

PHOEBE SEAN FOCUS



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

FOCUS

By Phoebe Sean

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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FOCUS

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Photo Description

A black-and-white photo of a beautiful young man, possibly a fashion shoot, on a plain background. Styled, light-colored hair crowns a pretty face. The man's eyes are sexy, his mouth slightly open. His checkered shirt is open, revealing strong, defined abs as he stretches his arms over his head.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Look at him. He is so gorgeous and so easy to work with; he really is my favourite model. Sadly I have started fantasising that the looks he is giving the camera are actually for me. But I know that could never be the case. Look at him, he is perfection, and then me, I am definitely not, I'm just an average guy.

Please help me get over my fantasy and move on from my delusion.

With thanks,

A shy photography geek.

I would really love a fun story with lightness and humour.

Thanks,

Verity

P.S. No smoking please.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: photographer, student/social worker, non-penetrative sex, anxiety, personal insecurities, past bad relationship

Word Count: 21,425

Dedication

To Verity, first and foremost

To Dominic and Frédérique

To Philippe, always

Thanks

Many thanks to my editor, Jennifer Mattison, for her patience and knowledge, and to all the proofreaders. Thanks to my cousin Stéphane Godin, the real one, for his tips on photography and fashion shoots. Special thanks to Phil, for always believing in me without fail and to my kids, for not being surprised or excited about this in the least.

FOCUS

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“You have reached your destination,” said the female GPS voice.

“WHAT? No way!” Fields of snow on his left, what looked like a plane hangar on his right, and nothing else. No studio. No signs of life. Perfect place for a mob hit. *Come on, Guido, we’ll meet at the closed hangar, where we store the guns. No, no, don’t worry, Don Giuseppe ain’t mad at you for fuckin’ up the last operation. We’re family, right? POW.* After pulling over, Dominic picked up his phone and entered the studio’s address again in St-Bruno-de-Montarville, Quebec.

“Head north on Airport Road,” the monotonous voice said. Dominic drove for three minutes. The GPS indicated a left turn at the next intersection. He’d reached a major crossway that led to Longueuil, away from St-Bruno. The GPS instructed him to turn right three more times, so he would be heading back exactly where he was before. He pulled over, turned off the engine, and looked around, not having a clue where he was. Nervous sweat on his back made him shiver in the cold temperature.

“Piece o’shit GPS app,” he mumbled as he picked up his phone to call Stéphane, the artistic director, who picked up on the second ring.

“Hello, St-Stéphane?” he sputtered. “It’s me, Dominic. I’m the sub who was supposed to be there ten minutes ago?” he said, closing his eyes in humiliation.

“Yes?” Stéphane said lightly. Good, Dominic thought. He doesn’t sound too pissed off yet.

“Listen, I’m really sorry, but my GPS took me to a plane hangar on Airport Road. I’m kinda lost.”

“You’re on Airport Road? You’re not too far. How’d you end up there?”

“I don’t know. I entered the address, one ninety Marie-Victorin. I even tried it twice.”

“Okay. Can you find your way to St-Francis Road?” Was it his imagination or did a slight irritation creep in Stéphane’s voice?

Oh shit. “Yes, I passed it not too long ago.”

Silence. “Stéphane?” Nothing. Dominic looked at his phone. Blank screen. It had died. “Oh fuck me!” He pulled the charger out of the glove compartment, plugged his phone in. Nothing. “FUCK!” He started the car and his phone beeped to life. He quickly called Stéphane back.

“Yes?” This time he sounded stern. Dominic’s stomach clenched. Of all the days to screw up, this wasn’t the best one by far.

“My morning just keeps getting better and better. I apologize, my phone died.” Dominic cleared his throat and continued. “I’ll get there as soon as possible, if you could just tell me how. I’m sorry again.”

Stéphane sighed and gave him directions. “You’re close. See you in a few minutes,” he said and promptly disconnected. Oh yeah, there was irritation in that voice all right.

Dominic threw his phone on the passenger seat, let out a frustrated growl as he hit the steering wheel a couple of times and drove to the photo studio. He didn’t feel like going anymore.

He’d been so excited when the agency had called with this gig, making sure he understood he’d be replacing their usual photographer, and not to fuck this up. Dominic had promised he’d do his best. He hadn’t planned on getting lost on the way to the studio and arriving twenty minutes late. He could kiss any future referral goodbye. He’d do the job as best he could and leave quickly, unless a divine entity heard his prayers to make a small but adequate meteor hit earth right at that moment on Airport Road, annihilating him and his car. No one but the people at the agency knew where he was, so when the news would report the tragedy, his family and friends wouldn’t make the connection and would declare him missing, stapling his picture on trees across Montreal. Dominic hoped they’d use the profile picture from his Facebook account; he liked his hair on that one and wore his favorite button-down shirt, a nice blue that brought out his eyes. Jax would bitterly regret breaking up with him and would devote all his time to search for Dominic. He’d then realize that Dominic had indeed been the love of his life. Jax would end up homeless, too heartbroken to keep a job, wandering the streets holding up a tattered picture of Dominic glued to a piece of soggy cardboard, asking everyone if they’d seen that beautiful man. Jax would be old, sagging, and smelly, but Dominic would remain forever glorious at twenty-five in everyone’s memory.

Dominic finally found the studio and parked. No meteor, no disaster. Oh well, one could only wish.

Dominic grabbed his equipment and walked the three seconds from the car to the door, just enough time for his nose to freeze and possibly fall off in minus-forty-weather wind. He entered the studio on the second floor and bent to remove his boots.

“Dominic?” said a voice that was probably Stéphane’s.

Dominic stood and smiled sheepishly. “Yes, hello. Again, sorry I’m late.”

“Let’s get to work, shall we?” said a very tall, built guy with black hair shaved on the sides, longer on top, dressed fashionably simple in a striped shirt and jeans. “You can hang up your coat on the rack beside you.” Dominic quickly got ready to work, doing tests and checking everything out. The studio was actually a large empty room with hardwood floors and huge windows, great for natural light. Umbrella spots were set up for flash. A few people were milling around, the usual assistants and techs.

A white backdrop was the only staging equipment. Stéphane came to explain what he wanted. This would be a simple shoot, only photos of the model in different clothing. The graphic designers would take over after that.

“Charlie, we’re ready for you,” Stéphane called out. Light footsteps announced the model’s arrival.

“Where do you want me?” asked a low, soft voice. Dominic was screwing the lens on his camera when he looked up to answer. Of... course. The model was heart-stopping gorgeous. Dominic wasn’t surprised, after all this was a fashion shoot. He hadn’t expected a four-foot troll with warts and crooked teeth, but the guy was perfect. From his perfectly coiffed hair to his perfectly smooth skin, the stylist and make-up artist had done a pretty good job.

“Uhm. Right there is fine for now,” Dominic answered, pointing to an X marked with tape on the floor. His mouth had gone dry. “Hi, I’m Dominic, by the way,” he said, testing the light against Charlie’s face.

“Hey, how’s it going? I’m Charlie. Heard you had a tough time getting here?” Charlie said with a smile in his eyes.

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Dominic said with a shameful face as he went to make sure his camera was plugged in the tech’s computer properly. He only heard a low chuckle in response.

“Okay, people, let’s get this show on the road, shall we?” Stéphane said loudly, sitting in front of his own computer.

This was the moment Dominic lived for, when he held his camera and pointed at his subject, ready to create images that would transmit a message or an emotion. No matter if it was just a bowl of cereal with milk made of white glue or a child's hair blowing in the wind or a model showing off clothes. It was all about capturing the essence of what it was supposed to say, without words. Behind the lens, Dominic wasn't shy or awkward anymore—he was in his element, in his skin.

The first outfit was a shirt and dress pants. Charlie responded well to his direction, never seemed impatient or irritated when the make-up artist would stop the shoot to powder his nose or when the stylist would pull on the pants to make them straighter.

He was a beautiful guy, probably early twenties, with a strong jaw and chin, nicely shaped lips, and a straight, masculine nose, but his best feature, in Dominic's opinion, was his eyes. Under expressive eyebrows were the warmest chocolate-brown eyes fringed with long lashes, no doubt coated with mascara, making them more piercing, as if they could reach inside Dominic's mind.

Don't trip on the wires. Don't step back into anything. And for the love of all that's holy, don't fuck this up.

"How about a small smile?" Dominic suggested softly, clicking away.

Charlie looked at the camera, a slight smirk on his lips, making him appear cool and confident. Very professional.

"Tilt your chin up a little, yeah, thanks," Dominic told Charlie, who moved just a tad, enough for the light to hit his cheekbone just right. "Excellent," Dominic muttered. Was that a hint of amusement in Charlie's eyes? A light flutter tickled Dominic's stomach. The guy sure was beautiful, but there was also a hint of mischief hidden under all that professionalism.

Dominic kept going, muttering instructions to Charlie, who followed them exactly, like their brains were synchronized. The photographer would say a word, and the model would react right away, looking to the horizon, at the lens, to the sides, a small smile, no teeth, a big smile, a shy grin. Dominic was in his zone, and for the first time, his subject was there with him. Behind his camera, Dominic's shyness melted away.

"Okay, guys, we got what I need for this. Break for lunch and change of outfit in a half hour?" Stéphane's voice crashed through Dominic's thoughts like a fart during a ballet performance. The moment was broken. Charlie winked at Dominic as he walked off to the dressing room with the stylist.

“Hey, come look at these, they’re really very good,” Stéphane said. When no one moved or answered, Dominic looked around and realized Stéphane was talking to him.

“Huh?” was all he came up with after such a fantastic compliment.

Stéphane’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, then went down in a frown. “Come look at these.” He was scrolling through the pictures.

Dominic came to stand beside Stéphane and saw what the director was talking about. Charlie jumped off the screen, his eyes vibrant, his expressions open and frank. He looked wonderfully comfortable in the clothes, but his face was what stood out, especially his eyes. You could tell a lot about someone from a photo. Dominic could almost always tell who’d taken the picture, if it was a professional, a colleague, a parent or a lover. Charlie’s face showed passion, or tenderness and affection, and was at times even bashful, other times mischievous.

The guy’s gotta be a professional actor. Charlie was probably in theater school or perhaps already working in independent films or playing small TV roles. Maybe he even did commercials, although Dominic wouldn’t know since he practically never watched TV.

“Good job,” Stéphane told him. “The agency sent me the work you did for *Trend* last month. You got a good eye, kid.” He scrolled through more pictures. “You guys have good chemistry. Keep it up this afternoon. He’s gonna wear something much more casual. I want fun, hot and sexy pictures, I want lots of the shirt and get some full-length ones too, but concentrate on the top. We’ll see how it goes, but I know this guy has abs of steel so we can play with that a bit later, maybe get some shots with the shirt unbuttoned. Go nuts, and if you want to use a fan, that’ll be great.”

“Sure, thanks,” Dominic answered, a bit embarrassed. He wasn’t used to his work being complimented so much, especially from someone he’d never worked with.

Stéphane took off for the craft table but Dominic stayed to look at the pictures the tech assistant was scrolling through.

“Wow, Stef must be *really* impressed with you, man. It’s your first time working with him, right?” the tech whispered to Dominic.

“Yes, it’s the first time. I’ve heard of him, so I’m really happy to get this gig. You’ve worked with him before?”

The tech swiveled his chair to face him. “Yes. He’s a great A.D. He’s not the type to shell out compliments though, so appreciate it. But the pictures are really very good, man. I haven’t seen you around. You new?”

Dominic extended his hand. “Kinda. I’m Dominic.”

The tech grinned wide. “It’s nice meeting you, Dominic, I’m Wiz.” They shook hands.

“You’re a computer wiz?”

“No, my brother just couldn’t pronounce Willis. It became Wiz and it stuck. You’re not the first to make that connection, though.”

Dominic chuckled. He liked Wiz.

“Is that me?” Dominic heard behind him. Charlie stood there holding a bowl of green salad with what Dominic hoped was grilled chicken pieces and not tofu. He was suddenly hungry.

Wiz nodded and kicked his chair to roll back from his workstation. “You wanna take a look?”

Charlie nodded as he took a bite, looking at the screen. He was now wearing a Batman T-shirt and jeans that had seen better days.

As Charlie’s attention was otherwise occupied, Dominic took in his appearance. Charlie still looked perfect, but even more so. In street clothes, he seemed less out of reach, more approachable, which made everything worse for Dominic. If anything, he was more intimidated. Charlie’s hair still held its shape from all the products, but his whole demeanor was relaxed and graceful. As Dominic watched his face, Charlie seemed impressed with the photos.

“I look pretty damn good,” he murmured around a mouthful. Turning to Dominic, he added, “That’s all you,” his eyes flashing a wink.

A hot flush crept up Dominic’s neck. “What? Are you kidding? Seriously, dude, you’re just beaut—” He decided to shut up while he was ahead. How much of a loser gushed over how beautiful a model was, as if models didn’t hear it all the time. Charlie’s head was probably inflated enough, if Dominic’s experience with models was anything to go by.

Charlie laughed. Actually laughed. Dominic wished the hardwood floor would do its job, swallow him and spit him out on the street through the ventilation duct. He thought he’d heard Wiz chuckle softly too. Great. He decided it was time to go check out the craft table for lunch. Everyone was

lounging around equipment and lamps. Dominic chose the same meal as Charlie, seasoned grilled chicken with leafy greens and raw vegetables. His normal diet of noodles and toast needed all the help it could get in the fiber department.

