

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

A CHANCE TO FIGHT

Lila Leigh Hunter

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A CHANCE TO FIGHT

By Lila Leigh Hunter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A naked man sitting on the concrete base of a fenced area with another naked man standing between his legs. Several boulders are on the background marking the river's edge with a bridge alongside. They both could be considered bears and have several tattoos. They are embracing each other just before a kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He means the world to me, always has and always will. Leaving him was the biggest mistake I ever made but I got so caught up in my own dreams of glory, desperate to make it as a pro boxer [can swap for another sport if you'd prefer]. I knew that staying in such a small town would put an end to my dreams. I never asked him to come with me; I knew he'd say no. Not because he didn't love me but because his parents were struggling and they needed him to stay close. I couldn't ask him to abandon his family for me. So I broke his heart—and my own—by leaving town and walking away from the only man I've ever loved.

It's been five years since I left and I've finally returned. It's the eve of his twenty-seventh birthday and my heart is pounding in my chest as I knock on his front door. He still lives in our home town but he's got his own place now. An old friend told me that he's living on his own and that he keeps himself to himself. I feel sick with nerves but I had to come back. I know I'm something of a celebrity now, but my dreams of success have long since lost their shine. Please say he'll give me another chance and that he'll forgive me for walking away. I need him to know how much I still love him and that I never stopped loving him. I don't want to spend another day without him in my life, in my arms, in my bed...

I'm looking for a contemporary romance with emphasis on the romance part! There's absolutely nothing I want more than a happy ending :) Please don't make the guy he left behind have another boyfriend when he returns. Other than that, I don't mind seeing some drama/action/angst. I'd like to see lots of emotion, maybe some hurt/comfort, and a wonderful "I love you"

moment. I live for the “I love you” moments! If you could help fuel my tattoo fetish by incorporating the MC’s tattoos into the story and maybe adding some more tats, I’d adore you forever! I love it when tattoos have a story behind them :)

There isn’t much I’d strongly object to, but please—absolutely no cheating or ménage, and preferably no GFY theme or BDSM.

Sincerely,

Lauren

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bears, boxer, alpha males, hurt/comfort, reunited, tattoos, first love

Content Warnings: suicide attempt, homophobia

Word Count: 24,367

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my hubby for his help at the beginning of this project. I know you drew a line after the armpit love.

To my Betas, Thing 1 and Thing 2, thanks for the support words and for always going along with whatever crazy idea I came up with since school.

And especially, thanks to my editor, A.M. Martinez. Hope this is the first of many conspiracies.

Lastly, I dedicate this short story to my mom, for always following me around the world to make my life easier, even though living with me is an adventure. You closed the factory with your best kid: me.

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Prologue

May 2005

Austin really needed darker blinds in his room. Gavin reluctantly opened his eyes and tried to dodge the little sun rays shining in his face. He flipped over for a cuddle, and found nothing but cold sheets. Gavin checked the time and made a quick calculation; they still had three hours before he had to drop Austin at the boxing gym. The bedroom door wasn't completely shut, and he heard the water running. He stretched and hugged Austin's pillow, before getting out to look for his boxers. He followed the sound of water down the hallway, to the small bathroom in the house Austin shared with his dad. Luckily, Mr. Black left the day before to arrive early in Grand Rapids so he could set up everything for Austin's last week of training before his next tournament.

Gavin walked into the bathroom and peeked behind the shower curtain. "Hey, why didn't you wake me up? You know I love to shave you," Gavin said as a morning greeting.

"Since you looked so comfortable in *my* bed, I didn't want to disturb your beauty sleep. I guess I'm old enough to do it myself," Austin snapped back.

His words shocked Gavin with the strength of a slap in the face. Every time he had a chance, he helped Austin shave before his boxing matches. It was almost a job for two, he always teased, since a light fur covered Austin's entire body. It was a feature that Gavin loved, but wasn't able to enjoy too often, due to Austin's constant training.

"I'm sorry," Gavin said, turning to leave the bathroom.

"Sky, stop! I'm just in a bad mood today," Austin said, opening the shower curtain further. "You can shave my chest if you like."

"Only if you want me to," Gavin responded, without turning to face Austin.

A wet hand gripped Gavin's biceps and then strong arms wrapped around his chest, pulling him backwards. Austin kissed Gavin's neck and murmured, "I'm sorry," in his ear. A shiver went through Gavin's body as he relaxed into Austin's embrace.

"I'm freezing my ass off. We need to go back in the shower."

"I can warm up your ass pretty quickly if you want," Gavin offered, turning to Austin, grabbing his ass with one hand and with the other pulling him by the neck to kiss him deeply. They were both hard and panting by the time they separated to breathe.

"Fuck, Sky! You make me so hard," Austin said, placing his forehead against Gavin's shoulder.

"OK, darling, to the shower you go. I want whatever I can get out of you," Gavin said, turning Austin around, but not without first patting him on the ass.

"Hey, watch it. If you keep it going, I may like it." Austin wiggled his eyebrows and turned the shower back on.

Gavin's heart stopped for a second and his blood boiled. He had seen Austin under the water multiple times, and every single one took his breath away. He was in perfect shape for his upcoming match. Keeping his weight down to one hundred and fifty-two pounds wasn't difficult for him, in comparison with Gavin's almost one hundred and seventy-five pounds and counting. The tattoo sleeves Austin sported shimmered under the drops. Water slid down his chest, making the soft patches of hair on their path curl. He wanted to follow them and trace them with his tongue, down to Austin's groin and that beautiful uncut erection waiting for him.

"A penny for your thoughts," Austin said, bringing Gavin back from his lustful thoughts.

"I'm sorry, darling. I was just thinking about following those water drops from your chest to your cock with my tongue," Gavin replied seductively.

"Fuck, you're getting me hard again and you know I can't even jerk off. Come here and shave me, slave. I know that's what you want." Austin stared directly at Gavin's tenting shorts.

He didn't lose another moment. Gavin removed his boxers and joined Austin in the shower. He got everything he needed and started working on Austin's armpits, trimming them first. He applied the shaving cream and used short, secured razor strokes to remove the shorter hairs. He removed the excess cream with a warm cloth, and then licked the pit from the bottom up. Austin quivered, and Gavin kissed him on the chest. "If you want, sit on the tub edge while I do the other one," he said, directing him to follow his instructions.

"Just finish up," Austin said abruptly.

"Hey, why so serious all of a sudden?" Gavin asked, kissing Austin's temple.

"I'm fine, just thinking about the match and my boxing future."

"Oh!" Gavin let go of Austin and looked down, dejected. Austin's career was taking off sooner than they expected, and their time apart had been increasing. He couldn't accompany Austin on this trip, and it wasn't the first time. Gavin still had one more year of classes at the community college, as well as his part-time job at Willie's gym. They were only twenty-two, but had planned their future together since they kissed for the first time, and now distance was taking its toll.

"We have to hurry up. We need to be at the gym pretty soon," Austin said, sitting on the tub edge. Gavin took a deep breath and continued shaving Austin. When he was done, they showered in silence.

The weather was finally good enough to open the truck's windows. Austin placed his hand on top of Gavin's, but continued to look out. Since he sold his car to get money for gear, they drove to the gym together most of the time. When Gavin was in class, Austin would borrow the truck, or run the sixteen miles to town.

Thirty minutes later, they parked in front of Willie's gym. Austin and his manager, Josh Carver, were driving to Michigan for the National Golden Glove Tournament. Hopefully, these would be Austin's last matches as an amateur boxer. He was ready to fulfill his dreams as a professional boxer—something his father never achieved after Austin's mother died and he had to shelve his career to take care of Austin on his own.

Gavin parked in front of the gym and saw Josh walking towards them. "See you in a couple of days, champ," Gavin said, squeezing Austin's hand one more time. They couldn't risk a kiss where someone could see them, but they said their goodbyes at the house. They stepped out of the truck and retrieved Austin's gear. Gavin removed the rosary his grandmother gave him before she died and placed it on Austin's palm. "I know you can't wear it when you're in the ring, but please keep it. I want it to keep you safe, since I'm not going with you."

"I can't take it. I know how important it is for you."

"It's not more important than you. Please take it."

"No, I—" Austin was not able to continue arguing about it because of Josh's interruption.

“Ready to go, Gunner?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” he responded, placing the rosary in his jacket pocket and grabbing the rest of his stuff. He followed Josh, but turned, creating a space between them. He took an envelope out of the front pocket of his bag and gave it to Gavin. “Can you please promise me you won’t open this envelope until the tournament is over?” he asked seriously.

“Yes,” Gavin said, staring at it.

“Sky? Look at me.” Austin waited for Gavin to comply. “Never lose that spark in your eyes. They shine like the sky on a sunny day. Always remember you’re mine.” Austin paused a moment longer, gazing deeply into Gavin’s eyes, before moving away to join his manager, without looking back.

Chapter 1

October 2010

The arena was loud and involved in the fight. The commentator's voice made the crowd roar: *Pastrana sneaks a right into Gunner's side; then another one. Wow, Pastrana connected a good body shot. His solid right hand connects with the defending champ. Another stiff jab, and another one from Pastrana. Several left hooks and a right hand again. Gunner continues to flick out the jabs. Pastrana gets him to the ropes and briefly works the body, but Gunner continues to hold strong. Pastrana just lands a jab with ten seconds to go in this round. It looks like he is trying to steal this match at the last minute.*

Sitting in his corner, defending Middleweight champion, Austin 'Gunner' Black thought this fight would end in the single digit rounds. He thought wrong. Young Jim Pastrana was taking the best out of him. Gunner was in his best shape ever, at one hundred and sixty-eight pounds, but mentally he was several states over. He heard everything his trainer Theo said, but he really didn't care. It was up to him, not Theo, to defend his belt.

The last round started and the commentator fired up again. As the last few minutes counted down, he announced: *They just tied up, as Pastrana tries to back Gunner into the ropes. Gunner jabs his way into the clinch, but Pastrana thumps the body point-blank. Uppercut from Pastrana met by a perfect left hook from Gunner. Pastrana connects with a lead right hand, jabs the champ's body. Clinch. Gunner just hooked Pastrana, sending him to the canvas. This fight is over.*

Entering the gym at five a.m. was part of Austin's daily life, rain, shine or snow, and every time he checked out his problems at the door. Unfortunately, for the last couple of months, his miserable love life had followed him everywhere, including into his gym's sacred space. Finding himself on the canvas after his warm-up, having sparred with an up-and-coming boxer the day before, wasn't the way to start his week. Now, he was at the principal's office, waiting to be punished for his transgressions.

"OK, Gunner, we need to start getting serious about the next step in your career. You're one step from getting a chance at the Light Heavyweight belt. We start full training in two weeks," said Theo, Austin's trainer.

“You need to get your head back in the game. You almost lost your last match and that doesn’t give me much to work with, to get you into the bill,” added Dan, his manager.

Austin didn’t even look at them. He knew he was losing his focus and he wasn’t even sure that he wanted to go for the belt. Lately, he spent most of his time feeling miserable. The last match had taken its toll on him. Jim Pastrana was younger, faster, and if it wasn’t for his seventy-three inch reach, Austin would have lost the match and the chance to retain his champion belt.

“I need some time off. I’m not sure I want to relinquish my belt to go for the Light Heavyweight title. I don’t think I can hit one hundred and seventy-five pounds comfortably. I think I may need a cool-down period before I can wrap my head around all of this.”

“It has to be now,” Dan said, punching his desk. “You’re a hot commodity and everyone wants to bring you down. You don’t have the luxury of giving up when you are so close to achieving everything we’ve worked so hard to get! What the hell’s wrong with you? Too many punches to that useless head of yours?”

And therein lay the problem. He was nothing else to Theo and Dan than a way of making more money. Since he started with them, after the Michigan tournament, he’d had a lot of success, but at what price? He was just a dummy to them—the one taking the punches so they could enjoy the money and popularity that he’d rightfully earned. Even his dad wanted to go with whatever stupid idea those two came up with. As an amateur boxer himself, Damian Black was living vicariously through his son. With every beating, he reminded Austin that it was because of him that Damian couldn’t pursue his professional career, and was stuck in a shitty hole with a baby and no future. It was Austin’s time to repay his debt and everything Damian had sacrificed to raise him, after his wife Stella died during labor, forcing him to take a job at a water plant so he could take care of their son.

“I don’t care what you want, boy,” Theo said. “You are going to train and win that belt. You owe us that much.”

“I don’t owe you anything. For the last five years, I’ve been dealing with you two, manipulating every single thing I do with my life. I’m tired of being told what to do and when to do it. I need time to think about all of this. I’m not fighting this winter. You can get that in your stupid heads now.”

“Fuck yes, you are. What the hell crawled up your ass now?” Dan snarled. “Or maybe that’s the problem. Go to a bar and get fucked. Then you can come back and fight like a man and not the cock-sucking sissy you’re turning into.”

“I’m not listening to this. I’m taking off for a couple of weeks, or maybe months. Then we can talk again. Don’t even try to contract the fight, because I won’t show up.” Austin got up, ready to leave.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Dan ordered. “Sit your ass down, or I will call your dad to beat you straight.”

Theo snickered. “I don’t think that’s going to work. Gunner likes a cock up his ass way too much to turn straight.”

“Fuck you,” Austin growled, shoving Theo out of the way and storming from the office. He raced down the stairs and jumped in his car before any of them were able to catch him. He pulled out of the parking lot and hit the highway.

