

A hand holding a pen, poised to write on a piece of paper. The background is a collage of various old, handwritten letters and documents, some of which are partially obscured or overlapping. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of brown, tan, and cream. The title is written in a large, elegant, white cursive font with a slight glow effect.

Until  
the Bitter  
End

L. L. B u c k n o r

## Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....	3
Until the Bitter End – Information.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Until the Bitter End.....	7
Author Bio .....	59

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## UNTIL THE BITTER END

By **L.L. Bucknor**

### 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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# UNTIL THE BITTER END

By **L.L. Bucknor**

## Photo Description

Three pictures of two friends, one black, one white. A cross-generational photo set of the friends from boyhood to their golden years.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We met the day I rescued him from the elementary school bully. We became inseparable until a family move put thousands of miles between us. After years of email, phone calls and a handful of visits, we both ended up back in our hometown. Reconnecting led to love and now here we are in our golden years.*

*We've been together for a lifetime and have had plenty of ups and downs. Won't you tell our story?*

*I want a sweet, contemporary love story. Other than no BDSM, I don't have a lot of other requirements.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lynette*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** some angst, sweet/no sex, best friends to lovers, interracial, letter writing, slow burn/UST, late 20<sup>th</sup> century

**Content Warnings:** Brief mention of drug use, minor and secondary character deaths

**Word Count:** 19,454

*Acknowledgements*

For Lori. The best cheerleader a girl could ever have.

Anonymous donor – you know what you did, this is dedicated to you as well.

Thanks to everyone who encouraged me to take this prompt and who helped make this story what it is.

Many thanks to Lynette for an excellent prompt and the MMR Group for all that they do.

# UNTIL THE BITTER END

**By L.L. Bucknor**

*55 years ago – September 1976*

Charles Jackson's first day of school was not going according to plan. He was in a new school in a new state due to his mother getting "sick" again. He knew she was back on drugs. His grandmother tried to make it easier for him by saying, "Your mommy's sick," but he knew what she did. And Grandma knew that he knew too, but she wouldn't discuss it with him.

He'd witnessed Adrienne, his mother, high many times before. Even saw what she did for money with her "friends" in the bathroom of their studio apartment back in New Jersey. Sometimes she forgot to close the door. Or the moans were too loud from "talking to her friends."

He had a feeling this time the move would be permanent. Living in New York wasn't bad; he loved his grandmother and Uncle Lamont very much. And it was easier to be able to sleep at night without worrying if his mother would be passed out on the couch or worse... an unresponsive zombie with a needle stuck in her arm. Quite the education for a ten-year-old.

His grandmother enrolled him at the Long Island elementary school, ironed his clothes for the day and sent him to school with lunch in a brown paper bag. Sadly, at the age of ten, he was unused to the attention or care.

Being one of the few black students at the elementary school was weird. He went from a predominantly black neighborhood to a neighborhood with a handful of diverse families. He felt like a fish out of water all day. Other than a few stares from some students and a lonely lunch period, no one paid him any attention save his teachers. He didn't make any friends. He was so used to being on his own, he didn't notice the difference. A short, skinny black kid with a love for comic books and mathematics did not scream Mr. Popular. He doodled in his notebook to help pass the time in class.

His Uncle Lamont had shown him the route to walk home. Charles grabbed his books the moment the final school bell rang and walked toward the exit. He kept his head down, meandering through the cliques and chatter. He rounded the corner with no problems, thinking about having chocolate milk once he got

home—and maybe sneaking in a peanut butter sandwich—when he felt something hit his shoulder. *What now?* He stopped to look behind him, and watched a pebble fall to the ground. A taller, scowling blond boy walked steadily toward Charles. He hoped whatever this kid's problem was, it was not meant for him.

“Hey you!” The heavysset kid came closer to Charles, standing directly in his face. The hostility *was* meant for him. Being bullied after school was not part of his plan.

Charles tried to put some distance between them, but the other boy would not let this happen. Charles stared back without answering.

“Don't you know you're supposed to pay a tax to go to my school?”

“What?”

“What?” the kid mimicked tauntingly, and backed Charles off the sidewalk and into an abandoned yard. “Can't you hear? New kids pay taxes at my school.”

Charles leaned away as much as possible. “And who am I supposed to pay?”

“Me, if you want to live to see another day.” Charles watched him smack his meaty fist into an open palm for a menacing effect.

It worked. But he was trying not to show how intimidated he was. “I'm not paying you nothing.”

“Guess you don't like your face looking the way it does. It's fucking ugly anyway. I guess I'll have to make it uglier.”

“I don't want any trouble.” Charles held his hands out, not touching the angry giant. He didn't think he'd survive if he made contact with any part of his body.

“Too late.” The bully pushed Charles's shoulders with both hands with enough force to make him bounce on the chain link fence behind him. He dropped his books in the grass.

“You're nothing but a dirty n—”

“Don't even say that word, Harold!” a voice boomed from behind the two.

Charles's bully looked to the newcomer but did not move his intimidating body, sadly. “Buzz off, Victor! This has nothing to do with you.”



Charles was glad the brown-haired kid got the blond's attention off of him. Harold still had a couple pounds on the newcomer, but two against one was better odds. "I'm not afraid of you, Harold. And you know why. Drop the routine and leave him alone," said Victor.

Charles watched in disbelief as the two stared each other down for the longest minute in his life. The blond muttered something inaudible under his breath and backed away from Charles. Miraculously, the blond giant left with a "next time," which Victor smirked off.

"He's an ass," Charles's savior declared after watching Harold leave. "I'm Victor, by the way."

"I figured that out already." Charles moved from leaning against the fence and picked up his books from the ground. He nodded at the taller, brown-haired white kid. "I'm Charles." He was unsure if he should be wary of someone who could make that behemoth scam or not. He wanted to know what Victor had on Harold but chose to not risk it. "Thank you. I guess I'll see you around." He held on tightly to his books.

"You're new, Charles. That's why Harold tried to get ya." Victor fell into step beside Charles. "I live three blocks away on Friedman Avenue."

"I don't know where that is."

Victor laughed. "Of course you don't. What street do you live on, and then I can see if we live close by."

"On Clemens. There's a big church at the end of the block."

"You live two streets away from me. You wanna walk to school together? We're in the same class, in case you didn't notice."

Charles had never met someone as friendly as Victor. And in his life, he knew something too good to be true, usually was. "You want to be friends with me? Why?"

"Why not?" Victor shrugged. "You're new. Harold needs to get it through his thick skull that he can't bully anyone he'd like. I'm not afraid of him. You shouldn't be either."

"Besides, I'm going to school anyway so why not have company? My other friend, Phillip, lives in the other direction. And you're going to need me to walk with you for a while."

He feared Harold wouldn't take Victor's save lying down either. "How did you get Harold to leave me alone? Did you beat him up or something?" Victor started to walk in the direction of home and Charles followed.

“Nah. His mom and my mom are friends, really good friends. If I ever told his parents what he tried to say to you, his entire family would beat him in front of the whole class. They’ve done it before, in third grade. Best. Day. Ever. He cried like the wuss he is.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Victor smiled. “You wanna come to my house later and play?”

Charles had never been asked to play at a classmate’s house before. He tried to play it cool. “I have to ask my uncle first. I think he’s home today.”

“Why not ask your mom?”

*Because she’s probably high right now is why not.* “I live with my grandma and uncle.”

“Only them?”

“Only them.”

“Oh? How come?”

Charles preferred giving the brief explanation when telling other kids. “I never met my father. And my mother is sick.” He waited for judgment. Other kids usually wanted to know why he didn’t know who his father was; everyone knew who their father was. He hated when his peers did that.

“Oh. Well, that’s cool. Where are you from?”

Charles almost didn’t answer from surprise. “New Jersey. But I think I’ll be living here in New York for a while.”

The boys continued walking to Charles’s house. Charles ran inside to drop off his books and let his uncle know about his new plans. His uncle went to the door to see the new friend. “Make sure you’re back before the streetlights are on,” Lamont called out as Charles zipped down the porch.

“See ya later, Uncle Lamont!” he called out, and started to walk with Victor. “Do you like comic books?”

“They’re all right. My brother has tons.”

“You have a brother? That’s cool. I’m an only child.”

“My brother Kevin’s in college. He likes comics more than me. Has stacks of them in his bedroom. We can check them out, if you want?”

“Sure.” Charles followed Victor into a big yard where a lady with a frown stared at him. Charles stopped walking behind Victor and stood still. It seemed

the prejudice he witnessed in some of his fellow students' eyes today was also in Victor's mother's.

"Hi, Mom." Victor tugged Charles forward into his yard.

"Victor." She walked down the stairs and stopped in front of the pair. "Who is this?"

"My friend, Charles. He's new. Charles, this is my mom, Mary—"

"You may call me Mrs. McQuade," she cut in. "What happened to your friends Phillip and Joseph, darling?" She didn't stop staring at Charles.

"They're at their houses, I guess." He shrugged. Mrs. McQuade ran her hand through her son's hair, which Victor wiggled out from.

"I should go, Victor." He knew where he was not wanted and did not want to cause any trouble for his friend.

Victor turned to look at Charles. "What do you mean? You just got here." Victor turned to look back at his mother. "We were going to look at Kevin's comics."

His mother raised her voice. "Where exactly? In his room?" She frowned.

"Yeah, we were—"

"Absolutely not. You can play outside with your little friend, in the front yard where I can see you. But not for long, we're going out for supper tonight." She took Victor's school books from his hands and walked back inside the house. She called out from the front door before going inside, "I'll call Phillip's mother and see if she can bring him over for you to play with, Victor. For the next time."

"I'm not like her, you know," Victor told him after his mother went into the house.

"Is that why you invited me over? To show me off to your mom?" Charles folded his arms together, thinking the worst of Victor already. He was grateful for Victor saving him from a face-pounding, but he did not want to be treated like a show prize.

"No. I want to be your friend. You look like you need one."

"How would you know?" He was just fine on his own without friends. He always was.

"I just do." Victor smiled a big gap-toothed smile and tapped Charles on the shoulder before running away. "Tag, you're it!"

Charles reluctantly smiled. *Maybe. Just maybe...*

The two played for the rest of the afternoon, cementing the first day of their friendship.

\*\*\*\*

*50 years ago – June 1981*

“Did you see Monica in homeroom, Victor? She was eyeing you up and down, man. I bet she’d go out with you if you asked her. She was my study partner last semester. She puts out. And you don’t even have to work for it.”

“You had sex with her?” Charles looked at the bespectacled Phillip and smirked. Phillip Castiano looked sweet and innocent, but looks could be deceiving. He was the first of their friends to lose his virginity. “Some friend you are. Are you trying to give Victor your sloppy seconds, man?”

Phillip started to make a lame excuse and didn’t notice Victor mouth a silent “thanks” to his now taller best friend for taking the attention off him. The two friends were pretty well versed in each other’s quirks by now, five years after their fateful meeting.

