

**500**

**KISSES TO  
STEAL  
A HEART**



**ANYTA SUNDAY**

***“...Five hundred kisses are all it takes to steal a heart.”***

Chris Montgomery doesn't believe it, and he'd know. He's met—and had—many a man. None of whom he'd want to share five hundred kisses with. If you don't like someone, you just don't like them. End of story.

No amount of kissing will change that.

Dylan Halsworth doesn't believe it either. But Chris and his arrogant, “always right, dare I be wrong” attitude has Dylan challenging him to try it. And who knows, maybe watching his most-loathed neighbor suffer through five hundred kisses with the same man is worth it? He'd sit back, crack open a Mountain Dew, and have a good laugh...

But... shit... there is one slight snag in his plan.

Chris has chosen Dylan with whom to prove his point...

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## 500 KISSES TO STEAL A HEART

**By Anyta Sunday**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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## Photo Description

Two men are sitting close, a whisper apart, and their gazes are locked onto each other's lips. The light glows behind them, bright, like the chemistry between them. They are about to kiss...

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*These two men appear to be sharing a moment of affection and tenderness, and they seem so comfortable with each other's personal space. How did they meet or find one another? What has their time together been like? Is this the lead-up to their first kiss or is it the lead-up to their five-hundredth kiss? Is their body language a reflection of their long-time intimacy and knowledge of one another, or is this an early moment in their relationship? Any genre (paranormal, contemporary, sci-fi, etc.) is fine if it helps the story flow for you, and a range of heat or spice is great, as well.*

*P.S. If possible, I'd prefer something without extreme amounts of angst. Also, no non-con/dub-con/infidelity/cheating, please. Slow burn and romance would be great to read, and please give them an HEA. Thank you so much!*

*Sincerely,*

*Marie*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, reunited, slow burn, camp, warring neighbors

**Word Count:** 20,797

*Acknowledgements*

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# 500 KISSES TO STEAL A HEART

By Anyta Sunday

## Dylan

It was a dark and stormy night—

And wasn't that cliché true right now?

Dylan Halsworth darted down the slippery gravel path to where his counselors and the thirty kids in this summer's *Camp Halsworth* huddled in their cabins.

Rain soaked into his jeans and through his hiking boots. Every running step was a squelch and a splash and a slip through deep puddles and loose stones. The storm pounded, hitting his camp hard.

An ancient chestnut tree had already been riddled with a million volts of lightning and snapped toward the dining hall. Right through the fucking roof.

The kitchen was totaled—the whole area would have to be cordoned off.

This was the second day of torrential rain now; already, half the parents had called him, wanting assurances the camp was running without hiccups. Most of them he'd had to convince not to come and pick their kids up early.

But now...

One of his counselors clipped toward him at a jog, cursing the downpour as much as Dylan was. He quickly zipped his mouth on the next f-word—banned in the campsite—and inclined his head. "Kids in cabins four to seven are all fine. A bit spooked, but laughing it off."

"One to three and eight to ten?"

"Ronald said all his kids are fine, but there is a small leak in cabin two. He ordered the boys there to pack up, and I told my boys in cabin five to expect company. It'll be all right for tonight. Heather said her girls are fine."

Water drizzled down the back of his neck, sluicing a path between his shoulder blades. So much good this jacket did. He was so wet he may as well have come out in his pajamas.

"Good," Dylan said, slapping his counselor on the shoulder. "Back inside with you. I'll figure out something for the morning. Keep the kids away from the dining hall."



Jeff nodded and was off.

When he was out of earshot, Dylan let out one of the many f-words flying around in his head.

He sprinted back to the dining hall and took another look at the damage. Well, shit. What was he going to do without a kitchen for the rest of the summer?

Thirty kids. Six counselors. And, well—fuck, right?

He couldn't have his kids picked up. Not halfway through summer camp. He'd have to give partial refunds, and... well, summer was the time he made most of his money for the year. The debt on this property was out the roof since he'd had to remortgage the place to afford his father's health care.

Summer camp kept his costs on track so he wouldn't have to sell; he made an okay living the rest of the year as a teaching assistant at Trinity High, but he lived on prime land.

It cost a fortune.

And selling his family home for something smaller and more manageable... well, it was out of the question. This was where he grew up, where he learned to ride a bike, where he went to school, and where he kayaked into town in the afternoons and hung out at Mary's café...

His father wanted him to keep it in the family. Just like he had for his father—Camp Halsworth had been around for generations.

It all meant he needed to find a solution. And fast.

He ground the heel of his boot into the sludgy soil—bleak, much like his eyes, hair, and situation.

He'd get contractors in first thing, but a mess like this... could take a while to fix.

If only there was a place that could provide them with a kitchen and an indoor hall for wet-weather activities.

Something close by...

Something big enough...

Standing in the doorway looking out at the slowly lessening rain, he groaned, and made a call...

## Chris

Chris Montgomery had forgotten his date's name. Cameron? Cole? Carter?

"I absolutely hate it," said he-who-could-not-be-named, "but my mom insists the name suits me. What do you think, man?"

Chris twisted onto his side, sheets tangling around his legs, and stared out of his large terrace windows. Thunderous rain pelted against the glass. Why did there have to be a raging storm tonight? It was well past the time this 'date' should have ended. Not because said date wasn't a good guy. He was, and that was the problem. He was too good, too sweet, too everything Chris wasn't. He'd made it clear this was just a bit of fun and nothing more. He-who-could-not-be-named had seemed like he was all for that, too. Until after their sweaty bodies were spent and Chris suddenly found an arm around his middle, a nose nuzzling into his neck.

And then that damn storm.

Talk about awkward.

His date—really, it was a one-night stand—prodded his side, lifted his arm and squeezed into another... well, there was no other word for it but *cuddle*. "Chris? You can tell me the truth, I can handle it. It's shit right? I should change it?"

Chris felt the nip of lips on his chest. He really wasn't feeling it. Never did go for round two.

Twisting onto his back and gently shoving his date off him, he sought for the kindest words he could use in a moment like this. "I, ah..." Words, words, where the fuck were they? Addressing him personally was the least he should do in this upcoming apology/dismissal—pre-emptive dumping?—"Nah, your name's all right." Surely if it were that bad, he'd have remembered it? "But, my honest thoughts? You're nearly thirty." *I don't think it's normal to be worried about what your mom thinks anymore.* Not that he knew personally. His parents had died in a car crash when he was in his late teens, and he'd been living solo ever since. Almost a decade. "If you hate it, you should do something about it."

He risked a sideways glance at his date. High-cheekbones, slender form. A good few inches shorter than his own six-one. Blond hair and blue eyes to his brown and brown again. Bouncy as hell, with a cute grin. His late mother would have given him the thumbs-up.

He wanted the thumbs-up—he did.

He wanted a lot of things.

Which was quite selfish of him really since he *had* a lot of things. Things money could buy, anyway. A mansion. Nine boats. Almost his own lake...

He never had to work if he didn't care to.

And most of the time, he didn't—unless it was restoring old boats...

Except this situation—in bed, with his date—was really starting to feel like the work he didn't care for.

"Yeah, sure, gotcha," his date said. "You're so right, Chris. You know, you're different from what I heard about you."

That caught his attention. He fished for a smile and faced the man. "What did you hear about me? And, color me curious, *where* did you hear it?"

His date bit his bottom lip and then blurted, "It's sort of all around town."

Town. Population five hundred, swelling to seven over the summer. What was all around town? "Tell me."

"Apparently you only ever do something if it's good for you; that it would be a blue moon if you ever did anything for someone else without expecting something back."

So that was the rumor going around town about him. He rubbed a hand over his stubbly jaw. Well, as with most rumors, it was untrue.

Wasn't it?

He-who-could-not-be-named continued, "And also that..."

"There's *more*?"

"Yeah, but it's nothing I imagine you'd care about."

Chris wanted to hear it anyway. "What?"

"You know that stretch of land by the river, with that haunted cabin of yours—"

Bennington Way. "I know the one." Chris pushed himself up into a sitting position, muscles stiffening. "What about it?"

"Mary says the lease is up for renewal at the end of July, and since she thinks you don't care for it anymore, she's going to lease it to the local hiking club."

Chris jumped out of bed, snapping his T-shirt up off the floor and jerking it on. "Why wouldn't I care about that?"

He-who-could-not-be-named blushed. "But... everyone says you never use it anymore. And the cabin's so old and run-down..."

"Well not everyone knows what they're talking about. I'm getting the lease renewed." No matter what it cost him. That plot had been on a long-term lease to his family for over fifty years; his grandfather had built that cabin... and—

He swallowed back the memories. He wouldn't let the hiking club get hold of it. They'd tear that cabin down and put up new, fresh cabins. Cabins that didn't have history like his did.

His date shrugged. "Mary seemed really keen on letting more people use the land. Or maybe she just doesn't think you're looking after it well enough?"

The phone on his bedside table rang, saving him from continuing that thought. He lurched for it but didn't answer.

"Who's calling you at midnight?" he-who-could-not-be-named asked.

The screen said *Dylan*. Halsworth.

Chris groaned, and his date peeked at the screen, frowning. "Who's *he*?"

No one. To hell if he would answer it.

His date raised a brow, and Chris slumped back to the bed. "He's the guy across the lake."

"Oh, your *neighbor*."

He should hang up on the call. "Neighbor is too friendly a word for what we are." Really. End call. Now. Go on.

His date shifted, cracking a grin. "Not the guy you gave the finger to as we docked earlier?"

Chris stared at the still-ringing phone. "The very one. It's how we say hello. Been that way since we were sixteen. He runs summer camps. Still can't fucking steer a boat."

"Why do you have him on caller ID?"

"So I can avoid his calls." Not that he called often, just when there was something they had to do regarding the narrow stretch of lake that separated their properties. Like cutting back the long weeds. The last time Dylan had

called, it was to tell him to replace the buoys at the end of the bottleneck. Dylan hadn't been polite about it.

'Course, Chris hadn't been polite about the floodlight Dylan had installed either. Glared right into his bedroom window, that beast. Could have lit a stadium.

Chris knew how to handle Halsworth though. He'd sailed over the narrow stretch of lake between them and stoned the damn bulb.

He smiled at the memory. Dylan had yelled for a solid twenty minutes when he saw the damage. Still didn't know it was Chris who did it.

He glanced out the window toward the rain pelting the lake. Large and hourglass-shaped, it took fifteen minutes to motor down to either end from his place. As a kid, he'd loved the fact that he and Dylan were separated by the narrowest stretch of water, but now... now he wished they lived at either end—where there wouldn't be constant reminders of their past.

"This Dylan guy might need some neighborly assistance," his date said, shuffling closer. "The storm has been wild, after all."

"What, and play the good Samaritan to him?" *Play the good Samaritan to him!* This could be a way to show Mary that he was a guy who could be counted on. A guy that could look after her property. Maybe if he showed her he was generous and giving, she might extend his lease?... "I mean, you're right. Maybe he just needs help."

*Spread this rumor.*

He answered the call.

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## **Dylan**

"Sure. You and the kids can use my place. It's plenty big enough for you all."

Crackled pause. Dylan frowned. He'd been preparing to humiliate himself by groveling. "Who the heck am I talking to?" Whoever this guy was, it wasn't Montgomery. Well, it was his deep, gravelly, arrogant voice, but... it sounded like the devil had mated with a unicorn, 'cause the shit coming out of his mouth was freaking rainbow-colored.

Down the line, a voice murmured in the background.

Oh. That explained it then. The devil had just got laid.

Well, applause to the fella for accomplishing the impossible and making Chris civil. “Keep that one I hear you got there,” Dylan said, moving into his living room. From the corner window, he could see Chris’s mansion through the trees. Stately, impressive, and isolated. “Sounds to me like he might just be able to make a man out of you.”

“Halsworth,” Chris said, the sour detectable in the overly joyous intonation, “always such a riot. Of course you and the kids are welcome here. My place doesn’t blow over at the wolf’s first puff. It’s brick. I take good care of all my property.”

*Poor little piggy*—Dylan heard the unspoken snark, lowered the phone, and shoved his middle finger at it.

But it wouldn’t do to snap back at him now. The bastard was doing him a favor, after all. Even if it stank of ulterior motive.

Well, win-win right? Dylan grinned at the sudden image of thirty kids running loose in that bachelor-pad mansion...

This might even be fun. “See you at 5:30 then,” Dylan said.

“Wait—what? 5:30 tomorrow evening, right?”

“Breakfast is at six.”

A long silence stretched a bigger grin from him.

Chris said finally, “You know how much I just *love* rising early to help out a troubled neighbor.”

Dylan choked on a snort. The man never got up before ten if he could help it. “Good stuff then. See you bright and early, sunshine.”