Austin was home within twenty minutes, and stormed straight to his room, where he took his duffel bag out of the closet and started packing up everything he could. He didn’t have much time before his trainer and manager contacted his dad to guilt him into taking the match, and he was tired of fighting just for the money. He lost his love for the sport a little more every day and was now seriously considering leaving everything behind. He was done fighting for nothing. He wanted a life, a partner to come home and talk to about his day, someone to take care of his injuries after a fight, to cuddle with at night. He needed someone to love. He wanted the love of his life with him once more, and he was going to win him back. He was a fighter and was used to winning when he wanted it. He just needed a chance.

Gavin parked his truck, grabbed his bag, and headed inside as fast as he could. He wanted to be in his brother’s room before he returned from his morning therapy. He could only stay for thirty minutes or so before the nurses’ shift ended. “Morning, beautiful,” he said to Leah Jacobs when he reached the nurses’ station. She was the floor manager at the assisted care facility his brother Brian lived in.

“Morning, sunshine. Where’s my breakfast?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, but I was running late today. Here—take my card and buy something for you and Chase on your way home.”

“Can I add a side of shoes to my order?”

“Good try.”

“Pretty please?”

“Fine. Go ahead. Go crazy shopping for shoes. Just remember you need to sneak me in here one night, so I can stay over with Brian.”

“Deal, but you know I’d do that without the bribe?”

“I know, and I love you because of it.”

“Sorry to interrupt the love-fest, but I think he’s here to see me,” Brian said from behind Gavin.

Gavin turned and smiled at his brother. Almost four years ago, Brian had lost control of his motorcycle while trying to follow Gavin, after a fight with their parents. They found out Gavin was having a sexual relationship with Austin Black, his supposed-to-be best friend, when Austin’s dad accused Gavin of corrupting his son. Gavin’s parents had walked in the house at that precise moment.

“Yes, I’m here to see you. You’re looking good today,” Gavin replied.

“Someone has to keep the hopes up for the parental unit about having grandkids,” Brian teased.

“I can have kids too,” Gavin said, pushing Brian’s wheelchair into the room.

“Do you want kids?” Brian asked seriously.

“No. I have enough with Emma. Plus, I don’t think I can find someone else to love me.”

“Yeah, right! Emma may love you, but she’s a dog. You’re a good guy; you have your own house, a nice hobby, a blah job and a handsome brother. What else does a dude need to get interested in you?”

“I ask myself the same question every day. But enough talking about me. We don’t have much time before I have to leave. Tell me, how’s therapy going? Are you considering moving in with me?” Gavin inquired, with hope in his voice.

“I’m not sure, man. I don’t want to be a charity case for you. Plus, you don’t need to rearrange everything to accommodate me.”

Brian wheeled himself to the bathroom and Gavin followed. “You know, Brian, I’m not asking you to move in with me to be my charity case. I’m your

brother and I love you. I can move shit around the house and install anything you need. You can have my room and I'll move to the dark room. I pass most of my time there anyway."

"OK, and how am I supposed to tell Mom about it? I'm here so she doesn't have to take care of Dad and me. Every time I try to talk to her about you, she changes the subject. She's convinced that someday you're going to show up at the house with a wife and ask for their forgiveness. I know you've done nothing wrong. Loving Austin was stupid on your part, but we all have our bad moments."

"Please don't give me a speech again. I know I was stupid enough, thinking Austin loved me, but I'm not planning on going home to apologize for who I am, especially not with a wife as moral support. I'm fine alone, unless you want to move into my house. Other than that, my love life, or lack of, isn't up for discussion." Gavin said his piece and sat on the bathroom floor to wait for Brian to take a shower. After the accident, Brian spent more than a year at the hospital, recovering from a concussion. He lost sight in one eye due to it. Plus, he lost both legs mid-thigh. After that first year, he moved to a rehab facility to continue healing; now, he was at an assisted-living facility, able to take care of himself most of the time. He just needed to have someone to keep an eye on a drain placed to help the blood flow around his brain without creating clots.

"Brian? May I come in?" asked Brian and Gavin's mom.

"Shit," Gavin murmured to Brian.

"No, Mom. I'll be out in a couple of minutes," Brian said, trying to finish up his shower.

"You don't have anything I haven't seen before, my dear. Remember, I cleaned your behind until you learned how to do it yourself, and helped you after all your surgeries."

"Thanks for the reminder, Mom, please give me a minute."

"I just want to be sure the drain in your head is working, baby. I have to go soon, because I have to drive your dad to the doctor for his checkup. Make yourself decent, I'm coming in."

"No, Mom!"

It was too late. Gavin held his breath and tried to make himself invisible, but his mother's face said everything before the words passed her lips. She was shocked and angry to find the brothers together. Brian grabbed a towel and

asked his mother to wait outside, but she refused to listen. Gavin knew what was going to happen. Just like every time their paths crossed, she was going to tell him how worthless he was. According to her, he was going to burn in hell and drag anyone around with him.

“Good morning, Mother,” Gavin said, without looking her in the eyes.

“What is he doing here? Brian, how can you let this sinner be here with you? I’m sure he’s lusting after you.”

“Mother, please. Gavin is your son too. Don’t be so cruel. He’s visiting me, like he does every week, and I look forward to it. He’s here with me because it’s the only time you’re not hovering around.”

“Brian Michael Parker, you better watch your tone. You may be almost thirty years old, but I’m still your mother. You know, he is not allowed here. He’s a bad influence on you, and he stopped being my son when he decided to sin with that boy.”

“That’s enough!” Brian snapped. “Get out of here before I call security to take you out. You may be my mother, but he is my brother and I love him unconditionally—as you should.” Brian got back in his wheelchair and moved close to Gavin, who was still sitting on the floor with his legs tight to his chest.

“You don’t understand! Everything that happened to you was because of him. You’ve been suffering for more than four years. Your dad had a stroke and I lost my family, because of him. He prefers to live in sin instead of loving his family. I would prefer for him to be dead than fornicate with men.”

“Out of here, now!” Brian ordered. “If you want him dead, then consider me dead as well! I don’t want to see you here again. As soon as I can, I’m moving in with Gavin, whether you like it or not.” Brian reached for Gavin’s hand.

“Brian, you don’t know what you’re saying. You’re better than him. He’s the one that needs to leave. I’m the one calling security.”

“No need. I’m leaving,” Gavin said, standing up and trying to walk out of the bathroom, but his mom blocked the door.

“Don’t even think about coming back here. You know you’re not welcome in this family.”

“Gavin, please don’t go,” Brian said. He tried to go after his brother, but his towel tangled in the chair’s wheels and Brian tumbled forward, onto the hard, tiled floor.

“Oh, God! My baby. See what you did? You hurt your brother again. Are you happy now?”

Gavin ran out and got help. Several nurses entered the room to take care of Brian. He was unconscious on the floor, and their mother was crying uncontrollably.

“We need you both to wait outside while we take care of him,” one of the nurses informed them.

“I’m not going anywhere until I know my baby is fine.”

“Ma’am you need to leave now,” the nurse ordered.

“Please, Mom. Let them help Brian. Come outside with me,” Gavin said, trying to help his mother move away from Brian.

“Don’t touch me. You disgust me. You stopped being my son when you took everything away from me. You did this to your brother. Go. Don’t come back to us again.”

“Mrs. Parker. You have to calm down and accompany me outside,” Leah said, coming into the scene looking at Gavin apologetically.

“This man is no longer allowed to see my son. Call security to take him out now!”

“No problem, Mom. Your wish is my command. I’ll leave and you won’t see me again.” Gavin stormed out of the room.

Chapter 2

Driving through the harvested cornfields on a clear night, did nothing to calm Austin's nerves. It had been five years since he left everything behind—including the only man he had ever loved—to follow his dreams of glory. Austin was desperate to make it as a pro boxer; now he was something of a celebrity, with an impressive winning streak. Sadly, his dreams of success had long lost their shine.

Austin's heart felt like it was trying to escape his chest, as he parked beside a familiar truck at the end of the gravel road. He'd driven for hours to make it on time for Gavin's twenty-seventh birthday, arriving the night before. The whole trip, Austin was trying to think how he could convince Gavin to give him a second chance. He knew he was a selfish bastard—he proved it when he ended the relationship with Gavin, with nothing more than a simple note.

He took his time exiting the car. Hopefully, his knees would carry him to the entrance and he wouldn't pass out due to lack of oxygen. Austin wasn't even sure Gavin was home, but if he wasn't, he'd wait until he arrived. A lost cause? Maybe, but he wanted another chance. He needed Gavin to know how much he still loved him and that he would do anything to be part of his life again.

"Can you stop staring at the door? It's been open for the last five minutes."

"What?" Austin replied, lost in thought. He didn't even realize the door in front of him had opened. The man before him looked so familiar, yet foreign at the same time. Not even in his dreams, could Austin have guessed how much Gavin had changed in the last five years. His hair was shorter, and his beard was fuller and unkempt. The hair on Gavin's chest looked thicker than before. He wanted to run his hand through it. He used to love rubbing his face against it, probably since personally he had to shave so much. Well, not much recently, but still.

"Did you finish ogling me?" Gavin remarked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not really."

"Then keep going. I have nothing better to do than to stand here with the door open when it's less than forty degrees outside, waiting for the Ghost of Christmas Past to speak," Gavin said in an annoyed tone.

Austin kept staring. It was almost impossible to stop, due to the low-hanging pajama bottoms Gavin was wearing. He had to smile. As always, Gavin didn't have a shirt on, but he was wearing a pair of fuzzy, bright socks. According to him, the carpet tickled his feet if he didn't wear them. Austin wanted to go down on his knees and beg for forgiveness, but knew he would probably end up kissing Gavin's crotch instead.

Austin noticed as Gavin crossed his arms, the two interlocking Mars symbols tattooed on his forearm. When he realized what was happening, Gavin turned to close the door, but Austin stopped him. "Sky, please, give me a moment to talk and then I promise to leave. I know I have no right to ask, but I would do anything to make you happy, even if that means leaving again." He grabbed Gavin's arm.

"That'd be great. You know your way out of town." Gavin rubbed his beard as he spoke, drawing Austin's attention to his lips. Gavin shook his arm to release Austin's grip, but Austin moved closer, grabbing Gavin's other arm. Gavin tensed and Austin almost gave up.

"I beg you. Please give me a chance. I know I was important to you once upon a time. Please, just give me ten minutes." Austin felt the indecision running through Gavin's body, and also knew the moment he gave up.

Gavin pushed him back. "You have five," he said, without looking Austin in the eyes; their touch lingered. Austin was glad Gavin hadn't noticed how hard he was. He adjusted himself and took a minute to calm down, watching Gavin walk back toward the house. Gavin turned around and their eyes locked. There was the promise of a fuck in his lips. It made Austin smile; just like him, Gavin knew what they felt for each other could not be hidden.

Finally, Austin gathered his courage and walked into the house. It was all Gavin. The colors were dark and inviting, and he could smell him everywhere. The space was small enough to take it all in at once. From the comfortable-looking couch by the fireplace, to the tall, square dining room table close to the kitchen. Everything looked perfectly in place. Even the dog's bed on the other side of the couch matched the rest of the décor. Austin could imagine Gavin and the dog, lying down after Gavin returned from work, telling him everything about his day, like they used to do every time they had the chance. Since they'd both lived with their parents, there weren't that many chances to get together, but they always found a way to share their beds.

"Emma?" Austin asked softly. The golden retriever jumped at him, almost making him lose his balance. "You kept her?" he asked, trying to contain his

tears. Gavin and he had rescued the dog six years ago and taken turns taking her home. The dog followed them everywhere and loved to sleep between them. At night, they'd go to the river with her and chase dragonflies. Now Austin realized they were a small happy family, and he destroyed their future together.

"I wasn't going to be a coward like you," Gavin said, "just because you ran away. It was difficult, but I stayed behind in this hellhole, and eventually got the life I deserved—without you."

"Ouch! That's not nice."

"I've never been nice. You know that better than anyone. Still, here you are, five years later, like nothing happened. Just like if we'd spoken and made plans to meet. At least it's good to see you made it without me bailing you out of every single stupid thing that brain of yours puts you up to."

"I know you have the right to think the worst of me."

"The hell I do, so start talking. You only have three minutes left." Gavin replaced his empty beer bottle and handed one to Austin. He sat by the fireplace and Emma jumped into his lap, but she was definitely too big to be a lap dog. Austin noticed other empty bottles around, but didn't say anything.

"Two minutes and counting."

"OK. Can I please sit down?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know where my manners are. Please feel free to sit anywhere you want. My house is your house," Gavin said sarcastically.

"Always so thoughtful."

"One minute."

"Before I start apologizing, I want you to know that I'm here to stay. It took me all this time to realize I should have never left. Here I had everything I needed, with you and Emma. I should have waited for you to finish your degree, so we could open the gym we always wanted. We were happy, and I destroyed everything we had, and could've had, leaving without telling you my plans. I just didn't want to pressure you to leave, when your parents needed you so much."

"Stop! Don't even think about using my parents, or Brian, to justify your stupidity." Gavin hit his bottle against the end of the table. He tried to stand, but slipped. He caught himself before falling, making Emma bounce away. "Fuck." Gavin kicked the coffee table and stumbled back to the kitchen to grab another

beer. He downed it without closing the fridge. Austin didn't know what to do. He was frozen in place. Gavin had never been a volatile person. The last time he saw him as lost as this was at the hospital, after his father had his first stroke.

