of what we ought to change. How did you figure this out?"

He shrugged. "Just observation. We have to keep a close eye on you since we overlap in a few markets."

"Did you notice the salary offered with the VP position?"

Whiplash change of subject. He smiled. "Uh, yes."

"Is it agreeable?"

"It's more than I make now."

"Enough more?"

"Enough for what?"

"To get you to take this job?"

Holy shit. "Are you offering me the job?" No, this couldn't be happening.

She crossed her arms on the desk. "I decided if I liked you when you came in, I was going to make you an offer. You haven't done anything to change my mind. Quite the contrary. How about I sweeten the deal with a small signing bonus?"

Holy double shit. "Uh, I'm interested in seeing the offer."

She tapped the desk again. "I'll send it to the headhunter this afternoon. I'd like to take you on a whole tour and try to persuade you to join us, but I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. Besides I think you already know everything there is about us. I like that." She laughed.

The words tumbled out before he could grab them. "I should probably mention that I'm gay. Company culture and all."

She grinned. “Well that’s interesting.” She stood up and he stood opposite her. She extended her hand. “So am I.”

His heart beat too hard all the way to the elevator. She paused there. “Seriously Craig. I know this seems precipitous, but I’ve interviewed a lot of people. I recognized your skills in your résumé and I’ve seen what you’ve done for my competitor. I’ll be back from Japan in a week, and I’d love you to come on board then.”

He tried to make his swallow look natural. “I’m honored. This has been sudden for me.” He couldn’t breathe.

“If you decide to accept the offer, as I hope you will, contact my assistant, Mary Arnold. I’ll include her contact information in the offer. She’ll let me know, and if you say yes, I’ll be dancing in the Ginza.”

He smiled, they shook hands again, and he got on the elevator. The doors closed on her smiling face.

Man, he liked her. Maybe he could even do the job. He leaned against the elevator walls. He couldn’t wait to tell Jessie.

Jessie.

Jessie said when he got a new job he’d graduate. The end of the tutoring. No. The end of Jessie. He felt punched in the stomach.

The elevator opened and he stepped off. He couldn’t go out there yet. The door across the hall said *Men* and he flew through it and into a stall. He sat on the toilet seat. Damn. This whole thing had just been a weird flyer. He didn’t need this job. Maybe he didn’t even want it. If he went back to work like normal, Jessie would keep trying. Oh that would be so good. He dropped his head. But he’d be lying. Jessie said he never lied. How could Craig lie to him?

Well, shit.

He got up and walked slowly out of the men’s room. He couldn’t lie to Jessie. Sigh. He loved him too much.

He mustered a smile for the receptionist as he turned in the paper badge and pushed out the front door of ClearWater. What in the hell was he going to do now?

He looked up at the bright eyes peering at him from the car. His face must look disappointed because Jessie's expression went from expectant to resigned in one second. Craig opened the car door and sat in the driver's seat. Jessie wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Hey baby, it was good practice, right?"

"Yeah. She said she'd let the headhunter know." A pulse throbbed in his throat.

"What was she like?"

Craig shrugged. "It was a short meeting. She had another appointment in fifteen minutes. But I liked her. Seemed bright and capable." Jeez, he was lying by omission but he couldn't seem to stop. He had to stop.

"Funny that she would have been so anxious for you to come in when she only had fifteen minutes."

Craig shrugged again. *Shit Elson, just tell him.*

"No worries. How about we go see your mom?"

"Now?"

"Sure. You promised I could meet her."

Oh damn, if Jessie met his mother Craig would just get in deeper. But it might give him a minute to think. He nodded.

Craig turned on music, and they both listened quietly on the drive over to the Laguna Hills nursing home. He could feel Jessie's eyes on him. He didn't know what to do. He'd be really excited about this job if it didn't mean losing Jessie. If he could have Jessie with him a little longer, it would almost be worth staying where he was. Jessie would hate that idea. Hell.

He parked, and Jessie fell in beside him as they walked into the low-rise building. He waved at the women at the desk. They all knew him and why he was there. He glanced at Jessie. The place always had a slightly funny smell and healthy people often recoiled from it. The guy seemed as at home here as he did everywhere. He smiled at the people around him—wheelchairs, feeding tubes and all.

He opened the door to the Alzheimer's wing, walked over to the desk, and signed in. The big nurse looked at Jessie with interest. Craig never brought

anyone with him. He could feel himself blushing. “Estelle, this is my friend, Jessie. He wants to meet Mom.”

She nodded and gave Jessie a big smile. “Good for you. She’s going to love you.”

Jessie flashed those white teeth. “I hope so.”

Craig pointed down the left hall. “C’mon. It’s down here.” He started walking. How the hell was this going to go? He’d been so excited about Jessie meeting his mom. Now everything seemed poisoned by his lie.

Jessie stopped and pulled on Craig’s arm. “Craig, what’s wrong? Come on. Not getting that job can’t be so awful. There are so many more jobs. We’ll find the right one for you. Tomorrow, after my morning class, we’ll go look at the apartment and the car and everything will move ahead.” He ducked under Craig’s downturned eyes and smiled up at him. “Okay?”

Craig nodded. *Tell him. Tell him.* “This is Mom’s room. Come in behind me so she sees me first. Sometimes she gets confused when she sees strangers.”

“Okay.”

Craig walked in and could hear Jessie’s flip flops on the floor behind him. His mom sat in her easy chair watching one of the endless stream of comedies. “Hi Mom.”

She looked up. For a second she did the brain search. Oh dear. She didn’t usually do that with him. “Hi, darling. Come in.”

She sat forward in her chair then looked at Jessie and stopped short. She stared at him wide-eyed and then at Craig. Then back to Jessie.

Jessie knelt down but didn’t come too close. “Hello, Mrs. Elson. My name is Jessie. We’ve never met. I’m a friend of Craig’s.”

How did he always know what to do?

His mom gazed at Jessie’s pretty face for a moment, her eyes blank. Then they crinkled. “Craig, this is your young man!”

How in the hell did she figure that out?

“Uh, no, Mom, Jessie’s just a friend.”

She frowned. Jessie looked at him with those big blue eyes. For a moment they looked shocked. Why?

Jessie kind of shook himself then sat on the floor a couple feet from her. “He’s told me so many wonderful things about you, I asked him if I could meet you.”

“Well of course, dear. We’re going to be great friends. How did you meet?”

“We met in a coffee shop. I noticed him right away because he was so good-looking.”

What the hell? Was he even there? Craig sat on the edge of the small settee that stood perpendicular to his mom’s chair.

She was with it now. “He is good-looking isn’t he? When he was born, I thought he’d look like his father, but I think he resembles me, don’t you?” She giggled.

“Spitting image. He’s like you in so many ways. Such a brilliant businessman. I’m still a student, and I’m in awe of all the things he’s accomplished.” He glanced at Craig and grinned.

She looked confused. “A student? Aren’t you a little young to be getting married?”

Craig coughed and grabbed the arm of the chair.

Jessie ignored him. “Well, I’m kind of mature for my age, and have you ever thought that Craig is kind of, you know, youthful? He still has some important things to realize about himself that I’ve already been through. So he helps me and I help him. And he inspires me too.”

Help him. How did he help Jessie?

His mom beamed. “Yes, I’m so proud of him. Like that wonderful new promotion he just got.”

“Oh!” Those words stabbed him. “I didn’t get a promotion, Mom.”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t?”

“They gave it to someone else.”

“Oh.” She frowned. He eyes darted around and then settled on the TV like someone had pulled a veil over her. Oh God, no. He loved having her with him for even a minute. He wanted to get back that liveliness. “Mom. I got a new job. An even better one.”

“You did?” His mother turned back and smiled.

“You did?” Jessie didn’t smile.

Oh shit. He was trying to put his life together and it was falling apart instead. He blew out his breath. He nodded at Jessie. Good, it was out. “Yes. I met with Alex Herschel and she pretty much offered me the job. She’s sending the details over to the executive search firm this afternoon.” He looked down at his hands. “She even suggested a signing bonus.”

A crease appeared between Jessie’s eyebrows. “And you weren’t going to tell me?”

Wait. What? “I just did.”

The frown deepened. “Oh. You’re not excited? We worked so hard, but you’re not happy.”

“No, I—”

His mother’s voice chimed in “He may not think he deserves it, Jessie. He’s never understood how good he is.”

Jessie gazed at him. “So true. You graduated and didn’t even tell me.”

His mother reached out her hand and touched his arm. “What do you mean graduated? He already graduated. Summa cum laude.” She looked around anxiously. “I have his diploma here somewhere.”

Craig just stared at his hands.

Jessie got up. “It was wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Elson. I’m so sorry. I have to go.” And he walked out the door.

No shit. What just happened? Jessie. He turned to his mom. “I should go talk to him.”

She grabbed his arm. “No, darling. Don’t go. You just got here. Tell me about your day.”

“Oh, it was great. I went on this interview and the chief marketing officer really liked me and—” He stared at the door and heard his voice crack “—oh Mom, I should go find Jessie.”

“Such a nice boy. I’m so glad you found him. So nice that he wanted to meet me. Tell me more about him.”

Oh God. “He’s the most wonderful man I’ve ever known.” He sighed, sat on the floor next to her chair, and described everything he knew about Jessie Randall. Well, almost everything.

Of course, when he left the nursing home a half hour later, Jessie was gone.

He trudged to his car. How could he have blown it so totally? Not told the truth. Not played the game by the rules. How could a loser like Craig have ever thought he could keep Jessie Randall?

If he just hadn’t reached so high, he’d still be living his dull gray life—and not known what he was missing.

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## CHAPTER NINE

Craig slid his legs off the side of the bed and sat up. Eight perfect hours of no sleep.

He stood up and dragged himself into the bathroom for a quick pee. A full night of total self-pity and it had gotten him absolutely nowhere. He stared in the mirror as he washed his hands. His sexy spikes drooped like limp linguini and the hollows under his dark eyes made him look like he needed rehab. He did. From his Jessie addiction.

He pulled on his boxer briefs which reminded him of Jessie, and walked into his living room where the recliner screamed Jessie's name. The arm of the old brown chair practically glowed from the cum they'd spilled on it.

He sat on the beige couch and stared at the chair. Today he should be looking at the apartment in Laguna. The apartment Jessie loved. Instead he was sitting here feeling sorry for himself. What the fuck good was all the tutoring Jessie had given him if he was going right back to his old ways?

He needed to change.

He stood up. He was a top, damn it. Enough of a man to have topped Jessie Randall, the sassiest bottom on the planet, and made him beg for more. What the fuck was he doing sitting here? He was a man who took care of people he loved.

He caught his breath. And he knew just how to do it.

He ran into the bedroom and grabbed his phone. Jessie on speed dial. It rang. C'mon answer. Don't be so pissed you won't pick up and—

“Hello.” The musical voice sounded tentative and suspicious.

“Hi. Look, I know I'm an ass, but you promised to show me that apartment in Laguna and I want to see it.”

Silence.

“Come on Jessie, please.”

“I can just give you the address and the agent's name.”

Shit. “I haven’t accepted that job yet, so I didn’t graduate. I need your help.”

“Craig—”

“Please.”

“Okay.” He rattled off an address and phone number. “I’ll meet you there at three when I get out of class.”

He smiled. “I’ll call the agent and ask to see it.”

“Tell her you’re my—tell her you know me.”

He swallowed hard. “Okay. Thanks.”

Deep breath. He dialed the agent’s number and set up an appointment. She really livened up when he said Jessie’s name. When he finished the call, he sat down at the computer and opened his email. As promised, the offer loomed large. *No emotion. Just read the terms.*

Ten minutes later, he shook his head. What an amazing offer. A great salary with stock options, three weeks’ vacation, and all benefits. Even more exciting was the list of responsibilities. They wanted a lot from him, and he wanted to accomplish everything on their wish list. Plus, he knew he could do it. He knew it. He had the skills they needed.

His hand hovered over the phone. He was a chicken-livered loser, but he wanted this job. And Jessie wanted him to have it. Hell, he wished Jessie was here to advise him. But only children needed tutors forever. He was a grown man with serious responsibilities. Jessie hadn’t promised to be his boyfriend, he’d said he could teach Craig how to top. And that’s exactly what he’d done.

He picked up the phone.