Chris laughed at that; the lack of response and the sudden dead tone of the phone was the “fuck you, Halsworth” Dylan had expected.

*Until morning then...*

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## Chris

What the hell was that sound?

Did he-who-could-not-be-named leave his cell behind when he finally got the drift and left last night? And what kind of sick time was this to set an alarm?

Chris grabbed the pillow beside him and shoved it over his head to drown out the sound. Shrill thing better stop soon. Couldn't even be six a.m. yet—

*Shit!*

He leaped out of bed, sheets cuffing one of his ankles and making him trip.

Hopping free with a stubbed toe, he grabbed his pants from where they lay strewn across the armchair and shoved them on.

The doorbell buzzed again—because that's what that God-awful sound was.

And he knew the bastard who was ringing it like it was Merry f'ing Christmas.

His T-shirt was crumpled and smelled of his date's aftershave, but he didn't have time to be picky. That bell was going to drive him insane.

Stomping down the wide hallway and into the foyer, he cursed and tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes. He yanked the door open. One part of him wanted to slam it back in Dylan's face because he'd changed his mind. He didn't want to be generous after all. It was just too damn early for it.

The other part had him leaning casually on the doorjamb. That was his driven part; the one that wouldn't forget the things his date had said: *you only ever do something if it's good for you; it would be a blue moon if you ever did anything for someone else without expecting something back.* And the most worrying: *the lease is up for renewal at the end of July, and since Mary thinks you don't care for it anymore, she's going to lease it to the local hiking club.*

And besides all that, he wouldn't let that smug, grinning, fresh-eyed Dylan win—it was like the man *expected* Chris to renege on his deal. That he couldn't handle his promise to help out.

“Looking great, sunshine,” Dylan said, his thumb still far too close to the buzzer.

“Well fuck—”

Dylan stepped up on the threshold, bringing them to the same height. “Better clog that potty mouth of yours, Montgomery. Kids'll be here soon.”

Over Dylan's shoulder, Chris caught sight of two women in bright blue caps hauling boxes of food from the jetty up the path to his back door—which he mostly used as a front door, since he preferred using his boat to get into town rather than the car.

“So, you going to let us in or what?” Dylan said. “Or do you just need time to find your voice this early? Or perhaps you’re waiting for your guy to get dressed first?”

Chris frowned. What was he on about—oh wait, *he-who-could-not-be-named*.

“No guy, just me.” He begrudgingly moved to the side. “And how the heck do you clog *your* potty mouth, Halsworth?”

Dylan folded his arms, stretching his bright blue T-shirt over a defined chest. If Chris didn’t know better, he’d think the guy was showing off. “Substitution,” Dylan said, and his smirk was growing. “But it’s not for you. Don’t think you’d be confident enough for it.”

Chris straightened and snagged Dylan out of the way to let the women in. “Kitchen’s through the foyer, down the hall, last room on the right.” Then he pinched Dylan through his sleeve and let go. “And I am f—*reaking* confident enough for it.”

Dylan smiled some more. Damn the man. “Well, snickerdoodles. Fancy that.” Snapping his boots over the polished marble floors, Dylan took himself off toward the kitchen.

Snicker-fucking-doodles? No way. He didn’t seriously mean he substituted *that* for shit, did he?

Chris shook his head and charged into the kitchen after him. This was *his* house; if a bunch of hooligans were going to go trampling through it, he was going to set some ground rules.

“I want those kids supervised at all times. No touching anything unless I say it’s okay.”

Dylan entered the large kitchen that Chris barely used—it really was too big for him. Besides, eating out was so much more fun. He didn’t have to cook or clean up after himself.

“This is perfect.” Dylan twisted and threw him what *maybe* passed for a grateful smile. “The kids will be great. In fact, I think you’ll like them.”

Him? Kids? Uh, yeah—*hardly*.

Dylan continued, “This kid Jason—honestly, he reminds me of you when we were fourteen.”



Chris blinked. When they were fourteen... well, that was a long time ago. Hell, they'd been friends then. The best of. "You mean he's a right pain-in-the-ass?"

"No, that would be if he was like you right now." And with an amused lift of his brow, Dylan set his focus on the kitchen. The loads of cereal boxes and bread. Breakfast.

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Chris fought the urge to doze and made it his task to boil the eggs. All he had to do was boil the water—how could he screw it up?

He tensed at the sound of stampeding feet, yelling, and something akin to laughter. Which, at just past six in the morning, really didn't make sense. The shiny kettle reflected his tousled, sleep-deprived look; Chris ran a hand through his hair.

Caught by Dylan, he wrenched his hand down. "I look like snickerdoodles."

"Oh, I love snickerdoodles," some kid said, as a swarm of adolescents moved into the dining room.

"Grab a bowl of cereal, eat, wash your plate," Dylan said.

Chris waited for the first lot of kids to do the breakfast routine before he dared to squeeze into a spot at the end of his long dining table. He grabbed a boiled egg from the basket along with some toast and cracked it open. Hard-boiled all right. These things were dry and looked sorta green.

Dylan sat across from him chatting to some kid. He raised a questioning brow at Chris: *really gonna eat that?*

So Chris ate it anyway.

Conversation waxed and waned and was littered with so much 'like' Chris was cringing. Surely he'd never sounded so stupid as a kid?

Then again...

Okay, the kids could keep their 'like.'

"So, I'm telling you, like, it totally works." Chris looked at the young man lounging back in his chair, swirling a spoon in the air as he spoke. Every time he finished a sentence, he jabbed the spoon as if to emphasize his point.

"No way, Jason."

Chris shifted, subtly angling himself toward the lanky boy with fashionably messy hair and a dimpled grin. So this was the boy that reminded Dylan of his fourteen-year-old self.

Jason jabbed his spoon again. "Yes, way." He leaned in conspiratorially, looking to Dylan and the dudes on either side of him. "Five hundred kisses are all it takes."

"Takes to what?" Dylan said, stealing into the conversation with a quizzical look, his elbows on the table and a piece of half-eaten toast pinched between his fingers.

"To steal someone's heart. *Anyone's* heart."

Chris snorted and butted right in. "That doesn't work. I promise you, if you're not interested, you never will be."

"I'd trust him on this, Jason," Dylan added smoothly, snatching Chris's gaze and holding it. "He'd know."

The dig at his experience was obvious. Chris glared back at Dylan and answered, "Right, *I* would know."

A sudden blush hit Dylan's cheeks, and he stuffed the rest of his toast in his mouth, eyes quickly diverting.

Chris kept going, "I could be kissed till the cows came home and never feel a thing." Well, not in his heart anyway. He was still a man.

Jason swung his spoon as he shook his head. "My brother did it to Chelsea—she hated his guts, too. And now they're all lovey-dovey and crap. Been going steady, like, a whole month now." He pushed his chair out, and the dudes next to him followed. Standing, Jason dropped his spoon into his bowl. He looked to Chris and then Dylan. "Five hundred kisses are all it takes."

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## Dylan

"It *could* be true," Dylan said, regretting the decision to stay and clean up. He should have dived in one of the boats and rowed back to camp with the counselors and kids. Couldn't he just outline a plan for the next three weeks over the phone? Or, better yet, e-mail.

"No, it's not."

And why the heck were they debating what Jason had said? It was like they had nothing better to do—

*Which for Chris might actually be the case.*

Dylan didn't have that luxury. After he was done here, he needed to ring contractors ASAP. He wrung out the washcloth with abandon before scrubbing down the kitchen surfaces. Milk, cereal, and crumbs were everywhere.

"Well," he said as Chris took the prepared cloth and wiped the adjacent bench. Dylan grabbed a second cloth. "Have you ever actually *let* the same guy kiss you five hundred times?"

A snort. "God, no."

Dylan turned off the faucet and began wringing again. "So you could be wrong."

In the corner of his eye, Chris paused, the cloth frozen in the middle of a puddle of milk. Then the guy's shoulders rolled back. He dropped his cloth and turned around. Resting against the countertop, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Nope. No way am I wrong."

Dylan rolled his eyes and wiped down the part of the bench Chris had neglected. "You're damn stubborn, Montgomery, you know that? Do you ever let anyone win besides yourself?"

"Hey now, who so generously gave up their place at *five-thirty in the* freaking *morning* to let some kids rampage his kitchen?"

Dylan glanced at the cocky smirk twitching Chris's mouth. "You are so working an angle with that," Dylan said, "and you know it."

"Me? Never." The smirk grew.

With a shake of his head, Dylan picked up Chris's cloth and dumped it with his into the sink.

He hated feeling like Chris was one up on him.

Someone needed to teach this egotistical prick a lesson.

Dylan spun on his heel and faced Chris squarely. "You know what? Prove it. Prove that you're right and Jason is wrong." He shoved a finger at Chris's chest. "Five hundred kisses with the same guy." He couldn't help it; he laughed. "I pity the fool who has to suffer it. But anything in the pursuit of truth, right?" Dylan leaned in a fraction, lowering his voice. "Unless you want to give up right now? Admit you could be wrong?"

Chris looked from Dylan's finger, still pressed against his chest, to his face. "No."

*And lesson in action.* Now to sit back and enjoy watching the one-night-stand-man try to claim five hundred kisses. Of course, Dylan didn't really believe the whole 'five hundred kisses to steal a heart' thing, but, damn, it felt good to force Chris into proving it. From all the rumors he'd heard, Chris only ever did casual dating; he rarely saw the same guy twice. Five hundred kisses would be nearly impossible for him to score.

Dylan started turning away—

"Just one thing, Halsworth." Chris's hand shot out; he grabbed Dylan's T-shirt in a fist and hauled him close. Firm lips planted hard against his mouth; teeth pulled open his bottom lip, tongue swept against his.

Chris pulled back an inch. "One," he said, breath whispering over Dylan's chin. "And positively gross."

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## Chris

Chris's lips were left tingling from the short, sharp kiss. He'd done it on impulse. Out of a need to wipe the satisfied look off the man's face. He'd done it because Dylan hadn't expected it. And look at him—standing there, frozen and speechless. With a grin, Chris went in for kiss number two. That one broke even quicker than the first; Dylan leapt back like someone had struck him with a thousand volts of disgusting.

"What the ever-living—?"

"Fuck? The kids are gone. You're safe." Chris crossed an ankle. "You told me to prove it."

"I didn't mean with *me*. So just stop that."

The way Dylan squirmed and shifted from foot-to-foot, obviously finding this extremely uncomfortable, was exactly what Chris had been after. Payback for trapping him into this bet in the first place. *Two can play at this game, sucker.* Holding back a laugh, he said, "Stop? Why? Scared you might just fall for all this?"

There went the furrowed brow and glowering eyes.

*Whallop!* Dylan's body hit his hard and his lips were attacking. Three. "Hell no." Four. "Never." Five. "And Montgomery?" Six. "Wipe the smirk."

Chris shoved Dylan off him at kiss number seven. "Wait a second, if you know you'll never fall for me, then you must think I'm *right* that 500 kisses

could never steal a heart. Sounds to me like this whole proof thing is null and void, Halsworth.”

Dylan quipped, “Sounds to *me* like you’re trying to get out of this. Scared I might just fall for you? Or perhaps you’re afraid *you’ll* fall for *me*?”

“No, just afraid of having to live through another four hundred and ninety-three of these God-awful kisses.”

Dylan grinned. “Just admit you could be wrong, and we can end it now.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” And because of that, Chris was willing to suffer through it. Let Dylan squirm and be uncomfortable. Make him regret suggesting he prove it. “How about instead, you admit I’m right?”

Make Dylan give this thing up first.

And he *would* crack, eventually.

Because Dylan was right about one thing: Chris was fucking stubborn.

Dylan’s jaw twitched, but he didn’t admit anything.

With a playful touch of his lips to Dylan’s jaw, Chris said, “Aren’t we just two peas in a pod?”

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## Dylan

Less than twelve hours later, Dylan slumped lengthwise onto his couch and muttered a curse into the cushion squished between his face and the seat. Didn’t he just have *screwed* stamped all over him? None of the contractors had been able to offer him the ideal solution to have his dining hall fixed yesterday.

He’d have settled for the end of the week, but both contracting companies estimated at least a month’s worth of work. Three weeks if he was willing to pay a heck-of-a-lot more. A heck-of-a-lot he didn’t have.

He complained again, and his hot breath bounced off the pillow and onto his neck.

In the distance came the yells and laughs of kids hanging out in the ‘free activity’ part of the day before dinner.

Dinner.

Peeking over the side of the pillow toward the clock, he found the time tick-tocking too quickly toward six. Toward Chris. Because he would be there—again—with his snarky comments, hard smile, and aggressive *lean*.