“Will you please calm down and listen to me? I'm not here to give you any excuses. I'm here to ask you to give me a second chance. I want us to take the time to know each other again. To learn what we want and need. I want to be here for you, to love you, to be the partner you always wanted to grow old with.” Austin moved off as he talked, following Gavin into the kitchen. Gavin's hands were holding the fridge door, contracting his back muscles into a perfect canvas. This was the first time Austin had seen Gavin's back piece tattoo finished. When he left, only the outline was completed. Now it was an intricate combination of colors and forms, blended together to showcase a magnificent combination of roses, thorns and tribal lines.

Austin moved closer, until he could feel Gavin's bare back against his chest. His heart was racing, and he held his breath, waiting for Gavin's reaction. Nothing happened. Austin moved even closer, placing his forehead against the back of Gavin's head, since they were both the same height. He could tell how tense Gavin was, but he'd waited so long to be this close again to the one person who meant everything to him, he'd do anything to gain Gavin's forgiveness, and he wouldn't let their individual fears interfere.

Gavin relaxed and Austin released his breath. He placed his arms underneath Gavin's and wrapped his hands over Gavin's shoulders pulling him even closer. Gavin shivered as Austin's erection made contact with his ass, and a hiss escaped his lips. Austin knew Gavin was surrendering to him, to their love. It felt like a dream to him. He never expected Gavin to be drinking as much on a week night, but particularly he was surprised that Gavin allowed him to talk. He was already prepared to beg and show up on Gavin's steps every night, until he opened the door for him.

“You know...” Gavin started, without moving away from the fridge. “I would've given anything for you to tell me all this before, but today it's too late. I already made the decision to forget you, and everything else that's hurting me. I'm tired of trying to do what everyone wants. This time, I'm doing what I want and I'm not going to apologize for it. After you left, everything fell apart. I blamed myself for not being enough for you, for not putting your career before our relationship. I tried to contact you, but you simply vanished. Nobody knew where you were training, or when you were coming back. It took almost a year before your dad showed up. By then, I had nothing. I quit at Willie's. I

couldn't even get into the parking lot without seeing your shadow everywhere. People kept asking me where you were, and I couldn't tell them why I didn't know, since we were such good friends. Yeah. Friends. Maybe you didn't love me anymore, but at least you could've had the decency to tell me you were leaving—" Gavin stopped talking, and his knees buckled. Austin held him tighter, and he balanced himself against the fridge.

"Come on, you're drunk. Let's go back to the couch."

Gavin didn't reply or release the fridge door. Austin grabbed his hand and opened Gavin's fist. He almost fell again, but Austin steadied him. He turned Gavin around and looked into his eyes. Gavin had been crying and his pupils were dilated. Austin moved closer and started kissing the tears away.

"Oh God, darling. I love you so much," Gavin said, holding onto Austin. His body started shaking without warning.

"Are you getting sick? Let me get you to the bathroom," Austin offered, trying to help Gavin.

"No. Beer," Gavin slurred.

"No. You've had enough to drink. You need to be in one piece to celebrate your birthday tomorrow."

"Not happening," Gavin mumbled before sliding to the floor. Austin cradled him.

"Give me a minute to get some water and a piece of bread. You need to eat something."

"Tell me you love me?" Gavin asked, closing his eyes and placing his head against Austin's chest.

"I can't imagine another day without you in my life, my arms, my bed," Austin declared, kissing Gavin's head. "You smell so good, Sky. I missed you so much. Nothing in this life is worth not being here with you. Please, Sky, look at me," he pleaded without a response. "Sky, please!"

It took Gavin a moment, but he heaved open his eyelids, looking straight into Austin's dark eyes. The same eyes he loved waking up to.

"Bye, darling. Too late. Pills. Love. Happy. Kiss—"

"Fuck, Sky! What did you do? Wake up, Sky. Look at me. Please don't leave me now that I'm back." Austin held Gavin tighter for a second, before

placing him softly on the floor. He searched frantically for his cell phone and kneeled back beside Gavin.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?”

“I need an ambulance. I don’t think he’s breathing right and he isn’t answering when I call his name. He said something about pills.”

“Sir, please calm down. Can you tell me what happened exactly?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know? I came to see Sky and we were just talking. He was rambling and then he began to shake. He had trouble keeping his eyes open.”

“How old is he? Did he have something to drink or eat?”

“He will be twenty-seven tomorrow. We had several beers and I don’t know if he ate or not. Can you please stop asking me stupid questions and send an ambulance?”

“Can you please give me your address?”

“Three-four-nine-two Empire Road, Eldon.”

“OK, that’s three-four-nine-two Empire Road, Eldon. Correct?”

“Are you deaf? That’s what I said!”

“Calm down, sir. The ambulance is on its way. Can you please verify his pulse, as well as his temperature?”

“He’s really cold and his heartbeat is low.” Austin kissed Gavin’s forehead. “Sky, wake up, stay with me.”

“Sir, please look around and let me know if you see anything out of place, any food or drinks that you may have not recognized, any medication bottles.”

“I don’t know. I just arrived less than twenty minutes ago. He had a beer in his hand when he opened the door and two more after. I can’t move now. He’s on the floor and I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“Sir, how’s his breathing?”

“I can see his chest rising slowly. Why is it taking so long? I’m going to take him in myself.”

“No sir, please. The ambulance will be there very soon. They will be able to give him the help he needs. I need you to try to calm down, so you can assist them.”

"I'm leaving now."

"Take a minute and think about it, sir. I know you're worried about him, but he'll have a better chance if you don't move him, until we know exactly what's happening. If he stops breathing on his way to the hospital, you won't be able to administer CPR. The ambulance is his best chance right now."

"I need them to be here now. He can't leave me." Austin's voice shook in desperation.

"I'm sure we will give him the help he needs. Please keep monitoring his breathing and pulse."

"Emergency assistance. Please open the door," the EMT called, followed by a knock on the door.

"It's about time." Austin quickly stood up, pocketed his phone and opened the door.

"Gunner?"

"Yes?"

"It's me, Steve Mallory. Man, it's good to see you," the EMT said, as he and his partner followed Austin into the house. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'm not sure. We were talking and he started acting up, talking shit and rolling his eyes."

"I see. Let's do some check-ups and take him in." Steven lifted Gavin's hand, holding it palm up. "Gunner, do you know when this happened? They look old."

"He didn't have the tattoo five years ago, but I'm not sure when he got it. Why the hell do you need to know?"

"Calm down, Gunner. I'm talking about the cutting marks under the tattoo. Look, here—he has them on both wrists."

Austin moved forward to get a better look. One wrist read *Love* and the other *Brian*. "Oh God! That's his brother's name."

"The cripple?"

"What the hell, Steve?"

The other EMT interrupted, "Mallory, we don't have time to be chatting now. We need to take him in. We're losing him."

Austin followed them to the ambulance.

“Gunner, you can’t ride with us.”

“The hell I am. Move out of my fucking way, before I kick your ass.”

“You aren’t a family member. You’ll have to follow us.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” Austin said, pushing the EMT aside and boarding the ambulance.

Chapter 3

Gavin never felt more miserable. Another frustrated attempt. He was such a loser that he couldn't even kill himself. He thought maybe he needed to hang himself, which would've been faster and dumb-proof, as once again, he was looking at the white, sterile walls of the psych ward at the county hospital. He was seated in the room's corner trying to make himself invisible—kind of difficult, due to his size and build, but he wanted it with all his heart. Gavin just wanted to make all the pain disappear. Soft steps drew his attention.

"Please don't say it," was all Gavin said when he saw Leah. He knew she was disappointed that he'd tried to do it again, but he couldn't take it anymore. She was his best friend for a reason. She knew him better than anyone; well, almost anyone.

She sat down next to him and placed her head on his shoulder. "You know me better. I'm not here to judge you. I'm here because I love you." Leah was the only person to reach out and help him after his world collapsed. For the last five years, she had been his rock and she helped him accomplish everything he did in his adult life. "Baby, do you remember when we first met?"

"Yes, Leah. I'll never forget how you just happened to bump into me, spilling your latte all over my shirt."

"You know, I tried for weeks to get your attention, but you never looked at me. You were so handsome and always so happy, that I wanted to be part of that happiness. And then, you started missing classes. I was heartbroken."

"Your point?" Gavin asked, cutting Leah's rant.

"I'm getting there. I promise I have a point."

"OK."

"When you came back, you were so sad. I wanted to make you happy again. Seeing you without your shirt was just an added bonus," she said with a smirk. Gavin leaned his head against Leah's and hugged himself tighter. "I knew you wanted to be alone, but you needed all the help you could get. I'm here for you again. No matter how many times you fall, I'm always going to be here, because I want to be part of your happiness." They cried softly together.

"I love you," Gavin said, moving to lie down on Leah's lap. "You know, sometimes I wish I could just vanish. Everything would be better for my parents, for Brian, and I wouldn't hurt anymore."

"Please, don't say that. You're an amazing person, Gavin. You've been there for everyone whenever they needed you, without asking questions. You just need to realize that in order to give so much to others, you have to take care of yourself first," Leah reaffirmed as she played with Gavin's hair.

"The other night," he said, "I had a weird dream. I guess I was pretty buzzed."

"I guess."

"I thought Austin came to visit me. He asked me to give him a second chance. He held me and I felt complete for the first time in years. I don't know why I keep waiting for him to return. It's been five years in hell since he left, and I don't know how to escape."

"If you let me, I'm here to hold your hand and bring you back to life," Austin said from the door.

Gavin turned into Leah's lap, trying to hide. He brought his legs to his chest and covered his face with his hands.

"May I come in?" Austin asked, without moving.

"And you are?" Leah demanded.

"I'm Austin Black and I—"

"Stop! You're upsetting him. Please leave."

"Sky, please listen to me."

"Don't call me that!" Gavin shouted, sitting back in the corner and wrapping his arms around his body.

Leah brushed his cheek. "Gavin, I'm going to go out for a minute. Will you go back to the bed and wait for me?"

Gavin nodded. Leah stood up and met Austin by the door. "I'm Leah, Gavin's best friend. Follow me."

Austin and Leah walked in silence, until they reached an alcove down the hallway. Leah sat down and invited Austin to do the same.

"Can you please tell me what's happening with Sky?" Austin asked as soon as he sat.

"Many things, but it's not my place to inform you," Leah said sharply.

"I'm not sure if you know who I am, but I'm here for Sky. No matter what he needs I can get it for him. I don't care the price or location."

“Don’t underestimate me. I know everything there is to know about you. Especially, how you abandoned Gavin when he needed you the most. You knew his family was struggling after Mr. Parker’s first stroke and how difficult it was for Gavin to lie to his family about who he truly was. But you felt compelled to pack up and leave without having the decency to let him know in advance.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know how you destroyed Gavin’s hopes for a future with you. How you chose your career over him. All he did, he did it for you, and when you left, he lost everything. His degree, his job, his family—everything he held dear to his heart was gone with the strike of a pen.”

Austin stared at Leah, puzzled by her words. He had no idea about Gavin losing anything. Since his father left town to live with him in Michigan, Austin had no way to know what was happening in Eldon. Six months after he left, he fired his trainer and manager and signed with Golden Boy productions. They took him in and five years later he was the current WBC Middleweight champion.

“I don’t think I follow you. I know Gavin’s family was having issues taking care of Mr. Parker, but he was doing better, even with his condition. His parents loved him and his brother deeply. Plus, he only needed one more year to complete his degree. I’ve no idea what you’re complaining about, or why you have so much interest in Gavin. You know he’s gay, right?”

“Mary mother of God! You are such a douche!” Leah shouted. “Please leave and don’t come back again. You aren’t worth my time or Gavin’s love.” She stood up, but Austin caught her arm, halting her departure.

“Let my damn arm go, or I’m going to scream for help.”

“You don’t have to do that. I just wanted to have a civilized conversation, to see how I could help Sky and you’re responding like a psychopath.”

“Psychopath?!” Leah seemed to struggle with the term as she panted heavily, trying to get herself under control. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. She sat back down, putting her elbows on her knees, and burying her face in her hands. She kept quiet for a couple of minutes, making Austin think he’d stepped too far, and she wasn’t going to reply.

“You see, I met Gavin in class several months before you left. I fell for him the first time he walked into the classroom. He looked like a GQ cover model,

but his brain and heart were my undoing. I started wanting him, but at the end, I needed him. Then you broke his heart and I was left to put the pieces together. Unfortunately, you took several of those with you, and he was never the same.”

“Fuck.”

“Calm down, Romeo. This is my story.”

“Go ahead, but know that I’m listening because I want to help Sky, not because I want to be your BFF.”

“Please! Like I need your friendship or your permission. I tried for weeks to call his attention. He arrived to class early and left last, always with a smile on his face. Sometimes he looked tired, and I wanted him to hug me with his big arms, take a nap in my bed; but nothing I did worked. One afternoon, I was walking down the street and saw him coming my way. He was distracted, talking on his cell phone, and didn’t notice me. I knew that was my opportunity and I went for it.”

“Do I really want to know this?” Austin asked, annoyed.

“Why? Are you jealous?” she replied.

“None of your business. Continue.”

“I walked directly into him, and spilled my coffee on his shirt. He automatically took it off and I went to heaven.”

“Definitely, I don’t want to hear this.”

“Do you ever shut up?”