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Gorgeous. Gorgeous. Craig stared through the windshield of his car at Jessie as he talked with a woman in slacks and a white blouse. His graceful hands made arcs as he described something to her. Of course, watching his hands was tough since that cute butt was filling out his jeans to such perfection.

Get over yourself, Elson. You're a has-been or never-was.

He climbed out of the car and walked across the narrow, tree-lined street to the large, two-story house. Pretty. But not as pretty as the man in front of it.

Craig plastered on a smile and stuck out his hand to the woman. "Hi, you must be Antoinette. I'm Craig." He glanced at Jessie. "Hi."

Jessie looked at his feet. "Hi."

"This is such a nice house. And the neighborhood is great."

She nodded. "Yes, I can't wait to show it to you. It's Jessie's favorite apartment, so I know he'd be happy to have a friend in it."

Jessie kicked at a rock. "Okay, so you're here. I'll get back to school."

No! "Please don't go. I need your help."

Jessie frowned. "Okay."

The realtor looked uncomfortable at all the tension, but she led the way, giving property descriptions as she went. Craig kept glancing at Jessie but the guy stared at Antoinette's back and kept walking.

Antoinette unlocked the large front door which led into a vestibule with a door to the left and a staircase in front. She climbed the staircase with Jessie behind her and Craig bringing up the rear. Rear was the appropriate word. Jessie's ass swayed and Craig would gladly have laid him down on the stairs and put that butt to good use. He sighed.

At the top of the stairs was a landing, and a door that was half glass and half wood. Bright light shone through the glass. She unlocked the door with her key and pushed it open. Jessie went in and Craig followed. Oh my gosh. The apartment was a symphony of sunshine pouring indirectly through windows on two walls of a big living room with a view of trees and a strip of ocean beyond. Hardwood floors gleamed, and light reflected off the high ceilings. Wow. He didn't need to see anything else. Just the feel of the place was home.

He looked at Jessie and caught the blue eyes staring at him. Craig nodded. "It's gorgeous. I sure understand why you love this place."

Antoinette was in her element now with a happy potential customer. “Let me show you the kitchen and the bedrooms.”

The kitchen was beautiful. All granite counters and stainless appliances. Jessie ran his fingertips over the range top and smiled softly. Oh yes, the boy was in love.

One bedroom was huge by Craig’s living standards, with a nice en suite. The other was smaller and had a bathroom in the hall. Jessie cleared his throat. “I thought you could use the second bedroom as an office.”

“What would you use it for?”

Jessie looked up, that crease between the eyebrows on display. “Me? Probably a combination office and guest room.”

“For your dad?”

“Uh, yes.”

He turned to the realtor. “I’ll take it.”

She clapped her hands. “That’s wonderful. I actually brought a lease in case you did want it because it goes on the market tomorrow. I know it will be snapped up.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’d like you to make out the lease for me, please.”

She nodded and they walked into the kitchen where they could lean on the counters. She started writing.

Craig put his hand on the counter. “Please make out the lease to Jessie Randall. He can give you the rest of the information.”

Jessie’s frown reached new lows. “What the hell are you talking about? I can’t afford this apartment and you know it.”

Craig nodded. “Yes, I do know it. But I’ve never paid you for your tutoring and I have this great new job you helped me get. So I’ll be paying the difference between what you now spend for rent and the total amount for at least two years. That will give you a chance to finish school and get into your first job. As you said, this place is pretty reasonable, so it’s the least I can do.”

Jessie shook his head. “I can’t accept this.”

Craig shrugged but he was trembling. So much to lose. “Then it will stand empty and I’ll pay the whole rent.”

“Why the fuck are you doing this?” His eyes glistened.

“Because you told my mom we take care of each other. This is my part.”

The glisten became a drop and landed on Jessie’s cheek. “But you don’t want me around. Why would you link yourself to me?”

“What do you mean? I’ve never wanted anything in my life as much as I want you. That’s why I didn’t tell you about the job. I couldn’t bear the idea that I was going to graduate from your tutoring so I was thinking of rejecting the offer.”

Jessie threw his arms up. “What? You can’t give up that great job!”

“I’d rather have you, Jessie.”

Streams ran down his face. “But you told your mom we were only friends.”

His heart beat in his throat. “I didn’t think you wanted me to say you were my boyfriend. Why would a guy like you want a guy like me?”

Whoa. Jessie ran two steps and launched himself at Craig. Fortunately, he was close to the wall because he needed the support for kissing this wriggling creature. Jessie leaned back. “Because you’re my top, you idiot.”

A throat cleared.

Damn, he’d forgotten about Antoinette. Still holding Jessie, he looked at her and gave his best sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

“Not a problem. I’ve prepared a joint contract for the apartment with both your names. If the two of you will just sign here.” And she beamed as she held out the pen.

Fifteen minutes later, Craig held Jessie’s hand as they walked across the street. He leaned back against his piece-of-shit car and smiled at his new roommate. “I’m so sorry I lied.”

He shrugged. “And I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions. I guess I’m good at giving advice to others I should take myself.” He smiled. “But I’ve never been so emotionally involved before.”

Craig gripped Jessie's hands. "Now that sounds good."

"You know what I'd like to do right now?"

"Yes, but they may not let us return to this neighborhood." Craig laughed.

Jessie grinned. "Dirty boy. I was thinking we should go see your mom. We left her hanging. I want to tell her yes, I am your boyfriend, and while we can't get married, we are moving in together and she'll be our first guest."

How could he be so lucky to have found this man?

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## CHAPTER TEN

Craig loaded the last reference book into his cardboard box. Funny you could work someplace for eight years and accumulate so little personal stuff. Even weirder was the guard waiting outside the door to escort him out. But that's what happened when you went to a competitor.

He smiled. On Monday, he'd start his new job at ClearWater. When he'd accepted the position, he'd gotten an immediate email from Alex Herschel welcoming him and expressing her enthusiasm. Since then, he'd met with HR and had lunch with the CEO, who was a great guy. They all seemed to believe he could do the job. Hell, he almost believed it himself.

He grabbed the windbreaker on the back of his door for when he'd taken his walks. Alone. Not alone anymore. When he walked out that front door for the last time as an employee, Jessie would be waiting. Then they'd pick up Mom and take her to their new place. Whew. Hard to believe his life could be changing so much all at once.

“Congratulations, Craig.”

He looked up. Lydia Wall's red head stuck in the door. “Thanks, Lydia.”

She walked in. “So Alex got you. Smart woman.”

He nodded. “That's nice of you to say.”

She smiled. “It only took me a few days after you'd left to realize I'd made a big mistake.” She perched on the edge of his now bare desk. “When I asked Howard for some advice on development of one of his so-called strategies and he looked at me like I was his firing squad. I'm truly sorry I wasn't more observant.”

He nodded. “It's okay. I never did anything to let you know they were my ideas.”

She looked him over from sneakered feet to spiky hair. “You look great. Your vacation must have agreed with you.”

“It did. And I want you to know that when I left on vacation it wasn't with the idea of changing jobs. While I was gone, the opportunity came up and, uh, well I was advised to try it.”

She waved a hand. “We treated you so badly, I wouldn’t blame you if you went and beat down ClearWater’s door.” She laughed. “My loss is definitely Alex’s gain. But I want you to know that I plan to keep an eye on you. Maybe we’ll get to work together again sometime.”

He stuck out his hand. “Thank you. You’ve always been a role model for me, so maybe that will happen.”

She stepped back and waved. “I’ll be seeing you.”

He nodded. *How about that?* He picked up his two boxes, and with his official escort, left his old life behind.

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Craig pushed open the door to his new home. Their new home. Jessie practically skipped in behind him. “Was that fun, or what?”

Craig waved an arm toward the dining area and the kitchen beyond. “Now we just have to clean up the mess. Who knew you could make beef bourguignon?”

Jessie twirled twice. “I have many hidden talents.”

Oh my, that was the truth. “I think my mom loved the dinner. And she really liked our new place.”

Jessie tossed his jacket on the new blue sofa—their one big purchase. He walked toward the kitchen that now included a pile of dirty dishes. “She was very lively tonight.”

Craig slipped up behind Jessie and slipped his arms around him. “I think she’s better around you. You didn’t know her before, so you accept her as she is. I think that makes her more comfortable.”

Jessie looked up at Craig and smiled. Heart expansion time. “She’s a wonderful lady and I love having her in my life. After all, I kind of missed out in the mom department.”

He hadn’t quite thought of it that way. That his mother might be more of a joy than a burden to Jessie. “Thank you.”

Jessie lifted a hand up over his shoulder and touched Craig’s cheek. “We take care of each other, right?”

Those beautiful lips. Craig bent down, nudged his hand against Jessie's chin to bring his head closer, and then pressed their lips together. Gentle—ooh, then hot. He slipped a hand down Jessie's front and got a handful of bulge. Just one gentle squeeze got Jessie moaning.

Craig pulled back from the kiss, still holding Jessie's jewels in his hand. "Let's get these dishes in the dishwasher, because I have something of yours I'd really like to take care of." He pressed his hips against Jessie's butt.

"I'll race you."

The two of them flew around the kitchen; rinsing, slamming dishes into their new-to-them dishwasher, laughing like kids. Once the pans were soaking and the whir of the dishwasher announced completion, Craig grabbed Jessie and pulled him around into a full-body hug. "Want to fuck you."

"My pleasure." Jessie wrapped both arms around Craig's neck and hopped. Craig caught him under the butt as those strong legs wrapped around his waist. Jessie dropped his hips until their cock bulges pressed together in their jeans, and then he started to grind. Holy shit, that felt good.

Staggering a little, since he only outweighed Jessie by about twenty pounds, Craig walked around the kitchen island and got to his favorite sexual landmark. He lowered Jessie into the big, ugly, super-comfortable, brown recliner neither of them had been able to give up when they moved in.

"Celebrating our anniversary, baby?"

Craig nodded. "This chair is the first place I ever topped you."

Jessie pulled his sweater over his head. "Let's mark the occasion. Get that cock out."

Craig had his sneaks, jeans, briefs and shirt off in seconds. Jessie was already nude and watching his every move. Craig grabbed the condoms and lube from the end table and waggled a finger at Jessie. "Let's do this face-to-face."

"Oh yeah."

Jessie perched his butt on the arm of the big chair as Craig pulled on the condom. He swiped some lube on Jessie's finger and drooled as the guy

slicked his own hole. Meanwhile, he slathered some on his cock. He tossed the lube on the floor.

Channeling Ringling Brothers, Jessie managed to balance on his back on the chair arm and pull his legs up beside his ears. Craig stepped up and positioned his rod at the most beautiful target he'd ever seen. With a nudge, he inserted and pushed just enough to get past the ring of muscle. Oh yes. The heat from inside Jessie flowed up his cock, into his balls, and through his entire body like some life elixir delivered by a good witch to a sleeping creature. Jessie had in fact brought him to life.

Jessie wrapped his legs around Craig's waist and pulled. Shee-it. All the way in with balls jangling.

“You were sleeping on the job, baby. Fuck me!”

And he did. Craig grabbed Jessie under the shoulders, leaving just enough of his back on the chair to support his weight—and fucked. Jessie's legs linked behind him and his butt pistoned onto Craig's cock so hard they could have found oil. Craig leaned his head back and laughed. “Man, I sure know what that T-shirt means now.”

He gripped tighter. It took all his strength to hold their fucking machine together. The machine made noises. Deep grunting sounds as Jessie's butt hammered against Craig's groin. Craig's cock thrust so deep inside it should have come out Jessie's mouth, and his testicles flew like tether balls, banging against his own thighs and Jessie's lower back.

He couldn't think. Just fuck. And fuck.

“Oh baby, oh baby. You turn me inside out. I never want you to stop fucking me.”

Craig gasped. The best. Of all the wonderful things that had happened since Jessie came into his life, those words were way up there.

“I'll never stop, my beautiful bottom. Never.”

“I'm so done. I'm going to explode into a million pieces because you are the besssst.” Hot spunk splashed on Jessie's chest and the boy's body literally danced on the end of Craig's cock as he trembled and thrashed.

Too much. No, not too much. Just right. “Oh God, Jessie.” And red light exploded behind his eyes as his balls gave up their load into the condom in Jessie’s ass. Who knew in all his life he could ever feel this way? He chuckled as the two of them fell over the arm of the chair into a heap on the seat. “You bottom me so hard.”

They giggled their way into a quick shower together, and then lay in bed snuggling.

