

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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IN THE RIGHT LIGHT

GB Gordon

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

IN THE RIGHT LIGHT

By G.B. Gordon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

Two young men in gym shorts, one slightly younger than the other, cuddling on a bed with two small dogs. Smiling and happy.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have struggled so hard to get to where they are in this place and time. Their differences were always a focus to those that wanted them apart. Family for one, Friends the other. But little do they know those vast differences are what make them perfect for each other. Complete. They are sure to lose one or the other along the way but they'll always have what is most important of all, each other. Please tell me the story of this handsome calm man (white shorts) and this exuberant, blithe artist (grey shorts).

Please be a Happy Ending. ;) Some good smexing and everything else, drama or supernatural/shifter can be up to you! Also, what type of artist Grey Shorts is, painter or sculptor or glass blower is all up to you too.~ Have fun! :)

Sincerely,

Judianna

PS. Those puppies are little orphans Grey Shorts found one day on his way to his apartment. They were so cute, and it was raining; he couldn't just leave them there. And in any case... who still leaves two puppies on the street?! He took it as a sign that these two were meant to be his.

PPS. Some wall and or desk smexing is always welcome. >:3

Thank You so much!

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hot and sexy, instant chemistry, fluffy, visual arts, landscaping, blue collar, men with pets, family drama, HFN

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IN THE RIGHT LIGHT

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In the right light, at the right time, everything is extraordinary.

~Aaron Rose

How his old man had managed to get them hired for a fancy-ass job like this, James couldn't imagine. Huge house. Cliff-top, river view. The land around it measured in acres, when what Carver & Sons Landscaping usually dealt with was measured in yards. Or even square feet. Not just the usual lawn mowing and hedge cutting here. The possibilities spun him around at every corner, looking this way and that. A forgotten need made his throat tight. And was that hope stirring under the rubble in his chest? Only to be ground back down, of course. This time by the architect's exquisite and presumably hand-stitched Italian flip-flops.

"A house like this," Sarah Holt said with a don't-fuck-with-me smile, "needs gardens that make a statement."

The old man was nodding as if he knew all about it, fooling no one. James looked away, embarrassed, and caught his brother's eyes. Rob briefly pulled one brow up, a silent comment about Holt's artfully frayed jeans, peasant blouse and the bandanna that held her dark hair back in a ponytail. James's lips twitched, but he shook his head. The old man and Rob might have her pegged as a leftover hippie, but James didn't buy it. This one took no prisoners.

Holt was leading them along the side of the house towards the river, sketching a picture of wide lawns, arbors, and statuary fit for a Roman villa. "A large magnolia tree right here. That'll fit well with the gentle slope and iron scrollwork. With branches hanging all the way to the ground and laden with flowers. A bench, maybe, or a patio set. We'll see."

The old man took notes, but didn't comment on her choice of tree.

Jesus Christ, Dad, tell her! The windswept plateau might be heaven on a sultry June day, but come February... "It'll never survive," James tried.

Holt, her deluxe vision unexpectedly interrupted, narrowed her eyes.

“The magnolia. Not hardy enough. Won’t last through the winter.”

She raised an eyebrow at the old man, who threw James a furious glance before he said, “Some of the newer hybrids are bred for our climate. I’ll look into it, Ms. Holt.” Another glowering look in his direction told James he hadn’t heard the last of this. He shrugged. Even zone four hybrids wouldn’t make it up here. The wide lawns would leave the rest of the vegetation at the mercy of the winds, and her arbors would be swept into the river below like so many matchsticks.

Rob put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “Just shut up and tag along. Why do you even still try? He sure as hell doesn’t appreciate it.”

No, the old man didn’t. Never had. James wondered what the owner of the place was like, if he knew what he was getting for his money, or if he even cared.

To give this Holt chick her due, she certainly had a good eye, might even manage to anchor her arbors against a March storm, but she knew nothing about plants and their needs. Which should have been where Carver & Sons came in, of course. Expertise and advice. Holt might have listened. She had a generous mouth and lines in the corners of her eyes that hinted at easy laughter or at least a sense of humour.

The more they were shown of the property with its dregs of previous failed gardening attempts, the more James itched to be given free reign over its landscaping. Ericaceous shrubs, boulders and natural stone walls to break the wind, mosses and lichens... He could make this work; make “a statement” even, given half a chance. But as soon as Holt left them, the old man rounded on James and stabbed a bony finger in his chest. “How many times do I have to tell you, if I want your opinion I’ll ask for it?”

James turned away without a word. They’d really fought this battle way too many times. But his father grabbed him by the arm.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.” The fact that he had to tilt his head back these days to look James in the eye didn’t improve his mood. “You give

the client what he wants. Or do you want them to back out? We need this contract.”

“I know,” James said. “But the contract’s worth shit if it ruins our name.”

“Well, it won’t.”

“Half her fucking trees are gonna die during the first winter,” James said, pointing back at the imaginary magnolia.

“Then we’ll plant new ones. Keeps us in business. These people are too rich to care.”

“Which is why you’re having them pay for irrigation as well, instead of letting me plant for drought?”

“Don’t raise your voice at me, you puppy. When I’m dead and buried you can do with the company whatever you want. If Rob lets you, that is. For now, you’ll do as you’re told.”

James pressed both palms against the seams of his jeans, so they wouldn’t curl into fists. It hadn’t been this hard to keep his mouth shut since he’d left school. He was so fucked.

“Why you even sent me off to college if you couldn’t care less about what they taught me, I’ll never understand.”

“That was certainly a huge waste of money,” his father agreed and turned to walk to the truck, where Rob was already waiting.

James hesitated. He would have loved to wave them off and say “I’ll walk”, but it was a long way down off the escarpment and back to town. Reluctantly, he trailed behind, but motioned for Rob to go get in first. The more space between him and the old man right now, the better.

“One day you’ll give the both of you a heart attack,” Rob whispered in his ear, grinning. Right. All a big joke to Rob. He didn’t give a shit about anything. James almost envied him sometimes. Certainly made things easier.

As the old man steered the truck down the driveway and access road, James threw a last glance back at the patchy front lawn, the weeds in the

gravel, and the dead spots in the boxwood hedges. He firmly shut his mind to any dreams of native dogwoods, willows, crepe myrtle and teaberry that would do so well on the windswept plateau. What a waste.

Mom was at her most steely this morning, explaining her ideas with choppy gestures and listening with curt nods whenever Danny made a comment or suggestion. Danny grinned. It was, of course, the electrician's fault. The stupid idiot had come in to check the wiring and bring it up to code and had visibly recoiled from a woman talking shop with him. Nothing ruffled his mother's feathers like people who treated women like they couldn't possibly know anything about wiring, or construction, or any other male dominated field. It made her ice up instantly, to the point where people had been known to reach for their jackets on hot summer days. Too bad the electrician had fled upstairs; Danny would have enjoyed the show.

They were just laying down the broad strokes, style wise; Mom wouldn't be able to make any decisions on his lighting details until the structural stuff was done, but this way they could both let their creative ideas percolate and know they'd be on the same page later, and that their designs would come together.

"Now, sweetheart." Mom closed the book of wallpaper samples she'd been using to highlight her vision. "I really have to talk to a man about a banister for the main staircase. And you have to look at the gardens." She went through a box filled with paper rolls, pulled one out and tapped it against Danny's shoulder. "Anything you need to know is in here."

"My copy?" Danny asked as he took the plans.

She nodded. "Scribble to your heart's content. Go wild. Off with you, shoo. And be careful of prowling, ill-tempered landscapers."

Danny laughed, "Will do."

Still grinning, Danny stepped through the double French doors onto the terrace. It was another sultry day, but way more bearable up here than down in the city. Pretty nice, actually. A light breeze ruffled the leaves and carried the

sweet scent of some flower or other. Danny got out his sunglasses against the glare and unrolled the plan, his mother's precise sketches and notes as familiar as his own.

He checked the compass rose on the plan to get his bearings and commit to memory the view from the terrace and where the light would be coming from at the different times of day. Then he took the three steps down to the grounds and started wandering, marking views, angles and distances, trying to ignore the existing layout and envision the one his mother had drawn for him.

Machine noise sounded from the east side of the property, and when Danny walked around the shrubbery, he saw two men hard at work taking out some large bushes. The first guy was tall and skinny, feeding cut branches into a shredder that spewed wood chips into the back of what looked like an electric cart. The other man... Danny swallowed hard. The other man stood with his back to Danny, swinging a pickaxe at the root of a huge lilac bush. Feet in heavy work boots planted firmly apart, muscular thighs and ass clad in jeans washed almost white, a plaid shirt hanging out of the back pocket. Bare torso tanned and gleaming with sweat, muscles bunching with every swing of the pickaxe. Danny tried the swallowing thing again, but his throat was way drier than the weather warranted. Holy hell, this guy was pushing all his buttons.

Skinny guy turned off the shredder when the cart was full and drove off. The sudden silence was deafening until the rhythmic thud of the pickaxe became audible. And hypnotic. Danny was staring, but he couldn't help it.