Charles winked and pretended to listen to Phillip discuss the rest of the easy pickings in their grade. At their age, the topics of choice discussed were girls, sex and Michael Jackson. If Phillip paid closer attention to anything other than the fairer sex, he might have noticed that Victor never joined in the talks about girls.

Today was the last day of school, which signified the friends no longer being high school freshmen. The three teens lingered in the front of their building to continue their conversation. Phillip had to go pick up his little sisters from the elementary school soon. He rarely had a chance to hang out with the pair, so whenever they could, the other two tried to accommodate him.

“You know Sandy was checking you out, Charles? She’s also good friends with Monica, man. Just saying. Tag team, man.”

“You think so?” He wasn’t as interested, but maybe he should be, to keep up appearances. It was what he thought boys his age should do.

“You could have any girl you wanted in our grade. I haven’t seen you try, unless you’re holding out on us, Charlie. But hey, if you don’t want Monica, you think she’ll go out with me? I might be a skinny white kid, but I got moves.” He started to not-so-subtly air hump in front of them.

“Isn’t it time for you to pick up your sisters?” Victor asked. He looked longer than usual at Charles, then away. Something was up. Charles could only wonder what was going on. He didn’t think there could be any more bombshells like the last one Victor dropped on him a couple of months ago.

“Shit, you’re right, Vic. Thanks, man. I’ll check you two later when I am not on sister duty.” Charles and Victor both clapped the bespectacled teen good-bye and turned in the direction of home, or in their case, Charles’s house.

Victor was fighting with his mother more than usual. Charles usually knew whenever Victor asked to spend the weekends at his house. And he’d been at his house three weekends in a row with nary a word about what was going on at home. Maybe today would be the day Victor would spill?

In the years they’d been friends, the boys had gotten closer, despite family differences, namely, Victor’s mother. She never missed a chance to let Charles know how she disliked him, thought he would try to steal from her house or let him know she was better than him in her cold, backhanded manner.

Her hatred for anything different only made the two friends bind closer. The more Victor’s mother acted snidely when Charles was present, the wider Victor opened his arms to Charles. Unfortunately, the homemaker was home more often than not, so the two usually went to Charles’s house, which became a second home of sorts for Victor, a place where he could escape and be himself with no judgment. Charles’s family accepted Victor with no hesitation.

Charles looked over and down at Victor, who stared into space. He brushed his shoulder against his friend to interrupt the reverie. He turned his head and made a gesture to start walking.

The boys walked in silence, Charles picking up on the tension in Victor’s rigid stance. Both were quiet as they walked the few minutes to Charles’s house. The two had the house to themselves as it was Uncle Lamont’s late day at the hospital and Charles’s grandmother, Diane, was at work as well.

Both dropped their bookbags on the kitchen counter and made their way to the fridge. They silently made themselves something to eat, in sync within the tight space, working in a rhythm they were used to. They sat down at the kitchen table with their plates of peanut butter sandwiches in hand. Charles was halfway through his food when he looked up and watched a range of emotion cross Victor’s face.

He swallowed quickly and swallowed a gulp of milk. “Vic, it’s just us, and I know something’s bothering you. What’s up?”

“Charles,” he said morosely and put his uneaten sandwich down. “The house finally sold. Mom convinced Dad to accept a job offer.” Victor’s parents had had a “For Sale” sign on their lawn for over a year, so the McQuades’ plan to move wasn’t a complete shock. Mrs. McQuade always referenced how their town felt unsafe any time she laid eyes on Charles during visits. Victor’s father was open to moving if he could find a better-paying job. It seemed he’d found it.

Charles listened intently, life as he knew it crashing before his eyes. Victor was moving. Who was Victor going to talk to about being gay? Victor had told Charles he was homosexual earlier in the year. Charles didn’t judge. How could he when his own Uncle Lamont was in the closet? He and his grandmother knew all about the permanent bachelor and his biweekly weekend overnight visits to his fellow bachelor friend’s home. Lamont left every other Friday night with his duffle bag and returned Sunday evening like clockwork. Charles knew Victor couldn’t tell his family, especially his mother who barely tolerated her son befriending someone of color. Victor had voiced his fears to him about being disowned or worse should he come out to his family.

“We’re moving to Jacksonville, Florida. My dad found a job. My mother gets to be close to her side of the family, and Kevin can look for a job. I just have to suffer.” He looked like he wanted to cry.

Charles stared at his friend and barely heard anything after Jacksonville, Florida. He assumed wrong. This would be much worse than a move out east in Suffolk County to a predominantly white community.

The two friends stared at each other, a range of emotion playing on both of their faces, still able to communicate through their silence.

It hurt to imagine next year without Victor next to him. The pain was worse than when his mother died. Adrienne had died from a drug overdose two years ago, making his temporary move to Long Island permanent. He’d mourned his mother’s loss. But he was numb when discussing it since their time together was spotty during his lifetime. He missed her because she was his mother, but he hadn’t seen her in so long, the pain was not as severe.

Victor’s announcement, however, he didn’t know how to deal with. “When?” Charles finally croaked out.

“Next week.”

“So soon? You sold your house already?”

Victor frowned. "My mother wants me to fly down with Kevin. Our tickets are already purchased. She thinks it will be better for me to spend the summer down there."

Charles had a guess at her reasoning behind flying down there so quickly. "What day are you leaving?"

"Monday morning."

He only had five more days left with his best friend. "I'll come with you to the airport." He barely kept it together just talking about it.

"Don't."

He shook his head. "But—"

"You're going to ride in a car with my mother?"

Charles frowned in return. He hadn't thought about that. Victor smirked. "Exactly." It might have been hasty, but he wanted to spend every minute, every second that he could with his friend. "I'll try to see if she'll let me come up before school starts. And I'll call you when I can."

"Long distance? Who is going to pay for that?" Neither of them had jobs, and Charles did not want to burden either of his family members when money was tight enough as it was.

"We can write letters to each other. There's nothing stopping that." Victor was always the optimist when it came to their friendship. He reached out to hold Charles's hand, not meeting his eyes. Charles sighed and reached over the table to hold his hand. Victor clasped his other hand over their joined hands. "I'm going to miss you so much. But it won't be so bad." Victor looked earnestly into Charles's eyes. They held each other's stare once more, and Charles began to feel uncomfortable. He wasn't... he couldn't... he was not gay. He used a familiar medium to break the tense moment.

"You'll probably forget me within a week." He pulled his hand out of Victor's hold and rolled his eyes comically.

Victor blinked and recovered with only a, "Bullshit. You're worth remembering for at least a month. Maybe even two months." He put his hands under the table and looked at the table top.

"Wow. Thanks, friend."

They resumed eating, both mulling over the change coming. Charles hated change. This was the hardest one he'd ever dealt with, even worse than moving

to New York. He did not think he could be numb about Victor's leaving. He knew come Monday he was going to be a mess. It'd been Charles and Victor against the world since that rescue by his best friend five years ago.

"We can go to college together and be roommates. Three years. It's not going to change, Charles. You'll see."

Charles doubted it but appreciated his friend for trying to lighten the mood. Things might never be like how they were at that very moment.

\*\*\*\*

*August 12, 1981*

*Dear Charles,*

*Florida blows! If you were here, it'd be better. Mom loves the neighborhood. I don't. It's boring down here. I'm tired of people down here staring at me when I talk. I have a Yankee accent I've learned, many times over.*

*My mother is trying to set me up with her high school friend's daughter. Do you think she suspects something? I can almost hear you say I am worrying for nothing. But I don't want her to ever find out. She'll probably stone me. I'm gonna borrow some of Kevin's nudie magazines and hide them under my bed to throw her off. She's so nosy. I can't wait to turn eighteen and leave.*

*There's one good thing. I got a job working as a delivery boy for a pharmacy nearby. Anything to get me out of the house and away from her. Can you believe I found a job before Kevin? I can see you rolling your eyes. Kevin has been busy drinking and making friends, in bed and out, with the locals.*

*Did you and Phillip get your class assignments yet? Did I mention school starts in a week? School starts in August in Florida. Man, I miss New York.*

*Charles, don't go back to being that quiet kid I met in 5th grade, okay? I won't be there to protect you from the Harolds of the world. Though the last I heard, he got caught blowing some boy in his father's toolshed. They sent him to a strict Catholic boarding school to help pray away the gay. I know my mother would do worse. Dad wouldn't give a shit. But Mom*



*and Kevin? No way. Make sure no one reads this. And pretend like you don't know if anyone asks about Harold.*

*You have to keep it together for me while I am stuck in the sticks. Then we can travel the world, my friend. Write me back!*

*Your best friend,*

*Victor*

\*\*\*\*

*September 11, 1981*

*Victor,*

*You have an accent. Own it. School just started here. How are your classes going? Do they teach reading and writing in the sticks? Phillip had a minor pregnancy scare with Connie Giorgio, so he's calmed down some. I give it a week, two, tops.*

*I miss you something fierce. School's not the same without you. Since I'm taller (I grew a few more inches this summer) I'd be the one protecting you. Ha!*

*I figured it was something serious with Harold since he's not skulking about the neighborhood. I would have never guessed he was what you said he was. I don't think telling your mother would be a good idea, nor Kevin. I'll keep your secret until I die. Don't go trusting just anyone down there.*

*I think the magazine idea is a little gross. You're just going to leave the magazine for anyone to see? Suppose it backfires? Then you're going to be thought of as a pervert. Just be careful with whatever you do.*

*I think I have a girlfriend. Tina asked me to the Sadie Hawkins dance already, and it's not even until November. I kinda told her yes since she asked me in front of half our class. So she's been blabbing it out to the entire sophomore class. I wish you were here. You'd know what to do or at least what to say.*

*Should I get her flowers or what? Is she supposed to get me flowers? I don't think I can. If you find someone, you can tell*

*me about them too. Even the other part. I don't want you to feel you can't ever talk to me.*

*By the way, I haven't found your replacement yet.*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*

*September 30, 1981*

*Dear Charles,*

*Play it by ear with your sorta girlfriend, Tina. She asked you out, so flowers from you would be a nice touch. I've even less experience than you with girls... Actually, I take it back. I confess I lost my virginity to a girl at summer camp two years ago. I am only telling you this now because it wasn't important to me. I wanted to try being normal for once, and I didn't like it. I finally figured out the way I felt about guys was okay by being with her. Weird right? The gay boy got his before you did.*

*You can say gay, Charles. You won't catch it if you write it. I am gay. You're best friend is gay. Your uncle is gay. It won't make you less straight.*

*I am officially 16! Less than two years until I am free.*

*Kevin is living over our garage because he prefers to do his partying without Mom hovering over him. This means she is even more of a noose around my neck.*

*I might have a sorta boyfriend. I tell you this because you're the only one I can tell this stuff. If you don't want to read it - IGNORE THIS PART: Ricky is more of a friend than boyfriend. But he likes jerking us off together. He graduated from Sticks High in June, cousin to the girl I told you my mother is trying to set me up with. Well, he gave me the best birthday present last night. Hint: He's not the best-looking guy, but his mouth is top notch.*

