



TIME TRIALS

Jay D. Clark

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Luke Nevin and his best friend and next-door neighbor, Nick, are in love with each other, but after their first kiss at age thirteen, Luke's conservative Mormon parents have kept them as far apart as possible. Luke's parents wanted to shut Nick out of his life completely, but when Luke's high-functioning autism causes him to meltdown, Nick is the only one he responds to. Nick's position as his peer guide keeps them together when they would otherwise have to be separated, and they have no problem taking advantage of that opening.

Nick Vogel's mother has never been much of a mother, but when his parents divorced shortly after that disastrous first kiss, somehow Nick's loving father was kicked out of his own ancestral home, and his mother gained custody of him. Nick still sees his father at swim practice though, and he still has his Granny, who lives in the carriage house between his home and Luke's. Both his dad and Granny know about the boys' secret relationship, and they help the boys when they can.

As Nick's eighteenth birthday approaches, Luke finds out that Granny guards many more secrets than just their own. Secrets abound between their two families, and if Luke can piece those secrets together, then Granny might just be able to help the boys achieve the happy ending they deserve, and maybe even change some hearts in the process.

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TIME TRIALS

By Jay D. Clark

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

Nick Vogel presses his teammate, Luke Nevin, against a chain-link fence, both bare-chested and embracing, foreheads touching. Nick has his hand on Luke's chin and lip, a tribal tattoo on his wrist. Luke has his left hand on Nick's bicep. This last summer together turns best friends into lovers, out and proud to stay together. Nick assures Luke that he, too, will pass his time trials so that they can swim together in college.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Look at these two men, caught in a moment of intense conversation. Are they on the same baseball team? Are they out or in the closet? How long have they been together? And what is the one on the left telling the one on the right, the one he's got pressed against the fence? Is this a lover's spat or is he telling him that everything will be okay? The intense look in his eyes took my breath away. The young man on the right seems to be listening carefully to his boyfriend, but might need a bit more convincing, don't you think? And what's the significance of the band tattoo? What meaning does it hold for them?

I would like a sweet and sexy romance with two ballplayers, if possible, and a story arc that includes the moment captured in this image.

Sincerely,

Sandra

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athletes, sports (swimming), friends to lovers, coming of age, first time, coming out, religion, special needs (high-functioning autism), tattoos, young adult characters, family, very distant cousins

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Acknowledgements

Top of the list of people to thank would be Sandra for first posting the photo and “Dear Author” letter that inspired this short story. Without Sue M. and Raevyn McCann encouraging me to take on the prompt, I never would have gone for it. Kaje Harper, however, has been an effective and demanding taskmaster as my beta reader, challenging me to do my best to let the characters reveal themselves in the most believable, true-to-life manner possible for the setting and story. Adara O’Hare also helped this story become hotter, sweeter and more reader-friendly with her skills and encouragement as my editor. I would never even know about the joyous world of M/M Romance without the gentle guidance of my cousin Ben, who is himself an inspiration. The opportunities to edit and/or beta-read for others also helped me to be a more disciplined writer myself, although that journey is far from over and really has just begun. Some of the story is vaguely autobiographical and some of it simply reflects on where I am in my own journey to enlightenment, the world we all share becoming my best muse. Thank you in advance to those who read and find some small pleasure in the reading of this story.

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Nick

The starting horn blared, and I watched the eight varsity girls two heats ahead of me leap off the blocks, arching out over and then down into the water. They surged forward, hands ahead and lower bodies undulating with dolphin kicks, until they broke the surface to race forward. The medal heat of the girls fifty-yard freestyle race had just started, while those of us in the boys heats of that event stepped up to the blocks.

Second back from block four, seeded first for the championship heat of the boys fifty-yard freestyle race, I waited my turn, enjoyed my earned vantage point, and just savored the moment. I stood proud in my snug-fitting racing jammers and swim cap in school colors and logo. I liked being surrounded by equally fit, half-naked guys who were as pumped with adrenaline as I was. The heat of mid-afternoon in late May in the foothills above Sacramento was itself a welcome treat; it had been cool and cloudy just a week earlier. The warmth heightened every other sensation of the occasion. For me, it was like being in the eye of the hurricane, isolated from the fury behind me and still ahead of me. Time stood still and flew by all in the same moment.

Seeded number two and flanking me, my friend and teammate Luke Nevin gave me a nervous little smile, shaking arms and rotating his neck in anticipation of the race. If this was the eye of the storm for me, it was the violent leading edge for him. Luke didn't easily wait for anything. He sought my gaze with uncertain eyes and an angelic face that drew my best smile. Luke smiled back, plainly reassured, especially when I put my hands on his arms. His need to calm down was my excuse to handle his smooth-skinned arms and gently knead the veined muscles beneath.

The meet director had called me Luke's "special needs peer guide" in front of everyone, just after the national anthem and before the first event. Swimmers from schools in other leagues had stared at us then, and they were staring at us now, but Luke and I just ignored them. It was not Luke's autism, high functioning or otherwise, that made me vital to his existence. My whole world existed only in his eyes, his face and his body, while I held his gaze on me,

each of us glancing away now and then to hide how much we meant to one another.

It took all of my will power to not press my mouth to his then and there, in front of everyone. Our kisses were rare, brief, and hidden after what happened the first time Luke planted his mouth on mine at age thirteen. The harsh moments that followed because of who saw Luke's first kiss played in my head whenever I thought too long about wrestling tongues with him. At least I could be next to him and comfort him when circumstances and daily pressures got to be too much. I could touch him to reassure him, even if touching him made me want to crush him to me. If anything was ever going to change things for the better, the next few races ahead were our best hope. We needed to do better than win; we needed to set records and change our future.

"I know we have a good five minutes to wait before we step onto the blocks ourselves," Luke admitted, teeth chattering as if suddenly cold on a very warm day. "Thank you for calming me."

"Just breathe and focus on me for the moment," I told him, trying to coax a smile with my own. "Whether you take first or I do, doesn't matter. We're in this together."

"Are we?" Luke questioned me with anguished eyes. "If I win, it means nothing. My parents have other plans for me; plans I have no say-so in."

"The Cal Bears' coach will be watching you, too," I assured him, gently squeezing Luke's powerful biceps. "He wants both of us to swim for him. So, let's swim our best for him right now. He's right there at the coaches' table between my dad and Coach."

"Nick, I can't look at them right now." Luke nonetheless glanced at the third coaches' table down the long line of tables along the pool's edge. Luke instantly refocused his entire attention on me. I could sense how much he needed me. "I can do this because you are here. I'm doing this for you, not them. Not any of them."

"Then, just be here for me and do your best to beat my best." I wanted him to know that I needed him, too. "We're always our best when we race together and against one another."

"I know we are, Nick," Luke agreed earnestly, energetically nodding at me, "but I still need to hear the words from you before we race. You give me peace to focus on the race."

“No one makes me feel”—I traced a heart on his left pec with my finger—“like you.”

“Except your grandmother,” Luke instantly pointed out rather than just accept the praise.

“I love her, and I’m glad she lives with us,” I assured Luke, drinking in every detail of his fit, sexy body, making a half-heart on my pec with thumb and index finger. “But it’s not the same.”

“And then there’s your dad,” Luke pointed out, as if I didn’t know what my dad gave up for me in time and money. “Your dad helps Coach with coaching us. My dad never does that.”

“Speaking of which,” I interjected just then, “you need to look at him and the rest of your family. Your dad, your mom and the whole New Testament are here to support you.”

Luke grinned at my biblical appellation for his three brothers and one sister. His parents had named all five of their children for prominent people in the New Testament, just as Luke’s dad’s twin brother had named his entire herd with names from The Book of Mormon. “They aren’t here to support us,” Luke chided me with a shake of his head. “They’re here to spy on us and make sure we stick to the deal they forced on us that horrible night.”

“It wasn’t all horrible,” I disagreed. “You were the good part; you made my heart pound.”

Luke shrugged and nodded. “And you rescued me that same night, after I lost all hope.”

“At least they are here, whatever the reason,” I told him. We didn’t discuss the humiliating part of that night when Luke first tasted my mouth and let me taste his; it still stung that bad.

My mother had never come to another swim meet after that night. My parents separated soon after. Dad moved out of the house he grew up in, taking only two suitcases of clothes. Staying with Coach Givens was supposed to be temporary while things got sorted out, but five years later, Dad still lived there. And it was there, not my home—my dad’s ancestral home—that I usually saw him, except for swimming. He was my real parent, not my mother. He saw my first steps and heard my first words; she just watched the videos he took of me. How my mother got custody was a mystery to me, and a pain that never left me.

My dad and my grandparents were the ones who took care of me, from my earliest memory until my grandfather died when I was eleven, and my father moved out when I was thirteen. After that, I still had Granny. She still came to my swim meets, but she was late to this last and most important one.

Even before the angry divorce and the strange custody hearing that mostly excluded me, my mom had tried to make me quit the team and never talk to my best friend and next-door neighbor ever again. The same impulsive impatience that had made Luke kiss me, that made him shake like a leaf before each swim event, that sometimes made him rage over problems so small that other people shied away from him, it all made me love him more, not less. Luke had risked everything but had sealed the deal between us with that kiss. And it was Luke's rages that had saved us.

After all the questions, harsh words and slammed doors, Luke had simply melted down and started screaming and yelling so loud that we heard it in our house, a hundred feet away. My mom had tried to stop me, but I pulled free of her grasp and got out the front door, my arms bruised and bleeding. Luke had been lost and crying out for help, help that only I could give him. I recalled pounding on his front door until someone, anyone, opened it.

I relived that moment when I had seen him through the open doorway that I no longer dared cross, and he had seen me and stopped wailing, but shook violently until I ran to him and held him tight against me. I had felt his heart pounding, and I knew he could feel mine pounding just as hard. They had never tried to keep us apart after that, they just watched us, very closely, too closely.

"First call for the championship heat of the Boys Fifty Free," announced the meet director over the sound system, cutting through my lost moment. "Swimmers in that heat should take position behind the blocks."

Luke gently squeezed my biceps, bringing me instantly back to the present moment. I realized that I had been shaking, and now it was Luke's presence that calmed me and got my head back into the race. Luke squeezed my arm muscles again right before we had to turn loose and step up to the blocks. I was good to go, and so was he.

"Swimmers, step up," called the meet director over the sound system, and we stepped up onto the blocks, glancing one last time at one another before focusing solely on the race.

"Swimmers, take your mark," called the director, and the eight of us bent down, put hands over the edge of the block, with one foot forward, and put

most of our weight on the one foot back. A whistle blew, and we all stood up. Someone had broken the perfect stillness that we were supposed to assume.

“Swimmers, take your mark,” the meet director repeated, then after a moment, once assured that we were all perfect statues, the horn blared and I flung my arms up and out, hurling my body forward in as perfect a streamline as I could. I kept my head tucked, ears below my elbows, and slipped into the water a good ten feet out from the block, my feet making only the barest splash by the feel of it. Water surged over me. I kept my hands outstretched ahead of me and pumped my abs, hips and legs in hard, demanding dolphin kicks, racing just below the surface, careful to burst up and swim just within the fifteen-yard streamline limit.

I fell into freestyle stroke form and breathed in a ragged gulp of air, ignoring my screaming lungs as I smoothly cut into the water, pressing hand and forearm against it until I had to pull that arm from the water, elbow high, and stroke down with the other arm. I reached the turnover point in just two breaths and four arm cycles, flipping over and planting my tucked feet against the end wall of my lane. I kicked off with all the might I could muster, my lungs still raging and my arm muscles starting to ache for lack of oxygen. I streamlined and dolphin-kicked until I had to surface, more than halfway to the finish. My arms and my lungs ached, but I only breathed as often as I needed to keep my head clear and my attention focused on the wall. The last three arm cycles felt like an eternity, and then suddenly I was there, hands on the wall, bursting up to gulp air like a drowning victim.

My eyes went to the electronic score board once I could finally catch my breath. I looked for Luke, who had just touched the wall hundredths of a second behind me, but more than half a second ahead of anyone else. My eyes stole a glance at the board, and I knew that both of us had made the mark. Mine was the winning time, and a new section, division, league and team best, but Luke had also broken all the old records to come in second to me. After the eighth-finishing swimmer reached the wall and we all clapped for one another, Luke and I embraced one another over the lane line, careful not to betray the full intensity of our emotion to anyone.

Luke

Nick and I climbed out and strode across the nearly empty space behind the blocks. We pulled our large team towels free from the chain-link fence. We had

ten minutes before the girls would be called back for the one-hundred-yard butterfly race and another ten before we would step onto the blocks again for my favored event. Spectators weren't allowed behind the blocks, and we were glad—really glad—just then. Hugging one another after Nick's victory had made both of us rock hard, and it showed through our jammers. We needed towels around our waists before we went to meet our personal spectators and spies.

My parents and the whole New Testament (as Nick tagged my brothers John, Mark and Matt, sister Mary and John's wife Liz) waited with but a little apart from Coach, Nick's dad, and the swim coach from the University of California at Berkley. My mother instantly claimed me and wrapped her arms around me as if I was still ten and had just swum my first race ever, only now I towered over her, not she over me.

Nick's gaze and smile kept me from pulling away from my mother's invasive embrace. Ever since Mom saw me kiss Nick and tried to keep us apart, I found no comfort from her hands on me. I didn't like people to touch me who didn't comfort me. I had to hang tough and not melt down because of the Cal Bears coach there to see Nick. I had to show Nick that I could endure anything or anyone for him.

"We are so proud of you," my mother gushed. But after twelve years of my competitive swimming, from age six to age eighteen, she still didn't know the events or when my times were really good or just okay. I just wanted her to shut up so I could listen to what the Cal Bears coach was saying to Nick and about Nick to our coach and his dad.

"Twenty seconds, fifty-three hundredths would win heats in NCAA swimming," the Cal Bears coach assured Nick, his dad and the coach. The university coach suddenly looked at me and added, "Twenty seconds, sixty hundredths is also fast, even in NCAA. I know you plan to serve a mission for your church right after high school graduation, according to your father, anyway. But keep the Cal Bears in mind, in case your plans change."

"They won't change," my father asserted flatly, his eyes on me, not the visiting coach. I looked away; I needed to avoid his gaze. A Mormon mission wasn't what I wanted; I wanted Nick.

"The Church will modify Luke's mission to accommodate his autism," my mom asserted. "Can UC Berkeley make the same guarantee?"

I resisted the urge to melt down right then and there. I needed to be strong for Nick, and I couldn't pull away from my suffocating mother or dare touch

Nick just then. I had to focus on something that would keep me from crashing emotionally right then. Nick's dad smiled at me, put his hand on Coach's shoulder, gently gripping it for the barest fraction of a second. I found the calm I needed to ignore my father's attack. I had Nick's father's support, and that sufficed.

"High-functioning autism isn't the barrier to excelling in sports or academics that it once was, ma'am," the Cal Bears coach assured all of us, his gaze focused squarely on me. "I have trained Olympic-qualifying swimmers with HFA, and if Luke joins us, I will again."

I also felt reassured by the glances that Coach and Nick's dad gave me, splitting their attention between Nick and me. I knew things about Coach Givens and Mr. Vogel that I wasn't supposed to. They trusted me to keep their secret, so as to give me comfort and needed support.