The man leaned his pickaxe against a rock and turned to the side to grab a spade. He spotted Danny and raised a questioning eyebrow.

And he looked just as breathtaking from the front as he had from the back.

It took every ounce of will Danny could muster to make himself move and walk over. He wished he'd taken his water bottle outside with him. He cleared his throat and managed a reasonably steady, "Morning."

The guy nodded a greeting in return. Wrists crossed over the T-handle of the spade, gloved hands relaxed, one foot up on the spade's blade. A vague flash of recognition shot through Danny. He'd seen the man somewhere

before. The dark eyes, the five o'clock shadow. His chest was covered with the barest hint of dark fuzz, just enough to outline his pecs and—

“Anything I can do for you?”

Danny barely suppressed a startled jump. Caught staring again. Even the man's voice gave him goosebumps. *Say something, idiot.* “I, uhm, heard the shredder.” He vaguely pointed over his shoulder to where he'd come from, desperately trying to string two thoughts together. “Only polite to introduce myself.” He lost his train of thought again somewhere in the bottomless depths of dark brown eyes that now crinkled at the corners in an amused smile, and dear God, could this guy please stop getting any sexier right flipping now or Danny's heart would just stop. He jerked his hand forward to break the spell. “Danny Holt. I'll be doing the lighting. Inside and landscape.”

Slowly pulling one of his heavy work gloves off, the man never took his eyes off Danny's. “James Carver. I'll be doing the digging.” His eyes widened ever so slightly when their hands touched, a touch that went through Danny's whole body, straight down to his balls and then his toes. Rough and calloused palms, firm grip. Carver let him go and quickly pulled his glove back on.

Now what? Leave? That was it? It couldn't be. At least—yes—phone number. Danny dug his wallet out of his back pocket, fumbled for one of his business cards, and held it out to Carver. He wanted to simply slide it in the man's back pocket, but he didn't want to get clocked.

Carver took the card and looked at the white on black *Fiat Lux - Light Art and Lighting Design*. His eyebrow went up again. “Light art?” He said, like he might have said “Seriously?”

Danny squirmed. This wasn't going well. “You know, sculptures, installations.” He cast around for words, needing Carver to understand. “Bruce Munro? No? Michael Hayden? Yochai Matos?”

Carver shook his head, then barked a short laugh. “Fucking magnolia's getting a lamp, I guess.” With that cryptic remark he turned away. “Lilac ain't digging itself,” he said as he hefted the spade. Down the path, Danny could hear the motor of the electric cart. Carver was back at his task before it came

around the corner. Skinny hadn't come back alone, but with an older man who looked enough like him to be his father. Mom had said something about the landscapers being a family business.

Danny gave a friendly wave and headed back to the house to get a drink and his breath back. He pulled the water bottle from his backpack and drained it in one go. When he turned, his mother was leaning against the doorframe watching him with a hard-to-read expression in her eyes.

"What?" Danny didn't really feel like talking right now, especially not Mom talk.

"I did warn you, kiddo," she said.

"He wasn't prowling. And not particularly ill-tempered, either. Except something about a magnolia."

His mother was rummaging around in the box with the floor plans. "Yes, he seems quite hung up on that magnolia. I wonder if I should listen to him about that."

"You didn't tell me he was flipping gorgeous," Danny blurted out.

"I was sure you'd be able to figure that part out for yourself. Aha!" Having found the roll she'd been looking for, she disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Yeah, well, he could've used a little warning. He could have kicked himself. What the hell was wrong with him? He was good with people. The sort of moronic stuttering he'd displayed around Carver didn't happen to him. He shoved the water bottle back into its pocket so hard that the netting ripped.

And he sure as hell didn't try to impress strangers with names of artists they'd likely never heard of. He straightened slowly and stared hard at nothing in particular. Was Carver a stranger, though? That niggling feeling of having met him before was still there. The way he'd stood there, leaning on the spade like guys leaned against a bar. Bar! The Lookout, favorite gay bar in town. That's where he'd seen him. Sonofagun. Carver was gay. Suddenly that whole

instant chemistry thing made a hell of a lot more sense. And was a hell of a lot harder to ignore. Hot damn. Would he call?

James slammed the door shut, bent to untie his boots and carefully toed them off on the tray. What a day. Fuck idiots who couldn't work with what they had, but had to bend the world every which way until it broke. He stripped in the bathroom, threw the shirt and socks in the hamper, made sure the pockets of his pants were empty and came up with the kid's business card. *Light art, my ass.* He tossed the card in the trash and stepped into the shower, eager to wash the day away. He turned the temperature up as high as he could stand it and just let the water pound on his shoulders, eyes closed, feeling the bunched muscles there relax bit by bit. Trying not to think, he ran his fingers down his thigh, under his balls, then closed them around his cock and started with slow, even strokes to get rid of that other tension that had nothing to do with swinging a pickaxe all day—and everything to do with a nice ass in chinos, a pair of clear eyes, same color as the woods in summer, and a smile full of rainbows and unicorns. *Ah, hell.* His strokes got faster as his breath hitched and his balls tightened. With a soft moan, he let his head fall back against the tiles. The water ran across his chest and stomach and washed the cum off his hand. He stood for a minute longer to let his heartbeat slow, then turned the water off. He was getting worked up over nothing. A stupid kid in flip-flops, barely out of university, who thought he was an artist. With light. *Joke's on you, Jamie.*

He ran a towel through his hair, slipped on a pair of ancient sweat pants, and went to get a beer. Grabbing *The Ontario Naturalized Garden* that he'd brought home from the library the other day, he settled on the couch and stared into space.

He hadn't thought they made kids quite that guileless any more. Nothing hidden about Danny Holt. No doubt he was into guys, little doubt he'd been interested by this guy in particular. Every feeling had played straight across his face. His reactions in bed would be mind-blowing. Which had nothing to do

with native Ontarian plants. James shook his head. *Stop thinking about him. Get a grip.*

His fingers had itched to grab those short, dark curls, touch those soft lips, made for kissing, for running a thumb along them, lick them—He'd have to stay away from the kid. Hell, a simple handshake had gone through him like lightning. And what the fuck was light art? He shut his book with a disgusted snort and fired up the refurbished laptop he'd bought at the used computer store last winter, trying to remember one of the names Danny had mentioned. Munroe. Bruce or Bruno? Googling "light art" he found a Bruce Munro and searched for images. What he saw made him sit up and slowly click through the pictures. That was fucking magical. He sent a silent apology Danny's way and spent the next half hour looking at light installations and exhibits, and getting glimpses of a world he hadn't even known existed.

When his bottle was empty he stretched his shoulders, went back into the bathroom and fished the little card out of the trash can. *Light art, eh? Who would've thunk it.*

"C'mon, ladies. I'm not waiting for anyone," Danny called with a chuckle. The dogs were practically falling over each other to get out. Hard to remember the pathetic little wads of matted Shih Tzu fur they'd been just over a year ago. Good thing it had been a row of mild days that January or they'd have frozen to death by the time Danny's run had taken him past the spot where they'd been left. Lux still bore a scar on one paw from frostbite. He knelt for a quick rub behind their ears and to put their leashes on. "Hold still, girls, or we're not going. And you do need a spa day."

Once they were across the road and in the park, he let them run free. As always, Lux, raced way ahead and then back, and ahead, and back, ad infinitum, while Lumen stayed by his side. At the other end of the park they both sat and waited for him to hook the leash back on their collars; they knew the way. And they loved Claire and possibly her treats enough to pull on the leash, so Danny gave in and jogged with them to the front door.

“You’re right, they do need a haircut,” Claire said when she saw them. “In with you all.”

Danny hugged her. “I really appreciate that you’re taking them to the groomer for me. I have no clue where I’d find the time this week.”

“Well, stay for half an hour at least. I’ve made breakfast.”

Danny groaned. He could manage half an hour, but he didn’t want her to give him the third degree. And she would. His own fault, too. He couldn’t seem to stop thinking about James Carver, and the name might’ve slipped out a number of times these past few days.

“Maple pancakes,” Claire singsonged.

That made him laugh. “You win.”

Sure enough, when he followed the girls into the kitchen, she asked, “So, how’s the Cliff House project going?”

Danny rolled his eyes. “Nice try. I might even answer that, if you can look me in the eyes and tell me you’ve not been talking to your brother about me.”

She had the grace to blush. “He says your landscaper trawls the clubs for one-nighters.” She shook her head. “And their company’s not exactly top of the trees, is it?”

Danny poured himself some coffee. “You know them?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “The Google knows. Tiny outfit. Which doesn’t have to be a bad thing, mind you. But apparently the company’s been in the same family for three generations and hasn’t exactly evolved since it was founded. Good thing pesticides are banned now. I’m sure they’d still be using those too.”

Danny had googled the Carvers, too, of course. No website. But his mother had known of a couple of their customers, and yeah, very fifties, the yards. He doubted they would’ve been hired if the season wasn’t in full swing already, with landscapers backlogged until Halloween. He silently loaded some pancakes on his plate, drowned them in butter and maple syrup and tried not to think too much about one particular Carver.

