

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

ZIPPADACIOUS

AR Noble

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

ZIPPADACIOUS

By AR Noble

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A ripped, dark-haired young man sprawls against some shelves. Shirtless, his dirt-encrusted abs exposed, with his fly unzipped, his dirty jeans have slipped down to his thighs, revealing white designer briefs and teasing mesh fly. On the shelf behind him, are storage boxes full to capacity, a small portrait of a serene, dark-skinned man rounds out picture frames, loose photographs, and pair of a heavy-duty work gloves.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It has been one of THOSE days where everything goes wrong from the start of the morning until the end of the day. Besides the alarm clock malfunctioning, my hair has decided to defy gravity in clumps today taking on many intriguing shapes while the rest of my hair lies flat and behaves.

Something clearly has happened to my boss last night. He is so prickly it's like he has a stick so far up his ass that I can see it in the back of his throat as he yells at me. (My job: up to you but hopefully very dirty and physical)

And while everything is going to shit and I am at my worst who walks in but a virtual GOD of course!

Can you help me win him even not at my best? (oh please no kids and if there's a rescue scene that brings them together that would be great!!)

Sincerely,

Morgan

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, with a small mystery

Tags: blue collar, graduate student, interracial, cross-dressing, Aboriginal history, antiques

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Author's Note

The historical portions of this story are constructions of real historical accounts; Angus and Reynard, alas, are figments of my imagination.

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Travis

A loud *whump* woke him up from a dream of lips and tongues, muscles and big, dripping dicks. He rolled over wondering why his neighbors were fighting so early in the morning. With one eye open, he sought his alarm clock—six thirty-eight—*shit-fuck-damn*. That was the end of his morning wood; he had twenty-two minutes to take a shower and get to work. Piece-of-shit clock never failed when he wanted to sleep in. Cap was going to skin him.

In the shower, he barely had enough conditioner to work through his hair. The towel, the last of the starter set his mom gave him when he'd moved out, ripped as Travis tugged it across his back. *Damn*, he knew he needed to go shopping, but *ugh, shopping*. Things got worse while he dressed; his only clean pair of socks had a hole in one, and he had to take them off and switch feet so the hole was over the little toe. And underwear—his choices were an ancient pair of boxers, fit only for a day sick in bed, and a pair of strange, white briefs—a gag gift from Kier, the least favorite of his (so far) three brothers-in-law. Probably bought it off the clearance table at Marshalls, the cheap bastard. With its absurd mesh fly, he didn't even know how it made it home with him from Ripon. There was no choice; he couldn't work commando or in boxers that fell down all day. Add laundry to the list of things he needed to do.

Heading into the parking lot, he was almost unmanned by a jogging stroller stashed on the pathway. And as he backed out of his spot, the owner of the stroller showed up to unfold it, blocking Travis's path to the driveway. No help for him now; Cap was going to ream him a new one, with a wire brush no less, for being late again.

Travis raked his hand through his hair, belatedly realizing he forgot the sprunching mousse, leave-in conditioner he normally used. Why did curly hair only look good on children? Already, part of his head had riotous frizz while the rest was flat.

He caught every red light between his apartment and the shop, as well as the Sprinter trains for both directions, diesel fumes wafting pleasantly in their wake. It felt like a miracle that he was only five minutes late by the time he

turned into the driveway of Mantiques Anatolie, “purveyors of manly artifacts,” but he knew Cap wouldn’t see it that way. Just when he began to think he was home free, she rose from behind the pallets he’d stacked for pick up. A cigarette danced on her bottom lip, smoky curlicues floating upwards in defiance of city ordinance.

“All right, let me have it,” she rasped. Cap’s voice could peel barnacles from a trawler, and some days Travis was certain she was part harpy. She even wore some sort of tight-fitting dress with huge, long sleeves that *thwapped* as she moved her arms.

“I’m sorry, it won’t happen again,” he mumbled. He tried to slide past her to the door.

Cap tossed her head back and squinted at him through her fake eyelashes. “Come on, hit me with it, everyone else has.”

Hell, was she expecting him to make a decision already? “Um, I’m not, I haven’t—”

“Travis.” She pulled herself up so the two of them stood almost eye to eye. Five-foot-eight Cap in Frigidaire harvest gold stilettos to six-foot-three Travis. “I’m talking about the show.”

Show? What show?

“Cap!” Somewhere, further inside the shop, Rigo was calling her.

“Just a minute!”

¡Mi amor!”

Cap huffed a big recycled, nicotine breath. “There’s sunflower seed shells in the back of the van; I want it pristine.” She looked around the shop area. “You ever get that racing set cleaned up?”

Last week, she’d told him to put it aside and concentrate on some milk glassware. Used to her capricious thinking, he’d done both. At least, for now, he could safely avoid admitting he had no idea what show she meant. “Yeah, the box isn’t in the greatest shape, not much we can do about that, but we’ve got all the parts now.”

¡Cappadocia, ya!”

¡Ya lo sé! I’ve gotta call the garbage company, fuckers put the bins back crooked again.” How she could wear heels like that and not break something, he just didn’t know.

Shrugging, he hopped up to the loading dock and entered the shop. Travis didn't have a real job title. When the government insisted on one, Cap declared he was "Skilled Worker № 3," a catchall for all the planing, gluing, welding, washing, and sanding he did. A box was on the floor near the chair he used when he did close work. Travis bent to move it, and his foot landed in Bask's water dish. While he jerkily tried to shake water off his Vans and wipe the floor at the same time, Bask, the shop cat, ran out between his legs. Travis flailed, narrowly missing Woody, who had appeared from nowhere.

Woody steadied Travis, and then let him go immediately.

"Fuck man! What's with Cap today?"

"*Junque Trunque.* The episode was on last night—don't tell me you missed it? They even showed the part where Auntie threatened the camera woman with her umbrella. Hilarious!"

Yes, of course Travis missed it. Relive that incredibly embarrassing train wreck? No, just no. The reality program that wandered the country from antique galleries to pickers had seemed like a great opportunity when the producers called back in January. But it only took Cap about five hours to totally piss them off during filming, so instead of two days, only three hours were filmed before the entire crew packed up and left.

"I went to the *dojang*, and sparred for a bit, ate dinner, and went to bed." *Avoided thinking about my life imploding.*

"Twenty-two is too damn young to be as boring as you, dude." Woody sucked a long draw on his Big Gulp of Dr Pepper. Since the summer of seventh grade, Woody began every morning with Dr. Pepper. It made Travis shudder just thinking about that much sweetness and that many calories this early. Woody snagged Travis's mug and shoved it in his face.

"You look out of it man, get your caff—" The ringing telephone followed by Cap's holler interrupted Woody, and he loped off to answer it.

As he poured his coffee (a splash of two percent, no sweetener, thank you), Travis breathed a silent "bless you" to the caller, saving him from another of Woody's "Get laid already, gay guys have it easy" speeches. Best friends since pre-kindergarten, they were as close as brothers. Still, Travis drew the line at sex advice from a straight guy.

The buzzer on one of the exit doors sounded, and he listened as the chimes rang out indicating someone had opened the door. Travis checked a packing list

against an order, sealed the box, and finished his coffee. He reviewed his pick list; a buyer in Kamloops wanted some rare Triumph parts that Rigo picked up in an auction awhile back. All they needed was a little cleaning, and Cap could send the potential buyer photos.

Woody walked by, carrying a monkey wrench. Travis raised an eyebrow, since, as a rule, Woody was not handy with tools. Maybe he was bringing it to Rigo.

Woody ran his hand across one of the shaved sides of his head. "You know, a change of type worked for me."

"Huh?" Now Woody was speaking in riddles.

"I switched from blondes to redheads, met my Brenda. You should drop those pretty twinkies and try something new."

Several replies came to mind, none of them worth ruining nearly twenty years of friendship. Nor did Travis want to hear, *again*, about the Bromeliad Princess and her endless perfection. Woody's happy engagement to the elegant law student had him acting like Travis's sisters, determined to find him a permanent man. And twinkies? Travis dated *men*, culled from the endless parade of lovely strangers on their way, usually, from or to Hollywood or San Francisco. Guys who wanted to be actors, models, doing their best to get by on their looks, so yeah, most of them had Twinkies for brains. Besides, the last redhead he'd gone out with had been a disaster. "Pretty? Duuude!"

"Some of those guys were prettier than girls I've dated."

"No argument there."

A thumping sound came from somewhere in the shop. "Woody!" shouted Rigo. "I need some help with this manifold."

"*Un momento, Tio.*"

Woody tossed the wrench from one hand to the other, shuffling his feet uncharacteristically. He cleared his throat. "Trav, everyone—no, ah, I just want to see you happy, ya know?"

Travis nodded and hoped Woody would drop the subject. Evidence notwithstanding, he *could* find love; just too many other things were fucked up right now.

"*¡Perfecto, ven acá!*"

Travis smothered a laugh as Woody ran to his uncle. Woody's real name still cracked him up after all these years. An almost perfect friend and near perfect doofus but probably not what Mrs. Alvarez had in mind when she named him.

He was just pouring a second cup of coffee when Cap huffed into the room, startling him.

"Travis! What do you know about some picture?"

"Cappadocia!" he yelped. Quickly, Travis yanked some paper towels and wiped down the counter with one hand. His shirt was soaked, and he held it away from his body while paying attention to Cap.

"I told you guys to use shop rags, we're spending too much on paper towels." From somewhere in the rafters, Woody tossed down a blue shop rag, which threw off dust and smelled like rotten eggs. Uh, oh. Woody was good at many things, but repairs were not among them. Cap tapped her foot, returning his attention to her.

He took a breath. "What picture, Cap?"

"Some guy on the phone, so excited, I couldn't understand him, yapping about a picture on the show last night."

Travis tried to cast his mind back three months; he couldn't recall any noteworthy pictures in the shop, then or now. Something heavy hit the floor above with a thump, then Woody's swearing filled the air. Travis and Cap looked at each other, both of them rolling their eyes.

"A picture of what?"

She shrugged.

"So you don't know what he wants?" He pitched the towel into the bin.

She shrugged again. "Be here in case he shows up, huh?"

Travis nodded; he wasn't planning any runs today. He'd be around.