“Only when I have a hard cock in my mouth.”

“That wasn’t necessary. I’m done dealing with you. Please leave and don’t try to look for Gavin again. He is better off without you.” Leah stood up and started walking back to Gavin’s room. Austin caught up with her at the door.

“Fine, I’ll shut up, but I don’t care about your attraction to Sky.”

“Can you stop calling him Sky? His name is Gavin.”

“He will always be my Sky.”

“*Your* Sky? Do you have any idea how hard it will be for Gavin to start over again? This is the second time he’s tried to commit suicide, and it was a lot closer than the last. He’s asking for help, but no one can help him if he doesn’t play his part. And you—” Leah stopped to clear her throat. She wiped hard at

the tears stinging her face and took a deep breath before she continued, "Gavin and I went to class together, did homework together, and then you left, and he was waiting for you to come back. His world was already shattered, and then Brian had his accident, and their dad had another stroke."

Leah saw the shock register on Austin's face. He hadn't known about Mr. Parker's second stroke, or about Brian.

"So you see," she said, "he feels guilty, but it's up to him to tell you exactly why. He's my friend, and I love him, and I'm asking you to give him time to process everything that's happened. Because if he gets too attached to you and you decide to leave again, it would be over for him."

"I have no intention of leaving him again. I'm here to stay, to be everything he needs. If you excuse me, I think he needs to hear this, not you." Austin stepped past her and entered Gavin's room. Leah went after him and pulled his arm, trying not to disturb Gavin, who was now fast asleep in bed.

"Get out of here." Leah hissed.

"No."

"I'm going to call security to take you out," she said, her voice loud enough to have awoken Gavin.

"Leah, please stop," he pleaded. "Let me talk to him."

She moved forward and gently sat on the bed. She moved the hair from his forehead, gave him a kiss and pressed her forehead against his. "I'm going to get everything ready to take you out of here. You're staying with me and Chase for a while. I've already contacted the plant and told them you're sick and that you'll be out for at least a week." She got up and started to move away.

"I love you," Gavin said.

Leah smiled back at him and stepped into Austin's personal space. She took a minute to look him over. "You better be good to him. If not, I'm going to turn into your worst nightmare." She poked Austin hard in the chest with every word.

"Understood."

"Good. Now, I'm going, before I change my mind." She left the room.

"A feisty one you have there," Austin remarked. He sat on the chair across from the bed, sliding forward enough to place his hands close to Gavin's. "How are you feeling?" he asked softly.

“Better.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“No.”

“OK. Since I’m not sure you remember, can I tell you what we talked about the other night?”

“No. I remember everything. I thought it was a beautiful dream. What I really wanted, given to me as my dying wish.” Gavin closed his eyes and tried to bury his face on the pillow.

“Sky, please look at me. What we had five years ago was beautiful, but what we can have now would be endless. I know you have a lot to think about, but I want you to know that I still love you. Everything I said was real and I won’t change anything about it. I’m here to stay, if you give me a chance to fight for your love.” Austin reached for Gavin’s hand. “Leah said you struggled over the years, with the consequences of my decision to leave, but I want to heal all the pain I’ve caused. Please, Sky, give me a chance.”

Gavin sat up and stretched out his arms, palms up, for Austin to see. “I don’t know why you want to be with me. You don’t know me anymore. I’m not the same happy dreamer you used to love. I’m nothing else than a lonely drifter whose only friend is a married woman. I think she tolerates me just so she doesn’t have to watch soap operas.”

“Sky, stop! First, I love you more than before I left. Secondly, I know you better than you think. You’re loving, caring, and you’re an amazing friend and lover. And I might be a bad friend, but I was always your friend too. I’m sure Leah knows how much you love her and from what I’ve seen she is on your side.”

“Really? Did you ask around? Do you know what everyone thinks about the town’s fag, who caused his father a stroke with his filthy lifestyle? No. You don’t know me. The only reason I haven’t left town is because Brian needs me. But my dear mom banned me from visiting him. See? I have nothing else here. I wish you’d never showed up the other night. All this pain would have been gone by now.”

Austin stood up and grabbed Gavin’s wrist. “You see this here? *Love*. I’m here because I love you and I know my love is strong enough to heal your heart. I wish I’d been here when your parents found out, but I was caught up in my own stupidity. Now I realize that no matter how many matches and

championships I win, you will always be more important. You mean the world to me, always have and always will. Leaving you was the biggest mistake of my life.” Austin pulled Gavin close to his chest and kissed his cheek softly. He continued kissing his jaw, his ear, his neck and rubbing his back. “Sky, please give me another chance,” he said, placing his face against Gavin’s.

“I need time, darling.”

“Anything you need from me you can have.”

Gavin moved away and took his previous position on the bed. So many times he’d thought about what he was going to do when this happened, and here he was, face-to-face with the man who stole his heart many years ago, and he was at his lowest point. Austin looked like a mirage; older than he ever pictured him, but still ruggedly handsome. His signature mustache was well trimmed and his cheeks had that five o’clock shadow Gavin loved so much. He never imagined his body would betray him, but the sight of Austin was bringing all the longing back to the surface. Gavin still remembered the last time he kissed those lips and got lost in those black eyes. To protect himself, he wrapped his arms around his own chest and looked to the floor.

“I think we have a lot to talk about and to learn from each other before you leave,” he said.

Austin moved forward and lifted Gavin’s chin, forcing him to look into his eyes. “As I’ve said multiple times already, I’m here to stay as long as you’ll have me.”

Now that Austin was standing so close, Gavin could see that the years had been good to him. He still had those wide shoulders and small waist he had loved to hold so much. In comparison, Gavin was wide as a linebacker and as tall as Austin. The dark jeans encased his legs beautifully, and the button-up shirt, opened low, allowed Gavin to see a collection of tattoos, covered by a light coat of fur. In happier times, he had loved to rub his face against that chest every time Austin returned from a long day of training. As Gavin reminisced, something shiny caught his eye. He reached forward and lifted the rosary he had given to Austin, when he left for the tournament. Since he had watched several of Austin’s matches as some sort of punishment, he knew the same rosary was one of the tattoos on Austin’s chest. Before he was able to let it go, Austin grabbed his wrist and pressed Gavin’s hand against his chest.

“Why are you here? Why now?” Gavin asked, trying to move his hand away.

"I have so many things to explain, but first I have to apologize for being an asshole—"

"Yes you were an asshole, but you don't have to apologize. It took me a long time and many bottles to understand that you had to leave. I know now that I wouldn't have gone with you if you had asked and that you did what you thought was right. I'm OK with that, and if you need to hear it, I forgive you for it. More importantly, I know that you didn't love me enough to trust me, or tell me what you thought you needed to do, and to let me find a way to be here for my parents and at the same time be there for you—"

"That's not true. I—"

"Don't interrupt me. I had five years to reach this conclusion and I'm not changing my opinion. Thanks for what we had, but now I have to move forward. Now that you have seen me at my worst, there's nothing left you may need from me."

"You're everything I need and want. I never felt like me since I left, but you're wrong. I loved you enough to let you go, without making you choose between your family and me. We were young and stupid, but I want back all those dreams we used to have. I want to travel with you, and see the world through your eyes. Without you, my life is dull and lonely. I need the happiness that comes from knowing I can make you smile, just by being by your side."

Gavin moved his hand away and cleared the tears from Austin's eyes. They were interrupted by a nurse, and Austin was asked to leave the room. When he returned, Gavin was tucked back in bed, facing the door and tracking Austin's movements. He was happy when Austin moved quietly and sat next to him again.

"I think we need to continue this conversation later," Gavin said. "I'm not sure I can deal with your return right now. I need some time to rearrange my feelings. As you can see, I've got to take better care of myself before I can tell you if I can give us another chance."

"That's OK with me. We can talk again when you are home."

"Home?"

"Yes. I'm planning on taking residency on your couch, so you don't have to stay with Leah. We need time together in order to know if this will work. I'm not going to push you; I just want you to know that I'm here for you. I don't want a perfect boyfriend, I want you as you are, because I know that I am more

with you than I am without you.” Austin leaned forward and kissed Gavin softly on the lips.

“You can stay in my house, if you’d like, but I’m going to stay with Leah for a couple of days. You can come visit me and I can meet you at the house too, but I need some time away from everything. Someday I’ll be strong enough to take care of you, but now I just need you to come here and hold me until I feel whole again.”

Chapter 4

Gavin took a minute to enjoy the warm arms wrapped around his waist. Since the morning Austin left, Gavin had not felt so safe. He knew their relationship couldn't be the same, but he hoped to have some part of it back. The hospital bed was small enough for their bodies to be in complete contact. It felt right to have Austin comforting him when he was at his lowest. Even if it was only for a couple of hours, he wanted to believe everything in his life was back to normal. At least Brian was OK, and as soon as he could, he would visit him.

"Gavin Elijah Parker, what do you think you're doing?" Leah questioned, waking up Austin.

"Taking a nap. And you?" was his reply. Austin tried to move away, but Gavin kept hold of him. "Stay."

"Damn, you're slow," Leah pouted. "I was expecting to interrupt some hot making out, at least. You two are so boring."

"If that's what you want," Austin said, grabbing Gavin's face and kissing him deeply. It took a minute for Gavin to catch up. A moan escaped his lips, and Austin used the opportunity to deepen the kiss. Gavin grabbed Austin's shirt, pulling him forward.

"More," Austin said, surrendering control of the kiss.

"Don't worry, she's gone," Gavin murmured in Austin's ear, but still continued to kiss his jaw and then his neck, tracing with his tongue down over the part of the rosary tattoo showing over Austin's clavicle. "Is this one for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

Gavin moved back to Austin's mouth, exploring every inch, biting his lower lip softly. "I want to see it and kiss you for every single prayer in it."

"Anything you want."

"Umm," came out of Gavin lips. He'd just started pulling Austin's shirt up, when a knock on the door brought them to a stop.

"May I come in?"

"Yes," Austin responded.

"I had to step out," Leah said. "That kiss was so hot my pupils were burning. I hate to interrupt, but I have your release papers, Gavin, and Chase is waiting to take you home."

"Who's Chase?" Austin asked abruptly.

"Never imagined you could go from nice to jackass in fifteen seconds flat," Leah remarked. "Chase is my lovely husband and when I say home I mean my house. This one here has been alone since the day you dumped him."

"Good."

"Excuse me?" Gavin said, moving out of the bed.

"I'm sorry. That's not what I meant. I'm just glad there's nobody in your life now."

"You think I would have let you kiss me if I had a boyfriend? I guess you don't know me that well." Gavin looked around the room for the clothes Leah had brought him for his three-day stay at the ward.

Austin followed him, and hugged him from behind, kissing his neck. "I just don't want to lose you now that I have you back."

"You don't have me. I just got carried away. I told you I need some time alone. I need to find myself before I make the decision to be with someone else." Gavin moved out of Austin's arms. "The offer still stands. You can stay at my house until I return."

"If you aren't going to be there, I'll stay at my dad's place," Austin said. Leah took some keys from her purse and held them out to him.

"If your dad's house is the one I think, you can't stay there. Here are the keys to Gavin's house. Emma is already at my house, so you don't have to worry about her."

Austin took the keys and turned back to Gavin. "Sky, I'd love to see Emma and you at some point this week."

"I'm not sure. Do you have a cell phone with you?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

Austin handed his phone over. Gavin entered his number and called his own, which sounded from Leah's purse.

“When I’m ready, I’ll call you and we can sit and talk. We’re leaving soon, so you can go ahead and leave now.”

Austin took his phone back from Gavin and kissed him on the cheek. He took a small box out of his pocket and gave it to Gavin. “Happy belated birthday, Sky,” he said and walked out of the room.

The only good part about staying at Leah’s house was the daily updates about Brian. Finally, for the first time since the argument with their mother, Gavin was going to be able to sneak in and see him. Gavin had spent the last week resting most of the time and ignoring Austin’s calls, texts and voicemails. He wasn’t sure how to deal with Austin; maybe if he ignored him, he would get tired and leave.

Gavin hoped Austin would be asleep, since it was only five in the morning. He had enough time to stop home and get his work gear, before going to see Brian. He used his spare key to enter the quiet house, removed his shoes at the door and stopped by the kitchen to set up the coffee pot. He saw nothing but fruits and vegetables on top of the counter. He opened the fridge and was surprised with how full it was. Austin had bought enough food to feed a small army for a month. A really boring army, since there was no ice cream that Gavin could see.

He took a deep breath and walked down the hall to his room. For a minute, he thought the TV was on, but he quickly realized Austin was moaning. Gavin’s heart sped up and his skin started heating at the noise. Through the slightly open bedroom door, Gavin caught Austin’s reflection in the bureau mirror. He was partially covered by one of Gavin’s white sheets. Austin was rubbing his chest slowly, pinching his nipples and following the trail down to his groin. Gavin couldn’t see Austin’s other hand, but he was sure he was tracing his hole. Gavin was overwhelmed by the view. He wanted so much to tie Austin’s hands and take over for him.

He’d eat him first, and then he would tease him with his tongue until he accepted it, adding one thumb first and then the other to stretch him good.

“Enjoying the view?” Austin asked breathlessly, startling Gavin.

“Fuck.” There was no way Gavin could hide how turned on he was, but he wasn’t going to give Austin the satisfaction of knowing how much he still affected him. He bolted, but Austin caught him in the living room and pinned him against the front door.