“You’re thinking about him right now, aren’t you?” she said, leaning against the counter, head cocked to one side.

“Claire! Stop analyzing me.”

“But one-night stands. That’s so not you. And Eric says he’s gruff, and tight-lipped.”

“Maybe I’m into the strong, silent type.” He was not going to argue one-nighters with her, friend or not.

“No, Danny, they suck at relationships. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“I appreciate the concern. I do. But I met the man exactly once. Introductions were made, I shook his hand and gave him my card. That was it. Jesus H. Christ.”

She looked as if she was going to say more, but in the end she kept it to a shrug and a “Don’t get your heart broken.”

Danny stabbed his fork into the pile of pancakes. “I’m so going to kill Eric,” he said under his breath.

She pushed herself off the counter. “We love you,” she said, giving Danny a quick hug.

“I know,” he said. “Love you, too. Just don’t overdo the mom thing, okay? One mother in my life’s plenty. Especially one I work with on the same project for the moment.”

“I’ll try. No guarantees.”

Danny rolled his eyes at her.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful,” she said.

Danny threw his napkin down, leaving his half-eaten stack of pancakes. “You’re a pair of drama queens. Seriously. Listen to yourself. I’m outta here. I’ll be late as it is.” He stopped in the door. “Thanks though, for...” He pointed at the dogs.

Claire scooped up Lux and waved at him with one of her paws. “All good. Go already.”

Danny jogged back to his car and drove up the escarpment in record time. He wasn't much later than if he'd been stuck in the rush hour crowd. Had to remember that.

Carver's truck was already parked in the drive, and that was enough for Danny's heart to skip a beat. *Focus*. He'd need some kind of cart to lug his equipment across the property. There was a shed at the back that might yield something. He went around the side of the house, listening for telltale sounds of a shredder or a chainsaw and hearing only bird song.

The shed turned out to be mostly empty, dim after the sunlight outside. Bare plywood walls, plastic sacks, buckets, a rake, some flowerpots. No cart or wheelbarrow in sight. He thought, not for the first time, that he should invest in a trolley of some sort. Something he could fold into the trunk of the car. Well, he wouldn't need the spotlights until it was dark. Might as well start to take some of the measurements, so he could coordinate with the landscapers about cables and outlets, and see whether any area of the garden had progressed enough for some inspirational photos. He walked towards the shed door, eyes still scanning the semidarkness inside for anything useful, thoughts galloping ahead to design decisions. It would be awesome if he could somehow incorporate the cliff edge itself. Without getting himself killed, of c—"Umph."

He'd walked smack into a hard body. Hands closed around his biceps to keep him from tumbling backwards. Fresh sweat and shower gel and a pair of bottomless brown eyes. James Carver. So close. "Just, uh, looking for a wheelbarrow," Danny managed before his brain got sidetracked. His breath caught in his throat. He couldn't swallow, couldn't move at all. Carver drew him closer and kissed him. Pulled Danny's lip between his own, licked across his teeth, bit softly into Danny's lower lip. He didn't move, otherwise, never let go of Danny's arms, just nibbled, sucked and licked until Danny couldn't suppress a moan anymore. At that he let go so suddenly that Danny's knees almost gave out, and he took a step back to keep his balance.

"No," Danny mouthed, but no sound came out.

“Christ, I... I’m sorry.” Carver sounded as breathless as Danny felt. “I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t know—”

“No.” This time Danny heard himself say it. “Again.”

“It won’t—What?”

“I want you to do it again.”

He’d barely finished the sentence when Carver grabbed his arms again, shoving him backwards into the shed and against the plywood wall on the left. Danny’s head banged against the wood, but he didn’t care, because those lips touched his again. Harder now, more demanding. Tongue playing against tongue, teasing bites, and lips, wet and sloppy. He didn’t feel the wall behind him anymore. The shed, the job, everything disappeared but those calloused hands now cupping his face. Thumbs running along his jaw, down his throat. Hard body crowding him against the wall. Danny moaned again, couldn’t stop himself, but this time it didn’t make Carver stop. James. Didn’t you go to first names after first kiss? At first kiss? The hands moved down his arms, pulled his T-shirt up. Rough palms against his skin, his ribcage, thumbs circling his nipples. Danny’s brain gave up the fight, and he couldn’t care less. The kiss, the hands, nothing else mattered. He bucked his hips against the thigh that had pushed between his legs, the hard muscle pressing against his cock, making him moan again. The hands moving down to his waist, to the button.

Then James grabbed his shoulders again, turned him sideways so that he faced the back of the shed, and stepped away. “I don’t think so,” Danny heard him say as if they’d been talking about something. He couldn’t focus, couldn’t make the connection. The blood pounded in his ears.

A shadow fell across the doorway, and James turned towards it. “Rob, have you seen a wheelbarrow Holt could borrow?”

“Not that I noticed. What do you need to move?”

He’s talking to you, moron. “Lights,” Danny croaked.

“If I were you, I’d just back the car in here,” Rob said. “You got a minute, James? I could use a hand.”

“Be right with you. Let me grab a few buckets.”

Rob’s steps faded away, and James turned to Danny again. He ran his hand across the back of Danny’s neck, and touched foreheads. “Jesus Christ, Sunshine,” he whispered.

Danny still had trouble herding his thoughts. “Sorry,” he said, meaning the near discovery, not the kiss.

“No sweat. Not like Rob doesn’t know I’m gay. I just thought you might not want to be surprised in a barn tussle.” He huffed a laugh. “I’ve got to go, and I have no clue when we’re gonna finish up tonight. But I guess I’ll see you around.” With that he grabbed the buckets he’d come for and left.

Slowly, very slowly, Danny gathered his wits about him. He pushed himself off the wall he’d still been leaning against and winced as he rearranged his cock in his pants. Jesus Christ, indeed.

Fuck, his pants were too tight. What was it about Danny Holt that was so impossible to resist? Not that James was in the habit of saying no to casual sex, but at work? In a shed? That was a first. And he wasn’t so sure he could’ve stopped himself if Rob hadn’t come in. The look in those eyes had been an open invitation. And nothing—absolutely nothing—was as hot as the way that kid could completely give himself up to whatever he felt. James had never met anyone like that.

This job promised to be way more fun than he had anticipated. *Just make sure it stays fun, Jamie.*

Work kept him busy until dusk crept in between the trees, and when they wrapped up, James was surprised to see Danny’s car still on the back lawn. The trunk stood open, and a bunch of cables snaked across the lawn from the switch box at the back of the house. As James searched the bushes where they disappeared, a beam of light shot up into the sky, was adjusted downward, and dimmed until it perfectly outlined the ancient maple they’d decided to leave. In the falling darkness, it looked like the tree had been magically carved from the dusk.

Then he saw Danny, a spotlight in one hand, a cable drum in the other, unreeling the cable as he walked toward the gazebo that overlooked the cliff edge. He placed the light, adjusted it, took some readings from a light meter. Then he jotted down some notes, dug a small camera out of his pocket, snapped a picture, and readjusted the light. James stood rooted, watching in fascination as Danny pursued his vision to achieve the exact effect he was after, working his light magic in the dark garden. He was completely absorbed in his task and obviously passionate about getting it just so, accepting no short cuts or good enoughs. James surprised himself by remembering what that felt like. It had been so long. Back in college, when he'd still believed he'd be able to make a difference, be one of the up-and-coming guys in his field. Yeah, right. And if he didn't drop his lofty memories right now and haul ass back to the truck, he'd be up-and-coming walking into town.

But the mood stuck with him all the way home. It made him antsy with nowhere to go. He finally grabbed his jacket and keys and went to visit an old dream. One he'd sworn to forget when it had become clear that it would bring him nothing but unfulfilled longing. It was a good half-hour walk, even cutting through the greenbelt. No one else was out here in the dark, at least no one on two legs. He'd discovered it by chance on one of his runs, an abandoned house on a medium-large property, backing onto the trail. The greenhouse at the back had caught his eyes first. Beautiful metal scrollwork, but most of the glass broken and scattered.

He left the trail and walked through a couple of quiet streets until he came to the front of the house. A good size with a double garage, definitely room for a storefront and office, the property large enough for a landscaper to show off some of his trade. The windows and door were all boarded up and covered in graffiti, the roof would need to be replaced and the grounds completely overhauled. It was perfect.

James hadn't been back here since the old man had made it clear that he expected James to stay with the family business, like two generations of Carvers had before him. It would be Rob's one day, and family was family, and that was that. Looking at the house now and remembering Danny's single-

mindful pursuit of his art, James's responsibility to his family suddenly seemed less clear-cut. It wasn't like Carver & Sons had never had employees. The old man could just as well hire someone. It wasn't like James was doing anything but following orders. Any idiot could do that. James curled his fingers into the mesh of the construction fence that surrounded the property and took a deep breath. There was honeysuckle growing somewhere in the dark. He leaned his face against the fence. Who was he kidding? He'd never be able to put up the kind of money it took to buy the place. And fuck Danny Holt for making him forget that.