"Damn, I'm hella good," shouted Woody.

"Woody, why didn't you wait for me?" Travis glared at Cap's back. She'd bitched for months about the smell of the hot water, and for months, Travis told her that the temperature was too low. But not until a customer complained last week did she tell Travis to go ahead and add shock treating the water heater to the work schedule; and now Woody had beaten him to it. Travis sighed and

checked his clipboard again. Logically, the smart choice would have been to move the water heater down here. Whatever idiot thought having it above in the loft was a good idea should rot in commercial real estate hell, designing daycare facilities, perhaps.

He spent twenty minutes looking for his tape gun. Why did people take things he needed and not put them back?

Something went *bong*. He looked upwards and yelled, “Wood, you need any help?”

“Relax, homes, I got this.” A grunt and several clanging sounds followed that before the trickle of running water could be heard. Woody clambered down from the loft and snatched the clipboard from Travis. He crossed off the water heater on the list, looking smug.

Travis slammed down his second cup, and turned to a shipment of barbed wire. Growing up near a farming community taught him that farmers collected all sorts of crap. That rich folks would pay top dollar for barbed wire had been one of the first things he'd learned when he started working at Mantiques Anatolie, Cap's store, that sold “antiques”, collectibles, and junk that people, mostly men, or women shopping for men, actually wanted. Advertising signs for obsolete products manufactured by defunct companies, vintage appliances for man caves, old toys, dashboards from ancient airplanes, sexist souvenirs from countries that no longer appeared in any atlas—you name it, Rigo would find the junk, and Cap would find a customer. Travis and Woody cleaned the finds, crated and uncrated them, shipped or unloaded; Travis fixed anything with moving parts. Rigo took care of most of the walk-in sales.

He popped the crate open then pulled on his heavy work gloves. The first bundle was 7-Strand Glidden, just rusty enough to please a collector in Oklahoma. He set it aside on the workbench and reached in for another. There was a sharp pain in his thigh. *Crap*, another pair of jeans ruined? Travis looked down but saw no tear so he pulled out the second bundle, 3 Diamond Hearst Ranch. He'd seen a want ad on a collector's site last week for some. He put that lot down, intending to look for the ad later.

Now his thigh was itching, and throbbing. He took off his gloves and touched it experimentally. A hot, hard lump, and not the good kind. Fuck, now what? The door to the restroom was closed, Rigo most likely.

The red first aid kit beckoned from the other workbench. He grabbed it and went into the break room, glancing around quickly before he unzipped and

shoved down his jeans. His wet shirt was bugging him so he tore it off and tossed it into the sink. A glance at his thigh showed a huge, pink welt with off-center fang marks. Fuck, a spider bite.

Cap, like Woody's mother, fervently believed in Vitacilina, the Mexican wonder cure-all. He dabbed some on the bite and started to pull up his jeans.

Later, everyone else swore there had been loud boom, but all Travis knew was that one moment he was pulling up his pants and the next he went flying backwards.

When the ringing in his ears quieted to a murmur, Travis opened his eyes. The back of his head hurt and a voice he didn't recognize was asking if he was all right. And when he focused on the voice, he found an intriguing combination. Deep forest green eyes above high cheekbones, framed by shiny, shoulder-length, brandy-colored hair, all wrapped up in skin like those See's Candy suckers his brothers-in-law gave out, nephew after niece after nephew. While everyone else fought for the chocolate or caramel, Travis always went for the butterscotch.

"Mate, mate, are you all right?" The speaker had an accent, kind of like that insurance company's lizard.

Wow, this man was stunning. Travis tried to stand, but his jeans fell to his knees, and he pitched face first onto Mr. Gorgeous's meaty shoulder. *Way to make an impression, Garamond.*

And *of course*, that's when Woody burst in. "Fuck, Travis, man, you promised I'd never have to see no faggy stuff! This place is 'bout to blow and so are you?"

Travis, his face flushed, pushed himself up and stole a glance at Mr. Gorgeous, who shrugged. What did that mean? Could this day get any weirder? Scratch that, he didn't want to know. He pulled up his pants and gestured for the stranger to move before him.

"Woody, you dumbass, did you turn off the gas?" At Woody's stunned look, Travis shook his head and moved towards the door. Something swung past his peripheral vision, and then *smack!* a fluorescent fixture swaying by its wiring. He barely staggered out of the way in time to avoid its return trip. He shook his head and nearly stepped on Bask, who was running full-throttle for the exit. Travis overbalanced, heard the stranger's sudden intake of breath, and then, he was awkwardly tossed over a rounded shoulder.

Well *this* was different. It was as if his fifth grade fantasy, the one where the Beast was Woody and Travis was Belle, had finally happened. But this time, Beast wouldn't bloody his nose after the kiss, unlike Woody. He shook his head; he didn't want to think about that right now.

The heat from his rescuer's hands on his thigh and biceps was the most thrilling feeling he'd felt in ages. All too soon though, the light from outside burst through as they reached the parking lot.

The stranger bent over, probably trying to set him down gently. Travis twisted himself upright and opened his mouth to speak to the stranger. Woody bounced over. "Dude, seriously, homes?"

Before Woody could say anything else, Travis asked, "Did you turn off the gas, dude?"

"Uh, no, I'll go do that."

"Forget it, I'll do it." Travis tried zipping up as he ran, but the damn slider fell off. Didn't that just figure?

He turned off the gas, and by the time he made it back to the others, the fire department was already getting out their equipment. The beautiful man was gone.

Cap waved some EMTs toward Travis, and he crab-walked with them, holding his pants up until they reached their vehicle. As they checked him over, he could tell they were trying not to comment on his pants. He explained about the bite, and they insisted on checking it. He was sure they were barely holding back giggles when they saw his underwear. The ebony-haired female EMT offered him a safety pin; he declined her assistance in fastening it. Finally, they cleared him.

Woody was signing some paperwork for the police. He looked up, shook his head, and smiled at the officer. Then he crossed the parking lot to Travis. He gestured at Travis's wrecked fly. With an even bigger smile, he said, "Finally."

"Huh?"

"You finally found one."

Maybe Travis wasn't the only one to get knocked in the head today. He was tired, hungry, and pissed. None of this would have happened if Woody had let Travis take care of things. Like he always did. Briefly, he wondered if this incident would change Cap and Rigo's minds—not likely.

“A real ‘Z’.”

Not that, really? He must have looked as skeptical as he felt.

“When your zipper breaks, it’s zippadacious, man. I’m telling ya, true love is just around the corner.”

Rigo told Travis to leave for the day. He’d get his daughter and some of his nephews to start on clean up. Travis agreed to meet Woody in the morning at the doughnut shop and headed out.

He was hungry and urgently needed a shower. *Fuck laundry*, he thought, and with teeth clenched, headed for the mall. A quick run through Old Navy yielded new jeans, a pack of normal boxer briefs, two packs of socks, and a few T-shirts.

In Target, he picked up a couple of towels, some groceries, conditioner, and, fuck the calories, beer. Woody’s comment on his dating life came back to him as he passed the electronics department.

The summer of their freshman year in high school was the first Travis and Woody spent at Rigo and Cap’s. Woody’s mom wanted to keep him from the ice queen blondes at the Christian high school. Travis was different. When you are allergic to almond trees, yet born into three generations of “ahmand” farmers, the only boy in a family of five sisters, and gay, meeting people’s expectations was doomed from the start. He’d spent most school breaks with his great-grandpa Noriguchi. Gramps showed Travis how to repair any motor, refinish all types of wood, and fix any clog in any drain. But Gramps died at the end of eighth grade, and Travis was at loose ends without that escape.

Coming to southern California was a different world. When they weren’t working, Travis and Woody went to the beach or park and quickly learned kids down here really did talk like kids on TV. And when either of them used “hella,” it was a dead giveaway they weren’t local. In turn, Travis and Woody laughed over words like “bodacious” and the way even girls called other girls “dude”.

Travis had his first blowjob out at Guajome Park that summer, and Woody pursued blonde after blonde. Until Brenda and her mother came into the shop, turning Woody into a slobbering hunk of steel to her electron super magnet. Her mother bought a *fin-de-siècle* pot that Woody and Travis delivered to the family business, Wright’s Bromeliads. Travis made a comment on the colorful,

spiky plants, and while Mrs. Wright launched into how even a pineapple was a bromeliad, Woody and Brenda wandered off into the greenhouse. She led him on for three weeks before finally sneaking him into her room one night. After dressing, Woody found out his zipper was stuck inside the seam. He already had his Chucks on so he didn't take them off again. Brenda brought him to the kitchen and her mother's craft table. He had just started using the hot-pink needle-nose pliers on the pull tab when the *au pair* got up to see what all that noise was about. She screamed, Woody got the pliers stuck in the slot, and then Brenda's dad and brothers arrived.

Travis smiled at the vision of Woody leaping around with a pink tool hanging from his pants. They went home to Ripon soon after, but Woody and Brenda stayed in contact online. Their parents made them date other people, but every school break, when Woody and Travis came back to Vista, Brenda occupied most of Woody's free time. That second summer was when Woody first expounded his zipper theory of love, and to needle him, Travis coined "zippadacious."

Fated zipper love was not going to happen for him; he didn't even know his mystery man's name. He threw off his wool gathering and finished his shopping.

At home, he took a shower and was on his (rare) second beer, when his mother called. The Alvarez-Reyes network had reached out and touched his mom. He reassured her that he wasn't injured.

"Oh, Sally's amnio results came back, she's having a boy." She paused, but Travis knew his mother possessed no subtlety whatsoever, and braced himself. "Any luck on the boyfriend hunt?"

"Mom!"

"Don't Mom me. Everyone else has found their prince, why not you?"

Next would come the "gay men can adopt or use surrogates, give me more grandchildren" speech. Not. Happening. Ever. "Last week, you were all 'You should go to college already, you got great grades on all your A-G classes.' How'm I going to do that if I'm off marrying and birthing babies?"

"Travis Isao Garamond! Find a nice boy. Go to college. Be happy! That's all you need to do."