Craig sighed. His brain could barely catch up with reality. “I never dreamed the day that I got up the nerve to ask you to tutor me that it would change everything.”

Jessie petted his chest. “But that’s what you were asking for.”

“I was?”

“Yes. You were this caterpillar ready to break out. You just needed some nibbling instructions.”

Craig laughed and tightened his arm around Jessie.

“But I haven’t quite finished my tutoring yet.”

Craig nodded. “I hope you never will.”

Jessie rose up on one arm and looked down at Craig in the soft light. “There’s one more very important lesson.”

Craig laughed. “Yes, I promise I’ll believe I’m good enough to be Vice President of Marketing.”

“Of course you will, but that’s not it.”

“No?” Oh God, what had he forgotten?

“Repeat after me.”

Craig nodded.

“I”

What? “I.”

“Love.”

Craig’s eyes widened. “L-love.”

Jessie tapped a finger against Craig's nose. "You."

The word came out on a sigh. "You."

Jessie leaned down and gently kissed Craig's parted lips. "Thank you. I love you too."

And all because of a T-shirt.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Tara Lain writes the Beautiful Boys of Romance in LGBT erotic romance novels that star her unique, charismatic heroes. Her first novel was published in January of 2011 and she's now somewhere around book twenty-one. Her best-selling novels have garnered recognition and awards for Best Series, Best Contemporary Romance, Best Ménage, Best LGBT Romance, Best Gay Characters, and Tara has been named Best Writer of the Year in the LRC Awards. In her other job, Tara owns an advertising and public relations firm. She often does workshops on both author promotion and writing craft. She lives with her soul-mate husband and soul-mate dog in Laguna Beach, California, a pretty seaside town where she sets a lot of her books. Passionate about diversity, justice, and new experiences, Tara says on her tombstone it will say "Yes"!*

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# SILVER ICE

By Suilan Lee

## **Photo Description**

Two men fill the frame, with only their heads, pale-skinned bare shoulders and bare arms visible. The light-haired one is closer, and leans his forehead on the other's shoulder, eyes closed, his face almost peaceful. He grips the dark-haired man's biceps; the other man does the same. The dark-haired man, only partially visible, presses his head into the light-haired man's chest.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*Sure, it started out as a challenge. That twink was so determined not to date an infamous playboy like myself that there was no way for me to resist proving him wrong. However, I didn't expect to actually fall in love with him. How can I make him mine? How do I make him believe I really want him and for him to stop pushing me away?*

*Sincerely,*

*Rachel*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sports, young adult, ice hockey player, college love, enemies to lovers, unrequited love, long-time crush, light-hearted romance

**Word count:** 14,830

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# SILVER ICE

By Suilan Lee

## CHAPTER 1

Silver Reese sipped hot chocolate, barely tasting the sweet liquid. His eyes were firmly fixed on the God of Ice skating powerfully toward him. Dressed in carnelian red and white, gloved hands gripping a hockey stick, Knox Thurston dodged an opponent expertly determined to reach the goal. Team captain Jude Martin passed the puck to Knox, escaping a trap from the other team.

A second later, number eighteen scored. The rink filled with thunderous applause, nearly making him deaf. Silver watched in awe as number eighteen skated with joy, jumping into the arms of his teammates.

“You’re going to spill hot chocolate on your clothes,” his best friend, Tina, warned him. She snatched the cup out off his hands and pressed a wad of napkins into his left hand, pointing to a spot on his black sweater. “Stop drooling, it’s embarrassing.”

Silver blinked, the spell broken. He wiped at the wet spot on his sweater with a sigh.

“The Knox curse strikes again.” Rex Granger, his other best friend, chuckled beside him. “I bet you have no idea what Tina was saying a second ago.”

“What?” Silver asked, grimacing at the stain on his sweater.

“I told you it was a waste of time to talk to him when Knox is playing.” Rex gave Tina a small grin. “He’s worshipping the God of Ice.”

“Pay attention, Silver.” Tina touched his left shoulder as the game continued. “The party tonight, I need you there.”

“What, no,” Silver protested, throwing the napkins into the brown bag brought with Rex’s hotdog. Obviously drinking was a bad idea right now, he’d wait until the game ended.

“Come on,” Tina begged beside him. She was a pint-sized redhead with startling green eyes. Her temper turned her cheeks a vibrant red. When he’d first met her five years ago, he’d nicknamed her the sizzling tomato.

She hadn’t liked that very much.

“No way,” he said. Knox was definitely going to be there.

“Beer, pizza, loud music, it’s a simple party. I swear you won’t even get to see Knox.”

“I’m not going.”

“Give it up, Tina,” Rex advised, biting into his hot dog. “I told you he’s hell-bent on dying alone.”

“That’s mean.” Silver turned to Rex.

He and Rex had dated freshman year. After a few disastrous dates, they’d quickly come to realize they were better off as friends.

“When was the last time you went out on a date?” Rex asked with a smirk.

He could barely remember and Rex knew it. Rex knew all there was to know about him, since they lived together. He made a face at Rex and shrugged.

“What does that have to do with anything?” he asked.

“Come on it’s a Psi U party; you know how awesome they are.” Tina wrapped her left arm on his shoulder. “It will be fun. You’ve been stressing over your thesis project and job interviews, this will be a relief.”

He started to protest.

“If you don’t come, I’ll tell Knox the big secret,” Tina threatened with a wicked smile.

Silver grabbed her arm in panic. She was dating Jude Martin, the hockey team captain and Knox’s best friend. Her threat was real.

“I’ll come,” he said quickly. “Please don’t tell Knox.”

“I knew you wouldn’t disappoint me.” Tina winked at him and he shuddered. She was cruel when she wanted to be.

“I’ll give you one thing, Knox is really hot. If he weren’t gay and I wasn’t in full-lust mode for Jude, Knox would do it for me.”

Silver laughed his gaze seeking out number eighteen on the ice again. He had no control over his heart when it came to Knox. This awful, painful crush had started three and a half years ago.

His second year at Alexander University, Knox Thurston had walked into the cocktail lounge looking for Jude and Silver’s world had turned over. Six foot one of powerful muscle, broad shoulders, serious abs, crew-cut blond hair. Knox had taken center stage in all his wet dreams.

Jude had been sitting at their table trying to talk Tina into a date. Knox had come to stand by his chair and to this day, he could still smell Knox’s intoxicating cologne. It was a fresh, clean, woodsy, arousing scent that drove him crazy. Every time he walked into a room and that scent got close, he instinctively looked for Knox Thurston.

His heart and body fully recognized how sexy, gorgeous and lust-worthy Knox Thurston was. His head, however, reminded him that getting involved with Knox would mean serious heartbreak and never-ending tears.

Buckets full of tears, his head reminded his heart when Knox scored again and did a sexy dance on the ice. How anyone could make that padding look sexy—he frowned and forced himself to think of Knox’s faults.

Knox Thurston was a full-fledged heartbreaker. His motto was “love them and leave ’em”. Campus was littered with heartbroken guys who’d once thought they could change him. Others fully recognized he was a man-whore, so they gave it up willingly whenever he deigned to look their way. *Playboy* didn’t begin to describe that kind of self-centered action. So, even though he could easily confess his undying love to the God of Ice, he would be better off hanging on to his safe, happy existence.

Man-whore tendencies aside, Knox was a damn good hockey player and the team was fighting hard tonight. The Reds fans were chanting wildly. This was a crucial game, if they won against the Celts, the Reds would be going for the semifinals. Tina and Rex drew him to his feet as they joined the chant, “Let’s go Red!”

Knox and Jude were passing each other the puck, flanked by the defense players, and quickly headed to the Celts goal. Silver clapped his hands in excitement as Knox came on their side. Silver gasped as Knox was suddenly body checked and flung against the glass. Knox stared at him for a moment before he fell back on the ice.

“Oh gods,” Silver said, worried that Knox was injured when he didn’t get up right away.

Jude skated toward Knox and Tina grabbed Silver’s arm. A few minutes later, Knox got up as his teammates yelled at the other team.

Silver pressed a hand to his chest in relief. He’d missed the previous game due to his job, but Tina had told him that Knox had been injured. A knock on the glass made him glance up and his eyes widened when Knox flashed him a wicked grin. Silver flushed beet red, blood filling his cock in response.

*Hopeless*, he thought as Knox chuckled and skated away. *He was hopeless.*

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“How’s your wrist?” Jude demanded as Knox glanced at the timer. They had just over a minute of play in regulation.

“I’m good.” Knox gripped his hockey stick tightly and gave Jude an assuring nod. They were ahead two to one. If they won, they’d make it to the championship semifinals. The game resumed, and he focused his attention on the Celts. The Reds put up a furious defense at the blue line as the Celts tried to bounce the puck into their zone. He growled in frustration when one of the Celts defense players managed to swat the puck along the wall headed to the goal line. He chased after the puck, hoping to get it back before it reached their goal.

He stopped the attempt to score, but managed to get his wrist whacked. Wincing in pain, he lost focus and the Celts managed to score and tie the game with forty-five seconds remaining in regulation.

The game went into overtime. Tension brought adrenaline coursing through his blood as they raced back and forth from net to net. The Celts were out for blood, but his teammates didn’t falter.

Six minutes into overtime, and the Celts managed to race behind one of their defense players streaking toward their net. Knox raced after him but not fast enough. In the next second, the Celts managed to toss the puck under their goalie for a game winner.

The Celts fans erupted in a deafening roar joined in by the teammates as they piled into each other in victory.

Knox cursed under his breath and threw his hockey stick to the ice. He was sweating; they'd played like mad through an overtime of twenty minutes, giving the best defense they could.

A hand dropped on his shoulders and he sighed.

“Great game,” Jude praised, shaking him slightly.

Knox found his gaze fell on Silver, seated beside Tina, his dark Mohawk tipped with red. Knox smiled when Silver stood and clapped with everyone giving their team morale. Knox turned to Jude.

“I'm pissed but we gave it our best,” he replied as the rest of the team came over.

In the locker room, the coach was supportive; he thanked them for focused play and urged them not to regret how they'd played the game. Knox sat on the bench staring at his best friend run a towel through his hair after his shower.

“We missed the semifinals by an inch.” Jude observed, throwing his towel on the floor. He retrieved his deodorant from his locker. “An inch, Knox, and we would be going to the semifinals.”

“We did our best.” Knox touched his right wrist and winced slightly, grateful for the fresh bandage the doctor had applied after the shower. He'd gotten injured blocking a shot the day before. The Celts had truly kicked their asses on the ice tonight.

Jude pulled on briefs and blue jeans, jumped on the bench and raised his arms. “Who's ready for a party? We might have not won the game, but you all deserve to celebrate tonight. We managed to get to the quarterfinals, it's been a tough season, and every one of you gave it your best. I'd love to see you at the Psi U house for a victory party.”

A round of whistles filled the locker room, and Knox shook his head when Jude jumped down.

“Great pep talk, Captain,” he said pulling on his underwear. Dropping his towel on the bench, he reached for his black jeans. “Tina brought Silver Reese with her today.”

“Silver never misses any home games.” Jude belted his jeans and sat on the bench to put his socks on. “The only reason he didn’t make it last night was because of work.”

“Do you think he’s coming to the party?” Knox asked, hating that it was taking him twice as long to button his black jeans. His wrist movements were restricted. Gritting his teeth, he finished with his jeans and sat down.

“You promised me,” Jude said with a frown. “You know Silver, Rex and Tina are a trio. You can’t mess with him.”

Knox scowled. “I’m not asking to date Tina, Jude. What’s the problem?”

Jude chuckled. “They’ve known each other since freshman year. Five years in the architecture program. Can you imagine what will happen if you dump Silver tomorrow? Tina will never talk to you and that would be weird. You can’t mess with that.”

Knox finished with his socks and turned to Jude. “Seriously, what’s the big deal? It’s not like we wouldn’t click. I’ve seen him watching me when he thinks I’m not looking. And who says I’ll dump him the next day?”

“You and Silver,” Jude mused. “Those pain meds are messing with your brain. There is no way that would work.”

Knox glared. “What do you mean by that?”

“Knox, I’m your best friend. Glare at me all you want, but remember I know where you used to take your so-called dates for blowjobs.” Jude gave him a knowing look and he laughed.

“Excuse me, do you want me to have a talk with Tina about your dates under the bleachers on game night in high school?”

Jude got to his feet with a soft curse. “I hate it when you threaten me with that one.”

