

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

FALLING FOR YOU

Joe Petty

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

FALLING FOR YOU

By Joe Petty

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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FALLING FOR YOU

By Joe Petty

Photo Description

One man is leaning over a balcony, having his knuckles of his hand kissed by another man who is rising up to meet the challenge.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Due to a very embarrassing accident I am stuck at home. Broken leg. My profession requires a lot of exercise, so not being able to move around freely drives me crazy. One morning while sipping my coffee and browsing the internet on my tablet, I spotted the most gorgeous guy just outside my balcony. He was so engrossed in talking to the dog he'd been walking that day, that he hadn't noticed me watching. In hope of seeing him again and maybe for a chance to get to talking I had every breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack and dinner on my balcony. Every day. I knew it was crazy but I just had to see him again. I did. For days I had been watching him and his dog play at the park across the street. One day, when he actually noticed me, it was everything I could have hoped for and more.

The only problem: his dog is his entire world. Unfortunately I've been suffering from Cynophobia (terrible dog phobia) ever since I can remember. How can we find our HEA? He would never choose me over his dog...

Sincerely,

Riina

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, veterinarian, sweet/no sex, men with pets, humorous

Word Count: 11,445

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FALLING FOR YOU

By Joe Petty

Chapter One

Marcello

I woke before my alarm even sounded, feeling content. That was probably because of the warm, heavy arm flung over my chest and the smell of musk from my boyfriend. I gently slipped out from under the weight of his thick muscles, tiptoed around the room, and quickly folded Speletsky's clothes before placing them on the blue wooden chair by the window.

A glance at the watch that never left my wrist proved I had plenty of time before he'd wake up. He wouldn't miss his sweatshirt, it would be an extra layer of warmth, and I'd be able to smell him as I ran through the city. Today was different in that it was a game day, so the run would be a little shorter. When I got outside, the chill morning wind slapped my face, and I started my light run across the street to the gated park. I didn't bother to bring the key to the gate on runs like this, so I skirted the edge, turned left to run the four blocks to First, and took a left to get to the route I used for shorter runs. The route was familiar, and I was able to let my mind go blank. I ran until I felt the burn, and then headed back towards the townhouse. I'd already made the decision to skip the gym and opt for a shower and steam back home. As I neared Gramercy Park West from East Twenty-First Street, I slowed to take in the view of the park before I reached the stairs down to my front door. The little run only took about fifteen minutes, so when I looked in on Speletsky I wasn't surprised to find him still asleep.

I stepped into the shower, adjusted the water temperature and began talking to myself, as usual. Whereas most people would be singing, on game days I use the time to practice what I want to say for the day. I even have my trusty little waterproofed recorder taped to the tile.

As I finished my last lines I switched the water to steam and sat on a stool in the corner of the shower, watching as the white subway tile around the sink seemed to disappear behind the fogged-over glass. I closed my eyes and tried to prepare myself for the big speech, the one that went with the talk I'd wanted to have with John for months, ever since two major sports figures, Jason Collins and Michael Sam, had come out of the closet. Slowly, I whispered my words for the recorder, just for that last minute confidence.

"You know, John, if an NFL and NBA player can do it, why can't someone who's playing for the NHL? And you're already on a professional team, which is something Michael Sam didn't have."

That was how simple the conversation should be. I was convinced if Speletsky only took the jump, we could go out on the town. I knew in my heart that he would be so much happier to not have to hide. As a man in the sports world, I knew how hard it was to play from the closet. My bosses knew when they hired me, but told me to keep it on the down low. In fact, they made it a condition in my contract, but I got bolder as I got a larger fan base. Just last week I'd come out to my camera man, who'd asked about a rumor he'd heard in the control room. And my assistants had known for a while, since we'd bumped into each other at a few clubs around town.

All I wanted was for John to be able to knock on my front door, or meet me at Gramercy Tavern at a table at the window. That was all I hoped for as I entered the bedroom and saw his body sprawled across the width of my bed. The body that I cradled when he was black and blue from fist fights over a small little piece of rubber. I let the white towel drop from my waist and walked nude across the room, keeping an eye on the gentle bear in my bed. I pulled on my typical sports day uniform: black jeans, a white Oxford shirt, and a simple red tie. Just the right look for a gay man running the sidelines at a Giants football game.

I shook my head and laughed lightly as I tied my Cole Haan sneakers, grabbed the newsboy cap off the hook, and walked to the bed. Leaning down, I kissed the back of Speletsky's neck to wake him. In one quick move, the hockey player rolled over and pulled me on top of him. We looked into each other's eyes and kissed slowly. Before long I protested and fought to get out of my man's grasp. It was a funny little battle.

"Did you hear? Michael Sam is set to get signed onto a team."

The once-tight grip fell dead away and Speletsky closed his eyes. "I'm not coming out."

I backed up and looked down at him. "Why? Gay marriage is winning in states across the country, Sam and Collins and countless other..."