Taj

After a day of undergraduates and their inane midterm answers, Taj walked from the bus stop to his apartment, hoping for some peace and quiet. No luck, his roommates were camped out on the sofa, one of those pawnshop reality shows on TV. For Seb and Ian, all reality shows and any sports were preferable to silence. Undergrads. How did they get any studying done? The televisions stayed on night and day, one for sports and one set to watch *Judge Lowlife*, *Chicken Farmer Swingers*, *Dumbass on the Tundra*—Taj couldn't keep up. He usually spent most of his time at the university or the club. A cock-up on his paperwork when he first arrived left him without the on-campus housing he'd planned on. By the time that was straightened out, he'd answered a Craigslist advert and ended up in this flat with the brothers.

It turned out for the best, though. Taj had the master bedroom, complete with en suite bathroom. The previous roommate had installed shelves, organizers, *two* extra mirrors. It was a dream come true. Almost as soon as he signed the rental agreement, Taj emailed his sister back in Melbourne his new address, with instructions to start shipping his boxes.

Ian, at least, was a fanatic about cleaning, so he and Taj made up for Seb, who was a bludger, plain and simple. Taj made it a point to eat at the kitchen bench, joining in on their conversation. Keep things neighborly, right? That's how he saw it and *him*. One of those programs that follow people buying other people's junk, fixing it, and then selling it. This one had a Latino couple, him grizzled, full head of hair, one arm missing, the other tattooed, quiet, until his wife's histrionics drove him to bark. She wore genuine Bruno Frisonis! Her long, black hair piled on her head like Jasmine, and a cigarette hanging from her painted lips. Oh, what Taj could teach her! She bitched and yelled at everyone, eventually getting into a shouting match with the show's host.

And that was when he saw Him; from the kitchen sink, as he washed his plate. Tall, dark, curly hair, beautiful, perfectly sculpted arms, almond-shaped eyes—and when his sweat-soaked tee rode up? Unbelievable ridges and valleys of muscle—Taj's fingers ached to travel that landscape. He wanted to shimmy up that long frame and dig in. But then the camera followed him into an area where it roamed the shelves. Tools, old canvases, miscellaneous motors, pictures, and a small framed picture of a man in a white shirt: Reynard Perouse—Taj couldn't sodding believe it.

What in the hell was a photo of the very man he'd done his senior seminar project on doing in an American junk shop?

“See something you like, Taj?” asked Seb.

Ignoring his question, he asked one of his own, “Where is this shop?”

“Ooo, you are interested.”

“Knock it off, butthead,” said Ian. “It’s right around here, Taj.”

Here? “In UC?”

“Naw, somewhere in North County.” Where was that? Taj had moved in just before fall semester started. He’d been to L.A. twice, gone to visit his buddy Aerik in San Francisco at New Year’s. As far as he was concerned, anything past the university was nebulously north.

“Gimme that remote, dork.” Ian traded remotes with his brother, pausing the lacrosse game he was watching, first. He rewound the program. For the hundredth time, Taj wondered, *if you are already watching, why do you need to record?*

Seb laughed and said, “Hey, that guy almost looks like you, Taj.” There was a young Latino man, shiny black hair, soul patch, and tattoos. As far as Taj could see, he bore no resemblance to him. Well, okay, the body type did. They probably were even the same height, same just shy of chubby, stocky frame. But Taj’s hair was an amber-red, thicker and more lustrous, not to mention, impeccably styled, as always.

“You’ve been checking Taj out,” chortled Ian at the same time Taj said, “Darling, if only I’d known you were looking.” The brothers were never short on the rent and always generous with beer. Even came to his show twice. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, they had dragged him back to Los Angeles to their parents’ home. Christmas Eve he went to the African Methodist Episcopal church with the whole family, and when they told their “awnts” about his hobby, the women were only too happy to swap shopping tales with him. He’d had a blast and come back to San Diego with three new hats.

“Shut up, dickwad.”

“Fuck off, you—” And over the sofa they tumbled. Taj barely managed to grab the Takis before the carpet became red no. 4, permanently. He fumbled with the remote, eventually figuring out how to stop the DVR at the beginning. The shop was in Vista; all he had to do was figure out how to get there.

Leaving the brothers to fight on, Taj went to bed.

This quarter, Taj taught two classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After his last class, Taj took the shuttle to the Coaster and the Coaster to the Sprinter. He knew how to drive, even on the wrong side of the road as they did here. Having a car in California was expensive, and as he was undecided on what to do at the end of the term, why lay out the dough for a vehicle he'd have to get rid of when everywhere he needed to go could be reached by public transport?

Taj came to California by accident, almost. When his degree was finished at Monash, he had considered applying at Queensland. He also thought about chucking the whole idea of being an academic. Studying aboriginal linguistics was his gran's idea; she wanted someone in the family to honor their past. To make up for the randy bastard her son, Taj's father, was. Granny was proud of her successful son and of all her many grandchildren, but the fact that he only sperm donored most of them was a never-ending source of shame for the old girl.

Finding out what happened to that rabble rouser Perouse, would satisfy his curiosity, but also, he reminded himself, could go a long way towards mollifying Granny, not to mention boost his career. The trouble with interdisciplinary studies was that nobody understood what you were on about, and it seemed easy to lose his way. A major or even, he reflected, a minor discovery, enough to publish and even present at a conference, *well, darling*, what to do about next year could solve itself.

Because Taj had discovered that he really liked California. There was an intoxicating freedom when people saw you as special and not a likely criminal.

Twenty-seven years old and no boyfriend, a sad state to be sure. One night, he'd come home from the Greyhound, his favorite drag club in Melbourne, to find his boyfriend waiting up. Stoney, still wearing his ghastly persimmon, WolfeTel uniform, the usual, bitchy questions: why couldn't he stay home, why did he need other men looking at him? There was a fight and the next day, as Taj walked across campus, he saw an advert for a fellowship program to study in the States. He was still so pissed at Stoney that he went straight to the library completed the app, uploaded recommendations from his advisors, and pressed "send". Then he forgot about it until the email came with news of his acceptance. He applied to UCSD and to UC Berkeley as well.

The Coaster hugged the shoreline, providing magnificent views of the Pacific and the lunatic surfers who braved those cold waters. He thought about getting off in Solana Beach to ogle surfer lads on the way back.

The Sprinter stop was supposed to be about half a kilometer from the shop. Typical quirky southern California with apartments right behind auto mechanics and furniture stores, surrounded by canyons full of trees and weeds that seemed to go up in flames daily. The mix was still a little disorienting to Taj, who grew up in Perth, went to uni in Melbourne—a city boy through and through.

The station was within a Y made by three roads. Across the tracks, roosters crowded; on the opposite street were donkeys! The “leg” of the Y was a dodgy-looking strip mall, where scruffy, over-muscled blokes with their pants sagging below their crease loafed about, real derros. It had been a long time since his early childhood in Balga, one of Perth's toughest neighborhoods until Mum got a good enough job to move them to Midvale when Taj was nine. He walked taller; he may look a right poofter, but he could take care of himself. He opted to walk instead of waiting for the bus, but soon wondered about that decision, because there wasn't even a footpath. *Should have changed from the Pradas I wear for work to my Chucks before setting out here.*

Mantiques Anatolie turned out to be in an industrial park; they had an entire building among purveyors of valves, used tires, and hair salons. No one was at the front desk, so Taj walked forwards past a chaotic assortment of furniture, petrol pumps, curious art, and barbed wire. A television blared one of those Spanish chat programs. Taj recognized it because Ian liked to watch them for the women in their gravity-defying dresses. There was an odd banging noise that he felt like he'd heard before, but he couldn't place it. Strange that no one was about.

The smell of coffee led Taj towards a hallway off to the left. There he was, the bloke from the show last night. Not only was his shirt off, but his pants were down! *In front of the microwave?*

A great big, booming noise cracked then, and suddenly there was stuff everywhere, and the bloke, that lovely man, flew out of the room. Naturally, Taj followed him.

Water and flaky stuff fell down around them as Taj bent to check on the very fine specimen of man who'd landed in front of what looked like the shelves he'd seen on the show. A little guiltily, he looked for the pic of Reynard, but didn't see it. He turned back to the man.

“Are you all right?” He looked very pale.

Taj thought he muttered, “Butterscotch sucker.” Maybe a head injury—where was everyone? All that shouting on the show, that irritating woman on the phone, where were they?

Then his shop mate appeared. A mention was made of a potential gas explosion, and the three of them were trying to get out of there, when a light came crashing down on his bloke's head. He looked a bit wobbly, and as his mate wasn't taking care of him, Taj heaved him over his shoulders and tried to carry him out.

He had always fancied himself a fireman. *'Course, in the fantasy, he was meant to be carrying me off.* The mesh fly rubbed on his biceps the whole way. Masculine scents drifted up to his happy nose—sweat, grease, varnish, and something that reminded him of that bloody terrifying summer camp Mum sent him to once.

When they reached the outside, Taj did not want to let go, but the golden-eyed man had to turn off the gas as his friend was bloody useless. Then the real firemen showed up, looking nothing like his fantasy. A female police detective took him aside to take his statement, and then told him to go. The man with the picture was chatting with the ambulance people. Taj decided to try again another day.

Travis

Morning brought the marine layer and cool fog. Travis and Woody were scheduled to make a pick-up at Doc K's down in Descanso. Travis drove to the shop and saw yellow caution tape flapping from a door handle. Cap had some of Woody's cousins cleaning things up. Bask was snoozing on the dock, stretching and meowing once he spotted Travis.

“Hey buddy, where'd you spend the night?” A flash of guilt passed through Travis. Usually Cap and Rigo asked him to take Bask home on long weekends.

Bask head butted his legs, purring and circling Travis. He found Bask's bowls and filled them, then went in search of the litter box, which, happily, was neither wet nor in need of cleaning. Wherever Bask spent the night, he'd done his business out there too.

With a wave to the cousins, Travis walked to the Laotian doughnut shop on Grand. By text, Woody told him that he was filling up the box truck's tank. After breakfast sandwiches, they took doughnut holes to go, stopped for

Woody's Dr Pepper at 7-Eleven, and were on their way. Neither spoke about yesterday's disaster.

It was a seventy-mile long trip, one-way. A great ride on the Goose, but a little lonely without someone else along.