Knox picked up his grey T-shirt and pulled it over his head. The tension in his shoulders eased and he sighed. Now that the season was over for the team, he'd get time to concentrate on his graduation in June.

Packing his hockey gear in a black duffel bag, he turned to find Jude talking to three of their Psi U brothers.

Jude held out his car keys. "Knox, will you give these to Tina? She's waiting outside."

He nodded and headed out of the locker room. His duffel bag over his left shoulder, he headed out through the semiquiet rink. Stepping out into the cold evening, he pulled his jacket together clumsily. His wrist wasn't making life easy.

Ithaca winters were a bitch. He wouldn't miss the cold weather when he left for good in June. His four years at Alexander University had moved so fast. Or so it seemed, he mused. He could barely remember his freshman year. There were of course a myriad of firsts that he'd never forget. Rush week, joining the ice hockey team, moving into the Psi Upsilon frat house. He smiled at the memories of the endless parties, events and challenges he'd faced within the Psi U house.

He'd gained lifelong brothers at Psi Upsilon and with his teammates. Now if only he could manage to complete the next two months.

Tina was standing by Jude's black Porsche, bundled up in a black jacket, a red scarf tied around her neck.

"Hey," he said when she turned to look at him. Dangling the keys with his injured wrist, he smiled at her. "He's on his way out."

Tina took the keys carefully before she hugged him. "You guys were great tonight."

"Thanks," he said, patting her back. He looked around the parking lot. "Where are Rex and Silver? Are they going to the party?"

"Of course." Tina pulled back with a wide smile. "Silver drove Rex over. I told them I'd wait for Jude."

He turned to the black SUV parked beside Jude's Porsche. Unlocking his

car doors, he threw his duffel bag onto the passenger seat and turned to Tina. “Can I ask you something, Tina?”

She paused in the act of unlocking Jude’s car. “What’s up?”

“Silver Reese,” he said, and watched her lips tighten. “I want to ask him out. Jude told me you don’t think he’ll say yes. Why?”

Tina sighed and shook her head. “It’s not that he won’t say yes. It’s that I wouldn’t want you and Silver together, Knox.”

“Why is that?” Knox was starting to hate this general assumption. He might not have dated every guy he’d slept with, but it didn’t mean that couldn’t change.

“Silver is not like you, Knox.” Tina touched his shoulder. “He doesn’t take relationships casually like you do. Even if you like him, can you please stay away from him?”

Knox chuckled and shook his head. “What if I can’t, Tina? Are you sure Silver feels the same way?”

Tina narrowed her gaze at him. “It’s because I know how Silver feels that I’m asking you to stay away from him.”

“Ah...” Knox chuckled. “So he likes me too.”

“Knox,” Tina exclaimed in frustration. “Please—”

He raised his hands up with a wide smile. “All right, jeez, relax. I’ll stay away, mama tiger.”

She glared at him and he laughed. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you at the party.”

She nodded but he didn’t miss the concern in her eyes. He waited until she entered Jude’s car before he drove off. It took him ten minutes to get to the Psi U house; he smiled when he noticed Silver’s red Mazda parked at the curb.

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Silver watched Rex tip the plastic cup, drinking heartily. He sighed as he realized he was officially the designated driver.

“Typical,” Silver said as he planned his next shot. “She twists my arm to come to the party, and then runs off to make out with Jude.”

Rex laughed, leaning on the wall. "I can't blame Tina. She probably wanted you to come along so you could babysit me."

"How lucky for me," Silver said with a small frown. "What's going on with you, Rex? You've been getting drunk more often lately."

"We're about to graduate and my thesis is killing me." Rex tipped his cup again. "I'm not like you and Tina. My project is giving me hell."

"Would it make you feel better to know that I have issues too?" Silver asked, setting up his next shot. "Not to mention finding a job. Every time I leave an interview I find myself wanting to get drunk. I called my mum yesterday and told her I'm going to end up back in Boston. She wasn't happy."

Rex groaned. "Let's not talk about real life anymore. We're at a party, surrounded by ice hockey players."

Silver walked around the pool table, glancing around the room. He couldn't deny Rex's observation, but he only had eyes for one ice hockey player.

Silver made his shot and smiled when the ball sank into its pocket.

"Are you looking for a date tonight, Rex?" Silver teased.

Rex leaned on the pool table studying the balls on the velvet green.

"Maybe," he said with a smile. "Or maybe I'm going to ask Knox out."

Silver leaned on his stick glancing at Rex in amusement. "Is that supposed to piss me off? I don't care what Knox does, Rex."

"Well that's good because he's right over there."

Rex cocked his head to his left and Silver followed the movement. A few feet away stood Knox Thurston, handsome in a grey T-shirt and black jeans. He was standing way too close to a twink staring at him with adoring eyes.

Silver froze when Knox laughed and leaned to whisper into the shorter guy's ear.

Rex held out a fresh glass of beer with a wide smile. "Drink. Your jealousy is making an appearance."

Silver forced his gaze away from Knox. He took the cup of beer, sipped it,

and ignored Rex's knowing smile. He aligned his next shot and missed. Rex got his turn.

"I don't understand you, Silver. Aren't you always spouting quotes like '*seize the day*'? Why won't you take a chance with Knox?" Rex asked as he aligned his shot.

"I'd just be another notch on his bed." Silver frowned, his gaze finding Knox and the blond twink. Knox had him pressed against the wall, his right hand braced above the shorter man's head. It was hard to miss the wrist brace. Knox leaned down and Silver looked away with a scowl. He tried to concentrate on what Rex was saying.

"You're going to end up regretting not asking him out. We're graduating in June, and leaving Alexander for good, Silver," Rex warned. "I think you should take a chance."

"Stop foretelling the future." Silver complained his gaze sliding to Knox again. The twink walked away, probably to get more beer. Knox turned and their gazes clashed. Silver looked away quickly. He picked up his cup and frowned when he found it empty. "I think I should get more beer—"

"Hi guys," Knox interrupted. He perched on the pool table and Silver held his breath. Waves of woodsy cologne filled his nostrils anyway and his heart started beating wildly. "How's it going Rex?" Knox turned to look at him. "Silver?"

"Thurston, get off the table," Rex warned as he aligned his shot. "How's your wrist? I'm sure Ryan is dying to help you dress every morning."

Knox chuckled. Silver tried not to love the husky tone or appreciate how it sent a thrill down his spine. He tried to escape Knox's close proximity by taking a step back.

He bumped into a bench and pain shot up the back of his thigh. He gasped. In his haste to rub the painful spot, he dropped his cue stick, and bent down to pick it up. Knox leaned down at the same time, and they hit their heads hard.

Silver moaned in pain, pressing his hand to his forehead. He was seeing stars.

“I’m so sorry.” Knox closed the distance between them. Silver froze as cool fingers touched his forehead gently. “Thank God, I didn’t crack your head.”

“It certainly feels like you did your best.” Silver chuckled hysterically as the feel of Knox’s hands on his forehead overrode the pain.

Knox smiled and picked up the cue stick. “Here you go.”

Silver blindly took the cue stick, one hand still pressed to his forehead, lost in smiling hazel eyes. He’d somehow lost the ability to speak.

Knox studied him for a moment before he turned to Rex. “Ryan and I are over. Are you offering to help me button my shirt in the morning, Rex?”

Silver cursed under his breath and caught Rex’s amused expression.

“Silver, what do you think?” Rex asked, with a wide smile. “Maybe you can help Knox?”

Silver cleared his throat and tried not to blush. “No thanks.”

Rex missed his shot. Silver moved around the table determined to win the darned game and make a quick escape.

“Ouch, Silver, your tone makes it sound as though it’s the worst thing you could do. I’m oddly insulted,” Knox said, slapping a hand against his chest in mock shock. “I’ve never had such an outright rejection.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Silver replied, playing his turn. “Weren’t you just talking to Ryan in the corner?”

“Ryan?” Knox shrugged. “He was just telling me how great the game was.”

“I’m sure all the twinks on campus tell you the same thing about your game.” Silver made two consecutive shots. Satisfied when the balls fell into their pockets, he straightened and smiled at Knox. “Are you sure he’s not waiting for you? We wouldn’t want to keep you from poor Ryan.”

Knox bit his lower lip and narrowed his gaze. “Rex, is your friend always this... *friendly*?”

Rex was leaning on the wall, staring at Silver in awe. “I’m just enjoying the show, Thurston.”

“Silver, you seem to have a problem with me,” Knox said.

“I don’t know you well enough to have a problem, Knox,” Silver said, as he aligned his next shot.

“Maybe I can give you the chance to get to know me.” Knox’s brow creased with a frown. “I’m pretty sure I’m undeserving of this attitude.”

Rex pushed off the wall and came to stand beside Silver. “Silver didn’t eat his dinner tonight. He gets this way when we haven’t fed him.”

Silver forced a smile for Knox and made his next shot.

“Want to play, Knox?” Rex asked, holding up his cue stick.

Knox stared at Silver for a moment before he raised his hands and shook his head. “That’s all right; I think I’ll go check out the card games in the other room. It was nice to see you, Rex. Silver, I hope you’re in a better mood next time.”

Knox left them to their game.

“Why were you so rude?” Rex demanded when Knox left the room.

Silver played his shot and shrugged. “I wasn’t rude.”

“You could have been nicer,” Rex complained.

“I don’t see the merits of being nice to Knox,” Silver said, throwing the cue stick on the table. “I’ve had enough of this party.”

“You’re leaving?” Rex said with a sigh.

“Yes, staying here is just going to piss me off.”

“Why can’t you just tell him how you feel?” Rex demanded, glaring at him. “He just asked you out.”

“You wouldn’t understand, Rex.” Silver grabbed his jacket from the armchair.

“Tell Tina I’ll call her tomorrow. See ya.”

“Silver,” Rex said in exasperation.

Silver started for the front door. When he saw Knox standing in the front hall talking to a group of sorority cheerleaders, he sighed and turned around.

The back door would do just fine. He had to navigate around a few couples making out in the hallway before he got to the back hall. The kitchen was filled with people in the middle of a beer-chugging game. A strong hand grabbed his elbow before he could reach the back door, and he was pulled into a dim pantry.

“You’re a stuck-up, ignorant, judgmental, stupid, and annoying idiot.”

Silver turned to find Knox glaring at him with burning hazel eyes. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Knox leaned closer when Silver tugged on his arm, hoping to escape the dim pantry.

“You smell real good, little tiger,” Knox purred.

“Get off me,” Silver demanded when Knox dragged him against the wall. Bracing his palms on Knox’s broad chest, he said, “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“We’ll see about that,” Knox murmured. “Are you always this prickly? I want you, Silver.”

Silver stopped breathing when Knox promptly took his mouth in a fiery kiss.

Flames streaked through his bloodstream. Knox moaned their kiss igniting. Silver closed his eyes when Knox’s hands trembled and roamed over his back, down to his ass. He gasped in arousal when Knox cupped his ass and dragged him closer, grinding his arousal against him, his alcohol-hazed mind was overwhelmed by the exploding sensations of their kiss.

They devoured each other ravenously, their tongues dueling, and Knox pinned Silver against the wall. He didn’t remember a kiss ever being this good.

“You taste so good,” Knox whispered hotly into Silver’s mouth. “I can’t wait for you to take me in your mouth—”

Silver froze. *Did Knox tell that to all the twinks he fucked? To that Ryan he’d been talking to?*

His brain screamed at him under the sexual haze in his head. His body was on fire, he wanted to keep holding Knox like this, feel Knox’s hand on his skin—

“What’s wrong, little tiger? Don’t you want to go upstairs to my room?”

“I’m not another one of your twinkles,” Silver said savagely, pushing him away with force.

*Oh God!* Tears stung his eyes. He was so close to becoming another one of Knox’s twinkles. When Knox’s larger frame wouldn’t move, Silver kicked out with his left leg, hitting Knox’s shin. Knox yelped and stepped back.

Silver dashed out of the storeroom, blindly heading to the back door. Out in the cold winter air, he started running, hot tears freezing against his skin. He cursed Tina’s insistence to get him to the stupid party.

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## CHAPTER 2

Knox limped upstairs after Silver ran off cursing under his breath. *Good riddance.*

“What happened?” Jude asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Knox lifted his head to find Jude and Tina at the staircase landing. He rubbed his shin in irritation. “I ran into Silver.”