And Dylan wasn't sure he was ready to see him yet. He'd been secretly thankful Jeff had taken responsibility for lunch so he could hide behind the task of employing contractors and calling his father, who was in a recovery spa in Hawaii. It meant he could pretend none of that other stuff had happened that morning—nor would it happen again.

With a groan, Dylan rolled off the couch and headed for his kitchen. His annoyingly-small, one-person-wide kitchen that was the reason he couldn't run meals in his own home. He grabbed a Mountain Dew from the fridge and cracked it open.

It didn't taste as crisp and delicious as it usually did.

It tasted like... like agitation and reluctance. He wanted to stay at home for the next month and not have to bother with Chris again. He could do it, too. He could have Jeff assume all of his tasks that involved talking to or seeing the man.

But...

But.

He gulped half the can of Mountain Dew until his eyes watered and the back of his nose itched.

But not dealing with Chris would make it look like he was avoiding him, which meant Chris—damn him—would assume he had a point about Dylan falling for him.

*So not ever going to happen; not in a million sex-less years, jerk.*

Tossing the can in the trash under the sink, he made a decision. He was going.

Just to show how little he cared for Chris and his kisses.

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## **Chris**

When Mary walked through Chris's door with a large pot and an even larger smile, Chris knew she was here early to speak to him. Perhaps his date had already spilled the beans about his generosity and maybe slipped in that line about taking care of his property?

"Mary," he said, welcoming her in.

"Where's the kitchen?"

"This way. Say, look," he said as he led her toward the kitchen, "I realize the lease on Bennington Way is soon up for renewal?"

She looked sideways at him. "You waste no time."

He took the pot from her and settled it on the stove. "Should I turn it on?"

"Low."

He set the burner to low and then faced her, arms crossed, leaning back against the bench. "I want to keep it."

Mary's expression flickered in surprise, and then she narrowed her eyes. "Really? Because you don't seem to be using the place much."

It was true; he didn't use it much. He'd been through the woods a lot, nearly every month, but he never did anything but look at his old cabin—and *remember*. "Look, maybe I can buy it off you? Make you a really good deal?"

"I'm not after money, Mr. Montgomery. But the hiking club wants to extend their tracks, and this could lead to more visitors in town. Besides, it's a lovely piece of land—it just seems a waste not to use it."

"I do use it."

Mary raised a disbelieving brow. Moving to the stove, she lifted the lid off the pot, grabbed a large wooden spoon from where it hung on the wall, and stirred.

Chris tried again. Letting out a slow breath, he said, "It has sentimental value."

She paused mid-stir. "Sentimental," she repeated. "Your parents...?"

Partly his parents, yes. The place encompassed so much of his childhood... "Is there some way, any way, that you'd renew my lease?"

She sighed. "I don't want to be cruel, you know, but I want to be sure if I did that—"

"Thank you!"

"I said *if*. I want to be sure you'd care for the plot, and more than that, I want you to be more involved in our community."

"You know I've never stopped hikers trekking through Bennington Way before."

"More involved than that. And I don't mean throwing money at things—time and effort, that's what I care about."

If that's what she cared about, that's what he'd do.

Bennington Way had to stay with him.

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## Dylan

Dylan forced a slow, steady gait up the path to Chris's. Jeff and the kids were already eating inside. Wafts of rosemary potatoes and stewed beef hit the back of his nose as he passed through the open door into the foyer. He followed the kids' not-too-distant chatter into the kitchen.

There stood Mary, with her large double-dimpled grin, chef's hat, and apron. Dinner was always the best when she was on duty. Best thing he ever did, employing her to moonlight at the camp for Wednesday dinners. It was a pity she had a day job and couldn't do more for the camp. Not that he'd have been able to afford her to work full time. That and the locals would hate him; she ran the local café, selling her famous scones and self-roasted coffee beans. Had been as long as Dylan could remember. She was the town's keeper, really. She knew everything and anything, and the last say on anything town-related—from street development to town-ball theme—went unofficially through her.

She ladled stew into thirteen-year-old starlet Holly's bowl. Then, catching him approaching, Mary gave a cheeky, waggling-brow, "Hello". Her voice came out hoarse like it always did—from too much gossiping, likely. He loved her for it. "Looking good, handsome," she said with a delighted cackle. "Goin' against camp colors tonight? There a special occasion I ain't know about?"

The fridge door closed behind Mary, and there was Chris—in loose jeans and an open shirt, showing off his white tank top. He snapped open a Mountain Dew, and his brows arched, teasing. "I wonder what that *special occasion* could be?" he said as he walked by, pausing to add in a hushed whisper: "What game are you playing, Halsworth? It won't work on me."

Wait. *What?*

Dylan hadn't dressed up. He was in a pair of jeans and a—well, okay, a black button-up, but it was hardly *dressed up*. He'd been this way for the contractors, too. And maybe he should have changed into a camp T-shirt before heading over here, but he couldn't be bothered. Mostly he wanted this evening over and done with.

He shrugged off the annoyance and settled on a light laugh.



To Mary, he said—loudly enough for Chris to overhear as he strutted to the dining table—“I can assure you there’s *nothing* special about what I’ll be doing tonight.”

A snort made its way from the back of the room, and then a bellowed “You won’t be *doing* anything tonight” came over the heads of thirty kids.

As if suddenly realizing how inappropriate his comment was, Chris blushed—honest-to-God blushed—and stammered, “I mean, you better not be. We have other plans, remember?”

If Mary picked up on the hidden meaning of their back and forth, she didn’t say anything. Instead, she poured him a bowl of stew and potatoes. “Wait,” she said. “That one there is for Mr. Montgomery.” She loaded up a second plate. “That one’s for you. Want all of you well-fed, not powering yourself on sugary filth.”

“Mountain Dew isn’t sugary—”

Mary stopped him with a wan smile. “Yanno I don’t want to hear it.”

Maybe she didn’t, but that didn’t stop Mountain Dew from being his favorite pop. Had been ever since the mountain hiking trip he and Chris’s family had made together when they were kids. Twelve-year-old Chris had been fun, adventurous, and, yes, he’d been sarcastic—but they’d been on the same team, then. Them against their folks. They smuggled those cans of pop into their hiking packs and drank them on the sly.

Chris even dared him to drink an entire can without stopping, and Dylan had done it. His eyes had watered, and his throat had stung, but he’d done it. Including the ripper-burp right after. The burp that got them and their Mountain Dew caught—pop was against his mother’s health-conscious rules.

The rest of that trip, the only mountain dew they got was the one that woke them up with its cold morning grip.

Lost in the memory, he made his way to the chorus of kid-conversation and snuck into a free spot at the end of the table, next to Chris.

Without a word, he set the bowl in front of his neighbor. The can of pop sat on the smooth table between them. Dylan glanced up to find Chris staring at the can. Was he also thinking back to that trip? Or did something else play in his mind? Like when they were sixteen, at the skateboarding park, both sitting on the edge of the ramp. Dylan had said something to make Chris laugh mid-gulp, and he’d spat the whole thing out in one misty Mountain Dew cloud.

Chris jerked when he caught Dylan's gaze and grabbed the pop. He took a long drink and nudged the kid to his right. "What's this bet you guys are yapping about?"

The kid, Ryan, shook his head. "You never heard of Lantern Night?"

Chris frowned, and Dylan found himself explaining. "Two teams are pitted against each other to make the best giant lantern."

Jason tapped at the table across from Ryan. "My team killed last year, and it will this year, too."

"Whatever. Bring it on."

Suddenly a shadow descended. Mary glowered down at Dylan and Chris, staring pointedly at their untouched bowls of stew. Folding her arms, she said, "You guys better be eating that."

Dylan picked up his fork and dug in. Chris angled his position toward Mary, flashing her a grin. "This is way too good to inhale," he said, though his stew hadn't been tried yet. "I want to savor your amazing cooking."

Chris picked up his fork and delicately scooped up some beef. He chewed slowly and swallowed with a "Mmm."

Mary was far too smart for that. "Schmoozing won't work, Mr. Montgomery. Next you'll be telling me you love having kids around."

Chris plastered on a smile that reeked of fake. "But I do love having the kids around. They're always welcome in my home." He gestured toward the hungry mouths.

Mary exchanged a look with Dylan—like she was reading his mind: *Yeah, right. Who does he think he's fooling?*

Dylan finished another forkful of rich, hot stew, and then shrugged, swallowing a mean smile. "So then, you wouldn't mind if we held a few camp events here? Like our lantern-building contest? Because your expansive backyard would be perfect for it."

Chris's smile widened, *thinned*. Dylan almost choked on a laugh.

Glancing up at Mary, Chris nodded. "Absolutely. Go for it."

Mary clapped a hand on both their shoulders; Dylan wasn't sure how hard she gripped Chris, but she dug into his shoulder tightly, as if she was telling him off for the smirk he was *so* failing to hide.

“That’s the stuff I was talking about, Mr. Montgomery,” Mary said. “And I’m glad to see you and Mr. Halsworth working together again. It’s been too long.”

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Dylan sighed. Well, it was almost done. The evening was almost over. *Almost.*

At the end of three rounds of dinner, the kids and counselors had rowed back to camp. Now Mary had finished packing her Chevrolet and was leaving them with a curious wink.

What was that all about? Mary sure was radiant tonight. Seemed she was the only one to really approve of Dylan and Chris working together... Dylan nervously shoved his hands into his pockets and ducked back inside the mansion. He didn’t look over at Chris; staring at his shadow on the polished floor was enough.

In the kitchen, Dylan finished wiping the long table. The *already-cleaned* long table.

*Just hurry up and get it done. Kiss him again. Prove you don’t care at all.* But maybe he’d make it long and hard and deep. Anything that might get Chris to give in, admit he could be wrong—have this thing over with.

Chris sighed, and the sound had Dylan pausing a moment. And then came the sound of footsteps drawing nearer...

Dylan scrubbed harder at invisible splotches.

Something brushed his ass. Before he could jerk away from it, Chris was pulling his back pocket and urging him around.

Dylan folded with it. *Here it comes then.* Quickly Chris withdrew his hand from his pocket and grabbed a fistful of Dylan’s shirt.

Lurching with the movement, Dylan met Chris’s lips with a bruising thump. The kiss was indeed long, hard, and deep, but not by his design. Dammit. The guy was trying what Dylan was supposed to be trying!

Well, wasn’t this a game of wills?

Chris pushed his tongue against his and leisurely explored his mouth. Dylan slid a hand to Chris’s neck and squeezed, drawing him in tighter. Locked into that kiss, he pushed his neighbor back until he hit the wall. Chests pinned together, Dylan drew back just far enough to study Chris’s face.

In the half-light playing over his cheek, his lips looked swollen, his cheeks flushed.

Dylan stared hard into his hard brown eyes and shook his head. *I will not be the first to give up.* “Eight.”

“And nothing special about it.” Chris cocked his head. “Are you really going to have your kids here for daily activities? And how long until your kitchens are fixed?”

“The rest of summer camp, unfortunately. As for the daily activities, if you don’t want us here, I’ll just tell Mary you couldn’t stand the kids after all.”

“Bastard.”

“Knew you were trying to impress her!” Dylan leaned in. Lowered his voice. “How about this: say you could be wrong. End this 500 kiss thing now and other than meals, consider yourself left alone.”

Chris twisted and shoved Dylan back against the wall. The breath knocked from him, Dylan didn’t have a moment to prepare for the ninth kiss. This one whispered at his lip before dragging over his jaw to below his ear.

“Ten” he said and nibbled a kiss on Dylan’s earlobe.

The shivers were so intense Dylan couldn’t help letting out a ragged breath.

Chris pulled away, grinning.

*Bastard.*

Maybe they really were two peas in a pod.

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## **Chris**

A week passed.

As did fifty-three kisses. Rough, hurried, long, deep, strong, soft, languid, heated. None of them meant anything, and each one was... was...

Chris stalked over his grounds, heading toward the boat shed like he did every night after Dylan disappeared in his rowboat and clumsily splashed his way back to camp.

Stupid kisses.

Stupid competition.

Stupid stubbornness.

It bothered him that Dylan wouldn't give up.

It bothered him more that *he* wouldn't give up. What was wrong with him? Why did he love the torture so much? Why did he damn well dream of the pressure of those lips and that body pressed against his?

It was the challenge in it.

No, more than that. If it had been anyone else, he might have dismissed the whole thing. Shrugged it off. Whatever. But because it was Halsworth... Because it was *him*, he had to press on. Would until the end.

To think they'd ever been best friends!

Chris glared over the moonlit water toward Camp Halsworth. Why he'd ever snuck over there most nights as a kid he would never understand.

Though, back then... back then he'd thought Dylan could never hurt him.

But he had. He'd sabotaged the boat Chris had worked on every Sunday for a year.