*I'm going to return the favor to Ricky tomorrow night.*

*IT'S SAFE TO READ NOW - Enough about my sex life. (Yes, I am rubbing it in.) How are your grandma and uncle?*

*Everyone's good? I miss being able to hang out at your house and being fed to death by your grandma. Even more now that I don't have a place to escape my mother when she's in one of her moods.*

*My dad told me I could call you on the weekend as long as I keep it under a half hour. My mother will be visiting my aunt that day. So what are you doing Saturday night around 9 next week? I hope staring at the four walls and expecting my call.*

*Your friend,*

*Victor*

\*\*\*\*

*November 24, 1981*

*Happy Thanksgiving, Victor!*

*Wish you were here. We're all missing you. Grandma was bummed about the cherry pie this year, since you and she are the only ones who eat it. She's not going to make it now. Whenever you come up here to visit, let her know so she can make her favorite. I felt so bad when we went to the supermarket. She frowned at the cherry filling. I was tempted to tell her to make it anyway... I could force myself to eat it. Almost. Who am I kidding? I hate cherries with a passion.*

*Phillip went back to his horny ways. As expected. He's been working at the gas station around the corner from your old house. So he's set for the next year in condoms.*

*Guess what? I'm officially a member of the club. The 16 and popped-their-cherry club. Tina and I had the weirdest few minutes of our lives together. I tried calling her last week, but she was busy. I think she's over me. I can't tell. I don't mind either way, I guess. She should at least let me know if our pseudo-relationship is over.*

*I told her it was my first time once we finished. She said she could tell. I'm thinking it was not a compliment. I saw her talking to Leonard Johnson after class yesterday. I don't know if I'm supposed to be jealous or not.*

*How is it going with Ricky? I bet a whole lot better than me and my mess. I hope you're being careful with him. There are all kinds of diseases out there. Phillip scared the hell out of me when he told me two of his friends came down with a case of the clap from some girl he slept with a few months ago. He's been leaving me free rubbers, so I'm sharing this PSA. I can't send you my stash, but I can send a warning.*

*Did I tell you the math club is in the national semifinals? If we win the next two rounds we're going to the national math tournament in Orlando. I don't think it's very close to Jacksonville, but maybe you can beg your mommy and daddy for a trip to Disney World around the same time. If our team makes it, that is. I probably jinxed us. Grandma is so excited about me being in the semifinals, she told everyone at work and church. People are expecting big things now. Luz, the other maintenance lady from Grandma's job, knitted me a lucky scarf with a cross on it. It is so bright blue, you could probably see it from Mars.*

*Thanks for the early birthday gift. I flipped when I saw that special edition. That must have cost you a pretty penny. Thank you!*

*Still looking for your replacement. You're a hard act to follow.*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*

*January 3, 1982*

*Hey Charles,*

*Thanks for the New Year's phone call. It was definitely worth it for that news! I never once doubted your team acing the state championships. You number nerds are ruthless. The lucky scarf worked! I wish I could have been there to see you guys get your trophy. Maybe I can see you in Orlando? I might be able to hustle a way to see you then. You are so set for your college application. My grades are not bad, but I wish school was over. My mom keeps bitching about my extracurricular*

*activities or lack thereof. Since Kevin dropped out of college, I'm her only hope.*

*Thanks for being okay with me talking about my relationship. I'll try not to be graphic. Me and Ricky are just me and Ricky. He hasn't told anyone he's gay. We're both in the closet, so to speak. He's going to start attending the local community college later this month. He already moved into a one-bedroom apartment with four other guys, so finding a place to be alone together is getting hard. Ha!*

*We have finally done everything two gay boys can do. Before you ask, we both tried it. It hurt like a motherfucker, but I think if I keep doing it, I could like it. Messy as hell but enjoyable. Is me talking about this disgusting you? Tell me if it is. You know you're the only one I can talk to about any of this. The sticks... they're hateful against anything different down here. Well, a lot of them. Not me.*

*Don't worry about my parents reading the mail. Dad's always working, and Mom is busy with her clubs and associations. It's one of my chores to get the mail every day.*

*How goes it with Tina? Last you told me, it was officially off. But sometimes people can change their mind. I'm sure Phillip is willing to help you mourn with a new girl. He always seemed to have someone up his sleeve. Who is he with now? I can't keep up with him.*

*Tell your grandma and uncle thanks for the gift.*

*Happy New Year,*

*V*

\*\*\*\*

*49 years ago – March 1982*

*Third place was not bad.*

Especially for a kid who'd never left the Northeast. The farthest Charles had traveled was going to his grandmother's in New York from Newark, New Jersey. He and his team shook the other teams' hands, took pictures with their trophy and made plans for their last night in Florida. Charles didn't have much

money to go visit the amusement parks like the rest of his teammates. Between his uncle and grandma, they barely scrounged enough money to pay for this trip. He didn't want to burden them to ask for anything that was more than necessary. The only other black kid on his team and assigned roommate (surprise) already let him know about his plans for the night. His family lived in the good part of town. And he hoped nothing would be missing when he left their room... Charles got the hint.

Charles was going to let his teammates know about heading back to his room in the hotel for the day when he heard a loud whistle coming from the audience area. He looked toward the source of the noise, a gangly, strawberry-blond teen who had his arm wrapped around his best friend's shoulder. He couldn't believe his eyes. Victor made it. Victor was beaming his signature thousand-watt smile at him, making him return the same. They'd spoken last week, and Charles had told him about the March math competition. He knew Victor's parents wouldn't be able to drive the hundred miles, and Kevin flat out refused.

"Where there's a will, there's a Ricky!" Victor called out and ran to hug his friend. Charles hugged him back just as fiercely. He looked over his shorter friend's shoulder and stared at the older teen, who he assumed was Ricky. Ricky winked at him and leered.

Victor pulled out of the embrace and smiled. "Way to go, man!" He couldn't help brushing their shoulders together. They were together again.

"We got third place." He shrugged.

"I saw. That's third in the entire country and first place against me. You know I hate math. You did great. I'm proud of you." He clapped Charles on his back and turned him toward the guy he came with. "Ricky, this is my best friend in the entire world, Charles. Charles, this is my new friend back in the sticks, Ricky."

"Nice to meet you." He nodded and turned to Victor. "I can't believe you're here, man!" This was the best unexpected surprise. He took in the changes since he had seen Victor last: the added inch or two in height, shaggy brown hair and happy light in his brown eyes. His friend looked the same and different at the same time. Charles was sure he looked different as well with his growth spurt, mini 'fro and stubble.

"Wouldn't miss seeing you if we're in the same state, man!"

“You were great,” Ricky chimed in as he got closer to the two friends. Ricky kept staring at him. Charles didn't think he was being paranoid.

“Thank you,” he muttered uncomfortably.

Victor carried on without missing a beat. “Ricky has a friend who has a girlfriend going to college here. He dropped him off, and here we are. I kept telling him about you.”

“I'm nothing special. I just like math.”

“Just like math? Bullshit.” He turned to the blond. “C'mon, give him an equation, Ricky. He can solve it like that!” He snapped his fingers.

“Cut it out, Victor.” Charles looked at his secondhand shoes during the unwanted attention. “I was getting ready to head back to my hotel room for the night before you guys came. The entire team is going out for the evening. I was going to be alone. Now that you're here, makes it so much better.”

Ricky perked up at the news. “Really? All alone? I've a math problem for you, Charlie. One of you, plus me and Victor equals?” He leered at Charles.

Victor put his hand on Ricky's chest and pushed him back. “It's not that kind of party, Ricky. Don't you have to go back to Debbie's dorm before we leave? Why don't you go now? Give me some time with Charles. Like an hour. What's your room number, Charles?”

Charles preferred that plan instead of spending any time with the flirting Ricky. He gave the room number, and went to notify his teammates about his plans for the night. The two friends left Ricky in the lobby and headed to Charles's hotel room.

The two couldn't stop bumping into each other as they walked inside. Charles closed the door and pointed Victor toward the left side of the room, where Charles's bag and clothes were neatly stacked. “That's my side.”

“Oh I can tell, neat freak. Never met any other boy who was so neat.” Victor sat at the end of the bed and faced Charles as he sat in the room's only chair.

“Shut up.” He pushed his shoulder lightly. “Thanks for coming. Really. I still can't believe I'm looking at you right now.”

“Mom heard the word college when I mentioned Ricky's plans, and she jumped at the chance. My parents think he's mentoring me.” Victor smirked. “Mom all but pushed me to spend the weekend with him since he's a college

student and positive influence.” He laughed out loud. “If she only knew what he’s *really* mentoring me in, she’d probably have a stroke.”

Charles widened his eyes at the new sexual glow emanating from his best friend. He’d never experienced Victor’s sexual side in person. Reading about it was totally different from seeing it.

“You look good.”

Charles wondered if he meant in general, or in a sexual way, because he couldn’t go there in his head. Just the thought made him blush uncomfortably.

“You too.” He fiddled with the armrest, feeling bashful all of a sudden.

“I’m sorry about Ricky downstairs.” He moved closer to the edge, their knees almost touching. “I wouldn’t let him do anything. I know you’re not into that.”

“I’m not,” Charles emphasized, then quickly looked down to their knees. He couldn’t look into Victor’s eyes. There were times when he wondered about what it would be like, especially when Victor mentioned something in their letters. He could never tell this to a soul though, not even his friend. “I’m straight.” Being black was more than enough for him, thank you. Being black and gay? He didn’t want to be like his uncle, living a half-life. He refused to go there even in his head.

“I know, Charles.” Victor rubbed his knee. Charles pushed his hand off as a reflex.

“Charles, what, I can’t touch you? I didn’t touch your dick.”

“It’s not... I know you didn’t—”

“You’re so uptight, you’d probably like it if I did.”

Charles folded his arms and would *not* meet his friend’s eye. Victor tilted his head to the side and stared.

“You would, *wouldn’t* you,” he murmured for only Charles to hear. Like a vulture that scented prey, he didn’t seem to be able to stop.

“Have you gone out with any other girls since Tina?”

“You already know the answer.”

“Why not? You were a catch before I moved. I bet nothing changed since I left. Don’t feel like looking?”



Charles finally met his eyes. "I'm focusing on my studies. I want to go to college. I want to study engineering and do better for myself. Make Grandma proud. You know my plans. As my best friend, you *know* this."

"There's nothing wrong with having fun sometimes, too. Didn't you have fun with Tina? Why not find another girl?"

"No one's caught my eye at the moment."

"Have you tried looking at the other half of the student body? Since no girl has caught your eye?"

"I'm not *gay*, Victor. Not everyone is going to be like *you* for not actively pursuing every fucking skirt in high school." He didn't yell but the emphasis was not to be overlooked.

In all the years they'd known each other, neither one of them was prejudiced toward the other. They might have squabbled here and there. However, the major stuff, the important things, like race, sexuality, family life, they never argued about. This time it seemed Victor was not going to stop pushing the issue. The walls that Charles built around him were getting tested whether he liked it or not.