Dominic ate quietly in a corner, not really knowing anyone, watching Charlie and Wiz go through the photos. They were having a good time, laughing or happily chatting, which surprisingly caused a pang of jealousy. He wanted to chat with Charlie, make him laugh and be happy. Eventually Jean-François, the stylist, and Jessica, the make-up and hair artist, and other people started crowding around the tech table looking at the photos and commenting. Once or twice someone would glance Dominic's way and nod or smile.

Jean-François dragged Charlie off for the afternoon shoot. That was Dominic's cue to get his ass in gear and get to work. He grabbed some bottled water and headed over to the tech table where his camera waited for him. He went through all the checks again, made sure his camera was properly wired to the computer so Stéphane could see each shot as it was taken, and waited for the model to reappear.

The outfit for the afternoon was a checkered button-down shirt and denims hanging very low on Charlie's hips. The shirt was untucked but short enough that the pockets on the jeans were visible, as was the fact that Charlie carried on the right. As if he could hear Dominic's thought, Charlie smirked at Dominic with his hands in his pockets, stretching the fabric to make it nice and obvious. Dominic could almost believe he'd done it on purpose. It was time for another prayer, this one to the Lord of Wilting Dicks for images of gross, disgusting things that would keep Dominic from getting hard in front of everyone. After all, they were the only two people moving most of the time; all eyes were either on the model or, if bored, on the photographer. Dominic knew this from being a trainee on different shoots. Some photographers gave more of a show than the models, lying on the floor upside down, lunging, throwing wacky or sexy suggestions to the models to get the shots they wanted. Dominic's low-key personality would prevent him from ever being such an exuberant photographer. His quiet, discreet demeanor would most likely discourage people to take too much notice of him, so if he did pop a semi in his boxers, it would mostly go unnoticed.

"Charlie, you're relaxed, you're having fun, you know you look good in that shirt, all the girls are after you, guys too, it's summer, you're having a good time," said Stéphane from the tech table.

Charlie had smirked at the mention of girls being after him, and Dominic thought he saw a glint of humor as Charlie cut his eyes to him.

“Okay, look at the camera, Charlie, right here. That’s right.” Dominic just clicked away, murmuring suggestions. Slowly but surely, they got back in their zone, their bubble in which they were alone, just the two of them, working together in perfect sync. “Drop your chin, just a bit—that’s right. Okay. Good. Give me a smile. Yup. Thanks.” Charlie was a pro indeed.

Stéphane interrupted at one point when Charlie’s skin started to shine and Jessica intervened. Dominic took advantage of the break, holding his camera down, watching Charlie patiently get his face brushed with powder. Boy, the guy was hot.

“Okay, let’s open the shirt,” Stéphane called out. Charlie unbuttoned the shirt, Jean-François coming to help him. Dominic thought Jean-François was just taking advantage to touch Charlie again, but maybe he was projecting. *Yeah, maybe.* Well hell, Charlie could probably unbutton a shirt without assistance, right? But Jean-François left and came back with a handheld steamer and stretched each buttonhole to close them up again, all the while murmuring things that made Charlie smile. *Leech.*

After adjusting the collar and making sure the shirt was crisp and fresh, tugging the jeans as low as they would go and Jessica dusting Charlie’s chest and stomach with powder, Charlie turned toward the camera. *Holy muscle tone, Batman.* Smooth, hairless skin showed off muscle definition on a stunning, lean chest void of any fat. The pressure in Dominic’s throat threatened to choke him. His ears rang. He lifted the camera to his face, getting his control back, getting in his zone.

“Let’s get a fan on low to keep him cool and get some movement in the shirt,” Stéphane directed. Someone went to get the fan and soon Charlie’s nipples pebbled, just asking to be licked.

Flies buzzing on rotting road kill. Worms hatching in Corsican cheese (true thing). Green moss on expired yogurt. An old lady’s bunions.

“I want sexy pics, guys. Charlie, you’re beautiful and you know it,” Stéphane called out. Dominic grunted. Charlie’s abs fluttered from him laughing under his breath.

“Turn a little to the side and flex your abs,” Dominic said softly, almost murmuring, his voice shaking.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” asked Charlie with that mischievous glint in his eye again. *The cheeseball! He knows what he’s doing to you! Get a grip! Be professional! Pretend he’s a girl!*

Dominic took a deep breath and put aside his mounting attraction. It was time to be professional and act like a serious photographer, not some teenage boy getting hard from a slight breeze on a hot summer night.

“Turn to the side a bit, stretch your arms and flex those abs,” Dominic said again, this time with a steady voice.

Charlie grinned, lifted his arms behind his head, the shirt opening wide, and flexed. Veins were visible under the taut, thin skin. It was getting harder to think of him as any other model, but Dominic did his best and clicked away. “Perfect. It’s perfect. Keep that pose a little longer, more, more, thanks.”

Stéphane called out to Jean-François. “Let’s see one arm with a sleeve turned up.” Jean-François jumped at the command, too eager to do the job in Dominic’s opinion. Yup, the arm was toned with perfect definition, just like the chest and stomach.

Maggots on an infected wound. A bucket full of poisonous snakes. Spiders crawling out of the open mouth of a scaly, grey corpse.

“Yes, we’ll keep it like that, just one sleeve. Charlie, try the same position,” Stéphane called out from the computer table.

Talk about flirting with the camera! Charlie was practically leering at Dominic, he was on fire. He looked like he was about to stalk off the set, grab Dominic by the shoulders and kiss the ever-living hell out of him, like the only thing stopping him was that they weren’t alone, but his eyes said he wanted them to be. Dominic’s cock was more than half hard in his pants.

He’s doing it on purpose, the weasel. It’s a test, to see when the new guy’s zipper will burst off his jeans.

This couldn’t be happening. Dominic had been on fashion shoots before. They were always crawling with beautiful people, either in front of the camera or among the assistants, and never had he had so much trouble remaining objective and cool. Of course Charlie was hot, super gorgeous with a body to kill for, but he wasn’t the first attractive guy Dominic had met at a photo shoot. It was like Charlie knew what he was doing to Dominic, like he wanted to flirt with *him*, not the camera. Like it was a challenge, and he wanted Dominic to face up to it. It seemed so genuine. Dominic felt those eyes looking right at

him, not the lens, reaching all the way to his gut, making his heart beat faster. But it was just a job to Charlie, Dominic reminded himself. The guy was just a ridiculously talented actor, so good even Dominic believed it was for him alone.

Okay, enough. Time to get back to work. Charlie was just a model; it was just a job. When this was over, Charlie would go back home and laugh with his boyfriend—or girlfriend if Dominic’s gaydar was out of whack—about the silly, geeky photographer who made a fool of himself at a run-of-the-mill photo shoot. Charlie would have fun telling the story to all his friends and pretty soon the whole industry would have heard of Dominic’s lack of work ethic and poor self-control. He’d get kicked out of the agency, he’d never get a contract again, he’d have to get a job clearing tables in a diner, he’d have to move back in with his parents, or he’d be homeless. He’d be the old, sagging vagrant smelling of pee. Maybe he’d get back with Jax and they could stink up the metro together...

He gave himself a mental slap, readjusted his lens, and worked like the trained photographer he usually was.

“Just one sleeve rolled up, Stéphane?” Dominic asked before continuing.

“For now, yes. Try it like that. Feel free to change it later on,” said the artistic director.

“Okay. Ready, Charlie?” Dominic asked, aiming his camera again.

Charlie’s arms went up again, the sexy grin back on his face. Dominic’s shutter kept going. Then Charlie pulled his right arm with his left hand, and his look turned to smoldering, hot passion. Dominic hesitated a second, and kept on clicking. The situation in his pants was not improving.

Before he knew it, he heard Stéphane say, “Perfect! I’ve got what I need. Excellent work, everyone,” before turning to Wiz to give him more instructions for the photos.

The bubble burst; Dominic almost heard it. With his usual shyness back in full swing, he screwed the cap on the lens and started putting his stuff away, beginning with the wire connecting his camera to the computer.

“Dominic, what do you think of this one?” Stéphane called out to him.

Dominic joined Stéphane and Wiz at the tech table, and they began going through the photos, choosing which ones were the best for each outfit. After a

few minutes, Stéphane announced he was very happy with everyone's work and thanked the techs and assistants for a job well done. Then he shook Dominic's hand. "It was a pleasure working with you, and I'll be sure to tell the agency."

Dominic returned the handshake. "Thanks. I hope I get to work with you again." Stéphane's smile was warmer than when Dominic had arrived that morning, which was a relief. Perhaps his getting lost was forgotten.

"Just don't get lost next time," Stéphane said, laughing softly. Perhaps not.

"Hey, anyone heading downtown Montreal?" Dominic heard behind him. He turned to see Charlie dressed up in a big, black jacket with a black, knitted cap topped by a huge orange pompom. He, of course, pulled it off with flare and elegance. *Scoundrel*.

His face was scrubbed free of make-up, and Dominic's heart fluttered at the sight of what were probably the cutest freckles he'd seen on anyone. Gone was the intimidating model. Standing before him was a gorgeous guy asking for a ride.

Before anyone could answer, Dominic croaked out, "I'm heading—" but had to stop because what actually came out was, "Hhhhhhhh." He coughed, cleared his throat and tried again. "Uh, I'm heading downtown."

Charlie had been looking at him anyway, so he just smiled and nodded, making the orange pompom wobble.

Dominic got dressed, gathered his stuff and they headed out the door, into the cold afternoon.

Dominic unlocked the passenger door first and went around the car to get in.

"Thanks, man. I wasn't looking forward to waiting for the bus in this weather," Charlie said, rubbing his gloved hands together.

Dominic said, "There are buses out here?" as he started the car, turning the heater on full blast.

Charlie chuckled. "Sure there are. How do you think I got here this morning? It took me an hour and twenty minutes, but I made it on time," he said, laughter underlining his words.

Dominic cut his eyes to Charlie to see him grinning, with his orange pompom and his pale freckles. "You won't believe me, but my GPS app didn't

recognize the address.” He pulled out his phone and gave it to Charlie. “Enter the studio address and see where it leads. It’s a hangar for planes of some sort, somewhere on Airport Road.”

“Seriously? Oh man, that sucks,” Charlie said, taking off his gloves and fiddling with Dominic’s phone. “Ha! Look at that! It’s a new construction, maybe that’s why. Lemme try with mine.” From an inside pocket of his enormous jacket, he produced a phone, a much better and more expensive model than Dominic’s. “My app does the same thing! Yeah, it’s probably because the building’s new. I got my info off my computer before I left. The bus company knows how to get there.” He turned to Dominic. “We did good work today. Stef was pleased. You made me look fantastic.”

Dominic’s heart came up his throat, but before he could reply something like *you’re amazingly gorgeous, you’re fishing for compliments*, Charlie asked, “How long have you been taking pictures?”

Dominic took a breath, grasped the steering wheel tighter. “My grandmother gave me my first camera when I was twelve. I’ve been trying to do it professionally for three years now.”

“Wow. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five. You?”

“Twenty-seven.”

Dominic gasped, turning for a quick glance at Charlie. “Shit! I thought you were twenty-one, twenty-two tops!”

Charlie chuckled. “I get that all the time. I’ll soon have to retire. I’m almost done anyway.”

“What do you mean almost done?”

“I’m doing this to pay for school. I’m almost done with my master’s, so I’ll be able to quit soon. If I never have another drop of product in my hair for the rest of my life, I’ll be a happy man.”

“Oh! I thought you were... you know...” Dominic said, although he didn’t know how to end that sentence without sounding like a dick.

Charlie chuckled. “A dumb model?”

“Of course not! No!” Dominic sputtered, then said, “Well, maybe a little. Not the dumb part. The model thing. I mean, you’re so good at it.”

Dominic's eyes were on the road so he heard the smile in Charlie's voice. "Thanks. It's served me well so far, but it's not my dream." Then, more soberly, "I know I'm living some people's dream and it might seem unfair, or that I'm full of shit, but it's just not for me. Not for a lifetime anyway."

"What's your master's on?"

"I doubt you'd be interested."

"Try me."

Charlie cleared his throat before speaking. "The effects on children growing up with parents with obsessive-compulsive disorders."

A shiver ran through Dominic, those words hitting a nerve he'd rather not be reminded of. "That's... awesome," he managed to say.

The orange pompom got smushed as Charlie leaned his head on the window, staring outside. "We can talk about something else," he said.

"No, it's actually very interesting. What are you going to do when you get your master's? What's your plan?"

"I want to be a social worker."

The car lurched a bit as Dominic's foot involuntarily jerked. "Wow," he whispered.

Charlie straightened in his seat. "Did you always want to be a photographer?"

"After your little announcement, my profession sounds so... trite," Dominic said forlornly.

A chuckle escaped Charlie. "Of course not! It's artistic and pure. Unless you take pictures of naked boobs covered in jizz..." he said, which he must've thought was hilarious because he laughed.

"Hey! I'll have you know that a perfect drop of semen rolling on a beautifully shaped breast with the light hitting it just right can be quite an artistic endeavor."