And then... then when he needed someone most in the world, when his parents had died, Dylan wasn't there. He was supposed to have known he'd need him, no matter that they hadn't been speaking for three years. He was just supposed to know...

Chris stopped moving, his throat tight, fists clenched in his pockets. "Shit." He craned his head toward the bright, starlit sky.

Every now and then that loss swept over him. So painful it rooted him to the spot.

He ripped himself toward his boat shed, shoving back the memories.

Wind rustled through the leaves of a nearby weeping willow, crickets sang, and—

Was that the sound of hushed whispers?

And were they coming from his shed?

Yanking open the door, he called out. "Who's in here?"

"Oh, shit!" came a familiar young voice.

Chris switched on the light. There, in his unfinished boat, were Jason and Holly. Flushed faces and rumpled shirts explained the situation perfectly. Kids sneaking out of camp to make out.

“Out of the boat,” he ordered.

They hurriedly complied. Jason muttered an apology to Holly under his breath.

“How’d you get here?” Chris asked, herding the two out of his shed.

“We rowed in the dinghy.”

“Then that’s the way we’ll go back.”

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## Dylan

“Yeah, yeah, just a sec.” Dylan hurriedly stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. The pounding at his door continued.

But it wasn’t the alarm the counselors were supposed to use in an emergency, so at least he knew it was nothing serious.

He dripped his way to the front door, checked the peephole, groaned, and opened. Chris.

“Keep your kids under control, Halsworth. I don’t want them on my property after dark.”

Dylan peered over Chris’s shoulder. No kids to be seen. “What are you talking about?”

“Jason and Holly were having a make-out session in my boat!”

“Where are they now?”

“Bumped into Jeff. He’s sent them back to their cabins.”

“Ah, crap.” This didn’t look good for his security. Of course, sneaking out happened from time to time, but... he’d set extra supervision on the cabins. “Look,” he said, running a hand through his wet hair, “I’m sorry about that. I can assure you, it won’t happen again.”

Chris pushed his way inside. “It’d better not.”

Dylan stared after him. He hesitated, and then shut the door.

Chris continued, “It was *awkward*.” He scanned the modest living room, and then settled his gaze on him.

Suddenly the towel felt too small, too thin, too everything.

Chris blinked and turned sharply, heading for the kitchen.

Leaving the guy to whatever it was he was doing in his kitchen, Dylan grabbed some fresh clothes. He shoved on a pair of jeans and a linen shirt. Barefoot, he trod back to the living room.

With a can of Mountain Dew in each hand, Chris lounged on his couch.

“Here,” Chris said, handing one of the cans to him.

The pop cooled his fingers, his throat even more. Were they both studiously drinking to avoid conversation?

He should break the silence.

And say what?

Chris beat him to it. “What’s on?” Picking up the remote, he switched on the TV. Baseball. Pirates against the Twins.

*This* was awkward. The last time Chris had hung at his place was when they were sixteen. Then, they’d shared easy banter and disgusting jokes. Sometimes they spiked their Mountain Dew with vodka—

Which was sounding good about now.

He grabbed some from the freezer along with some glasses.

The Twins played. They drank. They shot the shit about anything that wasn’t related to them. Sports. Cars. Camping equipment. More sports.

“Safe, dammit. Clearly fucking safe!” Chris poured himself another vodka-Mountain Dew mix.

Dylan drained the rest of his glass and set it beside Chris’s for a refill. “If we drank for every bad call, we’d be as drunk as that time in your cabin.”

That had been very close to the end of their friendship.

“Worst hangover of my life,” Chris mused. “My dad blew a fuse when I came home. I think I was still drunk.”

Dylan chuckled, but the humor quickly drained away. Late Mr. Montgomery had been strict, but he’d been a great dad. Always welcoming and accepting. When Chris came out, there’d been no family angst, just two parents who nodded and embraced him. Dylan still got choked up remembering...

He missed the Montgomerys.

Taking the glass Chris held out for him, he swallowed. “When was the last time you visited the cabin? It’s known as the haunted cabin around here. Every

summer the kids ask me if I'll take them into the woods to see it." Every summer, he said no.

Too many memories.

That, and Chris leased the land—even if most of the public hiked through it anyway.

Chris shrugged and looked down at his glass. "A while ago."

They finished their drinks as the Twins entered the last inning. Dylan set his glass down. That was enough for him.

*Cling.* Another glass met his on the coffee table. And the back of Chris's hand brushed his. An alcohol-induced zing rolled through him, and for a moment, it was like he was riding surf.

Chris looked at him. They were frozen like that for a moment, and then Chris leaned in and kissed him. He tasted of Mountain Dew. Aftershave lingered faintly on his skin. Dylan breathed it in sharply, and the kiss intensified.

Fifty-four. Fifty-five. Fifty-six... Sixty.

When they broke, Dylan was on his back, Chris a warm, solid weight on top of him. Their gazes clashed as they caught their breath, and then that smug grin was back.

"Nope," Chris said. "Still nothing."

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## Chris

Chris was fucking exhausted. Kids were hard work. Once this summer was through, he'd make sure to avoid them the rest of his adult life.

Okay, so maybe they also made him crack up and said stupidly endearing things from time to time. But still, he would avoid...

Well, if Dylan was *really* hard up for help, he *might* offer to assist again or something. But only for emergencies. And because, despite whatever the rest of town might think of him, he wasn't totally selfish and cold-hearted.

Chris tossed the baseball up and caught it. Did it again. Then he looked across the field to where Jason was readying his bat. The kid was a bit of a smart-ass, but Chris liked him all the more for it.

Was this really how Dylan remembered him as a kid?



Full of charisma and fun?

He smirked and pitched the ball. Jason swung. Bat hit ball with a mighty echoing *thwack*, and it was out of here. Before running to first base—or all the way home—he dropped the bat and high-fived Ryan behind him.

Then slowly, deliberately slowly, he jogged his home run.

Okay: full of charisma, fun, *and* arrogant.

He gave the boy a lift of his cap in a show of respect.

Jason inclined his head in acknowledgment.

So maybe, *maybe*, on occasion—if Dylan really, really needed it—he could offer to run a few baseball games?

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## Dylan

Dylan ate another spoonful of pudding. Across from him, Jason and Chris were arguing about which baseball teams would make it to the playoffs.

“Hardly, not with a pitcher like that.”

“Think the Pirates will make it again this year? Or was that a one-hit wonder?”

“Please.”

Funny to see Chris so laid back, genuinely engaged. It suited him having kids around. Mellowed out the smug in him.

“What are you smiling at, Halsworth?” Chris asked, scraping the rest of the pudding from his bowl and then licking his spoon. “What?”

Dylan’s smile widened. “Nothing. It’s just a good day, is all.” Especially since the contracting team working on his kitchens had said they might finish earlier than the original quote. “Maybe I’ll tell you later.”

*Later* happened once the kids had cleared out, and Chris had backed him into a wall. A kiss tickled his bottom lip, and Dylan ran his teeth over the tingle to make it stop.

“Now, tell me,” Chris said, inching toward kiss one hundred and eighteen. “What has you in such a pleasant mood?”

One hundred and nineteen. One hundred and twenty. “We’ll be out of your hair in just over a week. Contractors will finish early.”

Dylan expected a whoop of joy and a horribly relieved smile. Instead, he got a slow nod.

“Finish early?” Chris pushed off the wall. “I mean, yeah... great.” Then, after a pause, “Be good to have the place all to myself again.”

Chris and his bachelor pad mansion. This big, echoing mansion.

Dylan pitied him.

“Better race through the rest of these damn kisses, then,” Chris said, resuming his cocky lean. “Sooner the better.”

\*\*\*\*

The next day, Dylan stood between Jeff and Chris, shaking his head at Jason and Ryan playing Twister outside on the sprayed grass. Five girls surrounded the two boys in a crescent moon, with a grinning Holly at the board spinning the arrow.

So he and Chris weren't the only ones who couldn't say no to a challenge.

“Come on,” Jason said toward the grass as Ryan shoved his leg to red, knocking his ear. “We can handle your bet, Hols. But can you girls handle ours?”

Holly spun the arrow. “Left hand blue.”

Jason and Ryan crashed to the spray-painted grass. *Chris's* spray-painted grass. But the guy had taken it better than Dylan expected—barely blinked when he told him the kids had defaced his backyard with red, green, yellow, and blue spots.

Jason picked himself out of the tangle and helped Ryan up. He slung an arm around his friend's shoulder and nicked his head at Holly. “Me and my buddy here dare you girls to listen to our retelling of Red Ribbon.”

Holly snickered. “Think we're scared of a stupid ghost story?”

A smirk twitched Jason's lips. “Oh, you will be.” Then, turning, the boy snatched Jeff's gaze. “Did you ask about camping at the haunted cabin?”

Jeff shoved his hands in his pockets and faced Dylan.

*Here it comes, just like every year.*

“Well, you heard him,” Jeff said with a shrug, “should we set something up?”

“Spook-night. Spook-night. Spook-night,” Jason and Ryan chanted, fists pumping above their heads.

Just like every year, Dylan shook his head, and then stopped at Chris’s arched brow and crossed arms.

“Why not?” Chris said. “What camp doesn’t run a horror night for the older kids?”

*Camp Halsworth, that’s what camp.*

The chanting grew into a chorus as the girls joined in. Even Jeff was tapping his foot along with the beat.

Dylan took Chris aside, out of earshot from Jeff and the kids. “The haunted cabin is yours, and—”

Chris snorted and gestured around them. “Mine? Hasn’t stopped you using it yet.”

Dylan fished for another excuse, anything to keep away from the cabin—*those memories*. “I don’t have enough counselors to take the eldest out camping for the night.”

“If you’re *that* desperate,” Chris said, shifting from foot to foot. “I guess I could... come with you.” He followed it with a shrug.

Dylan blinked and looked around them. Chris hadn’t spoken loudly enough for anyone to overhear. “Are you... *volunteering* to help us?” He checked again. Nope, no one who could spin this to the rest of town to gain Chris favor. Well, Mary would like it if she heard about it... Maybe that was his angle?

And yet, the way he was offering... it seemed more genuine than the times before.

Chris shifted suddenly. “Don’t get the wrong idea, Halsworth. I just see this as a prime opportunity to scare the bejesus out of you.”

Jason came out of nowhere, ramming against his side with a hoot of laughter. “Yeah, scare the girls *and* Mr. Halsworth. This’ll be epic.”

“Scare me?” Dylan said, readjusting his Camp Halsworth cap. “I’ve lived my whole life around campfire stories. I ain’t been scared yet.”

Scanning the hopeful, chanting chorus of kids behind them, he gave in. “Fine,” he called out to them, effectively silencing the crowd. “Friday we camp at the haunted cabin.” To Chris, he said, “Bring it.”

“Done deal,” Chris nodded his head toward the mansion. “Could I see you in private for a second, Mr. Halsworth?” To Jason he said, “We need to discuss the scary-ass details.”

Inside, Chris shut the door behind them and cuffed Dylan’s wrist, yanking him back. Dylan’s back hit the cool, hard wood. Chris leaned against him. Length to length. Nose to nose.

“One hundred and thirty-one,” Chris said as he hovered toward a kiss. Dylan’s hands went to the lapels of Chris’s shirt, and he pulled him that last half-inch to his mouth. Slightly chapped lips and rough stubble moved over his mouth and chin. Their tongues met in a hurried clash, and Chris was pressing harder against him.

Dylan drew his hands up over his shoulders to the back of his neck. With a fist full of short hair, he pulled. Chris answered with another thrust of his tongue.

“Yep,” Dylan murmured when they took a second to catch a breath. “Those are some scary-ass details.”

Chris pulled back. A grin stretched his lips, and his eyes were lit with amusement.

Dylan shared the moment with a grin of his own.

They broke apart. Chris ran a hand through his hair and then hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts.

Dylan slowly peeled himself off the door. “Guess we should...” He gestured toward the backyard.

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “Yeah.”

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## **Chris**

Chris could tell his story had crept Dylan out. Could tell by the startled little jump he gave when the fire crackled, and then again when a twig snapped somewhere in the distance behind the decrepit-looking cabin.

Holding his smirk in check, he encouraged Jason to tell his story. Between him and the other counselors—Jeff, Dylan, and Heather—ten girls and boys huddled under woolen blankets. Holly kept trying to laugh off the boy’s story, but her laugh grew strained by the end of it; she and some of the others—boys

included—kept eyeing up the tents, as if they wished they could crawl into them and be done with the horror part of the evening.

Of course, none of them wanted to leave the group alone.

“...the red ribbon curled around the girl’s neck, softly at first, so that she thought this was something magical, something good. And then she heard a whispering in her head, telling her to walk into the woods, telling her there was more magic waiting for her. All she had to do was step inside the haunted cabin and let out the ghost of Mr. Ripple. A sad, lonely man, who’d died alone in the woods...”