“Why didn’t you answer my calls? You’re making me crazy. Please, Sky, come back with me to the room. Let me feel you again,” Austin begged. He moved closer to Gavin, pushing his naked body against him. “Sky, please? Fuck me until I can’t remember my name. Show me you still love me.”

“No,” Gavin said. He wrapped his arms around Austin, moving them slowly and grabbing Austin’s ass. He used the momentum to swap places and pulled him up. Austin clamped one leg around Gavin’s waist.

“Please?” he begged.

“I said no,” Gavin replied, kissing him. They were rubbing on each other, panting and moaning. Gavin didn’t want to think. He needed this. He wanted to find out if he was ready to be the man Austin needed. “Come for me, darling,” he commanded, biting Austin’s ear.

“Oh God, Sky.”

Gavin felt Austin shatter and pushed a finger inside him, riding out Austin’s orgasm, and then lowering him back to the floor. He removed his shirt and bent to clean him up. After an awkward moment, Gavin moved quietly to the kitchen. Austin hurried to the back of the house and started the shower. Gavin wasn’t sure if he should wait for Austin or leave. He looked at the time and realized he was too late to visit Brian. *I may as well stay and take care of the elephant in the room*, he thought. He got his coffee ready, and went into the bedroom to look for a clean shirt and his work gear.

By the time Austin came out dressed, Gavin had scrambled eggs and bacon ready for the two of them, together with coffee, juice and some fruit. They started eating without paying too much attention to each other.

“Thanks for breakfast. Do you have any plans for today?” Austin asked.

“Yes. I was on my way to see Brian, but got a little sidetracked,” Gavin responded with a wink, making Austin smile. “I only have a little time to finish eating before I have to leave for the plant.”

“You’re working at the water plant? Why?” Austin sounded surprised.

“Where else in this town am I supposed to work, with a high school diploma and an unfinished degree?” Gavin replied defensively.

“Why you didn’t finish?”

“None of your business,” Gavin said, standing up and placing his dishes in the sink. “I have to go. Can you take care of the kitchen?”

“Yes. Can we meet tonight? I really want to spend some time with you,” Austin said, setting his own dishes in the sink.

“I don’t know. I can’t get to Leah’s too late, and I’m pretty beaten up by the time I’m done. Plus today is my first day back after a week. Maybe another day.”

“I can have dinner ready, and give you a massage when you’re back,” Austin offered suggestively.

Gavin moved closer and placed his hands around the back of Austin’s neck, using his thumbs to rub circles on his face. Austin tilted his head to the touch and closed his eyes. “You’re definitely a man after my heart,” Gavin said.

Austin opened his eyes and looked directly into Gavin’s emerald ones. “Yes, I am. I held your heart in my hands once and hurt it, but now I’m ready to treasure it.”

Gavin kissed Austin’s lips softly. “Dinner better be ready by eight o’clock, and thanks for the birthday present.”

Gavin was ready to leave work from the moment he walked in. Between all the paperwork he missed the week before, and the emergency job on one of the pumps, his day was turning out to be one for the books. Everyone wanted to know what had happened to him, and why he’d been in the hospital. He didn’t think people would care, so he wasn’t ready for all the questions his nosy coworkers could imagine to ask. He simply blamed it on appendicitis.

He tried to forget about Austin waiting for him at the house, and what had happened that morning. They didn’t talk about it, but it felt almost natural, as if they were apart for only a couple of days instead of five years. Everything felt so right and he wanted more. This morning was everything he always wanted: someone to love and spend his time with. In reality, that someone had always been Austin, and Gavin thought that was probably why his life was so miserable.

When his shift ended, he was ready to bolt and hide in Leah’s house, but he couldn’t be that cruel. He told Austin he was going to be there, and he needed to do it for both of them. If they could start over, and forget their past, they might have a chance. It might be difficult, because their past was great—up to the moment Austin left—or, at least, that’s what Gavin remembered. Maybe Austin gave some clues about his career being his first priority and Gavin never

acknowledged them. They were young, and their relationship started out as a lifelong friendship, until they began experimenting. Then it became a connection that they didn't even have with their families. They were it for each other, and Gavin simply broke apart when Austin left.

Now, when he was in so much pain, Austin was back, and hopefully, he would be the bigger man. He still loved Austin and they deserved a second chance. He would talk with him to learn what had changed between them. Maybe that's why he hadn't been able to kill himself the past two times. Life had a plan for him. Gavin never expected to see Austin again, or imagined Brian would still move into his house after everything that happened. Gavin had the chance to start a new life with the two people that meant the world to him. He only needed his parents to have a change of heart—*maybe when hell froze over*, he thought.

Gavin debated stopping at Leah's house to shower and get ready to see Austin, but it felt stupid when he was going to his own house. *Oh well*, Gavin thought when he arrived. He had nothing to lose, but his own heart; which Austin already had. He took a breath and stepped inside his house.

"Are you making me chili, darling? Let me take a shower and I'll help you set the table," Gavin said, taking his coat off. He heard a crashing noise and moved to the kitchen. Austin had dropped a bowl full of chili, which was now covering most of the floor as well as Austin. Gavin couldn't resist laughing at the situation, even though he could tell Austin wasn't amused.

"I'm sorry I startled you," Gavin said, still laughing. "I was just excited about the chili. Go ahead and take a shower. I'll clean all of this."

"I'm the one who's sorry. I lost track of time, and didn't hear the door open. I'll take care of the mess myself."

"Take your ass into the bathroom. I said I'd do it."

"I like it when you get all bossy on me," Austin said with a wink.

Gavin just growled and left to get the cleaning supplies.

An hour later, they were sitting on the couch, finishing their chili and watching *SportsCenter*. Gavin caught Austin smiling at him several times. Everything felt right. They commented about stats and the different news in the program. Austin got interested in an MMA interview and Gavin took the time to study his profile. Austin wore sweats and a muscle shirt that looked as if someone had painted it on him. He had his legs on the couch and his elbow

resting on the armrest. He looked so at home that Gavin realized how much he wanted this to happen every day.

“Do I have chili on my face?” Austin asked.

“No. I’m just glad you’re here with me. I really missed you all these years. I may be stupid enough to forget how much it hurt me when you left, but I couldn’t stop wishing for us to have a second chance.” For a moment Gavin looked down. He wasn’t sure why he’d told Austin that. He wanted another chance, but it felt a little too fast to let his heart free. Maybe they needed to start developing their friendship again, before jumping in the deep end.

“Gavin?”

“Yes.”

“Are you OK?” Before Gavin was able to react, Austin put his bowl down and tackled him. He just hugged him for a long time. Words weren’t needed. They knew exactly what the other was feeling, how long they had been apart, and how hard it would be to be together again. Gavin had so many questions for Austin, but he didn’t want to ruin the moment. They would have the chance to deal with everything over time. Now they just needed to sort out the path they wanted to follow.

They were interrupted by Gavin’s phone. When they moved apart both had a smile on their faces, and their eyes were shining with tears.

“Hello, love, I haven’t tried to kill myself today. I’m just at the house having dinner with Austin,” was the greeting Gavin gave Leah.

“Please don’t joke like that. You know I only worry about you because I love you.”

“I know, and that’s why I can. I now understand that if I want, I can have a chance at happiness again. I have people that love me, but more importantly I have people that need me to be strong and take care of them.” He said this to Leah, without taking his eyes off Austin. Gavin moved on the couch and made a space for Austin to lie down between his legs. When Austin’s back touched his chest, Gavin wrapped his free hand around him and continued talking to Leah. He kissed Austin softly in his hair, and on his jaw and neck.

“I’m going to see Brian tomorrow morning before work, do you want to go with me?” he asked Austin.

“If he wants to come here, I can make breakfast. You can spend the night here so you can be with him longer,” Austin said hopefully.

“He can't come. He had a motorcycle accident four years ago and now lives in an assisted living facility. He's planning on moving in with me, but we had several delays since I had to fix the house to accommodate him.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't know. Yes, I will go with you.”

“Leah, are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Austin and I will be there early. I'm staying here tonight, so we can save some time.”

“I imagine. You may even save water too, if you shower together.”

“Leah!”

“Relax, Gavin. I could tell the moment I met him he was all you needed to be happy again, but please slow down and do things right this time. It may take a while for you two to learn how to put your love for each other before everything else.”

“Since when did you become so thoughtful?” Gavin asked.

“Since always. I love you and I'll talk to you later.”

Gavin put his phone aside and wrapped his other arm around Austin, moving his hand up and down his chest. “We have a lot to talk about,” he said.

Chapter 5

Austin felt completely at peace in Gavin's arms. Finally he had what he wanted, now he needed to figure out what to do to keep it.

"I know we have a lot to talk about and that's exactly why I'm here. I know I have a lot of groveling to do and I'm up for it. It's not going to be easy and I'm sure I'll say a lot of stupid things that may not make sense to you. I just want us to try, to have a chance at happiness forever." Austin got comfortable against Gavin's chest and closed his eyes.

"Thanks for not running out of town. If anyone has been stupid, it's me. I'm no longer that happy guy you once loved. I'm trying to survive with everything happening around me. I'm trying to be strong, but sometimes I just want to fall and have someone there to catch me," Gavin said.

"I'm here for you," Austin promised. "I'll never run away again. I loved when you were there for me and I was a coward leaving you without a word. If I only knew everything that would happen to you because of me, I wouldn't have ever left."

Austin was holding Gavin's wrist and rubbing circles softly over his tattoos. Gavin tried to pull his arms away, but Austin kept hold of him. He kissed the one showing Brian's name and placed it against his face, kissing it softly. "I know how much you wanted to be like your brother, and I'm here if you need to talk about what happened, when you're ready. I'll also be here for you when you are ready to talk about the marks his name is covering." He placed Gavin's arm over his chest and grabbed the other. "Is this one for me?"

"Kinda. You were my first love, but I got this one to remind me that I need to love myself first. It's been hard, as you know. I'm not quite there yet, but I started therapy again and I'm not planning to stop again."

Austin kissed the word *love* and traced it with his tongue. "I love how your back piece looks. It's much more elaborate than the outline you had before I left."

"I know. The pain from the needle feels good, so I kept adding lines and roses. After you left, I added the thorns."

"I'm sorry I caused you so much pain, but this time apart made me a better person. I'm sure if I didn't leave, we would have ended, grown apart. I was too

immature to figure out how important your love was—well, is—for me. I learned that boxing is just something I like, but I love you more.”

“I’m not sure. I would have done anything for you to stay with me. I have always known how important your career is, and I would never have asked you to put me first. I just wanted to know what you were planning, rather than finding out so cruelly.”

Austin turned to face Gavin. The only light came from the TV, creating shadows between them. Austin kissed him, letting him know how much his words had meant to him. He bit Gavin’s lip and kissed his jaw. He moved closer and murmured in Gavin’s ear, “Please let me show you that I will be there for you for the rest of our lives.”

“OK,” crossed Gavin’s lips.

Austin took a minute to pinch himself, just to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. He was with Gavin, on his way to visit Brian. The last time he rode in Gavin’s old Chevy was the day he left. Today they woke up cuddling. Nothing happened during the night, but Austin was OK about it. Just having Gavin holding him during the night was all he needed to feel his life finally getting back to normal. He didn’t miss his daily training, or the fame that came with his championship belts. All Austin needed was his big man beside him.

Austin was fit and had stayed at the same weight for several years. At six-one, he was considered tall. He stopped any manscaping when he left Nevada and had no plans to do it any time soon, unless Gavin wanted to do it for him. Thinking about Gavin shaving him made him squirm in his seat, and Gavin gave him a questioning look. Austin just smiled and watched out the window to cover the blush taking over his face. If he had to guess, Gavin was probably over two hundred and twenty pounds now, making Austin look smaller, and he was amazed how easily he could manhandle him around. His beard was unkempt, and Austin could imagine how much he would enjoy it all over his body.

He definitely needed to corral his thoughts; visiting Brian while lusting after Gavin might not be a good idea. They spoke the night before about Brian’s accident and how guilty Gavin felt for not stopping his car when Brian asked. The wreck wasn’t Gavin’s fault; it was simply a tragic accident. Yes, Gavin left the house and ignored Brian’s attempts to stop him, but the east turn in that

highway had cost several people their lives. Brian was lucky to have survived, even with his limitations. He was mostly independent now and Austin would help the brothers with anything they needed.

“Are you ready?” Gavin asked, when they arrived at the assisted living complex where Brian lived.

Austin nodded and followed Gavin inside. They arrived at the nurses’ counter, where Leah was waiting.

“Your mom left about thirty minutes ago and she isn’t coming back until dinner time. You’re safe to stay as long as you need,” she told Gavin. “Austin, if you like, you can wait in my office.”

“He’s coming in with me, I’m sure Brian will be OK with him visiting, after the initial shock,” Gavin replied, taking Austin’s hand. Leah laughed.

“I guess he knows how to defend himself. Just be careful about flying debris. His arms are pretty strong,” she warned Austin.

They continued to Brian’s room, holding hands, making several people look twice. Eldon’s main claim to fame was its American Gothic House. The facility was in a larger city that was not as progressive as other towns in Iowa. Austin didn’t care what others thought about them. He loved Gavin and was getting another chance to fight for his love; nothing to be ashamed of.

When they entered the room, Brian had his prosthetics on, and was standing by the door. He was wearing shorts, which allowed Austin to see them. Gavin had told him not to stare, but Austin was failing miserably. When the door closed behind them, Brian turned and realized Austin was in the room. Just like Gavin, Brian didn’t know how to hide his emotions and his face showed the surprise at seeing Austin change into anger.