Travis thought about the call from his mother last night. "Dad's medical bills are all paid off now, your sister got a full-ride scholarship, stop working at that shop and do something with your life. Go to college, marry someone, move to a house instead of another dump, be with the same someone for more than a week."

That was when he'd cut her off. "I'm fine, Mom, talk to you Sunday, I love you, bye."

It was true that his lease was up in a couple of months; he wanted to move to a better neighborhood, have more privacy from his neighbors. He'd like a boyfriend, too, but they didn't exactly pop up like ground squirrels either. Guys were usually all about getting off and getting gone, not that he ever met anyone he wanted to keep.

Doc's modest ranch house stood at the end of a long driveway, off a dusty road. The surrounding hills were prematurely brown. Like almost everywhere around this part of the county, drought made April look like September. An old man, snow-white hair perfectly styled, stood next to the oversized steel barn, outrageous in an orange suit, matching fedora and purple-banded collar shirt, and purple Timberland boots.

"Oh, boy," exhaled Woody.

"Don't start," warned Travis.

"Come on, man."

"Finish that thought and you'll finish this run on your own!" Doc had been a great customer in the years he and his partner Louis had the expendable income. Now, Louis was back east, undergoing cancer treatment, and Doc was liquidating everything so his "Louie" got the best possible care. Lou was a big-hearted man, and Travis sincerely hoped the clinic Lou's daughter found fixed him up. But he didn't like talking or thinking about it—too many memories of his own father's lost battle.

Doc shook hands with both of them, then directed Woody to back up to the roll-up doors on the side.

Doc put a hand on Travis's arm. "Come along, I have something special I want you to take pictures of for me. Cappadocia says she may have an excellent buyer."

Travis accompanied Doc to a side entry to the house. It was a study, dark wood, green leather upholstery, and crystal lamps. Doc walked to an Asian-looking set of faux double doors hanging above a very modern desk. Travis's heart sank. Kung fu movie memorabilia sold well, classic early Datsuns, early Honda bikes, but no one shopped Mantiques Anatolie looking for carved screens. Doc pressed a button on the desk, the double doors opened and they were looking at a charming painting of an elegant woman wearing a huge, old-fashioned hat and dress. On the lower right side, in elaborate lettering, Travis read "Julien Eltinge, 1913."

"She's a dude?"

"He was the greatest female impersonator in the world, a superstar ahead of his time," replied Doc. "I got this off a fellow who said he got it from Julien's ranch in Alpine before it burned down. This has been authenticated, and I won't be talked down on price."

Travis nodded before he got to work with his camera. He knew Cap was planning to offer one of their premier clients first crack at this piece. He made a little small talk with Doc, listened as Doc told him, *again*, how he and Lou met as members of the Gay Liberation Front and their fleeting attempt at a gay commune, and then headed to the barn in time to help Woody load up a pie safe with a rainbow finish.

On the way back to the shop, Travis thought about the beautiful stranger from yesterday. Was his hair a shiny red or maybe orange? The heft of his hands as he carried Travis outside. Travis snorted back a laugh, carried wasn't the right word; they must have looked like kids in one of those stupid party games. He wondered if the man had spoken to anyone else in the shop, maybe signed the guestbook, if he would ever come back; he didn't know why but he felt cheated that he did not even know his name.

When they got back to the shop, Travis wanted to groan. Rufus was here. Woody gave a sympathetic headshake. Rufus's mother, Rosalia, was a very good customer, and Rufus sometimes picked items up or brought them into the shop for appraisal or repair. He was the only customer Travis had ever gone out on a date with. That date was the one and only time Travis called Woody to his rescue. In the two years since, Rufus had mostly behaved himself. He wasn't

exactly a friend, now, but he knew Rufus wanted to be, and that he accepted there could never be anything between them.

They unloaded the truck and Rufus wandered into the warehouse area. “Yo, Woody, I’ve got a shed needs demolishing,” he yelled.

Woody flipped him off, Rufus laughed, and as Travis came back around with a dolly, he hissed, “Beat it, people work for a living around here. Besides, customers aren’t allowed back here, you know that.” Rufus wandered off, whistling.

Travis sat down to complete his paperwork when he became aware of Rigo speaking to someone.

“I think I know the one you mean, but you will have to talk to Travis, our technician. I think you met him the other day? The portrait is his personal property.”

Travis looked up to see Rigo with the man from yesterday. Wearing a teal button-down, open at the throat, hair clubbed back, tan Dockers again, and those eyes—like iridescent moss in an old forest, they went from impersonal regard to unmistakable interest to shyness.

Rigo said, “This gentleman is interested in the print you insisted on saving last summer, you know, the one from that tallboy we picked up at that Laguna estate sale.”

He remembered. An odd Rocco reproduction, a bit ugly for his taste but lovingly finished, the drawers smelled amazing, like nothing he’d ever encountered before. The picture was in the back, missed somehow by the previous owner. The man’s vulnerability and dignity captured in the picture called to him, he couldn’t explain why, not attraction, just maybe that someone had cared enough to save the picture, and so would he. It had no monetary value, and Cap was going to throw it away, but Travis said he wanted it, and Rigo told Cap not to charge him. Getting something free off Cappadocia Reyes was always win-win.

Travis wiped his hand on his jeans, then held out his hand. “Travis Garamond.” The stranger’s hand clasping his was unexpectedly soft, and when Travis looked down, he could see that his nails were well-manicured, making Travis conscious of his own rough, calloused, permanently grease-stained ones.

“Taj Djaru, pleased to meet ya.”

Wow, an exotic man with an exotic name, not to mention that accent. New Zealand, maybe? Travis knew he sucked at small talk; he wondered if he should ask about the name or the accent. He was still wondering and staring when Taj asked, "May I see it?"

It? Oh, the photo. "Come on," said Travis, leading the way to the employee lockers. "So who is he?"

"I'm hoping he's Reynard Perouse."

They had reached the lockers. Travis opened his, dug through a few 1950s gay magazines, his collection of vintage gay pulp fiction (the lesbian ones like *Dyke Bait*, the gay ones like *Cockalorum*, he kept at home), a silk aviator's scarf he thought too purple to wear himself but too cool to pass up, and finally the cheap plastic frame with the print inside. "Is that someone I should have heard of?"

Taj took the offered print, holding it by the edges as if it were a precious relic. His face looked enraptured as he studied it. "He was a leader in the fight against the Second Dispossession. How much?"

How much? Travis never meant to sell it. It was supposed to go in his new place. Instead, he said, "Why don't we discuss it—over dinner. I'll buy," and then held his breath.

The smile that filled Taj's face made every nerve in Travis tingle. "Really? Oh, but I'm meant to catch the 5:40 Coaster."

"I'll run you home if you miss it, where do you live?"

"UC, University City, are you sure?"

Oh yes, it might be tomorrow morning, but yes, Travis was sure.

"No problem." He looked down at his clothes and frowned. "I've got to take a shower."

"Nothing wrong with how you're dressed, and I don't need fancy."

"Nah, come with me, and I'll clean up."

Travis grabbed his paperwork and went to find Cap.

"Sure go ahead and take off. I don't have anything that needs to be done until tomorrow. You did a great job with Doc."

Well that was nice; she didn't give many compliments. "Just be sure to come in on time tomorrow."

“Yes ma’am.”

The drive from work to his apartment flew by. All green lights, no trains, and Taj sat happily beside him—no cracks about whose mother he’d stolen his 2004 Honda Element from. Yes, he’d bought it off of his middle sister, Cherie, but it was practical and reliable, he couldn’t give a fuck about popular.

“So where are you from, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Australia,” Taj said, then sat straighter as if expecting a crack from Travis. *As if.* He thought back to sixth grade geography. “Big place, what part?”

Taj relaxed. “Perth, I was born in Brisbane but lived around Perth until I went off to university in Melbourne.”

“Yeah? What was your major?” He turned into the apartment complex’s parking lot.

“Linguistics.”

“Why?”

Taj stretched his legs out a little more. “My granny, mostly. She wanted someone in the family to do something good for our people, and I’m the only one who went to uni. Linguistics was easier than anthro and less depressing than social work.”

“What kind of people is that?”

Taj looked at Travis quizzically. “We’re mixed, Aboriginal and white. Because of, well, not to get political, let’s say Australian government policies, we know we’re Aboriginal but not much about where we came from.”

Travis parked in his space, and they both got out of the car. “My family is mixed, too. Scots and Japanese on my mom’s side, California Okie, Italian, and Native American on my dad’s. One of my sisters is marrying an African American, another a Chicano, and the oldest married a closet case dickhead.”

Taj snickered. “I wasn’t aware there’s a genus ‘dickhead’.”

“Woody and I think he’s an alien or mutant, not human anyway.”

“Woody, the bloke at the shop?”

As he led Taj up the stairs, his neighbor was coming down. She stared open-mouthed at Taj and almost missed a step.

He really is a beautiful man.

He unlocked his door and stood back to let Taj in. Thank fuck he cleaned up yesterday. “Woody and I have been best friends since pre-K. My sister Cherie even married his brother Rodolfo.” He watched Taj look around his small place with approval. The furniture was mostly used, damaged goods from work: two mismatched Eames chairs that he replaced the broken legs on, a Platner lounge, the scratched, wood surface restored, its upholstery replaced, the futon that used to be his bed before he could afford a real mattress. It had never been his intention to have a color scheme in 1950s avocado and pimento, but once he picked up the orange, gold, and chrome cocktail cabinet, the theme had been set. A shelving unit from Home Depot held his books and CDs, and a card table his mom gave him rounded out the front room. Woody called it “Vegas on a budget,” but it was unique and all Travis’s.

“You want, well, I wasn’t expecting company... would you like beer or water?”

“No thanks, man, I’m good.”

“Uh, I watch TV on my computer, want me to power it up?”

Taj grinned and said he appreciated no television for a change. Travis didn’t know what he meant by that but hurried into his room for his new threads, and then to the shower. But first, he made his bed. Good thing he had clean sheets.

Extra care in the shower, he had a good feeling about Taj.

The navy-blue tee and his new maroon jeans, not as dressy as Taj, but it worked and was nice contrast to his amber eyes. He sat down to put on his black Chucks and remembered his youngest sister complaining, “You’re the most un-gay looking gay guy ever.”