The night I first planted one on Nick, and all that passed after, was because of what I saw at summer practice when no one thought I was looking. I was fixated on what I had briefly seen for days after, until I had to do it with the guy I loved. I didn't know if Nick knew what I knew, but I knew why Nick's dad had really left after I kissed Nick. I knew because his dad had told me himself. His dad didn't want me to blame myself for any of it, so unlike my own parents. What they couldn't blame on me, they blamed on Nick; my dad resented Nick but pretended not to.

Coach later told me that Nick and I had their support in everything, that what I knew about them, they also knew about us. Sometimes, Coach and Nick's dad let me see the barest hint of affection between them on deck that no one else ever saw. Those hints gave me hope and calmed me.

Ignoring my own family, I said to the Cal Bears coach, "Thank you for considering me. If my plans do change, I'll let you know."

My mother pulled away from me, thinking to punish me by withdrawing her touch. But her retreat felt like just another victory to me. Only a warning look from Nick kept me from grinning at her. I patterned my expression after Nick's and let my mother play drama queen all alone.

"Here's my card," the university coach told me, extending it. My father was closer than me and sought to take it himself, but Coach Givens was closer yet, and he rescued it for me. "Call me directly if your plans do change, not the university or my staff. Both of you are that good."

“You’re not staying for our next events?” I blurted. I knew instantly it was a foolish question.

The Cal Bears coach grinned at me. “I wouldn’t miss you swim the butterfly for the world, Luke. But we may not get to talk again afterward, and I want you to be able to contact me directly.”

I was overwhelmed with joy, but overwhelmed was never good for me. My mother saw the danger signs and smiled. But Nick moved faster than imaginable to slip his arm around me and support me. Reassured, I grinned and said to the coach, but really to my rescuer, “Thank you.”

Nick

We were putting my team towel back into the chain-link fence behind the starting blocks, when Luke’s hand strayed down and gripped my cock right through my jammer. No one saw him do it, not through the fence and in the empty grass beyond us, or along the blocks behind us. His towel in my hands also helped hide his hand groping me. I didn’t flinch or pull away; I just let him do it and smiled at him for it. I knew by the hidden gesture that he wanted to kiss me and assure me that he loved me. We found chances when and where we could to touch lips and taste tongues, but we never had time to do what we really wanted for and to one another.

I didn’t reciprocate for the simple reason that if we were caught in the act, people would attribute Luke’s actions to what make him special in that negative way some people saw him. I did, however, silently mouth the words he needed me to say, “I love you, too.”

Luke silently mouthed back, before giving my cock one last squeeze, “I love you more.”

We couldn’t yet be boyfriends openly, much less lovers. Even so, we had our hidden gestures of love.

Aloud, I said, “Good luck with the hundred fly.”

Bringing his hand from my crotch to my bicep, Luke responded, “Good luck with the hundred free.”

“Hey, ass burger,” snarked the self-proud idiot behind block three as we stepped to Luke’s coveted place behind block four. “Is ‘ass burger’ another word for ‘queer’?”

"They stopped using the term 'Asperger's' because of bigots like you," Luke coolly handled the obvious homophobe, having heard and dealt with that exact remark a dozen times before.

"I'm not a bigot." The teen was offended enough to repeat himself, "I'm not a bigot."

The swimmer to the other side of Luke looked across and said, "You really are. And too stupid to see they make a nice couple. Who cares about the special needs? So, shut up and swim."

The guy behind block five glanced down at the boner in my jammers and then smiled at both of us. "I wish I had a guy who loved me enough to sport a boner like that over me. You guys are lucky."

Guys in jammers got hard-ons often enough that most people on deck became blind to them, but not to other gay guys or to homophobes—who were often self-hating closeted gay guys themselves. So, having my erection for Luke noticed by both a homophobic idiot and an envious gay guy made having one all the sweeter for me. When Luke did not react, I nodded our appreciation to the gay swimmer beside us.

I could tell Luke did not know how to respond to being accepted or essentially outed right then. I could feel him tremble and see the telltale glassy look in his eyes as he struggled with that new, unknown interaction. "You did good," I whispered into his ear. "Neither of these guys know our families, and there'd be no reason for them to say anything, even if they did. Everything's fine."

Keeping one hand on Luke's skin until he was called to step up ensured the erection he had given me lasted until that moment of parting. It also helped Luke stay focused and not melt down at the block. When the call came, Luke turned to look at my eyes and then glanced down to see if I was still hard for him. Seeing that I was as hard as ever made him smile, and I knew he was enjoying it, too.

Moments later, Luke was a poised statue of pure muscle on the block. The horn blared, Luke leaped forward, and I stepped to the edge to watch him arch over the water, plunge down at a perfect angle and then arch again to keep his dive shallow, just below the surface of the water. Hands ahead and lower body undulating vigorously, the water passed over his body like a river of glass as he shot forward mere inches below the surface. Luke's almost perfect streamline after his beautiful dive took him more than half the length of the pool before he

broke the surface and breathed, his powerful arms plunging down under him. As his face crashed down into the water, his two arms came forward, fingertips barely tracing the surface but shooting out a fine spray as they went. Cycle after cycle of graceful arm swings, hip undulations and arm pulls soon brought him to the wall for his first of three turns. His two-handed touch was textbook, one hand capping the gutter as the other pointed back over his head as he planted his feet, pushed off and streamlined just under the surface, once again traveling more than half the next length before breaking the surface to breath and swim the butterfly stroke.

Luke's plunges down were shallow enough that I could watch the water slide over his muscular back again and again, his every move keeping me rock hard. Luke knew how sexy he looked to me when swimming that stroke with all his might and power, because I told him so every chance I got. I also knew that knowing (and that I would be watching) helped him fight the inevitable fatigue of his fourth and final length of the pool. He was literally swimming to me and for me as he broke the surface that last time, many of the other guys still making their final turns. Most were still streamlining underwater when Luke touched the wall.

Before looking anywhere else or at anyone else, Luke looked up into my eyes, savoring the boner I still had for him even more than the victory he had just earned. He turned to lean against the lane line for support as he applauded the next swimmer in to touch the wall, then each finisher after that. Luke shook hands with the second place finisher, who was the same guy to insult him. The swimmer grimaced as he gripped Luke's hand, "I'm so sorry. I was stupid to say that."

"It's, okay," Luke told him coolly, gripping his hand again. He looked up and I nodded my approval, nodding also to the other guy. Reassured, Luke smiled at the second-place swimmer. "We're good."

Luke then grabbed the wall and climbed out with powerful ease. I had his towel for him as we stepped back from the edge, and I helped him dry off, making sure it shielded his hands as he briefly groped my crotch again. Then, we went to the fence and traded towels. "You handled that perfectly."

"You're not going to tend to that until we are both in the tower windows," he told me, ignoring my compliment. I was used to him abruptly changing topics, especially when time was tight for us, as it was just then before I had to race again. "I want to see you jack off and spill your load."

"And then I want to see you spill yours for me," I told him with a little grin.

Our two homes were 120-year-old Victorians built at the same time and like mirror images of one another for twin brothers. Both had towers as their third floors, each with a railed crow's nest above that. Once everyone was asleep, we often went up into the tower rooms and turned on lights in one room and then the other, trading views. Tablet cameras and live streaming helped the view, but we enjoyed watching one another with our own eyes, as well.

The two historic houses shared a horse corral and combination barn and carriage house at the end of their huge backyards. The horse corral was on Luke's side and the carriage house and barn were on mine. My grandmother lived in the apartment above the carriage house, her windows the only ones that viewed both facing tower windows. We knew exactly how far to stand back from the glass in the tower rooms so that we couldn't see her windows or be seen from them.

All too soon, it was my turn to step up, take my mark and then leap over and down into the water. I knifed the dive just as cleanly as and streamlined as far as Luke did before breaking the surface to swim to the wall and do my first flip turn. I knew my foot plant and push off were so fast and violent as to send spray all over the lane judges behind me. Two more pool lengths, two more violently fast turns; I focused on just two things: swim as fast and efficiently as I could, and make my friend and secret boyfriend proud of me. The need to look sharp for Luke, as well as my college goals, kept me fast, clean and powerful against fatigue in my fourth and final length.

I touched the wall to finish and instantly looked up at Luke, who was allowed to stay there due to his special need. No one else remarked on Luke's HFA and his need to stay close to his peer guide—me. He held his towel-draped arm out just enough to let me see the boner he had for me. We were shameless about using Luke's established special need to mask our secret and mutual special need.

I grinned at him and did my duty as the heat winner and champion for the guys trailing in behind me, clapping loudly for each in his turn.

Once I was out of the pool, dried and both Luke and I had towels snuggled around our waists, we walked over to where his family, the coach and my dad waited near coaches' table three. The Cal Bears coach was gone, but the chair he had occupied was unclaimed. My dad said, "He waited until your official time posted on the scoreboard to leave, son. He made other people he came to see wait so he could watch you finish. He made sure to leave additional copies

of his personal card for you both and said he will be at your high school graduation without fail.”

Just then, my grandmother showed up and hugged me. She smiled at Luke and then hugged my dad. Even in her mid-sixties, Granny was a looker who kept herself in shape and gray banished from her styled hair. “I was so surprised by that nice university swim coach,” she said. “He introduced himself out of the blue and then told me all about the races I had missed, as if he had nothing more important to do than visit with an old lady like me. So, the both of you boys set new section records today; that’s very cool. I am very proud of you two.”

Granny would be late to her own funeral and then make everyone just glad she was there at all. Even Luke’s parents and his three brothers, one sister and one sister-in-law couldn’t help but smile at her. She left my dad’s side to put herself between Luke and me, sliding a hand around each of our bare waists and hugging us to her. “Nick will turn eighteen on the Sunday after tomorrow, as you know,” she went on. “I am having a very special dinner catered for him, in the big house, of course. I’m sure you won’t only let Luke attend but will come yourselves as well. Everything will be Mormon-friendly, so no need to fret over that. You will come, won’t you?”

Luke’s dad nodded and said, “Of course we will be there, Granny.”

“Thank you, Shane. I knew I could count on you,” Granny told him warmly. She turned to Dad and said, “You’ll be there also, son, won’t you?”

“Yes, Mom, but—”

She pulled her hand from around me and put a finger on Dad’s lips, shaking her head. “No buts, not from anyone, son. Just be there. You, too, Derek; I want you there as well.”

Coach Givens just nodded and said nothing.

Granny put so few demands on anyone else that people rarely refused the few things she required of them. She was like a mafia godmother in pink Prada pumps and red hair. Her smile and her frown were serious weapons, and she knew how to use them.

“You folks won’t mind if I borrow these two stripling heroes to help their old granny out to her car?” she asked without really asking, then demurred, “I would love to stay and chat, but I have things to do for Sunday. Everything just has to be perfect for my two special boys.”

Her car, a vintage 1965 Ford Mustang in powder blue, was parked a good distance from the pool, farther than it really had to be. We passed several good parking spaces walking out to it. Both Luke and I braved the hot sidewalks and hotter blacktop with our bare feet. Doing so without wincing or fussing was a studly move, which Granny barely glanced at. But when we got to her car and stepped to the shady side of it, she said, "You boys both deserve a kiss, don't you think?"

Luke instantly bent down and kissed her cheek, and I kissed her other cheek. She patted each of us on the cheek and said, "That was sweet and not at all what I had in mind. You need to kiss one another, and take your time at it. Granny will stand shotgun for you while you kiss. Consider it an early birthday present, Nick."

Luke and I grinned down at her, but then looked around to see if anyone was looking our way. I opened the passenger door of her Mustang convertible and sat down, pulling Luke onto my lap. He immediately leaned in on me, his shoulder pressed against my chest. I put my lips to his, but it was Luke who slipped me the tongue. He shuddered violently with pleasure, and I shuddered, too. Our still-damp jammers pressed tight with raised cocks and were soon damper yet with pre-cum as we let hands wander and tongues wrestle, pausing only for enough air to continue.

Granny eventually put a gentle hand to each of our faces. We slowly, reluctantly parted from one another under her touch, Luke standing first and me after. Luke and I checked around to make sure no one was looking and then pecked Granny's cheek once more. She nodded, "Time for me to get going and for you two to head back before anyone misses you and comes looking."

"Nick's dad and Coach will stop that from happening," Luke disagreed. My doubts about that must have been on my face, as Luke and Granny shared a glance and Luke said, "My parents annoy Coach; he never lets them hurry me off after practice in wet jammers. And your dad knows how important Granny is to you. They'll make them wait on us."

"Good answer," Granny nodded at Luke. Splitting her steady gaze between us, she said in parting, "The world won't end just because you two let yourselves be the boyfriends you were meant to be."

Luke

Once Nick finished and turned the lights out in the tower room exactly opposite me, it was my turn. I left the glass I could anonymously press against

in the dark and turned the lights on so Nick could see me dance and jack off for him as he pressed against his darkened window.

Our occasional visits to the tower rooms and their matching windows started out as simple shared calisthenics mirrored in the window for one another on nights we could not be together. After I first kissed Nick at age thirteen and our families went crazy, the mirror effect of the windows slowly transformed into jacking off for one another; my parents and his mother left us no real time together alone. Hand jobs in the window were less risky than having sex in secret. So, the simple act of jacking off for one another evolved into sexual dancing and jacking off.

I set my tablet down, our live-streaming still open, Bluetooth earbuds picking up Nick's happy sigh after he finished performing before my eyes; it was my turn to perform for him. I cued up the music and started off solo dancing and working my cock to Eric Carmen singing "All By Myself." During the instrumental runs between lyrics, I hopped onto an old table that I had screwed securely to the floor in view of the window for that purpose and did one-handed pushups, dipping down to slide my cock over lube I had put on the table top. As soon as the vocals came back up, I did a handstand and flipped off the table, landing on my feet facing the window but safely back from the glass, and went back to slow-stroking in time to the music.

Both of us had taken dance and gymnastic classes together as kids as "therapy" for my "condition," classes my parents stopped after Mom witnessed our first kiss. Making those skills part of our window sex routine helped sooth our anger over all the restrictions imposed on us by my parents with one goal in mind: the straight and narrow Mormon life for me.

"You rock," Nick's appreciative voice sounded in my earbuds. "Keep it up. More."

The tower room was more than a little warm, even in mid-May. I was all too quickly coated in my own sweat, enough so that I could use it instead of more lube on my cock. We usually tried to draw out our cock rock show for one another to include at least five, maybe six pre-selected tunes. How long we lasted before shooting cum like cannons, as Nick described it, all depended on the day before, the heat or cold of the tower and our individual moods.

I went from solo dancing and slow stroking to Eric Carmen, to doing so to Queen and "Las Palabras de Amor." Between verses, I was again atop the table, air fucking it as I did various gymnastic and yoga poses, using my hand on my

cock only when it couldn't come down in contact with the table top. It was slow and easy, but I was hot. Sweat ran over my body in rivulets, but I was also progressing well toward my eventual goal and enjoying every stroke of it.

"That's so hot," Nick assured me. His comments kept me focused on my routine and helped me change it up some. Thinking just then was bad for the mood; for my hard-on, doing was better.