“My Silver,” Tina said in surprise. “What did you do?”

“I’m the one limping here.” Knox pointed to his shin. “He kicked me and ran off.”

Jude laughed. “Did you try to kiss him?”

“Maybe,” Knox said gruffly. “I have no idea why he lost his mind over a simple kiss.”

“Oh, why can’t you keep it in your pants?” Tina accused. She turned to Jude. “I gotta go.”

“It was a simple kiss.” Knox frowned, staring at her in confusion.

“To you, you bastard,” Tina glared at him. “Not to Silver, he’s—” She bit her lip and waved her hands in frustration. “Keep your lips to yourself next time.” She hugged Jude quickly. “I’ll call you later, honey.”

Confused, Knox turned to Jude with a frown.

“It was a harmless kiss. I’m the one who deserves the sympathy, that punk was wearing steel-toe boots.”

Jude chuckled. “What were you doing kissing Silver?”

Knox headed for a small lounge tucked into the corner of the hall. Thankfully it was empty, so he dropped into a couch with a sigh. “He pissed me off.”

Jude perched on the arm of a couch across him. “You don’t go for guys like Silver. Why are you so interested in him?”

“He was playing pool with Rex. I went over tried to have a simple

conversation with him. He started acting all entitled—” He shook his head remembering Silver’s condescending tone.

Jude raised a brow at him.

“What?” Knox asked.

“When was the last time a guy said no to you?”

He frowned. “I get told no all the time.”

“Not by guys like Silver.”

Knox shifted on the couch, dropping his head back. “He’s a stuck-up, introverted, know-it-all virgin. I probably gave him his first kiss.”

“And you liked it,” Jude finished for him with a smirk.

Knox glared at the ceiling. Yes, he’d liked their kiss. He’d loved how Silver melted against him, like hot liquid fire. “I’m never touching that idiot again.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Jude said, his tone making Knox glance at him.

“I don’t like that look; what do you mean ‘that’s too bad’?” Knox asked.

“I’ve always thought you and Silver would make a great couple. He’s the shy, introverted type, and you are loud and outgoing. He might just cure this ridiculous mood you’re in.”

Knox scoffed. “More like a match made in hell. I bet he had a huge coming-out scene in high school and believes in happily ever after and sparkly love. What a pain. I’m not interested.”

“I understand,” Jude said, with a shrug. “Then... let’s go downstairs and find you a new fling.”

“I came up here to hide from Ryan, he keeps hounding me,” Knox complained. “Besides, I don’t think there’s a guy I want downstairs. They all talk my ear off and the sex is becoming mediocre; I could do it asleep.”

“You are getting jaded right before you graduate.”

“I’m jaded by easy sex.” Knox sat up on the couch and met Jude’s gaze.

Truth was he was a bit envious of Jude and his relationship with Tina.

Jude studied him for a moment. “All right, I have a proposal for you.”

Knox glanced at Jude warily. “I’m still surviving your last proposal.”

“Oh come on, you love ice hockey.” Jude nodded to Knox’s wrist. “You played tonight with a sprained wrist. I call that undying love for ice hockey.”

“You bet me into playing, you punk.” Knox relaxed against the couch. “Not to mention rushing Psi U when I was content to blend in with the population. No wonder my mother loves you so much.”

“I’m good for you.” Jude crossed his arms against his chest in thought. Knox smiled at the dark-haired finance major. With his dark looks, tall physique and charming smile, Jude Martin would probably end up a CEO to an important company in the future.

They’d known each other since kindergarten. Knox had found two kids bullying Jude on his way home and he’d fought them off. They’d watched each other’s backs through the years. Being openly gay would have been much harder for Knox if it weren’t for Jude.

Jude stood and started pacing the length of the wooden coffee table.

“What are you thinking about, Martin?”

“How to get you and Silver together,” Jude said.

“Stop, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to be with that punk.” Knox glared at Jude.

“Fine, if you’re happy with Silver’s rejection,” Jude said, with a raised brow.

Knox thought about Silver’s comments in the game room and cursed. “He didn’t even give me a chance. I’ve never been judged so harshly before.”

“Don’t you want to try him again?”

Knox met Jude’s knowing gaze. He chuckled. “You don’t think I can win over Silver Reese, do you?”

Jude smiled and shook his head. “Nope, although it will be fun to see you try. He kicked you on the shin.”

Knox closed his eyes, thinking about Silver’s hot lips. Their kiss in the

storeroom had been worth the kick. Would all their kisses be that intense? He met Jude's smiling gaze. "What do you have in mind?"

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Silver fired up the soldering gun and concentrated on joining strips of metal together, his thoughts carefully blank as he forced the metal into the design he'd drawn for his project. The door to the workroom flew open and Tina walked in.

"Retreating into your work," Tina said, coming around the work table. "You left Rex without a ride."

"Rex can find his own ride home." Silver continued joining the delicate metals, hoping Tina would get the hint and leave.

"I'm not leaving until we talk," Tina said.

Silver glanced up to see her leaning on the storage counter, arms crossed against her chest.

"Are you going to bury your head in work for the rest of your life?" she asked.

"I doubt that's a danger at the moment. I can't even get an interview right." Silver turned off the soldering gun and placed it on its holder. He removed his workshop glasses and placed them on the table. "Tina, you didn't have to come running because of a simple kiss."

"I came running because I dragged you to that party. Knox stopped me in the parking lot earlier. He was asking about you and—" She sighed. "I was worried what he might have said to you. Ever since the guy you dated that semester in Italy—"

Silver reached out to touch her shoulder stopping her tirade. "Let that go, Tina. Raphael and I weren't meant to be."

"Are you all right?" Tina asked.

Silver chuckled and shook his head. "It was a stupid kiss. My lips and I are fine. I'm pretty sure Knox is the one you should worry about. I kicked him pretty hard with my boots."

"I heard. Jude and I met him on the stairs."

“I’m sure he wasn’t happy.” Silver studied his diagram and sighed. There were still a few pieces to solder before the structure took on a better shape. He would end up working all night at this rate. “Tina, go back to Jude, enjoy your night. You don’t need to be here worrying about me.”

“You’re alone.” Tina picked up a cube of wood and studied it for a moment. “I hate that you close yourself off in this workshop. What happens after we graduate in June? Rex and I are heading to Boston. I’m afraid you’re going to run off to Italy—”

“It’s not a bad idea.” Silver removed his work gloves. “Tina—”

“I wish you’d snap out of this funk.” Tina dropped the wooden cube on the work table with a thud and glared at him. “Is Raphael the reason you won’t even try dating other guys? ’Cause if he is, you need to stop punishing yourself. He dumped you, Silver.”

Silver shook his head as he thought about a handsome, dark-haired Italian man. He’d broken Raphael’s heart. He’d been the one to walk away, and instead of telling Tina and Rex the truth, he’d lied. He’d left Raphael to return to Ithaca, thinking that he might get a chance with Knox someday.

“Can you please go back to Jude?” Silver removed his work gloves and left the workshop.

“Jude can handle a few hours without me. I’ll make you a sandwich. You didn’t eat dinner earlier.” Tina followed him to the kitchen. “How is it that on the one night you decide to go to a party, you and Knox end up making out?”

“I blame you,” Silver declared.

He pulled open the refrigerator and got a bottle of milk. He’d made coffee when he’d first walked into the house. Tina found bread, slices of ham, and lettuce. She washed her hands and got to work.

“I try to avoid victory-game after-parties. The last one I went to was when Knox first joined the team,” he said grinning at her.

He got a mug and poured a dash of milk. Taking the coffee pot, he added the fragrant liquid into his mug. “Remember, Rex got so drunk he puked in the Psi U kitchen?”

Tina chuckled. “Jude and Knox had to carry him to the dorm. You were blushing every time Knox asked you a question. Jeez, what happened tonight?”

“Rex and I were playing pool. Knox came over and I told him off. He walked away and I figured the best way to avoid the whole scene was to leave. He cornered me in the storeroom.”

“Maybe you two deserve each other.” Tina frowned as she cut the sandwiches into halves. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell him how you feel?”

Silver sipped his coffee and leaned on the kitchen table. “We have two months left. What kind of relationship do you think we can have?”

Tina put the sandwiches on a plate and slid it to him. She wiped her hands with a dishrag and came to lean on the table beside him. “How good was the kiss?”

Silver picked a sandwich, took a healthy bite, and grinned at Tina. “Mind blowing. It’s too bad I’m never getting anywhere near Knox. He made me want to be Ryan tonight.”

Tina leaned her head on his shoulder. “You’re more handsome than Ryan. Are you still going to take the photographs tomorrow?”

Silver sipped coffee with a slight frown. He’d been anticipating a free Saturday when he’d rushed home from the party. His frown deepened when he remembered Tina’s sorority fundraiser. “I completely forgot. Do I have to go?”

“I don’t have another photographer. You’re really good, and if you can get those photos in the school newspaper even better. Please don’t flake out.”

Silver closed his eyes. “Is Knox going to be there?”

Tina took his hand and squeezed his fingers. “You can go back to your old ways of avoiding him. You’ve gotten pretty good at that.”

Silver stared at his sandwich with distaste. “You’re right about that. Tonight was a fluke; he was drunk. I doubt it will ever happen again.”

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## CHAPTER 3

The girls of Theta Phi mingled with their guests, wide smiles and charming conversation as they tried to raise as much money as they could for their homeless charity. Their guests were making bids on different gifts that Tina had spent the past month finding. Silver focused his lens on a pair of tickets to the final NHL Stanley Cup game. He was pretty sure Jude and the rest of the hockey team were going to make bids on the tickets.

“Great prize,” Knox said beside him. Silver jerked up, his concentration disappearing. Knox’s cologne filled the air and his heart sped up wildly.

“Morning, Silver. Are you in a better mood?”

“Knox,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’m sure Tina is around here. I’ll go get—”

“I don’t want to talk to Tina.” Knox dropped an arm on his shoulder and gave him a half hug. “You ran off so quickly last night, we didn’t get a chance to talk.”

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t have talking in mind.” Silver tried to take a step away from Knox but he wouldn’t allow it. “Are you sure I can’t find Tina for you?”

“Why don’t you like me?” Knox asked leaning close to his ear.

Silver managed to quell his shiver and shook his head. “I don’t know you enough to hate you.”

“Good, we can correct that. Hang out with me today,” Knox said, with a satisfied smile. “We can get to know each other.”

Silver held on to his camera and shook his head. “I’m busy. I’m actually here to work—”

“I don’t mind.” Knox looked around the room. “How many more photographs do you need?”

“A million, it will take me all day to get them done,” Silver declared, managing to extricate himself from Knox’s hold. Adjusting the camera strap on his neck, he moved on to the next showcase. “I don’t have time to socialize.”

“Silver, you’re trying to avoid me.” Knox followed him. “By the way, those glasses make you look so adorable. I never realized you wear glasses.”

Silver pushed the black rimmed glasses up on his nose. He’d hoped wearing the glasses would make him obscure. Apparently not. He frowned focusing his lens on a package of expensive beauty products coupled with gift certificates to a popular spa.

“Did you get home all right last night?” Knox followed him. “Tina left the party so quickly; I couldn’t help worrying.”

“I got home fine,” he replied. “What are you up to, Knox?”

Knox studied the package of beauty products. “I’m trying to have a conversation with you.”

Silver finished with the package and straightened, focusing his lens on Knox. He was perfect for the camera, chiseled profile, clean-shaven jaw, sharp hazel eyes, and soft lips. He’d never seen Knox grow out his hair; it was always cut short. He lowered his lens, cradling the camera against his chest.

“I’m not going to change my mind and date you.” He’d thought about it all night and while he’d love nothing else but to kiss Knox again, the pain wasn’t worth it. “You can stop trying to talk me up.”

Knox gave a low whistle and followed him to the next table. The Statler Hotel was offering an expensive dinner and one night stay in their VIP Suite. Silver wondered how Tina had managed to swing this one.

“How do you make friends?” Knox asked.

“I make them just fine,” Silver replied, focusing on the package on the table. He took three shots.

“What can I do to make you drop this negative attitude toward me?”

Silver straightened and glared at him. “The only reason you’re talking to me is because we kissed last night and you think you can wear me down to go out with you.”

“Is that so terrible?” Knox asked, with a raised brow. “It’s been my experience that when you like someone, you go after them with all you’ve got. Do your best to get to know them.”