Susan shivered violently next to him, and Chris took pity on her. He whispered, “It’s just a story.” When her teeth started chattering, he added, “I know for a fact that cabin is not haunted.”

“H-how do you know?” she asked him quietly.

He fished in his pocket for his keys. On it was the key to the cabin. “Because it’s mine. I used to hang out here on weekends all the time, with Dy—” He swallowed. “The only reason it looks scary is because I haven’t taken care of it.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Grew out of it.” *Didn’t have anyone to hang out here with anymore.*

Looking over the fire, he found Dylan watching him. Chris clasped the keys in his fist and stuffed them back into his pocket.

“...each step the girl took, the ribbon shifted around her neck, comfortably, lulling... And then right in the middle of the woods, where no one but her friends could hear her thrash about—where no one could help her, the ribbon tightened, and tightened, and tightened...”

Holly screamed when Jason snuck a hand to the back of her neck and squeezed. Once she’d recovered, she glowered at a giggling Jason. “Just you wait,” she threatened, before the counselors broke up the storytelling and sent the girls and boys into their separate tents.

Chris sat alone on his log, unable to tear his gaze from the cabin. So easily he’d suggested they come out here, but why was that? How did the offer run so quickly off his tongue, when he’d not been able to force himself out here for years? Sure, this was exactly the type of thing Mary wanted to see from him,

but that thought hadn't processed when he'd made the offer. Like that first kiss with Dylan, it'd come spontaneously. Without real thought.

The fire fizzled to glowing embers, and the chatter of kids in their tents slowly died down. Something moved beside him, and he turned expecting to see Dylan—

A large garden spider scuttled over the log.

Chris leaped off the log and over the ember pit, coming to a screeching halt in front of a quietly conversing Dylan and Jeff. He blinked. They'd been sitting there all along?

Dylan raised a brow. "You good there, Montgomery?"

Chris squared his shoulders. "Sure thing. Just off to my tent. Night."

Jeff wished him a good sleep.

Nothing came from Dylan but a knowing smirk and a pointed glance towards the log Chris had abandoned.

"Whatever," he said and rounded the guys.

Dylan watched him over his shoulder, and while Jeff was facing away, Chris kissed his middle finger and blew it over to Dylan.

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## Dylan

Dylan shook Jeff three times, hoping to shut off the snores, but it wasn't happening. The guy slept like a log truck over a gravel road, loud and solid. Nope, he wasn't having any more of this. He wriggled out of his sleeping bag, threw it over his arm along with his camping pillow and snuck out of the two-man tent. Save a whistling wind and Jeff's snores, the rest of the camp was quiet.

Crunching over grass and wilted leaves, he made for Chris's tent. He wasn't a foot away when there came a shuffling and a *ziiiiiip*.

Chris popped his head out and rolled his eyes. "Thought I heard you." He ducked back into the double tent and Dylan snuck in after him.

"Jeff snores like you wouldn't believe," Dylan said, hunched in the small space.

Scooting back into his sleeping bag, Chris laughed. "I can hear it from here."

Dylan listened to the distant droning. “Yeah, that’s nothing. Up close it actually vibrates.” He dumped his sleeping bag on the ground. He couldn’t crash with Heather, so this was his only option. “I’m setting up next to you in here.”

A rather loud snort came in answer. “How about no.”

“No?” Dylan sank to his knees on his feather-down sleeping bag. He wasn’t going back to snore central. No way. Luckily, he knew just how to play Chris into letting him crash here. “You afraid something might happen?” He jerked his thumb toward the rest of camp. “Cause I got about a dozen reasons why they won’t. The tippy-top of which being—*gross*.”

Chris laughed. “Dude, that isn’t the issue.”

“Why not then?”

Milky moonlight filtered through the open tent flap, showcasing the evil grin that twisted Chris’s lips. “I just like watching you suffer.” Chris shifted further into his sleeping bag and rested on his side, head propped up on his hand. “Tell you what, though, my sadist side will be satisfied if you just admit to being scared *snickerdoodle-less* by my story.”

Dylan rested his pillow at the top of his sleeping bag. “I was *not*—”

Chris snatched his pillow and stuffed it behind him. “You want a place to sleep or not?”

“You’re cruel, Montgomery.”

“Yeah, but you’ll get me back for it. Two peas in a pod, remember?”

They both grinned.

“Fine,” Dylan said, gesturing for his pillow back. “I got creeped out by your story. Good enough?”

“Hmm, not really. But I take pity on you.” He threw the pillow, and Dylan caught it against his chest. “Don’t ever say I’m not compassionate.”

“Bastard.” Dylan climbed into the sleeping bag, turning on his side to face away from the man.

Their quiet breathing turned out to be more distracting than Jeff’s snores. Dylan’s whole body was tense as he tried to convince himself to shut off, to not think of the man behind him or count his breaths to check if they were as unsteady as his own. After half an hour, he clenched his jaw and twisted to his other side—

Chris was watching him. When their gazes clashed, he had the audacity—and the confidence—to raise a brow.

Under his breath, Dylan let out an uncensored curse and leaned in to kiss him once more, hard and brief. Full of frustration. The frustration of not being able to sleep, that was. Nothing else.

Absolutely *not*.

He jerked back a couple of feet and slammed his head back down on the pillow. Chris's grin mocked him. "Not even tolerable in the dark."

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## Chris

Morning found Chris locked tightly around a warm and wriggling Dylan; a pleasant pressure rubbed against his morning-hard cock—

He froze. What-the-fuck?

He snapped away, knocking into the tent wall and making it wobble. Dylan stirred.

"Huh?" a groggy Dylan murmured. "What's happening?"

Chris didn't say anything about the reason for the sudden scuffle. Nor would he. Ever.

He willed his wood away. "Nothing. It's time to get up."

A laugh rumbled out of Dylan. "That coming from you?"

"Yeah, whatever. I just couldn't sleep with a big lug like you sucking up all the good air." Lie.

Dylan shifted into a sitting position and unzipped his sleeping bag. "Spooked out by the stories after all?"

Spooked out by *something*.

"Let's get this show on the road. I have things to do."

And other things to forget.

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Chris finished the fiberglass covering and stepped back to admire his handiwork. It'd taken a few months, but he was more than halfway done on his classic mahogany runabout. He ran his gaze over the bow and smiled. Looked authentic. Just like a past classic.



Next he had to install the motor and propeller shaft, and then deck the hull. He couldn't wait to take it out for a spin. Show Dylan how to really drive a boat—

From a distance, of course. He wouldn't actually let the guy sit in there with him.

A sharp frown cut into his brow, and he forced himself to focus on cleaning up. Dylan didn't belong in this shed with his beautiful boat. He didn't belong anywhere so close to him.

Fuck. He needed a break. Everywhere he turned, Dylan was there. Kids were in his kitchen three times a day, or out in his yard, or—well, he just couldn't escape the word Halsworth.

Grabbing his wallet, he made his way to Rosita, his utility boat, and motored around the lake to town. After docking, he made the ten-minute walk to the local café. The sweet smell of freshly-baked raspberry white chocolate scones hit his nose, and he followed it right to the counter. He resisted buying one and stuck to his usual latte.

“You having this here today?” Mary asked, looking toward his usual table in the corner of the cozy couch-filled room. It was rather strange of her to ask. When in the last ten years had he done differently?

“Just like every time,” he said, and picked his way to the small, sunshine-yellow table that offered a view of the lake.

Mary's words followed him there. “People change their minds sometimes.”

When she carried over his latte, she continued her little speech. “I had this guy who absolutely hated eggplant. Said he'd never in a million years try it.” She rested her hands on her hips and grinned.

Chris frowned; he didn't get where this was going. “Okay,” he said, picking up his latte and taking a sip.

“Well, he came in here the other day, didn't he? Ordered the savory-pie special. I didn't tell him there was eggplant in it, 'course, and he gobbles the thing up and orders a second. Some people just don't know what they like until they taste the pie, you know? One little taste can make 'em see what they're missing.”

“I like this spot, thank you,” Chris said and resumed drinking.

Mary shook her head and retreated, muttering, “Thick, that one.”

Thick? He wasn't thick! He glared in her direction, and a heavy laugh came from across the room. He swung his gaze sharply toward it. Marco, from the gym outside of Grand Rapids. They'd flirted, from time to time; they'd not jumped each other, but the tension was brewing there. "Hey, Marco. What brings you here?"

Marco made a path to Chris and squeezed into the seat adjacent to him. "Just passing through. Haven't seen you at the gym for a while now."

It was a question, of course. *What have you been doing? Is there still a chance for us to have naked fun?*

Marco added, "Actually, I have a day off today. Was going to go for a hike, but do you want to get a drink?"

Chris shifted uncomfortably in his chair, straining for a grin. He lifted his latte. "Already have one of those."

Marco didn't waste time. He leaned in, pausing with his mouth close to Chris's ear. "Not the kind of drink I was thinking of."

Setting his glass down, Chris shook his head.

A frown cut into Marco's brow as he rested back in the chair. "You with someone, Montgomery?"

"No. Absolutely not! But... I have a bunch of kids back at camp—it's just not a good time."

"Right. Gotcha. Another time, then?"

Chris blinked and shrugged. "I mean... yeah, sure. Another time..."

Marco winked and made a quick retreat.

Chris watched him go. His backside looked firm, tight; his jeans were slung just right. But—nothing. He just wasn't feeling it today...

He sipped his coffee. Fuck, he needed to hurry these last kisses with Dylan. The whole thing was screwing with his head. What they were doing didn't mean anything. He barely tolerated the guy. And the kisses were... Really, okay, yes, they were good. But that was only because Chris was such an expert. He could make Big Bird rock a kiss. It had nothing to do with *Dylan*.

Hell no.

Chris stared into his glass. The coffee was murky, just like his damn thoughts. Maybe he should finally admit to Dylan he was wrong. Jason and his

500 kisses *could* have merit. But if he admitted that, it might sound like the contest was affecting him. Like it was messing with more than outward body parts.

Which it wasn't.

He tipped the last of the coffee into his mouth and headed back to the counter. He planted twenty bucks on the counter. "Two scones to go please. Keep the change."

Mary returned bluntly, "And you keep up the good community work."

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## Dylan

"Two more days, you think?" Dylan asked the foreman, who settled his yellow helmet back on his head.

"Yep. Then we'll be outta here."

Dylan could've hugged the guy. Life would be back to its old status-quo soon enough.

Over the foreman's shoulder, through a gap in the trees, Chris's boat motored into view. It would have been an everyday sight, except the boat was angled toward his property. Curiosity getting the better of him, Dylan took his leave and arrowed for the jetty.

Chris docked. There was a short clash of acknowledging gazes as he tied Rosita up and gracefully leaped onto the jetty.

Dylan took in Chris's steady, confident gait, and his own step faltered. His skin prickled with every step nearer, and a shiver rippled through him.

Shaking it off, he cleared his throat. "What brings you to Camp Halsworth?"

Chris lifted a brown paper bag and stopped a foot from him. "I scored us some scones. Now I was hoping to score a little something else."

The guy did have a way of making Dylan laugh. "You're to the point." He beckoned him down the jetty, to the bench he'd erected in memory of Chris's parents. It overlooked their favorite part of the lake.

Chris looked at the embossed bronze plate, and his Adam's apple jutted out with a swallow.

“Or we could sit somewhere else?” Dylan suggested suddenly. He hadn’t meant to hit a sore spot. In fact, it hadn’t occurred to him that Chris hadn’t seen it before. It’d been there so many years...

“Here’s fine,” Chris said and sank onto it, still blinking rapidly. He dropped the brown paper bag between them.

Dylan didn’t have a clue what to say. The tension between them felt heavy, taut—close to snapping point. He peeked into the bag and tried changing the subject. “You bought us Mary’s famous raspberry and white chocolate scones! I could kiss you.”

The words had flown out of his mouth in a teasing manner, but instead of lightening the situation, it felt like he’d only managed to add a layer of awkward on top of it.

Chris drew his gaze away from the lake to him, staring intently, as if searching for something. An answer. The old Dylan that was his best friend, perhaps. Then Chris seemed to jerk out of the moment. “Kiss me then,” he said, “that’s why I’m here after all. I just want to get the rest of them out of the way.”

Dylan was all for speeding things up and forgetting the whole thing, but... but... “What’s the hurry?”

Chris’s smirk didn’t seem to fit him right. Too large. Too wobbly. “What isn’t the hurry?” Chris said. “You dislike it as much as I do... right?”

Dylan paused. Dislike it... yeah, that’s what he thought of their kisses. What he always thought about them... “Right.”

Chris narrowed his eyes toward the scones, fished them out of the bag, and handed one to him.