My third selection was Enrique Iglesias singing "Hero." I got serious with my cock, jerking it hard to his voice. I even lip-synced the words, progressing to the point I needed to air stroke a little to keep from blowing my load too soon. I used those moments to muscle dance in the window, popping first one pec and then the other, rippling my abs and finally each of my glutes before repeating. Doing it right took thinking and sagged my cock just enough to ease back my urgency. Once out of danger, I went back to working my cock, careful to edge but not go over.

"Not yet, not yet," Nick urged me, "You can last one more song, I know you can. I believe."

"Some Nights" by Fun came up, and I danced and continued to edge myself, doubly encouraged by Nick's sweet whispers in my ears. Right in the middle of the second verse, I reached my limit of edging, and I shot gush after gush of cum across the top of the old table top as I always did.

"Way to geyser it!" Nick exulted in my ears as I came all over the table top. "I am so jealous of that old table. Some day, it's going to be me sunny-side up getting painted in your spunk."

Before I could say anything, a repeating flash of light on the window glass caught my eye, and I rushed to shut off the lights of my room. I went right to the glass and looked down into Nick's backyard. A flashlight in the apartment windows signaled: three short flashes, three long.

"Why did you do that?" Nick wanted to know, obviously unhappy to no longer see me in the window opposite his dark one.

"Granny is flashing a light beam on my window," I said. "Why is she up? What does that mean? She didn't see me perform for you, do you think?"

"No, not possible. She's playing shotgun for us again," Nick decided. "Someone must be up in one of the houses, lights on. It's time to get briefs on and clean up, fast. Love you."

"Love you more," I told him, as I always did.

I quickly found my boxer briefs and slid them up, careful to milk the last fluids from my spent cock before I did so. I licked the semen from my fingertips, wishing it was his. I snugged my junk into place in the boxer briefs. Flushable wipes made table clean up quick and easy. I finished by spraying the air with my mother's favorite air freshener. I folded and bagged the wipes, then tucked the bag into my boxer briefs, right under my balls; clean up done.

I quickly worked up a new sweat doing regular calisthenics, so that I had my excuse for being up there all set. But no one came in, and I was able to go down, use the bathroom, flush the only evidence and get into bed unnoticed. That meant the lights were on in Nick's house, not mine.

I realized I still had my Bluetooth earbuds on when my head hit the pillow. Before I could take them off and shut down my tablet, I heard Nick's mom demand, voice slurring from being drunk or high or both, "What the fuck are you doing up here at this time of night?"

I lay still, barely breathing, and listened in the dark.

Nick

I had boxer briefs up, the old table in my room cleaned and the scent of sandalwood in the air, and was doing calisthenics, lights on, when the door flew open, framing my mother in the doorway. She had been a looker once, but she drank too much and took too little care of herself. Her latest "husband" was there only for the free ride she had to offer; it wasn't for her looks. Grady managed to assure her she was still as gorgeous as ever, his only ability being to lie well enough for my mother to believe every word he said. My dad paid all the bills, including for the booze and pot that Mom and Grady consumed regularly.

I answered my mother's first words with harsh ones of my own, "You're drunk, high, or both. You look like shit right now. Go back to bed. I need to go out and check on Granny."

"How dare you—"

"How dare you pretend to mother me when you are staggering drunk?" I cut her off and immediately softened my voice. "You suck at parenting; we both know it. Here, let me help you back down those stairs, woman. I don't want you going down them alone in your condition."

"But what were you doing up here in this heat?" she persisted, her own voice less harsh, less angry. She didn't argue with my assessment of her

parenting; she knew. We both did. I knew she loved me in her own broken-down way, and that was enough. I had a real father in my dad, even if he didn't live with us and I only saw him away from my home, his childhood home.

I had suspected that my dad was gay like me for a while. I was sure that he and Coach were lovers, but if so, it was their secret and not my place to pry. All I knew for sure was that my good parent didn't live with me, but my broken parent did. And I cared for her more than she ever took care of me. I had to respect my dad's choices, although I didn't understand them. He stayed in my life enough that I could not hate or resent him for not being there all the time.

"I was working out," I told her. "Our house has six bedrooms, four baths and no workout room, except for the tower room. I always come up here to work out, especially when I can't sleep."

"You should at least open a window," she suggested as we started our way down the stairs. She leaned heavily against me, the smell of her addictions getting on my sweaty skin, by far the worse smell between us. Body odor from honest sweat was a smell I liked; the stench of stale pot smoke, booze and sex without cleaning up was purely disgusting. But the smell of Grady on her made me want to retch more than all the other offensive smells. I had no use for him at all.

I saw her to her bedroom door and then went to mine.

"Aren't you checking on your grandmother?"

"I thought I would slip on gym shorts first," I lied. What I wanted was to get her smell off of me with a quick shower. "Then I will be dashing across the backyard to her door, believe me."

"She won't mind the boxers, especially if she really needs the help," Mom told me.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you for caring," I nodded. I thought of her as "Mom", I really did, but I couldn't use that word without betraying all the anger that went with it. "It means a lot."

I instantly left her and went tearing down the stairs, wondering if Granny really did have a late night emergency or if she was just playing shotgun for us as she had done to Luke's and my surprise hours earlier. As I ran through the large house and out the kitchen door into the backyard, I heard Luke observe, "You handled your mom perfectly. I will do better myself."

"You did just fine yourself today with both your parents," I assured him.

"Yesterday," he corrected me, as he often did with such details. "It was yesterday now. It's well after midnight."

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "And I loved every minute of it that you shared with me."

Granny met me at her door, which surprised me, given the flight of stairs she had to come down. She reassured me, "I'm fine. I was playing shotgun again, watching the second floor windows of both houses. You need to be careful because of your age and Luke's parents' perception of his special needs. I thought I could help."

"Have you seen what we do in the windows?" I asked, somewhat taken aback by the thought of my grandmother seeing us jerk off in sight of one another.

"TMI in that question, Nick," she shook her head. "You boys stay far enough back from the glass—whatever you are doing up there—to be seen. Your secrets are safe, even from me, but since you are here, do come up and visit for a bit."

I shook my head. "I stink from helping *her* back down the stairs, Granny."

"If it bothers you that much, you can shower here before we visit," she persisted. "I have some old jeans that were your grandfather's that you can put on after the shower. I am sure they will fit you just fine."

Once upstairs, I waited in the great room without sitting down, eyeing the combination kitchen, dinette and living room I knew well but did not visit as often as I used to. Granny came back with a pair of faded jeans and had me press them to my front. I nodded, "Thanks, Granny."

She handed me a white plastic grocery bag, telling me, "Put your boxer briefs in that if you are taking them with you. But feel free to leave them in the laundry hamper, if you want."

"They're pretty grimy, Granny," I shrugged without looking down. "I'll take care of them myself. It's not like I don't know how to use a washer and a dryer."

I knew exactly where Granny's bathroom was. I had taken many a bath in her bathtub as a child, long before my parents separated. I had no memories of my mother caring for me as a child, only my grandmother and my dad. I only remembered having to be stronger for my mother than she was for me. I was there for Mom, not her there for me.

The court gave physical custody of me to Mom at age thirteen; the family court judge was a conservative with traditional views about everything, including motherhood. The evidence against her state of motherhood didn't matter. She got use of the house, sixty percent of my dad's pay, and I got a long-term, unpaid adult babysitting job.

The house couldn't be given to her or sold for cash because it belonged to my grandmother, not my father, and reverted to the family trust on her death. Both houses belonged to the trust, and Granny, as trustee, decided who lived in which house. Neither family could sell, rent or lease their house without her written consent, because our two families had once been one family. Granny had final say on such matters until she died or named her successor.

I closed and locked the door, remembering that as a kid, it was a spanking offense to lock it. Knowing how slow the hot water was to arrive, I turned the shower on before doing anything else. I put the jeans, tablet and bag down on the edge of the sink, stripped down and got into the water. It was barely tepid when I first got in but soon got warm enough. Lathering up with body gel to rid my flesh of its stale odor, I thought of Dad and Granny washing my hair as a kid with no-tears child shampoo. Thinking about those days made bathing there now very special to me.

Once I was done showering, Itoweled off, racked the towel and tried on my dead grandfather's jeans. They were a little snug but still a good fit. Gramps had been a lean, wiry man to the day he died. It sort of shocked me to fit in the pants of a man who once towered over me, although they were a bit snug in the ass and the thighs. I put my Bluetooth earbuds back in and made sure my tablet was active. I used some of the men's cologne in the medicine cabinet, a scent my grandfather had often worn. I put the boxer briefs in the bag, rolled it up tight, and went out to greet my grandmother properly with a hug and a kiss.

Afterward, she looked me over and observed, "I am glad you fill Gramps jeans so well; you are even more like he was at your age than your father was. Keep them and think of him."

"I will," I promised, then sighed. "I miss him and wonder what he would think of me now."

"He would be as proud of you and who you are as I am," Granny assured me. "You are so very much like him. He would be grinning ear to ear at you if he were here to see you now."

"But he loved girls, not boys," I reminded her, humbled by the comparison.

“He loved who he loved, and you are here because of it. He knew your father was gay before your father did, before I did. He was so angry at Star for getting his gay son drunk. But the first time he saw you and held you, all of his hatred of her melted away. He had been prepared to let our family end with your father, until you came along.” Granny had the glitter of tears in her eyes as she said, “Your father had his example as his guide in raising you. And you will have both of them as your guide in raising children of your own, gay or not.”

The flood of ideas hit me hard. I sat down next to her, as vulnerable and crushed as the day my dad moved out. I hid out at Granny's and wouldn't tell him good-bye until he came to find me. The touch of Granny's arm over my bare shoulders reassured me now as it had back then. I had to search for the words to utter. “I like that idea, a lot, but what if I have to adopt to be a dad? That's the most likely way for me to become one.”

“I won't care if your children carry our blood or not, Nick. I just know that someday you will be a dad yourself. They'll still be my legacy and yours: the next generation of this family.”

“I like the way you think, Granny,” I nodded, relieved, suddenly mindful that I had a future beyond swimming or even being with Luke. “I haven't dared think beyond being able to finally be with Luke. I have no idea how he feels about long-term plans or marriage or kids. We are just kids ourselves. But now I want to have a family, so I can give back what you, Dad and Gramps have given me.”

“That is the only way we ever give back to the generation before, by giving love to a new one,” she assured me. “Family is about love, not genetic bloodlines. If I am still alive when you become a father, I will love your adopted little ones just as much as I love you, both of you.”

Tears welled in my eyes and ran down my cheeks. Luke actually let out a sob in my ears. It was fitting that my first chance to out myself was with her and that she took loving lead in the conversation. It was also fitting that our talk should be about family and not about being gay.

“I want you to know that I hit the jackpot the night your mother got your dad drunk enough to get her pregnant with you,” she told me, as I tried to dry my tears and then failed to. “Both your dad and I know what a gift we were given by your mother's manipulation to be part of this family. Regardless of what happens ahead, I will do right by her, just as your dad has always done right by her because of you. You are precious beyond words to me.”

Granny let those words sink in for several minutes. She hugged me, and I hugged back. I always knew she loved me; she always told me so and showed it, but I never knew just how intensely, unconditionally, until that moment. “Thanks, Granny. That means a lot to me.”

Nodding and smiling at me, she went on, “What I want from both of you, since I can assume you have those earbuds on to hear Luke and your tablet active for Luke to listen, is to know what you two want for yourselves as a couple. So, what do my grandson and my grandson-by-love want most for yourselves?”

Luke

I fed the horses earlier than usual the next morning. That daily chore became my pretext to go visit Granny but without Nick. I wore cargo shorts and a swim team tank top, which bothered my Mormon parents as much as going shirtless. A tank top was proper enough by Granny's values, regardless of what Mom and Dad thought. Granny's door was open, and I went upstairs to greet her with a hug and a kiss. She had me sit with her on the couch to visit.

I hadn't been inside the apartment above the carriage house since I was eleven, when Nick and I had our last sleepover together. The two of us had stayed there with her at her request between the time her husband died and his funeral. Both big houses were full of her extended family, all of them family and friends of my family in those days. Granny's “cottage” was also the only place we could have sleepovers together, until my dad said I was too old for “such nonsense.”

I was pulled back into the present from that sweet, forgotten memory by Granny fussing with boxes and photos on her coffee table. She saw the look on my face and said, “The spare room is exactly the way it was when Gramps died and you last shared it with Nick. You should take a look. It will help you remember that visit.”

I stood up from the sofa as Granny set down a large, flat box and a small jewelry box on her coffee table. When I glanced at them, she said, “These things can wait a moment. Those old memories are tugging at you, aren't they? They need to come out, and so do you, even if it's only to people you know will accept you as you really are.”

I stepped past her and into the small, short hallway with three doors. Her bedroom was to the left. The center door was the large, old-fashioned

bathroom. The door on the right went to the spare room. I opened it, drew a deep breath as if to swim underwater a long ways, and stepped in. I suddenly recalled spooning with Nick, his chest against my spine and his arm draped protectively over my ribs. It was early morning and the twin bed meant for me was still untouched; we had spent the whole night snuggled together, unaware that it wasn't normal behavior for two men in some people's eyes, much less boys as young as we were. We were too young to know about sex or sexual orientation. We just knew we belonged together.

The door opened in the early light, and Granny stepped in bearing a tray for breakfast in bed. She set it down in such a way that we had to squeeze together even more as we sat up for it to fit. She touched our cheeks and said to us, "What happens in Granny's cottage stays here. This isn't something to share with anyone else, until you are ready. Just know that God made you this way and that your love for one another is God's gift to you, your sacred birthright. Never let anyone convince you otherwise. So, cherish the gift and hang onto it."

That sudden memory made me realize that we had always been gay and gay together. We had been a couple before we were old enough for that to have any sexual meaning. And Granny had known it from the very beginning, even before we did. I left the room, full memories and raw emotion. Granny took me by the hand and sat me down, smiling at the angst in my eyes as I sought to solve the puzzle. Granny had protected our secret even from us until we found it ourselves, waiting and watching. "I remember," I said. "I remember every last word you said."

"Good," she replied. "That makes exactly one of us. I remember the gist of what I said back then, but hardly every word of it. Your personal gift is that memory of yours. Nick's memories won't be so crisp, but he will be able to give you context to your memories. Finding context is his gift, not the memories themselves. God has a gift for each of us, but it's on us to find it and use it."

"Biding your time must be your gift from God, Granny," I told her in awe. "Waiting for so many secrets to come out, bit by bit, must be hard. I'm not sure I could do all that the way you have."

"But you already have, sweetie," she smiled at me. "You have waited all this time to be together with Nick and belong to one another forever. And you have kept Ethan and Derek's secret—not just recently, but for years—even from Nick. You have that gift more than you know."

As soon as I nodded agreement, she tapped the boxes on the coffee table, "Let's see if some of these old things I have kept for years will meet Nick's and your needs and desires. If not, we can go shopping for the things that will. Let me be your fairy godmother and see what magic I can do for the pair of you."

"Pun intended?" I smiled at her. I noticed then that she had included very old photos and modern photos of older paintings from both Vogel Houses. Most but not all images were of the original Vogel twins. Most of those depicted them together, side by side.

"Only if it pleases you, which I can see it has," she grinned back, bringing my gaze back to hers. "Open the small jewelry box first."

Inside the small, old-fashioned ring box were two identical men's rings in yellow gold, each edge decorated in what appeared to be chains of white and yellow gold; chains crossing twice across the face of each ring. At the point the crossed chains formed two Xs, two small diamonds were channel set so as to not pass above the precious metal bands. There was a small, folded piece of faded paper in the box behind the rings. The paper looked very old, all by itself.