Silver gritted his teeth. “What happens if that person doesn’t want to get to know you?”

Knox smiled. “I do my best to change their mind. Is it working? Or do I have to promise to wait on you all day and night?”

Silver tried not to laugh but Knox’s expression was way too innocent. He bit his lip but his smile widened when Knox chuckled.

“You think you’re pretty charming,” Silver said. “What happened to the friend you talked to last night?”

“We’re not together. We’re just friends by the way... with benefits.”

“Is that a fancy way of calling Ryan your booty call?”

“Do you know him?”

Silver shrugged and concentrated on taking pictures of the full Harry Potter series.

Knox cleared his throat. “So, you work for the newspaper?”

“Yes,” Silver answered. “I take photographs for the various events happening around campus.”

“I’ve never seen you at the sports events.”

“Someone else’s department,” Silver said. He’d specifically asked not to be assigned any ice hockey team events. He’d perfected reducing his chances of meeting Knox.

He adjusted the focus on his lens and leaned closer to capture an elegant picture frame made by one of the art students at Theta Phi. When he was done taking pictures, he took a step back, almost running into a guest. Knox moved him out of the way with a gentle hand on his elbow.

“I heard you’re still going for interviews,” Knox said gently. “What are you looking to do after graduation?”

Silver sighed, hating the reality of how close graduation was. It was tempting to hug the comfort of Alexander University, maybe apply for a graduate program. But he’d spent five years in college training to be an architect. Finding a job, however, was next to impossible.

“I have ten interviews set up next week.” He afforded Knox a small smile. “I’m hoping to have better luck in impressing all those firms.”

“I’ve seen your projects, you’re very good,” Knox assured him. “I went through the same thing last month, until I finally landed two offers with investment firms. I have to choose whether to go to Manhattan or Boston soon.”

“Congratulations. Although, I’m a bit surprised,” Silver said, pausing by wide windows in the Theta Phi living room. The sun was shining outside, melting the snow. “I always thought you’d end up playing hockey professionally.”

Knox put his hands into his navy blue chinos and leaned on the wall. He was handsome in a subtle aqua V-neck shirt and a light blazer. “Ice hockey is a hobby, but I’m not as good as some of my teammates.”

“I don’t know about that.” The only reason why he liked going to watch the ice hockey games was Knox. “I can’t imagine you in an office crunching numbers.”

“I can’t imagine you at construction sites.”

“A white hard hat suits me very well, thank you.” Silver winked and checked his camera. “Last summer I got a chance to work at an archeology dig in Italy. It was very interesting work and I’ve been thinking I might try to do that if things don’t pan out with my interviews next week.”

“Would that mean you’d have to leave for Italy?”

Silver frowned at the tinge of disappointment he heard in Knox’s voice. “Probably,” he replied, meeting unreadable hazel eyes.

Knox nodded. Silver looked away. “How’s your wrist?”

Knox pulled his right hand out of his pocket to show off the black bandage tied around his hand. “Better,” Knox said, turning his wrist slightly. “I tortured it during the game last night but it held up.”

“Why would you play with an injury like this?” Silver asked, dropping his camera against his chest to reach for Knox’s hand. “You’re right-handed; you could have hurt yourself worse than this.”

He held Knox's hand gently, studying the bandage and Knox's fingers. They looked a tad swollen and were warm to the touch.

Knox cleared his throat, and he looked up in surprise. "I didn't want to let Jude and my teammates down."

*Loyal*, he added to Knox's pro list. He'd compiled a very long "Knox's cons" list last night after Tina had left. Sadly, he'd worked at making the pros list very short. He let go of Knox's hand and took a step back. "Shouldn't you be wearing a brace?"

"It wasn't working with the look," Knox replied.

Silver gave him a onceover and rolled his eyes. "You look great in anything. You should take care of your hand, Knox."

"I like this side of you, Silver Reese." Knox pushed off the wall. "That little frown on your forehead is making me feel very special. Are you sure you don't like me?"

Silver started for the next showcase. "I show general concern for everyone who's hurt."

"I'll remember that." Knox touched a set of cutlery on the showcase table. "I don't see anyone bidding for a set of dishes."

"They're very expensive china," Silver said, taking rapid shots of the dishes. "Aren't you bored yet?"

"Nope," Knox said quietly. "Are you hungry? I'll get you a plate."

Silver watched Knox walk to the dining room, and almost jumped when Tina touched his shoulder. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Tell me everything," she said, excited. "He looks so handsome today; I think he took extra care knowing you'd be here."

Silver gave an exasperated sigh. "Happily-ever-after theories are running away with you."

"I think not," Tina said with a wide smile. Her auburn hair was tied in an elegant bun, and her dress was vivid blue. She was all business today. "You two looked so great talking. I'm imagining double dates in the future. Go to the dining room, take a break, and talk to Knox. He's making an effort."

“What? No,” Silver refused. “I came here to take photos, then go back to fighting my thesis into shape.”

“You’re no fun, Silver Reese. You’re not turning into a prude on my watch. Go into the dining room now,” Tina ordered, pushing him in the direction Knox had gone.

Silver grumbled under his breath, and capped his camera lens to protect it. He’d been taking photographs all morning, anyway. He detoured to the kitchen where Tina had kept his camera bag. His heart was pounding at the thought of spending an hour in Knox’s company. Maybe he was wrong? Knox was interesting, and it was a definite plus watching him smile. He pushed the kitchen door open, eager to pack his camera so that he could go to the dining room.

He stopped when he found Knox pressed against the counter, with Ryan’s lips fused to his mouth. Hot pain lanced through him, anger, shock, disgust; he couldn’t be sure which emotion to assign to how he was feeling. He’d been ready to buy into Tina’s excitement, and Knox... he gaped. Why had Knox been flirting with him?

Ryan opened his eyes and saw him. Silver felt a sharp stab through his chest when Ryan smiled at him and stepped back from Knox.

“I missed that,” Ryan purred.

Silver blindly reached for the camera bag sitting on the counter. He turned and made an escape just as Knox called out his name. He rushed out to the living area and found Tina.

“I have to go,” he said when he found her talking to a professor. Pulling her aside, he tried to stay calm. “I took enough pictures for a pictorial. I’ll make sure they get to the editor. I’ll see you later.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, talk to you later,” he said, kissing her cheek. He made it out the front door before Knox grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Silver,” Knox said tightly. “I’m sorry, what you saw in there—”

Silver pulled his arm out of Knox’s grasp fighting his anger. “What you do

with Ryan is none of my business. I have no idea why you think I need an apology.”

“Don’t say that. I saw your face in the kitchen.” Knox hissed angrily. “You’re trying so hard to keep your distance, but I can see you’re interested. You like me too.”

“Children want to play with fire, doesn’t mean they get to do it.” Silver started for his car in quick strides and was glad Knox didn’t follow. He slammed into his red Mazda and drove off.

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Knox cursed under his breath, kicking a stone. Things had been going so great, Jude had been right. Silver was easy to talk to if you found the right topic. If he hadn’t needed to get napkins in the kitchen, he’d have made it back to Silver without Ryan’s interference. Damn it. The hurt in Silver’s green eyes in the kitchen... He closed his eyes with a sigh. He didn’t ever want to see that defeated pain again.

“I told you he was going to walk away,” Ryan said behind him. “I don’t know what you see in Silver Reese.”

Knox grabbed Ryan’s sweater and slammed him into the pillar beside him. “You had better stay away from me. I’m going to hurt you real bad the next time you pull a stunt like that.”

“Jeez, Knox,” Ryan gasped, holding his wrists tight. “Since when do you care so much for the guys you want to fuck?”

“I don’t care for the guys I’ve already fucked,” Knox hissed. “Only the one I want to make mine. You stay away from me and Silver from now on.”

He let go of Ryan’s sweater and walked back into the house. He needed to find Tina. There was no way he was letting the day end without another chance with Silver.

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## CHAPTER 4

“Are you sure he’ll come to this party?” Knox asked Tina later that evening at the house she shared with four other girls.

Tina carried a platter of finger food into the living room to a table set in the corner, Knox following her closely. “Silver always makes it to our little get-togethers. Usually he keeps away from the main Theta Phi events. Instead he comes to the evening after-parties. He’ll be here.”

Knox sighed and shook his head. “I messed up, Tina.”

“I know you did,” Tina said, placing the tray on the table and turning to glare at him. “I told you to stay away, but you won’t. Silver likes you. He likes you so much I worry. But you, and your flings, you can’t be trusted to be with him. Do you know how pathetic that makes him?”

“Why have you never told me?” Knox asked. “I could have—”

“Could have what?” Tina demanded. “Stopped sleeping around, asked dear Ryan to let you go?”

“That’s not fair,” Knox said with a shake of his head.

“Yeah well, love never is,” Tina said with a sigh. “I’m not even sure what to tell you. I think you and Silver should walk away from each other. You’re not yet together and mines keep exploding left to right.

Knox grinned. “That just means we have awesome chemistry. It means he is jealous, and he likes me.”

“I swear if you hurt him, I’m going to skewer you alive and roast you in a pit in the front yard,” Tina warned, her eyes flashing with anger. “I mean that literally, Knox Thurston.”

Knox gaped, and watched as she headed back to the kitchen. Tina’s guests started arriving a few minutes later, mostly neighbors from Cook Street. Knox prowled around the common living room nursing a beer. Jude showed up an hour later with Jamie Foster, the team’s goalie, and Gabriel, who was the Psi U president.

He hung out with them, making sure they stayed in the front living room so he could see the front door. At around ten o’clock, he’d lost all hope that

Silver was going to show up. He stood to stretch, and paused when the door swung open and in came Silver and Rex wrapped around each other. Behind them, four of their Delta Chi brothers were singing loudly.

Knox dropped his hands and stared when Silver kissed Rex, sinking his fingers into Rex's hair. White hot anger swept through him and he started for the kissing couple. Jude stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Calm down," Jude advised. "They do that all the time, especially when they're wasted."

Knox cursed under his breath as Silver broke away from Rex and smiled blindly at Tina.

"Are we late?" Silver pulled Tina into a tight hug and sighed. "We forgot about the party, you know Delta Chi. I went over and my brothers had drinks, we made a small party of our own."

"Must have been a hell of a party," Tina said, touching Silver's Mohawk gently. She tugged the red tips with a grin. "How much did you drink?"

"I don't know," Silver said dismissively. He looked around the room. "Wow, there are a lot of people. Do they all live on Cook Street?"

"Most of them," Tina said. "I need to get you coffee. Rex why the hell did you let him get this drunk?"

"I don't think he could be stopped." Rex turned then and met Knox's gaze. Rex gave him a hard look before he wrapped an arm around Silver's waist and led him toward the kitchen.

"I'm going to see what's going on," Knox told Jude through gritted teeth. Jude allowed it although he followed him to the kitchen.

They found Rex forcing Silver to sip coffee.

"What's going on?" Jude asked, stopping to kiss Tina. "Rex?"

Silver looked at them with bleary eyes. "Oh, look who it is." He chuckled pointing at Knox. "Are you here to make out with Rex too? You can't, Rex is mine, my kissing friend."

"Silver," Knox sighed. "I'm sorry about what you saw earlier."

Silver shook his head. "There's nothing to be sorry for," he slurred. "Right, Rex. Knox and Ryan..." Silver hiccupped, "Knox kissing... Ryan..." His eyes filled with tears.

Rex pressed coffee to his lips and Silver swatted the cup away. It crashed on the floor. Tina gasped and Silver pressed a hand to his forehead in frustration.

"Rex, take Silver upstairs to my room," Tina said, grabbing paper towels to clean up the floor. Rex reached for Silver's hand.

"You guys are handling me," Silver complained refusing to follow Rex.

"I'll take you upstairs," Rex cajoled. "Come on, you can't even walk."

"I can walk just fine." Silver pushed Rex away and stumbled toward the living room.

Knox grabbed his arm to stop him. He gaped in surprise when Silver turned on him with stormy green eyes. "Get off me, you bastard."

"Calm down," Knox said, aware their little altercation was gaining an audience. He tried to pull Silver back into the kitchen, Silver wouldn't have it.

"Don't tell me to calm down," Silver yelled. "I don't even know why you're here. Shouldn't you be out with Ryan or one of the other twinks you fuck? This is not your thing."

"Silver, you're making a scene," Knox said, keeping his tone calm even though he was on the verge of shaking Silver senseless. The music had stopped and everyone was watching them now. "If you want to talk, let's go elsewhere."