Victor rose from the bed, standing angrily. Charles copied him, glaring. "You have a problem with me being gay? It seems that you do. I mean, you can barely write the word in your letters to me."

Charles looked down stubbornly and ground his teeth.

"You think it's wrong because I like boys? Think you're better because you're straight? Makes you a man? What makes you any better for liking girls?"

He didn't just like females. Sometimes, he wondered what Victor did exactly in his letters. From the looks Victor gave Ricky downstairs, it was more explicit than he ever did with Tina, Charles guiltily thought, shifting uncomfortably. "I didn't say—"

"That's right, you didn't say. I'm asking you now, you think it's wrong? Because I think you do. Why else would you push my hand away like I have the cooties? Think I'm going to give you a gay disease?"

"I don't care who you're attracted to, Victor. You know that!" He couldn't control himself from yelling. This argument was getting way out of hand. Fast.

"Me being your friend won't make you gay. Reading about me and *my* *gayness* won't make you gay. If I touch you, it won't make you gay. Fucking a guy means you are. And last time I checked you haven't, have you?"

Way back when Victor first came out to him, Charles felt weird thinking about having sex with another guy. He didn't find it as revolting as Victor seemed to think he did. In fact, he couldn't stop thinking about two men touching each other, especially at night. The dreams he had at night were vivid and real if the proof in his sheets was evidence. Just thinking about men having sex made him horny, especially at that moment, which made him feel more awkward.

He tried to move his hand stealthily to adjust himself, but, while trying to be inconspicuous, he must have glanced away from Victor's pissed glare. Victor looked down, watched his hand. Charles froze. Victor did too, and then looked at his crotch. Charles watched, wondering what Victor's next move would be.

Victor smirked nastily and waited until Charles met his eyes again.

With a disgusted sigh, Victor moved toward the exit. "It was good seeing you, Charles. I should go wait for Ricky in the lobby. He should be back by now."

He'd felt... weird looking into his eyes. It was the same set of brown eyes he'd always seen, yet different. He started to feel tingly in his gut, and he'd *never* felt that way for his friend. He wasn't going to try to think back about it and open that can of worms. "Wait. You're angry. Don't leave angry. Just wait—"

Victor looked back. "I'm not angry. I get it now. See you later, Charles."

Victor left without any fuss. Charles walked to the hotel door and stared at it. He couldn't even speak from the abrupt change of events. He was wrong for shaking his hand off, but it was a reaction. Leaning against the locked door he sank to the floor, disappointed with the turn of events. What the hell just happened? His stomach was tied in knots from this fight. He hoped they could bounce back. Hopefully.

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*May 3, 1982*

*Victor,*

*I tried calling last month, but your brother picked up. He said you were out. I don't know if he was lying or not. Or if you're pissed at me.*

*If you're avoiding me, it's cool.*

*Just answer me back, at least. Let me know if you're mad, you don't want to be my friend anymore. Give me something.*

*I'm not calling again until you write me back.*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*

*July 24, 1982*

*Victor,*

*Just say you're mad. No answer from you, and it's nearly the end of July. The summer's almost over, and school's gonna start. We're juniors. I started looking into colleges. I'm thinking of applying to Queens College in the city. They have a great engineering program. And I could live at home. Or maybe if you go to college up here, we could dorm together and be roomies.*

*Update about home: Grandma has some heart problems. She's been fainting at work. Only found out about this from Uncle Lamont. She fainted at work, and one of the patients found her on the floor. She might have to have surgery. We can't afford it. I hope it doesn't come down to that. Maybe if she said something earlier, we could have done something about it. I hate feeling like this.*

*Will you quit being a shit and talk to me? I don't give a shit if you're gay. And I'm not gay. Don't try to guilt me for not being gay. I don't think that you touching me or any of those things would make me gay. That's ridiculous. It was a kneejerk reaction. I'm sorry.*

*I miss you.*

*Talk to me.*

*Charles*

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*49 years ago -September 1982*

Charles grabbed a glass of juice from the kitchen when the telephone rang. Uncle Lamont answered. Charles figured it would be for anyone else but him

since Phillip was away visiting family for the summer, and Victor still ignored him. He was getting ready to leave the room when he heard his Uncle say a name he's been longing to hear for months.

"Who is this? Victor McQuade, is that you?"

Charles stopped in his tracks and kept his back to his uncle while he eavesdropped.

"Boy, it's been too long since I've heard from you. How you been?"

His Uncle chuckled at something his friend said. "We've been pretty good. Your friend's been moping around for a bit. You two fight?" *Was it that noticeable?*

"Mmhhh. Let me call Charles down from his room." His Uncle snapped his fingers to get Charles's attention. He continued once Charles met his eyes. "Whatever it is, it's not as important as your friendship. You two spat. Now just make up. He's stubborn, and you can be a hothead. It's bound to happen. But I never seen two boys who needed each other more. Hold on."

Lamont covered the receiver. "I know you heard every word I said. I meant it. Here you are." He gave the phone to his nephew and stared at him once more before leaving the kitchen.

Charles felt his defenses go straight up. "Now you know how to call me." He was pissed and felt he had a right to be.

"Charles."

"What?"

"I got your letters."

"You should have with all the letters I sent."

"Can you forgive me? I'm sorry."

Charles pressed his mouth close to the phone and looked around once more, even though he saw his uncle go down to his room in the basement, and they were the only ones home. He whispered loudly, "You should be sorry. I don't have a problem with you being gay. If I made you feel that way, I'm sorry."

"I know. I read your letters," he sighed. "Me too. I mean, I'm sorry for being an asshole and yelling at you the way I did. We're still tight, right?"

"Why'd you wait until now to call me?"

“I don’t know. I just didn’t feel like talking about it. Every time I tried to write a letter back, I was angry. And I just—I don’t want to be angry at you. And I don’t want you to be angry at me. And if you ever end up hating me for being who I am, it’d fucking kill me. Because you’re it for me. You’re the only one I tell everything to. You get me.”

Charles sighed into the receiver and switched hands, hunching over the phone. He really wished Victor was there right at that second as he twirled the phone cord around his finger. “Okay. I forgive you as long as you forgive me. You’re an asshole though.”

“You’re still my best friend. And you can be an asshole, too.”

Charles chuckled. “I know. You’re just a bigger one.”

The two talked for a few minutes more about their homes and their families, their bond a little dented but not broken.

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*September 9, 1982*

*Dear Charles,*

*I know I apologized when I called you yesterday, but I’m going to apologize again. I’m sorry.*

*We only got to talk about your grandma and not much else. Everything here is the same. Lame. Boring. Hot as hell. Closed-minded. Sometimes I feel like people are too ass backwards down here. There was a kid who kicked this black kid’s ass at school the other day, just for looking at a white girl. No one batted an eye or tried to stop it. I tried to step in but was held back by a classmate. I felt like a shit. Still kinda do.*

*Plus, I sorta got dumped by Ricky. Can you be dumped by someone who wasn’t even your boyfriend? Turns out one of Ricky’s roommates doesn’t mind sucking cock. So my friend has found someone new. I’m a little pissed about it. Didn’t tell you on the phone because Mom’s been trying to figure out why Ricky isn’t around as much, and also trying to listen in on my calls. She’s so nosy.*

*I’ve been angry a lot this summer. Angry enough even my mom is not smothering me as much. Wait, maybe this is a good thing?*

*I'm going to focus myself on schoolwork. I kinda goofed off last year. Maybe I can end up being smart like you if I start paying attention in class and study. I don't know what I want to major in at college. What I'd really like is to have a year off after high school. Travel abroad to Paris or Greece. Learn how to be a man on my own terms. If I ever get a chance to do that, you can join me, maybe? I know you won't, but I doubt I'll get to travel anywhere like Europe anyway.*

*I'll make an appointment with my guidance counselor, see what schools in the NY area I have a shot at actually getting into.*

*I really wish I could erase what happened the last time we saw each other. I don't know what came over me.*

*I'm a shit. But I hope we'll still be friends.*

*Still your friend,*

V

\*\*\*\*

*December 6, 1982*

*Victor,*

*Thanks for calling for my birthday last week. And you didn't have to send me a gift. I know you're trying to save for your Moving Out fund. I have been playing the hell out of Thriller. Michael Jackson is king. King, I say!*

*Phillip told me to tell you hi. He's over here working on a science project with me and hiding from Larry Drucker. He slept with Larry's girl, Tanya Peterson. You know, the redhead girl with the annoying voice and big boobs. Phillip's been staying here more often, since it's the other side of town, to avoid getting his face pounded in. I think it's gonna happen anyway. Phillip's plans never work out, as you well know.*

*I hope you can get into a NY college. Let me know which ones you're looking at, so I can see if they have any good engineering programs.*

*That's messed up, getting sort of dumped. I know this well. I'm sure you can find a guy out there for you. Good plan on*

*getting your grades up. I wish you were here. I'd probably nag you to death about letting your grades slip. Can I talk about something serious? I read in the newspaper about a disease affecting homosexuals. I'm sure you even heard about it down there in the sticks. I don't believe any of that crap some people are saying. I know you can't catch it from shaking a gay guy's hand or anything. But be careful, okay? I would lose it if anything happened to you. I know we're at a good spot right now, but I want to get this out in the open to avoid a blow up.*

*I'd write more but my hands are falling asleep from all this writing we have to do. I'll call you on Sunday. Hopefully you'll get this letter before then.*

*Charles*

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*April 24, 1983*

*Dear Charles,*

*The sticks might not be so bad after all. I'm sorry about not writing you as much lately. I met Roger, and he's been kinda taking up my time.*

*Roger moved into town last month, and his family is all kinds of rich. Don't worry; he's not your replacement. He's like me. You know, white. Just kidding. (He is though.) But he's also gay. His parents don't care. I'm jealous of that. I was almost stupid enough to talk to Dad about myself, but I didn't. Anyway, Roger knows how it is to be gay and have to hide in the sticks. We don't announce it or anything, especially with the AIDS scare. If you only knew what some of the homophobic hicks discuss out in the open. Makes me want to hide inside the closet with double locks.*

*Roger took me to this gay bar a few towns away the other day when I slept over at his house. Big eye opener. Lots of fun. I did some things. Careful things. Let's leave it at that.*

*Being Roger's friend is so different from being Ricky's. Maybe it's because we're going to the same school, and he gets me. Understands how it is. I'm not in love with him or anything,*

*but it's nice to have someone who gets it. He doesn't flinch if I touch him in public. We're not holding hands or anything, but he never treats me like a shit for doing it.*

*So keep writing. I'll still be writing you.*

*I wish you could meet Roger. You two would get along pretty well. He likes math like you do. I told him all about you getting second in that math competition last month. It sucks how it was in Chicago, and I couldn't make it. I showed him the picture of us together before I moved. I need a new one. Remind me the next time we meet up. Gotta keep up with my hot best friend. (Ricky had a crush on you. I was jealous at the time, but I'm over it.)*