“We’re going to talk about him in a minute,” Brian said to Gavin. “First, I want you to come here and tell me how you’re doing.”

Austin released Gavin’s hand so he could move closer to Brian. Brian hugged him for a long time and talked into Gavin’s ear, but Austin was too far away to hear. Were it not for how much the brothers looked alike, Austin wouldn’t have recognized Brian. He looked older, too mature for his age. Austin could tell his upper body was strong, probably from all the work done during his rehabilitation. He could see how Gavin changed when he embraced him, like a scared little boy getting comforted by his older brother.

"I know you did something after you left here. Tell me now, and don't try to sugarcoat it," Brian ordered Gavin after they separated. "It has to be a really stupid reason for this one to be here with you."

"He has a name and you know it. I didn't do anything out of the ordinary, just worked and played in my dark room. I had to wait for Leah to give me the OK to come visit after what happened with Mom."

"You know that's bullshit and I'm only giving you one more chance to talk. If not, I will ask you to leave. I was waiting for at least a call, to have a chance to wish you a happy birthday, and I got nothing. It took you almost two weeks to come see me. So talk now, or you and this one can walk away." Brian moved to the bed and sat on the edge.

Gavin looked uncomfortable, like he was being reprimanded for stealing cookies out of the jar. Austin moved forward and stood beside Gavin, placing his hand on Gavin's lower back. Gavin relaxed and walked to join Brian on the bed. He sat beside him and held his hand. Brian had a matching tattoo on his wrist, of Gavin's name, but no cut marks underneath. Gavin held Brian's hand and closed his eyes.

"After I left the other day, I didn't know what to do. I just drove around a little while and ended up at Randy's. I stayed there drinking for several hours and then drove home." Gavin opened his eyes and looked at Brian. Austin could see the desperation in Gavin's eyes reflected in Brian's. He was sure he knew exactly what Gavin was going to say. Gavin continued, "When I got home, I started thinking about everything that happened before, and with Mom that morning."

"Please tell me you didn't. You promised me you would talk to me before you tried something that stupid again."

"I'm sorry," Gavin said looking down into his lap. Austin wasn't sure what to do. The moment was private. It was a conversation he didn't need to be part of, but he was happy that someone had worried about Gavin all these years. Brian hugged Gavin, and when Austin tried to leave, Brian asked him to stay. Austin walked to the bed and hugged Gavin's back. After a moment, Austin moved away and stood by the window, allowing Gavin and Brian to have a moment together.

"Gavin, can you please let me talk to Austin alone?" Brian requested.

"No. I want to hear anything you have to tell him. I'm not the stupid twenty-two year old you have to babysit anymore."

“Believe it or not, little brother, for me, you’re always going to be that annoying baby Mom and Dad brought home to dethrone me. So live with it. I just want to know why Austin is back after all the havoc he caused to our family.”

“He didn’t cause anything. It was my—”

“Sky,” Austin interrupted, moving closer so that he was standing behind him. “I understand Brian’s concerns and I’m fine answering any questions he may have. If you want to stay that’s OK. I have nothing to hide, and any apologies I need to offer, are just to you.” Austin kissed Gavin and wrapped his arms around his neck. He wanted to protect him, to keep him close all the time. He knew better than anyone how painful it was to have your family hurt you.

“Austin, Brian needs to know that the only reason I’m here today is because you showed up at my door.”

“It’s about time he did something worthy of you,” Brian said sarcastically. “He was your all, and left without looking back. Now I’m sure he just wants to pick up where he left. Like if what happened to all of us never existed. Gavin, you can have the life you deserve, if you finally let him go.”

Austin accepted what Brian was saying, but he wasn’t going to let Gavin go. He held Gavin tighter and was rewarded when Gavin leaned back against him. He knew then that Gavin was choosing him and he was ready for the challenge. The recovery route was going to be long, but Austin would be there for him. He would accompany him to therapy if need be—whatever it took to get his happy Sky back.

Gavin looked his brother in the eye. “We’re giving each other the opportunity to see if we can have at least a friendship again. If it ends in more it’d be great, if it doesn’t, we’ll know it’s finally over.”

“Fine,” Brian said. “Do as you please. I’m here for you either way. Plus, I’m going to cock-block you, since I’m ready to move in with you when you can have me.”

Gavin scooped Brian up into his arms. Austin was surprised with the reaction. The brothers looked so happy that Austin had to smile. He didn’t know how they’d manage it all together, but he was sure he could charm Brian.

They only had a couple of minutes before Gavin had to leave for work. Austin was going to drop him off and then get some things done at the house.

He was getting really used to living at Gavin's and was ready for him to move back in. He was ready to retire and stay with Gavin.

"I'll wait for you in the truck so you two can have some time alone."

"Thank you, darling," Gavin responded.

Chapter 6

For the next two weeks, Gavin continued to show up at his house after work. On his days off, he and Austin spent time together buying groceries, running in the afternoons and lazing on the couch in the evening, watching movies. Every night Gavin would return to Leah's house and in the morning he'd go back to have breakfast with Austin; some days they stopped and visited Brian.

In two days, they would be moving Brian into the house and Gavin would finally stay, but Austin would be moving to his dad's house. Gavin wanted him to stay with them, but Austin wanted the brothers to have the space they needed. Plus, they needed to take it slow. So far, everything had worked great between them. At times the tension was high, but other than making out and some fondling, they had played it very safe.

Maybe they needed something more, Gavin thought, because since Austin's return and his therapy sessions, he had been feeling better. He was seeing life with a different perspective and was taking it a day at a time. He finally understood the importance of putting himself first, but he was ready to move forward with Austin. If not, he would never know if they belonged together, or if time was now standing between them. Gavin was ready to take the first step on the path to happiness. He might not have his parents' blessing, but having Brian move in with him gave Gavin the comfort of knowing that he hadn't lost all his family. He knew he needed to try to talk again to his parents, but he needed to be stronger for that.

Gavin finally understood why suicide wasn't his way out of all the pain surrounding him. He was finally going to own his happiness. The days he spent alone in the hospital showed him that he was letting others control his life. He was ready to break through and find the peace he needed in his life. Killing himself would only hurt those he loved, creating new victims out of his problems. Gavin knew it would take time, but he was ready to move forward, not for anyone else this time, but for himself.

Emma jumped on Gavin's lap, surprising him. He hadn't noticed the dog return with Austin from his afternoon run. Gavin had left work early to stop at Leah's house and get ready for a night with Austin. It was Black Friday and he wanted to do something special, to thank Austin for being there for him for the last month or so. He knew that no matter what Austin said, he would need to

return to Nevada at some point, to train and defend his championship belt. Gavin wouldn't let him give up on his dreams when he was so close, just to play house with him. Austin grabbed Emma and sat on Gavin's lap with her. He kissed him softly on the lips and the dog joined in.

"No threesome, Emma. You know I'm a faithful one," Gavin said smiling.

"So pick one," Austin joked. "Her or me."

"Emma is always going to be my baby, but you're my darling," Gavin replied, kissing Austin's neck and marking him. "Do you have any plans for tonight?"

"I think she is free tonight, but I can check her agenda," Austin grinned.

"Oh, you're a comedian now?"

"Since I'm going to retire, I need a new career. Class clown was always my best quality."

"I know. I was there."

"Yes, you were. Always trying to keep me out of trouble and always ending up with me at the principal's office."

"Please don't remind me. I made the stupidest decisions when you were involved. I think I still do."

"You did and I love you more for it. And no, I have no plans but to be with you tonight."

"Good. Go get ready. We're going out tonight! Dress warm—the weather forecast is calling for below freezing temperatures tonight."

"Are you asking me on a date, Mr. Parker?"

"Indeed I am, Mr. Black. Now, move your ass. I have to finish getting everything ready."

"Do you want to help me get ready?"

"No, my boy. If I do, we won't leave the house tonight."

"That's good with me," Austin said, putting Emma down on the floor and getting comfortable on Gavin's lap.

Gavin growled and moved Austin to straddle him. He removed Austin's gym shirt and attacked his nipples. He loved the taste of Austin's sweat. He alternated between twisting and nibbling each nipple, blowing on them and

watching them perk up. He continued to kiss Austin's chest and every little defined muscle in it. He then realized the rosary was inscribed with the word *Sky*. Gavin looked at Austin and he smiled back at him.

"You're always with me, Sky, close to my heart. I love you," Austin confessed.

"I know it may be too early, but I love you too, darling. I just want to make everything right this time. Please get ready so I can take you out on a proper date for the first time."

"OK. I want to have many more firsts with you." Austin kissed Gavin and stood up. He didn't try to cover the bulge in his running shorts. He just moved down the hallway, leaving Gavin with only a wink.

Gavin held Austin's hand as they entered Randy's, a small dive bar that was the center of Eldon's night-time entertainment. They used to meet there over the weekends, to have dinner and a couple of beers once upon a time. Most nights they hustled people at the pool tables, before the band started playing covers, ranging from Toby Keith to Nirvana. The place hadn't changed much since they were younger; Friday night was still steak night.

"Wow, Abby hasn't changed a single thing in this place," Austin commented.

"Nope, and the steak is still great."

"Nice. Now I'm officially a cheap date," Austin added.

They moved to an empty corner table away from the band area. Gavin wanted to have a chance to talk without having to shout. Since they only had one item available for dinner, there was no need for a menu. To Gavin, it felt like a dream to be back at the dive with Austin. After Austin left, Gavin never stopped by, because everything reminded him of Austin. About two years ago, Leah made him stop for lunch and it wasn't too bad. Since then, he stopped a couple of times, but always on his own.

"Hey, Gavin, who's the catch?" a waitress asked.

"Georgia, this is Austin. Austin, this is Georgia," Gavin introduced them.

"He's really handsome. You finally found a good one. He does look kind of familiar though."

"I get that a lot," Austin replied.

“Can we have two steaks, medium rare, fully loaded potatoes, and two cold ones, please?”

“Yes, Gavin, especially since you asked so nicely,” Georgia responded.

After the waitress left, Gavin took a moment to study Austin. He looked so different from the dreamer he used to be. In the time they were apart, both of them had changed considerably. Gavin felt they were shielding their hearts and he was afraid that he was too damaged to love Austin the way he deserved. They had talked a lot during the last couple of weeks and had arrived at a simple compromise. Gavin knew Austin wanted more from him, but he wasn't sure if he could trust Austin again. He needed to find a way to assure Austin they could have a relationship, without the need for him to retire from boxing. Just like before, Gavin couldn't leave Eldon to follow him. Before, he needed to help after his dad's stroke, and now he had Brian to take care of. Hopefully someday, Brian would be able to live on his own, but until then, Gavin was stuck.

Gavin wanted to wake up every day with Austin and have a chance for a normal life. He wanted to be there when he trained, to take care of him. He wanted to start dreaming again, to plan the next ten years of his life, without the fear of being left behind. Maybe he needed to be selfish and think about himself first, but he always wore his heart on his sleeve and couldn't say no to someone who needed him. Austin noticed him staring and smiled. As always, that simple gesture warmed Gavin's heart. Maybe it was finally time to let go and live the life he imagined.

Austin grabbed Gavin's hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss.

“Am I dreaming or has the prodigal son returned to this humble establishment?” Abby, the bar owner, interrupted their moment.

“I'm here in flesh and blood, dear Mistress, for you to do with as you please,” Austin replied. He stood up and hugged Abby. The older woman wasn't more than five feet tall and looked like a dwarf compared to Austin. Gavin smiled, seeing Austin had not changed his flirtatious antics.

“I was so worried when the sport channels began speculating on your retirement,” Abby said. “For the last couple of weeks, the reporters have had a ball, counting the days before the announcement. I'm glad to see you're in great shape and worthy of your current championship.”

“They may not be too far from reality. It's not official yet, but I'm considering retirement. Well, that is if this gorgeous guy finally takes me back,” Austin replied, making Gavin blush.

“Oh. I thought you guys were just friends.”

“We are. I just want to be more than that to him.”

“Gavin, that sounds like a proposal to me. You know it’s legal for you guys to marry here in Iowa, right?”

Gavin’s face got several shades redder.

“That sounds great to me, too,” Austin agreed. “What do you think, Sky?”

“I think the two of you are delusional,” was Gavin’s response. “Austin, you’re too young to retire, and Abby, I’m not a damsel in distress, waiting for my Prince Charming.”

“OK, Cinderella. I didn’t mean to insult you. Gunner, you better go sweet-talk his ear. He doesn’t sound like a man in love. It was great seeing you. Please don’t forget about your dear Mistress again.” Abby kissed Austin and left them alone.

“I think she’s right,” Austin said thoughtfully, taking a sip from his beer. “I don’t think you love me enough to marry me.”

Before Gavin was able to answer, Georgia arrived with their food. It took several minutes for her to leave the table, because Abby told her who Austin was, and she proceeded to tell them about how sorry she was for not recognizing Gunner Black. According to Georgia, she always watched his matches and had made several hundreds betting on his wins.

They were finally alone again, the silence that followed was awkward, changing the feeling of their night together. It was Austin who broke the silence.

“I can’t do this anymore. If you don’t want me, I’m willing to leave. I love you too much to let you destroy your life. If you need me to be away in order to be happy, I will, because I love you.”