Charlie just laughed louder. Dominic was starting to get frustrated when Charlie put a hand on his arm, gently, so as not to make him spaz, but Dominic felt it all the way through his coat. "Okay, enough. I'm serious. It's a noble art. Who's your favorite?"

Placated, Dominic thought for a second. "For portraits, it would have to be Philippe Halsman. I'm also a fan of Weegee. For still life... You probably don't know what the hell I'm talking about," he said, shaking his head.

"That Halsman guy I admit I don't know, but the Weegee character I think I've heard of. Is he the guy who started the whole tabloid photo thing?"

Dominic was really impressed. "Yes! How did you know that?"

"I read a lot and that name, Weegee, struck me as funny. I guess that's why I remember it."

They were driving over the Jacques-Cartier bridge by then, soon to be on the Island of Montreal.

"Where do you want me to drop you off?" Dominic asked, although unwilling to let Charlie go.

"Anywhere near a metro is fine."

"We're close to Papineau station."

"Yeah, that's fine."

"I'm going all the way to Viau, if you're heading east," Dominic said, hoping to make the moment last longer. He really liked talking with Charlie; it was soothing. He was funny and refreshingly humble.

"Actually, I'm heading west, but thanks. Papineau station is fine."

A pang of disappointment hit Dominic's gut. He turned west on Sherbrooke.

"But I have a bit of time, if you want to have some coffee somewhere, maybe? My treat, to thank you for the lift?" Charlie offered.

Dominic huffed a laugh. "You don't have to do that." *You really don't. I'd take you to the moon if that's where you wanted to go. Or South America by mule. Anywhere. Name it.*

"Oh. Okay. Well. Thanks," Charlie said quickly. "I'll get out here, then you can turn left at the next light."

And with that, he was gone. "Wait!" Dominic said to a closing door. Shit. Too late. A honk behind him let him know the traffic was moving. Crap. What the hell was wrong with him? *Yes, I'd love to* was the appropriate answer to that question, *you fucking moron!* He made his way back east, a lead ball in his stomach. He'd blown it. The guy had invited him for coffee and he'd *laughed*,

for chrissakes. No wonder Charlie had run out of the car, even if it was balls-chilling weather.

He was parking—thank fuck—in the front of his home when he heard, “Ta-ta-ta-taaaaa—*cymbal*—taaaaa—*cymbal*—ta-ta-ta-taaaaa—ta,” the Star Wars theme, coming from somewhere in his car. He yelped, not too loudly but enough to be embarrassed, and looked everywhere for the sound again, until he reached under the front passenger seat where a very nice smartphone was flashing. The ringing stopped, and started again, same theme, his own number with “unknown caller” on the display. Taking off his glove, he slid his finger on the cold screen and tentatively said, “Hello?”

“Mmm, Dominic? It’s Charlie.”

“Yes?”

A soft chuckle. “Hey, ah, yeah, it seems I have your phone and you have mine.”

Hope, utter joy and mild panic washed over Dominic. “Oh?”

“Yeah, hmmm, how do you want to do this? I can get back on the metro and meet you at Viau, if you want...”

Dominic cut him off. “No, no, I’ll come. It’ll be faster this way. Where are you now?”

“I’m at a coffee shop on Ontario, southwest of Papineau.”

“I’ll be right there.” He disconnected before Charlie could say anything else or change his mind. He’d get that coffee with Charlie after all.

In the fifteen-minute drive, his anxiety level had time to go from gleefully excited to downright terrified. He’d get a chance to apologize and take Charlie up on his offer. But then perhaps Charlie would rescind the offer, seeing as Dominic had laughed in his face when he’d suggested it. He’d have time to realize that Dominic was just an ordinary, boring guy who was only comfortable behind a lens, and as he could have any guy or girl he wanted with his looks and dazzling personality, he didn’t want to waste any time with Dominic. Once Dominic got to the coffee shop, Charlie would already be engaged to the beautiful barista who would’ve jumped at the chance to be with him, who wouldn’t have laughed in his face when Charlie had invited him or her for a cup, and they’d be mooning over each other while Dominic found a parking space on busy Ontario Street.

By the time he opened the door to the café, Dominic had cramps. Charlie, on the other hand, was sitting at a table, his coat off but the orange pompom hat still pulled down tight on his head, with a coffee and a newspaper. At the sound of the doorbell, he looked up and smiled a genuine, honest smile at Dominic, and stood, the phone in his extended hand.

“Sorry about that. I must’ve mixed them up when I checked the apps.”

Dominic took his phone, mute and frozen, and just stared in Charlie’s beautiful, warm eyes.

Charlie’s smile faltered, then fell altogether. “It was a mistake, I didn’t plan for this, I swear.”

The disappearance of the smile jolted Dominic out of his trance-like state. “Oh! No! That’s all right, really. I know. It’s happened to me so many times to pick up the wrong thing. Once I got home with someone else’s keys and it took two hours to figure out whose they were...” His voice trailed off when Charlie’s eyes got wide and his lips started to turn up in a smile, but not quite.

“I’m blabbering. Sorry. I do that.” He dug in his pocket and retrieved Charlie’s phone to hand it to him. “Listen, I’m sorry how that sounded in the car, when you invited me. I wasn’t laughing at the offer, I was laughing at the fact that you thought you had to buy me coffee for the lift.” He took a deep breath. “It was my pleasure to give you a ride. But, well, since I’m here...”

Charlie’s smile broadened. “Sure, join me. What would you like?” he said, on his way to the counter to order.

“Just coffee. Black. Please,” Dominic said, taking off his coat and hanging it on the back of the chair. He sat but was facing the back of the shop, and wondered if it would be terribly noticeable if he turned around and stared at Charlie’s butt. He decided it would, indeed, be quite noticeable so he refrained from that and stared at the back wall and the signs for the washrooms, drawings of little cups and saucers shaped like toilet bowls. Funny or cheesy, he couldn’t make up his mind.

“There,” said Charlie, putting down a cup that looked very much like the ones on the toilet doors in front of him. The coffee was surprisingly very good, not brown water like Dominic was expecting, but a rich, bold flavor.

“Thanks,” Dominic mumbled as he took another sip. “You’re waiting for someone?”

“No, well, you, yes. I was in the metro when I realized I had your phone, so I got out and phoned you. I’m just happy I caught you before you got out of the car.”

Dominic just smiled. He was glad he’d been in the car too.

Charlie couldn’t believe the guy in front of him. He seemed so sure of himself when he was in photographer mode, all sleek movements, confident tone, the epitome of professionalism, all tall, cool, and so handsome, with those pale blue eyes, strong chin and thin lips covered with a dusting of stubble that Charlie wanted to rub on his face. But here, with a cup of coffee in hand, or back in the car, he was just so adorably bashful, Charlie didn’t know if he should hug him or throw him over a table and fuck him senseless. Photographer Dominic was hot. Normal Dominic was... hot and vulnerable. Charlie decided that was a pretty good combination.

When he’d realized he had Dominic’s phone, he’d been partly thrilled he’d get a chance to talk to Dominic again. He just didn’t want to look like the guy who did it on purpose for an excuse to contact him again. So lame. After all, Dominic had laughed at his suggestion of paying back the lift favor with coffee. Maybe he’d read him wrong at the shoot, maybe Dominic wasn’t as affected as he seemed. He’d met photographers who got in a zone while shooting, got all hot and bothered, making lots of comments on the mood of the photos to inspire the models. Dominic hadn’t been like that. He’d seemed so sincere, so real, without all the usual bullshit some photographers threw at models.

Charlie had been waiting for the metro when he’d wanted to check his schedule and realized his mistake. He’d quickly run up to call Dominic on his own phone, hoping he’d get Dominic before he got out of the car and left the phone behind. He was a bit surprised Dominic hadn’t locked the phone but hey, lots of people still didn’t.

While he’d waited for Dominic, Charlie had decided to take a chance and save his number in the contacts with just his first name, hoping this would make Dominic notice his interest.

Then Dominic had arrived and excitement raced through Charlie’s veins. He hadn’t been excited about meeting someone new in a long time. This was fun.

With both hands holding the coffee cup, Dominic looked up.

“Social worker, huh?”

Charlie just shrugged. It would be another conversation where he'd have to convince someone else he wasn't just a pretty face.

"That's cool," Dominic added before he could answer. A weight Charlie hadn't realized he carried with him was lifted off his chest.

"Yup."

"What made you want to go into that?" Dominic's question wasn't underlined with annoyance or disdain, as he was expecting. It sounded genuinely sincere.

"My whole family is into healthcare. My parents are doctors, and my sister's gonna be a dentist."

"Wow. You didn't wanna follow the same road?"

"I was accepted in med school but I changed orientations to go into social care. I wanna take care of people who really need it."

Dominic harrumphed. "Seems everyone needs doctors, no?"

Charlie shrugged. "Yes, but there are plenty of those. Anyway, the situation for doctors in Quebec isn't what it used to be. And I wanted to work with people, not diseases."

Dominic nodded, his eyes on his cup. "I can see that. You're so easy to talk to." He looked up, surprised by his own words, eyes wide, blushing.

Charlie laughed softly. "Thanks. That'll help in my job, for sure."

They chatted a bit more. Charlie learned that Dominic lived alone in a small apartment near Viau metro station, in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, and Charlie told him about his two roommates in the Plateau Mont-Royal neighborhood, near the McGill University ghetto.

"Wait. If your parents are doctors, why do you need to have two roommates?"

That unpleasant weight came back to press on Charlie's chest. "Since I didn't want to pursue a medical degree and become a doctor like them, my parents didn't support my career choice, so I decided to do it on my own. They're not paying for anything. Which is why I'm modeling until I'm done." A small smile curved his lips.

Dominic's whole face opened in wonder. "You're a badass," he said reverently.

Charlie chuckled, lowering his gaze to the cup of now-cold coffee in front of him. "I wouldn't know about being a badass, but yeah, it's my little rebellion. I know it pisses my dad off to know that his gay son's face is plastered in fashion mags and retail stores where he wouldn't be caught dead." He knew his face had darkened, felt his features grow stiff, his lips tight. Nothing new there. Just the same old shit. But talking to Dominic about it seemed to open old wounds he thought he'd dealt with before.

"Is the gay part a problem?" The question was timid, almost whispered.

"It was when I came out. Now, I think they just ignore it. They're more pissed off by my career choice than my orientation." He sighed, gave himself a mental slap on the head, and straightened in his chair. "So, what about you? Do you have a boyfriend?"

Dominic frowned for a second, like the change in subject wasn't welcome. Or maybe just that Charlie had asked him a personal question. Dominic caught himself quickly, shrugged, lowered his gaze and said, "Not at the moment."

Was that discomfort or sadness? Charlie regretted his redirection of the conversation. It was intimate before, now it seemed stilted, cold.

"Sorry, didn't mean to pry."

Dominic shrugged again. He seemed to do that a lot. "It's okay. You?"

"Not at the moment," Charlie said, using Dominic's words, but with a broad, warm smile. "Anyway, I really do have to go, but thanks for staying and having coffee with me. Maybe we can do it again sometime?" he said, trying to sound hopeful but not desperate.

Dominic cleared his throat. "Uh, sure. Yeah, that'd be great."

"You have my number in your cell now. Call me, anytime," Charlie said, getting up and putting his coat on.

Dominic got up too, his chair scraping the floor and making tons of noise before falling backwards from the weight of his jacket. He turned quickly, trying to minimize the damage but not succeeding, the chair's legs hitting the underside of the table, his jacket on the floor.

"Fuck," he muttered, putting the chair back up while untangling his jacket from the backrest. Charlie saw a blush creep up Dominic's face. He went around the table to help, but Dominic had it sorted out fast.

“You okay there?” Charlie asked, putting a hand on Dominic’s shoulder, which seemed to calm him immediately, to Charlie’s surprise and pleasure.

“Yeah, thanks,” Dominic answered, still looking a tad frazzled but better as he put his coat on. “These things always happen to me, I should warn you, in case you wanna retract that invitation to do this again sometime.” His features said that’s what he was expecting.

Charlie laughed out loud. “Of course not! It’s okay. Happens to everyone.”

Dominic’s face lit up. “Okay. But you were warned.” He smiled, a shy little grin, and Charlie’s heart melted.

“I’ll take my chances,” Charlie said happily.

In the metro, after, Charlie couldn’t keep the smile off his face. He knew he was grinning alone like an idiot, but who cared. He’d met a really nice guy that day, and he couldn’t wait for Dominic to call. He wasn’t worried he wouldn’t. He should’ve been.

When Dominic got home that evening, he quickly transferred the photos taken that day to his personal laptop. He couldn’t do anything commercial with them, they were the property of the store who’d ordered them, but he could put them in his portfolio with their consent.

He quickly went to the last ones taken, the ones where Charlie’s arms were behind his head, his eyes challenging Dominic not to feel the passion, the need in them.

Dominic picked his favorite, where the shirt was lifted softly by the fan and Charlie’s abs were contracted, his eyes drilling a hole in the armor Dominic kept around his heart, his soul.

He put that photo as his wallpaper after tweaking it a bit, in black and white, so the emphasis was on Charlie’s face, not the clothes.

He stared at that picture for a long time before his stomach growled and it was time for a frozen dinner.