Crunchy on the outside, fluffy on the inside, chocolate baked to perfection, and Dylan still couldn’t enjoy it.

When Chris wiped a loose crumb off Dylan’s lips and followed it with a light kiss, Dylan’s skin prickled all over again.

“I guess that makes one hundred and forty-five,” Chris murmured, and Dylan found himself shaking his head. *Actually, it’s not.*

He swiveled on the bench toward his ex-best-friend. “Really, it’s one hundred and forty-six.”

“Are you saying I miscounted? Because I don’t think so—”

Dylan interrupted him. “No, I mean, it depends on what you count as our first kiss.”

“You mean...” Chris laughed suddenly, but there was something panicked about it. “You still remember that?”

“I was sixteen; it was my first kiss. Of course I remember it.”

Chris broke a chunk off his scone and threw it into the lake, toward the lazily looping swans.

Dylan pushed. He had to; it was something he'd pondered for a long time. “One day there's the promise of your lips on mine, and then the next you were gone. Off courting your next conquest.”

Chris crumbled the rest of his scone and dropped it into the water. “You were my friend.”

“Exactly, I was your *friend*,” Dylan said. Friends didn't do that shit to one another.

Chris shrugged and looked out toward his boat, as if he were regretting coming over here. Typical Montgomery thing to do. Shrug off anything that was real. Anything that involved feelings.

“Whatever,” Dylan muttered. “Just go if you can't handle this.”

Chris swung his head back in his direction, and Dylan immediately swallowed his anger at the sheen in his neighbor's eyes. “We were too young. It never would have worked. I didn't... didn't...”

“Didn't what? Like me like that? Yeah, I got the message loud and clear when you stood me up on our supposed date.” They'd said they'd meet at the haunted cabin. Dylan had snuck out of the house to meet him there at midnight. He'd been so cheesy as to bring along a rose.

He waited until dawn, convincing himself Chris couldn't figure a way to sneak out, that he'd get out there eventually. Dawn came and went; Dylan slumped home. Redressed, went to school.

Chris didn't spare him a single glance the entire day, and then... then when Dylan went to confront him, at the bike shed at the back of school—

Well, the guy had been there hadn't he? With his tongue down Joseph McHay's throat.

Dylan shook off the emptiness that consumed him remembering that day. He tossed the rest of his scone toward the swans.

Chris stumbled over his words. Not so suave today. “What I meant was I didn’t...”

“Care?” Dylan said, shrugging his shoulders. “What, Chris, just spit it out—”

The man lurched to his feet. “I didn’t want it not to work! Back then I thought... Jesus, I thought if we waited... But you wouldn’t listen and then you *keyed my boat*. You knew how long I spent on that!”

Glued to the bench, Dylan couldn’t move—couldn’t even speak. And then he remembered how he’d taken his key to the haunted cabin and, in a fit of hurt, marked up the side of Chris’s boat with the words ‘man slut.’ His voice crackled. “That was... what I did was out of line. I never should have reacted like that.”

Chris stumbled back a few steps. Again with the indifferent shrugging. “Yeah, well whatever. You know what? It doesn’t matter. We can take these kisses as slow as you like. I’m never going to feel anything for you. I’m never going to admit I’m wrong.”

And with a dimpled smile that didn’t reach the guy’s eyes, Chris twisted and hightailed out of there, leaving Dylan alone on the cool bench with their crumbs. Crumbs of the past that they needed to brush away and finally forget.

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Two days later, the construction work was completed. The last of the subcontractor’s trucks made dust clouds down the gravel path as they zipped out of there. Dylan folded his arms and watched the clouds slowly settle. He thought he’d be more relieved that they were done, and he *was*... but...

Well, he was ten thousand dollars poorer, now, wasn’t he? *That* was why he felt unsettled; why too much acid gnawed at his gut.

Over his shoulder, he took in the dining hall, the roof repaired, its new tiles bright against the older ones. All he had to do was wait for the final inspection that afternoon, and once he got the thumbs up, the kids could eat at camp again.

No more bothering Chris.

Dylan kicked at the gravel, sending it scuttling down the decline toward the lakeshore and the jetty.

Chris.

He'd avoided the man the last two days, sending Jeff to be in charge with the kids. It wasn't because he didn't want to see Chris, either. Because... well, honestly he was getting used to having the cocky guy around—seeing him wasn't such a bother anymore. And wasn't there, perhaps, a little more to him than snark and charm? How he'd looked at the wood and wrought iron, at the bronze plaque with his parents' names on it...

His stomach twisted again.

The real reason he avoided Chris was because... he was ashamed, wasn't he?

He'd tended toward self-pity in the past; had dwelled on all the ways Chris had hurt him, but... he'd been a part of it, too. A big, stupid part.

Staring over the lake to the edge of Chris's property, Dylan sighed and headed for his dinghy. It was time to man up and face him again.

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Dylan found Chris hammering at a loose plank on his jetty. He wore jeans and a tank top, and the sun beamed down on him, highlighting the sheen of sweat over his upper arms and brow. Dylan almost paused just to watch him—

Chris glanced up over the water. Their gazes met for a fraction of a second, and then Chris continued pounding away.

Jumping out of his dinghy, Dylan strode toward him. A dozen feet away, Chris dropped his hammer and stood. Shoulders set hard, like he was expecting resistance of some kind. "What do you want, Halsworth?"

Three feet away, two, one—

Dylan kept going until they were less than an inch apart. He wrapped his arms around the man's shoulders and hugged him. Hugged him for all he was worth.

Chris tensed in his grip, and Dylan spoke at his ear. "I was an ass. A complete ass to key your boat. I'm embarrassed, and I'm sorry."

Chris relaxed, resting into the embrace, and they stayed like that for a long while. Dylan should have let go already, but he wasn't quite ready. It felt comfortable holding the man like this, and his stomach had lost its acidic twist. Now it sort of fluttered. Light and at ease.

Breathing in a mix of sweat and aftershave, Dylan squeezed Chris again on impulse. A soft puff of breath hit his neck in answer, and a shiver rolled

through him. Finally, he untangled them, and then leaned in and kissed Chris lightly on the mouth. This time he didn't jest about it being gross or how hard it was to suffer through it because this one wasn't. It was... an apology. He meant it.

"That's why I came over," Dylan said and slowly retreated down the jetty. "Just that."

Chris stood there with a frown cutting into his brow, a finger tracing the kiss he'd left on his mouth.

Dylan swallowed, jumped into his dinghy, and rowed home.

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## **Chris**

After the kids had cleared out, and the dinner dishes were done, Chris took Dylan's hand, threaded their fingers together, and pulled him into the living room. He kissed him at the door and again at the couch. Flicking on the television, Chris kissed him some more. So what, they'd gone from saying they hated it to just saying nothing? It didn't stop it from being true. Of course he hated it. It was just... saying it all the time was redundant. They both knew these kisses were nothing but numbers on the way to 500 and out of this competition.

Still, he couldn't quite shake off the shivery feeling Dylan had left him with on the jetty.

He'd been convinced Dylan would avoid coming over for dinner with the kids after that, but lo and behold, he'd been the first to arrive.

And, like always, he'd be the last to leave.

Chris smiled and dropped to the couch. Dylan lounged next to him in his jeans and a blue Camp Halsworth T-shirt that'd hitched at the side to reveal the red elastic of boxer-briefs.

"What're we watching?" Dylan asked, looking at him out the corner of his eye.

"Baseball. Should be any time now." In the meantime, since the commercials were so damn boring...

He leaned over, snagged a fistful of that blue T-shirt, and brought those soft lips once more to his. His other hand curved around Dylan's back, and he dragged it slowly to that triangle of skin peeking out at the hip.



Dylan's breath hitched, and Chris wanted to make that happen again. It gave him goosebumps. Big, shivery goosebumps—

Dylan pulled away. "One thing, Montgomery."

Chris tensed. "Halsworth?"

"The inspector gave the dining hall the okay. The kids can eat back at camp."

"Oh." He grabbed for the remote and fumbled with the channel buttons. He hated commercials, dammit. The numbers seemed to blur, but he pressed anyway. "So that's it? None of those rascals coming back over here?"

"You're a free man again."

He shrugged. "Well, I... You know..." Fuck, his throat was tight. "They were always saying such ridiculous things."

*Why can't I admit one true thing? Why can't I just say, 'It was fun while it lasted' or... or that I'll miss the noise—the stomping, laughing, screaming...*

Dylan reached over and clasped his hand around the remote, their fingers touching. "You okay?" he asked. "The kids will miss traipsing around this big house of yours."

Big and empty house, now.

Fuck.

He shrugged and stared at the screen. "Maybe, I mean, you know, I might miss them a little, too."

Dylan pulled at the remote and plugged in the sports channel. "We're still going to use your yard for lantern night this Friday. Mary is hella excited about it."

Chris closed his eyes and nodded. He still had lantern night. Good, he'd be able to give a proper goodbye to the kids.

Standing suddenly, because his throat was too tight and his eyes were prickling, he said, "Mountain Dew? I'm just gonna grab some..."

He marched out of the room to the kitchen. The fridge opened with a squeal, and Chris lingered in the cool air, resting his head against the top frame, staring at the packs of pop. He was all fucking out of whack today. He needed to get a grip.

He snapped two cans free, straightened his shoulders, and headed back to the lounge. To his ex-best-friend turning... friend again?

The lump in his throat tightened.

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Lantern night. Though technically, it was only evening. The sun was setting slowly over his backyard. Sheets and sheets of taped cardboard stretched before him; kids sat on the grass, craft knives in action as they carved out their design. Their team had decided on a dragon theme, and—*wow*.

Chris had never seen anything like it. These kids were talented—the dragon cut-out displayed a long snout, spanned wings, and a snaking tail.

He worked alongside Mary and Heather and a whole bunch of kids he barely knew the names of. Except for Jason and Holly and Tom and Carlo and Susan and—huh, maybe he did know all their names.

Mary bumped her shoulder into his side. “What you day-dreaming about?”

He startled. “What? Nothing.”

“You were smiling.” She leaned in and whispered, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you love this.” She gestured around them to the kids, the lantern mess, and toward the other corner of the field where Dylan was laughing and rubbing his hands together.

Chris stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged, and Mary shook her head. “I like this Mr. Montgomery,” she said. “A kind, caring part of the community. I hope you keep it up after I have your lease renewed.”

He whipped toward her. “Really?”

“Yes, really—” She didn’t get to finish; Chris yanked her into a twirling hug that had her yelping and laughing at the same time.

“Stop the hugs,” Jason screeched. “We need the cellophane, take those and go, go, go!”

Holly tugged his sleeve as soon as he’d let Mary go. “Get there before we get left with baking paper!”

Chris followed his orders, racing to the end of the half-mile garden where the supplies were stacked.

Running toward the supplies on behalf of the other team was Dylan. *Of course.*

These were the rules: councilors/adults fought for the materials; kids were the only ones allowed to work with them.

And of course, there was only one set of each material.

Mary had won them the craft knives, leaving the rival team to use safety scissors and their hands.

A glance over his shoulder indicated the other team was ready for the cellophane part of their lantern-making, too.

So it was a race. Game on.

He accelerated into a flat-out run. Dylan sped up, too. They shared a determined glance and zoomed their gaze in on the prize. The box of cellophane sat between a box of tinfoil and a box of string.

Kids chanted behind them, a chorus of 'Montgomery' and 'Halsworth'.

Chris grinned; he was a foot ahead. He'd get there first—

Dylan dove, tackling the box of cellophane and crushing it, sliding into Chris's legs.

Stumbling over the man, he cursed. Well, the kid-friendly variety of cursing, anyway. "Fudge snickerdoodles! You *dove*?"

A hard chuckle came in response, and Dylan hauled himself to his feet, arm hooked around the cellophane box. "Have fun with the baking paper, sunshine." He jogged off, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be back for the tape before you can blink."

Not going to happen.

Grabbing the box filled with rolls of baking paper he raced back, dumped it, and turned right back around again.

Dylan had already started on his run for the tape, but he didn't seem to be running as fast as before.

"Worn out already, Halsworth?" Chris called out as he charged for the supplies.

"Just giving you a chance to catch up, Montgomery. It's not as fun beating you otherwise."

He laughed, and this time he did the diving. But not for the tape. He tackled Dylan around the waist, bringing him to the ground with a thump.

Dylan spat out a mouthful of dirt and grass. "Cheater."

Already off him and snagging the tape, Chris shook his head. "Not against the rules." He found the second best option for the rival team. String. He dropped it at Dylan's nose. "There you go. Now let's see who wins this thing."

Laughing, Dylan climbed to his knees and swiped the box of string. They stared at one another for a few long seconds, and Chris could feel his smile widening. It just wouldn't go away. Wouldn't even lessen.