Gavin dropped his fork in shock. He thought carefully before he responded.

“For a while, I thought that was what I needed. Then I realized how stupid I was. I didn’t want to think about the pain I caused. I have everything I’ve always wanted with you. I trust you, and know you will never do anything to hurt me. I want you to know that I will be strong for you, but especially, I will be strong for me. I want to be the one holding you up. I want you to know you can count on me and that I’m not going to break every time you turn your back.

If you want, you can have me and your career. You don't have to choose one or the other."

Austin shook his head. "I want to choose, and I choose you. Five years ago, I placed my career first and my heart second, and all it gave me was a cold bed and a gold belt. What I've always wanted was your heart and your company. Please, let this be the time we take a leap of faith and love each other unconditionally."

"I will," Gavin answered. Austin moved forward and kissed his lips softly. They both continued eating and smiling at each other. Gavin faced the bar and saw Abby's knowing gaze on them. Georgia magically disappeared, leaving them alone. They talked about people they used to know, and Austin told Gavin about his matches. Gavin told Austin about the year he had left to finish his college degree, and they made plans to help each other fulfill their dreams.

"Do you want to dance with me?" Gavin asked, when the band started playing George Strait's "Cross my Heart". Austin stood up and followed Gavin. Several couples were already on the dance floor, and only a couple of people looked at them, frowning. Gavin didn't care. When Austin left, rumors started, and by now the whole town knew he was gay, thanks to his lovely mother and her public prayer requests to save his soul. He was relieved Austin accepted the dance with him. This was the first time they displayed any type of affection in public. Most people in the bar knew them, and he was sure it would have some repercussions down the road, but he wasn't going to lose the opportunity to have a normal relationship.

They held each other and lost themselves in the lyrics. Gavin placed one hand on Austin's back and with the other he held his neck. Austin had one arm around Gavin's waist, and the other between them, resting on Gavin's chest. He nuzzled Gavin's neck and rested his head on his shoulder. They swayed to the music, like they were the only two souls left in the bar. Their bodies fit against each other perfectly and Gavin felt his life taking shape once again. They were stealing small touches here and there; they kissed several times and swayed against each other. Gavin could feel his body responding to Austin's closeness, and he knew Austin could feel it too. When the song was over, Gavin grabbed Austin's hand and led him outside. It took them no time to be on the road, but Gavin turned away from the house.

"Where are we going?" Austin asked.

"It's a surprise, but I'm sure you'll want to kiss me when we get there," Gavin said and blew a kiss to Austin.

Gavin couldn't do anything else, but smile. His life had turned full circle. With a lot of help from his therapist, Brian, Leah, and Austin, he was able to find himself. He understood that the pain he was feeling wasn't because of all the troubles he thought he'd caused, but because he allowed his fear of being alone to take over his life. He always lived to please others and thought he had no value when Austin left, when his parents pushed him away, but, more than anything, when he thought he was responsible for Brian's accident. Now he was on the right track, and had the love of those who wanted him to do better and keep moving forward. This time, he was going to live his own life day-by-day, trying to be happy.

They left the truck and walked close to the fence that divided the river bank from the water plant. It was a remote area they used to visit together when they were younger—the place where they kissed for the first time, on a warm summer afternoon. Austin had challenged Gavin to skinny dip in the river and he didn't think twice about it. The fence was covered, so people couldn't see the equipment storage behind it, and the pier on the other side was condemned, after some parts of it were damaged by flooding several years before.

When they came out of the river, Gavin had reclined against the fence and pulled Austin to him. Their skin was bare and cool from the water. Austin placed his hands on the fence and Gavin held him by his biceps. They hesitated and held their foreheads together. Their lips were close and their breath was caught. If someone had taken a picture, their love would have shone through.

This time, before they made it all the way to the fence, Austin tackled Gavin to the cold ground, but he didn't feel anything other than a great expectation. The warmth from Austin's body was enough to make him forget about the hard, frosty earth. They held each other close, kissing and trying to touch each other—difficult, since they were wearing several layers and winter coats, but they tried anyway.

“Darling, please let me love you,” Gavin said and kissed Austin deeply.

“Are you sure you are ready?” Austin asked, when they separated to breathe.

“Yes.” Gavin kissed him again. His hands moved around Austin's back, until he found skin underneath his shirt. He traced circles over and over and pressed him closer. A *hmmm* escaped from Austin's lips when their hard-ons rubbed together. Gavin felt Austin smile against his lips. He knew the effect he had on Austin. He was capable of making him forget everything that was

happening around them. Gavin could only feel the pressure of his chest above him and he wanted more skin-to-skin. He needed Austin more now than their very first time, when they both came as soon as Gavin breached Austin.

"Please fuck me," Austin pleaded, sitting up on Gavin's groin and grinding against his cock. "I want you to fill me, and make me forget everything."

"No."

"What?"

"After all these years I want to make love to you in my bed, our bed, where you've always belonged. Plus, I don't want you to freeze that pretty ass of yours." He rubbed Austin's thighs, until he reached what he wanted. "Now, move forward and sit on my face. We can't leave before I taste you. I'm sure you're dripping for me already." Gavin grabbed Austin's dick through his jeans and helped him forward.

"Fuck, you are going to make me come with your words and your hands."

Austin didn't lose time. He aligned himself and opened his jeans. Gavin helped him free his dripping cock and kissed its head reverently, causing Austin to shudder. He licked the underside, to the tip, and lapped around the slit, using one hand to pump Austin and trying to grab his ass with the other.

"Your jeans are in the way. I want to touch you and feel your hole quiver."

"Oh God."

"I know. Later I'm going to eat you properly and get you ready for me. Move your hand back and touch me. Yes, like that." Gavin swallowed Austin's dick all the way down his throat. Austin took a minute to adjust, and started moving slowly. He found a rhythm, alternating speed and depth. Gavin still needed more. He put his hand inside Austin's coat, pinching one nipple and then the other. Austin withdrew quickly. Gavin tried to pull him in again.

"Fuck my face, darling. Show me how much you missed me and how much you like me sucking on you."

"Oh fuck, Sky. I'm going to come. Oh shit." He moved frantically in and out of Gavin's mouth.

The first spurts started and Gavin swallowed Austin's load until he was fully expended. He released him with a pop and Austin moved down Gavin's body for a kiss.

“I could come again, just from tasting myself in your mouth. I missed you so much, Sky. I can't believe I was stupid enough to leave you.”

Gavin offered two fingers to Austin and he opened his mouth hungrily, lapping around them and making them wet.

“Don't worry, darling. You have all night to show me how much,” he said. “Now we have to go, before I put you on your knees and fuck you raw.”

“I'm ready. Go ahead.”

“As tempting as that offer is, I want to take my time exploring your body again. I want to mark you as mine, so you will never leave me again. And if you're really good, I may let you fuck me.”

“OK. Time to go,” Austin said, tucking himself back in. He got to his feet, pulling Gavin with him. Gavin smirked at his antics.

Getting into the house was interesting. Gavin couldn't stop touching and kissing Austin long enough to open the door. He was surprised they actually had stopped at the river bank. Gavin was ready and wanted nothing else but to show Austin how much he'd missed him. He'd dreamed of having one more chance to even so much as talk to Austin, and now he had the chance to claim him, to make Austin his once again. He couldn't believe he almost lost everything, and it was Austin who gave him a new opportunity at life, by saving him with his arrival.

“Fuck,” Austin shouted after stubbing his big toe, as he fought his shoes off. “Could you remind me again why I need to take my shoes off at the door?”

“To keep the mud off the carpet. Not all of us have a maid to take care of the house, unless you're offering to stay and do it for me. You can wear nothing, but a cute apron, so I can have quick access to all your bits to give you your payment.” Gavin wiggled his eyebrows salaciously.

“Anything you want,” Austin agreed. “Now, can you please stop talking and use that tongue for something more creative?”

“Oh, yes I can,” Gavin said, going down on his knees. He removed Austin's other shoe and opened his pants. Pulling them down over his thighs, he ordered Austin to turn around and brace himself against the wall. He spread Austin's cheeks and started licking him, from his balls to the top of his ass, circling his hole with his tongue, while holding his ass cheeks forcefully. “Grab your dick and stretch it down so I can have it too.”

Austin followed the command and Gavin didn't lose the pace, giving equal attention to every single inch of Austin's lower region.

"Fuck, Sky, you already made me come once tonight. Slow down. I want to come with you balls-deep inside me."

"You're so sexy, darling, when you talk to me like that. I'm just getting you ready for me. I need to take my time with you."

Gavin continued his assault, sucking on one of Austin's balls, and then the other. Gavin was glad Austin didn't shave them. He loved the rough texture in his mouth. He licked from Austin's perineum to his hole and back again, his hand on Austin's lower back, pushing him down and bringing his ass closer to his face. He teased Austin's opening several times and then sucked hard on it.

Austin's legs wobbled, but Gavin held him close to his body. "OK. We need to take this to the bedroom. Too many clothes and I need you now." Gavin helped Austin out of his pants and kissed him one more time before taking his hands to guide him down the hallway. He closed the door so Emma couldn't follow them. She didn't need to see her daddies fucking. Gavin surprised himself with that thought, but he liked the sound of it.

Gavin removed Austin's shirt and threw it to the floor. He took a minute to look at Austin's body. There was something so erotic about having him in front of him, completely undressed, while he himself was still fully clothed. He moved his fingers slowly over Austin's jaw, neck, down his pecs, tracing the rosary on his chest. Austin's cock was pointing straight up, hard and dripping pre-come. He grabbed it and gave it a couple of tugs. Austin shivered and moved to the rhythm Gavin imposed.

When Gavin stopped, Austin went down to his knees and rubbed his face against Gavin's jeans-clad bulge. Austin moved back and opened Gavin's pants, bringing them down to his ankles, together with the black briefs he was wearing. Gavin's cock bounced free and Austin gasped. Gavin looked down and saw the surprise on Austin's face. After Austin left for the tournament five years ago, Gavin had Austin's name tattooed below his navel. He knew Austin was going to win the tournament and he wanted to do something special. Unfortunately, he did it, only to find days later that Austin wouldn't be coming back.

"Sky," Austin murmured, taking hold of Gavin's hips. He took his time, tracing his name, first with his fingers and then with his tongue. "When did you get it?" he asked.

“Couple of days after you left. It was your gift for winning the tournament. I did it even before the tournament started. I knew with all my heart you would win.”

“I’m not going to live long enough to apologize for what I did, but I promise you from now on there isn’t going to be a single day in which I won’t show you how much your love means to me.” Austin tenderly kissed the tattoo.

Gavin didn’t say anything, clearing tears from his face before Austin noticed. He placed his hands in Austin’s hair, which was longer than when they were younger. He didn’t pull or guide him; he just enjoyed running his hands through it. Austin palmed Gavin’s dick and nibbled the underside, giving special attention to Gavin’s sack.

“Stop, darling. I need you now.” Gavin helped Austin up and they moved to the bed. Gavin opened the night stand and took the lube and some condoms.

“Feeling lucky?” Austin asked sarcastically.

“Nope. I know I am. Climb up the bed on your back,” Gavin commanded, with a swat on Austin’s bare ass. Austin responded by wiggling it for more. Gavin spanked him again and pushed him, making him bounce on the bed. Austin laughed and moved to the center of the mattress.

Gavin took his pants all the way off and removed his shirt. He felt Austin’s eyes on him. He didn’t have a perfect body, like Austin. They were both the same height, but Gavin was never a gym rat. He preferred physical jobs and junk food. He wasn’t fat—more like a big bear. At the sigh, Austin started jerking off, calling Gavin’s attention. He crawled into the bed, spreading Austin’s legs, his hands traveling from Austin’s ankles, all the way to his chest. Gavin stopped Austin’s hand and kissed him deeply.

They both grunted as their bodies finally lined up skin to skin. Gavin reached for the lube to get Austin ready, bending Austin’s left leg at the knee and kissing him again. He slowly entered him with his index finger, then used another to make Austin comfortable. He dragged his lips down over Austin’s chest, taking his time to explore each nipple and trace around his tattoos. Gavin sat on his haunches and used his other hand to jerk Austin’s cock, increasing the speed of his fingers in Austin’s ass to match.

Austin was panting and Gavin loved all the noises coming from him. He lined up with Austin, moving his hand to grab both of their dicks at the same

time and rubbing them together. He removed his fingers from Austin's ass to get the condom. Austin grabbed his legs, pulling them close to his chest and exposing his hole to Gavin in readiness.

"I love you so much, darling. I missed you," Gavin said, as he entered Austin. He didn't stop until he was all the way in.

"Fuck, Sky, that's so good. Please make me yours, Sky."

"You're mine, darling. You're not leaving me again." Gavin remained completely still. "Say it. Tell me you're not leaving me again."

"I promise, Sky. I'll never leave you again."

Gavin started moving, slowly at first, enjoying all the cursing coming from Austin's lips, as he tried to make him move faster. He wanted it to last, since the last time they were together felt like a lifetime ago. Austin placed his feet flat on the bed and pushed against Gavin, trying to take over.

Gavin moved forward and whispered, "I love you," in Austin's ear. He pulled out. "Get on your knees, face-down on the bed," he ordered. Austin complied. "So beautiful," Gavin said and grabbed Austin's hips so hard he was sure he would have bruises in the morning. Gavin moved one of his hands around and got hold of Austin's dick, jerking him off.