The next morning, Saturday, he slept in as usual, but his return to consciousness was illustrated with Charlie’s beautiful face from that night’s dream. Not a bad way to wake up.

In his dream, Charlie was sitting at the café table with the hat with the pompom but nothing else, describing how he’d fought the *Death Star* with his

Millennium Falcon. Dominic couldn't remember the entire conversation, just the tone of it. Still, he woke up hard.

Jerking off with lots of lube solved that problem. His orgasm was brilliant, intense and hot. The guilt at jerking off with images of a half-naked Charlie in mind took hold of him the minute his cum started cooling on his stomach.

What would Charlie think if he knew Dominic had been jerking off to memories of his tight abs and sexy eyes? *He'll think you're a pervert.*

He got up, ate cold cereal and wished he'd taken the time to make a hot breakfast because shit was it cold in his apartment. Checking the temperature on the Weather Channel, he found out why: it was minus twenty-one with the wind chill factor. He shuffled to the kitchen to make coffee. At least that would warm him up a bit.

He checked his phone for messages. He had none. In the phone log, Charlie's number appeared. Charlie had taken the liberty of entering it in Dominic's contacts, with his name and everything. He'd even added his email.

Remembering his activity in bed that morning, Dominic threw his phone on the counter. He'd have to work on being embarrassed about things no one could possibly know or guess. But he knew. And that's what bothered him. Sure, he jerked off practically every day, but he usually didn't imagine undressing and blowing a guy he'd just met who was so, so nice. It felt intimate, like a violation of Charlie's trust. His smiles were so warm and friendly. But that's not the Charlie Dominic saw behind closed eyes, pulling on his dick and balls; the Charlie in his fantasy was the one in the picture, the one with those piercing eyes and glorious body, just asking to be licked and sucked.

Whoa. He was getting hard again. No no no. Time to distract himself. He got his laptop open and pulled it from sleep mode. Bam. Charlie's hot, sexy stare greeted him.

Fuck! He couldn't get away. He quickly clicked to open his browser but it took two or three seconds with that blue circle twisting on Charlie's belly, the computer taking its time to start up and install everything. But when the window opened, Dominic minimized it and feasted on Charlie's picture. Man, was he ever gorgeous.

But the guy asking him out for coffee wasn't this guy. It was the guy with the orange pompom flopping around when he laughed or looked up. It was the guy whose soft heart wanted to help people. It was the guy who didn't want to

be thought of exactly as Dominic was thinking of him when coming. The guy who wanted to be seen for who he was, not what he looked like. Dominic truly felt like shit.

Maybe he should invite him for coffee, to make up for something Charlie had no idea he'd done.

He spent the rest of the day going through pictures for his contract with a botany journal. The photos were more about information than art but what the hell, they paid the bills.

Sunday morning came and went, with a hot breakfast this time, the weather not cooperating with minus thirty-four degrees. He couldn't wait for winter to be over. Another month and spring would come. Not warm weather, just more shitty cold snow with the idea of spring coming. It wouldn't be warm before May, three months away.

Sunday afternoon, Mike came over.

Mike had been Dominic's best friend since high school. He'd been witness to the whole Jax debacle and had been there for Dominic through it all, for which Dominic would be forever grateful.

"What're you up to?" Mike said, crashing on Dominic's couch. He hadn't removed his scarf nor his hat, just his jacket.

"Oh, you know, just fiddling with my camera."

"So, nothing new then. Got any coffee?"

Dominic didn't raise his head from his camera in his lap. "You can make some. Dump whatever's left in there. It's from this morning."

Mike went to the kitchen to make a fresh pot.

"What'd you do this week?"

"Had a fashion shoot on Friday. Went well."

"Oh yeah? Any hot girls for me?"

"Not this time."

"Oh? Hot guys for you then?"

Dominic's cheeks flushed. "Only one."

"Let's see!" Mike rushed back in the living room, sliding on his thick socks and landing on the couch, picking up the laptop from the coffee table.

“Wait!” Dominic yelled but too late, Mike had moved the mouse and Dominic’s new background photo came to life.

“Oh-ho! What’s this?” He looked up at Dominic, whose pink cheeks turned to a fire engine red.

“It’s from the shoot. It’s a good picture,” Dominic mumbled.

“I’ll say! It’s a good picture of an awesome dude! Your new crush?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh come on! It’s good that you like someone. It’s been too long. It’s not just the picture, right? It’s the guy? What’s his name?”

Dominic wished he’d changed his background before Mike had come over. He knew Mike would get on his case about the photo and tease the ever-loving hell out of him.

“His name is Charlie, and he was very professional. It’s just a good photo, all right?”

“Sure, sure, man. Anyway, you always put the best picture of your latest shoot on your background. Right,” Mike said, smirking. He was enjoying this too much.

“Fuck off.”

Mike barked a loud laugh.

“So? You got his number? He *is* gay, right?”

“How would you know? You can’t tell from that.” Dominic scoffed.

“I can’t, but you wouldn’t waste time over a straight dude. You wouldn’t even put up a good photo of a girl, so yeah, I’m guessing he’s gay. So, you got his number?”

“He put it in my phone.”

“Oooohhh-hhhooh! Way to go, man! Did you call him? You know, you could just go for coffee or something.”

“We already had coffee Friday, after the shoot.”

“What? Already? You’re smokin’! I’m so proud of you!”

“It’s not what you think.” Dominic downplayed Mike’s enthusiasm. “He took my phone by mistake so we had to meet to make the exchange.” He didn’t

bother mentioning that Charlie had asked him for coffee and he'd laughed, making an ass of himself.

"Oh. Well now you have to call him, right?" Mike's broad smile warmed Dominic's heart. His friend only wanted him to be happy. And get laid.

"I don't know."

"Come on! He's interested, right? He put his number in your phone. Did he type his name and everything?"

"Yes," Dominic answered reluctantly.

"He's interested! If he wasn't, he wouldn't have done that. So call him."

"Mike, seriously. I know you're my friend and everything, but Jesus. Look at him!" he said, pointing dramatically at the screen.

"Yeah?" Mike said, frowning.

"As if a guy like that would be interested in me." Dominic just shook his head at his friend's obvious naïveté.

"So what? So he's good-looking. So are you."

Dominic scoffed again. "Stop making fun of me."

"Oh come on. Stop that shit. Why wouldn't he be interested in you? You're good-looking, smart, funny, you got that cute little shy thing going for you," Mike finished with a wink and a grin, even going as far as punching his shoulder. *Jeeez.*

"That's ridiculous. He could have anyone. And I mean anyone. He's not just gorgeous, he's smart, open, warm, kind..." That pink hue on his cheeks was back with a vengeance. He quickly straightened his features into a neutral expression, having felt them heat up just talking about Charlie.

"You got it bad. Just call him, what's the worst that can happen? He'll say no. You move on. But at least you'll have tried, right?"

"But what if I have to work with him again? It'd be so awkward."

"You're always so professional. I doubt it'd be a problem. If he's as nice as you say, he wouldn't make it hard for you, plus he wouldn't wanna be unprofessional either, right?"

"Well... yeah, but still." Dominic had stopped fiddling with his camera and was just sprawled on his chair, frowning.

“You ask him out, he says no. You work with him again, you take his picture and you go home. What’s the big deal?”

Dominic sighed, a long-suffering exhale laden with sorrow and hardship. “I guess. But he has my number too. Maybe I’ll wait for him to call me.”

“Fuck, Dom, just call the guy. For once, you make the first move. You’ll see, it’s not that hard.”

“Yeah, but Jax—”

Mike cut him off. “Don’t talk about that asshole. He’s nothing. His opinions don’t count anymore. You’re a catch. Just call this Charlie dude and see what he says. You never know.”

“I’ll see,” Dominic answered reluctantly. He appreciated Mike’s vote of confidence but they were best friends, and best friends weren’t always objective.

I’m near Pie-IX stn waiting for 2 hrs. Up for coffee?

Was it too soon to text Dominic? Charlie hoped he’d read Dominic right and he’d be up to seeing him again. If not, he’d refuse. It was only five days since the shoot after all. He didn’t want to appear desperate. He could’ve waited a bit longer to reach out. Oh well. Too late now. No big deal.

Except it was a big deal to Charlie. He hadn’t stopped thinking about the wild feline—that’s how he saw Dominic. A skittish, wild and graceful lion, with lean muscles and beautiful eyes that spoke volumes. There was a strength there, under all that shyness, one that appealed to Charlie in many ways.

Charlie had drawn a line between his modeling work and his academic career. He’d promised himself he’d never date anyone from work. Every shoot was packed with beautiful people, higher-ups who would subtly dangle future projects in front of models’ and photographers’ noses in exchange for sex, all in good fun. He’d been propositioned himself a few times, and he couldn’t even say if it’d all been in his imagination. Maybe he’d read intentions where there were none, that’s how cautious the head honchos were.

For Dominic, he was ready to break his own rule, cross that line.

Sure. Wanna come over?

Then, as an afterthought perhaps:

Or we could meet somewhere.

Charlie hurried to answer the first reply.

What's your address?

It took Dominic a few minutes to answer. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe he was just busy. Charlie told himself to relax, but he couldn't help imagining Dominic panicking from his too-quick invitation. Finally, an address on Letourneux Street appeared. Charlie walked the five minutes to Dominic's apartment.

Dominic opened the door, looking flushed and frazzled. "Come in," he said, staring at the floor.

Charlie tried to convey with his smile his pleasure in being there. "Hey, thanks for inviting me." He took off his boots and hung his jacket on a peg next to the door, on top of other jackets, scarves and sweaters.

The apartment was small, typical of the area, with a tiny kitchen alcove with a fridge and stove on one side and counter space and cabinets, only two of them top and bottom, on the other. Just enough to cook decent meals and store very little. The rest of the big room was the dining and living area, with a small wood table for two and a couch facing a TV on a cheap bench with drawers. Every inch of wall was either occupied by photographs or shelves. The maximum of space was put to good use. A closed door probably led to the only bedroom. What was noticeable was the amount of light coming in from the large uncovered window. Even on this cold, grey day the room was bright, without the need for artificial lighting. It was damn cold, though.

Dominic rushed to the kitchen to make coffee. His movements were agitated, like preparing a pot of coffee put him in a frenzy.

"Need help?" Charlie asked softly, not sure Dominic had heard him with all the clattering going on.

Dominic stopped abruptly and whipped around to face Charlie. "No, that's fine." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Thanks." He got back to bustling with the coffee things.

"Have you lived here long? It's a great place." Charlie took the opportunity to observe Dominic unseen. The grace in the movements, even if hectic and rushed, was undeniable. Long legs clad in tight jeans held a slim waist and a strong back.

“Three years now.”

“That’s why everything looks so settled in. My apartment fits three, and every school year there’s a chance someone will leave and a new person will come along, so no one bothers to decorate or organize anything.”

“How long have you lived there?” A familiar and comforting smell announced the coffee was brewing. Dominic gestured to the couch and took a seat in the overstuffed chair on the side. Charlie sat with one leg tucked underneath the other.

“Four years. I moved there when I changed programs.”

Dominic just nodded. Charlie started to think this was a mistake, that Dominic had invited him on a whim but regretted his decision. Perhaps it would’ve been best to meet somewhere after all. Charlie had been curious to see where Dominic lived, but it’d gotten a bit awkward. It became more so.

“Why are you here?” Dominic asked bluntly.

Charlie felt his face fall, his jaw slacken. He should definitely make up an excuse and leave. Before he could answer, Dominic continued quickly. “I mean, not that I’m not happy you’re here, it’s just... Did you want to talk about the shoot last week?”

Charlie cleared his throat. “No, I... Well, it was fun to have coffee with you. I thought you’d enjoyed it too. I can leave. In fact, I probably should,” he said, getting up off the couch.

Dominic moved forward in his chair, a hand up in a stop gesture. “No, no! I’m... It’s great! Fuck. I lack social graces, or so I’ve been told. I’m sorry. Please, sit.”

Charlie smiled tentatively and sat back down. “I don’t wanna bother you. Just thought we could hang out.”

Dominic was still on the edge of his seat. “No, I’m really glad you texted. Seriously. I just... wonder why a guy like you would want to hang out with me.” His tone was sincere, there was no fake timidity, no fishing for compliments. How refreshing.

Charlie inhaled deeply before answering. “I had a good time with you last Friday. I had a couple of hours in the neighborhood and thought we’d catch up.” His heart was beating fast.

Dominic blushed bright red. “Oh. Cool. Very cool. Okay. What are you doing around here? Aren’t you far from home?”

“Actually, I come in this area every week. I volunteer at the psych clinic on Ontario Street. It’s part of my research. I had a meeting this morning, so I had a couple of hours to kill.”

“Nice. That must be a hell of a change from fashion shoots.”

“Yeah. I like modeling, I mean it pays well. But this is more rewarding, that’s for sure.”

Dominic sat back, more comfortable, until he sprang up from the chair. “I forgot the coffee! What do you take in it? I have milk and sugar. I don’t have flavored coffee creams...”

“Black is fine,” Charlie interrupted, chuckling. “Thanks.”

Dominic went to the kitchen counter and poured two mugs, handing one to Charlie on his way back.

“Yum, this is good,” Charlie said after his first sip. “Rich.”