Well, this is me, like me or not. Course many guys couldn’t handle that he supported his mom by paying his dad’s medical bills. Or had.

He hurried back to his living room. Taj turned from the bookshelf, putting *Coxswains from Malibu* behind his back and returning it to the shelf, Mr. Smooth. He settled back into the sofa, only to turn around and reach back for something. A DVD. He looked up and smiled at Travis.

“*The Swingman*,” he read aloud.

Fucking Rufus and crap. “Hey!” He tried to snatch it up.

Taj smirked, looked at the cover closely. Travis hated how this looked. A hunky man, baseball cap over long flowing locks, that dark make-up ballplayers use making his eyes pop from his face. Baseball pants down around his knees as a hefty ginger was swallowing his giant cock. A large blond with a catcher's mask over his head prepared to slam his cock into the Swingman's glossy ass. The copy on the box read: "Some days he's a starter, some days he's a reliever. In between, he's in between!"

"Is this what you're into?"

"No! That belongs to Rufus." Travis's mother decided to clean out her garage at Christmas. She persuaded him to take an old New Home sewing machine back to Vista. He hadn't known anyone who wanted it and was complaining about bumping into it one day while Rufus was in the shop. Rufus called his mother's partner and the damn thing was sold. Against his misgivings, he invited Rufus into his apartment after they stowed the sewing machine in Rosalia's truck. Rufus brought out some Aztec Sacrifice Red IPA, an ale from one of the local breweries and tarallinis from a deli in Little Italy. Rufus put on the DVD, but the combination of seven point six percent brew and not very entertaining porn put them both to sleep. He must have missed the DVD during his cleaning spree. "Never mind, you ready to go?"

Taj frowned. "Rufus?"

Travis muttered, "Someone from work, let's go."

They could have walked, but one look at Taj's shoes and Travis concluded driving was better. He hadn't been to Vittorio's in a while and Philomena greeted him with effusive hugs, kisses, and scolding. She insisted on being introduced to Taj, turning his hand over and declaring Taj "*maschio, coraggioso*." It was weird; she'd never made a big deal over any of his other dates.

Over spaghetti and meatballs, Menabrea, and kick-ass garlic bread, Taj explained that he was a graduate student in linguistics at UCSD.

"I'm currently working on comparative aboriginal narrative discourses, not just Australian, but dispossessed aboriginals all over," he shrugged, "it got me the fellowship at a time I really needed a change."

"Do you like it here?"

"Absolutely! People in San Diego are friendly; no one ever has negative expectations about my family background. Although it was startling the first few times someone asked how long it took me to learn English."

“Really?”

“Yeah, I thought the first few times they confused Australian with Austrian, but that only made things more embarrassing.”

Travis regaled him with tales of customers and the odd things they wanted and stranger reasons why. He even mentioned Doc's Eltinge panel, but changed the subject, grimacing as he thought of Louis. They talked about films and music and laughed at each other's jokes.

“So this Woody fellow, are you and he...”

“Woody?” Travis was startled by the idea. “We're from the same small town up in the Central Valley. Both of us are the babies of our families, well, until my little sister was born. We met in preschool, two chubby boys, too out of shape to keep up with the other kids. So, we hung out together. Some girl picked on Woody one day for his name,” he looked around quickly, then whispered, “it's Perfecto.” He resumed in a normal tone, “and I went after her.” He smiled ruefully. “She wiped the floor with both our asses. The director called our folks and both our moms sent our dads to pick us up. Turned out they both worked at the tampon factory over in Modesto and didn't know each other until that day.”

“You hit a girl? Man, my mom would have had my balls, and my dad would have, well, I don't know, but it wouldn't have gone well for me.”

“I have four older sisters,” Travis offered as defense for the four-year-old he'd once been. “They were always thumping on me and blaming shit on me that I usually hadn't done. But, yeah, it wasn't acceptable. Except for my grandfather, Woody was my favorite person in the world, and I couldn't let her get away with it. There was a taekwondo studio up the street from the school and our dads arranged for us to take classes to control our anger.” He picked up a breadstick from the basket on the table, started to put it back, then chomped on it. “We were both too fat to wear a *doh bahk*, a uniform. So, we would change into sweats, and one of the older teens that ran the preschool would walk us over and bring us back until our parents picked us up. Wood's dick was very obvious under his sweatpants and one of the older kids dubbed him Woody.”

The waitress asked if they wanted refills on the Menebrea or breadsticks. They both declined, asking for more water instead.

“I never thought much about being gay, right? Woody's older brothers would say stupid shit like ‘that's so gay’ or ‘don't be a fag’. My sisters took us

to see *Shrek*, and... I don't know, all that true love talk, I guess, led me to think 'I like him more than anyone.' So I kissed him one day when we were hanging out after soccer practice."

Taj looked sympathetic. "Not a good idea?"

"Nope. He decked me, and I went home and tried to hide what happened. My mom found the bloody towels, and my dad and I went fishing."

"Do you want dessert?" asked Travis.

"Not unless you're on the menu."

Travis grinned and picked up the check the waitress left and reached for his wallet.

"Is that a euphemism?" Taj mused. "Gone fishing?"

"No, we really did head over to the Tuolumne River. I don't think we caught anything. He told me it was okay that I liked boys, but I needed to learn when another boy was okay with me liking him, and it'd be better to wait before I tried again."

"Very cool, my dad was like," he deepened his voice and broadened his accent, "Figures, your mum had you hanging around *those* people."

"Ready to go?" Travis stood, left the tip, they walked up to the front desk, and Travis paid. It was cooler now than when they had arrived. The restaurant was in between a Laundromat and a martial arts studio. Not the one he belonged to; this one was full of small children.

Taj paused in front of the studio's window, watching the little be-robed bodies bow their heads to their instructor. Smiling, he asked, "The exercise is that good?"

"Huh?"

"Bloke like you, looks like an underwear model?"

Travis sputtered, shook his head as he laughed softly. "Taekwondo is good exercise, but it was more like I just grew, I'm built like my dad and my mom's dad. But I went on a few dates with a model once."

Taj waited, but Travis didn't continue. "And?"

"His name was Jack, and he was from South Africa. There's a lot of them here because of all the golf and Cal State's athletics. We had a little fun." Travis blew out a gust of breath. "Went up to L.A. for a day with him, he had a

modeling job. His agent meets us, she rags on him, didn't he know he wasn't supposed to gain weight? Why had a piece of ass been more important than working out? She went on and on. Then she threw a box at him and started yelling at another guy. He kind of looked at me, all embarrassed, and pulled a packet out and tossed it over.

"This man was skin and bones! I mean people call me skinny, but you could've counted his vertebrae from the front, you know?"

Taj nodded.

"So I looked at the packet, and it's a lemongrass 'cleanser'. I kinda lost it, don't remember what I said, but—fuck! I'm a gay man, what don't I know about hygiene?"

Taj sputtered, and then a full-on laugh burst through. Travis looked on with a mix of chagrin and bemusement before reluctantly cracking a grin and laughing along.

"So-sorr-sorry," Taj gasped.

Travis shook his head and unlocked the Honda.

"Jeez, I've done most of the talking; tell me about you, your family."

"Well, d'you know that old Temptations' song, 'Papa was a Rolling Stone'?"

Travis grimaced. "I grew up in the Central Valley, remember? Because there's no canyons like around here, you get decent radio reception. But your choices are only *banda*, Country & Western, whack-job bible thumpers, and oldies. Yes, I know it."

"That was my dad. Is I should say, darling, he's not dead. Knocked my mum up when she was fifteen. She threw him out of the apartment Dad was paying the rent on when she found out he had a wife in Canberra."

"Wow."

"Yeah, spirited, that's my mum. The wife divorced him when she found out about his girlfriend in Sydney. He works as a sales rep for an American medical devices company. What we call a flash black. Traveling is part of his job, women and making babies are his hobby, you could say.

"My mum did nails while she put herself through school. She was so mad at him for not showing up in time for my birth, she had me in a taxi and named me after the driver! Dad claims my 'early exposure' to gay men at her salon

made me gay.” He arched an eyebrow and looked sideways at Travis. “She got married when I was about thirteen, and I have a younger sister. Dad’s been married three times, and I have seven more brothers and sisters, thanks to him.

“That woman back at your work?”

“Cappadocia?”

“Hard woman to work with?”

Travis turned into his parking lot. “She’s a pain, but they’ve both been really good to me. When my dad died, there were lots of bills. His insurance from the plant had run out, and there was a worldwide glut of almonds on the market, so there wasn’t much money. Cap and Rigo gave me a summer job, and I kept coming back until I graduated.”

He started to say, “But now they want me to go to school like everyone else planned”, but he didn’t. He hated whining.

As soon as Travis shut the door, Taj had him up against it.

“What do you like?”

Travis swallowed. *You can’t get what you want unless you ask.* “I’d really like you in me.”

Taj smiled. “I’d like that too, but first—”

He plunged his hand into Travis’s hair as he began to kiss him. The other arm went around Travis’s waist, hand palming his ass.

Taj tasted of the hard blue mints they’d both grabbed at the restaurant’s door. Travis stabbed his fingers into Taj’s silky hair. Even his hair was minty smelling. His lips were perfectly sized to mesh with Travis’s.

Without stopping the kiss, Travis began unbuttoning Taj’s shirt, damn, an undershirt. They came up for air, nuzzling their scratchy, bristly, cheeks, both breathing hard. Travis pressed his fingers into his back as they rode down Taj’s tee and pulled it up and out of his pants.

Taj ran his hands up from Travis’s waist to the opening in his henley. “You’re so beautiful, I want desperately to feel your skin, and I’m nervous.”

“Why?” He knew that taekwondo kept him looking good, but Travis was sure he was nothing special. Taj was stop traffic, open your mouth and drool perfect.

“Cause I’ve seen your muscles, and I, I’m...”

“Perfect,” said Travis. “You are absolutely to spec.”

Taj giggled, “Perfect, huh?”

“Mmhm, maybe I need to perform,” he pulled the undershirt over Taj’s head, “an inspection.”