Dylan pulled his gaze away suddenly. "Till our next round," he said quietly, and Chris wasn't quite sure he was talking about the lantern-making competition.

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Chris grinned and moved back up the path toward the gleaming lanterns. Their team kicked ass, in the end. Though mostly because Dylan's team had trouble stringing on their cellophane...

God, he was smiling like crazy. He wasn't sure when he'd last felt so... so elated. It was as if his blood skipped and danced, making his insides itch.

*Because Mary had agreed to renew his lease on Bennington Way...*

The counselors herded kids to the boats for curfew, and Dylan stayed behind to help clean up. As always.

Chris glanced at the silhouette in front of the giant dragon-themed lantern. Orange-gold flickered behind Dylan as he waved to the rowing kids just before they slipped out of view.

Chris cut across the grass toward him. "You love cleaning up, don't you?"

The silhouette turned to face him—except now, he wasn't just an outline. From here, the lanterns cast soft light on Dylan's sharp nose, strong jaw, arching brow. Arms folded.

"Why would you say that?" came Dylan's gravelly, amused voice.

"Why else do you always offer to help?"

"Someone has to do it."

"You could have asked any one of your employees."

Close—half-a-foot close—Chris stopped.

Dylan looked out toward the shimmering navy lake. Copper strands in his dark hair glowed.

Chris's skin tingled and tension stretched between them, sudden and sharp. Dylan shifted and, slowly, he drew his gaze to him. His mouth opened, poised to say something. Chris flinched. Something serious gleamed in his neighbor's eye. Whatever he was going to say, it would be game-changing, and... and...

Leaning in, Chris took the words away.

His tongue stole inside Dylan's mouth, twisting, seeking, exploring. They grabbed each other, groins surging forward.

Chris fought the urge to liquefy in those strong arms and sink deeper into the embrace.

The kiss gained speed, gained need, and their hands were seeking flesh under their shirts. Chris's skin sang. Kisses with Dylan were intense. Never had they been like this before...

Hands tangled in his hair, and the slight sharp pull had him moaning. Resting their foreheads together, they both caught their breath.

Dylan chuckled. "One hundred and seventy-two."

Something pissed Chris off about that number. Like it was an intruder, and it didn't fucking belong there. Not *that* time.

But what-the-shit-ever, right?

He snagged Dylan into another kiss, and another: 173, 174, 175, 176... He kept going, languid kisses turning into hot, hard little nips on his lips and then over his jaw, down his neck. 188, 189, 190, 191, *more*.

His fingers roamed over Dylan's shirt; he undid the buttons, leaving kisses in their place against his hard chest. Shirt undone, Chris resumed kissing Dylan's neck as he drew his hands under the fabric and pushed it off his shoulders.

His lips moved back to Dylan's chest. God, his skin was so warm, firm, and yet... it pebbled with goosebumps under his lips. He liked that he could do that to him.

Reaching a nipple, he flicked out his tongue. A sharp intake of breath and a hand threading into the back of his hair had Chris taking the nipple into his mouth and sucking.

The moan that came had Chris's cock straining against his jeans. He shifted, dropping slowly to his knees, kissing a path down past Dylan's navel.

He reached to the belt blocking his path, hands poised to pull it off, and—

And what the fuck was he *doing*?

Why did it pull at him so achingly to continue? To take his... *neighbor* in his mouth and...

*Make him yell out my name! My name from his lips...*

Chris jerked back, hurriedly getting to his feet. "Keep your fucking pants on. I still feel nothing."

*Nothing.*

Fuck.

He strode toward his house and didn't look back.

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## **Dylan**

Dylan grabbed his shirt and shoved it back on. The door slammed shut just as he began jogging after Chris.

He rang the doorbell, and when that did nothing, pounded on the hard wood. How he wished he had on him the key Chris had given him a few weeks back. "Come on, Chris. Open up. We're not sixteen anymore. We have to talk about this."

There came a shuffle from behind the door, and that's when Dylan knew the guy was right there, listening.

He stopped pounding, flattening his hand on the wood and leaning into it, as if he could whisper through. "Please, let's just talk."

Chris cracked his door open, but the chain stopped Dylan from pushing his way in.

"Thank you," Dylan said, content with something at least. But before he could continue, Chris spoke.

"You win, Halsworth. I give up. I'm wrong. Jason could be right. The 500 kiss thing doesn't as hell work for me, but it's not to say it couldn't work on some other guy. Now, we're done. Game over. Goodbye."

"Wait—"

The door shut in his face. Dylan leaned his forehead against it, his breath bouncing off the wood back to him. He wanted to tell Chris the rest. Wanted to tell him what he'd been about to at the lanterns, before their kiss.

Now it would have to wait.

Dylan retreated from the porch and turned off the lantern lights, but his stomach was knotted tight, and he couldn't shake off the ghost of Chris's kisses.

Damn, what he had to say couldn't wait long.

Picking his way to his dinghy, he devised a way to get Chris to listen...

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Crack of dawn the next morning, Dylan texted Jeff. Once he'd heard back, he took his pre-packed hiking pack and shoved it into his jeep. It would be quicker to row across the lake than to drive the ten minutes around it, but for his plan to work, he needed wheels.

In the driveway, he put the brake on and left the car running. House key in hand, he unlocked the back door and snuck inside. The foyer echoed his steps. "Chris? It's me," he called out as he beelined for Chris's bedroom—the same one he'd had as a kid, the one that faced the lake. And his place.

"...kidding me," came Chris's mumbled voice.

Dylan pushed the bedroom door open just as Chris shoved a pillow over his head.

"You need to get up, Montgomery. Something's happened to your cabin. There was a report of fire—"

That got Chris leaping to his feet. "What? Shit, what happened? Is anyone hurt?"

The pure concern on the guy's face almost made Dylan crack and confess there was no such fire. Almost.

He'd apologize later.

Chris pulled on some jeans over his boxers but didn't bother with any shirt over his dark vest. He shoved his feet into a pair of boots. "I have to get there—"

"My jeep's running, I'll get you there. Take your keys."

Chris barely looked at him, but inclined his head, grabbed his keys, and when they reached the driveway, jumped into the passenger seat.

Dylan drove quickly the fifteen minutes into Montgomery woods.

Wiping his eyes of sleep, Chris ripped out a yawn. "Shit, wait," he said suddenly.

Dylan gripped the wheel tightly as he rounded the last couple of corners.

"Wouldn't someone have rung *me* first? How'd you hear about..."

The silence betrayed the truth.

Staring hard at the dirt path, Dylan concentrated on driving. Nearly there, anyway.

"Halsworth, what's the meaning of this? Are you"—the laugh that came then was incredulous—"kidnapping me?"

Dylan slowed the jeep to a stop just outside the cabin. He ran his palms over the grainy rubber steering wheel and focused on the cabin gables and trimming. "Adulnapping you, really."

Chris rested his head against the headrest and looked at him. "You know I'm stronger than you, right? I could overpower you with my thumb."

"In your dreams, Montgomery." He might have been strong, but that would only make them well-matched.

"Come on. In high school,"—Chris pointed to the cabin—"I challenged you to ten pull-ups; you could barely do two."

Dylan looked pointedly at him. "A lot has changed since high school. That was a very long time ago." When their locked gazes got to be too much, Dylan glanced to the wood-surrounded cabin. They were parked close to the spot they'd last shared a tent. "Tell you what, I bet I could out pull-up you now."

Chris snorted, but there was something nervous about the way he was fidgeting.

Dylan clicked open his seat belt and hopped out of the car. "Let's do this thing."

Within seconds, Chris was out of the car and—in faux confidence—charged past him to the cabin, keys jangling. "You're on."

Grabbing his hiking pack, Dylan followed. Inside, the cabin was musty. Light filtered through the windows, making the dust in the air glitter. There were two sad-looking beds, with the patchwork quilts Mrs. Montgomery had made them for their sleepovers.

Their steps creaked over the wooden floorboards.



“Looks different,” said Chris, “but still smells of pine and honey and adventure.” He dropped his keys on the bed closest to the small rectangular windows.

Above them ran the long metal pole that they'd used for everything from hanging wet clothes, to making forts, drying pasta and—well, those pull-ups.

Chris seemed to have frozen in the middle of the room, their pull-up challenge momentarily forgotten.

Dropping his hiking pack at the side of the bed, Dylan quietly picked up Chris's keys, fingering through them to the right one.

Chris turned sharply toward him but didn't seem to notice the keys in his hand. “Long time since it's been you and me in here.”

Dylan held his gaze. Maybe he wouldn't need the keys? Maybe Chris would listen to him without them.

He stepped forward, but just as he opened his mouth, Chris jerked back, cutting over him. “Let's up the challenge. Twenty-five pull-ups. I'll start.” Turning his back, Chris reached for the pole and gripped. His muscles rippled as he heaved himself into his first pull-up. “One.”

Dylan clutched the keys tighter and after two pull-ups, snuck back to the door. Sliding the key into the lock, he twisted, locking them in.

“Three. Four. Five. Piece of cake, this. Six. Gonna crack me up watching you. Seven. Really think you can make twenty-five?”

Dylan unlatched the window, pushing it open as far as it would go, which wasn't much more than five inches. As he extended his arm out, the keys suddenly jangled.

“Eight—what the—?” Chris dropped, spinning quickly around.

Not wasting a second, Dylan flung the keys as far outside as he could.

“What the hell?” Chris jumped on the bed next to him, staring out the window to where his keys lay twinkling in a spot of sun. Then he leaped toward the door—

“It's locked,” Dylan said, calmly moving to the edge of the bed.

Chris tried pulling anyway, then with a grunt he jumped on the bed and tried to wrangle out of the window. The bed wobbled under Dylan with each of Chris's efforts to get out. The window was impossibly small for his broad

frame, and with a grunt, he gave up. He slithered to the floor and paced the small space between the beds. "Why?"

"Because I want us to talk. Talk without one of us running away."

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## Chris

Twisting his back towards Dylan, Chris resumed his pull-ups. He pulled so high, his hair brushed the open beams above with every 'up'.

He had to work out the frustration. Shit. How could Dylan have locked them in and thrown away the key?

The air in here was thick with Dylan already. He was there wherever Chris looked around. Laughing in the corner by the fireplace, lounging on his bed reading a book, at the small table beating him at checkers, hunched on the floor with him sipping at pop and reading comics.

He didn't need to be locked up with adult Dylan, too. It was already too much.

"Eleven. Twelve..." Pull-ups weren't helping to erase the memories of the last three weeks, or of them as kids...

Those memories were why he couldn't bear the thought of Bennington Way being leased to anyone else... They were why he came out here and sat in his car, just looking...

A sharp breath tugged at him, and he struggled with the next pull-up. Gritting his teeth, he strained through it, adjusted his grip and continued.

Every time he counted his pull-ups, he couldn't help it, he relived each of their kisses. He swallowed, pulled up again, and forced out "Fourteen—"

Something tickled his hair.

Probably a dust bunny—

It moved, and Chris hung, frozen. "Dylan?"

Though Dylan had quietly let him steam out his aggression, he was quick to answer, bed springs groaning as he shifted. "Yeah?"

"Is there, um, like, something on my head?"

Chris willed himself to let go of the pole and shake his hair free of whatever it was, but he couldn't. He'd seized up, and the thought—the thought that it could be—

It moved again, touching his neck.

“Get it off, get it off,” Chris breathed.

Dylan was already behind him, he could feel his warm presence there. The fingers touching his side. “Just a second, almost got him.”

A shudder rippled through him, and those fingers tightened while others moved at his neck. “Please say it’s not a spider. Not a spider.”

“It’s... not... a spider.”

Halsworth couldn’t lie for shit.

“Got it.”

When Chris heard the window shutting, he finally allowed himself to drop to the floor. He shuddered again. Dylan returned to his spot at the edge of the bed, resting his elbows on his thighs, and clasping his hands together. Slowly, he looked up.

Chris shrugged. “I mean, thanks. For getting rid of the spider.”

“Just your harmless garden variety.”

He looked all around him for more and then slunk just a little closer to Dylan. Closer still. At the hiking pack, he stopped. “What’s in this thing? Just how long did you plan to keep me here?”

Dylan grabbed the bag and opened its clasps. “Just until this evening. I arranged for Jeff to save us around sunset.”

Out of the bag, Dylan pulled some sliced bread and cheese, apples, and—Chris laughed—a six-pack of Mountain Dew.

With a grin, Dylan tossed him one of the cans. They snapped their drinks open at the same time. Chris drank, but Dylan leaned back and rested his on the windowsill.

Gulping down the mouthful of liquid, Chris fiddled with the can ring. Then, sighing, he rested his drink on the bench adjacent to the cabin bathroom.