Dominic beamed. “I like good coffee. It’s fair trade, too.”

They sipped their hot beverages for a few seconds.

“What time do you have to be at the clinic?” Dominic asked.

“Four. Why?”

“I was gonna play some Black Ops. Do you play?”

“Yeah! And I have time for a game.” Charlie’s face broke into a wide smile.

Dominic came to join him on the couch and pulled controllers out of the drawer in the coffee table. He picked up the TV remote, put everything on and prepared the split-screen game online. Charlie noticed he smelled nice, very nice. Softener and... Dominic, probably. Just him. It made him shiver.

“Here,” Dominic told him as he handed him a headset.

“You have two?”

Dominic hesitated. “Uh, yeah.”

“Cool!”

They played a game and did well. Dominic didn’t yell obscenities at anyone. He remained calm and his game was strategic and calculated. Charlie,

on the other hand, was more vocal and ended up having a good time laughing with a guy from New Jersey.

“I gotta go,” Charlie said in a disappointed tone after the game. He really, really didn’t want to go. He was having such a good, relaxing time with a nice hottie.

“You can come back and play, if you want. Someday. You know, whenever,” Dominic babbled, his voice getting softer as he spoke. He wasn’t looking at Charlie, just fiddling with the controllers.

Charlie laughed. “Yeah, sure. Maybe next week? Before my tour at the clinic?” Dominic liked him! The happy dance in his head was nothing short of cheesy.

Dominic’s smile reached his eyes, creating cute little wrinkles Charlie wanted to kiss. “Sure. I should be here.” Was that heat in those eyes? Charlie sure hoped so.

And thus they had what Charlie was hoping was a date for the following week.

“Fucker!” Dominic cried, throwing his controller on the couch next to him. He really hated when he was killed early on in the game.

Charlie was furiously tapping away on his controller, trying to stay in the particularly ferocious game. His character was also killed not long after.

“Well, that was short,” Dominic said dryly. The game had taken a turn for the worse not long after they’d joined in, and now that it was over, he didn’t know what to do with Charlie there. *I hate awkward silences! And they get even more awkward because I don’t say anything to help the situation!*

He’d been so happy a few weeks ago when Charlie had said he’d come back to play. He’d been coming every week for the last three. Dominic thought of him every day. Mike had caught him daydreaming and made him blush over it.

Charlie would come over, they’d play Black Ops for a while, then talk, drink coffee, compare movies and music. Charlie had asked him why he never put up his own photos on the walls, and he’d said that he’d already seen his own stuff, he wanted to look at other people’s and that had made Charlie laugh. Dominic was still wondering why. It was easy between them, fun. He was

much calmer around him, not so frazzled like the first time. Charlie had brought cookies the week before, and that day he'd brought donuts. He'd started living for Tuesdays.

Of course, he'd googled Charlie and found plenty of pics Charlie had done for various fashion magazines and high-end retail stores.

But the guy sitting next to him, with that stupid hat with the pompom and those cute freckles free of make-up, was just a normal, albeit absolutely gorgeous, person. When he smiled at Dominic, it was genuine and sincere. It was that same smile he'd given him during the shoot, so Dominic was almost certain those smiles *were* directed at him.

"More coffee?" he offered.

Charlie leaned back on the sofa, one leg tucked under the other in what seemed to be his usual position. "No, thanks. It's very good, but a little potent. If I don't wanna jump around my clients this afternoon, I'd better stick with just one."

"Do you ever take that hat off?" As soon as it was out, Dominic cringed. Charlie's eyes went wide. This is where he would leave, thinking Dominic was a stupid loser. He sure felt like one.

Then a miracle happened. Charlie burst out laughing. "Your face! Man, you look like you swallowed mud!" And he kept laughing.

"I'm sorry. That was so... lame. You look good with the hat. You probably look good with any hat. And you probably know that too." He was just digging himself deeper and couldn't seem to stop himself. That hole he was sinking into was actually quicksand and he'd die any second now. With any luck.

Charlie kept laughing. Well, someone was having a good time.

"Dude, relax. Seriously. You're gonna give yourself a coronary. I can practically hear you thinking." He took a deep breath and with one swipe, took off his hat.

"You're blond!" Another spectacularly smart outburst. Dominic's face heated, and not in a good way, and his palms got sweaty. "I'm... I apologize. I don't know what it is. I'm a moron when I'm around you."

"Maybe that's a good thing?" Charlie winked.

Dominic stopped breathing. Was Charlie flirting with him?

“Uh... I don’t know?” Why was his voice so high suddenly?

Charlie sat up straighter and cleared his throat.

“Yeah, my hair’s actually blond. Most of the products they use make it look darker.”

“And you don’t wear product?” Dominic said, his voice back to normal, glad Charlie was giving him a break.

“I never put it in myself. I wouldn’t even know how. And in winter I always wear a hat so it’s pointless.”

His hair was long in the front, hanging in his eyes with nothing to hold it off his face. It looked soft and shiny. Dominic wanted to run his fingers through it. His features must’ve betrayed him, because Charlie’s eyes heated with need, or maybe lust. Charlie’s body leaned just a fraction toward him. His heart rate increased.

“Wanna touch it?” Charlie asked with a slow smile, and Dominic wasn’t sure they were still talking about hair.

Dominic decided to keep his cool and say nothing. He lifted his hand gently and threaded just two fingers in the front of Charlie’s hair. It was as soft as it looked. Charlie’s lids closed slowly and Dominic thought he heard a purring sound, like a cat’s. This encouraged him to do it again, but with his whole hand, caressing the hair and Charlie’s brow at the same time. Charlie leaned into the gesture and Dominic’s internal thought was “fuck it,” and he kissed Charlie.

Just a soft brush of lips, warm breath mixing with his own, Charlie’s skin as soft as his hair, no apparent prickle of stubble, just smooth lips.

It was fantastic.

That purring sound came again, prompting him to deepen the kiss. He licked Charlie’s lips with just the tip of his tongue, and Charlie’s mouth opened, inviting him in. He accepted, rubbing their tongues together. Charlie tasted of coffee, maple glaze and hope.

He felt Charlie smile in the kiss and kept going. A giggle erupting from the object of his affection made him stop, wondering what he’d done wrong. He opened his eyes quickly, pulling back.

“No! Don’t go! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to giggle like a schoolboy. Come back,” Charlie said, putting his hand on the back of Dominic’s neck and pulling him forward.

“What made you laugh? Did I do something wrong?” Dominic asked self-consciously.

“Not at all. In fact, you’re doing everything right. Come here,” he said, his eyes boring in Dominic’s with purpose. “I’m just thinking we should’ve done this a long time ago. I’m usually not that slow.”

Dominic smiled. “It’s okay, it wasn’t the right time, until now.” And he kissed Charlie again. They made out on the couch, cold fingers slipping under sweaters, hands exploring chests, tongues tasting and dancing, until Charlie’s timer went off on his phone.

“Shit,” he said as he pulled back. “I have to go.” He nuzzled Dominic’s neck, the tip of his nose cold, which made Dominic shiver in pleasure.

“Okay.” Dominic made no move to disentangle their limbs so Charlie could leave. “You wanna come back before next Tuesday?” he asked in a small voice.

Charlie held him in a strong hug, his hand on the back of Dominic’s head, fingers threading in his hair.

“Yes. Please. I wanna come back sooner than Tuesday.”

Yes! Yes! He doesn’t wanna wait a week! Jesus... I’d die if I had to wait that long. Okay now, don’t sound too desperate. Don’t ask him to come back after the clinic today, even if that’s what you want.

“How about Thursday? I’m free from three.”

“Okay, three on Thursday, I’ll be here.”

“Okay. We’ll have to let go now.”

Charlie giggled again, not letting go.

“Yeah, all right. Here we go.” But Dominic stayed where he was, snuggled in Charlie’s embrace, Charlie’s hand in his hair. He didn’t want the moment to end. It was too nice, too perfect. So what if his dick was as stiff as marble in his jeans and the zipper was digging in the hard flesh. He could live with it.

Charlie laughed and disengaged from his arms, but kissed his lips again, just mouth on mouth, no tongue, but soft and reassuring, to take the sting away from the separation.

Charlie got up, put his hat back on, and took Dominic’s hand to pull him up.

“Walk me out,” he said. Dominic was too happy to oblige. They held hands the four steps it took to reach the front door.

Charlie got dressed and put his boots on. Then he grabbed the front of Dominic's sweater and pulled him in for a last kiss. Smooth lips brushing together full of promise.

"See you Thursday."

"Yeah, see you Thursday."

Charlie left, closing the door behind him. The minute the doorknob clicked in place, Dominic swooned, twisting on his feet, and flipped over the back of the couch to fall on the cushions. Then he kicked his legs in the air and pumped his fists in triumph. This was wonderful. He couldn't wait to see Charlie on Thursday. He'd need to buy condoms; the ones he had were from Jax's time and were probably expired. And he'd need to work himself up to having sex, assuming that's what Charlie wanted. Isn't that what all guys their age wanted? Dominic hadn't met anyone his age with the same hang-ups. Plus there was Jax... But Dominic didn't want to think about Jax.

Once he'd calmed down, he decided he was too excited to work, his concentration was completely shot, so he watched mindless TV for a few hours. Nothing like daytime shows you weren't watching to numb your brain. His little hamster in his head was going a hundred miles an hour. His whole body was tingling. His lips tasted of Charlie, and he couldn't help brushing a finger over them to keep the sensation of his kisses alive.

A knock around six got him up. He noticed his legs were stiff from being bent on the couch for so long. He swore as he walked to the door that when he'd made it big, he was buying a couch on which he'd be able to stretch out his full six-foot height.

He opened the door to a smiling Charlie. He was speechless, so Charlie had time to say, "I couldn't wait 'til Thursday." He came in, put his gloved hand behind Dominic's head and pulled him in for a scorching, passionate kiss with cold lips and an even colder nose.

Charlie had thought of Dominic the whole time he was with clients. He'd listened to them, gave solutions or suggestions and did his job, but in the back of his mind, his lips were still on Dominic's.

The guy was driving him nuts. He'd been there for weeks, flirting discreetly, probing for reactions. And getting none. Or almost none. A flutter of eyelids here, an intake of breath there, but not the usual response he normally got from guys who were interested.

Let's face it, being a model made sex a sure thing with pretty much anyone. The minute someone recognized his face, or he mentioned he modeled when asked if he had a job, people's reactions were almost always the same, guy or girl: "We'll sleep together and it'll be special," sometimes just plain "I wanna sleep with you so I can tell my friends I did," or variations of both.

Dominic, however, was not impressed with his modeling. Charlie knew Dominic found him good-looking, that was obvious from the photo shoot, but it seemed to stop there. He'd yet to meet someone so reserved and shy when it came to sex.

But Charlie found he liked it. A lot. At the beginning it made him insecure, knowing Dominic was attracted to him but wouldn't move forward. Why? At first he thought maybe Dominic was in love with someone else, yet after weeks of visits, there was no sign of anyone else in his life. No second toothbrush in the bathroom, no pictures, no texts, no phone calls, nothing. Maybe Dominic was pining for someone else, an unrequited love that would make things harder for Charlie.

Now, Charlie was convinced Dominic just moved slowly, surely, putting everything in focus before acting. He wasn't impulsive when it came to his intimacy. Most guys would just jump in bed with Charlie, but not him.

Which made these kisses that much more sweet.

"Hi," Charlie whispered on Dominic's lips, which curved in a smile before they answered, "Hi," back.

"Wanna have dinner with me?" Charlie asked, staring into Dominic's eyes to best see his reaction.

Dominic's whole face opened in a beautiful grin. "Yes, sure. Where?"

"Do you know any good places?"

"Actually, I don't eat out much."

Letting him go but staying close, Charlie said, "Let's check out restaurants nearby." He took off his gloves and boots and followed Dominic to the couch. Dominic grabbed his laptop from the table and opened it. The movement of his hand stopped abruptly over the mousepad, and Dominic looked up at him, guilt written all over his face. As Charlie tried to understand that behavior, Dominic closed his eyes, sighed then woke his computer up.

Charlie sat next to him and saw the screen come to life. Dominic pursed his lips and entered his password.

Charlie saw his face pop up on the desktop, in black and white, his expression unusable for a fashion ad. It was so intimate, full of lust and desire, nothing hidden, no inhibitions. He'd never seen himself that bold, that sexy. He'd known he was playing with Dominic at the end of the shoot, but never had he imagined the photo would come out like that. After a sharp intake of breath, he muttered, "Jesus. That's me?"

"Um, yeah." Embarrassment laced Dominic's voice.

"It's great. I mean, really. Wow. You tweaked it?"

"Yeah, a bit. It's a good picture," Dominic said in a low voice.

Charlie turned to look at him and Dominic's frown made him want to hug the shyness away. "It's fantastic."

"Yeah, but they're never gonna use that one. That's why I kept it. You don't mind, do you?" Again, that adorable shyness.

"Of course not! I'm flattered! Are you crazy? Look at me! I look hot as hell!"

Dominic turned to him in awe, then he smiled, a small, tentative curve of lips. "You do."