"Shane and Dane Vogel's wedding bands," Granny told me. "I have their wives' wedding bands as well, stored separately. These are kept together by their own instructions in their joint wills."

I nodded at her. I knew my dad and his twin were named for the Vogel twins who had the Vogel Houses built so long ago, because my great-grandmother had been Charlotte Vogel Nevin, the only daughter of Dane Vogel and the reason my family occupied one of the two Vogel Houses. Dad and his brother were the first twin boys in either family since the original brothers.

I considered the boxes, what I knew of the Vogel twins and the mirrored twin houses. I knew they were born on the same day. They didn't really look like twins or even brothers in the old photos, cousins maybe. Nick and I were distant cousins who looked sort of like one another and could pass for brothers, if we insisted we were. "There is a secret to all this, isn't there?"

"Several, actually," Granny nodded. "Keeping them secret goes with being trustee-in-trust for the Vogel Houses. Tell me what your guess about the secrets is, and I can tell you if you are correct or incorrect in your thinking, but no more. And the price of knowing you are right is keeping the secret yourself. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can keep secrets," I nodded. "I can keep this secret."

"From Nick as well?" Granny held my eyes to hers.

"I can, I will."

"Then, take your guess. I won't laugh at or deride any guess you make."

"These rings are kept together because the brothers married women but loved one another," I blurted, suddenly doubting myself. Granny said nothing, and I ventured to guess further, looking at the old images of the twins. "They look alike but were not identical. Not all twins are identical. In these photos, they look at one another the way Nick looks at me. They were in love, that much I am sure of."

"Fraternal twins secretly in love with one another?" Granny questioned, her eyes on my eyes.

"No," I shook my head. I stared at the photos some more, then said firmly, "I somehow know they were cousins, not real twins. Nick and I look like we could be brothers, but we're not. We're cousins, but not closely related ones. The Vogel twins are like Nick and me. We're like them. They used their shared birthday and last names to say they were twins and hide their love for one another. Tell me I'm wrong."

Granny nodded. "You're right, of course. You see the tells in the images. You just don't have the words to fit what you observe. They were cousins, but not first cousins, so they were a lot like Nick and you. The important thing here is how certain you were about being right, even though you couldn't explain yourself. It's why I picked you and not Nick to be the next trustee. Knowing is more important than sharing or proving to this important family job."

I nodded. I knew lots of things but didn't always know how I knew them. I just knew I did.

Granny went on, "Those are the two secrets of this box but not the only secrets of these two houses. Dane and Shane were cousins born on the same day; they grew up next-door neighbors, like Nick and you, and fell in love. They came to California to seek their fortunes together and told people they were twins, not cousins, so their closeness wouldn't be questioned. But now that you have guessed those secrets, you are sworn to keep them, even from Nick. He must also guess on his own, in his own time. These two are the most sensitive of our family secrets and the reason for all the others."

I had asked Granny to help me find the perfect engagement rings for Nick and me. I wanted to come out so that I could lay claim on Nick as mine more

than for any other reason. I nodded at Granny, fighting a rush of raw emotion. "You are offering to let these rings be our engagement rings?"

"I am, and not just because of their symbolism for you, now that you know their secret," Granny told me. "See the folded paper inside behind the rings? Carefully take it out, unfold it just as carefully and read it aloud."

I moved my hands slowly and very carefully to obey Granny. When the small handwritten note was unfolded and opened, I read, "To our descendant or descendants who can take these rings and lovingly exchange them man-to-man or woman-to-woman, whether in private among discreet friends, as we had to, or in legal marriage, as we never could. Signed Shane and Dane Vogel."

I stared at the old photos and photos of old paintings. I carefully refolded the note and just as carefully tucked it behind the two rings. I found myself fighting back the urge to cry, my eyes getting moist. "I am Dane Vogel's heir and Nick is Shane's heir. Nick and I look like them; we are them, in a way. We can complete their secret legacy. We can use their rings as intended."

"And keep the secret all the days of your lives," she told me. "When family members rage that you two wear those rings, you can't say more than that I, as Trustee-in-Trust, gave them to you to wear for your lifetimes or so long as you remain together. If you break up or both of you die, the rings go back in this box until the next time they can be used as intended."

"Have they ever been used since the original brothers died?" I asked.

"This box has only been opened one time before for prospective bearers, but never used," Granny told me. "Other than to see them the day I became a candidate for trustee, I am the only trustee to ever open the box more than twice. This is the third time I have seen it opened."

"Nick's dad, Ethan," I guessed.

"Obviously," she nodded. "But don't be hasty in your next guess. You only get three guesses per family secret, right or wrong, and you have used one. It's how the twins wanted family trustees to be trained. Let it all roll about in your mind. See who my son interacts with and avoids."

"Ethan's first love was someone he now avoids," I guessed. "That'd make sense. It'd hurt to see a love who rejected you."

Granny nodded. "So, take your time, observe and then guess only when you are certain."

Something suddenly occurred to me; I couldn't contain the notion in front of her. "You mean guess when I'm so certain that it's not really a guess, right? Is why they made you trustee?"

"I became a candidate to be trustee when I correctly guessed the secret of the matching rings from a painting of the twins," Granny nodded. "I told my guess to Lucas Vogel, my future father-in-law, on the day of my engagement to Ethan, Sr. My Ethan and I saw the rings together when the box was opened. Those two secrets were very hard on my Ethan until the day he saw our Ethan kiss another boy at the horse corral. Then it all made perfect sense to him."

I didn't need to ask the next question; I knew. I was now a candidate to be trustee after her not because I had seen the rings or might use them for Nick and myself, but because I correctly guessed their secret. The look in my eyes had to have made her guess my self-doubts.

"You were made perfect in God's eyes, and in my eyes, just not in the eyes of the blind who choose to be," Granny assured me. "God wouldn't give so many of his children minds like yours if it wasn't a gift and a secret to be learned. Embrace the gift."

I nodded as Granny closed the ring box and placed my hand over it. "Keep them safe until you and Nick use them to propose to one another. No one can know you have them until Nick and you wear them. It can be Sunday, a year from then or when you choose. You have the rings."

I pocketed the box, and she opened a large, faded garment box, the sort that might contain the gift of clothes at Christmas time. In it were two handcrafted shirts in black see-through lace. "I made these at my son's request for his beloved first love and himself, so that they could come out together and wear the rings."

"But they never wore them or the rings," I guessed. "And now the shirts are part of the secret of the rings. What kept them apart, broke them up?"

Granny looked at me with a little smile and just waited. Then I guessed and nodded. "Star got Ethan drunk, and when she knew she was pregnant with Nick, she confronted Ethan."

"She confronted all of us," Granny told me. "All three of us, my two Ethans and me. She never knew who Ethan's lover was, and we never told her. She confronted us the day I was to give our Ethan the rings and the shirts. My Ethan was furious, which surprised and scared Star. She hadn't reckoned with us knowing or accepting that our Ethan was gay."

"My dad wasn't Ethan's lover, although they are about the same age," I reasoned aloud, "Dad's two years older than Ethan?"

Granny nodded, eyes holding mine, waiting, "Closer to three years older."

"My parents already had one kid, and Mom was pregnant with me. But Dad knows who it is, doesn't he? That doesn't count as one of my guesses, does it?"

Granny smiled and shook her head.

Then an impossible thought occurred to me, and I slowly, carefully thought out loud, "My uncle Dane didn't marry until after Nick was born. They used to tease him about never dating after his mission, while my dad married my mom just three months after his mission. My uncle Dane and your Ethan avoid one another like the plague. I don't need to guess, Granny, I know."

"I know you do," Granny assured me, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

I felt a sudden stab of pain in my heart. Granny saw the doubt in my eyes. "Dane is why Dad hates me and resents Nick."

"Your father loves you," Granny assured me. "And he does resent Nick, but not for being gay. Your father was once Dane's closest friend. He knew his brother was gay and accepted him completely. Your dad protected Dane and Ethan's love affair from his father and their family."

"How old were they when Dane and Nick's dad first kissed?"

Granny sighed, "A lot older than you and Nick. Dane was nineteen and Ethan sixteen. Shane and Dane were about to leave on their missions for the Mormon Church. After that kiss, Dane almost stayed home and didn't go. Only the fear of getting outed to their father made him go. Ethan wrote to him every day of his mission. And Dane answered daily. I still have all of their love letters."

"Can I look at them, read them?" I asked. "I shouldn't have asked that."

"When it falls to you to protect the family secrets, then you can read them as you please," she told me. "And you will want to read the secret letters between Shane and Dane, as well."

"Dad's angry at Nick because he's why Dane and Nick's dad aren't still together," I guessed and then shook my head. "That's even worse than hating us for being gay."

"Or just as bad," Granny agreed. "Your father is a good person at heart, your mother, too. They have just lost their way. They used to double date with Ethan and Dane in West Sacramento."

“So, the break-up because of Nick hit them hard,” I nodded.

“Too hard,” Granny assured me. “They overreacted. They made Dane’s tragedy their own.”

“What about the Church and my grandparents?”

“Your father and mother were prepared to leave the church, to be shunned by your grandparents, if Dane coming out to be with Ethan caused that to happen to him. That’s how much they cared.”

“I don’t understand how they got from there to where they are now!” I lamented.

“They do, but they live in denial rather than face bitter truths,” Granny told me. “Your love for Nick and his for you is the key to opening their hearts again. You can heal them with your love.”

“How?” The notion overwhelmed me, made me shake.

“That is why you have your fairy godmother in me,” she smiled, putting a calming palm to my cheek. “I have a plan that will help end some bitter secrets and yet protect other, sweeter ones.”

“It all comes down to the family secrets.” I pressed my cheek to her palm, needing the contact.

“You are stronger than you know,” she assured me with a gentle pat of my cheek. “Soon, all the family secrets will be yours to keep. When that day comes, I will name you my successor.”

“And Nick?”

Before Granny could answer, her phone rang. I looked at the clock and knew it had to be my parents. It was time for my mom to leave for work and drop me off for school. I started to get up, but Granny shook her head and answered the phone, “Hello. Yes, he’s here.”

Granny paused to listen, then responded lightly, “And good morning to you, by the way. Luke and I are visiting.”

Granny nodded, glancing at me, “You can leave for work now. I’ll see he gets to school on time.”

After another pause to listen, Granny shook her head, “Well, actually, that agreement sunsetted three months ago, when Luke turned eighteen. Legally, he is free to visit me anytime he pleases. And right now, I am discussing some of

his rights under the Vogel Family Trust, which means you will politely butt out, thank you.”

“What he tells you or does not is entirely his choice. If I find you have pressured him, you know the consequences. And you know I won’t hesitate to invoke them.”

“I’ll count that as a correct guess. Yes, Susan, that is my plan for Luke, but again, you will not discuss that with anyone, not even Shane,” Granny warned. “That’s the burden of making correct guesses around me as Family Trustee. If you want to visit more, see me on your time, not Luke’s. As you pointed out, he has limited time or he’ll be late to school. ’Bye, now.”

I looked at Granny as she carefully but casually put the receiver back on the charger. “You wanted her to call now, just so you could have that conversation with her.”

She smiled at me. “That will have your mother thinking and stewing in a good way. So, when she asks you anything about our conversation, just tell her she has to take it up with me.”

“And now I know the answer to my question without asking again. I say nothing to Nick.”

“Nick can be told I have given you the rings to use, and whatever else he correctly guesses,” Granny told me, “but nothing more until the day you wed or I die, whichever comes first.”

“I’ll keep the secrets because I love you, Granny,” I told her. “I don’t want you to ever die.”

“We all die, some in our proper time and turn, some not,” she told me. “I just want to live long enough to see my two grandsons-in-love tie the knot and perhaps become parents after that. Do you want to drive the Mustang, or shall I?”

I stood up. “Of course, I want to drive, but I need to go put school clothes on.”

“Clean cargo shorts, clean shirt, clean socks and shoes. You look just fine for school to me,” she looked me over. “You have your wallet and driver’s license?”

I nodded and smiled.

“The world will not come crashing down if Lucas Dustin Nevin wears a tank top to school,” Granny asserted, sliding two other photos in front of me.

One showed boys and girls cross-dressed in clothing from the early 1960s. The other showed boys and girls in sheer shirts and dark eye makeup of 1980s Glam Rock. The girls wore black bras and bustier tops underneath their see-through glam rock shirts.

"That's me and the boy next to me is my Ethan," Granny touched two faces in the first photo in turn. "Two generations of this family fought hard for the relaxed dress code you kids now enjoy. And wearing that tank top is not only your right, but also homage to our past protests against tyranny."

"Why the cross-dressing in that photo? What was the point, besides being fun?"

"We got all the boys and girls in our high school to do it," Granny told me. "By the time we did it for two days in a row, most teens in the whole state were doing it. It won girls the right to wear pants and for boys to wear jeans to high school, for the first time ever."

"And the see-through glam rock shirts and eye makeup?"

"They won the right for boys to wear tank tops and girls to go sleeveless," Granny told me. "The boys in that photo are Nick's dad, your dad and your uncle Dane; a freshman and two seniors."

"My dad was a dress-code protestor?" The idea shocked me first and then steeled my resolve.

"Not just your dad," Granny grinned, tapping the image of a girl in a black bustier and hot pants under her see-through glam rock shirt.

"Oh my God! That's my mom. I'm so wearing tank tops to the end of school."

"That's the spirit!" Granny told me, and then once again waited me out.

I looked at her and knew there was more but not to the last two photos. She had all the photos fanned out in front of me, really old ones and the newer ones. It was guessing time for me. I took a breath, considered the fan of photos and said, "Our family's been activists for personal choice and social justice from the very start. Haven't we? And when I wear tanks tops, come out or do whatever, I need to hold to our Vogel family values. I need to be out and proud."

"And smart enough to pick our battles wisely," Granny advised. "So, let's start with tank tops."

Nick

Birthday or not, the two horses in the corral still had to be fed, and early in the morning at that, but feeding them also usually meant seeing Luke first thing in the morning. So, of course, I showered, shaved, put on cologne and then went shirtless just the same to do that chore. I had to be my very best for him, birthday or not. I went early because Luke had fed them without me earlier in the week, the day Granny gave him the antique rings and dropped him off to school in a tank top. He looked so sexy in it, but even at school we had to be careful because of the Mormon kids we both knew. So, I had to look as sharp and sexy for him as I could on my birthday.

That morning, I did not see Luke down at the corral and ended up feeding the horses alone, my personal grooming efforts a waste on their equine sensibilities. I lingered until I suddenly smelled a whiff of hot, fresh pancakes coming from Granny's apartment above the carriage house. The enticing aroma soon made me abandon waiting for Luke and go to Granny's, opening her unlocked door, bounding up the stairs, and calling ahead, "Hey, Granny, it's just me, the Birthday boy."

As quickly as I topped the last step and entered the small great room, I saw Luke sitting shirtless at the table across from Granny, the small table loaded with all my most favorite breakfast foods. My eyes were torn between the love of my life looking deliciously sexy and the food: sourdough pancakes, sliced strawberries, homemade whipped cream, bacon, fried ham, buttermilk biscuits and sausage gravy, and steamy hot chocolate, Mexican style.