He made an effort to stay away from Danny after that. He volunteered for the muscle work during the day and hit the clubs at night for a few drinks and a quick fuck. But mostly to tire himself out enough to just crash into oblivion when he got home.

After a week of that, he overslept on a workday, barely making it out of the shower before the truck's horn sounded outside his door. Rob took one look at his unshaven face and said, "I guess we'd better stop for coffee."

"If he can party at night, he can get up in the morning." The old man didn't even take his eyes off the road.

"C'mon, Dad." Rob fiddled with his seat belt. "A drive-thru won't even slow us down."

James said nothing, just stared out the window. Rob was a good guy; he just never understood how much the old man's constant Bronx cheer grated on James's nerves. James would've preferred to skip coffee, if it would shut the old man up.

He'd long ago given up on trying to figure out why even the tiniest transgression on his side was met with endless lectures. It still got to him, though, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it. And the old man kept it up throughout the day. By the time they were packing up, the reins James kept on his temper were frayed to breaking point.

Rob waved a tardy bee out of his face as he secured the tarp in the back, and the old man turned to James. "Did you get rid of that wasp nest?"

“They’re honeybees.”

“I don’t give a shit what they are. I want to know if you got rid of them.”

“I called the experimental farm, and they’re sending a bee guy over to relocate them.”

“Re— what? I’m not paying for that.”

James almost laughed. “I know.”

“Well, Rob can just spray some stuff on it tomorrow and be done with it.”

“No, he won’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not gonna let him poison a colony of bees just because you ‘said so’. The removal doesn’t cost us anything. So, why don’t you for once just accept that I have a brain and shut the fuck up?” He was breathing hard by now and could feel his heart beat in his throat. He couldn’t remember having sworn at his father, ever.

The old man had frozen in mid-step. A pulse beat at his forehead. “You are way too much like your mother,” he said, visibly fighting to control himself. “God knows I tried to raise you right. But I’ve always been afraid her bad character would tell in the end. This is your choice now.”

“Seriously?” James’s head swam. So many things clicked into place, and so many didn’t. He latched onto the most obvious one. “Are you seriously giving me an ultimatum between the bees and the family?”

Rob inched around the truck, out of the line of fire.

The old man squared his shoulders and gave James a curt nod before turning away.

James followed his brother. A million things crowded on his tongue, “Fuck you!” being the most prominent among them.

“I’ll walk,” he said when Rob ducked into the truck. He closed the car door on his brother’s surprised face and bolted. This couldn’t possibly all be about his mother having cut and run when James was a kid. Could it? Bad character?

How full of shit could one man be? Did the old man actually believe that cheap movie script he'd been spouting? Fuck him. Fuck Rob for ducking out, and fuck the fucking landscaping business.

He'd stormed all the way to the cliff edge. No magic light in the trees tonight. He stood there for a while, watching the sky darken until the wind blowing up from the river cut through his shirt and gave him goose bumps. He felt like screaming into the void in front of him. But that wasn't him. He clamped his teeth shut and headed back. It was a long way home. Would give him time to walk off his funk.

Two of the windows on the ground floor were still lit, and a current ran through his body. Please, don't let it be Sarah Holt. Aw, fuck, who was he kidding? He was cold and messed up, and he didn't give a shit about following his own rules right now. Please, let it be Danny.

The back door was unlocked, and a sliver of light fell into the hallway from a cracked door on the left. He quietly peeked into the room, ready to vanish if it was anyone but Danny. But it was him. On the naked walls, Danny had strung up plans of the property and photos of different views at different times of day. He was standing, back half-turned to the door, chewing on his thumb, studying them. The only pieces of furniture in the room were a massive, ancient-looking desk and a kitchen chair. The kid looked good enough to eat, in his usual beige chinos, leather flip-flops and T-shirt, and James just wanted to rip it all off, see the desire explode in his hazel eyes and those soft lips part on a moan. He was giving himself a hard-on just standing here.

He knocked softly to avoid startling the kid too badly, but it made Danny jump anyway. Surprise gave way to delight when Danny turned towards him, and a bright smile spread across his face. "Hey. You're working late. How're you doing?"

James swallowed hard. God, it felt so good simply to be in the same room with Danny's smile and welcome and realness. It occurred to James, just as he opened his mouth, that "I desperately need to fuck you" might not be the thing to say. He rubbed his hand across his neck. "The others have already left," he said. "Thought I might mooch a ride."

“Sure.” Was that a flicker of disappointment in the kid’s eyes? “I should probably wrap up, anyway. Might have some better ideas with fresh eyes tomorrow.” He came towards James and drew his brows together. “You okay? You look... unstuck.” He cupped James’s face with one hand and brushed a thumb over his cheekbone, sending a shiver all the way down to James’s cock.

Unstuck. Way to put your finger right on it. Perceptive Danny. Sexy Danny. Without taking his eyes off him, James turned his head just enough to close his lips around that thumb and started sucking, watching Danny’s eyes go wide, watching him swallow, watching his lips part on a deep inhale. Hot damn.

The knuckles of Danny’s other hand brushed along the fly of James’s jeans, across his stomach and chest. His hand came to rest on James’s shoulder, massaging his trap muscle between fingers and thumb. “So tense,” he murmured, as he pulled James in for kiss. Soft and curious, exploring, tasting. It made James’s toes curl. There was no demand in that kiss, and yet James felt himself pulled further into the room, then moved backwards a few steps until the back of his thighs touched the desk. Danny’s lips whispered over the stubble on his jaw, grazed down his throat. James had no idea what he was saying, or if he was saying anything at all. Without meaning to, he allowed his eyes to close and his head to fall back. Soft nibbles on his collarbone almost distracted him from the hands on the button of his jeans, the zipper. But nothing could distract from the hand sliding into his briefs and closing around his cock. Danny’s body heat radiated through the fabric of their shirts. He slid down the length of James’s body, until he was kneeling and those soft lips touched the tip of James’s cock. The shock made James’s buttocks and stomach muscles clench. He forced his eyes open, because he desperately wanted to watch.

Danny’s eyes were closed, the look on his face that of a musician lost in his music. He kissed James’s balls, licked and sucked, slowly moving along the groin and abdomen, the sensations killing rational thought until all that was left was the pressure of the elastic behind James’s balls and the feather-soft touches of Danny’s fingers and tongue. Heat shot through James’s body when

Danny licked his cock from root to tip, then closed his lips around it and started sucking. James gulped in air and gripped the edge of the desk, because his knees suddenly needed help doing their job. Danny wrapped one hand around the shaft of James's cock, stroking in time with the movement of his head, the other hand rolled James's balls and—Jesus Christ—how did he manage to massage *there* at the same time? Danny's tongue playing all over and around the tip of his cock made breathing impossibly hard, and the rhythmic movements sucked every rational thought from James's brain like the surf at ebb tide sucked the sand out to sea. The blood in his ears sounded like surf, too.

He was getting way too close way too fast, wanted to draw this out, say something, when Danny took him so deep that his nose touched James's groin and he swallowed around his cock, once, twice. James tried to warn him, but all that came out was something between a groan and an inarticulate cry. The world went dark, James's knees buckled, and only his death grip on the edge of the desk held him upright as his whole body shuddered through the release and aftershocks.

The world slowly came back into focus. Danny was passing a painter's rag across the wood floor, smiling that sunshiny smile of his at James as he tossed the rag into a corner. At least he hadn't been clueless enough to swallow. Not that anyone giving blowjobs like that could be called clueless.

With somewhat shaky fingers James zipped himself back up, but he didn't trust himself to stand just yet. "I..." he started, looking down into Danny's wide eyes. But he had to clear his throat, because his voice didn't work right either.

"Ready for that ride now?" Danny asked with a grin that said he knew exactly what he'd done to James.

James huffed a laugh at the double meaning. He might be able to walk, if he pulled himself together. How had he lost control of the situation so quickly, and so completely?

But Danny, too, was breathing hard, and his face was flushed. His eyes turned dreamy. “That was so hot,” he said, running a hand up James’s leg. “Too hot.” His grin returned as he stood up. “I might’ve just come in my pants,” he admitted with no hint of embarrassment.

Feeling a bit ambushed, but too dazed to care, all James could do was to watch Danny collect his stuff into a carryall he slung over his shoulder and follow him out to the car.

It was fully dark on the grounds now, the yard light surrounded by mayflies. James breathed in the still warm air, sweet with the last lilac blooms, before he got in the car and buckled up. The anger he’d carried around all day was gone. Muscles heavy and sated, he felt nothing, and that was just fine.

Taking the turn onto the main road Danny asked, “Want me to drive you to your place? Or come home with me?”

James looked at him, trying to make out his face in the dark. But Danny had his eyes on the road, driving like he did everything else, with his full attention. The occasional oncoming headlights threw his profile into stark relief.

“Didn’t your mama tell you not to bring strangers home?” James murmured, mesmerized by the shadow play.

“My mama taught me to trust my instincts,” Danny said.

It sounded easy when Danny said it, and it shouldn’t. It wasn’t. Lines were getting blurred here, priorities shifting. This was all supposed to be just fun. He should go back to his own place. But the thought of his empty apartment washed over him like a bucket of cold water. “Home with you,” he heard himself say.