Travis stepped back and looked Taj over. His arms were, not sculpted—he surely wasn’t a gym rat—not running to flab either. Twin flat, burnt sugar nipples stood up upon a nicely defined chest. A tiny bit of a belly, which was the only spot with hair, even his arms were bare, how did that happen? He ran his hands down then up to Taj’s jaw, kissing him with all the surging anticipation and nerves rushing through him. His finger slid into the belt, freeing it. Their kisses became wilder, Taj broke away long enough to yank on Travis’s shirt, tossing it behind them somewhere. He stroked his fingers along all the muscles.

He managed to open Taj’s pants. Smiled at the pink, plaid, Hugo Boss boyshort boxers, and the thick golden cock sticking up. He knelt, slid the clothes out his way, and sucked that meaty pole in. Nice, sweeter than pecum usually tasted. He could feel Taj’s fingers grasping and releasing his hair. Travis wrapped his arm tightly around Taj’s waist.

Taj made gasping, cawing sounds. Travis swallowed him down, tongue stroking the underside of Taj’s cock, pressing it against the roof of his mouth. Suddenly, Taj grabbed Travis’s face and wrenched his cock out of his mouth.

“Bed,” he panted, “over here?”

Travis opened his eyes. Taj was pointing at the futon. “No.” He got up, kicked his shoes off while Taj did the same. “Here,” he gasped out and jerked them down the hallway, both of them wriggling out of their remaining clothes.

Taj kissed Travis with one more hard kiss, then thrust him onto the bed. “*Ooof!*”

“Where d’ya keep your supplies?” Taj’s voice was harsher, now. Less Nicole Kidman and more Hugh Jackman.

“Drawer—” Travis pulled his hand out from under his own body.

“Gotcha.” Taj settled over Travis. Travis prepared for clumsy, painful, fumbling, but he was surprised when Taj urged his thighs up, then lovingly

stroked his ass. He breathed softly across Travis's hole, then licked, softly at first, thumbs massaging the tender muscle. "How long's it been?"

"What?"

"How long since you last bottomed?"

Travis thought about it. "Five years, maybe?"

"Oh, good to know, better late than never. I wondered why you tensed up so much. You sure?"

"Yes." He didn't like to explain, it always came out wrong. Having someone else in charge was almost more euphoric than the actual orgasm, depending on the man topping him. He'd had one good experience and one bad, as well as countless rejections of, "But I thought you were a top." Travis liked Taj very much, but if he could do this right, he'd be a keeper.

"Okay." Taj settled back atop Travis's thighs. He kissed his neck, licked and nipped his ear, the top of his spine. His hands kneaded Travis's back, fussing over a bruise from yesterday. When he reached his coccyx, he sucked the thin skin, then blew some air across the divot. His tongue traveled down to Travis's anus, and then a lubed finger probed him.

Travis's last complete thought was, *Thank fuck, Taj didn't make prep a big deal*, and then he was on top of Travis. From the corner of his eye, he saw the blue metallic condom wrapper flutter to the floor. And then, pressure, a burning. Someone, maybe both of them sucked in a breath. He could feel Taj trembling. "Now," said Travis, "now."

Taj moved in a leisurely, smooth fashion. He grasped Travis's upper thighs, urging him up. Taj moved faster. "Sorry," he breathed.

"S'alright." Because who was Travis to complain? Taj grabbed Travis's dick, pumping it. "Fuck!" He let go, moved his body closer. "Sorry, I'm gonna—"

"Yeah," said Travis as he grabbed his own dick, loving the feel of Taj's body moving above him and inside.

Faster, faster, all systems *go!*

Mmhmm. Travis awoke to a warm body spooning him, when was the last time that happened? Once or twice, a long time ago. Usually he was the big spoon.

He stretched, his hand finding the cold, damp, washcloth from last night. As many times as they'd needed it last night, the only surprise was that it didn't stick to his hand. He used the bathroom and glanced at his alarm clock. Taj never said what time he needed to be back, but Travis had to be at work by seven-thirty.

Such a beautiful man, he thought. Most incredible legs on a man, ever. Funny, and smart, and proud. Maybe a little too proud? Not about the Aboriginal part, but being gay. One moment Taj was the confident, exotic professor and the next he was barely restrained camp. Travis couldn't put his finger on it; he thought something was odd during dinner, too.

But last night? Last night had been wonderful, abso-fucking-lutely *ne plus ultra*, as his English teacher would have said. Although discussing the best sex of his life with Mr. Madison, buzzkill.

Taj rolled over, so Travis walked back to the bed. "Hey."

"Mmm, hello." Taj blinked up at him. "'Time is it?'"

"Five-thirty. I thought we could—"

"Shit!" Taj threw off the covers and looked around wildly. "I've got an eight o'clock class!"

"Okay, I'll get you there. Hey, there's a cool diner I know of in Solana Beach, how about—"

"No, no, no. I've got to take a shower and get my lecture notes, and—oh, please, just drop me off at Buena Creek station."

"You sure I can't drive you somewhere closer?" he asked. "The city has lots of rehab facilities near there. Some of those guys might not be too tolerant of a gay man if they see you alone."

"I'm tougher than I look."

"So, how about Saturday?"

"Sorry?"

Taj would look real good on the back of the Goose, that wonderful body behind his...

"Ah, I've got a thing Saturday."

"Oh. Okay, what about Sunday or next week sometime? I figure your schedule is more restrictive than mine."

“Um, well... ah, this has been nice and all, but I don't really have any spare time right now.”

Well, this was awkward. Travis got dressed and drove Taj to the station. He hadn't been there since he and Woody had been teens. Watching Taj walk to the Compass reader, swipe his card and board the westbound platform didn't make him like the station any better now.

What had he done wrong? Not only did he not have Taj's number, he was itchy. He'd forgotten the leave-in conditioner, again, so his hair was all over.

Cap wanted to go to a storage auction all the way in Glendora, one hundred miles each way. He drove the box truck with one of the cousins, a skinny kid of about fifteen, known as Gordo, along at shotgun, while Cap and Rigo rode in their SUV.

It was hot for early March, seventy-two degrees by the time they arrived. Some disagreement between the auctioneer and the storage lot's manager resulted in the auction beginning an hour late. Cap talked smack with the other bidders, and Rigo played with his phone. When bidding began, Cap was beaten by a newbie on the first unit she wanted. She ratcheted up her A-game and bought a total of four units that day.

The first two were trash—someone's old clothes, picnic gear, gardening tools. Travis and Gordo cleaned and hauled away the crap. The other two had sellable stuff, but Gordo was looking at a pretty African-American girl instead of watching where he was going, tripped, and dropped the 1920s German table they were carrying.

“Oh fuck!” wailed Gordo.

Travis bent to check on the damage, a scuff and a small crack on one leg, he could—

“What. The. Fuck.” Cap's voice was low and harsh.

“Hey, Cap, I don't think—”

“No, you don't think, *pendejos*. Pay attention. I'm beginning to—”

Rigo put away his phone and slipped his arm around her waist. “*Mi amor*, come and look at this lot.” Nevertheless, as he steered her away, his eyes looked out from above the sunglasses that had slipped down and seemed to say, “What the fuck, indeed.”

Travis made vague plans for a repair as he and Gordo moved the table to the truck. If nothing else, he could buy it.

The rest of the week went no better. Travis was surly and grumpy with everyone. Sleeping was difficult.

By Friday, everyone was fed up with him. Woody was exasperated. "Did you go on one of those all tuna diets again?" Anyone else, who wasn't a lifelong friend, would've decked Travis by now.

Travis didn't answer, just shifted the pallet on top of the stack they were working on.

"Fuck Trav, if you faint again, your mother is going to pound my face."

Why couldn't people stay out of his business? He hadn't fainted since eighth grade.

"My mom wouldn't do that," he mumbled, "get you to do something ugly like clean out a combine, maybe."

"What's wrong with you, man?"

"Yeah, man, what's wrong?"

Rufus. Great, just what he needed.

"He went on a date, finally! I thought he'd be happy, but he's been a jerk all week."

"With who?"

"Some guy, came into the shop. He was here the same day you were."

"Oh, the pretty one. He looked familiar to me."

Okay, that was it. Travis did not want to hear anything Rufus had to say about Taj. He grabbed the push broom and thrust it into Woody's hand.

Rufus stepped into Travis's space. "I know. In Hillcrest, I've seen him around there."

Despite himself, Travis felt his heart lurch. "Big deal, sooner or later, every gay man in this county hits the clubs in Hillcrest."

"Come on, sweets, when was the last time you went out clubbing? There's nowhere around here. Your mind will rot hanging out with straights all the time. Do you some good."

Travis opened his mouth to refuse, but then he thought about it. "Why not?"
"Atta boy, you'll see."

Woody let out a whoop as Travis ground out, "I'm not your boy."

Rigo and Cap were going to Sacramento for a wedding that weekend, so Friday night Bask came home with Travis. The scrawny, half-starved stray that Travis had nursed to a giant furry beast refused to spend weekends alone. Saturday morning Travis did laundry, washed the Goose, and bought a new shirt. He considered dress pants, but he'd already made up his mind to take the Goose, so jeans and his leather jacket would have to be good enough.

Ville au Carré hadn't changed from the last time Travis visited it. Woody and Brenda had wanted to take him out for his birthday, so he suggested a drag club, thinking they would say no and leave him alone. Brenda had loved the idea and Woody loved the well drink prices. Travis endured a very uncomfortable two hours before they agreed, mercifully, to leave.

Rufus was waiting at a table close to the stage. No surprise, there. Rufus was one of those people who always "knew a guy" able to fix him up with anything he wanted. *Except me.*

"I didn't know you like drag, thought you like things wilder."

"Ah, Travis, just stow it already, would ya? I ain't apologizing again, *capiche?*"

"Fine, I don't see what we're doing here."

"Hush, it's about to start."

The lights dimmed, a drum rolled. The emcee boomed, "Gentlemen, and others." The audience tittered. "Ville au Carré is proud to present, Laydee JaJa!"

AVICII's "Addicted to You" blasted from the speakers. The queen strutted out, the crowd cheered. Dancing on very high, rainbow-patterned pumps, shimmying in a tight, gold, sparkly dress, big hair, a crazy hat, full make-up was Taj. His Taj. The music segued into something Travis didn't recognize; Taj or JaJa, quickly changed into a new outfit.