I kissed Granny on the cheek and then more thoroughly kissed Luke on the mouth as I sat down in the chair on the end between them, the other side of the table being against the apartment wall. Each offered me a hand, and Granny nodded for me to say grace, which I did, "Lord God, thank you for this food and my two favorite people in this world. Protect Granny and keep her strong. Protect Luke and help us find ourselves together forever with your blessing. Amen."

I had what I thought was a small helping of everything offered on the table. My plate ended up stacked much fuller than I intended. Granny grinned at me and shook her head.

I took a couple of bites of different treats, made sure I chewed and swallowed before observing, "We have our to-do list, we have those cool antique rings, and we have this great breakfast, so what else is on your mind, Granny?"

Granny smiled at me. "You know me too well."

"And?" I asked after enjoying and swallow a couple more bites.

"You two are going to have both houses pretty much to yourselves for an extended amount of time today," she gently reminded us.

"You don't have to remind me, Granny," I assured her, gazing long and hard at Luke.

Granny waited until I looked her way again. "I have a really big favor to ask of both of you during that time when you are here alone, free of spying eyes, as you call them."

"Whatever it is—"

Granny stopped me with a single shake of her head. "Listen carefully before you agree. I have good reasons that will serve you well, but what I ask will not be easy for either of you."

Luke gave me a warning look. He had told me what he could of his private visit with Granny earlier in the week. She made him promise to keep secrets from everyone, including me. I gave her my eyes and waited for her to go on.

"Based on what you've told me and how I have seen you interact, both of you are still virgins," she told us. Before I could speak, she added "And no, jerking off does not count, and no, we are not discussing that further right now. The point is that when you do, your behavior toward one another will change. You will give off little tells here and there. Trying to avoid those tells just gives off other ones. I will know it. Ethan and Derek will know. And most importantly, Luke's parents will know it. I think they will still follow the path we are nudging them toward, whether you have real sex before dinner or after, but waiting gives you coin to spend in sealing the deal."

"You want us to wait to have sex until after dinner tonight," Luke sighed heavily, gazing at me.

"I want you to succeed in the hopes and dreams you have shared with me," she shook her head. "What I am simply saying is that you have waited this long because you feared losing one another. How about waiting just a little more to give yourselves the best chance to stay together and bring Luke's family along? Can you wait a few more hours out of hope instead of fear?"

I looked at Luke for the longest time, and he at me. Finally, we both nodded, and I said, "We will do what you ask, Granny. We promise because we love you and have faith in you."

Granny smiled, but shook her head. "Don't promise, just give waiting a try. I won't be angry if you don't wait. I just think that if you can and do wait, it will make a difference. I am counting on our plan jarring them back to their senses, and sensitivity toward you two and your love. And if you can't wait all day, so be it, just try to wait until all the work we have to do is done."

Luke nodded. "No promises, just our best efforts. You sound like Coach before a meet."

Granny smiled and nodded. "Treat today like a swim meet and dinner as the final wall to touch. And one last thought on the matter: Do you really want your first time to be a rushed quickie?"

Luke and I looked at one another for several seconds before we both shook our heads.

After that, conversation turned to our day's agenda, what was on the menu for dinner later in the evening, but mostly, we ate quietly. Luke and I had a lot to think about due to that one simple promise and how that was going to change our whole day for us.

I got up to help with clearing off. Granny took the plates from my hands and pressed something else into one palm. I looked at what she put there and hardly believed my eyes: car keys. I had spent the last two years borrowing one of her vehicles but never having one of my own. I needed a car for our plans that day, but those keys had a Cal Bears key fob on the key ring.

Granny said, "Your first present of the day is parked in the alley behind the carriage house and I think you will like it. You and Luke go take it for a spin while I clean up. There's time before the day's schedule starts to stack up. So, go."

I kissed her, thanked her and then took Luke by the hand before rushing out and down the stairs. We had to go through the carriage house and past an antique carriage and an antique touring car, both with wooden spoke wheels. What I found in the parking area against the back of the carriage house, once outside, was a used but newer Ford F-250 pickup with an extended cab, lift kit and chrome lettering proclaiming its four-by-four drive-train status. It was even navy blue.

Luke and I looked it over thoroughly before we got in. We noted the long bed and the fifth-wheel mount in the bed, which meant it was all set up to pull our fifth-wheel horse trailer, a boat or even a travel trailer. All of those were

things both of us meant to have someday. By the time we finished checking it out, Granny had come down and was watching us with a big grin.

"Thank you so much," I told her, rushing to hug and kiss her without crushing her. I immediately pulled back and asked, "How can you afford to buy me something that expensive?"

Granny shared a smile and a slight nod at Luke. He said, "The Vogel Trust is about more than these two old houses. Our families are pretty rich, but it's all tied up in the trust. Everyone gets their piece of the pie, so to speak, when they turn eighteen. You can have your yearly trust fund stipend paid each month, each quarter of the year or once a year, after you do the paperwork."

"Cool," I said, only partially listening. When Luke finished, I asked, "Want to go for a ride?"

I saw that ignoring his careful answer annoyed Luke, but my persistent smile made him smile back. He glanced at Granny, accepted her nod and nodded to me as well. "Sure, let's go."

I grinned at Granny. "Thanks again."

"Just remember to stick to the plan, boys, or more than this ride will turn into pumpkins."

"I promise," Luke answered instantly.

"Me, too," I agreed. "We can have some fun and still stick to the plan."

I climbed up into the cab on the driver's side and Luke got in on the passenger's side. The real leather seats felt good against our bare backs. I noted that the center seat also had a shoulder harness. I looked at Luke and said, "If everything goes right this evening, I want you strapped in there, right next to me when we take her out for a spin."

Luke nodded at the center seat as he buckled into the door-side seat, lifting his gaze to mine, "If there was no chance of it messing up our plans, of us being seen too soon, I'd sit there now."

We drove around the neighborhood slowly, well within the speed limit, but both of us wanted to take it out onto the freeway and let it roar. There just was not time, not yet. Instead, I eventually ended up in front of our two old houses and parked along the sidewalk.

"Is there any chance of my being your ride to church this morning," I asked Luke as he got out and down from the truck, "Especially since I plan on attending?"

Luke shook his head. "Let's stick to the plan, so we don't mess up."

I looked at Luke's veined forearms as he leaned against the open truck door, then at my own. "We have an hour to kill before we have to get ready for church, so let's spend it together."

"What do you have in mind?" Luke asked, already getting into the truck again.

"Let's go get our first tattoos," I grinned.

"That'll take a lot longer than an hour. We don't want ink that looks rushed, sloppy."

"Not if we do them in henna first to make sure they're what we want for keeps," I assured him.

Luke's worried look instantly turned into a grin. "Great idea. The design we have in mind will still freak my family out, henna or not."

As quickly as Luke buckled himself in, we were off to get wrist tattoos bearing one another's name in henna and a mind to make them ink later, if we liked them there.

Luke

I made sure to leave space next to me on the pew for Nick when I sat down with my family for church. Teenage Mormon boys took care of setting up the sacrament table for church. Older guys my age would bless it, while the youngest teenage boys would distribute the blessed bits of bread and tiny cups of water to the congregation. When asked to be one of those to bless the bread and water that Sunday, I politely refused. Before I had to explain I was expecting a guest for church, Nick appeared in the entryway, dressed in a dark blue suit. He looked extra hot that way.

My dad got up to greet Nick. My dad's twin brother left his seat of honor on the stand to go down and personally greet Nick. Everyone in my family and extended family knew exactly who Nick was and the threat he posed to their plans for me. I was good at puzzles but not human faces, which could also be puzzles. I depended on Nick for that, but I knew hypocrisy when I saw it. Uncle Dane could no longer hide from me his resentment and rage for the boy who changed his whole life so much. I shook Nick's hand, "You came, Nick. That's so cool. Thank you."

The words “visitors welcome” stood out on the front of our Mormon Church and all others, right under the church’s long name, but some visitors were more welcome than others. Visitors who brought big problems when they came were less welcome. Visitors they saw as a threat were welcomed with fake, angry smiles. That was the greeting Nick got.

Nick smoothly ignored every unwelcome glare over a fake smile that he got. His eyes were on me, and my eyes were mostly on him. I could not ignore the stir he caused, and I wanted to savor it as the best Sunday in church ever for me. They were finally getting some payback.

Sitting next to Nick without touching him was torture, but I felt the pressure of his shoulder and arm against mine through the fabric between us. That was contact enough with him for the time being. When the bits of blessed bread and tiny cups of water in memory of Christ were served, I showed Nick how to partake of each. Nick already knew, but showing him so openly made it impossible for other church-goers to not stare right at us.

Visitors were normally offered what other Christians called “communion” and Mormons tagged “sacrament.” Mormons only denied it to members on their bad list, but never to visitors. No one stopped me from sharing the bread and water with Nick, but it angered a lot of haters.

I replayed the memory and smiled through two long, dull sermons. The pressure of Nick’s body next to mine helped me sit through the boredom. I wanted to feel that same pressure in private and without the clothes. From time to time, we would pull back the sleeve cuff and let one another secretly peek at the fresh henna tattoos on the underside of our left wrists. The rest of the time we would scroll things to see or read on his phone or mine. I had the Mormon scriptures on the top page of my phone, so that I could open them before letting anyone else see the screen.

My leg started twitching toward the end of the boredom, until Nick put his hand on my knee, calming me instantly with his touch. Dad glared at us, but Mom’s face softened. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she did not wipe them away. Her tears confused Dad, but not me.

I had heard Granny’s end of the conversation three days before. On the way to school, Granny had told me more about the trust and the trustee. The trustee decided who lived where on what Vogel Trust property and that most of the extended family lived in houses owned by the trust. My parents got almost a quarter of their monthly income from the trust. Some pretty strict rules went

with accepting the money, especially the money they got for each of their kids under age eighteen. Mom knew that Granny was grooming me to be the next trustee. That alone had to have her rethinking all sorts of things about her relationship with me.

Top of the list, as Granny had suggested to me, was the idea that I was a family asset and not a burden. Second was the fact that I would be getting my next monthly stipend and that they owed me three months of it, if I were to demand it paid back. But mostly, Mom had had three days to think about the fact that Dad and she were losing their tight grip on me. And Dad knew none of it.

After the worship service, there was more church to go, a lot more. We did not plan to stay. My uncle, the bishop, caught us in the foyer going for the glass entry doors. He said, "I was hoping to visit with the two of you in my office, Luke, Nick."

My uncle was more than the bishop; he was our high school choir teacher. He was boring, but he knew his music. I now knew his homophobia included himself. His classes were never full, and I suddenly knew why. His life was a lie, an angry fiction made up to hide from the hurt he still felt. His unhappiness affected his whole life, his teaching and his music. The look I gave him as I suddenly understood him made him blink at me, then avoid my eyes, which really surprised me.

I said, "The deal was that if Nick came for sacrament meeting, I'd go with him to try out his new truck. It's his birthday today, you know. He turned eighteen. We're both eighteen now."

"Maybe next time," Nick told the unhappy bishop. I saw Uncle Dane glance at Mom and she at him. She had obviously told him as her bishop what she couldn't tell Dad. He had to wonder what secrets of his Granny had shared with me. That was why he avoided my eyes. He knew.

By that time, my parents and the whole New Testament had gathered in the foyer. My dad started to step forward to get physical in trying to stop me, but my mother put her hand to his arm and shook her head. "It's Nick's birthday, Shane, and he did come to church."

She searched my eyes and then Nick's. I smiled at her, but then almost defiantly took Nick by the hand. Tears ran down her cheeks and she held my father back with her hand on his arm. She held Uncle Dane back with a stern look, but her eyes softened the instant they fell on me again, and she nodded at

the two of us. "Thank you for coming to church, Nick. We'll see you at dinner tonight. Happy birthday, Nick. I love you both."

That was nothing I ever expected to hear from her. I kissed my mother on the cheek, side-hugged her with one arm. I turned away, still holding Nick by the hand in front of everyone, and we left. This time, when we climbed up into Nick's new truck, I slid over to the center seat and buckled in right next to him. We shared a kiss as he started up the engine. He drove out with one hand on the wheel and his other hand in mine. We were officially out and proud of it.

Nick

Dressed down to cutoffs, shoes, gloves and no shirts, Luke and I spent most of Sunday afternoon supervising and helping work crews Granny hired to make some changes to the main house, the carriage house apartment, and one project involving Luke that had to be done before his parents got home from church. I had misgivings about that project, but both Luke and Granny insisted that we stick to our plan. Both felt that if his mom's change was real, she'd be on board with that project, like it or not. It'd be the litmus test of how deep that change of heart was for her.

Other than to visit with Luke and I when we first got home, Granny was gone most of the afternoon, out on a shopping spree with my mom and Grady, in a chauffeured limo no less. Among several stops, Granny had them help her check out a variety of nicer apartments in West Sacramento. While there, she texted me a photo that depicted a café surrounded by a wide covered veranda with men in couples and groups at the tables. There was gay rainbow flag on a pole over the café. The caption read:

Grady likes apt, hates outdoor gay café across street. Café is Ethan's fav.

Nice view, I texted back.

Luke grinned at my response, took my phone and added,

Luke 2 Granny, buy it.

LOL boys, will do.

"I wish I could see their faces when Granny explains to them who the condo is for," I told Luke.

Luke smiled and nodded. "She is being more than fair in the offer, all things considered."

By that point in the afternoon, Luke and I were tired, sweaty and pretty grimy from our efforts, but the work was done and the work crew of ten guys and girls was gone. I looked at Luke, and asked, "Think Granny would object to us sharing a shower? We got the work all done."

"Sure, as long as we save the sex for tonight after dinner," Luke told me. "We've waited this long, and I like the idea of our first time not being a quickie."

"So, no soapy hands in the shower?"

Luke grinned, "Why even shower together without that? Kiss, touch, enjoy, but don't come."

"So, which shower?" I asked, grinning back. "There're four in the big house and one in the apartment."

Luke closed his eyes. "I'm counting to a thousand. Be naked with the water on when I find you."

We hadn't played hide-and-seek together in years, but the erection in my cutoffs showed us both how much I liked his updated version. I kissed him on the mouth, sharing tongue, and then said, "Start counting. I'm outta here."

Figuring I had time, I stopped in the kitchen and grabbed some pre-packaged granola bars for us to snack on along with two bottled sport drinks from the refrigerator. I went up the back stairs from the kitchen and to the old-fashioned main bathroom on the second floor. It had an antique tub with claw feet and a circular shower curtain. When I got there, the water was running and the curtain was open just enough for me to see Luke standing naked in the running water, his big cock rock hard. He grinned at me, "You never said what to count by, so I used hundreds."

"Asshole," I grinned, setting down the food and stripping off cutoffs and shoes as fast as I could, my hard cock throbbing as fast as I could set it free.

"'Asshole' means 'bottom'," Luke snickered back. "That will depend on who wins the wrestling match after dinner."

I loved the sex games he kept turning our old kid play into.

"So, if I want to bottom first, I have to throw the match?" I asked, climbing into the tub and grabbing him by the cock for support as I did so. He instantly grabbed my cock back and pulled me to him. We kissed hard and deep, pausing several times for breath while slowly stroking one another's cocks and balls.