Danny’s heart skipped a beat. As dismissive as James had been the first time they’d met, he’d only half expected that. Even the “barn tussle” had been a bit high-handed—or had it? In any case, something had changed today;

something had given James a knock it would take him some time to come back from.

Danny wasn't naive enough to call what was between them love. Yet. But there'd been an instant strong chemistry with hints of a deeper attraction, and despite what everyone else seemed to want for him, Danny thought he'd be damned if he dropped this. He was fascinated and intrigued, to say nothing of swept off his feet by the sheer sex this guy breathed through every pore.

"You hungry?" Danny asked.

"Starving." James's voice sounded slurred, as if he'd been half asleep.

"Sushi okay?"

"Isn't that raw fish?"

Danny laughed. "Doesn't have to be. You can have chicken or just veggies in your roll. Or shrimp; those are cooked."

"As long as I don't have to eat raw fish." Drowsy again. Probably tired after a day of working his butt off in the garden. And on a certain desk.

When Danny threw him a quick glance, his head was resting against the seat, and his eyes were closed. Dark shadows around the jaw, the lines of his throat exposed, begging to be—Danny wrenched his gaze back to the street. Holy hell, the guy was just, just... He swallowed hard, almost missed his turn, and squeezed into street-side parking in front of the restaurant with his heart hammering in his throat for no good reason.

"Be right back," he said. Good thing there was a line at the Sushi bar. Gave him time to catch his breath. He didn't have to wait very long, though, and was back at the car within fifteen minutes. James's head had rolled to the side; he was fast asleep. Danny stowed the food behind his seat, got in and quietly closed the door. He sat for a while, staring, looking his fill at James's face in the orange light of the street lamp. The five o'clock shadow outlining his chin, the soft lips. Knowing how soft they were pulled at the back of Danny's navel. Despite the Roman nose and dark, straight eyebrows, he looked softer asleep. Younger.

A car horn sounded at the other end of the street. Danny turned the key, drove the couple of streets over to his apartment building, and parked the car.

James peeled himself out of his seat. “Sorry ’bout that,” he yawned.

“Been a long day.” It would be so easy to slip an arm around his waist. Or both arms. Better get the sexy guy inside. Now.

Danny led the way, and as he turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open, he said, “By the way, small dog alarm.” As if on cue, Lux jumped up at him as if he’d been away for months, yipping and licking. A habit Danny hadn’t been able to break her of. Lumen was suspiciously absent. She’d probably known he was bringing a stranger before he’d even opened the door, and was now hiding somewhere until she was sure it was safe to come out.

Danny knelt to scratch ears and ward off sloppy dog kisses, holding the sushi bag above his head. James took it from him.

“That’s enough, Lux. We have visitors. Behave yourself.” Lux promptly lay down and just looked at Danny with adoring eyes. “Yeah, right.” He turned back to James. “Sorry. C’mon in. There’s another one of those around here somewhere, but she’s shy. You have to woo her.” He kicked his flip-flops off and padded into the kitchen. “Juice, water, tea, wine, beer?”

“I wouldn’t mind a beer.” James slowly followed him and held out the bag.

Danny took it and nodded toward the fridge. “Grab me one, too?”

Tail wagging, Lux sat by the table, eyes on the food being unpacked.

“Lumen?” Danny called. “C’mon, girl. He won’t eat you. I promise.”

James handed him a beer and grinned. “You sure?”

“Shhhh, you’re making it worse.” Danny wanted to kiss that grin, but first he had to make sure the dog was all right. He found her hiding under the bed, little tail thumping the carpet when he reached in to scratch her head. But she wouldn’t come out just yet. “Silly girl.”

James stood in the doorway, Lux beside him, both watching Danny with their heads cocked.

“You two are too funny,” Danny said.

James raised one eyebrow, and Danny wanted to kiss that, too. And why the hell not?

Body heat and end-of-day man smell, and lips and tongue and teeth, and a hitched breath. James’s arms went around his back, cupped his butt and pulled him close. Danny was uncomfortably reminded of the jizz in his underwear. He pulled back a bit. “Why don’t you start eating? I won’t be a minute.”

James “Kiss Me” Carver waiting two doors away led to a turbo clean-up. When Danny made it back to the kitchen, one of James’s chopsticks was snapped in half, and he was eating the sushi with his fingers. Damn, more sexy. Danny mentally kicked himself and fed the dogs before joining James at the table. But every little thing riled him up tonight. James drinking from the bottle, with his head tilted back? How not to stare at that?

James set the bottle back on the table and, seeing Danny stare at him, crooked his finger in a c’mere gesture and pushed his chair away from the table. A hypnotic command, impossible to ignore. Danny let himself be pulled closer. James tapped his legs and Danny straddled him, unable to suppress a moan when James took both his hands and pulled him into a kiss. He wrapped his arms around James’s neck, felt James’s hand under his T-shirt, the heel of the other, *Oh Holy Friggin’ Son of a Carpenter*, grinding against his hard-on. He gasped into the kiss, needing to get closer, needing to get out of his pants, needing... “Bed!” he panted.

James huffed a laugh. “Sorry, kiddo, as hella sexy as you are, I’m afraid if I lie down now I’ll be out like a light.”

The interruption returned enough of Danny’s mental faculties that he became aware of both dogs sitting next to the chair, whining softly. So, Lumen had decided that James posed no threat, just in time to be annoying. He groaned his frustration and ran both hands through his hair. “I have to take the dogs out. You wanna crash, or come along? I warn you, though, I make no guarantees for your virtue on the trail.”

That earned him another laugh. “Naw, I’ll come. Clear my head. And I like walking in the dark.”

Danny put both dogs on a leash. He didn’t like letting them run free on the trail at night. There’d been the occasional coyote sighting out there. No threat for a grown man, but a small dog would be an easy dinner.

Dogs pulling ahead and James trailing behind, they made their way down the small path that cut between two houses onto the hiking trail. Danny turned left to start his round and only noticed after a couple of steps that James hadn’t followed. He was still standing at the entrance to the path, staring at the property on the other side of the trail.

When he saw Danny looking for him, he pointed at it. “You live right behind my house,” he said, sounding stunned.

“You live there? I thought it was abandoned.”

“No, I don’t. I mean, it is. I mean...” He shook his head. “I don’t live far from here, half an hour on foot. Must’ve lost direction when I dozed off in the car.” He looked shaken, but Danny had no clue why.

“That,” James said, waving at the wire fence, “is a dream.” Again he shook his head, then said, so quietly that Danny wasn’t sure he’d heard right, “If I had the money, I’d buy that.”

Lumen sat on Danny’s foot, but Lux was having none of it. She’d been promised a walk, and they weren’t walking. She was choking herself, pulling on the leash.

“Show me?” Danny said.

James joined him, pointing at a metal frame in the overgrown yard. “That used to be a greenhouse. Glass’s all gone, of course.”

They walked around to the boarded-up, spray-painted front that looked anything but inviting to Danny. “It’s a good size,” he said, because that was the only positive thing he could say.

“Breathe,” James said. “Smell that?”

Indeed, now that it'd been pointed out to him, Danny did. A sweet, intoxicating scent on the warm evening air.

“The first honeysuckle of the season.” James pointed into the dark. “You can't see it now, but there's a huge hedge of it along that side.” He stuck both hands in his pockets, then pulled one back out and indicated the front of the house. “Double garage. Perfect for an on-site office. There's ample storage for machinery in a shed you can only glimpse during daylight.” His voice was getting more animated the longer he was talking. “The property is a stunner. There's a little dip that's perfect for a natural pond. And the whole thing slopes quite a bit towards the front, perfect for showcasing a terrace or two. Since it's been abandoned for so long there's a good cover of native plants already there. I'd take that crappy lawn here out, of course, and—” He stopped himself in the middle of the sentence. Although it was too dark to see, Danny was sure he was blushing.

“Sorry,” he said, passing a hand over his neck. “Got carried away. Didn't mean to bore the shit out of you.”

It was the most Danny had ever heard him say. There was a hidden passion there that went deeper than the physical one that had bowled Danny over so completely. Well, hell. “I'm not. Bored. Not the least bit. I wish I could see it. I'll have to come back and look at it in daylight. Is the basic structure solid?”

James shrugged. “No clue. Probably needs a new roof by now.”

“Who's the owner?”

Another shrug.

“But it is for sale?”

James stared at his feet, the flame of his passion visibly turning to embers. “Can't afford it, anyway.”

“You don't even know if it's for sale. How would you know how much it'll go for?”

“I know how much I have.” It hurt to see him bury his dream like that.

“You can get a mortgage with next to no down payment these days,” Danny tried. “You need a good bank. Come on. It can’t hurt to ask around. You have such detailed plans for it. And they sound awesome. If you want to make them real, I’d say now’s the time. It won’t stay abandoned forever.”

The dogs were bouncing against his legs, then pulling on the leash again in a futile attempt to get them going. Even Lumen was fed up with all this standing around.