The tenderness in those blue eyes shot straight to Charlie's heart. His mouth found Dominic's for a kiss that wasn't anything like the photo. It was tender, affectionate. Charlie meant it to be reassuring and hoped it worked. From the expression on Dominic's face, it did.

"I like it in black and white."

"Well..." Dominic hesitated, then took the plunge. "The colors in the shirt were busy, bold. This way, it's your face that's the focus." They both stared at the screen.

"You make me look hot, man. No one's done that."

"I've seen your pictures on the net. You're always gorgeous."

"Perhaps, but not hot, not like this. And in one of them I look so dorky and cheesy."

"I haven't found any in which you don't look spectacular."

"You haven't seen the ad I did for acne cream when I was sixteen then!"

Dominic's face whipped his way. "Where?"

“Here, I’ll show you. You can’t find it if you don’t know what you’re looking for. I wasn’t happy my name wasn’t mentioned at the time. I don’t feel the same now,” Charlie said, laughing.

He typed a brand name, a year and clicked on images. A very young, very coiffed Charlie appeared holding a tube of cream next to his face with the widest, phoniest expression.

Dominic burst out laughing, an honest, guttural laugh. Charlie suddenly wished Dominic laughed like that more often. He noticed Dominic had a tooth that wasn’t as straight as the others, a slight overbite that Charlie wanted to lick.

“Oh man. That’s bad. The photo is good but, dude, that face!” Dominic giggled some more until Charlie closed the window and the photo disappeared.

“Not my finest moment. It was my first gig, it paid three hundred dollars. I was so proud. I went out and bought these Adidas shoes my mom thought were hideous, but I really wanted them.”

“Why? At three hundred dollars, I bet they were awesome.”

“I thought they were, but my parents didn’t like us wearing trendy, flashy clothes. They’re very conservative, so we had to dress like proper little children from a wealthy family with taste, not like common drug dealers.”

“Drug dealers?”

“My mom said only drug dealers bought flashy, expensive running shoes.”

“Oh. That’s harsh.”

“Yeah, well... that’s my parents. We don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things.”

Dominic placed a gentle hand on his. It was comforting, sure, but so sweet and unexpected.

It was so easy being with this guy. He told him stuff he’d never tell anyone. When Dominic wasn’t self-conscious or afraid of being embarrassed, he was a genuinely nice, funny, smart guy it was a pleasure to be with.

Dominic gave his hand a quick squeeze and brought his attention back to the computer. His fingers danced on the keyboard and a list of restaurants nearby appeared.

They picked a bistro not far from Dominic’s place and decided to walk since it was only minus ten outside.

The streets of Montreal at six thirty on a clear night shone with street lamps and the moon chaperoned their way.

They were served quickly, a perk of going out on Tuesday evening in winter. They practically had the place to themselves and a very attentive waiter, who zeroed in on Dominic as soon as they were seated. The waiter smiled at Dominic, welcomed Dominic, spoke to only Dominic, to Charlie's amusement.

"Je vous apporte quelque chose à boire?" ('Can I bring you anything to drink?')

"Juste de l'eau pour moi," ('Only water for me') Dominic told him before turning to Charlie. "You?"

"I'll have a glass of red," Charlie answered. "Why don't you have one with me? Do you like wine?"

"Yeah, sure. Maybe we could split a half-liter then, what do you think?"

Charlie's grin was answer enough. "A half-liter of red, please," he told the waiter, who was looking at Dominic the whole time, a hip cocked on the side, a smirk on his face.

"Je vous apporte quelque chose à grignoter avec ça? Pogos maison? Frites?" ('Can I bring you something to nibble with that? Homemade pogos? Fries?') the waiter offered to Dominic. Charlie chuckled as Dominic didn't seem to notice all the attention he was getting.

"You?" Dominic asked him.

They decided to share fries and ordered their meals right away, crab ravioli for Charlie and salmon steak for Dominic. The waiter assured Dominic their food would be served in a jiffy, and Charlie burst out laughing when the waiter was far enough.

Dominic raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Don't tell me you didn't see that," Charlie said, snickering.

"See what? His fly was open?"

"No!" sputtered Charlie. "If his fly was open, I would've discreetly let him know. I wouldn't laugh about that."

Dominic's brow straightened. "Then I don't see what's so funny."

"He wants in your pants and you didn't even notice!"

The knife Dominic was inspecting fell with a clang on the fork resting on the table.

“He did not,” Dominic said somberly, his lips in a thin line.

“He did too,” said Charlie, still laughing. “Come on, it’s flattering, no?”

“You’re wrong or you’re just making fun of me, pulling my leg.”

Charlie’s laugh died on his lips. “I’m not making fun of you. Why would you think that?”

The cutlery inspection resumed. “Why would he want in my pants? You’re sitting right there! If there’s anyone here the waiter would wanna bone, it’d be you.” And he looked like he believed it too.

Moving forward in his chair, Charlie asked, “Why is it so surprising someone would want you, Dominic?” He had a sinking feeling someone had been mean to Dominic, someone had stripped away his confidence, if he had any at one point in his life, which everything about him indicated so far. He had a decent job, which could turn into something really fabulous someday, he had lots of talent and he was secure behind his camera. He lived alone, supported himself, his apartment was put together in an efficient manner but decorated with a true artist’s touch, he even had a car in working order, so he wasn’t a textbook case of a complete disaster. On the other hand, he was self-conscious and awkward when someone gave him attention, and he wasn’t ruled by his dick, so either it was fear of intimacy, but Charlie didn’t think that was it if their kisses were anything to go by, or something had happened to him to shake his confidence and self-esteem. Charlie was voting for the last option. He didn’t want to treat Dominic like a client but he wanted to peel off that uncertainty and take a look at how he could make Dominic see what he saw.

Dominic’s eyes slowly rose from the fork he was checking. “It just doesn’t happen very often, that’s all. Anyway, I think you’re reading too much into it. He’s just doing his job, taking care of his customers.”

Oh my God he doesn’t know! He has no clue how beautiful he is! How many opportunities did he lose by not being aware they were offered to him?

“Okay, maybe you’re right.” Charlie didn’t think he was, but he let it go. “What did you do while I was gone?”

A slight blush crept up Dominic’s cheeks. “Nothing much, really. I watched TV. Nothing interesting.”

“I thought you had work to do.”

“I did, just not in the mood. How was the clinic?”

“It was fine. I met a new family. The mom’s a hoarder, it’s making the kids anxious and the older one is acting up in class.”

Dominic’s face turned sympathetic, interested. “Poor kids. My dad was OCD, although he was never diagnosed. I realized what it was when I moved out. I read an article and looked it up. It’s not easy.”

“What did he do?”

“So many things. One of them was that he’d take an hour every morning getting ready, with the bathroom door closed. I remember no one could bother him when he was in there. Even just knocking would send him into a rage. Then if he had to let me in if I really had to go, he’d swear up a storm and yell.”

“That’s hard on a child. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know that now.” Dominic was calm, but Charlie could almost see the frightened little kid under there, checking cutlery for evil water spots or deadly food specks.

“You’ve talked to someone about this, haven’t you?”

“Among other things, yes.” And the period at the end of that sentence was final.

“Your dad never got help?”

Dominic laughed, but there was no humor. “Are you kidding? Therapy and any kind of help was admitting weakness, defeat. He was macho, borderline misogynist, homophobic and generally a very unpleasant person.”

“How long ago did he die?”

The question seemed to surprise Dominic, but he answered frankly, without hesitation. “Three years ago.”

Charlie would’ve said he was sorry, but that always seemed so empty, like a social thing you say when you’re uncomfortable around death. So he didn’t say it.

“And your mom?”

Dominic’s face lit up. “She’s good. She grieved for a year, then it’s like she decided she could have a life now that he wasn’t around anymore to piss on

everything, so she's good," he said fondly. Then, he said, "Isn't this like talking shop for you?"

"It's okay. I don't mind. What do you wanna talk about?"

Dominic shrugged. "Do you date a lot?"

Charlie almost spit out the water he'd just drunk. "Define a lot."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I'll tell you if you tell me," Charlie said with a smile to soothe the tension that had raised Dominic's shoulders.

"Okay."

Charlie braced himself, not knowing if he was gonna blow his chance with this guy. "I date occasionally. I sleep with people I meet sometimes. Is that what you wanted to ask me?"

"Do you sleep with lots of people at the same time?" There was a quiver in Dominic's voice.

"Not really, and definitely not if I'm in a committed relationship. It's never happened before." *Aha*, Charlie thought, *we're getting to it now*.

"Have you ever been in a committed relationship?"

"A couple of times. Nothing really serious. I've never lived with a lover, but there were two people that meant something to me. Things didn't work out, but not because of fucking around." Charlie sure hoped that would count in his favor.

Dominic just nodded, tracing patterns on his place mat with the fork.

"You?"

The question seemed to startle Dominic; but a deal's a deal, so Charlie patiently waited for his answer.

"I don't date."

"Never?"

"Well... I haven't dated since my last breakup."

"How long ago was that?"

Hesitation, then, "A year."

Fuck. He didn't wanna talk about Jax.

Dominic could tell Charlie was surprised that he hadn't dated in a year.

"That's a long time not to date. You go out, surely? Dancing? Drinks? A hook-up, maybe?"

An elephant sat on Dominic's chest. He wished it wouldn't.

"Uhhmm I don't do hook-ups. Nor do I dance." He fidgeted in his chair. "Listen, if you wanna go, that's all right."

"What? Why would I wanna go?" Charlie's jaw dropped, his eyes got really wide.

"Well, because I'm not a good date. I'm apparently not a good boyfriend either." He felt his face flush and closed his eyes. "Not that that's what you wanted, I mean, not..."

"Hey. Stop. We're having dinner, we kissed, it was nice. I'd like to do it again." Dominic heard the amusement in Charlie's voice but when he opened his eyes, all he saw was understanding.

The elephant shifted to make itself more comfortable, a little lighter.

"A year's a long time to get over someone," Charlie finally said in the silence at their table.

There were the usual restaurant noises, but not very much as it was pretty quiet. Their waiter came to fill their water glasses often. That guy didn't have much to do apparently because he was always fluttering around their table. Even so, he couldn't break into the bubble that had grown around Charlie and Dominic, cutting them off from the rest of the world.

"I'm over *him*. I don't love him anymore, haven't in a long time. I'm just not over..." Christ. He was gonna sound like a pathetic loser.

Charlie's hand came and stilled his own that was frantically flipping his knife over the wooden table, making a tap tap noise. Dominic looked up to soft, almost affectionate brown eyes that weren't judging him.

"Over what?"

Charlie's hand stayed on his, and normally he'd have pulled away by now but he liked it, so he left it under Charlie's until Charlie decided to remove it. It was nice and warm, long, delicate fingers cradling his own in a comforting gesture.

Who does that? Apparently, Charlie.

“Les raviolis ici et le saumon pour Monsieur,” (‘*The ravioli here and the salmon for you, Sir*’) the waiter said, cutting off the moment that had become intimate and sweet. Oh well. The waiter winked at Dominic as he set his plate down. Okay, the wink he noticed. Didn’t mean anything though. So the waiter was flirty. He’d probably done the same thing to Charlie.

But Charlie was smirking at the waiter, totally ignored.

“Je vous apporte autre chose? Du poivre frais moulu?” (‘*Can I bring you anything else? Freshly ground pepper?*’) This was directed at Dominic again, and he realized Charlie was right about the attention.

Dominic asked Charlie, “Want some pepper?” unfortunately pulling his hand away from the warmth and comfort of Charlie’s.

“It’s a good thing you’re here, I don’t think I’d get anything otherwise.” It was said with humor but Dominic was worried his dinner companion would get frustrated by the end of the evening if this continued. “I’d love some, thanks.”

Dominic turned to the waiter. *“Mon chum va prendre du poivre, merci.”* (‘*My boyfriend will have some pepper, thanks.*’) The waiter’s smile faltered and he quickly spun to get the pepper grinder.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Charlie said.

“He didn’t even ask you! Do you mind that I answered for you?”

“No, no, thanks. But you didn’t have to tell him I was your boyfriend.”

“You caught that?”

“You don’t live in Montreal all your life and not pick up a bit of French here and there,” Charlie said, chuckling. “Besides, it ruins your chances with him.”

Dominic’s throat strangled him. “Pff! I don’t want a chance with him!”

Charlie laughed lightly. “Good. I’m glad.” His gaze heated up as he stared at Dominic a second before taking a bite. The waiter came back and furiously ground some pepper on Charlie’s ravioli until Charlie put up a hand quickly so as not to get too much. The waiter wished them *bon appétit* and disappeared in the kitchen like the place was on fire.

They ate in silence until Charlie asked, “Were you going to tell me about your ex?”

Damn. He didn't forget.

"Apparently we had an open relationship."

"And?"

"I wasn't made aware."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"That sucks."

"On the bright side, my STD tests all came back negative."

Charlie coughed. "Sorry." Then cleared his throat. "That's good. Were you worried?"

"Well... I was when I found out he'd been sleeping around for a year, but I guess he still had one decent bone in his body and wore condoms with the other guys. Anyway, there's not a big chance of..." and he stopped there. My, my, my his food was very interesting suddenly.

"What? You weren't having sex?" Charlie asked, eyebrows raised.

"No, we were having sex. Just not... you know, not... complete sex." Wow, that elephant picked up a friend. "That was apparently part of the problem."