"I'm fine right here," Silver scoffed.

Knox narrowed his gaze. "What is your problem? This isn't you, getting drunk, raging out of control."

"How do you know what is me or not?" Silver asked, anger shaking his slender body. "You know what; this is me finally taking a step into sanity. I should be locked up in a psych ward for liking you for as long as I have. You drive me crazy just by breathing. Standing here with you this close is killing me, but you can't see that, can you? You never have."

Knox gasped in surprise. “Silver—”

“Don’t ‘Silver’ me. You’re a bastard man-whore heartbreaker and you deserve Ryan. That punk will never love you like you deserve because you’re incapable of having a relationship. Don’t touch me again.”

Silver pushed him off and turned to the guests watching them in the living room. Taking a bottle of beer from a coffee table beside him, he held it up. “Let’s party!”

The music started again and the party continued. Knox stared after Silver in shock.

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Sunday morning, Silver woke with a pounding headache. After a hideously cold week, the sun had decided to make an appearance, shining right through his windows. He took dark glasses from his dresser and jammed them over his eyes. Rolling out of bed onto bare feet, he wasn’t surprised to find he was still in his jeans. Habit got him to the bathroom since he could barely see. Taking a piss, he reached up to scratch his chest and his fingers came away with a paper.

He stared at the note for a moment and then dumped it in the sink; he finished taking a piss, flushed, and turned on the water in the sink.

“Shit,” he cursed under his breath, grabbing the wet paper clumsily. It ripped and he tried to read what was on it.

Rex must have been nuts to write him a note after a night spent drinking. Giving up on saving the wet note, he threw it into the trashcan, washed his hands, and avoided looking into the mirror. He left the bathroom and followed the scent of freshly brewed coffee into the kitchen.

Taking a mug from the cupboard above, he poured himself coffee and added a generous heap of sugar.

“I’m glad to see you awake.”

He hissed in irritation when he burned his tongue with hot coffee in surprise. Holding the mug carefully, he turned to find Knox leaning on the kitchen door jamb.

“Hangover must be killing you,” Knox said casually. “You mixed a lot of drinks last night.”

Silver winced, pressing his fingers to his left temple. He couldn’t hold a full conversation right now; even the sound of Knox’s voice was grating against his nerves.

“Please lower your voice,” he managed.

Knox sighed and came into the kitchen. Silver tried to ignore his presence in his house, hoping the man would get the hint and leave. His hopes were dashed when Knox took his arm and led him to a chair.

“Sit, I’ll make you a cure.” Knox returned a few minutes later with a tall glass filled with lemon-yellow liquid. “Drink,” he ordered.

Silver grimaced at the color. “I’ll stick to my coffee, thanks.”

Knox took the coffee mug deftly, and pushed the glass into his hands. “It works, believe me.”

“I bet.” Silver wrinkled his nose before he took a quick sip from the glass. “Pickles,” Silver said, gagging a bit.

Knox chuckled softly. “It’s good for hangovers.”

Silver finished the concoction quickly, and slammed the glass on the table. “Thanks, you can leave now.”

Knox gave him back his coffee. “You don’t remember last night?”

Silver looked at him with a frown. He remembered leaving Tina’s fundraiser and going to hang out with his frat brothers. He’d found them drinking and joined in; the rest was unclear.

Knox smiled and Silver scowled in annoyance. Why did that smile, so simple, send riotous thrills through him? He looked away. “I remember just fine. Got drunk with the guys, came home to sleep. I woke up to find you prowling around my apartment. What do you want?”

“Missed out on a couple of events between the drinking and coming home parts,” Knox said with a smile.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, where to start,” Knox said in an amused tone. “Should I start with your friends crashing Tina’s party, you strip dancing on top of a coffee table, or the epic confession you gave me in front of everyone?”

Silver choked on his coffee—a horrible wet sound that resulted in coffee spewed over the table. Knox held out a bunch of napkins from the holder and Silver grabbed them. He wiped his nose and mouth. Pulling off his glasses, he wiped the table and moved his coffee mug to the side.

Silver stood, taking the dirty napkins to the trash can. He sighed when he noted that their trash bags were going to overrun the kitchen soon. But he had bigger problems right now. What in the hell was Knox talking about? Confessions, strip dancing... he didn’t remember any of it. Where was Rex?

Knox answered as though he could read his mind. “Rex was arrested; Tina went to get him out. She asked me to check on you.”

Silver slumped against the counter. “What the hell happened last night?”

Knox pushed his chair back so that he could look at him. “What happened last night was a result of you denying yourself the pleasures of life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You didn’t need to get roaring drunk to tell me you liked me.” Knox smirked at him when he gasped. Silver shook his head in denial and Knox stopped him. “No use denying, you declared it pretty loud. The whole street knows you like me.”

Silver bit his lip and wondered if his frat brothers would let him hide at the Delta Chi house until graduation. He was melting with embarrassment.

“Silver—”

“I think you should leave.”

“We need to talk,” Knox said his hazel eyes serious. “Do you really think I’m incapable of having a serious relationship?”

“Is that what I said?” Silver folded his arms against his chest, marveling at the lows he’d reached this weekend.

“There were also words like man-whore, player, and heartbreaker thrown in there.” Knox came to stand in front of him. “All I got was that you’ve had a crush on me, and you don’t think we can date.”

“Looks like I covered everything, so what are you doing here?”

“Despite what you saw with Ryan yesterday, there’s nothing going—”

“I don’t need to know.” Silver dropped his head into his hands. He wished he could forget the image of Knox and Ryan in the Theta Phi kitchen. He’d felt hurt, having been the recipient of one of those kisses just the night before. He’d felt betrayed—he had no right to feel that way—yet he had. Eyes closed, he berated his heart for the painful twist every time he thought about their kiss in the pantry. “Please, Knox, can you just go away. I’m sorry for embarrassing you.”

“Silver—”

“Stop,” Silver said quietly. “You started this when you kissed me Friday night. I’ve tried to stay away from you, but you—” Silver shook his head. “I don’t need you complicating my life.”

“I like you too,” Knox said, taking a step closer. “I’m here because I’d like to make it work with you.”

Silver chuckled bitterly. “You’re caught up in the drama, Knox. I’m sorry I apparently lost my mind last night, but we’re too different to make it work.”

Knox’s eyes narrowed in irritation. “I think I like you better wasted—you’re more truthful. I’m taking you out for dinner tonight.”

“Call Ryan, take him out.” Silver ran a hand through his choppy hair. He needed to find his cellphone and find out if he could make it up to Tina and Rex. Shit, the last time he’d had one of these drinking blackouts he’d woken up half naked in his frat house backyard.

Knox reached out to touch Silver’s jaw with his left hand. He tried to turn away, but Knox wouldn’t let go. He closed his eyes as Knox’s traced his stubble with a thumb. “I’m hoping you’ll remember what you told me when we finally got you home. When your head is clearer, please try to remember. I’ll pick you up at seven tonight.”

Knox surprised him with a kiss on his forehead before he left. The moment the front door closed, Silver rushed back to his room determined to find his phone. If he could just remember what had happened last night.

His socks and T-shirt were on the floor. Picking up the black T-shirt, he grimaced when a whiff of stale beer hit him. He dropped the shirt and stared at the bed. He hadn't noticed before, but he'd slept on top of the covers. His ring tone jingled, drawing his attention to the black phone on his study desk.

He answered on the second ring.

“Did you read the note?” Tina demanded.

“It fell in the bathroom sink,” he said, moving to sit on the bed. “How bad is it?”

“You promised to give Knox a chance last night,” Tina told him with a laugh. “I wrote the note to warn you that he might show this morning.”

Silver dropped his head and rubbed his eyes. “How's Rex?”

“Rex is fine, suffering a hangover.”

“How did he get arrested?” Silver asked.

“Disturbing the peace,” Tina said. “You and Rex started a porch fight yesterday with my neighbors. Knox saved you; Rex got caught with a few of Knox's teammates. They were too drunk, so the cops kept them overnight.”

Silver groaned. “I'm sorry, Tina.”

“Don't be,” Tina laughed, making him feel better. “It was great to see you let loose for once. Take a shower; we'll be right over, all right?”

She hung up and he stared at his phone in shock. His life seemed to have spiraled out of control in the past twelve hours. Letting a sigh escape, he threw his phone on the bed and headed to the shower.

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Silver hugged Rex when they finally came back home. Rex looked beat, hangover, and his clothes reeked. “Go take a shower, there's coffee in the kitchen.”

Rex hurried to his room. Silver turned to Tina and raised his brow in question. “What happened last night?”

“You,” Tina said, walking into the living room. She sank onto the couch with a wide grin. “You and your frat brothers got wasted. Rex says it started

around one o'clock, by the time you showed up at my house, you were definitely drunk. Knox was there, and you two had a fight in the living room with everyone looking on."

Silver groaned and sat down in armchair. "I feel like I'm in freshman year again."

"I thought it was fun as hell." Tina grinned at him. "I know you didn't read the note I stuck on your chest. I hoped you would."

"It fell in the sink." Silver sat back in his chair. "Knox was here when I woke up. He told me he was taking me out to dinner. Do you know what that's about?"

Tina reached for her bag and pulled out her cell phone. She came around to sit on the arm of his chair and held out her phone. "I'm your best friend, and last night happened to be the craziest night you've had since I've known you. I taped this because I figured you'd want to remember."

She handed him the phone and stood. "I'll be in the kitchen."

He frowned as she hurried away. He started the video and gaped when he saw Knox laying him down gently on his bed. Knox started to move away, but he stopped him. Grabbing onto his shirt, he pulled Knox close.

"Silver," Knox whispered, bracing his palms on either side of him on the bed. "You need to sleep."

"I need you," Silver slurred out. He bunched his fingers into Knox's shirt.

"I'm right here," Knox said, leaning to press a kiss on his jaw, then his eyes.

Silver moved slightly and Knox's lips found his. They kissed, Knox still braced above him.

"I love that," Silver murmured a few minutes later. "I love kissing you Knox. I'd do anything to have you kiss me all day and night. Why do you have to break my heart with Ryan?"

"Silver, I didn't know," Knox said. "I didn't know you cared about me at all. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why would I? You'd have used me and thrown me away and I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

Knox sighed and pulled him into a tight hug. “I promise you if you give me a chance, I’ll commit, Silver.”

Silver scoffed, his arms going around Knox’s waist. “Will you hold me for a while before you go?”

Knox shifted on the bed, until he was lying beside him. Silver watched as Knox held him against his chest gently.

The video ended and he sat gaping at Tina’s phone. No wonder Knox had been so persistent this morning. Placing Tina’s phone on the coffee table, he sat back in the armchair and thought about dinner with Knox. Maybe it was time to give in, he thought, his heart beating wildly. To have Knox, to be with Knox always. He closed his eyes. Wouldn’t that be heaven?

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## CHAPTER 5

Knox stood at Silver's door at exactly seven o'clock. He adjusted the collar of his double-breasted black jacket and stuck his car keys into the pocket. Ringing the doorbell, he stepped back, nervous. He'd waited for Silver's call all day. When the call hadn't come, he worried that Silver might stand him up.

He waited a minute before he reached for the doorbell again. Before he could press the button, the door swung open. Silver looked handsome in black: black slim blazer, black T-shirt, black jeans, and on his feet, black Nike kicks. His mink-black hair was trimmed to a shorter Mohawk. The red tips were gone, sad, but the new look suited Silver. Green eyes met his and he smiled.

"Are you ready?"

"Question. Is this an official date?" Silver asked, holding on to the door. "You're not going to be kissing Ryan tomorrow, are you?"

Knox sighed. "I promise this is a serious first date. No more Ryan."

Silver gauged his answer before he stepped out and closed the door. Knox led the way to his black SUV. He opened the passenger door for Silver and earned himself a short smile. He drove them to Just a Taste; Tina had told him it was Silver's favorite restaurant.

They were seated at a secluded table, and Knox watched Silver order dinner. As they waited for their food, Silver hugged his wine glass, a frown dancing on his forehead.

"I wanted to apologize again for screaming at you last night," Silver said quietly. "For embarrassing you—"

"Apology not accepted," Knox said, making Silver's head jerk up in surprise. "I would never have known how you feel about me without that outburst."