"You knew!" he yelled at Rufus.

"Not exactly, no. But I guessed, and I guessed right didn't I?"

Travis got up from the table.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going backstage to catch my man.”

“You can’t just go back there, Travis.”

“He can’t leave without letting me talk to him. I’ve got to know what I did wrong.”

Rufus leaned back in his chair. “Pinky is on tonight, let me smooth the way.”

“Who’s Pinky?”

“Follow me.”

Travis followed Rufus to the side stage door. A tall man, hair shaved close, stood at parade rest. He straightened as Rufus approached.

“Pinky, my man!”

“What do you want, Rufus?”

“My friend Travis here wants to see, uh, what’s his name again?”

Travis shoved Rufus aside. “Taj, I need to see Taj. Please.”

Pinky scrutinized Travis, made a twirling motion, and Travis, frantic and exasperated, held his arms up and turned around.

“What did you say your name is?”

“Travis. Garamond.”

Pinky checked something on his cell phone. “Well, you’re not on the list of people who need to be kept out.” Travis’s heart had lurched when he heard “not on the list” before he realized that was a good thing.

Taj/JaJa had finished his number. “Please,” pleaded Travis, “I’ve got to speak to him.”

Pinky made a call and Travis heard him say his name. He hung up and nodded to Travis. “You can go back.”

Rufus started to follow Travis when Pinky put out his paw to stop him. “Just him, you’ve got no business back there, Rufus.”

Travis stopped and turned around. “Thanks, Rufus.”

Rufus clapped him on the shoulder. "We even now, kid?"

"Sure, Rufus, see you around."

Taj

Taj started to hurry his cleanup routine after Pinky called. He had known he would have to face Travis again; he needed the photo and any information about where it came from, after all. *God, you are such a bogan. A smart, beautiful, young man comes into your life and you treated him like shit!* He reached for his bag with his trackie daks and the door opened.

Take all the guys in DMA, on tumblr, anywhere, anyone. Nobody could hold a candle to Travis. The lights from the club framed his head, his golden almond-shaped eyes were luminous. Ultra cool, I'm-a-bad-boy-so-I-don't-have-to-give-a-fuck hair. Leather motorcycle jacket that screamed it was his own not bought for effect. *What am I thinking, everything about this man is for real; he does nothing for effect.*

At the same time, the other half of Taj's brain was screaming: He's here, he's here. In. The. Club.

Travis cleared his throat. "You're all I've thought about, I-I don't want you to leave without talking to me. Whatever I did wrong, if I said something stupid, tell me. Please, even if you really never want to see me again, I'd like to know why."

There's the high road and the low road, dearie. And you fucked up; you've got to make this right.

Taj turned back to his mirror. "Come in and close the door." Travis moved to the old avocado crate, upended it, and sat down. Taj ripped his wig off and set it aside. Watching Travis's reflection, he used more vehemence than he felt. "This is me, okay? I like soft, shiny clothes on me. Wearing big wigs and bigger hats! To pack myself in tight and become glamorous, to not be the 'good but gay boy', just me!"

Travis opened his mouth to speak, but Taj wasn't through, yet. "And before you ask, no, I'm not transgender, I'm a dude you might remember!"

"May I have a turn now?"

Taj sniffed and went back to the mirror.

"I know the difference between drag and transgender, Taj. I went to my first drag show when I was eighteen. My workplace makes a significant income off drag related items, and I'm no small part of that success."

"Who are you and what have you done with Travis?"

Travis affected a long, drawn out sigh. "I hope you have something else to wear, that outfit is going to be a bitch on the Goose."

"The Goose?"

"My bike, that's what I call her."

"Is there room for my caboose, on your Goose?"

A full range of looks passed over Travis's face, and then, "Yes, there's room for your caboose on my Goose, so go get loose."

Taj removed most of his makeup, keeping the lipstick and eyeliner. He changed as rapidly as he could, feeling a little gauche that he wouldn't be as cool as Travis. Travis walked around the cramped dressing room, picking up sponges and puffs, and brushes. He followed instructions on how to fold up the costumes. "I think there's a problem here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I want you hanging on to me not your clothes. Is there any way you can leave them here and pick them up tomorrow? We'll come back in my car."

One of the other drag queens, Sasha Sashay, came in. She squealed when she saw Travis. "Back off," snarled Taj, "he's taken."

"Like that, is it? You could show your manners and introduce us."

"Travis, Sasha Sashay, Sasha, Travis."

Travis took Sasha's hand, looked deeply into his eyes, and asked, "Would you do us a favor?"

"For you, honey, just ask."

"Hey—" began Taj.

"I wasn't thinking and brought my bike tonight, would you hold on to Taj's stuff until tomorrow? Pretty please?"

"You undeserving bitch," Sasha hissed in a far too loud stage whisper. "So toppy and a bike, some girls have all the luck!" Turning back to Travis, she

said, "For you, of course!" She made a grand sweep with her hands, and Travis obediently picked up the garment bags, backpack, and wig cases, and followed her out to the parking lot. It was not until after he deposited them into Sasha's "I'm a drummer on Sundays" Camry station wagon, that Travis realized Taj was not with them.

They were retracing their steps when they heard "No means no! I told you before, I'm not interested!" Taj was up against the wall closest to the stage door, a man leaning over him, hands to either side of his shoulders.

Travis didn't think. He raced to Taj, grabbed the other man, whipping him around and up against the chain link fence. "I believe the gentleman asked you to leave."

"Look man, I just wanted a dance with JaJa, she thinks—" Travis knocked him down, then got tight and close into his personal space.

"One word of advice, asshole. You don't call a drag queen by her queen name when she's back to being a dude. More importantly," he stepped back and threw an arm around Taj, "*he* is mine, and if you bother him again, I'll be forced to hurt you."

"Now you think you're taking over," demanded Taj.

Travis smiled at him. "Should have known you're high maintenance." Then he knelt, heaved Taj over his shoulder, nodded to Sasha, and headed for his bike.

"Was that truly necessary?"

"I think so." Travis stopped at his CX100 Moto Guzzi, glowing lustrously under the street lamps. He set Taj on his feet and unhooked the extra helmet he had brought optimistically.

Taj knew nothing about motorcycles, although he'd had a Kymco scooter for a while, back in Melbourne. He eyed the straight, slim, passenger "seat" dubiously.

"You'll be perfectly fine."

Taj huffed but made no other movement.

"Come on, Taj, give me your address, put on the helmet, and get on the bike." When Taj still didn't move, Travis grew threatening. "Don't make me have to tie you onto it."

“Bossy, much?” But he followed orders and settled down to soon discover the feel of a powerful engine between his legs and a familiar warm man in front. It was exhilarating until they reached the overpass sections and the merges to the other freeways. Travis was as good a driver on his bike as he was in the car, and thankfully, they met with little traffic. Taj didn't think he'd survive lane-splitting. Finally, they exited onto Genesee Avenue. Taj directed him from there to the townhouse.

Travis parked and they went inside the apartment. The televisions were off, the apartment dark. “I think my roommates are out,” he told Travis. He opened the door to his room and felt Travis startle behind him. *Oh, fuck.*

“Wow, I thought I was having some kind of strange déjà vu! It was like being in Woody's mom's house.”

Taj's nerves were frayed to bits, *again with Woody!* “What, his mother is into drag?”

“Naw, she has all these crazy doll vacuum cleaner covers. There's one on every floor of the house. When I stayed overnight, I'd get up to use the bathroom and there'd be this creepy doll's head floating over the couch.”

Taj straightened himself up and gestured around his room. “These are not dolls.”

“Nope.” Travis looked at the mannequins, the wig stands, the jewelry boxes, and the accessory holders, laden with scarves, boas, and stoles. “And I'm no little boy getting up for a drink of water. But I feel like I need you, like water.”

Oh, man, Taj was a goner. He swept aside an emerald sequined Hular gown and sat down on his bed. Travis dropped down beside him. “I met my first boyfriend at the Greyhound. It's a drag club in Melbourne, so he knew what I did. Once we started going out, he became controlling, and he didn't want me to do drag.” He lay back, kicked off his Top Siders, and spread his arms. “I tried, but I'm just not right without drag.”

Travis moved over, lifting Taj's head so that he was on his thigh. Taj continued, “The next bloke, I met in a different club. Same story, I'm cute enough, but why can't I stop once I've got someone? That just isn't me. We had a big fight, and I saw the poster for the fellowship, I didn't let myself think or procrastinate, I applied. Then, when they accepted me, I had to hurry up and find a university that would take me.”

Travis shimmied himself about until he could put his arms around Taj. “Let me get this straight. You know what it’s like for someone to assume something about you and be wrong? Yet you decided I wasn’t good enough to speak for myself?”

Taj tried squirming away. “It wasn’t like that exactly. I liked you fine, but at dinner, your face got all squinchy when you talked about that impersonator. I thought that meant you don’t like drag. That you’re just another one of those fellahs who talk gay pride but don’t have any pride beyond the contents of their knickers. You’re the first guy I’ve been with since I got to America, but I couldn’t bear it if you were like all the others.”

Looming over Taj, Travis looked taller, a little tougher. “If you saw something in my face when I was talking about the Eltinge piece, it’s because of Lou and his cancer. Lou reminds me of when my dad was sick and some days, I’m not a big boy, I don’t want to think about stuff that hurts. Having you run out on me, telling me you’re too busy? That hurt. Are you going to be like that with me again?”

Ooh, I could so get used to having toppy Travis around. Although bottoming Travis was quite nice, too.

“No, I want you, I want to be with you, and if you won’t make fun of drag, even come to a show some—”

“I’m coming to all of your shows! What kind of boyfriend do you think I am?” growled Travis.

“Oh.”

The next thing Taj knew, Travis rolled them over so that Taj was on top. They didn’t have time for more than frothing that first go round, but they made up for it during rounds two and three, so much in fact, that Ian pounded on their shared wall.

Later, Taj woke up to find Travis staring absently at him. “Do I have a booger hanging from my nose?”

“Nah, I was just thinking that Woody was right, and I hate when Wood is right.”

“Right about what?” What was it with this bloody straight boy?

“You and me, we’re zippadacious, Mr. Linguist, zippadacious.”