James stood, hands in his pockets, looking at them, then up at Danny, a wistful expression in his eyes. “You’re like those dogs. All bouncy and excited, and I lo—like y—. It. I like it.” He looked back at the house, then turned away and shrugged one shoulder. “I should head home. Like I said. It’s not that far. I... See you tomorrow?”

“Wh...? Uh. Sure.” What the hell had just happened? “Uhm... Sleep tight. I guess.” He watched James stride down the road until the darkness swallowed him. The city should really put some street lamps up here.

James realized he was nearly running and slowed down, but not for long. He couldn’t get away fast enough. “*I like it*”??? *What the fuck? Way, way too close to a declaration, Jamie boy.* What the hell was wrong with him? First he lost his shit with the old man and now with Danny? How did Danny live directly behind The House? What was the chance of that? Was fate trying to tell him something, here? And how terrifying was that thought?

He made it home without noticing where he’d walked, his empty apartment mirroring the hollow feeling inside him. Just a quick shower and bed. And staring at the ceiling, trying not to think about tomorrow or the rest of his life. Or Danny. But his body remembered Danny’s hands, his lips, his tongue. Dammit, he would not jerk off again with Danny on his mind. What was he, twelve? How was a kid with two ridiculous little dogs tying up his thoughts six ways from Sunday?

Both arms firmly wrapped around his pillow, he stared at the clock in the dark and watched the numbers change. He was falling harder than he ever had

in his life, and now was the time to either give himself up to whatever waited at the end of that fall or to pull the emergency cord and pray it would open a parachute.

Not that there was anything inherently wrong with love or commitment, he just really wasn't good at it. Not like Danny, who could open himself up to the world and consequences be damned. That kind of openness took guts. And James didn't know how to match that courage. Didn't even know where to start. Most days it was hard enough to breathe, as trapped as he was.

And yeah, that was the other thing he needed to make a decision about. Leave everything he'd ever known behind, because the old man could be a dickhead? James would be nowhere near where he was today without him. Good and bad.

At five he dragged himself into the shower. He was no closer to either decision. At this point the arguments for and against just circled round in well-worn grooves in his head.

Later, in the stillness of the kitchen, both hands wrapped around his coffee mug, he caught himself wishing for dogs milling about his ankles. Fuck, he was messed up. His eyes strayed to the clock at the top of the stove. Would he be picked up this morning, or had his insubordination the day before been taken as his notice?

The horn sounded at the usual time, but it was Rob driving and the old man in the middle seat, arms folded, lips pressed together so tightly it left creases in the corners of his mouth. James sighed and silently apologized to Rob. Looked like he'd taken up the fight when James had left them last night.

“Got home all right?” Rob asked.

James nodded. Then, just to break the oppressive silence, he added, “Danny gave me a lift.”

The old man snorted.

Rob lifted an eyebrow. “No more Holt, eh? Danny, now,” he teased.

James bit his tongue. He'd never learn to keep his fucking mouth shut. Thankfully, Rob waited until they'd arrived and the old man was out of earshot before he continued. "So, anything going on between you and 'Danny'?"

James got up on the tailgate step. "So, you think that's any of your fucking business?" He pulled out one of the bags of fertilizer and heaved it at Rob, who caught it with a grunt.

"I didn't think you went for young and bubbly, is all. You're gonna scare the shit out of him."

"You'd think, wouldn't you? Hasn't happened, though."

"Or he'll bore you to tears in a week," Rob said, hoisting the bag and loading it into the cart.

James made sure he had his gloves and shouldered the other bag. "Hmmm." He didn't see that. Didn't see that at all.

The old man stayed away from him not only all day, but for the following days as well. James had no clue what Rob had said to him, but he was grateful for the reprieve. It wasn't peace, but it was a truce. And it took some of the weight off James's shoulders that had permanently settled there. James, in turn, stayed out of Danny's way. There were things he needed to turn over in his head. Preferably more than once. And he couldn't think when Danny was around. Smiling that Danny smile, touching him, kissing—*Fuck! You're so fucked, Jamie.* He hammered the wooden peg into the ground with considerably more force than necessary.

"Do you have a minute, Mr. Carver?" Sarah Holt. Shit. This was so not good. She had no business with him. She always talked to the old man about anything concerning the job.

He straightened slowly and nodded.

"I thought up about a million excuses why I'd be wanting to talk to you, but I find I'm not into that kind of BS very much. The truth is, I'm warning you off. Because I'm starting to get worried about my son." She leaned against

the pile of patio stones that had been delivered this morning and crossed her arms. “I’m not in the habit of worrying about him. But then, he’s not in the habit of researching mortgages for his boyfriends. Especially not recently met ones he hasn’t even introduced to his family yet.”

What? The fuck? “I’m not his boyfriend.”

“Ah, yes, well, if he’s looking into mortgages for a fuck buddy that makes me feel much better, of course.”

“Jesus. I...” She was pulling the rug out from under him so fast that he was ass over teakettle before she’d even finished her sentence. “Things haven’t— We haven’t... You’re assuming way too much, here.”

“Am I?” She was playing with her car keys. “Danny doesn’t have a suspicious bone in his body. He’s never had a reason to shield his heart. I don’t know if that’s a good thing. I always thought it was. But, I swear to God, if you con him or so much as jerk him around, I’ll find you when you sleep, tie you up, pound your balls with a meat tenderizer until they’re the size of tortillas, wrap them around your ripped-off dick, and feed them to you.”

“Con...? You’re seriously messed up, lady. Who the hell do you take me for? Get out of my face before I forget you’re Danny’s mom. And stay the fuck away from me. Con him. Did it even occur to you that a con takes two? Give the kid some cred—”

“James!” Rob called from somewhere behind the shrubbery, a note of urgency in his voice. “Jamie! Help!”

James was already running.

“Goddammit, Dad,” he heard Rob hiss as he sprinted around the hedge, where he found Rob trying to support the old man in his arms. But the old man kept sinking to his knees, left arm clutched across his chest.

“Call nine one one,” Rob said. “I think it’s his heart.”

“I’m on it,” Sarah Holt said behind him. “We’ll take my truck. It has a rear door and bench. I can have him at the General in ten.”

James didn't argue. Ignoring the old man's feeble protests, he scooped him up like a child and half-walked, half-ran back to the house and around to the front. Over his shoulder he heard Holt call ahead to the hospital. With Rob's help they managed to make the old man reasonably comfortable on the back seat. Holt actually had an amber emergency light she slapped on the roof of the truck. With that and all the hazard lights flashing, she floored the gas pedal, and the truck shot up the drive. Rob sat with his back to the passenger door, keeping an eye on the back seat. James wedged both legs firmly against the floor. Holt drove like a demon. She knew exactly what she was doing, how fast the truck could take a corner or when and how hard to brake without jolting the old man too much. She seemed to have fifteen pairs of eyes on the traffic at any given moment and never lost her cool. James was still pissed at her, but fuck, that woman knew how to drive. He occasionally threw a glance at Rob, who was white as a sheet and had his eyes glued to the back seat.

They reached the hospital in record time, and thanks to Holt's call ahead someone was already waiting for them with a stretcher. James and Rob jogged along until they were barred from going any further. Rob had to fill out and sign some forms, and then they were left to kick their heels in a waiting room. They stood awkwardly between the chairs, too riled up to sit down.

"How'd it happen?" James asked.

Rob shrugged helplessly. "One minute he was spreading grass seed, the next he's on his knees, clutching his chest. He wasn't doing anything strenuous, I swear." As if it was somehow his fault.

James grabbed his shoulder and hugged him briefly. "I'll go see if they have coffee or something. You want one?" Rob shook his head. James didn't either, but it was an excuse to move. If this shit was anyone's fault, it was his own for ticking out over the bee thing. He'd never gone up against the old man before; that must've been a shock. Why the fuck did he have such a short fuse recently? He'd always been able to keep a lid on it before. Hell, in his yearbook, "keeping his cool" had been listed as his superpower.

He got himself a soda from a vending machine in one of the hallways and meandered his way back to the waiting room. Rob perched on the edge of a

chair, arms on his knees, kneading his fingers. He sat up when he saw James and ran a hand through his hair. “Shit,” he said.

James sank down next to him and bumped his shoulder, but Rob shook his head. “I was laying into him for being an ass over the bees that day,” he said.

“Yeah, well, so was I,” James said. He turned the can round and round between his fingers. So Rob had indeed talked to the old man about that. “I was grateful he left me alone for a bit,” he confessed. “What’d you tell him?”

Rob threw him a quick sideways glance before looking back down on his kneading fingers. “I told him you’d leave,” he said. “And with you every ounce of creativity and passion we have in the company. I told him...” He clenched his fingers so hard they turned white. “I told him that he’d kick the bucket one day and leave the company to me to piddle along in mediocrity until the end of days unless he pulled his head out of his ass and listened to you.”

James stared at him. I-don’t-give-a-shit Robert Carver had said that? He let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding. “Fuck,” he said. A movement caught his eyes, and he looked up to see Danny standing in the doorway. The shock almost made him do a double-take. He swallowed hard. “Fuck,” he said again. Not that, too. He was starting to drown in everything happening at once.