Silver blushed slightly. "The last time I drank like that, I was in freshman year. I woke in the backyard at Delta Chi half-naked with pen marks on my face. It wasn't the best experience."

Knox chuckled. "I would have loved to see that."

"I bet," Silver said, sipping his wine. They both laughed, and Knox felt relief as the air lightened.

He relaxed, and they ended up talking about Silver's thesis and his own plans after graduation. They moved on to talking about their families, and during the main course Silver told him about his semester in Rome.

It was surprisingly easy to talk to Silver. Knox loved Silver's quick wit, and the easy way he listened. Silver's green eyes held his with interest, clearly enjoying their conversation. Knox couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a good time. They lingered over dessert.

Watching Silver fork bites of a chocolate soufflé into his mouth turned into an exercise in self-control, his gaze continually drawn to Silver's lips as he licked whipped cream from the corner of his mouth.

Knox dropped his napkin on his lap when the waiter brought their bill. He didn't want to leave just yet, but he wanted a chance to kiss Silver tonight. Reaching for his wallet, he paid the bill.

They left the restaurant and Knox drove slowly back to Collegetown. Silver sat quietly in the passenger seat, so Knox reached out and took his left hand.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

Silver held Knox's bandaged hand gently. "I had fun tonight. I don't want the night to end yet."

Knox nodded. "I have an idea."

Silver glanced at him with a frown. "What kind of idea?"

Knox grinned. "It's a surprise."

Silver laughed squeezing his fingers. "I don't know if I like surprises."

"Trust me?" Knox asked quietly.

Silver hesitated for a moment before he answered quietly. "I trust you."

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*Trust*, Silver thought, as Knox drove through campus.

The past two days seemed like a whirlwind. It seemed as though one minute he'd been standing by the pool table wishing Knox would see him and the next, they were kissing and having fights—and now they were out on a date. An actual date, with Knox Thurston. Silver's heart was dancing merrily in his chest. He was glad Rex and Tina had urged him not to cancel on Knox. *"You can't live your life on the sidelines, Silver. He wants to give it a try, and you've wanted him forever. Seize the day."*

So here he sat, in Knox's car, playing with the bandage on Knox's right hand. Whatever happened, he decided, he'd always have this moment.

Knox pulled into the Alexander Rink. He parked his car in the back and urged Silver out.

"What are we doing here?" Silver asked. It was almost nine o'clock; he wondered if the rink was still open. Knox smiled mysteriously at him. They entered the building through a side entrance.

Knox paused long enough to get them skates from the skate rental booth before they headed to the lighted ice rink. Silver sat on a bench, removing his kicks so that he could wear the skates.

"What happens if we get caught?" Silver looked around the deserted rink warily.

"We won't be caught," Knox promised, helping him with his skates. "Do you know how to skate?"

Silver shrugged, tying the laces on his skates. He'd never really skated, but it couldn't be that hard. "I can manage."

Knox held out a hand to help him up. Knox rubbed his upper arms to keep him warm and buttoned his jacket. He pulled out gloves from his pocket and handed them to Silver.

"When did you start playing ice hockey?" Silver asked when they got on the ice. He managed to keep his balance as he watched Knox glide a few feet away. Knox was the picture of grace in dark chinos; his double-breasted jacket fit him to perfection. Silver caught his breath when Knox did a few turns on the ice.

“I was in second grade,” Knox said, coming to take his hand.

Silver breathed out in relief when Knox tugged on his hand slightly and he managed to glide his skates on the ice. It was terrifying and fun. He was half afraid he’d fall on his ass.

Knox stayed by his side as they skated slowly. “My mother thought I was crazy, but she liked ice-skating. She thought I was going to turn out like those guys who do flips and jump all over the ice.”

Silver laughed. “I can imagine you in tights.”

Knox grinned. “You wish. I’d rather die than be caught in those. When I joined the community ice hockey team, my mum cried buckets. She thought I was going to end up with no teeth and all my bones broken.”

Silver’s gaze fell on Knox’s right wrist. “I can understand her.”

“Were you worried about me too?” Knox asked with a raised brow.

“I’ve been to the ice hockey games. I’ve seen how bad the players get hurt.” Silver tightened his hold on Knox’s left hand.

Knox turned to look at him, skating backwards. “It’s ridiculous how happy I feel right now.”

“Why?” Silver looked at him with a raised brow.

“You worried about me,” Knox said, stopping abruptly. Silver bumped into him and gasped as he started to lose his balance. Knox wrapped a strong arm around him. Silver glanced up to find Knox smiling at him. “It warms me deep inside, Silver.”

Silver held on to Knox’s shoulders and stared into hazel eyes.

“I guess you’ve found me out,” he murmured. “It’s not exactly easy liking a guy like you, Knox. You’re handsome, popular, reckless, not to mention your dating flaws.” Silver sighed. “With all those odds, my stupid heart seems hell-bent on caring for you.”

Knox leaned to kiss him, the touch of his lips intoxicating, sending wild thrills through him. He clung tightly to Knox’s shoulders. When they pulled apart, Knox smiled.

“I don’t think your heart is stupid. And the only reason why I’ve dated like I did before was because I hadn’t met you. Yesterday, after your confession, I wished we’d met earlier. I wished I’d paid more attention and seen your heart, Silver.”

Silver buried his face into Knox’s shoulder. It felt like a dream to have Knox talking to him like this. His resolve and anger melted as Knox held him tight. His body burned for Knox, needing him.

“I’m afraid,” Silver said quietly.

Knox rocked them back and forth for a moment. “Me too,” Knox confessed.

Silver pulled back to look at him. “Why are *you* afraid?”

Knox shrugged. “I’m worried you’re not going to give us a chance. I’m scared you’re going to judge me too soon and walk away.”

Silver reached up to touch Knox’s jaw.

“I won’t,” he promised.

Knox smiled and kissed him again. He closed his eyes and melted into Knox’s embrace.

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They left the rink, and Silver clutched Knox’s hand during the short drive to Knox’s apartment on Cook Street. The rink was always cold, his fingers freezing every time he went to an ice hockey game. Tonight there was none of that; Knox’s warmth seeped into him, awakening his body. As they stepped into the living room, they were both glad to discover a note from Jude saying he was staying at Tina’s.

“Want coffee?” Knox asked as he removed his jacket to reveal a white Henley. “I’ll make it—”

Silver closed the distance between them and leaned up to kiss Knox. Now that he had him so close, he didn’t want anything else. Knox moaned, dragging him close.

“Are you sure, Silver?” Knox asked, breaking their kiss abruptly. “I don’t want to hurry you—”

“I’m sure.” Silver reached for the edges of Knox’s shirt, pulling it up. “I won’t be afraid anymore, Knox. I want you.”

Knox stroked his jaw, “I want you too.”

They undressed each other in frenzied passion, clothes strewn on furniture. They ended up on the floor. Silver’s body arched in silent ecstasy when Knox took him into his mouth. He came violently, fingers digging into the carpet as Knox stroked him. He begged for more and got it, clinging to broad shoulders when Knox took him with slow thrusts, building up their passion. Driving him mad with need each time he thrust and hit that spot deep inside him that made him grind his hips against Knox. He wrapped his legs around Knox’s waist and leaned up to kiss him. Their lips fused, and they found their rhythm, finally coming apart in each other’s arms.

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## CHAPTER 6

Silver pushed his reading glasses higher on his nose and adjusted his drawing pen. His project was almost done; his final thesis review was scheduled for eight in the morning the next day. He'd been working nonstop for a whole week now; it felt endless. One minute, he was making progress, the next; he discovered an aspect that wasn't working with the plan.

"Food time, Silver." Knox interrupted his thoughts. "You have to eat; it's almost midnight."

Silver smiled, loving the sound of Knox's stern voice. They'd been together for a month and a half. Endless nights spent together at Knox's apartment, or his, making love. He blushed at the memory of their insatiable bouts. Their passion was unrelenting, burning him to a crisp each time they came together.

Knox came around the desk to sink his fingers into Silver's hair. Silver closed his eyes when Knox pressed a hot kiss on the back of his neck.

"Hello, sexy," Knox purred into his ear. "How's the project going?"

"I'm almost done," Silver said, turning to look at Knox. He moaned when Knox took his mouth in a heated kiss. He dropped his pen and pushed back his chair so that he could stand. Knox pulled him into his arms, breaking the kiss after a moment to hold him.

"I'm worried this project is stealing you away from me," Knox complained. "Rex says you didn't go home to shower today."

Silver chuckled. "You were worse two weeks ago when you were doing your final finance project. I barely saw you."

Knox groaned and held him tighter, if that were possible, before he let go. "I brought you a hamburger and coffee to help you stay up. I'll keep you company until you're done."

"You don't have to stay here," Silver said in surprise. "I mean—"

Knox stopped his protests with a kiss. "I love you, Silver. I'm worried about you. Keeping you company will make me happy."

Silver grinned at Knox.

“What?” Knox asked, staring at him when he didn’t move to the small table in the workshop where the food was. “Do I have something on my face?”

Silver shook his head. “You just said you love me.”

Knox paused and flashed him a smile. “It’s the truth.”

Silver swallowed hard, and closed the distance between them. “I love you too,” he said, quietly hugging Knox. “I love you so much.”

Knox laughed, burying his face into Silver’s neck. “I’ve been hoping to hear that from you for a while now. I was kind of hoping to hear it before graduation.”

“Why?” Silver pulled back to look at him.

Knox took his hand and led him to the small table, pushing him into a seat. Silver took the hamburger and fries Knox held out and took a bite.

“I accepted the job in Manhattan.” Knox told him quietly.

Silver stared at his hamburger, thinking about the interviews he’d done a few weeks ago. He and Knox had thrown a celebration party when an architecture firm in New York had called him. With Knox accepting the job in Manhattan, they were definitely going to see each other often.

“Silver, say something,” Knox urged.

“Is it what you want?” Silver asked him, worried that Knox might have chosen the investment bank in Manhattan only because he would also be going to New York.

“Yes,” Knox said quietly. “It’s a great offer, and it comes with a few perks. I couldn’t have asked for a better first job.”

Silver smiled and picked up his hamburger. “So what is it you haven’t told me?”

Knox pulled his chair closer to him and took his hand. “We haven’t talked about life after graduation. Silver, I don’t want to lose what we have together. I don’t want to spend a minute away from you.”

“Knox—”

“Will you move in with me?” Knox asked quickly. “Come live with me in Manhattan? I checked out my apartment and your new job. It’s an easy commute with the subway and—”

Silver put his hamburger down and tangled his fingers with Knox’s. “You drive me crazy. All these roundabout stories—you should have just asked me. I’d love to move in with you.”

“Are you sure?”

Silver cupped Knox’s jaw. “I’ve wanted you since sophomore year—three years and a couple months. The past month has been amazing, being with you.” He shook his head in awe. “I don’t want to lose this either. So, yes, I’m sure, Knox.”

Knox laughed and smiled. “This is the best graduation gift.”

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Silver managed to finish his thesis project. He presented it before a panel of his professors, nervous and animated about the restoration topic he’d chosen. His five years condensed down to two hours answering intense questions.

When he finally left the review room, he found Knox waiting in the hallway for him. Knox didn’t talk; he opened his arms and held him tight, giving him courage. When Silver could breathe without panicking, he pulled away and paced the hallway as the review board discussed his project.

Jude, Tina and Rex arrived a few minutes later, to wait with him. When one of the professors came to get him, Knox squeezed his shoulder and he went in to get the decision of his life.

It didn’t take long; he left the review room ten minutes later with a nervous grin.

“Well,” Knox demanded when he finally reached their group.

“I passed,” Silver said his voice shaky. “I’m graduating.”

Knox pulled him into a tight hug, with a loud shout of excitement. He was twirled around and passed to Tina and Rex, even to Jude. Silver finally found himself back in Knox’s arms and he couldn’t help the tears in his eyes.

He was officially a qualified architect. He had a job, the greatest friends, and best of all, the man of his dreams. He hoped their future would remain this bright forever, but for now... Knox kissed him sweetly. This was the best graduation gift in the world.

A perfect happy ending for now, he decided when Knox twirled him around.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Suilan Lee is a budding author. Her recent novel is Kiss Me to Spring Time, a romantic Asian-themed tale. Suilan loves traveling and learning about new cultures, she's constantly meeting new friends and loves keeping in touch with old ones. When she's not writing, she gardens, reads, and works for her family's business.*

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