*Call you when I can!*

*Your best friend until the bitter end,*

*Victor*

\*\*\*\*

*September 13, 1983*

*Victor,*

*We made it! We're officially seniors. The picture inside is me and Phillip at Action Park. He's such a dork with that sunblock on his nose. Wasn't the same without you there.*

*How was your summer? Last time we spoke, it was the beginning of June. I figured you were going to be busy between hanging out with Roger and work.*

*I spent mine mostly working. Nothing cool like you visiting bars. (You got a fake ID, didn't you?) A summer full of work and checking out colleges does a nerd make. I think I have it narrowed down to a few. I'll give you my list when you call. Don't feel like you have to choose the colleges I choose if they don't offer a program you want to study. We don't have to go to the same school. It'd be nice, but we like different things. Did you decide what you want to major in? Grandma says you could live here the first year, and we could save up for our own place for the year after.*



*I got my driver's license! Uncle Lamont lets me drive his station wagon to pick up Grandma from work. He says I drive better when an adult is present. Whatever. I think I drive just fine. I haven't hit anyone yet. Remind me to tell you the latest in the life of Phillip when we speak next.*

*Nothing on the girlfriend front for me. Phillip let me know the latest details on Tina. She got knocked up this summer. She won't say who's the father, but it sure as hell isn't me. Not saying it's a bad thing, because if I did knock her up, I'd be there, you know? But that's the latest from the gossip mill. This is my last year with the mathletes. I'm going to miss my nerdy team. I can hear your joke about me missing my mathletes. Don't pretend you didn't either. I can see you through your window from NY. Close the blinds! Ah!*

*Happy early birthday, by the way.*

*Charles*

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*April 1, 1984*

*Dear Charles,*

*I have good news and bad news. So you might need to sit down for this.*

*Let's get the bad news out of the way. My great-aunt Mary died. I know you never met her, but she used to visit once in a while, and she loved my dad and me. I would listen to her life stories and not ignore her like Mom and Kevin did.*

*She left me and Dad money in her will. I got \$10,000 with my name on it! Can you believe it?! I had a talk with Dad about it. I'm not going to college this year. I will next year. Dad made me put half of my money in savings, and the other half is mine to do what I want. And what I want is to go to Europe and backpack. Roger plans on going because his family is cool like that, and now I can travel with him!*

*I'm so sorry about ignoring the college subject when you called for these last couple of weeks. I know we planned on*

*meeting up for college, but I will never be able to make the grades you do, let's be honest. I've been dragging my ass with giving you a straight (ha!) answer. I wish you could come with me to Europe, but I know you can't and wouldn't.*

*I haven't told Mom yet. I plan to tonight. Wish me luck. If you hear on the news there was a woman who combusted in Jacksonville, it will be her. I know she'll blow a gasket, but it's my life. I'm going to tell her it's either my way or she can forget me ever going to school. I'll just move. Besides, I'll get some culture from my travels. That's going to be my main selling point.*

*I can hear you saying it's a bonehead move, but I have to play to my strengths. Once you finish with school, we can go on a trip together, and I can be your tour guide. So think of it as preparation for the main event. I will send you postcards and be back before you know it.*

*We're leaving after graduation. Roger has been to a few places over there with his family. It's all good.*

*Don't be mad with me. Our plans will still happen. Just a few adjustments to the time frame.*

*I'm calling you on Saturday, our usual time.*

*Your friend,*

V

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*46 years ago - February 1985*

Charles looked at the latest postcard from his friend. Victor was in Amsterdam, living the good life. Charles traced the scrawling handwriting with a smile. He might be envious of his friend having the wherewithal to backpack through Europe, but he wished him nothing but the best. It was funny his postcards made him feel closer to his friend. The snippets of his travels made him feel like he was there experiencing a new location with him. He added the postcard to the stack he'd collected and grabbed his textbook before heading out the door. Time to face reality and go to class.

He wished his friend the best out of life. But he didn't think the two of them would be heading in the same direction.

And he was mostly fine with that.

He had friends, a few new, some old, Phillip and his group being the friends he mostly hung out with. He worked at a nursing home as a janitor four days out of the week, had classes five days. Any free time he spent reading. He didn't feel like anything was missing.

Except maybe his best friend.

If you asked his grandmother, she would say "a significant other." Charles hadn't found a girl who interested him. He did meet a girl named Amber back in October. They had sex. It wasn't special for Charles. He didn't know what was missing. Maybe he was bad at sex? It'd probably be better with someone he cared for. He just hadn't met her yet.

He might have stared longer than normal at a student in his English 101 class who looked like Victor. He kept comparing their looks, which ultimately led to sex, then sex and Victor, which caused tighter pants. His feelings about sex with men were all over the place, but mostly he'd end up disgusted with himself for having these urges. He'd rather deny that part of himself, even if his subconscious was not letting him do so. Maybe he should try to actively search for a girl, or at least someone to let people know he followed the norm. He might be a bastard with a father he never met and a dead junkie whore for a mother, but he was not some black kid from the ghetto who wouldn't amount to anything in life.

He was going to stick to his plan: become an engineer, marry a woman, have 2.5 kids, live the American dream. *Be* the American dream, or as damn close to it as possible. He'd just shelve any wayward thoughts into the back of his being, right next to his pitiful childhood, and keep striving to achieve his plan.

The fact that he'd angrily jerk himself off most nights to the thought of kissing his best friend meant he needed to try harder at being straight. He was good at denial, he thought.

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*June 19, 1985*

*Dear Charles,*

*Your eyes are not deceiving you. I sent you this letter from Florida.*

*I stuck to the plan! I bet you thought I'd end up being a bum in Europe.*

*The things I did! The places I saw! The experiences I had! Charles, I was tempted to not come back. But I didn't want to blow my inheritance on that kind of life. I left Roger in London, of all places. He fell in love with this artist named Kent. We were all staying at Kent's flat for the last month and a half. I don't miss all the sex they had. They can wake the dead with all their groaning.*

*I made it back in time to sign up for the fall semester at the local community college. I'm going to stay at my parents' house (Kevin moved out of the garage apartment, so it's mine for the time being) and try to start the next phase of my life.*

*I fell in and out of love all over Europe. But you're the one reason why I knew I had to come home.*

*Enough mush. I hope you're not too pissed that I haven't called... I was on a budget, like I explained in some of the postcards.*

*We've got to travel together. I insist.*

*Your friend,*

*Victor*

\*\*\*\*

*December 17, 1986*

*Charles,*

*I'm taking a semester off. Again. And changing my major when I go back... again.*

*Stop scowling, Mr. Dean's List. I'm going full time at the pharmacy. Bill wants to go halves on an apartment together. He's still living at home with his wife, but he's only there for the kids.*

*He found an apartment with a private drive. I can't wait. My mother's becoming too suspicious about my meetings with the professor. I can't believe I'm dating a professor. It's different being with someone older, you know? Not that 38 is*

*that old. He says I keep him in tune with his students. Two months going strong with Bill and counting. I sent a picture of him and me together. I don't want you thinking I'm dating a geriatric. He looks a little like Sidney Poitier to me. You might think I don't know what I'm doing. But I do. Bill and I do, I should say. He's so grounded. I need that, especially now. I got a letter from Roger, my Europe friend. His lover has AIDS, and Roger's freaking out that he might have it too. Those two liked to have sex with other guys, so who knows where he got it from. I hope Roger is safe from that. It scared me. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about this with Bill. He told me he could never have enough stamina to be with anyone else. Apologies if that made you uncomfortable but it's true. Let's go to another fun topic, shall we?*

*Kevin moved to Arkansas to chase some woman. I don't know what his deal is. Don't care. Sometimes I wish I could return certain members of my family and trade up for a better model.*

*How are Mr. Lamont and Mrs. Diane? It feels like forever since I've seen you or your family. I found the goofiest Christmas cards for all of you guys. I think you're going to die of laughter.*

*Your friend,*

*Victor*

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*43 years ago – March 1988*

“Where the fuck is he?” Phillip asked Charles as he put his beer mug on the table.

It was the last day of their spring break. Charles had made plans with Victor to meet up. It'd been years since they'd all seen each other. Phillip, Charles, and a group of their college friends wanted to have their last hurrah before graduating later that year. Phillip was finally able to convince Charles to bring his “boring ass” to Daytona for spring break. For the few days of being in the party town, it had been nothing but swimming, drinking booze and ogling the other spring breakers.

Though, while Phillip eyed the pretty girls and Charles pretended to, neither of their hearts were in it. Phillip was committed to Tanya. The two were in love, and Phillip stayed true to her. It was very weird to see the ladies' man anticipating settling down. Phillip planned on proposing to her on the day of graduation. He'd already told Charles he would be in the wedding party.

Victor was supposed to be joining them for a few hours before driving to Ocala to go to a family function. *He's late. I hope he doesn't flake out.* Since Bill had come into Victor's life, his best friend wasn't always dependable.

Charles was tired of hearing the same country songs being played on the bar's jukebox. A little popular music wouldn't kill them to break up the monotony. His annoyance with the music added to his anxiety.

If he got one more stare from a patron... He knew he was the only black guy in the place, but did they have to make it so obvious? He'd gotten used to it back home, but it felt a little different down south. He sighed and checked the time again on his watch. Where the hell was he?

A loud whistle came from the left, and Charles looked at the friend he hadn't seen in a few years. Damn, Victor looked good. *A strictly platonic observation*, he told himself. Victor's smile could light up the room and then some. He held his arms open, and Charles stood to hurry into them. When he bumped into Phillip, he remembered himself. It wasn't just Victor and him. Phillip was there, too. And what the hell was he doing acting like a fool? Next thing, he'd have hearts glowing out of his ass for the entire world to see, he thought derisively as tried to pace himself to not be too eager as he hugged Victor.

Phillip moved away to pat Victor on the shoulder, blabbering about Victor's late arrival, and Charles went in for more torture for himself.

Charles held on tight to his friend. Victor finally grew into those broad shoulders. They filled out nicely with the rest of him, not too skinny or husky. And as he embraced the man, he might've smelled his friend's close-cut hair as he squeezed him once more. He was sure no one noticed that he sniffed him. Victor was the one to let go first, Charles, a few seconds later. He chastised himself for acting so sentimental.

He stood close and noted the differences. Victor had the same warm brown eyes, the same dark brown hair, the same little gap in between the front teeth, and left dimple so deep it looked like it was carved into his face. Victor stopped growing at maybe five foot nine or five foot ten, definitely shorter than Charles' six foot frame.

Charles was sure he looked different too. He'd filled out his previously skinny frame with toned muscle, not overly defined under his cocoa-brown skin. He'd lost the afro for a low fade. He'd grown a goatee, and his voice had definitely deepened, but underneath the T-shirt and shorts, he knew he was the same Charles.

They went back to the table and sat. "We've been waiting forever. Me and Charlie over here had cows *and* ate their burgers," Phillip said good-naturedly, as he signaled for the waitress.

"What the hell, Phillip? Still the same old jerk-wad, I see."