“Jamie...” Rob started.

“It’s not. Your. Fault,” James said, getting up. “I’ll be right back.”

He motioned for Danny to follow him out into the hallway. He had to tell him to leave. He couldn’t deal with that decision on top of everything else right now. Hazel eyes and a worried smile. James forgot what he was going to say. That kid even fucking smelled of sunshine. He pushed Danny into the corner between a cupboard and the wall and kissed him. Hard. Desperate. Needy. It didn’t help at all that Danny gave himself up to that kiss, gave it back, gave James everything he demanded. *No, fuck it, stop.*

James wrenched himself back, breathing as if he’d been chasing after a runaway train. “I don’t... I can’t...” he gasped. “What’re you doing here?”

Danny, eyes wide, made a phone gesture with thumb and pinky. “My mother told me what happened. I thought I’d see if there was anything I could do to help.”

With an effort James pulled himself together enough to say, “No. Thanks. Really. There’s nothing. Go home.” He was still far from a decision, and he wouldn’t, as Sarah Holt had put it, jerk Danny around while he didn’t know which way was up. Though he had already, hadn’t he?

“I could just be here,” Danny started.

“No! Go home!” *Way too loud, Jamie.* Danny blinked. James briefly closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. I... Your mother is right. I’m jerking you around.”

“My... What?”

“Just go home, Danny.” It came out as a hoarse whisper. James cleared his throat. “Please.” With that he turned and went back into the waiting room.

Danny watched him go, too stunned to move. Of course they didn’t know each other that well, and family was more important now, but he hadn’t quite expected that brusque a dismissal. That kiss... He shivered. That kiss had told him he was needed. It had been raw, unguarded. So why was he being sent away? *Your mother is right. I’m jerking you around.* He hadn’t felt jerked around before. Now he didn’t know what to think. Had James just wanted some time with his brother? That he understood. Or had the mesmerizing bastard just broken off the most tantalizing and exhilarating thing that had happened to Danny since... ever? That he wasn’t ready to accept. He wanted to go in there and demand clarification, or better, return that kiss. But the timing sucked.

He threw a last glance at the two brothers sitting in their own little bubble in the waiting room and turned towards the elevators. Might as well go home and take the dogs out for their walk.

They were ecstatic to have him home early, but they seemed to sense that something was off. Lumen was glued to his side, and even Lux refrained from her usual scoutings to stay with him. Danny took them up the trail to walk by James's house, which made him even more determined than he already was not to let James go without a fight. He played their brief conversation over and over in his head. Or tried to. He kept getting stuck on that kiss.

What he didn't get was what in anybody's name his mother had to do with anything. Well, she'd be in her office for the rest of the day. Time to find out. He returned the dogs home and fed them, then took the bus downtown. Easier than trying to find parking.

"Hey. Any news?" she said when he walked into her office.

He shook his head. "Not by the time I left. Mom, why would James Carver say you're right about him jerking me around?"

He was trying hard not to phrase it as an accusation, but the way she pressed her lips together let his hope of a misunderstanding fade fast.

She rolled up a floor plan, then smoothed it out again on her desk. "He said that?"

Danny shoved both hands in his pockets and glared at her.

"Fine. I wanted to check him out. You've never been so head-over... I mean, the thing with the mortgage just threw me. I needed to know what was going on."

"So, you ran to him, instead of asking me? How do you even know I looked into mortgages?" This was quite unlike her. She didn't spy on him or his boyfriends. What the hell was going on here?

"Josh Rainier told me." Tapping her fingers on the plan.

"You discussed me with our banker?"

"Oh, keep your pants on. I didn't discuss you with him. He asked me how the house hunt was going, said his cousin was an inspector and gave me his card in case you found something. It very obviously never even occurred to him that you might not have told me of your plans." It hadn't taken her long to

switch from defense to attack. But if that was supposed to make him retreat, it failed. If anything, it served to set up his back for good.

“There are no flippin’ plans. I didn’t even ask for myself. James has his eyes on a house he thinks he can’t afford. I thought before I encourage him I should find out what the current deals are. I’m not looking for a house, why would I? Why didn’t you just ask me?”

She threw him a quick glance, then took the floor plan and fiddled with fixing it to her drawing board, turning her back on him.

“You don’t trust me,” he said, not even trying to hide his disbelief.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Nononono, I’m right. You don’t trust my judgement. You thought I was going off half-cocked, buying a house with a man I met three weeks ago.”

Now she did look at him. “I just wanted to protect you. It’s what mothers do.”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“You can still get hurt.”

“Then I’ll get hurt. Big flipping deal. People get hurt all the time. I’ll survive. I’ll even try not to do anything stupid, if that helps.”

She huffed a laugh. “You gave your brand-new bike away for an injured cat that died the next day.”

“I was five, Mom.”

“You were devastated. The point is, you’re always all in. You can’t guard your heart.”

“No, I can’t. But that is not actually the point. The point is, no one can. Not if they want a chance at love. But then, you know that already, don’t you?”

She recoiled as if he’d hit her, and he said more softly, “Look, I know you had a rough deal. You still made a good life for us, and I would never dream of arguing with your decision to not try again. But I don’t want to live like that. That’s my decision. Please don’t argue with it, either.”

Her brows drew together as she searched for an answer. “You’re my son,” she said.

Danny didn’t want to fight with her or hurt her, but neither was he going to let her ride roughshod over him or run his life.

She must have seen it in his face, because she pulled herself up short and tried to laugh it off. “And I’ve screwed things up rather royally for you, haven’t I? I’m sorry, Danny.”

He shrugged. “I guess you meant well.”

“Ouch,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Tell you what.” She grabbed her car keys. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll go talk to him.”

“Oh, nonono.” Danny leaned his back against the door and spread his arms wide. “Nuh-uh. No more meddling.”

“But, I thought—”

“Promise me.”

“Fine.” The keys dropped back on the desk. “But you better not screw this up and have your heart broken.”

“Well, if I come back here crying, you get to say ‘I told you so’.”

She threw him a speaking look from under her eyebrows. Danny blew her a kiss as he pulled her office door open and left. It meant apology accepted, though it would take a while until he was no longer mad at her.

Now what? Back to the hospital? He checked his watch. Hopefully things weren’t bad enough for the brothers to still be there. James had said he lived within walking distance of the old house, but as directions went, that was rather vague. Time to check if he was listed in the white pages. Danny’s hand went to his pocket, but there was no phone. He patted himself down quickly. Shit. It better be on his kitchen table and not somewhere on a bus seat.

Back at his apartment building he checked for mail—latest copy of *Enlighter Magazine*, hydro bill, spam—then, one-handed, fiddled for his door key.

“Hey.”

Danny nearly jumped out of his skin. James sat on the stairs leading to the upper floors, arms on his knees like he'd sat at the hospital. Playing with Danny's phone.

“You lost it at the hospital. I would've called, but...” He grinned tiredly at his lame joke. “Anyway.” He held the phone out to Danny. “I figured, since it was probably my fault you lost it, I should bring it over.” He had deep shadows under his eyes. In combination with the usual five o'clock shadow, it made him look as if he hadn't slept in days.

Danny didn't take the phone, unlocked the door instead. “C'mon in.”

“I don't really—”

“Don't let the dogs out.” Not giving James a choice but to follow him in. “How's your dad?”

“Not too bad all things considered.” James followed him into the kitchen and put the phone on the table. “Apparently he had this heart attack coming for a long time. But the surgery went well, they say. They put him on a diet plan he'll hate every meal of.” He paused and passed a hand over his neck. “And they told him to retire, basically. No physically demanding work.” James shook his head. “He was too out of it to say much, but I expect we haven't heard the last of that one.” He stared at the floor, lost in thought for a moment, then hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I should go. Lots of shit to take care of.”

“Does anyone ever call you Jim?”

“What the...? No, not if they wanna live.”

“I talked to my mother,” Danny said.

James looked at him and wanted to do what he'd done at the hospital. Grab him by the shoulders, push him against the wall, and lose himself in the kiss. It had been a mistake to come here. He should've dropped the phone in the

mailbox. His brain had known it, too. But then, he hadn't been thinking with that, had he?

One of the little dogs, he couldn't tell them apart, sat in front of him. James stared at it, so he didn't have to look at Danny.

But Danny wasn't having any of that. He crouched into James's line of sight. "She's wrong."

God, he was so serious, so intense. He made James's skin tingle just by looking at him. "Did you really ask about a mortgage?" James asked.

Danny made a face as he straightened. "Just checking the lay of the land. You were so amazing when you talked about that house. I wanted you to go on forever." He smiled, and James's heart stopped for a moment. "Thought I'd better check if it was safe to cheer you on."

His easy enthusiasm made the guilt congeal in James's stomach. "Danny, I'm not..." How could he have such a fuckton of thoughts in his head and no words to get them out? "I'd only drag you down."

"Maybe you'd ground me," Danny said, shrugging the argument off.

James huffed a laugh. "You don't need grounding. You're one of the most together people I've ever met."