Finally, Luke pulled back his tongue from mine and said, "Winner gets to pick how the first time goes."

"Rules?"

Luke grabbed my balls and gently squeezed them. "Anything that doesn't spoil the mood is okay; anything that's a mood killer isn't."

I grabbed his balls and squeezed them a little harder than he had mine. Luke's cock throbbed and gushed a little pre-cum. He was angled just right for the shower water to not wash the pre-cum away. I looked into his eyes and asked, "Can I?"

"Lick, yes, suck, not yet," Luke told me. "Licking is foreplay, sucking is oral sex."

Luke had pigeon-holes for all sorts of factoids. They helped him negotiate life. But right then the ones he was using on me had me hornier than hell for him. I instantly went down on him and licked the pre-cum from the corona of his cock. My tongue work made his cock gush more pre-cum, but before I could lick his cock any more, Luke pulled me to my feet. "No more of that or we won't be able to stop. Kiss me and stroke me, but that's all right now."

I already did not want to stop, but I nodded my acceptance of his limits on our fun together.

Luke sometimes found loopholes in his promises as big as the Grand Canyon, but as far as he was concerned, he always kept them. Bent was not broken, not to Luke. Sucking his cock right then would break our almost promise, our implied promise. We owed so much to Granny, and she thought waiting a little longer would help Luke's parents accept us. Waiting would make later that night all the more fun and sexy. And if it helped our cause, so much the better.

After that, Luke and I kept one another hard with hand strokes and occasional pre-cum licks, but we did not let one another climax. We got out of the shower just as hot and horny for one another as we got into it. It was torture, but fun torture because it was a choice we made for ourselves.

Wrapped around the waist in bath towels, we put our cast off clothes in my room. While there, I got out the old, small jewelry box that Luke trusted me to hide for him and looked at the rings. I extended the box out for him to take but misjudged his grasp on it, and the box fell to the carpeted floor, spilling the contents.

Luke instantly bent down to gather everything back together and eventually stood up with the box, note and rings, along with two old-fashioned keys in his hands and a second hand-written note. The second note read, "Find the locks to doors that are not doors when you seek our safe harbor from prying eyes. Signed, Shane and Dane Vogel."

The identical keys were gold or gold-plated and had the same yellow and white gold chains on their heads as were on the gold wedding bands. Luke gazed at the key heads and read the note aloud again. He suddenly grinned, "The grandfather clock on the landing of the main staircase in each house has this same white and yellow gold chain effect on the door locks to the weights and chains."

Luke gave me the jewelry box with the first note tucked behind the remounted rings, tucking the second note in under the velvet ring mount. I put the box away in my socks drawer and Luke handed me one of the keys. I looked at the key head, edged in alternating gold chain and saw the array of five staggered bars or cylinders on it. "I have an idea, a guess, really."

Still wrapped in towels, too intrigued by our discovery to dress, we bounded down the main stairs of the old house to the landing halfway down. I easily slid my key into the lock of the glass door of the old grandfather's clock and turned it. Once I had the door open, I held the key with shaft and teeth down, head up. I positioned the five clock weights in the clock cabinet to match the pattern on the key head. Suddenly the hands of the clock turned around twice in opposite directions, arriving back to the correct time of day, then the clock suddenly clicked and opened into a recess in the landing wall, revealing a doorway and tight, stone steps curving down in a spiral.

Luke and I looked at one another. He nodded for me to go first, since it was my discovery. There was an old-fashioned light switch inside the narrow curving stairwell. I turned the key head handle and small electric wall lamps lit up down the stairwell. I went down slowly, carefully, with Luke right behind me. At the bottom, we found a narrow, antique door with an old-fashioned knob and keyhole. I inserted the key again, turned it and then the doorknob, opening the door. Again, I found an old-fashioned light switch, turned it and saw a large room light up that had to extend under both houses.

There were four antique round tables with six antique chairs at each, an old-fashioned bar with a brass boot rail and real brass spittoons, a mirror behind it, and rows of hard liquor in very old bottles to either side of the large, flawless

mirror. The very old painting above the mirror depicted men dancing with men and women with women in the same tavern-like room.

"The legendary Vogel Speakeasy," I guessed aloud. "It really does exist."

Luke nodded but his attention was on the antique player piano to one side of the bar. We stepped to it and immediately saw that it was electric and not powered by a foot treadle. Luke flipped the switch to activate it. A large cream-colored scroll of paper with square holes in patterns began to roll before our eyes. The piano keys depressed as if by unseen magic, and a slow, sentimental tune that had to have been popular during Prohibition and the 1920s started playing. Luke smiled at me. I said, "Want to dance?"

"Our towels'll slide off," Luke noted more than objected.

"Not if we take 'em off, first," I said, pulling mine off and draping it across the back of a chair.

Luke grinned at me and did the same with his towel. Both of our cocks instantly engorged and only got harder as we embraced, hand in hand and body to body in a slow, rhythmic two-step in time to the tune. I kissed him, sharing tongue, slow and easy in time to the music, lost in ourselves in our love and the old-fashioned piano music.

"You might want to consider putting your towels back around you," we suddenly heard Coach Givens voice direct us. "Nick, your father is helping Granny down the stairs, even as we speak."

"Too late," Granny corrected him as we broke apart to face the coach and inadvertently both my father and Granny. "But it would still be nice to put those towels on, anyway."

Luke and I scrambled to put the towels snugly around our waists, both of us blushing clear down to our navels. As soon as we were wrapped, Granny stepped to us, put an arm around each of us at the waistline and said, "Don't be embarrassed. We aren't. We intruded in on your romantic moment uninvited; the mistake is ours, not yours. We'll just know to knock first before barging in like that, won't we Ethan, Derek?"

"Or text ahead," Dad suggested. "The speakeasy has its own electronics repeater array."

Derek added, "Smart phones are the electronic doorbell of the new century."

Dad grinned at the two of us younger guys. "Now that Derek knows about the speakeasy, I think it could be a toss-up as to which couple will be using it at

any given moment. There has to be some benefit to keeping it clean and maintained all these years.”

I looked at Dad, who was carefully watching my face more than Luke's. He had just outed himself to me, officially, and as casually as if he had just ordered a pizza for delivery. No big talk, no long explanations. Just talking as if I always knew what I had long suspected about him.

Coach smiled from beside the player piano, touching control buttons. The music stopped. We heard a whirring noise as the old scroll rolled up, replaced by a different one: Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*. Coach grinned at us as we recognized the tune. "I couldn't resist. It's Ethan's and my theme song. That's dance music."

"And now, you will have a lot more help keeping it up," Granny nodded to Dad after smiling at Coach, then glanced at us, "Won't he, boys?"

"Sure thing," I agreed, mind still seething more than I let on.

Luke also nodded, his eyes and attention on me, "Absolutely."

"Dad," I said, stopped and took a breath, then tried again, "Luke and I are boyfriends and plan to be more than that soon. I thought I should be honest with you about us. That's what family does, right, Dad? Be honest with one another about personal relationships, right?"

"Ouch," Granny grinned at my dad, her son. "Burned by your own son over what you thought he couldn't handle. I guess it sucks to be you, son."

Dad grimaced and nodded. "I guess I deserve that."

I shook my head, successfully fighting back real tears. This was a good moment, and I didn't want to spoil any of it, but I also had all those times that I had to bottle my feelings around Mom or her current boyfriend. I had learned to wait until I could talk to him or to Granny. All of those bottled up feelings had just been uncorked. "What I want and deserve is a hug and a kiss from my two dads, my real parents, and no more bullshit about not being a couple."

Dad and Coach immediately stepped to me and hugged me between them, each of them kissing me on a cheek, Coach fighting back tears of his own.

I looked at Coach and then gently tore into him. "You are still my coach, Pops, but I get to give you your family title since you never claimed it as you should have. Right, Pops?"

"You can call me 'Derek,'" he told me with a little smile. "I'm not a big fan of 'Pops.'"

"Nope," I shook my head, keeping my face somber. "You are more than just 'Derek' to me and you know it. You always have been, so suck it up and let me call you 'Pops.'"

"I like 'Pa' better," Coach told me, putting one of his big hands to my cheek, his eyes serious. "But to be clear, you are not angry with me because your dad moved out to be with me?"

"No, Pa, I'm not," I sighed, slowly shaking my head. I decided to keep that point light by teasing, "Dad has much better taste in men than Mom does. And I want you as my parent."

"Thanks," Pa laughed with a wink. "Ever since your dad and I became a couple, I have thought of you as my son. I just feared you'd hate me if you knew he moved out because of me."

Dad looked at me and said, "I didn't move out just to be with Derek. That was the sweet part of the deal, but not the real reason. We knew then that you two were gay like us. People would have blamed it on Derek and me, not simply accepted that two generations of men in the same family could be organically gay. So, I moved out, downplayed the fact that we knew you were gay, and we kept our relationship mostly secret to not bring too much attention to you two."

Granny added her thoughts, "Your mother played it all up in the custody hearing, and that judge bought all of her good mother bullshit. I am glad you don't resent him for what he did for you."

"So, do Derek and I get a hug and a kiss from our future son-in-law?" Dad demanded of Luke.

"Sure," Luke told him, letting the two of them lavish a sandwich hug on him and a kiss on each of his cheeks, "But we haven't formally asked each other yet."

"Formalities are for formal occasions," Pa added as he joined the group hug. "Here it's just family and no pretenses."

Dad looked at Granny and said, "The five of us are all here, so how did Star and Grady take the change in status?"

Granny smiled, "All the details will have to wait until dinner, but I will tease you boys, all four of you, with one detail: Grady got to find out up close and personal why my rented chauffeur came with us and did not stay with the

car. He was not very happy to find it out, either, especially since I made a point of hiring a gay driver, and Grady is nothing if not a homophobe.”

“You’re not gonna dish any more than that until dinner?” I demanded with my best grin.

Granny grinned back, patting my cheek, “Of course I will dish more—five great big bowls of ice cream—just as soon as you two go upstairs get some cartons out of the freezer. Whatever else you two do down here after dinner or later, the hard liquor stays on the shelf and out of your hands. Promise?”

“Promise,” Luke nodded.

“Promise,” I nodded a moment later, gazing at the shelves of bottles. I knew when to admit defeat and changed the subject, “Which ice cream flavors? I had all new cartons stocked.”

“All of them,” she said, “It’s not like I can actually spoil your appetite now, can I?”

I smiled at Luke and said, “Ice cream is an okay substitute for what I really want, even more than old liquor.”

Luke grinned at me, kissed me, eventually telling me, “Good answer.”

Luke

Eating ice cream shirtless while leaning against the speakeasy bar turned out to be a good thing. I spilled several droplets of melted ice cream right down my pecs and abs in my hurry to enjoy the treat. Each time I spilled some down my front, Nick would grin at me then lean forward and lick the splotch right off my skin. He would then “spill” some down his front and I would lick it off his skin. I liked the taste of his skin, even without the ice cream. But the little game was fun.

Granny and Nick’s two dads would just laugh at us, Mr. Vogel and Coach kissing one another every time either Nick or I licked ice cream off the other one. But when Nick spilled some down near the edge of my towel and it started to seep inside, Nick’s dad said, “That one’s out of bounds, boys. Use a napkin on yourself for that one, Luke.”

“We need to keep this game family friendly, boys,” Nick’s pa agreed.

I grabbed a paper napkin and complied. “Spills” below the belly button all got wiped away, not licked away, after that. It was the most fun I had ever had

during family time. I was sad when the ice cream was gone and so was our time to enjoy it.

"I wish I had a dad like you two," I told Nick's two dads as we washed up the spoons and bowls in the sink behind the bar. "Eating so much ice cream, listening to fun music and flirting with my boyfriend right in front of you is so cool. You have no idea."

"You do have a dad like us two," Coach told me, tussling my hair. "You have us. And we know exactly how much fun it is to flirt in front of a loving parent, right, Mom?"

Coach and Granny exchanged smiles, and I knew Nick's dad and the coach had her full approval, just as much as Nick and I did. I loved all their approval, but I wished my own family could accept me and my relationship with Nick the way his family did.

Coach went on, "No more 'Coach' or 'Mr. Vogel' for you. It's either 'Dad and Pa' or 'Ethan and Derek' from now on. You have your own dad, of course, but you are our son-in-love now and will be our son-in-law after you two man up and pop each other the question."

I liked the idea and nodded, but did not try calling either one of them by those new names. Nick smiled at me, kissed away my self-doubt and promised his dads, "We'll work on that one."

Nick was still eyeing the bottles of alcohol on the shelves to either side of the large mirror when he noticed something and exclaimed, "Half of these bottles have 'Vogel Brewery' on the label. Do we... does the trust own the brewery?"

"That's the source of much of our wealth," Granny nodded. "This speakeasy was a hopping business back in the days of prohibition. That, and the fact that several Vogel and Nevin boys ran bootleg for our then illegal brewery all throughout northern California. It's all legal now."

I laughed at the thought. "My parents must love that bit of family history."

Nick's dad shrugged and smiled at us, "They both used to laugh at it a lot."

"My father and grandfather were brew masters," Granny added, glancing at the time. "The caterers will be here soon, Ethan. Do you and Derek mind going up to watch for them?"

Ethan nodded, picking up the leftover ice cream cartons. "We'll put these away, too, Mom."

As soon as the last footsteps of Ethan and Derek going up the spiral stairs faded, Granny pointed to a door opposite the open one. "Both of your keys open that door as well. The stairs lead up through the grandfather clock on the landing in the other house. The same clock weight combination will work on that side as well. The doors to the right of the bar lead to the bathrooms, which include showers as well as sinks and toilets. The door on the left of the bar leads to a row of underground bedrooms and a long hallway that ends in a staircase right under the carriage house cottage stairs, exiting in the carriage house from inside the tack room. Ethan has a key, and so do I. Now each of you have one, too."

"Can we spend our first night together down here?" Nick asked his grandmother.

"Of course," she smiled. "Just make sure your dads know that you are staying here tonight. And bring some fresh clothes down for the morning."

We escorted Granny through the long tunnel to a fairly large sitting room under the carriage house. Granny told us, "This was the official guest entrance into the speakeasy, the only entrance known to most people. Getting to wait down here was still no guarantee of getting in, but they did let people buy drinks here while they waited."

"All this was built underground after the rest of it as a speakeasy?" Nick asked.

Granny shook her head. "It was put to use that way during Prohibition. It was built by the Vogel twins after they made their fortune so that they and their gay friends had a safe place to socialize in a past and very homophobic era. Keeping it up and keeping it secret is part of being trustee."

She showed us the door up and the stairs into the carriage house, and how to secure both top and bottom doors from inside. Nick and I followed and parted company with her at her front door. We raced back to the house, went up the back stairs from the kitchen, and got dressed for the evening in black slacks and the black lace shirts. Nick and I gathered such things as we might need to spend the night together from Nick's room. I found the lube where he told me it'd be, along with an anal douche kit Nick hadn't mentioned. When I showed him that I had found it, he shrugged and said, "Feel free to use it; I already have. And I'll do it again, after dinner."

I grinned. "I have a pocket kit in my stuff, and I used mine, too. I wanted to make sure I knew how to use it in front of you. I know we need use them again after dinner."

“Thinking about getting to do whatever we want with one another has me a bit nervous.”

I nodded. “Me, too. We can take it slow and just sixty-nine each other, if you like.”