"The jerk-wad who can walk outta here with your girl any day of the week."

"Doubt you'd ever do that on your best day, my friend."

Charles hid his smile. No way would Phillip be walking off with anyone Victor was interested in. Unless, of course, he had a secret lust of men he'd been hiding.

Victor caught Charles's smile and smirked, then picked up the soda bottle Charles ordered for him. "What's happening, dudes?"

"Dudes? You listening to this, Charlie? He thinks just because he lives down here and probably banged a surfer chick, he's a local. You're still a New Yorker, damn it! Talk like one!"

Victor chuckled and winked at Charles, which made the pit in his stomach flutter. *What the hell was going on?* He tried to follow along with the rest of the conversation, but he felt like he was listening in, rather than participating. He couldn't shake this... feeling he had. Maybe it was an extreme case of elation of getting to see his friend again. It had been a few years. He watched Victor's mouth move, listening to the deeper voice. *Had his lips always been so plump?* Why did he care? He shouldn't notice any of these things.

And he couldn't stop himself.

He planned to resume actively looking for a girlfriend after this trip. Maybe another try with Amber? She seemed amenable to dating him, if her hints were anything to go by. The second time having sex had not been any better than his first time with Tina. But it hadn't been worse either.

"Let's get out of here. There's a wet bikini contest happening around the corner from our hotel. I can't touch, but I most definitely will look," Phillip announced enthusiastically. The group followed and talked, Victor and Phillip

doing most of the chatting. Phillip asked about Victor's job and return to college this semester, having finally decided on a liberal arts major.

What Phillip didn't know was that the reason Victor had taken the semester off last year was due to finding love with an older guy named Bill. Charles hadn't trusted the Bill character at all. He'd strung his friend along too many times to count in an almost two year love affair. And affair was the key word since Bill was still legally separated and not divorced as he'd promised Victor too many times to count. Victor used him as a sounding board, unleashing the frustrations that he never voiced to Bill on Charles.

Charles shouldn't judge, especially someone he'd never met, but he didn't think anything good would come out of this. What his friend told him about the older man, he didn't like. Victor was a loving guy; he deserved someone to appreciate him, not hide him or squeeze him into a schedule as an afterthought. He would never do that to Victor if he was in Bill's shoes. He tried not to entertain thoughts of that nature, because then it led to shameful masturbation that left Charles hating himself.

And thoughts like that caused trouble. He thought he'd tamped his feelings down, but Charles had had an increase of thoughts like that since learning of his friend's affair. And the tingling in the pit of his stomach traveled southward... leading to jerking off on just the thought of Victor... with him. Not that he would ever breathe a word of this to a soul. It was his deepest secret.

He tuned into his friends' discussion to add a laugh to a joke Phillip told. They made it to the event, a rock band Charles didn't know the name of blasting on loudspeakers, and hundreds of rowdy, drunk college students cheering on the scantily clad girls on stage. Phillip found his friends and made a party of it, yelling for his favorites. He didn't notice Charles's and Victor's eyes were on each other rather than the show.

"Wanna go someplace quieter?" Charles yelled, barely heard over the raucous cheering.

Victor nodded, and Charles led him back to his hotel room. A case of déjà vu hit him as he closed the hotel room door. This time, the room was nicer. There was a couch for both of them to sit, which they did. Charles folded his leg over his knee to face his friend and study any changes he might've missed. And if the tip of his toe brushed against Victor's leg, so what? It was completely innocent.



They talked to each other via phone and letters so much now Charles had nothing to say. He kept looking at his friend. He was lying to himself. There was something he wanted to talk about, but he didn't know how to go about it and avoid an argument. Victor could get testy, especially when homosexuality was the topic.

Charles wanted to know how Victor knew he was gay. Would dreaming about men from time to time make you gay? He still could get it up for a woman if he was attracted to her. Or a man. Maybe he could admit it out loud? Then he worried if he did, it would change everything he thought he knew about himself.

He was so conflicted, and he wanted to share. But he couldn't; it'd solidify his feelings. Feelings he was too scared to admit to himself much less discuss with another person. He wasn't ready. He shouldn't do this. He forgot to stop looking at his friend while he argued with himself.

Now Victor studied him. "What?"

"What, *what*?"

"Why're you looking at me like that?"

"Looking at you like what?"

"Like *that*."

"Nothing."

"We're not having a repeat of the last time I visited you. Ask whatever is on your mind. I can usually tell when there's something, and you're not making it hard at all." If he only knew.

Charles chose the cowardly route. "How've you been? Really?"

Victor fiddled with his shoelace. "Me and Bill are kind of on a time out."

"Let me guess: He has to spend time with his family?" This was not the first time he'd heard the excuse, and he doubted it'd be the last either.

"He has kids with this woman, Charles. It's not easy."

"So what does that mean? Time out? You can see other men?" He didn't like him seeing Bill, but he disliked him seeing other men even more.

"Why, you offering?" Victor punched his arm, not noticing Charles's hesitation.

Charles froze, any witty comeback stuck in his throat. "If I was?" Charles questioned boldly, then instantly regretted it. Of all the boneheaded things to ask...

Victor leaned in closer. "I wouldn't take you up on your offer."

Charles returned the gesture, getting into Victor's personal space. "It's not like you don't date straight men."

A small frown line appeared on his forehead, signaling to Charles just how pissed Victor was getting. "I'm not having this discussion with you, Charles."

"Prefer them older, do you?"

"Are you flirting with me, *straight* boy?"

"If I was?"

"You think you're the first straight guy to be curious and flirt, Charles? Please."

Victor stared at Charles with the oddest expression on his face. Charles couldn't tell if it was curiosity or disgust. But his emotions made him stop thinking and just act. He lunged the few inches from Victor's face and kissed him.

It was Victor's turn to freeze as Charles assaulted his mouth. Charles turned his head to get the right angle. And Victor didn't push him away. He was doing this. Oh my God, he was doing this. His eyes were closed, and that was all the encouragement he needed. He sipped at Victor's closed lips, not having a plan at the moment, just going with the flow. He pressed the tip of his tongue at the closed seam, and Victor let him inside.

It was definitely different from kissing a woman. Stubble rubbed against his chin as a musky smell that was all Victor invaded his nose. Victor. This was Victor. Charles opened his eyes and pulled his mouth away abruptly.

They both stared and breathed heavily. God help him, he wanted to kiss him again. But he shouldn't.

"This is why."

"What?"

"This is why I don't want to deal with a *straight* boy. Charles, let's forget this ever happened, okay? I love our friendship, and I don't want this to come between us. Deep down, this isn't you. Let's leave this as a curious mistake and move on."

“It wasn’t a mistake.”

“Nothing will come from this. I’m seeing someone, and you have your hetero dreams. I don’t fit in them. Am I the first man you kissed?”

“Yes.” Charles looked to his lap.

Victor raised his chin with a finger. “Charles, this doesn’t make you gay, just curious. Don’t overthink it.” He eyed him with the most serious expression. He didn’t remove his finger until Charles nodded in agreement.

“I need to go. I have an hour and a half’s worth of driving ahead of me. Tell Phillip I’ll call him later.” He hugged Charles and lingered for maybe a second longer.

Charles didn’t think he could forget this, but he would damn sure pretend to. Being shut down by his friend hurt. When he went back to New York, he was going to call Amber, ask her out on a proper date.

He was forgetting himself. He must stick to his plan.

\*\*\*\*\*

*July 27, 1988*

*Victor,*

*I tried calling but I forgot that you’re out of town with Bill. Hope you’re having fun in Atlanta. Get a damn answering machine already.*

*I am officially an employed civil engineer. I can’t believe I got a call back. It’s the government job in the city. Grandma cried for half an hour when I told her the good news. Is it weird I wished my mother was still alive to see this? A lot of my memories of her aren’t good ones, but I think about her at the oddest times.*

*I thought about her on graduation day. Wished she could see what I’ve become.*

*I’ll be able to make more long distance calls! Plus help out around the house. I don’t like Grandma having to work so hard at her age.*

*I’m seeing Amber again for a third date. I brought her home to meet Grandma, but she wasn’t impressed. And no, it’s not*

*because she's white. You know she doesn't care about stuff like that. Grandma doesn't think it'll last. She says I'm just a passing fancy for Amber.*

*How can anyone ever know what the future holds?*

*Big (not really) surprise, Phillip proposed to Tanya. She said yes. Then told him she wants to be married after she finishes graduate school. Best happy-pissed face ever. He asked me to be his best man. I accepted. It would have been great if I captured the moment, right?*

*And that's why you have the greatest Polaroid picture on Earth in this letter. You're welcome.*

*Call me when you get this,*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*

*42 years ago - February 1989*

“Hello, you’ve reached Victor. I’m sorry I’m not in to take your call. Please leave a message after the beep.”

*Beep.*

“Victor. She’s gone. She’s passed away. Grandma, she’s dead. She had a stroke. Her brain stem, they told me. She was brain dead. My grandmother is dead. I have... Victor.” Charles began to sob. “She kissed me good-bye this morning. She told me she loved me. How proud of me she was. Kissed my forehead like she used to every day when I was little. My grandmother is dead. I’m sorry for leaving this message. I didn’t know who—”

“—Hello? Charles? What’s going on?” Victor panted down the phone. It sounded like he’d been running.

Charles was barely able to repeat the words about his grandmother. She died so suddenly. Charles prayed she felt no pain.

“I’ll be right there, you hear me,” Victor promised. “Right there.”

True to his word, Victor’s “right there” did not last more than ten hours from Charles’s phone call. The house was so silent, Charles could hear Victor’s arrival through his open bedroom door. His bedroom was closest to the stairway, so he overheard his uncle greeting his friend. Murmuring from Victor.

His uncle boomed, "I'm hurting. My mother is dead. I have a friend's shoulder to cry on right now. Go do the same for our boy upstairs. He's going to need it."

He heard Victor run upstairs and watched his friend knock on his doorframe. "Come in."

Victor walked inside and closed his door. Charles moved from the middle of his queen-sized bed to make room for his friend. Victor lay next to him, not saying a word but offering silent, comforting support in his time of need.

The two stared at each other, both making a move to embrace one another in a tangle of arms. Charles broke down once again, forgetting the mess of last time they were together as he took comfort in his friend's arms.

\*\*\*\*

*January 2, 1990*

*Victor,*

*How are you doing? How did your finals go? You haven't told me. I know you were struggling this semester, the last you told me. I hope everything at work is good. I have some news to deliver.*

*I might think it is wrong for you being your lover's dirty secret, but you are happy. I'm jealous of that. So, I kinda asked Amber to move in with me. Her parents had a cow when they saw she was dating a black man. They disowned her. So I asked her to move in with me. It's only me and Uncle Lamont here, so why not?*

*Before you tell me we're not in love, I know this. She knows this. But she's in need of a place to stay, and it is sort of my fault she's out of her home. What's the worst that could happen? I get a roommate with benefits.*

*I'll call you when I can,*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*

*41 Years ago - June 23, 1990*

"Charlie, you're a chick magnet today, my friend. You need to clean up for me, let me live through your bachelorhood," he finished with a boisterous

laugh. "Thanks for being my best man and all. I ain't no gay, but you're not ugly. Put you in a tux, you're fucking Denzel Washington or some shit. If I get one more girl asking me for your number at my own wedding, I'm going to have to charge a finder's fee. Jesus, you think they smell you're back on the market after that Amber fiasco? Like blood in the water and a lot of hungry sharks swarming around." Phillip had his arm around Charles's shoulder, smiling at the crowd in the catering hall.