"Baloney." Danny shoved both hands into his pockets, pulled them out again, then gently pushed the dog out of the way with one foot and closed the distance between them.

James's heel connected with the doorframe behind him. His breathing and heartbeat sped up, and he had to press both hands to his legs to keep them off Danny.

"When you sent me away earlier," Danny said quietly. "Was that because you aren't interested anymore?" There was a crease between his brows, and James could see his cheek muscles jump.

He tried to come up with something, anything, to say, and drew a complete blank. Danny's lips were closed in a straight line, which wasn't right. They should be open and soft. James brushed his thumb across to relax them into a

smile. “Jamie. Those I love call me Jamie,” he whispered, listening to Danny’s harsh intake of breath.

Danny leaned closer. “Or did you send me away,” he murmured, so close to James’s ear that James felt his breath on his cheek, “because you bought into my mother’s crap talk?”

He smelled of shampoo and Danny, and it took everything James had not to grab him and pull him close, bury his face in those short, dark curls, and close both hands over that tight ass. “I don’t want to jerk you around,” he squeezed through the roughness in his throat.

“Maybe I like to be jerked around.” He could feel Danny’s lips moving against his ear, was losing the battle to not just turn his head and kiss him, when Danny straightened and looked at James, eyes intent. “You’ve been pushing every single one of my buttons from the second I saw you swinging that pickaxe, James Carver. And the more I see and hear and taste of you, the more I want. And I think there is more. There are depths behind your stillness just waiting to be explored. I think this, us, could be more than just a fling. But if not, and in the meantime, it’s my secret goal to be manhandled, shoved and kissed against every wall in the city.”

Every one of his words grabbed the muscles in James’s stomach and pulled them into a tight coil of need and want. He couldn’t have said anything if his life depended on it.

“If you consider that jerking me around,” Danny continued, “bring it. I’m not scared.”

“I know you’re not. But I am.”

“I know. Just not what you’re scared of.”

“That the depths you see turn out to be shallows?”

“Not going to happen. But,” with that smile that turned James inside out, Danny leaned in close again and whispered, “you’d be surprised just how shallow I can be, given the right incentive.”

The doorframe behind him, the warm body in front of him, touching him, leaning into him, James had nowhere left to go. “You have about three seconds to change your mind,” he growled in a last ditch effort to regain control.

But Danny didn’t move, just watched him. “Not a chance,” he said.

James would never not lose himself in this man. And just like that, there was no decision to be made anymore, because walking away was no longer an option. “In that case, Sunshine, your ass is mine.”

Danny hummed against James’s throat and wrapped both arms around his neck. James grabbed his ass and lifted him up, hissed when Danny’s thigh rubbed against his hard-on, felt Danny’s legs go around his waist, and carried him to the bedroom.

“Kick the dogs out.” Danny’s voice sounded strained. “Or they’re gonna be all over us.”

James threw him on the bed, scooped up one of the dogs and set it outside, where the other one was still sitting, undecided. He closed the door and turned around just in time to see Danny’s T-shirt land on the floor. He watched Danny open the button and pull down the zipper of his pants, then raise his hips to push them off along with his briefs. James’s own pants were uncomfortably tight. As soon as Danny was naked on the bed, James grabbed his legs and pulled him closer, until his ass was almost on the edge. Danny propped himself up on his elbows. He was smooth everywhere, from tanned chest to shaved balls. And James vowed not to stop until he’d kissed and licked every last inch of his body.

“There’s a debt I’ve been wanting to repay for a while now,” James said. He pushed Danny’s knees apart and knelt between them, saw Danny’s eyes go wide. He took his time, admiring the smooth skin, breathing in the clean musky scent. Now that it was spiced with anticipation, he could enjoy the tight pull of his own need that had nearly killed him a few moments ago.

Danny gave a short laugh. “Are you just going to sit there?” he teased, but the tightness was there in his voice, too. And his cock was straight and hard against his stomach.

“Patience, Grasshopper.” James ran his fingertips across the insides of Danny’s thighs, saw his cock twitch and smiled at the hiss of his indrawn breath. He followed with his lips, licked Danny’s balls and pulled them in his mouth. Danny’s stomach rose and fell as his breathing sped up. James continued to lick across and around Danny’s balls. Danny’s hips came up, even as he moaned, “Wait.”

When James looked up, Danny’s eyes were glazed. He had to lick his lips before he could say, “Take your clothes off. Please. I want to see...”

It did feel good to get out of his too tight jeans. James stood naked, ran his hand across his balls and gave his cock a couple of loose-fisted strokes that pulled a groan up his throat. But it was Danny’s he heard. Danny, who was biting his lip, the need raw and shiny in his hazel eyes.

James dropped back down to his knees, closed his fist and lips around Danny’s cock and started to suck in a slow rhythm. Again Danny’s hips came up. “Please,” he moaned. “Oh God, please James. I’m begging you...” He didn’t say for what, but his hips trying to speed up the movement said it for him. James was breathing hard himself, now. He straightened, grabbed Danny’s ass and shoved him higher up on the bed, so he had room to kneel behind him.

“Please tell me you have lube and condoms,” he rasped.

Danny waved his left hand vaguely in the direction of the nightstand. “Nnn-drawer,” he said.

James had to force himself to slow down so he wouldn’t rip the condom. He lubed himself up quickly but took more time with Danny, losing himself again in the smoothness of his skin, spreading the lube over Danny’s cock and balls and between his ass cheeks. Danny pulled his legs up and out to give him as much access as he could. “Please,” he moaned again. And when James started to open him up with his fingers, he hissed. “Never. Mind. Just... Go!”

So inviting, so demanding. No denying him. But James still took it slow. He didn’t want to hurt Danny, and he also needed to savour every little thing. The way Danny’s stomach rose and fell with every harsh breath, the sheen of

sweat on his skin, the tremor running through his thigh muscles when he tried to push himself closer. James placed a hand on Danny's navel, holding him down, entering him at his own slow speed. Danny's "Please!" turning into a strangled groan. His eyes looked green now and brightly translucent. He had both arms up against the headboard bracing himself, and now and then his head would fall back, exposing the arch of his throat. But he always came back up to watch, his lips half open, moving with pleas and moans. Everything about him always open, unveiled and bright. He made everything look not just possible, but clear and easy. Light art. Magic.

James kissed his way up his torso to his chest, tasting every inch of skin and keeping up his slow rhythm, keeping himself on a plateau of need and desire, their skin between them slick with sweat and pre-cum. He played his tongue over each nipple, biting, licking, and sucking until Danny whimpered with every thrust. James looked up to find him still watching, his pupils huge, brows slightly drawn together. Joy, lust, every sensation playing out on his face, crashed into James like a tsunami, surging in his balls, pulling him off his plateau. He leaned back, braced himself against the backs of Danny's thighs, and, giving up his fight for control, fucked Danny hard and fast, his balls slapping Danny's ass, his breath harsh and desperate in his own ears.

Danny's pleas had turned completely inarticulate. His muscles strained with the need to meet James's thrusts. Meaningless syllables collapsed to rhythmic, low-pitched panting. Suddenly every muscle in his body clenched and with a shout he came all over his own chest. Hot, salacious abandon that pulled James's balls up as he was dragged helplessly into his own sweet agony of relief, again and again, until he collapsed against Danny's legs.

He managed to pull out and roll onto his back, gasping for air, vision blurred, heart hammering in his throat. He felt Danny's hand groping for his and took it. They lay like that, fingers intertwined, just breathing. After what felt like an eternity, Danny rolled to his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "What did you say to me that day in the shed?" he asked.

James huffed a laugh. "Jesus Christ, Sunshine," he said.

“That.” Danny wiped himself off with the sheet, crumpled it up and threw it into the general direction of what looked like a laundry hamper. A soft whine sounded from the other side of the door, followed by a scratching sound.

James rolled his eyes, making Danny laugh, and heaved himself off the bed. He went into the adjoining bathroom to get rid of the condom, clean himself up and indulge in a long piss.

When he came back, Danny had pulled on a pair of gym shorts and threw James one as well. James barely managed to catch it and not step on one of the dogs. They fit. Just. James flopped back down on the bed, his head on Danny’s shoulder, which seemed to be the signal for the dogs to jump up as well and wiggle all over both of them. James scratched a fuzzy little head between the ears and smiled. Life could be simple now and then. “Wanna tell me what you found out about mortgages?” he asked.

“Really?” Danny said, excitement in his voice. “You gonna try for the house?”

James nodded. “If it’s for sale. We’ll see.” He touched his head to Danny’s. “But what’s more important: You think you might wanna do this again some time?”

Danny laughed. “And again, and again, and again.”

“Good,” James said, warm and languid between Danny and the dogs. “Me, too.”

THE END

Author Bio

G.B. Gordon worked as a packer, landscaper, waiter, and coach before going back to school to major in linguistics and, at 35, switched to less backbreaking monetary pursuits like translating, editing, and writing. Having lived in various parts of the world, Gordon is now happily ensconced in suburban Ontario with the best of all husbands. Santuario is G.B. Gordon's first published work, but many more stories are just waiting to hit the keyboard.

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