"You mean penetrative sex?"

Dominic's fork fell on his plate, making lots of noise. His eyes darted from side to side, although the restaurant was as empty as it was when they arrived. The elephants sitting on his chest were laughing at him.

"Sorry," Charlie said quickly. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's none of my business."

Calmer since no one could've heard Charlie anyway, Dominic picked up his fork and prepared a bite. If he died of embarrassment, his last meal being with Charlie was worth it. "No, no. It's okay. There's no one to hear us anyway. And yes, that's what it was."

"You mean your boyfriend went to have anal sex elsewhere because you wouldn't have it?" Charlie looked sincerely dumbfounded, which surprised Dominic.

"Well, yeah, among other reasons. But yes, that's what his main concern was."

“Are you still friends with him?” Charlie asked.

Dominic choked on a humorless laugh. “Noooooo.”

“Good. The guy’s a douche.”

That made Dominic relax. “Yeah. But I’m no better, I didn’t read the signs, although they were there. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty. Mike wasn’t surprised. He never liked Jax.”

“Who’s Mike?”

“My best friend.”

“And Jax?”

“The douche. His name is Jacques but anglos would always pronounce the ‘s’ at the end and it turned into Jax.”

“He’s still a douche,” Charlie said with conviction.

“Yup,” Dominic said, happy with the support. “Anyway, I figured I’d lay low for a while after that.”

They finished their meal, sharing cheesecake with maple cream, and Charlie walked Dominic back to his place. The elephant and his friend had left without a word, leaving Dominic free and light.

“You wanna do this again soon?” Charlie asked, burrowed in his coat, when they arrived in front of Dominic’s building. The temperature had dropped a bit, it was minus fifteen and windy.

“I’d love to,” Dominic said, like Charlie was giving him a gift. He was relieved Charlie hadn’t asked to come up. He wasn’t ready for sex yet. In his mind and heart, that is. His dick would be up for it.

“I’ll text you. Are we still on for Thursday around three?”

Dominic’s face broke into a big grin. “If you want to, sure!”

“I want to,” Charlie said, leaning in for a kiss. Their lips were cold, the breath between them foggy and chilled, but the kiss was sweet.

“See you Thursday,” Charlie said, winking as he turned to walk toward the metro.

Dominic watched him walk away before skipping all the way to his third-floor apartment, happy in his heart.

On Wednesday, Charlie had lots of work to do for his thesis but his mind was in a small apartment on Letourneux with a beautiful, sweet guy who made his heart melt with his shyness.

The day was long and tedious.

On Wednesday night, he couldn't resist sending a short text before turning off his bedside lamp.

See you tomorrow?

Two seconds later, he got a response. Dominic was near his phone. *Yes. 3?*

Yes. Goodnight. Xx

He sent the text before he could change his mind about the *x*'s. Would Dominic think it was cheesy? A ring on his phone announced a new text.

Xxx

So, not cheesy. Charlie fell asleep with a smile on his face.

The next day, he had lots of reading to do before he could go to Dominic's house. His roommates were gone for most of the morning so that was good; it would help with his concentration because his mind had a tendency to wander east.

He realized his apartment, with all its old charm and great location, was missing the coziness of Dominic's. Because roommates tended to come and go each year, no one had taken the time to really decorate. The walls were bare, there were no curtains in the living room, no television either, the dining room consisted of a large table with mismatched although cute chairs, and the huge refrigerator was sectioned off inside with colored tape, marking each roommate's space. Rules of the house were posted on the pantry. Everyone had a basket in the bathroom. It remained impersonal and cold, whereas Dominic's small place described the person living there well, with art on the walls, a snuggly throw on the couch, everything organized and in order amid the chaos of books, an inconsistency that Charlie found interesting, as if Dominic had organized everything but when he'd gotten to the books, he'd given up and left them where they were: everywhere.

Two fifteen couldn't come fast enough. Charlie got dressed for the cold weather, including the black hat with the orange pompom, Dominic's favorite, and picked up his messenger bag. He stopped on the way to the metro to pick up Opera cakes from the bakery and made his way to Dominic's. He tried

reading in the metro but was too excited. Then he spent the rest of the traveling time trying to analyze why his attraction to Dominic turned him into a hopeless idiot.

When he knocked on Dominic's door at three sharp, a stranger opened it sporting a big grin. The guy was medium height and build, with messy dirty-blond hair and blue eyes, not the sky blue like Dominic's, but more like knees on jeans that were washed to death. He was wearing a henley and a checkered shirt, baggy corduroys and wool socks.

"You must be Charlie," he said, stretching the name long and loud.

Before Charlie could respond, the stranger was pushed out of the way by an arm that belonged to Dominic, who moved in front of the guy, blocking him from Charlie.

"Hi," Dominic said with a breathless smile, his eyes shiny and bright. "Mike was just leaving."

"Was not!" Charlie heard from somewhere behind the door.

Dominic's smile fell and his eyes darted sideways. "Yes, you were. Bye, Mike. It was nice seeing you. Now fuck off."

Mike just poked his head around the door, still wearing a broad smile. "So Charlie, you gonna come in?"

Charlie, who still hadn't said a word, cleared his throat and came in, brushing past Dominic and kissing his cheek.

"Hi," he whispered to Dominic in an intimate greeting. Dominic blushed and grinned until Mike spoke again.

"Hi, I'm Mike!" he almost yelled, thrusting his hand out for Charlie to shake, which Charlie did.

"Yeah, I gathered. Hi, Mike, nice meeting you," Charlie said, chuckling at Mike's enthusiasm.

"It's great to meet you, dude. Dominic's told me aaaaallllll about you—hmp!" He'd stopped abruptly when Dominic jammed his elbow in Mike's ribs.

"Yeah, this is Mike. He was just leaving."

"So you said," Charlie said, a playful eyebrow raised on the same side as the corner of his mouth curled.

“Ah, come on, man! Lemme stay, please? Just five minutes? Lemme stay!” Mike pleaded like a hyperactive puppy who’d just spotted his squeaky toy.

Dominic sighed and rolled his eyes. “Okay. Five minutes. Shut up and behave.”

Mike’s happiness was palpable. “Thanks, man. Five minutes tops.” Then he turned to Charlie. “So you’re a model? You don’t look a thing like your picture. You don’t mind that I saw your picture? It’s a great picture anyway. My man here can sure take a good picture.”

Charlie laughed softly. “Yeah, I model. I’m also doing my master’s.”

Mike went from overexcited to serious in one second flat. “Oh, I know. Dom told me that too. Social work? That’s great, man. We need good people in that field.”

“Uh, thanks,” Charlie said tentatively. He was finding it a bit hard to follow Mike’s mood changes.

Dominic gently pushed Mike out of the way and came to stand in front of Charlie, while Charlie took off his boots, coat and all the rest. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Yes, please. I got us cakes—oh sorry,” he cut off, looking guiltily at Mike. “I didn’t know you’d be here. You can have mine.”

The deliriously happy Mike was back. “Oh no, that’s fine. I was really just leaving. I just wanted to meet you so I stuck around,” he said bashfully, still wearing a huge grin. “I’m glad I did. I’m gonna go now.”

Mike walked to the door and started getting dressed. “Hey, Dom, see you soon?”

Dominic put down the coffee things on the small counter and came back to the door to show Mike out. “Sure thing.”

They hugged, like rugged men, with the fist hitting on the back and everything, and Mike called out to Charlie, “It was great meeting you. See ya.”

“See you, Mike,” Charlie said, waving.

Once the door closed behind the whirlwind that was Mike, Dominic came up to Charlie and brushed his lips on his.

“Hi, Charlie,” he exhaled.

Charlie chuckled. “Hi, Dom. Mike seems nice.”

“Hmmm,” was Dominic’s reply as he brushed his lips on Charlie’s again.

Charlie put his hand behind Dominic’s head and deepened the kiss, licking his way inside Dominic’s mouth, sucking on his tongue. Dominic made a groaning sound fit for porn. Charlie’s dick responded.

“Man, that sound you make,” he said against Dominic’s mouth.

“Hm?” Soft lips brushing.

“It’s very sexy.” Mouths opening, tongues rubbing.

“Do you really want coffee?” Hands exploring, fingers (cold) roaming.

“Not right now.”

Charlie walked Dominic backwards toward the couch and pushed him down, following him so they lay together, side by side. Their legs entwined, they kept on kissing and caressing each other’s bodies.

Dominic’s skin was so soft he wanted to savor it. In fact, he wanted to bury his face in Dominic’s hair, in that sweet smell of softener and Dominic. He wanted to touch every part of that toned body, learn the path the soft hair took to bring him to the end of the treasure trail. He wanted to make Dominic groan again, like before when they’d kissed with tongue. He wanted to make Dominic scream with pleasure, twitch with orgasm, paint him with cum, ravish him with—

“Wait-wait-wait-wait!”

What? Wait for what? To come in my pants? To check the cutlery? We’re not using any!

“What’s wrong? What did I do?” Charlie’s erection deflated instantaneously. He’d read the signals wrong, again, with this guy. Fuck.

“You didn’t do anything! Well, you did do stuff, and it was fabulous, but no, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s me. I’m... The thing is... Oh fuck it.” Dominic sighed as he turned his face away and let his hands drop from Charlie’s back, which had been receiving a sexy massage just a second ago.

Charlie shifted so his flagging erection wasn’t rubbing on Dominic anymore, cramming his body between the couch and Dominic’s body.

“I want to, I do,” Dominic said desperately, his voice thin.

“Okay.”

Dominic's eyes searched his, wide with uncertainty and lack of confidence. "I just don't... I'm not big on one-time things. And there's that whole no dick up my butt issue..."

Charlie smiled and kissed Dominic's temple. "We're doing whatever you want to do. It's up to you. I'm good for anything."

"Yeah, but for how long?" Those blue eyes shot down, long dark lashes covering the insecurity Charlie was starting to really hate.

"Hey, look at me." When Dominic didn't move, Charlie put his hand under that strong jaw and pulled Dominic's face up, leaving no choice but to meet his eyes, and he said, "I don't know what's gonna happen. I don't know if this is gonna work, if you even want a boyfriend, but I'd really like for this to go somewhere. And I'd like it if you'd like that too."

"You sure?"

Charlie's hand on Dominic's jaw softened to cup that beautiful face, which he kissed everywhere with little pecks.

"There are so many things we can do without you getting a dick up your ass, if you only knew."

The body next to his relaxed and softened immediately.

"The other thing is that I haven't done this in almost a year, so..."

"So?" More kisses peppered on Dominic's face, neck, ear, hair. So good. So, so good.

"Well... it's bound to be shameful."

Charlie burst out laughing. "That would just be fucking flattering, Dom. Besides, we're young, we'll recuperate quickly, no?"

Dominic turned on his side, putting their bodies flush against each other. A tentative hand came up to Charlie's hair, the part flopping in his eyes.

"I'm... It's—well, it's been a while and I'm not sure how to go about this. My last relationship's left me... hmmm, insecure I guess." He blew out a breath that seemed to come all the way from the pit of his stomach, a welcome warmth on Charlie's neck. "I have anxiety issues."

"No shit," Charlie said, deadpan.

"Hey!" This was accompanied by a tap on Charlie's chest.

“So what? You have anxiety issues. I have image issues. I’m always worried people only like me because I’m a model, that no one’ll take the time to get to know me. You did.” He kissed Dominic’s head. “I noticed your anxiety weeks ago. So fucking what. I still want to make you feel good, Dom. I like you. A lot. Whadda ya say?”

Dominic’s answer was a kiss under his ear, soft and light. But the lips stayed there, not moving.

“Okay, get up. We’re gonna try something,” Charlie said, dropping a hard kiss on Dominic’s mouth.

Standing and readjusting his jeans, Dominic frowned at Charlie, unsure.

“Where do you keep your camera?” Charlie asked, getting off the couch.

After only a moment’s hesitation, Dominic pointed to a shelf on the wall. Charlie went to pick it up. “Lenses?” Again, Dominic silently pointed to a bag on the floor. “Which one for close-ups?” This time Dominic had to move to dig out the proper lens.

“We’re not doing porn,” Dominic almost whispered.

Charlie’s laugh rang out loud and clear. “No worries. You don’t even have to click the shutter.” He grabbed Dominic’s hand and dragged him to the only closed door that wasn’t the bathroom.

“Can we go in there?” he asked Dominic, who’d paled a bit.

Dominic just nodded, swallowing hard.

Christ, this guy needs to unwind. Before I leave here today, he’ll have come at least twice. And be happy and sated. Fuck, a whole year...

The bedroom was small and sparsely furnished, with only a bed and a dresser. Shelves above the dresser optimized the space. A huge photo of a hand Charlie thought he recognized hung above the bed.

“Yours?”

“Yeah. An experiment in photographing my own hand. It was for a class in CEGEP. My prof thought it turned out pretty good and it was exposed at the end of the year. I stuck it there. I had nowhere else to put it.”

“I like it a lot. But then, you have such beautiful hands.”

Dominic snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“It was a sincere compliment, Dom. I like your hands. I noticed them at the shoot, your long, slender fingers holding your camera like it was precious. I wanted to be your camera.”

If Dominic’s blush was anything to go by, Charlie was making headway.