They'd finally finished having their pictures taken and made their way into the wedding reception. Tanya looked radiant in her wedding gown, and Phillip looked ready to burst with happiness as he watched his bride. "Go to her," Charles said, shooing him away.

Charles was happy for his friend, but he'd be happier when Victor arrived. The last time they'd seen each other was at his grandmother's funeral last year. His *Amber fiasco*? He should have never asked her to move in with him. Other than a shared major, they did not have much in common. They used each other to scratch their itch, and Charles learned the hard way about trying to start a relationship with someone looking for room and board. In the end, all it had taken was liquid courage, a good meal and some honesty from them both. Parting wasn't easy, but it wasn't hard either, especially as Amber's family had welcomed her back with open arms now that he was out of the picture.

Single he might be, but he wasn't anxious to be bitten by the sharks at the reception. There was only one person on his mind, and he definitely wasn't female. He and Victor might have agreed to forget the kiss, but Charles couldn't. Even when he had been with Amber, it was all he thought about.

He'd been thinking about sex with a man more and more. He told himself he wasn't tempted to act on it, though maybe if he did it would be out of his system. The idea of being with a man wasn't as scary to Charles at twenty-four. Ask him ten years ago, he'd have shit a brick.

"And there goes the wayward son. V! Come over here, man, let me look at you. Another pretty boy on the loose!" Charles looked up at the mention of Victor's name and watched his best friend walk across the floor to greet Phillip.

"Congratulations, man. Tanya already passed by. She looks beautiful. I told her to give me a call when she comes to her senses."

"Hardy-har-har. You could try, but she's carrying my kid. Look surprised when we announce it before she starts showing. And, uh, I'm not going nowhere, pretty boy. Jackpot! There's Tanya's great-aunt Lois sitting by her

lonesome at that table. She's loaded. Going to ingratiate myself with the in-laws."

Phillip clapped Victor on the shoulder, already smiling widely at a wrinkled old lady in a ridiculous hat. Victor and Charles were left alone, dressed to the nines and comfortable in their silence. Victor raised his eyebrows toward the closed patio door. Charles got the message and walked behind him. There was nothing on the terrace but stone benches overlooking the hall's front entrance. A few reception attendees were far enough away, that their conversation could not be heard. Charles had some time before his best man's speech was due.

"How are things?" Charles asked. They sat on the bench furthest away from the door in the sunny afternoon.

"What kind of things? Florida things? My relationship things? Work things? College things?"

"All of the above."

"Florida is okay." He took off his suit jacket and laid it in between them. "Bill and I are giving it a go again. His wife moved to Nevada with the kids to live with his mother-in-law. It's probably for good. I applied for fall semester. I'm sticking to business this time. I'm attempting to actually graduate."

"You let Bill take up too much of your time," he blurted out.

"And you're an expert on relationship advice? Amber hightailed it out of your life less than three months after moving in." Charles folded his arms, and Victor sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Charles."

Charles nodded and put his arms down. His hand brushed against Victor's. He didn't move it, letting their fingers graze. "Since he has the house to himself, are you moving in with him? You'd save money once you stop paying rent at your apartment."

"Bill doesn't want us living together yet. He has appearances to maintain. You know he's a professor. What would happen if his students ever found out? Or God forbid, the faculty?"

"You guys have been together for some time. If he wants to be with you so badly, he should progress to the next step. Get divorced."

"Not everyone has a five-year plan like you, Charles. Or have it all together. I'm still a work in progress."

"A closeted work in progress," he mumbled just loud enough for Victor to hear.

“Fuck you,” he returned with no heat.

The two looked off to the left when the others on the terrace closed the door to go back inside. “Looks like you might be needed inside soon, big man. I appreciate your concern, but it’s not necessary, Charles. I know what I’m doing.”

Charles doubted that but knew when he was talking to a brick wall. “Fine. New subject but more important. Do you ever think about our kiss?”

He looked around before leaning in. “The kiss we’re supposed to forget?”

“That one, yes.”

“Why are you bringing that up now?”

“Will you answer me?”

Victor tilted his head, signaling to Charles that he was more affected than he claimed to be. “Have you had anything to drink?”

“Stone cold sober.” Charles smiled and twined his pinky over Victor’s for a few seconds. “If we weren’t here, I think I’d do it again. Right now.”

“Charles, this is a rebound move. You only want to kiss me because you were dumped. There are a lot of ladies eyeing you out there. I noticed the moment you walked into the room.”

He shrugged. “I only have my eyes on you.” He didn’t notice anyone, but he was secretly happy Victor noticed him and the attention.

“Well, I’m not looking back. You know I’m in a relationship. And newsflash, you have only fucked women.”

“I think about our kiss. It’s been a year, Vic, and I replay it at least once a day.”

Victor started to breathe heavy as he removed his hand from Charles’s and picked up the suit jacket. “Charles, stop it. Just fucking stop it, right now.”

“I’m being serious. I can’t stop my feelings.”

“Don’t mistake what happened for more than what it was. It was misplaced rebound lust.”

“Really? I noticed you never pushed me away when I kissed you in my ‘misplaced rebound lust.’ I should know since that kiss has been a highlight for me. I could have let it drop, but I can’t. I’m still fascinated. I don’t think I built



this up in my head. I'm straight, but not with a period. It's beginning to end with a question mark."

"I didn't push you away because for a second I had a fantasy come to life when I closed my eyes. But reality came rushing back once I opened them."

They were interrupted by a frazzled Phillip. "There you are. I should have known. You two are always off someplace together. Charles, you gotta learn how to share him, man." He pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. "We're getting ready to sit at the wedding table. C'mon, Charlie."

"I'll be right there."

"Not moving until you're walking next to me. I know how you two get. Like magnets when you're in the same room."

Both sighed and tried to smooth their clothes as they stood.

"We'll talk later, yeah?"

"About anything else but that, Charles. Find someone else."

"Have regrets?" he asked boldly enough to be heard.

"No. But nothing will come from it. I've grown up."

Charles watched Victor saunter inside, past Phillip, who gave him a "what was that about" face. Charles shrugged, checked his pocket for the speech he'd written down and went inside with the groom.

He wasn't going to jump Victor in public, but he felt something. And he thought that Victor might have, too.

After the reception, Charles played his phone messages. There was only one from Victor, who left early. He knew when he was being avoided.

"Hey, Charles, something came up, and I had to leave Phillip's reception. I'll call you later. Hope you left with one of the bridesmaids that were eyeing you tonight. There's something about weddings that make single people want to get laid. I'm counting our talk on the terrace as that. I will admit I had a crush on you when we were kids. But I'm over it. Respect my wishes. Forget all of that. Let's just be friends. Bye."

Charles replayed and analyzed his message. He got to his friend, but maybe he should give up on trying. He had been burned before by people not wanting him, people like Tina or Amber or his mother.

Friends was all he wanted to be? Then friends was what they were going to be. He tried to ignore the pang of regret in his chest.

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*May 11, 1991*

*Victor,*

*I tried leaving you a message... it's full. Delete some, my friend. I hate it when you and Bill are in your "off period." You mope and turn into a hermit. I'm not surprised his wife came back, and I think you would agree if you analyze it. It doesn't take that long to get divorced.*

*You should find someone worth your time. I say this as a friend. It's not the first time I've said this. I'm not speaking out of jealousy or anger. You probably don't want to hear it again. But you listen better when it's in letter form. I just want better for you.*

*Anyway, I'm flying to Sacramento next week for work. In case you get this and feel like taking yourself out of your pity cocoon and can't reach me then.*

*By the way, Uncle Lamont is moving out. He's moving in with his "friend" Alan. He didn't come out, but he said it was time to have my own space. I offered to move and let him have the house, but he told me Grandma would want me to have it, raise her great-grands here.*

*Babies. I think he's getting sentimental now that Phillip brings his baby girl over here when he visits. Won't lie, Michelle's a cute baby. Doesn't look like an alien at all. Let's hope she doesn't get Tanya's squeaky voice.*

*My plan of marrying and living my dream? I don't think I can achieve it yet. I might have to change some things around. But I can say I'm working my way to being happy. I think it's why I want you to be happy too.*

*Love,*

*Charles*

\*\*\*\*\*

*40 years ago - June 1991*

“Are those tears, Uncle Lamont?”

“No, it ain't no damn tears. Just had something in my eye, is all.”

Both sat down in the living room after Lamont did his final check of the house. His uncle moved all the heavy and important items yesterday. He could've left yesterday, but Charles thought his uncle didn't want to say goodbye. “I'll miss you too, Uncle Lamont.”

“I'm only going to be one town over.”

“I'll still miss you.”

“You know, you were the best thing that ever happened to your mother. I was just a kid when you were born. Dad nearly had a stroke when your mom told us she was pregnant. The day you were born, he changed his tune. She was my big, crazy sister who used to never mind me tagging along. Then you came and I'll admit, I hated you for maybe an hour.” He chuckled. “But you were something special. Always knew. I loved you then. I love you now. I'll love you for what you'll be. I'm proud of the man you are, Charles. Your mother would be too. Ma always let you know. But I know Adrienne would be as well.”

“What if I might be gay? Would you still be proud of me?”

Lamont stared at him for one of the longest minutes of Charles' life. “Hypothetical or actual?”

“Let's say hypothetical.”

“Well, you ain't stupid. So you know I'm an actual, but I don't advertise it. It's different for us. There's a stigma. Now you... I've thought you could be a hypothetical, what with you following around that McQuade boy. I thought you was sprung especially that last year before he moved. But I realized he was like your other half. You needed him. You were the quietest little boy with the saddest eyes. Your eyes changed once you met Victor. You got to be a kid and started to enjoy yourself. Victor is...?”

“An actual, Uncle.”

“I figured since you're asking. I have no problem with Victor nor you being... actuals. Might explain why you never really had a woman though. That Amber accident was just that, an accident. Unhappy girl, that one.”

“What's life without a few mistakes here and there?”

Lamont grunted in agreement. Charles watched his uncle look bashful for the first time he could ever recall. "Never freely said this to anyone who wasn't in the lifestyle, though I might be talking to a new member." Charles was mistaken; it wasn't bashfulness. Lamont was uncomfortable. He held a hand in Charles's face. "I don't want to know if you been with a man, because you're family, and I've changed your diapers. Please leave me out of the loop about any of your sex stories."