“So, you never explained, who is Reynard and why is he important?”

They were lying on Travis's bed, Travis on Taj's shoulder, his foot rubbing along Travis's calf. “What do you know about Australian history?”

“Um, what most people do? The English sent their convicts there and everybody went hunting Aborigines?” He chanced a look at Taj, who was looking at him indulgently.

“Hey, I wanted to be a math teacher!”

Taj turned, shifting Travis onto a pillow. He licked a line from one of those magnificent pecs to his collarbone, giving it a quick nip. “You did, huh? Why didn't you go to college, I'd think you'd have got a scholarship?”

“I got As and Bs in all of my A-G classes, but I made good money working for Cap and Rigo and there were bills to pay.” He gasped as Taj sucked in some skin.

“You're young, you can still go.”

“Everybody wants me to, but I don't want charity.”

Taj paused, brows furrowed. “Grants and scholarships aren't charity.”

“No, I know that. It's just that, at work, Cap and Rigo have joined forces with my mom. They've offered, no, ordered me to go to college and work part time at my current salary. That feels like charity to me. Can you get back to the Aborigines?”

Shaking his head, Taj said, “We'll straighten the school stuff out later. We like to be called Aborigines not Aborigines. Indigenous or First People is preferred if you are political. Depending on who's talking, a quarter million to a million Aborigines were organized into 250 nations with something like 300 languages. Then the Europeans came with guns, and diseases, and their certainty they could put the land to better use than we savages could. We call that dispossession, and it happened over and over.”

Taj paused to drink some water. Travis smoothed his hand down Taj's neck. “Kind of like what happened to Native Americans, without the reservations,” he offered.

“No, they didn't call them reservations, but settlements. Moreover, like here, no sooner had land been set aside and settled, then someone decided they wanted that land and the inhabitants were dispossessed again. And then they started taking their children away, as many as 100,000 or as few,” Taj made air

quotes with his fingers, “as 20,000 kids. People lost their kinship and heritage. Truthfully, some people gave up their kids so they could get an education, especially those who were mixed or half-castes, quadroons, or octoroons, as they called them. It was supposed to make them better, integrated Australians. They could not see their families or speak their own language. Girls were made to work as maids and boys as laborers.

“All Aboriginals were prevented from using facilities reserved for whites, there were separate entrances and so forth, similar to Jim Crow laws. During the Depression, some Aboriginals organized conferences, demanding civil rights and an apology for the government’s treatment. One conference turned into a kind of labor union, and they targeted a shipping company owned by a man named Angus Rafferty. He had made a fortune in opals, before diversifying. He sold most of his opals but he kept a matched set, a ring, and a brooch. Reynard Perouse was the leader of the union that demanded better pay and better jobs for Aboriginals. Things got heated, many white Australians were out of work, and higher paying jobs were reserved for them.

“Rafferty and his fiancé held a party to celebrate their engagement. It was at a fancy Sydney hotel near where the union would congregate. Police were brought in to keep the partygoers from seeing the savage Abos. A riot ensued and men were beaten. Rafferty went out into the throng to confront Perouse, try to get him to call his men off and promising to meet with him the next day.

“After the riot, Reynard went missing. So did Angus Rafferty and the Rafferty opals. The press blamed Reynard, but then the war or something started and neither was ever heard from again.

“My gran wanted me to do something significant for our people, so I went into linguistics. However, neither side of my family is from any particular Aboriginal nation, I know several languages, but I don’t know that I’m doing anything useful. Then I saw that photo on the telly, a photo of a man who I knew came to a mysterious end, and more importantly, a beautiful man with it, I just had to check it out.”

Travis rolled over and blew a raspberry on Taj’s stomach. Taj scrunched up his nose, *overdid the history lesson*.

“How did Reynard’s picture end up in Laguna, California?”

“I don’t know, do you know where it came from?”

Travis smiled. “I can do better than that. The piece I found it in?” Taj nodded. “It’s still in the warehouse in Oceanside.”

Taj caught his breath, a new excitement running through his veins.

“And you know what else is still there?” Taj shook his head, he had no idea.

“The valet box.”

The warehouse turned out to be a former cold storage building—wall-to-wall dressers, old refrigerators, propellers, hubcaps, jukeboxes, pachinko and arcade quality video games—a man cave on steroids. Travis walked along checking QR codes on his phone, muttering every now and again. He stopped at a utility cabinet and thumbed through his keys until he found the right one.

When the doors were open, he switched on the flashlight. That cabinet was chock full of items—cufflink cases, curio boxes, and fancy dishes for cleaning out your pocket contents—and jewelry boxes. A rainbow of carved or sculpted wood, alabaster, malachite and Taj didn't know what else. He looked over at Travis, his face concentrated like it did when prepping for sex or when Taj blew him. He must have felt Taj looking; he turned and grinned, kissed him lightly on the nose, then carefully drew out a black lacquer box.

“I always meant to look this over more carefully, but never got around to it.” There was a crate labeled “1935 Panther” and he carefully placed the box on top. He made a flourishing motion at Taj. “You do the honors.”

The box lid had an Art Deco design. It unfolded on two hinges like a piano. Lifting the lid revealed four drawers. Taj's hands trembled. “I'm afraid of damaging it.”

“Nonsense.” But Travis took over, pulling each drawer out, turning them over before placing them aside. Nothing. Then he picked each one up, looking at them more closely. Taj took out his cell phone and used the flashlight on the empty box interior. Something didn't look right.

“What'd you find?”

“I don't know, nothing?”

Travis nudged his long, lean frame firmly along Taj. He picked up the box, held it towards the light, angling it this way and that. Poked at the back edge with his long index finger, *ah memories. Need to focus, Taj.*

There was a *ping*, and a panel popped out of the back. A piece of paper fluttered loose and started to fall. They nearly bonked heads as both of them dove for it. Travis's long hand got it first.

Not a piece of paper, a photo.

Two men, in old-fashioned evening dress, Reynard Perouse and Angus Rafferty. The corner was stamped with a photographer's mark, and on the back was handwritten, "Café Gala, April 1938."

"They left together," whispered Travis. "That was a well-known, gay supper club in Depression-era Hollywood."

Taj was speechless.

Travis frowned, pulled out a loupe, and examined the pair in the picture. "Look!"

Taj leaned in to see what he was so excited about. They weren't just holding hands; they wore matching rings and matching cufflinks. Opals.

Epilogue

The August sunshine was just burning off the morning marine layer as Taj tipped the barista and headed back to the table where his boyfriend was none too subtly ogling the surfers as they came in from their morning rides.

"I thought you said coffee was the chief attraction here."

"The scenery is good, too. Nothing like at this table, though."

Placated, Taj set down their coffees. "You promised to make it up to me for waking with a cat on my head."

They had moved in together, to a place inherited by one of the professors Taj knew from UCSD. A once-beautiful house, two blocks from the state beach. It was small, only two bedrooms, but they used the second room as a giant wardrobe for JaJa. Travis had enrolled at MiraCosta College, working towards a transfer to Cal State San Marcos and a math teaching degree. He did only restoration work for Cap and Rigo and he was happy to avoid the auction runs. Bask had missed him, so Cap had nagged him until Travis brought the cat home. Taj only went to the club every other Saturday, and once, Travis had even tried out on amateur night.

"Ya know," began Taj, "I went poking around in the Ladies of Oz Club the other day."

Travis took a big sip of his coffee. "Oh, why?"

In his best news presenter style, Taj replied, “The founder of the Ladies of Oz was from Sydney.”

Travis made a noise, sipped some more coffee.

“She was married to a lumber executive and came over here with him bringing all the comforts of home.”

Travis looked up suddenly. “Oh no Taj, no more old hats, you promised!”

“Have I got your full attention now?”

“Taj...”

“The comforts she brought included *Schmidt's Weekly*, a long defunct, and little missed Sydney tabloid. The club was having a rummage sale—um—”

Travis's lips moved soundlessly, “No more hats.”

“Anyway, I went pawing through and guess what I found?”

“Can it be worn?”

“No.” Taj fixed Travis with a stare. Then he grinned and pulled out his iPad. “Look.”

It was an image of a newspaper article. “You see, I didn't even bring it home so you could bitch.”

“I do not bitch.”

Over a grainy photo of two men, one clearly darker-skinned than the other, Travis read, “Last shot of millionaire and Abo unionist?” The copy under the photo read, “Could this indecent act be a clue to missing mining millionaire Angus Rafferty and unionist Reynard Prouse?” The two men in the photo were standing very close to each other, hands near their groins, surprised looks on their faces.

“Is this really what it looks like?”

Taj shrugged and reached into the paper bag.

“Why didn't the police follow this up?”

“Well,” said Taj as he delicately split his carrot-raisin bran muffin, “this paper, Schmidt's, went out of business soon afterwards. I think the Rafferty family probably shushed them and the police, too.”

They decided to walk breakfast off with a stroll down Coast Highway. In front of a fair-exchange boutique stood three men, one of them with an over-

groomed beard, too much product in his hair, leather jacket so new it squeaked, kind of a hipster, the other two in jeans and tees. The men in jeans and tees stood at opposite sides around a clothes rack, both of them examining shorts. They each reached for a pair, but the price tag for one pair had become entangled with the zipper teeth of the other pair. They exchanged awkward moves and glances back and forth.

Taj and Travis watched as the hipster yelled, “Are you even listening to me?”

And the man in the animal rights tee flicked him a glance. “I heard you, but you never hear me.”

The man on the other side, the one wearing a Surfrider tee, finally released the shorts in his hands. He cast about awkwardly, gave an uncertain smile and began to walk away. Animal rights man shouted, “Hey, wait up,” and hurried after him.

The hipster frowned then brightened.

“Shall we tell them?” asked Taj.

“That when you’ve got the ‘Z’ it’s inevitable?”

“Yeah.”

Travis took Taj’s hand and piloted him back to the street and the house they had moved to. “They’ll find out.”

“Hey,” said Taj.

Travis stopped, looking over at Taj. “I love you, even if you switch to 501s.”

With a laugh, Travis kissed him. “I love you, too, even if you switch to Chemin de Fers.”

The End

Author Bio

AR Noble is the nom de guerre of a housework-hating mom of teenagers.

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