“We can talk more about that later,” Nick told me, adjusting the front of his pants and adding, “when it does not instantly get me so hard it shows.”

I grabbed him by the cock right through his pants, guided his hand to where my dick pressed against my pants, and said, “I am glad talking about it makes us both this hard. Too bad if we have hard-ons all evening, just as long as we finally get to use them tonight down in the speakeasy.”

We took what we had put together for our sleepover in the speakeasy down the stairs to the grandfather clock, opened it, set the weights, and entered the spiral stairs to descend, but this time, I closed the clock door behind us and locked it as Granny had shown us how to do. It was a stout door, and even if someone discovered that it was there, it would be hard to get through.

Nick and I had picked the second of three bedrooms in a row along the carriage house tunnel. We liked the king-sized bed, the mirror on the ceiling, the soft lighting and old-fashioned feel of the room. We eyed one another while making the bed with the fresh linens set out for us, looking for little pretexts to touch fingers or kiss one another. Leaving our things in the room, we smiled up at one another in the ceiling mirror and kissed in view of it. We thought we looked really sharp in the black see-through lace shirts. I knew the shirts would test my mother and anger my father, but this was about us and what we really wanted, not them.

There were voices coming from the formal dining room when we relocked the clock door on the landing and went down the final half-flight together, hand in hand. The caterer was serving salads around the table. Granny was at the head of the table. Nick's two dads sat to her right; my parents to her left. Two chairs and table settings were at the foot of the table, chairs close but manageable for two guys in love, like us. Nick and I wanted this dinner party to be small, intimate and with us firmly in control, so it would just be the seven of us, no one else.

We walked to the table and lifted our joined hands over the backs of the two chairs, sitting down in the same moment so that our hands held tightly together. The gesture was not lost on my parents or Nick's family. Granny smiled, as did Nick's two dads. My mom nodded in acknowledgement of us, but my dad just stared, expressionless. But Dad was often hard to read.

"Happy Birthday, Nick," his dad told him. Nick's dad and Derek knew about us wearing the shirts made for Uncle Dane and Nick's dad, but seeing us in them made him tear up, just the same. But we could see the pride in his face for us.

"Happy Birthday, son," Derek told him, instantly drawing my parents eyes to him.

"Happy Birthday, sweetie," Granny nodded.

My parents each murmured, "Happy Birthday, Nick."

Neither of them challenged the see-through black lace of our shirts. I'd had the tank top discussion with both of them already. I told them I'd seen their protest photos. They didn't fight me on wearing tank tops to school or anywhere after that. Our see-through lace shirts were mild compared to what they wore as dress-code protestors themselves and they knew it.

"Happy Birthday, my love," I added, and then kissed him full on the mouth in front of everyone.

Granny and Nick's two dads beamed. My mom sighed and nodded; my dad just stared.

When Nick and I finished the kiss and turned our eyes on my parents, my dad appeared ready to bolt for the door, restrained by the lightest touch of my mother's hand on his arm. Mom looked at Nick and politely inquired, "Your mom and Grady are not joining us? Are they, ah, ill?"

My parents rarely mentioned Nick's family, but my mother's query told me that she knew perfectly well what drunks Nick's mom and stepfather were. Nick shared a glance with me, his eyes telling me that he had similar thoughts. He said to Mom, "Mom and Grady no longer live here. I am eighteen. Her custody of me ended at midnight, so they have a new place in West Sacramento. Granny helped them move in today. I did not invite them to my birthday dinner."

"What made them pick West Sacramento?" Dad wanted to know.

I grinned at him. "Actually, Nick and I helped Granny pick it out for them. Nick and I really liked the neighborhood. It's very friendly. Do you have a problem with West Sacramento, Dad?"

Mom glanced at Nick's dad, shook her head. "We used to like West Sacramento just fine. Your dad and I used to double date a couple we knew and dined there many times."

Granny spoke up. "The trust is paying for the apartment and it will be another family property, so Nick's mom will be compensated the rest of her life for giving us Nick. I chose West Sacramento because we really don't have much trust property there. And Star needs to learn to accept our Nick for who he really is. I really hope West Sacramento will do that for her."

Dad turned his gaze from Granny to me. He cleared his throat and tried to choose his next words carefully, "We sort of noticed how empty your bedroom looks at the moment."

"That's because Luke is moving in with me," Nick told them. "We are both eighteen, now. All of his things are put away in our bedroom. He won't need that room anymore."

Dad turned red, Mom looked pale, and her hold on Dad's arm tightened, but she nodded. "Your father and I discussed that possibility before we came over," she told me, trying to control her emotions. "We are prepared to accept that arrangement without argument, son. We—I have always known how special Nick is to you. My soul struggles to accept what my heart already has: you love Nick and Nick loves you. It may not fit what the Church teaches us, but it does fit both of you. I accepted that kind of love between Dane and Ethan because I saw it happen. They fought falling in love until they couldn't resist one another anymore. But we were too involved in Dane's anguish to accept it when it happened again with you. I have lost five years of your life trying to make you fit into a Mormon square hole when you are clearly a round peg. I won't waste another day that way."

The look on Dad's face puzzled me until I realized that he was looking at Derek and that Derek was looking back. Derek shrugged, "I've known about Ethan and Dane's past for a long time. Ethan never stopped loving Dane; he just made room in his heart for me, too."

My parents both looked at Nick's dad, who just nodded affirmation of what Derek had said. They suddenly lowered their eyes, Derek's words and Ethan's nod somehow hitting them hard and in ways they were not ready to deal with. I stood, reached for my mother's hand and assured her, "Thank you, Mom, for what you just said. I love you so much for saying it."

She raised my hand to her lips and then pressed it to her cheek. "That's the first time you have told me that since that night when I saw you kiss Nick and made all the wrong choices. I wish I could take all of that back and have memories of better choices on my part. You have always loved Nick, and we

knew it. We fought it but it was not our battle to fight. It was not what we wanted for you or what the Church wants for anyone. But it's not about wants; it's about needs. The need to be loved, the need to be understood and accepted. You're all grown up and I need you now more than you need me, so it's my turn to do the accepting. Now, I just need for you to be happy so that you can let us be part of your life together."

"That is why you are here and Nick's mom is not," I told them. I waited, watched their faces. Both nodded their acceptance. I finally saw Dad soften his grimace into a tentative smile. "We have something special planned before we eat and hope you will sit through it and accept it. We won't be offended if you can't, but we wanted to give you the choice to accept it or not."

I gently pulled my hand free of my mother's, reached into my pants pocket, and pulled out the old ring box. Dropping to one knee beside my chair, I took out the ring sized for Nick and showed it to him and everyone, saying, "Nick, I love you and want you to be mine. Will you marry me?"

"I love you, too, Luke. Of course I'll marry you," Nick accepted the ring as I slid it onto his ring finger. I returned to my chair and we kissed. Before anyone could say anything, Nick slid out of his chair and knelt, offering me the other matching ring, "Luke, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Nick, I love you more," I grinned as he slid that ring onto my finger. Once he was seated again and the box was back in my pocket, we kissed long and fully. Nick's family cheered and I heard my mother cheer as well. Once Nick and I parted lips and looked around, I saw that Dad's was more genuine. His eyes were on our heirloom wedding bands. He sighed deeply, nodding.

Mom asked us, smiling as best she could, "Have you set a date for your wedding?"

Dad suddenly gazed at her, easily pulled his sleeve free of her grasp and took her gently by the hand instead. She beamed at him, squeezing his hand again and again. She grinned at me.

"Mom," I said, speaking for Nick and myself, "We still need to graduate next month and then there's college. That means that Nick's my mission, my only mission. I'm swimming in college with him, not letting the Church treat me like a broken toy on a pretend mission. Nick gets me; he helps me grow. The Church has failed me on both counts. I just wanted it clear to everyone that I have found my true love and that marriage is part of our plan. We don't know when or where we will marry, but when we do, we will be sure to invite you and Dad to be there."

"No," Dad suddenly barked, then shook his head, lowering his eyes. "I mean, yes, of course, it's your right and no one else's to decide when to marry. But I want you to marry one another here at the Vogel Houses. Let's do things right by you two, for a change."

Everyone around the table startled and then clapped approval; I kissed Nick and we nodded.

Dad suddenly decided, "It's time for the neighbor fence to come down and stay down. We can have the wedding there and fill the shared backyards with chairs and people to see that special day for all of us. Will you two boys help me take it down tomorrow after school?"

The neighbor fence had been up ever since Nick and I were eleven, just after Gramps Vogel's funeral, when something caused a rift between our families. Nick and I never knew what it was and no one ever said. The fence was designed to go up and come down easily to accommodate shared and separate plans of the two families, but it had been up and stayed up for almost seven years. Nick and I nodded, Nick saying, "We can take it down now, if you like."

"No, that would mar this special evening. It can wait until tomorrow." Dad paused, then looked to Granny, "May I bless the food and this engagement?"

Granny nodded, and Dad offered her his hand. We all quickly linked hands around the table, everyone closed their eyes and bent their heads to focus on the words, everyone except Granny and me. We shared a smile and a wink before we closed our eyes to listen to the prayer.

"Dear Lord in Heaven," my father prayed, "please forgive this fool of a man for not seeing and rejoicing in the true love his son has for Nick and that Nick has for him. Thank you for sending Nick to us to heal the wounds of our family and to love our son. Continue to bless them, Lord, and give them added strength. Bless us through their love for one another. Bless this food to nourish us and strengthen us all in the holy name of thy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen."

I lost my fight against tears about halfway through Dad's prayer. I looked up after he finished to see everyone else in tears, happy tears, but with "the waterworks on" as Dad usually put it. Dad broke through the raw emotions and said, wiping his own tears on his free sleeve, "Let's eat."

Nick

Luke's dad smiled at the stare Luke gave him and said, "No, son. I haven't been kidnapped and replaced by aliens. But I have been expertly manipulated into waking up to my old self, thanks to Granny, with plenty of help from you two. I feel like Theoden being saved from Wormtongue. Just without wizards, magic or hobbits."

"There's the old Shane we used to know, full of allusions to his favorite stories." Granny told the rest of us, "He used to be his twin brother's best friend and closest confidant. Shane knew all of Dane's personal secrets. Didn't you, Shane?"

Luke did his best to appear surprised by what was said, but he didn't fool me. I guessed that Granny was filling his head with her secrets. The guilty little glance he gave me made sure of it, but I was okay with it. Luke was Granny's pick to replace her as trustee. I never wanted to be.

After the main dish was eaten and the caterers were clearing dinner plates, Luke looked at his father and asked, "Dad, why did the neighbor fence go up and stay up so long?"

His dad looked at us and said solemnly, nodding at us both, "This is as good a time as any to 'fess up on that one. The morning after Gramps Vogel's funeral, you were staying over in their apartment as you often did. Granny's door was open and so I went up without bothering to knock. You boys were eating one of her breakfasts in bed. I heard her tell you that your special love for one another was a gift from God. I almost interrupted but froze and stayed silent. I left; I was so angry. I resented everything about Nick even though I knew I shouldn't."

Luke's dad looked at me, "None of it was your fault, of course. I had spent four years of my life too deeply involved in my brother's personal life. Two years on our missions and the first two years of my marriage to Susan. Dane was ready to leave the Church to be with Ethan before we knew about Nick. I was ready to leave the Church over him, if it came to that. Then, Star confronted Ethan over her pregnancy with you. Dane was crushed and turned to the Church instead of away from it. He purged himself of everything and anything to do with Ethan. I supported him all the way in that abrupt change of direction for us; and Susan supported me."

Luke's dad blinked back tears, wiped his eyes, and went on, "You two boys were friends from your first visit together as toddlers. I still don't know how or

when young people know they're straight or gay. I just couldn't accept you two being gay so young, or Granny knowing it. The only thing I could think to do was put up the neighbor fence and never let Luke stay there again. I never said a word to anyone, not even Susan. Dane appeared to pray his gay away, so I meant to prevent Luke from becoming gay. When Susan saw you kids kiss and didn't want our son to end up like my brother, I let her fears hide my anger. But we were happiest when we supported my gay brother in being himself, not the phony super Mormon he now is. I want to be that happy, supportive person again. I still lost Dane to his wrath; I don't want to lose Luke, too."

Luke's mom nodded and put her hand to Luke's dad's face. "Thank you, Shane. Good choice."

Dad looked at Pa and said to Luke's dad, "How about letting Derek and me help you take that fence down after dinner, so you can stop thinking about it. This is a happy night. No more tears."

Luke's dad smiled at them and nodded, "I'd like that, Ethan. We used to be much better friends before... before Nick was born. I want to be better friends again, this time with both of you. We three dads have sons in common, now... always, really. We need to be friends and allies."

Just then the caterers wheeled in a serving cart with a large sheet cake, decorated for our engagement instead of my birthday. As the server got ready to cut it, Luke's dad protested, pulling his smart phone from his pocket. "No, no, thank you. Our sons have to cut that cake. No more special events between them without photos."

As Luke replaced the server behind the cake, cake knife in hand, the cute guy showed the two of us how to hold the knife handle and successfully wield it together, hand on hand. He smiled at us and we thanked him with smiles of our own. Luke's dad stood up and took several photos of the cake and then several of each serving we cut. He even snapped a shot of me kissing Luke.

Shane Nevin set his phone down, walked to us and took Luke's left hand in his and fingered the antique wedding ring on it. "Dane told me everything he knew about these rings. I'm glad Granny let you use them. And thank you, son, and Nick, for helping me to wake up to who I really am and who you really are. And, Susan, pardon the strong language, but fuck Church leadership for having their holy heads up their holy asses. We were for equal marriage once and will be again. One God, one savior, one love."

As Luke's dad started to drop Luke's hand, he suddenly saw a peek of the henna tattoo. He snickered gently and asked Luke, "May I see it, son?"

Luke opened the cuff of his sleeve and showed us all the design. "It's henna and Celtic runes for 'Nick.' We're still deciding if we want the design there or someplace else."

I opened my cuff and revealed my matching wrist tattoo. "Mine says, 'Luke.'"

Luke's dad nodded. "Simple, hideable and subtly out there. I, for one, like it just as you have it."

"Thanks, Dad," Luke smiled at him and at me. "You ever think about ink for yourself?"

"Actually, I did once," Luke's dad admitted. "Eight of the nine actors who portrayed *The Fellowship of the Ring* had their own take on the 'One Ring' poem tattooed to a butt cheek. I thought that was so cool. I just never had a slogan or a reason, until now."

Luke's mom laughed and shook her head. "I'm not getting a butt tattoo, not even for you."

Luke's dad laughed himself, and so did everyone else. "Well, not there," he persisted, suddenly unrolling his own sleeve to reveal the underside of a still fit forearm. "If we all agreed, I would have the five of us put it here and again in Celtic runes, like the boys: 'one love.'"

"I love you for the sentiment, dear, but it's not going to happen," Luke's mom laughed again, and everyone else laughed with her. To Luke, she said, "I like us this way better, too, son. Thank you for helping me find my way back. Nick, you are the best mistake your dad ever made, and obviously a miracle God sent to heal us all. Thank you for loving our son and helping him to help us back to sanity."

The words were not meant to sting, but they did, and I needed an answer from my dad. "So, which I am to you, Dad, a mistake or a miracle?"