"It's not like I have—"

"Please, stop talking. There are two bars close by that cater to *actuals* and *hypotheticals*. I'll give you the name of the one with the younger crowd."

"Why not the other one?"

"That's where I go from time to time, and I'll be damned if I see your bony ass over there."

\*\*\*\*

To: CJ\*\*\*\*\*@aol.com 17:34:53 October 24, 1993

From: VM\*\*\*\*\*@aol.com

*Charles,*

*I can't believe we can talk electronically now!*

*I am still leery about sending messages though. How can I know it's not going to be read by others and posted in the newspaper for the entire world to read? You're a federal worker. You can't fool me that you guys aren't spying on the public.*

*I told Bill not to send me anything racy from work to be on the safe side.*

*Thanks for the picture of you and Phillip and his little family. Two kids and another on the way. He's not playing. You guys look like you had fun at Niagara Falls. I'll try to come the next time you plan a trip.*

*I miss seeing you guys.*

*But I miss you the most. Of course.*

*Victor*

\*\*\*\*

To: CJ\*\*\*\*\*@aol.com 17:34:53 May 17, 1994

From: VM\*\*\*\*\*@aol.com

*Charles,*

*My holier than thou mother... has been having an affair with a neighbor! For years! She's judged just about everything and everyone. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. We're adulterers.*

*I'm so disappointed with myself. I have ended it for good with Bill. Not because he wanted to cool it, but for me. I'm tired of hanging on and letting life pass me by. I miss the ten-year-old who stuck up for you against Harold. I miss me. And to reclaim myself, I'm changing.*

*I came out to my mother. She faked a panic attack. Said my year in Europe corrupted me and put those sinful thoughts in my head. Fuck her. We had a big argument. The entire family was there to hear it. Kevin, of course was on her side. Called me a faggot and said a cocksucker could never be his brother. I'm not hurting from the loss. My mother... even though I expected the hate, it still hurts.*

*Dad surprised me. He knew, Charles. He knew all along that I was gay; saw me making out with Ricky one night. And he still loves me. He's been keeping things inside. This is how I found out about my mother. Dad let it all out trying to defend me. He's been sticking his head in the sand for too many years and had it. He's divorcing her. He wants to move back to New York. I'm moving with him, away from the disappointment and temptation.*

*Dad is going to join his friend's construction company. He wants to go back to doing something he loves. They need someone to help out with the books and accounts, so I possibly have a job lined up. Dad's going to put in a good word for me. My aunt in Syosset has room so we'll be staying there until we get a place of our own. I should say until I get a place of my own. I need my own space.*

*I'm not hiding who I am anymore. If there are people who don't like it, tough. Don't worry, I won't start cramming the joys of gay sex down everyone's throat.*

*Finally we can be in the same state, back on the island. I'll call you later in case you don't reply soon enough.*

V

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*37 years ago – September 1994*

“The three amigos back together again.”

“I think it’s more like three amigos and a señorita.” The three men looked at the sleeping infant in Phillip’s arms. Victor smirked. “God exacts the perfect punishment. You’re the father of daughters.”

“Hey, Tanya could be pregnant with a boy this time.”

“I hope not. Can you imagine when his girls are teenagers?” He turned to Charles, grinning wickedly.

“Oh man, he’s going to be bald. They carry his genes after all.”

“My princesses won’t know a thing about boys. Gonna forbid dating until they’re sixty.”

“Good luck with that,” Charles chimed in. If they were anything like their dad, they’d be sneaky handfuls.

“This is the most sedate birthday party ever.” They celebrated Victor’s birthday with an after work get-together at Charles’s house, pizzas and beer—soda for Phillip—living it up in style. Their schedules were never in sync between Charles and his job, Phillip and his family and Victor’s resettling in New York. Finding days to hang out were not easy.

“You’re the one bringing a baby for a date.”

“Giving Tanya a break makes me a great husband, which equals hot pregnant sex.”

“Phillip!”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.” Baby Gianna made her announcement that she was awake with a wail. “Be right back, boys, someone needs a changing.” Phillip excused himself while baby speaking to his fretful Gianna. It boggled his mind that Phillip was someone’s father.

Charles put down his beer can on the living room end table. “So how does it feel to be almost old? You’ll be the big three-oh next year. You remember when we thought thirty was ancient?”

“Man, I stopped counting after twenty-five. Thirty was a lifetime away. Now, it’s staring me in the face.”

“I have two months left before I start singing the blues.”

“Pizza and beer for your birthday then?”

“And strippers,” Phillip chimed in with a bundled baby in his arms. “Fellas, we gotta call it a night. I gotta pick up the rest of the fam at my in-laws. Victor, have a great birthday, man. We gotta find time to do this more often. I’m serious about the strippers though, so you two think about it.” Charles shook his head as he locked the door.

“If Phillip only knew the strippers I’d prefer for your birthday.” Victor smirked as Charles sat next to him.

“That might not be so bad.” Victor looked out the corner of his eyes at him, not commenting. Instead, they watched the Jets game on TV.

Charles waited until the next commercial break to ask something that’d been on his mind since learning Victor was coming back to New York. “Any luck with apartment hunting?”

“Nope. But I need to find someplace soon. It feels weird moving out, then moving back in again with a parent.”

“So move in with me.”

“Um... no?”

“Why not? I have plenty of room. It’s closer to your job. I’m not even here most of the time.”

“I’m not looking for a handout, Charles. Thank you.”

“Who said anything about handouts? I’d charge you rent. Lamont made a full apartment in the basement.” Charles moved to hold Victor’s hand. He tried to pull away, but Charles held on.

“Charles,” Victor groaned.

“Listen to me, will you?” He waited until Victor looked him in his eyes. “Spend the night. Don’t look like a compromised heroine. Platonically... though I would like to kiss you.”

“Charles—”

“Before you go into your spiel about me being curious, you’re right, I am. I’m curious about being in a relationship with *you*. Romantically. I think we’ve been courting one another for all of these years anyway.”

“You’re not gay, Charles.”

“I’m not straight either, Victor. I’ve tried some things. Not all things like you, but a few things with a guy, for a few weeks. It was an eye-opener, but I don’t regret the experience for a moment.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Like you tell me about *all* the men you’ve been with?”

“So now you’ve slept with a man, and you’re gay all of a sudden.” He snorted. “Just one guy?”

“Just one. Steven. He’s taught me some things. I’ve learned to admit I was ashamed to be attracted to another man. I still am, at times. I’m learning not to bottle my feelings. It’d be easier to try to fit a straight mold. But why should I have to fit a heterosexual mold?”

“Who are you, and what have you done to my best friend?”

“I’m still Charles. I just don’t want to hide that part of myself I’ve struggled with from you. I’m not with Steven anymore, by the way. There’s this feeling that I have that I’m recognizing as want for you. It could be lust. But it’s not curiosity. I’ve had many thoughts about you unclothed. For years.”

“Years?”

He nodded. “Our kiss was the highlight of my life, as sad as it may sound.”

“It’s not sad. It’s just—you’re really serious?”

“Very.” Charles liked being honest with him. “I would like to date you. I don’t want it to start off with sex... though I will not lie. I hope we have it in the future.” Watching the hope grow in Victor in turn gave Charles hope. He didn’t want his friend to mistake his sincerity.

“We should take it slow. Can we take it slow? Give me time to wrap my head around dating you.”

He nodded with a smile. “No rush. In fact, you’re not getting a kiss out of me until the third date. How is that for slow?”

“Well... I don’t know about all of that.” Victor winked.

Charles was determined. “You’ll consider moving in?”

“The last time you moved someone in, you struck out. I don’t want to fuck up our friendship. It’s the most solid relationship I’ve ever had.”



“Friends make the best lovers.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“We’ll make our own.”

“Charles, promise me, if at any point you want out, you’ll tell me. I don’t want secrets or hard feelings. We’re going to fight, but at the end of the day, you’re it for me.”

He wanted to hear Victor agree. He needed to hear the words. “So you’ll move in?”

“Yes. Besides, I don’t think you’ll take no for an answer.”

“No, I really won’t. I have a plan written down on how to win you over.”

“You and your plans.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to be a secret to another man, Charles. Can you handle that?”

“I sort of came out to Uncle Lamont. It was a joint outing of sorts. I’m a hypothetical who wants to be with an actual... which probably means I’m bisexual.”

“What?”

The start of their first day as a couple was an interesting one.

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*April 2031 - Present day*

“Don’t forget your nighttime glasses, Charles.”

“I don’t need them. I see just fine.”

Victor shook his head. Rather than start an argument with his lover of over thirty years, he just picked up the glasses from the bedside table and slipped them in his shirt pocket. He knew Charles would need them once he tried backing out of the driveway. He was just too stubborn to admit having a minor handicap.

The couple was getting ready to leave for their son’s engagement dinner, an event he and his husband never thought they would ever see. For a few years, they were worried about their son making it to thirty. But Brandon straightened out. Barely. Brandon’s fiancée was a major factor in their boy having focus.

They’d adopted three kids: Brandon, Dawn and Thomas. They made the couple’s life all the better. For those three drug addicted, special needs and

unwanted children, Charles and Victor provided a nurturing home and made a family on their own terms.

Victor's father was the proudest grandfather on the island and loved to show their pictures to anyone he could. Victor's mother refused to acknowledge Victor and changed her number when she learned Charles was her son's life partner. Victor finally stopped trying to connect with her and his brother thirty years ago. Besides, Victor's father had remarried, and she embraced the entire McQuade-Jackson brood as a doting grandmother. Lamont spoiled their kids as well. He and Alan were the cool uncles that helped out when needed.

Coming out to family and friends as a couple was not as hard as Charles had feared. He was more surprised with who chose to remain their friend, namely Phillip, who made a single request after they announced being partners "not to start screwing until he left the building."

Being in an interracial gay relationship had its ups and downs. It certainly was not easy in their conservative neighborhood. They got stares, were called names, and when the kids came along, some neighbors became hostile. Thankfully, nothing escalated to violence. Charles remained in his grandmother's home, making it into his and Victor's family home, and refused to be driven out by bigots. Throughout the years, the committed partners only became closer, a unit that was bonded and never broken.

"Before we leave, I wanted to show you something. I was going through some boxes in the basement the other day, and look what I found." Charles opened a drawer and pulled out a stack of envelopes. It was the letters Victor had sent from the time he lived in Florida. Charles had kept every one.

"You kept all the letters I sent you?"

"Down to your postcards."

"We'll add to the collection now that you're finally retired." Victor let Charles know every day how much he loved having him at home more often. "We can send new postcards from our travels to the kids and make them wish they were on our two-month-long vacation with us."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I know how you love planning, lover of mine."

"You helped make those plans better, my friend."

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*L.L. Bucknor loves to read... a lot, drink caffeine (coffee and tea the best, yum) and has been known to do some things for chocolate (there might or might not be a case pending—j/k, maybe). She writes sometimes too. She used to write slash fan fiction for the masses many years ago. She figured it's time to get back into the game. A staunch believer in happy endings and the various paths one can take to get there.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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