He slumped next to Dylan on the bed, shoulder-to-shoulder, but the mattress dipped, bringing them even closer.

To stop him from toppling off balance, Dylan braced a hand on Chris’s leg, close to his knee. A strong, warm pressure. Chris stared at the hand as it lifted a bit and drew slowly, lightly up his thigh.

Dylan's shuddering breath whispered over his stubble...

Shutting his eyes, Chris felt himself leaning toward those lips. Dylan's nose was so close to touching his, he could feel the short distance tickling his skin.

"I'll be the first to admit it," Dylan said softly, words that had Chris opening his eyes again.

"Admit what?" he said, still hovering, still almost kissing.

"I like it. The kisses matter."

A shiver raced down his arms, down his legs, right to his groin. He felt each one of Dylan's words. Felt relieved to hear them.

Felt the same.

"I've thought it for a while now," Dylan continued. "Maybe even since the beginning."

Chris choked on a breath. "So... what, only two hundred kisses to steal your heart?"

Dylan leaned closer, lips pressed to the bottom of his ear. "Only *one*."

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## Dylan

Dylan fell back against the bed at Chris's shove. A hard weight settled on him, and lips dragged down his neck, peppering it with kisses. Salting them with little nips of teeth.

"I like it, too," he whispered into the curve between his neck and shoulders. "Fuck, but you are the most addictive, beautiful, frustrating man I've ever known and I... I want more of you. All the time. Row your dinghy to me every night and stay right at my side. Stay for breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. And..." Chris pulled Dylan's hands above his head and laced the fingers of one hand through both of his. He swept a kiss over his lips as he pinned Dylan down. "Don't leave me again. I couldn't bear missing you all over again..."

Dylan's voice came out rough, touched. "You missed me?" A wave of something tingly and warm settled close to his skin so Chris's next kiss sparked, like live wires.

"Hell yes. And when my parents died, I... got so angry that you weren't there. So angry at myself that I couldn't tell you I needed you."

Dylan tried to sit up, but Chris kept him firmly to the bed. "Let me go?"

Chris shook his head. "No."

"I want to hug you, Chris."

"That's... why I can't let you up. I don't want to fall apart. I'm stronger than that."

Dylan sighed. "Come down then."

When Chris lowered a kiss on him, Dylan murmured softly against his lips. "I'll never doubt your strength. But you don't have to be strong all the time." At his ear, he added, "I can catch you."

Chris held himself rigidly for a breath, and then his weight sagged onto him. "I'm sorry, too, you know," Chris said. "I hurt your feelings back then. I was stupid and scared, of *us*. I came here that night..."

Dylan stilled. "You did?"

"You were sitting on the porch with a single rose. You were beautiful, and I wanted to go over to you, but..." He cleared his throat. "I just couldn't. I knew if I did, I'd screw it up, and then I'd lose my best friend. I'm sorry about what I did to you. Sorry I didn't handle it well."

"We were young and stupid, I guess. But did you really expect we'd still be friends after ditching me like that?"

"Yes—no. I mean... I knew you'd be mad for a while, but I thought you'd get over it. I was gonna say something, but I wasn't sure how, and then when you caught me kissing McHay... I felt stupid, and angry—because you got so mad, and I yelled at you to wait so I could explain but you didn't, and..." Chris loosened his grip on Dylan's hands. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

"We both did." Dylan wrapped his arms tightly around him, keeping him pressed to his chest. They stayed that way for a few beats, until the heaviness of their apology evaporated. Because they were in the here-and-now—there was nothing to be done about the past, but the future, well...

Muffled, close to his armpit, Chris said, "While we're on a roll, I'm sorry about your floodlight, too."

"That was you? Bastard!" But Dylan said it softly, against Chris's hair.

Chris pulled back up and grinned at him. "Actually, I think I have to take that last apology back because if you so much as think about replacing it, I'll do it again. I've got great aim and a killer swing."

Dylan grabbed a fistful of Chris's tank top and yanked him into another kiss, this time arching against the man, letting him feel how much he ached for him.

Chris rubbed their hard groins together, his breath hitching.

Cool fingers crept under his shirt, caressing his skin, playing at the elastic of his briefs. Then slid to the belt. Undid it.

Buttons snapped open, those fingers dancing over his hard cock. He groaned, and a smug, beautiful grin lit up Chris's face. He wriggled down his body, grabbing at his jeans as he kissed Dylan's cock through the thin layer of material covering him.

"Stop teasing," Dylan said, threading a hand in Chris's hair and angling his head up until they were looking at each other. "Three weeks have been long enough, get inside me already. Condom is in my wallet."

There came a blur of action and sensation. They peeled off their clothes with little ceremony, dumping them in a heap on the floor. Chris spent a moment swearing as he searched for Dylan's wallet and then came back with a condom and a cocky grin. "And I see it's lubed for our convenience." He knelt between Dylan's legs, his cock standing proudly hard. With another grin, he took himself in hand and stroked, dropping his head back and breathing a low "fuck."

"Cocky, exhibitionist tease," Dylan said, shaking his head. He grabbed his own pulsing cock. "Two can play at that game."

Three firm strokes was all he got in before Chris swiped away his hand. Lowering that cheeky expression, Chris flicked out a tongue at the head of his cock.

Dylan twitched, but his next string of accusatory words was erased from him as Chris suddenly sucked him in deep. Hands explored Dylan's chest and tweaked his nipples as wet heat enveloped him and tightened.

Dylan resisted the urge to thrust his way to a quick release. But damn, he wanted this to last. He wanted to come with Chris—

Chris nuzzled a finger at his entrance and worked his way inside to the rhythm of his sucking mouth.

"Seriously," Dylan groaned. "Inside."

One last agonizingly hot suck, finger fucking him in double time, and Chris drew off him, lips swollen, gaze needy with lust. He reached for the condom nestled at Dylan's ass, ripped open the foil, and rolled it on.

"How much prep you need?" Chris asked, rubbing two fingers at his entrance.

"Forget that, I can handle it." Dylan prepped himself enough on his own.

"Nevertheless. I love watching my fingers"—a blast of sparks flooded him as Chris slid two fingers into him, brushing against his sweet spot—"disappear into you."

Dylan lifted onto one elbow and hauled Chris into a kiss, wet, hot, hurried. "Do you want me to beg?"

"Well, now that you mention it..."

"Bastard."

They kissed again.

Chris landed a palm on Dylan's chest and pushed him back against the quilt. There was a predatory look in his eyes as he positioned himself, and then a roared "Fuck, yes," as he filled Dylan with his cock.

Fisting the sheets, Dylan panted. Chris was inside him. *Chris* was coming undone because of *him*.

"More," Dylan demanded, and Chris snapped his hips into action, thrusting long and hard and hitting his spot with every stroke. "That all you got, sunshine?"

Lust deepened, and Chris growled. "Oh, I got more." The bed jerked with the thrust, banging against the wall. "And it's going where the sun don't shine."

Chris crushed him with his thrusts, and Dylan loved it. The hard, warm weight pounding into him, the slapping of their bodies, the grunts, the dirty, filthy words bouncing between them, making his skin shiver.

And then Dylan yelled, "Fuck, yes."

Their gazes caught, and Chris stared down at him with passion and need and then something so tender—

Fully sheathed, Chris leaned forward and kissed him again. "Never get enough of your kisses."

Dylan held him to his chest, their kiss slow, languid, speaking words neither of them could. *You're beautiful. Be with me. Let's make this work.*

Chris held the kiss for another moment before he couldn't hold back any more. He took Dylan's cock in his hand and stroked in time to his thrusts, working fast, faster, faster toward—

Chris came. "Dylan!"

Hearing his name combined with a gently twisted stroke sent Dylan over the edge, and his orgasm burst out of him, hitting both their chests.

Stickiness disregarded, Chris sank onto him, their bodies meshing, fitting just right together. As if he were made for Dylan and Dylan for him.

They stayed close like that; little breaths puffed against his stubble, his cheek, and it was a feeling he hoped he would get very used to.

Chris said, "We're not too young now..."

"Too young for what?" Dylan grinned. "'Cause I'm not too old I couldn't go again... in like an hour."

Chris chortled and kissed his shoulder. "I mean, for it to work out. For us. I've never been satisfied with anyone—I was waiting to find another Dylan. Another best friend."

Dylan had no words; they were trapped behind a large lump in his throat. He drew Chris's face to his and kissed him. He'd lost count of how many kisses they were at now, but his bet was they had to be close to 500.

With a grumble, Chris rolled off him and found a picnic towel Dylan had packed.

When they were come-free and dressed in their boxer briefs, Chris snuck in another kiss. And then another. Dylan let each one soak into him like sun on a warm summer day. They lay next to each other sharing grins that reminded Dylan of their youth, when they would share the bed after freaking each other out with ghost stories.

Chris brushed a kiss on Dylan's shoulder. His gaze seemed to be focused on the windows. "What are you looking at?"

Chris shook his head. "I'm too damn stubborn sometimes. Thanks for locking us in here."



"I wasn't sure how I'd actually get you inside." Dylan laughed and bumped their noses lightly together. "I'm relieved you're so competitive. It really helped me imprison you in here."

Laughing, Chris slowly drew away, swinging his legs off the bed. "About that... we never really settled that bet."

Dylan shuffled into a sitting position. "Go on, then." Not like he could tire of watching Chris as his muscles flexed and sweat sheened his skin.

Chris jumped up, catching the bar. He smoothly finished his twenty-five pull-ups. "There," he said with a haughty descent. "Kiss that."

Perched at the head of the bed, back resting against the wall as he admired the view, Dylan laughed. "Nah, I'd rather just kiss you. I can still barely do two pull-ups. Nice watching you though."

"What? You mean..." Chris pounced on him, hitting his stomach and side with playful punches, like in the old days... "I'm stronger than you. I want to hear you say it."

"Nuh-uh, never gonna happen."

"Then I'm gonna pin you down for three seconds and prove it..."

They rolled around, each as determined as the other not to be pegged. Chris tumbled off the bed with Dylan on top of him, but he didn't find purchase for long. Twisting, turning, ducking, shoving, they kept at it until they were both exhausted, lying side by side.

"Truce?" Chris said. "I mean, for now."

Dylan rolled on top of him. "How about no?"

"Bastard."

But Chris didn't push him away. He drew Dylan nearer and nipped his lips. "One thing before we start round two."

"What's that?"

Chris blushed lightly and clenched his jaw, as if he knew he was red and hated it. "Can I help out at camp some more? I mean, you know, maybe run a baseball session or ten?"

A deep smile pulled at Dylan. "You really *do* love having kids around. Mr. Montgomery, you give me the best surprises."

“So that’s a yes?”

“More than a yes, Chris. It’s a promise.”

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*CHRISTMAS – half a year later*

### **Chris**

Christmas day had Chris dragging Dylan out into the snowplowed yard toward his boat shed. The shed he’d kept the man out of for months. And it was no easy feat.

“It’s done? I can finally see?” Dylan asked, *again*. Seemed the guy was super-excited.

Chris swallowed his smirk and tugged Dylan into the shed. A tarpaulin cloaked his mahogany runabout.

“I never thought I’d see the day you’d let me in here,” Dylan said, curiously rounding the covered boat. “Can I take a peek?”

Chris uncovered the beauty, but once he was done, his gaze was all on Dylan.

The man blinked several times, first in awe of the boat, and then as if he were choking on emotion. Chris knew exactly what had done it, too. He’d hoped for so much.

“You named your boat after me?”

“Because it’s a one and only.”

Dylan laughed, but it was the soft, touched kind of laugh. He reached out to touch the bow. “Can I?”

“Yeah. But I need you to promise something, Halsworth.”

“What’s that, *Montgomery*?”

A shared grin. And then: “I want to take you out in it sometime—”

His “but” got cut off at Dylan’s enthusiastic: “Will you let me drive?”

Chris just laughed. “That’s the thing I need you to promise me. No way ever will you drive my boat.”

“What?” Dylan pouted, but he didn’t seem too upset. Probably because he knew himself how uncoordinated he was out on the water. “Why not?”

“Dude, I love you, right—but you suck at steering.”

Dylan faced him sharply. “What did you say?”

“I said you suck at steering.”

Dylan backed him up against the runabout. Their noses met. The kiss curled Chris's toes.

“I love you, too.”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*A born and raised New Zealander, Anyta Sunday has been exploring the literary world since she started reading Roald Dahl as a kid. Inspired, stories have been piling up in her head ever since. Fast forward to her mid-twenties and jump a few countries (Germany, America, and back again), and she started putting pen to paper. When she's not writing or chasing her kid around, she's reading, hiking, watching a Joss Whedon series, attempting pilates, or curling up with her two cats. Updates on her projects can be found at Anyta's website.*

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