Susan Nevin blushed and she said, "I was joking, and I see that I hurt you. I am so very sorry."

I shook my head. "You and I are fine, no worries, but I do want an answer from my dad."

Dad said, bluntly, "Susan had it right, son. You're my greatest hope and the cause of all my worst fears. I seemed to abandon you, and you forgave me. You could have been as bitter as Star, but you're not. Embrace it, savor it. Jesus did a lot of good, but you're my savior."

Pa said, "Well, team, the time trials are over for this family and we are the victors, thanks to our very best swimmers, almost nineteen years ago and now."

Everyone laughed at his vulgar reference to Luke's and my conception as "swimmers," although Susan Nevin laughed and blushed at the same time. After that, conversation turned to other, less memorable table talk as we ate the cake and strengthened our renewed family bond.

When the cake was gone and the caterers removed the dessert plates, Granny said, "Thank you all for coming. This little old lady needs to wander back to her cottage and get some rest."

Luke's dad looked surprised. "You are not moving back into the main house?"

She shook her head. "The cottage has been my home for almost nineteen years now. My Ethan died there, and I plan to do so also. Besides, I want Nick to have real memories of family with his two dads and with Luke in this house. But I would like to see you and Susan visit me in my cottage again, like you used to when Ethan was with us."

Luke's mom nodded. "I would like that, too."

The awkward moment came when Luke's parents left and Luke did not. His mom hugged him to her for the longest time, and he let her, melting into her warm embrace. Finally, she sighed, turned loose of him and smiled at me. I let her hug me and tell me, "We love you, too, Nick. We really do."

I nodded, "Thank you."

Luke's dad looked at his wife and then at my two dads. "The fence can wait until tomorrow."

"Or the two of us can still take it down tonight, if you're okay with that."

Luke's dad nodded. He smiled at Luke and me, and gave each of us a one-armed hug. "Good night. Don't be strangers to us. We want the fences in our hearts down, too."

"We won't," Luke promised. "We'll come visit you tomorrow."

Luke's parents looked at the two of us standing side-by-side one more time and then let Granny walk them out. They had accepted us as a couple and yet still struggled with the thing they could not mention, the two of us sharing a bedroom and one another. Luke all but collapsed into my arms the second they were gone from sight. We kissed. He murmured between kisses, "I love you so much."

"I love you more," I whispered back, stealing his usual line.

Moments later, thoroughly hugged, kissed and ready for greater privacy and intimacy, Luke and I left the dining room, went up the first half-flight of stairs, opened the clock door with my key and locked it behind us to descend the spiral stairs, one at a time yet still hand in hand.

Luke

Once down in the speakeasy, Nick and I promptly got our male douche kits and went to the bathroom. I did not have much shit to dump but Nick dropped a load to rival an elephant. I made sure he wiped thoroughly before using his kit again. I quoted a favorite gay webisode to him: "Nobody likes a fudgy bottom, Nick."

Once we had our asses irrigated, pants back up, and hands washed, we went back into the main saloon of the speakeasy. There, we let our hands wander a bit more freely as we kissed, but we took our time. Nick and I were excited about the moment, but a little nervous, too. When we parted lips, Nick said, "So, compared to Westley and Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*, how does our kiss stand up?"

"Rank amateurs, all of them." I grinned, trying to quote the movie, "Of all the greatest kisses that ever were or ever will be, our kisses leave them all far behind."

"Now you are just paraphrasing the movie, not quoting it," Nick grinned.

"They really need to redo the movie with two Westleys and no Buttercup," I observed, "but let's stop talking about the movie before we spoil seeing it again."

Nick nodded, fingering the highly textured black lace of my shirt, fingers touching skin beneath the lace. He started unbuttoning my shirt and let me undo his. He slid his hand into my shirt and gently yet eagerly groped my chest. "I love these pecs of yours."

We shared a smile and gently yet more urgently finished taking off one another's shirts and carefully laid them aside, now more mindful of the music from the electric player piano in the background. Derek had told us he pre-programmed it for us, tailored to our tastes in music. Once, stripped to the waist, we started dancing to a favored tune we had used to jack off to only days before. When the music faded and while we waited for the paper rolls to

change, we took off our shoes and socks, leaving our pants and boxer briefs on as we danced to the next, more vigorous tune a little more rapidly. The next time the player piano changed rolls, we took off our pants, ending up dancing nude together again after yet another tune.

From the first tune through to dancing naked, body to body, we were very aroused, the dancing only barely reducing our hard-ons. We kissed and felt one another up. I loved the feel of his pecs and nipples; he loved to grab my firm, muscled buttocks. We both loved to handle one another's cock and balls. As soon as the music faded again, I went down on him, gripped his butt cheeks in my hands and deep throated his cock. He knew I had gagged on a lot of bananas to get ready for the real thing. I gazed up into his eyes as I mouthed his big penis and sucked on it.

I loved the feel, the taste of his cock in my mouth. It was ten times better than I had ever imagined. No more bananas, no more jerk off fantasies for me; I had the real thing to do with as I pleased. I explored his dick with my tongue and lips, teasing him and pleasing myself at the same time. He trembled with pleasure as I unmouthed him just long enough to invite him, "So, face fuck me, lover boy, face fuck me hard."

Nick gently cradled the back of my head in his big hands and thrust his cock back into my mouth and down my throat. He went slow at first, gaining speed as he slowly got his thrusting rhythm in control. I kept my teeth from scraping his cock, lavishing each thrust with my tongue and lips. Having him in my mouth made me feel whole, real, complete.

All too soon, Nick pulled out of my mouth, reached down and pulled me to my feet. He kissed me long and hard, and then licked both of my nipples. He slathered his tongue down my abs and navel, tickling and teasing me, finally sinking to his knees. He mouthed my throbbing cock with an unrehearsed ease that surprised me, although he choked on my cock at first. He hadn't practiced as much as I had, but he quickly got the hang of deep throating me. Nick was way more spontaneous than me because he could afford to be. We both hated bananas by that point in our lives, but I could see in his eyes that he loved cock as much as I did. I, just as slowly, carefully started fucking his mouth, shuddering and moaning with pleasure.

After thrusting into his mouth several dozen times, I pulled back some but left the corona of my cock in his mouth to be polished by his tongue. I told him, "Table top or floor, I want to sixty-nine with you, now."

We ended up in the middle of a round, sturdy table with me on my back and Nick in push-up position over me. He rammed his mouth and throat down on my cock as I thrust my hips up to ram into that sensuous suction of his. The tricky part turned out to be getting his cock into my mouth. I had to turn my face to prevent getting jabbed in the eye, so I grabbed his erection and guided it into my mouth. Every joyous sensation of sucking and being sucked by him multiplied totally out of control. As much as I loved doing that with him, I finally pulled off his cock and said, “No more foreplay, Nick; take me to bed and fuck me, fuck me hard.”

We got off of the table almost instantly, and Nick led me by the hand to our bedroom. I got the lube as he turned down the covers. We slid in together, Nick pulling me to him and raising my legs and butt off the bed just like we had seen in a porno together. Nick licked my balls, then the space between them and my ass. Eventually he took a single, tentative tongue touch of my ass, then another. Moments later, he was swirling his tongue over my asshole like the pros in our favorite pornos—the ones we played more than needed to teach me what to expect.

I gasped with pleasure and my cock gushed pre-cum as Nick rimmed my anus with his tongue. “No more, Nick, just lube up and stick it to me. Go bareback. I want to feel you inside me, not fucking rubber.”

Nick obeyed my every word and within a few seconds he was gently, persistently pressing his cock against my anus to thrust it into me. It hurt a little at first, but the pain just made me hotter for him. We swam, we wrestled. We knew how intimate pleasure and pain were to one another. Again, his cock in me made me whole, made me better. “Fuck me, fuck me hard.”

It took Nick a couple of tries to find and hit my prostate gland with his cock, watching my reaction until I felt it, gasped with pleasure and nodded vigorously. Even then, he still missed hitting it just right from time to time but it still made me shudder and groan in pure pleasure. I watched his eyes and loved the look on his face as he fucked me as hard as he could. But once again, he pulled back. He grabbed me by the shoulders and rolled over in the bed, taking me with him so that I ended up on top of him.

“Now you fuck me and make me shoot all over my abs,” Nick told me. “Just lube up and go in.”

“That’s not going to happen, Captain America,” I refused his impatient demand. “I’m going to prep you and take my time.”

Nick protested, but I ignored him, and he let me wrestle him over so I could roll him up and spread his legs. I was not so shy about rose-budding him. It was something in pornos that really turned me on, and I loved licking his asshole just as much I as thought I would. And he loved it, too, gasping in delight when I pressed my tongue into his ass. I gently slapped his butt cheek and told him, "Good boy, no fudge, just sweet, clean ass to lick."

Nick giggled and then gasped as I licked a finger and slid it into his ass. "You get three fingers, one at a time, before I put my cock in you. I know you did not practice on your dildos as much as I did, did you?"

"I love it when you take charge like this, Luke," Nick confessed. Games were always easy for me to run, take charge of, as long as I knew all the rules in advance. Sex play just turned out to be my favorite game to direct. And I had watched enough porn to have a good feel for our rules.

Once I had finger-fucked Nick with all three fingers as promised, I lubed my cock and positioned it against his tight anus, gently but forcefully thrusting forward. His anal opening yielded under pressure and my cock slowly slid into him. Nick let out a yell of pure joy as I slowly went in all the way. I quickly found his sweet spot, the bulge of his prostate with my cock, but I still wanted to explore his ass with my erection and make all of it mine. I very slowly fucked him at first, but then he grabbed my buttocks in his hands and propelled me hard into him. "Fuck me harder, Luke; you know I can take it. Throw it to me."

I obeyed, loving the sensation of my shaft in him. He was tight and smooth, bucking up against me as I thrust down on him and into him. I only got a dozen good thrusts into him before my cock got urgent to unload. I started to slow down but Nick slapped my ass and pulled my buttocks down, thrusting my cock into him hard. "Go ahead and shoot it inside of me."

His inviting words literally took me over the edge and I came, gushing my seed into him. Almost but not quite in sync with me, Nick's cock erupted and he shot cum all over his own face and torso. As quickly as I finished coming, I licked the cum from his face and snowballed it back to him in a kiss. I collapsed against his torso, the rest of his cum load spreading out between us like too much mayo on slices of hot toast. We kissed and kissed for the longest time, and then lay still against one another, enjoying his warm stickiness between our torsos.

"That was so worth the wait," I assured him. "Thank you. Was it good for you?"

"Thank you," Nick answered me. "But don't relax too much. As soon as our cocks are good to go again, we are doing it all again."

"Good answer," I told him. "The best answer ever."

Nick

Granny, of course, texted us about mid-morning on Luke's phone, which was handier for me to reach than for him.

Don't worry about school. Both excused. Breakfast or not?

Luke and I were spooned together in the sheets in the gentle glow of dimmed lamps, my morning wood pressed against his spine. I gave him the phone and put my arm over him to grab his morning wood as he texted back.

Breakfast big yes. 15 to shower up.

Stay in bed. Text back when set up in saloon.

Sorry. Need 2 P.

Go pee, shower up and towel up. Be there in 10 with food.

"Sex in the shower while we clean up?" Luke invited me.

"I am not in the mood for quickies with you," I told him, "only take-our-time longies for us."

"Good answer," he replied. We got up, tossed the covers up and left for the bathroom, hand in hand, using the passage that went between the bar wall of the saloon and the speakeasy storage room, glancing at the door to the carriage house tunnel just to be sure we were alone.

I turned on the shower before we took turns taking a leak. We quickly brushed our teeth and gargled mouthwash so our first kiss of the morning would be sweet and fresh. We locked lips and entered the warm water while groping one another and wrestling tongues. Eventually, cocks quite hard, we lathered one another up and took care of getting cleaned up.

We had towels around us, erections firm against the fabric, when Luke realized he'd left his phone in the bedroom. I had mine, but Granny had texted to his phone.

When we ventured into the saloon instead of going for the phone, we saw a table spread with all our breakfast favorites. Granny stood by the table with a

catering cart beside her, fingers on the push bar. "I'll leave the cart. Bring back the dishes and any leftovers when you feel like it."

"Thank you, Granny."

"You're welcome," she smiled at us. "Just don't spend the whole day down here. You still have people who care about you and want some of your time as well. Now eat up. I love you both."

"We love you better," Luke assured her for both of us.

Once Granny left, we sat down and ate. About halfway through the meal, Luke let some strawberries and whipped cream fall to his chest, whether by accident or design I did not care. I instantly leaned forward to lick my favorite pancake toppings from his smooth warm skin. I playfully spilled some strawberries and whipped cream down my front; Luke instantly licked them away, but paused at my belly button. His grin teased and taunted me.

I suddenly grabbed him, pulled him up to his feet, shoved our plates aside and laid him down hard onto the table, pulling off his towel. I took the strawberries and ladled them all over his torso, the whipped cream following and then I started licking both off of him, tossing aside my towel. He giggled, "You had better share some mouthfuls back to me as you kiss me."

"Oh, I will, trust me," I assured him with my mouth partially full already. "And I have some hot cream to share after the cold stuff is all gone."

"Fancy that," he laughed as I did my best to tickle him with my tongue, "I'll have some of that to share with you as well. And I love you even more when you're crazy like this."

"Good answer," I told him. "I love you so much it makes me crazy."

"Stop talking, keep licking and then share. I'm hungry, and not just for what's in your mouth."

I kissed him to silence him, strawberries and deflated cream oozing out between our mouths and tongues. He crushed me to him, making the spilled toppings gush out between our torsos. I noticed that my phone was precariously close to the sweet mess we were making. I started to move it, then had another thought. I reached out with it and took a selfie of us all smeared in strawberries and cream from the waist up.

"What was that for?" Luke demanded, surprised but too horny to be upset.

“Just making some memories of us for others to share someday,” I grinned at him. “You told me we have to start journals and keep photos of ourselves because of you being the next trustee.”

Luke pulled the phone from my hand and set it safely aside. He moved suddenly and rolled me under him, scattering dishes, causing some to fall and break. The breakage damped my mood until Luke teased me, “That’s coming out of your first trust check, not mine.”

I took advantage of his hesitation and rolled back on top of him, causing some leftovers to hit the floor, breaking more plates. “That’s on my check. The first ones are on yours.”

Luke changed the subject on me, his cock hard against mine, “We never did have that wrestling match I promised you. So, let’s have it now, all covered in strawberries and whipped cream.”

I nodded, said nothing more, and did my very best to comply with my lover’s request. We eventually ended up on the floor after breaking nearly everything but my phone. When I realized that the way to win the game was to lose, I quickly let him pin me and surrendered to his will. And then the fun really began.

The End

Author Bio

Jay D. Clark was born in and has returned to live in rural northern California after living in other states and countries. His life has been a mixture of really great moments mixed with some pretty difficult ones, both of which inspire and shape his writing. He feels that since his own personal and family histories read like romance novels m/m romance is his writing niche. He spends time with his family and friends, having a passion for reading and writing. He loves rural living, horses, open spaces, swimming and all things outdoors and in nature. He is new to M/M romance but finds in it a sense of completion missing for decades in his own life. The only downside of writing M/M romance fiction is having less time to read stories from the true masters of the genre. Jay D. is thankful for so much inspiration from life and good friends for his writing.

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