“Thanks,” Dominic whispered, looking at his fingers holding the lens.

“Okay, put that thing on here and let’s start my little experiment.”

Dominic obliged and the camera was ready. Charlie sat on the bed, leaning on his hands behind his back, ankles crossed.

“Whadda we do now?” Dominic asked, holding the camera loosely.

“Now you take my picture. You only click if you want to.”

Dominic’s eyebrows raised a bit, but he played along and put the camera to his eye. He took a couple of pictures until Charlie deliberately, slowly, removed his checkered button-down shirt.

Dominic’s jeans got tight again.

Think of something else. Think of... of... fuck he’s gorgeous, all natural like that. No. No. Think of not coming in your underwear. Think of how it’s uncomfortable, with the fabric sticking to your bits, the stains, not to mention the humiliation of exploding like a thirteen-year-old. Okay. Fuck he’s gorgeous.

Charlie was sitting on his bed, taking off his shirt languidly, eyelids low on those sexy brown eyes, pupils slightly dilated. Charlie flung the shirt on the dresser.

“Talk to me, Dom. Tell me what you want me to do.”

With the camera in front of his face, he got in his zone. “Turn toward the window. Right.”

“Like that?”

“Yes. Okay, lower your chin. No no, not too much—right.”

Charlie just obeyed, leaving all control to Dominic. He knew what Charlie was doing, what this experiment was all about. Making him comfortable. And golly gee, it was working.

“What do you want me to do now, Dom? How about I take off my undershirt?”

Still in the zone, but with an impressive hard-on in his jeans, Dominic said, “Good idea. Take it off. If you’re cold, just tell me.” He kept clicking, taking spectacular photos of Charlie without make-up, styling or fancy clothes. Just the funny, warm guy who was a good listener, played Black Ops with him and brought sweets at every visit.

Charlie, a devilish grin on his face, took his undershirt by the hem and quickly passed it over his head, then slowed his movements to leave his chest exposed, abs contracted, with his arms bound by the undershirt above his head, looking at the lens through his lashes.

Dominic gulped. *Stay in the zone. Ignore the zipper chafing on your woody.* “Yes, that’s it. Beautiful.”

“Do you like what you see?” Charlie asked, mischievous and taunting.

“Yes, very much. Lower your arms before you cramp.”

“What do you like about it?” His arms came down, still bound by the undershirt, to rest on his thighs.

“Everything.” *Click, click.*

“Like what?”

“The expression in your eyes.”

The taunting look made room for surprise. “Oh?”

“You thought I was gonna say your beautiful face or your spectacular abs?”

Charlie chuckled, and Dominic kept his finger on the shutter to take that laugh, frame by frame.

“Your abs are spectacular and you do have a beautiful face, but these pictures aren’t about that. They’re about you, your essence, your nature.”

The smile turned into a bashful grin, all sexiness gone, as a blush flushed Charlie’s cheeks.

“Excellent,” praised Dominic. This is the guy he fell in love with. He could admit to himself, behind the camera. He was safe there.

Charlie recovered quickly, gave a little shudder, and stretched the fabric of his undershirt, bulging up his biceps and defining those perfect arms.

“What do you want me to do now?”

Dominic just kept clicking, focusing on a hand caught in the fabric in a tight fist, an extended tendon on the forearm, a pectoral muscle next to the bulge of a bicep with a protruding vein. This guy's body was a work of art in itself. It was usually hidden under T-shirts and sweaters, all layered up for a Canadian winter. Dominic wished they could live in Florida to see all this glorious flesh all year long.

"I want us to move to Florida."

Charlie laughed. "Why? You wanna escape the winter?"

"I want you to not ever have to wear a shirt again."

A snort followed that remark. "You see me as a piece of flesh?"

"I see you in all your glorious packaging." *Click, click.* "I see the perfect envelope for a wonderful soul, a kind heart, a good ear, and a smart brain. Now get rid of the shirt and lie back." *Click, click, click.*

As Dominic said the words, Charlie's face fell a little and the blush came back. He was now lying on the bed.

"What now?"

"You just lie there for a second, however you want. Make yourself comfortable."

Charlie's lips curved up in a small smile, his thumb tracing circles on his chest and stomach. His nipples were hard.

"Are you cold?" Dominic asked, concern in his voice.

Charlie grinned. "A bit. Maybe you should come over here and keep me warm."

Challenge accepted. With the camera, Dominic felt bold and brave. He straddled Charlie on the bed, focusing on his navel, the line of hair leading to his underwear, the freckles on his shoulders and finally his teeth, which were on his lower lip.

There was no room for Dominic's dick in his pants, especially in this position. His jeans were too tight, his zip was digging in his flesh and he was pretty sure Charlie could feel it. In fact, Dominic could feel Charlie's erection with the tip of his own.

Without thinking about it, Dominic started rocking his hips, his dick on the one underneath it, just a small movement, enough for delicious friction. He kept

the camera on Charlie, whose hands moved to Dominic's thighs. Something had to be done about the jeans. His dick would fall off if it didn't get any breathing room in the next few seconds.

Charlie bucked up in time with the rocking, and it was too much. Dominic groaned and Charlie's nostrils flared, his eyelids dimmed and he bit his lower lip really hard. *Click* on those teeth. He squeezed Dominic's thighs.

"Do that again," Charlie asked.

"I may come, so I won't. Flex your abs." *Click, click, click.* "Whadda you do to get those?"

"A hundred crunches a day."

"Pays off well." Then, a second later, he said, "Thanks."

"For what?" Charlie's eyes were glazed. Dominic wasn't sure Charlie was listening, really. He wasn't sure he was coherent either.

"For giving me you."

Charlie's hands were rubbing his thighs, hard, fingers digging in his flesh as he took pictures of them. "What do you mean?"

"This. You. You're not hiding anything. You're giving all yourself to me. These pictures, they're precious. You trust me not to sell them?"

"Didn't even cross my mind." And as he said this, Charlie showed off the result of those hundred crunches a day and curled up to kiss Dominic's neck at the shirt collar. Dominic put the camera on the bed next to them and hugged Charlie close, one hand in Charlie's hair, the other splayed on his back.

"It's not fair. You're wearing too many clothes," Charlie said in his neck, grabbing both layers of clothing Dominic was wearing and pulling them off in one shot.

Skin to skin. It was glorious. They kissed hard, plundering each other's mouths. Almost at the same time, they both reached for the other's belt and pants and undid what they could. Their mouths separated and Charlie lay back as he smiled at Dominic, freeing his cock from his pants. The relief was instantaneous, but so was another rush of blood to his dick, and Dominic gasped as the flesh engorged even more at the touch of Charlie's fingers.

Dominic gave breathing room to Charlie's erection and together they started pumping each other's cocks frantically, eyes locked. Dominic wanted a picture

of the blush that crept its way from Charlie's chest to his neck, erasing the freckles, but he couldn't reach his camera.

Dominic groaned and that set Charlie off. Dominic felt the head of Charlie's cock bulge, and on a cry, it erupted with hot cum, spurt after spurt, which set Dominic off, even if Charlie's pumping had become erratic while he was coming. Their cum melted together on Charlie's stomach as they panted their way down from the orgasmic high.

Dominic dropped next to Charlie on the bed, and while Charlie lazily mixed their cum on his skin, Dominic put his arm under Charlie's neck and cradled his head, kissing his temple, his cheek, his damp forehead.

When they could both breathe normally again, Dominic muttered, "Cool trick."

Charlie turned to face him. "You think so?"

Dominic's laugh was more a belly flutter than anything. "Yes, Mr. Psych Major." He found the camera and took a close-up picture of their mingled cum. Charlie laughed, remembering their conversation in the car. Then Dominic reached behind him for tissue and helped Charlie wipe most of it off.

Charlie turned toward him and kissed his nose then his lips. "Nice artistic endeavor."

The sweat on their bodies cooled, and they got rid of the rest of their clothes and snuggled under the covers, Charlie's head resting on Dominic's shoulder, legs entwined.

"I'm just curious," Charlie started.

"Why I don't like anal sex?" Dominic said, resigned.

"You don't have to tell me. I'm just curious. Did you ever try it?"

In a monotonous voice, Dominic said, "My first boyfriend and I tried it. He got first turn and ripped my asshole. I bled for a month."

"Ouch, shit, that's horrible!" Charlie's arms tightened around his body. He nuzzled Dominic's neck, under his ear. "Poor baby."

"It's been eight years. I'm over it."

"Yeah, but I'm sure you remember the pain and that's why you don't wanna try again. Damn. I understand. There's lots we can do. Do you like blowjobs?"

"Hell yeah." Dominic squeezed him, chuckling.

“Do you top at all?” Charlie asked a minute later.

“Not after that. I don’t even wanna try hurting someone like that. Jax insisted, but I’d lose my erection so it never happened.”

“Douche. I’ll say it again. Hey! We have cake to eat!”

As Charlie prepared to get up, Dominic put a hand on his chest and kept him there. “I’ll go. Stay here, all nice and warm for me.”

Charlie’s lazy smile followed him all the way to the kitchen. He’d put only his jeans and the shirts on, no socks or shoes. His feet were cold as he put the cakes on a big plate and took out two forks. The doorbell rang and he dropped the forks on the side of the plate with a clang. He wasn’t expecting anyone, and Mike usually texted before he showed up.

What he found on the other side of the door sent a shock through his body, taking his breath away. He froze with his hand on the knob, speechless.

“Hey, Dom. Can I come in?”

Jax. Jax was standing there, after almost a year of absence. Same curly black hair, same green eyes, same upturned nose. But the arrogance and self-righteousness were gone. The look of pure humility on his face surprised Dominic, as he didn’t remember seeing it before.

“Well, no actually. You can’t. What are you doing here?”

Jax’s face fell. An embarrassed flush flooded his cheeks. He hunched his shoulders. “I came to apologize, among other things. Can we talk sometime, if now’s not a good time? Can I call you?”

“No, you can’t call me! What’s this about?”

“Look, I just wanna talk. This past year... Well, anyway. I know I was a jerk, I realize that now and I’m sorry. Can we please have coffee sometime?”

Dominic’s anxiety levels, which had dropped spectacularly after sex with Charlie, rose at an alarming rate. He felt his chest constrict, his fingers tremble and his gut clench. He guessed his rectum tightened up too, but he would only be sure once the source of anxiety went away and he would feel it relax afterward. Not a pleasant sensation.

Why now! For fuck’s sake! When I have someone I love in my bed, you have to show up out of the fucking blue! No warning! Charlie will think I have too much baggage and take off! This’ll ruin my chance with him! You fucktard! Go away!

“Why, Jax? Why now? There’s someone here, and he can probably hear everything, just so you know.”

Jax ground his teeth before he said, “I asked around! You’re still single!”

“I don’t know who you talked to, or why you asked, but I’m not single anymore, not that it’s any of your business. You should leave.” Dominic’s heart was beating fast and hard on his ribs. He didn’t want a panic attack now, not with Charlie keeping the bed warm.

Charlie. Just thinking about him waiting for Dominic in his bed made Dominic relax a fraction.

“I’m sorry, okay? Just know that. I know now what a jerk I was and I apologize for the mean things I said. I was awful.”

“Why now?” Dominic asked again. Then a thought occurred to him. “Oh my God, someone did it to you?”

Jax’s downcast eyes and thin lips were answer enough.

“Well I’m sorry too, Jax. But there’s nothing really left to say.”

“Not even ‘you deserve it’ or ‘what goes around comes around’?” If Jax tried to hide the bitterness in his voice, he failed miserably.

“No, Jax. I don’t wish that on anyone. Now if you’ll excuse me, my boyfriend’s waiting for me.”

Jax sighed, his lips curling in a grin. “Good for you, Dom. You deserve to be happy. You’re a good guy. Is he a good guy?”

“The best,” Dominic said, smiling for the first time since he opened the door.

“Okay. Tell him I’m sorry for interrupting.” And on that note, he turned and went down the steps.

“Good luck, Jax,” Dominic said before closing the door.

Charlie was in the hall, just a few feet away, fully dressed.

“That was Jax,” Dominic said uselessly.

“I know. I wondered if you wanted me to leave.”

Dominic leapt the few feet to stand right in Charlie’s space. “Why would you wonder that? Are you nuts?”

“Well, you guys have history. I just wanted to leave you some space if you wanted to talk to him.”

“Now that you’ve heard what I said, what do you think?” Dominic said, brushing the hair out of Charlie’s eyes affectionately.

“I think you called me your boyfriend. Did you just say that so he would leave?” Charlie asked in a small voice.

A big grin appeared on Dominic’s face. “I was hoping you were my boyfriend, actually.”

Charlie’s relief was beautiful on his features. His mouth turned into a smile, the creases at the corners of his eyes betraying his twenty-seven years disappeared and color rose to his cheeks.

“I am. It’s what you call someone who loves you, right?”

Dominic’s heart clenched, but in a good way. All anxiety left and yes, he was all nice and relaxed.

“Then you can call me your boyfriend too.”

The End

Author Bio

Phoebe lives in Montreal, Canada surrounded by a bunch of talented people who inspire her, including a rock star, an artist and a fellow writer. She reads an average of three hundred books and short stories a year on the electronic devices she keeps breaking and replacing.

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