"Oh fuck, Sky, I'm almost there. Fuck me harder, I'm coming. Oh God, Sky—"

Gavin felt Austin's ass grab his cock and he increased his pace. He kissed Austin's back as he exploded. One or two more thrusts and Gavin followed him.

Gavin pressed his weight against Austin and stayed there, until their breathing calmed. He pulled out carefully and went to the bathroom to take care of the condom and clean up. He returned with a warm rag and took care of Austin, dropped it on the floor and climbed back into bed. They cuddled together, but Gavin stayed awake, waiting for his love to fall asleep. He kissed him one more time and slowly drifted off to sleep with his head on Austin's chest.

Chapter 7

“Where the hell is my son?” Damian Black screamed as soon as the door opened. He didn't wait for an answer. He simply stormed inside the house, pushing Gavin aside. Gavin turned and grabbed the back of Mr. Black's shirt, stalling his pace.

“Let my fucking shirt go!”

“You better leave now. This is my house and I didn't invite you in,” Gavin said, pulling Damian harder. Austin walked out of the bedroom.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I knew you were going to be here, fucking this loser,” Mr. Black snarled at his son. “Get your stuff together. I've given you enough time to fool around. Now it's time to start training for your next fight.”

Austin stayed right where he was. “I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm not a kid looking for your acceptance anymore. I told Dan and Theo that I'm not going to fight for the Light Heavyweight belt and I'm not defending my title next spring. So get the fuck out of here.”

Damian escaped Gavin's hold and went for his son. He tried to connect several punches with Austin's midsection, but Austin was much faster than his father. He'd learned to protect himself against his father long ago and he was tired of being treated like a piece of property.

Gavin moved forward, ready to step in and protect his lover, but Austin signaled to him not to intervene. He knocked his father to the ground, face-down, and pinned his arms back, placing a knee in his back. Damian continued to struggle and shout in a fit of rage.

“Calm the fuck down,” Austin told his father, at the same time tightening his grip.

“Let me go now and fight like a man! I'm going to beat your sorry ass and then you're coming back to Nevada with me!”

“I'm not letting you go until you calm down. Then you're going to walk out of here and never come back. When I'm ready, I'll contact Dan and start the process to relinquish my belt. I'm going to retire.”

“In your dreams. You will retire when I say so.”

Austin forced his father to his knees and stood up without losing his hold. Again, Gavin tried to help and Damian launched at him, but Austin grabbed him before he escaped and shoved him out the open door. He fell down the porch steps and quickly struggled to his feet, all set to go for Austin again, but Gavin stepped between them. Austin put a protective arm around Gavin's waist and steered him away, turning his back on his father. The force of Damian's charge threw both of them to the floor. This time Austin didn't think twice, attacking his father to defend Gavin. By the time Gavin was able to stop him, Damian was barely moving.

"Please, darling, stop. We need to get him to the hospital. Go get dressed and I will take care of him."

"No. Let him die like the dog he is."

Gavin held Austin close and said, "Like it or not, he's your father, and he needs our help. Let me be here for you. I love you."

Austin collapsed against Gavin and started sobbing quietly. "He never loved me. All he wanted was for me to achieve what he couldn't. Why help him? He never helped me. No one was there to help me, when he beat me up, night in and night out, to 'make me a man.' I can't take it anymore."

Gavin shushed him gently. "You don't have to. We'll take care of him now, and then we can start a new life together."

Austin stepped back from Gavin and looked at him, and in that moment his future flashed in front of him. He understood the value of the love they used to have, and the miracle of how much more it had become. The years apart only provided them with the opportunity to grow and be the men each other deserved to love, and be loved by. He would do everything in his power to love Gavin with all his heart, but most importantly he would allow Gavin to take care of him. That was the gift he didn't recognize before—the ability to love unconditionally—that Gavin possessed. From this moment on, he would live for the chance to be Gavin's world.

Damian slowly pulled himself into a sitting position, holding his ribs and leaning back against the railings. One of his eyes was closed and he was bleeding from his nose and mouth. Austin tried to move closer, but his father pushed him away. After a few minutes and several tries, Damian staggered to his feet and turned to leave.

"Dad, let me take you to the hospital."

“I’m no longer your dad. I’ll take care of myself, as always. I spent my whole life looking after you and this is how you repay me. You’re leaving behind everything I taught you, for this asshole. You can have anyone you want and continue your career, but you have to come back to this miserable town, just for this fucking faggot.”

Austin didn’t know how to respond. He’d always looked up to his father, even when Damian returned drunk from the bar and released his rage on his son, leaving him crying in a corner. He’d always tried to be the son his father wanted and lived his life to achieve his father’s dreams. Austin loved boxing, but his father was obsessed with it. If his father had asked him to return when he was driving to see Gavin before his birthday, he would have done so, but now it was too late. He was finally in the place he belonged: with the man who owned his heart.

“I never cared you fucked guys, but I can’t forgive you for letting me down. I made you what you are. You owe me your life and your career. Without me, you’re nobody. Don’t even think about calling me again. You’re dead to me.”

“Dad, please.”

Damian ignored him and moved slowly to his car. When he was gone, Austin fell to his knees on the driveway. Gavin carried him inside the house, where he helped him shower and put him to bed. As he started to doze, Austin knew everything would get better with Gavin on his side. It might take time, but he was ready to let go of his father’s hold and become a man in his own right.

Austin opened his eyes to find a pair of emerald ones looking directly into his. Gavin was guarding his sleep. Austin was glad about it. They canceled all their plans and stayed home. It took a moment for it to become clear, but in the last couple of weeks, Gavin’s house had become Austin’s home too. Gavin and Emma were always his family, and finally everything was falling into place.

Now that the end of the year was approaching, Austin was glad to have a chance at a new life. For the first time in five years he felt at peace. He didn’t need to look for nameless strangers to spend his nights with, and didn’t have to train for a career that he’d stopped caring about the moment he stepped out of Eldon. He loved boxing, but not the bureaucracy and scams around the championship matches.

"I see a part of you is glad to see me, darling," Gavin said with a smile.

"More than you can imagine. Every time I see you, my heart melts."

"Awwww. He really, really loves me," Gavin responded jokingly, but Austin held him tight and started kissing him, trying to convey how much he truly loved him. He felt so lucky Gavin had forgiven him without too much of a fight. They were both in a low moment in their lives, but each other's love was stronger than any wrong-doing they'd suffered because of each other's decisions.

"Darling?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for giving me another chance to live. You gave me my life back and pieced me together." Gavin cuddled closer to Austin.

"Sky?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for giving me another chance to fight for your love."

"Always."

Austin sat up and reached for his phone. He was ready to start his new life and only one thing kept him from moving forward. He tried to call his father, but the call went directly to voicemail, three times. He felt like throwing his phone against the wall. Gavin rested his head on Austin's legs, distracting him from his rage. He played with Gavin's hair until his anger subsided, smoothing his hand over Gavin's cheek and beard, his index finger tracing his lips. They parted for him and Gavin lapped at his finger seductively. Austin felt his body heating up and his cock hardening under Gavin, causing him to smirk.

Austin withdrew for a moment to call his manager. Gavin started kissing his cock through the blanket, causing Austin's breathing to become rapid and shallow. By the time Dan answered the phone, Austin was rock hard.

"Fuck," he murmured, making Gavin laugh and Dan ask what was happening. Austin told him he was retiring, and it took a minute for Dan to stop shouting, but Austin's offer to compensate him until the end of his contract, and possible investments, calmed him enough to finish the conversation. Austin agreed to talk with Dan and Theo in person as soon as possible and ended the call.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Gavin asked from his place in Austin’s lap.

“Yes. All I need to be happy is you—well, and maybe Emma.” Austin lifted Gavin’s face to his and sealed their future with a kiss.

Epilogue

March 2013

Gavin lit the fireplace and rearranged several candles around the room. He had ten more minutes to place Emma in the bedroom and catch his breath before Austin's arrival. Gavin had waited for Austin to leave in the morning so that he could get everything ready to celebrate Austin's thirtieth birthday. Now he was starting to worry about whether he would like what he had done to their home. Since Austin returned, almost three years ago, they had been living together. They had been there for each other, and their love had grown more than they had expected.

They still had some family issues, but Gavin's parents were getting used to seeing them together in town without making a scene. Brian moved to an apartment of his own, since he started dating a lovely girl he met in a support group and at least once a month they double-dated. Austin's father was a different story. After that day, three years ago, Damian disappeared, together with half of the contents of Austin's house. They really didn't care about the stuff he took, but the little they knew about him was through Dan and Theo. Neither of them were especially happy about Austin's retirement, but they were more than pleased with getting a percentage of Austin's investment in Willie's gym.

Now they both worked at the renovated gym. Willie sold it to them after he learned of Austin's return and retirement. Gavin finished his business degree and was the gym's manager. His photography had also taken off, transforming his hobby into a second full-time job, allowing them to travel the world. Austin was in charge of the training and development of new boxers. As businessmen, they were at an exciting stage of their careers. As a couple, they were ready to take the next big step. Maybe if Gavin could stop sweating, he would be presentable enough to make that happen.

When the door opened, Gavin stayed quietly by the fireplace. All the house lights were off and candles were on every surface. The fireplace was set and a blanket with assorted fruits and cheeses was awaiting them. Two glasses of champagne were set on the cloth and in the center was the small box Austin had given Gavin after his twenty-seventh birthday.

Austin came into the room and saw Gavin standing next to the fireplace and holding a cake. He was wearing a black suit, with a black V-neck sweater, together with a pair of boots. Austin smiled in amusement.

"I didn't get the memo about the dress code," he said, dropping his gear on the floor.

"I'll let it slide just once, but please try to do better next time."

"Hey, if you're going to be looking that hot every time I get home, I'm willing to follow any of your rules."

"Any?"

"Yes, any." Austin moved closer to Gavin. Since he was returning from the gym, he was wearing only his training shorts and a polo shirt with the gym's logo. His feet were also bare, as he'd left his shoes by the door. Once again, Gavin was amazed by how lucky he was to have Austin by his side. After all this time, his body still responded immediately to Austin's closeness. Austin took the cake from Gavin and placed it with the rest of the food.

"Are you my early birthday present? Can I unwrap you?" Austin asked, sliding his hands under Gavin's jacket and around his waist. Gavin looked into Austin's eyes and saw how much he was loved. He led Austin over to the blanket and waited for him to sit before kneeling in front of him. He saw the moment at which Austin realized what he was doing, and smiled.

"Since the moment we met, we were best friends. We were inseparable and shared many firsts together."

Austin's smirk interrupted him.

"Out of the gutter please," Gavin said. He waited a moment before he continued, "When I figured out what love was, I knew I wanted to share it with you for the rest of my life. I was so happy that you felt the same way. It's always felt natural to be together and move forward with our dreams. As a couple, we were great when in private, but never figured out how to share our love with others. Unfortunately, we were apart for some years."

Austin looked down, but Gavin lifted his face and made him look into his eyes. He leaned forward and kissed him softly. "We needed that time apart to be where we are today. You saved my life and I will never forget that. I'm here because your love made me stronger, and gave me a second chance at happiness."

Gavin stood up and grabbed the small box from the mantel. Austin's smile was bright, and Gavin couldn't do anything but smile back to the love of his life. He returned to the blanket and sat against the couch, facing the fireplace. Austin moved between Gavin's legs and they stayed quiet for a while, getting

comfort from each other. Gavin wrapped his arms around Austin and opened the box. Inside, two platinum wedding bands sparkled at them.

“When you gave me this box I thought it was a sick joke. I was deep in a black hole without a way out, but you never pushed me, or asked for more than I was able to give. You were patient, but most importantly, you were there to guide my every step. Now I know you understood from the beginning how big our love was. I want you to give me the opportunity to love you for the rest of your life, to be your husband and dedicate my life to showing you how much I love you. Austin Jefferson Black, would you make me the happiest man alive? Would you marry me?”

Austin turned and straddled Gavin. They kissed deeply, stopping only for Gavin to take Austin's shirt off. Gavin bent his legs, allowing Austin closer, and continued kissing him.

“Can I think of this as a yes?” Gavin asked.

“Yes, Gavin Elijah Parker, I will marry you. Since the moment we met you were everything to me—my friend, my lover, but most importantly you were my Sky. You allowed me to fly high and gave me all I needed to soar.”

No more words were spoken.

The End

Afterward

No person or situation is worth your life. If you feel there is no other option available for you than suicide, please ask for help. You are an amazing human being with a bright future ahead of you.

Just reach out.

Loves,

Lila Leigh

Looking for help?

The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project is an American non-profit organization founded in 1998 and the leading national organization focused on suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth.

Toll free 1-866-488-7386

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

Suicide.org

Suicide.org is 501c3 nonprofit organization which was conceived and founded by Kevin Caruso in 2004. We currently assist more than 3,000,000 people throughout the world each year. Our mission is to prevent suicides, support suicide survivors, and educate the public about suicide.

International Hotlines

<http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html>

Author Bio

Lila Leigh Hunter lives in sunny California, but spends her days indoors following gay porn stars on Twitter for inspiration. When outside of her cave, she likes to observe men and try to guess their stories. Sometimes she wishes the voices in her head were real; going out with the boys in her books sounds like a plan made in heaven. Her love for writing is only surpassed by her devotion to reading. Lila considers herself lucky for the love and support of her husband and four kids. Even when they think she doesn't do anything around the house. Someday her books will pay enough to change their opinion.

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