My words were cut off by a pillow thrown at my head. By the time I pulled the pillow off, John was already out of the bed, searching for his clothes, and making an exasperated sound when he noticed them folded neatly on the chair. He kicked the chair out of the way and grabbed at his clothes.

"This discussion is over. It ain't happening." When he got mad, Speletsky fell into his white-trash tongue. "I'm not gonna be the laughing stock of the NHL. You think I gots bruises from fights 'cuz of the puck slamming someone

in the crotch? Next they'll be bruises because someone thought I was looking at their cock in the shower. It's over..."

I stood against the wall; a quiet fear tightened my stomach into a knot.

"This is over... it's over, I can't deal with this shit. March, you're a... great... I love what you do, but this can't work if you need me to be a party boy on your arm. I'm out." He turned away from me to check his reflection in the mirror behind the bed. To me, he looked stunned at the words that came out his mouth. "I'm out of here."

The door slammed—the back door, of course, the one connected to the alley behind the other buildings so that he could escape without being seen. Not that photographers were that welcome around Gramercy Park, or that anyone would know that John had been here.

I stood there, shocked. I lost him. *My love life, my fuck buddy. I lost it all because I wanted him to be out to the world.* I looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, wiped my eyes, and left for work.

If that had been the end of it, it would have been fine. But, Speletsky just couldn't shut up. During the course of the game, he texted three times, and each time I replied with a simple 'no'.

JS: *Can I come over tonight?*

MM: *no*

JS: *Can't you forget what I said?*

MM: *no*

JS: *We can meet at a hotel*

MM: *no*

He wanted another chance, but didn't want commitment. He didn't get it at all. You don't break up and then just come back. I didn't want to be a hate fuck. Or a convenient bed to hop into.

The players were running down the field, I felt the phone vibrate in my hand, and I had just enough time to glimpse down and read the long message from Speletsky. Then I was running, talking, and trying to type.

JS: *March, look it's really tough for me to do what you want me to do, but I need you. Can't we just forget about this and make up tonight?*

MM: *No, you don't do this, ever again.*

JS: *Why is it such a big deal what we do in the bedroom?*

MM: *I'm tired of hiding. I want a real relationship. I used to be proud to know I was getting fucked by you.*

JS: *Used to? What? I'm not good enough for a little FAGGOT like you?*

Then the shit hit the fan, and it all happened so damn fast. Anything else but that word. Like how some women cringe when “cunt” is slapped across their face, “faggot” had the same effect on me. And John knew it. I got lost in the blur of texting as I moved quickly to the end zone, not paying attention to anything else.

The cameraman, Hank, who had been working with me since I'd gotten the sidelines contract, was following closely behind me, but also focusing on the game. He lifted the camera at probably the best and worst time. I was too busy cussing in Italian to notice the two huge players who were barreling towards me. In the blink of an eye, it was over. Giants #39 had just tackled #18 from the Vikings, and then they both tackled me.

There was silence in the stadium as they pulled the two large men off of me, and in that instant, it was like being in a cocoon; the warmth and heavy breathing surrounding me. I almost didn't want anything to stop the intensity of it all. Hell, it was just like bear night at the Hole. There was spit or sweat all over my face, I wasn't sure which. I lay on the ground, practically laughing, except I couldn't breathe. The Viking player on top of me was babbling and apologizing and trying not to spit anymore onto my face. It was sorta cute and I could just kiss him when it was all over. Once the players were off of me, I gasped for a breath and looked to my left at the phone vibrating on the ground. Remembering my fury with John, I jumped up and attempted to hurdle the bench, but my toe caught the edge. I heard the snap as I fell near my phone. This time when I tried to stand, my left foot swayed under me, a pain shot up my leg, and I collapsed into a heap, passed out.

I opened my eyes to see that I was surrounded by medics. The smell of wet grass, chalk and antiseptic filled my nostrils as I clutched my phone to my chest. If the phone and those texts ever fell into the wrong hands, it could be disastrous. Once they had me on a stretcher, the medics told me to relax, lifted and carried me off the field. I heard the cheer from the crowd as I waved my hand that I was all right.

I wasn't all right, because I saw that they'd called in Suzi Sarno to replace me. She was great, not that I had big shoes to fill. But I hated missing a game. I kept repeating in my head, *It's not the end of the world.*

But for the next couple days, it sure as hell felt like it was. Hank told the bosses that he'd seen me texting and yelling loudly, and, unfortunately, it was all seen in the replay. Hank was the best cameraman I'd ever known, and he filmed what was the most important shot at the time. Me. And it turned out the initial crash hadn't even been what broke my ankle. It was the bench I'd tripped over trying to retrieve my phone, like an idiot, when it went flying. All of it, every embarrassing second, had been caught on film and sent live to the world watching the game.

Then I saw the nightly news— I heard the entire scene played out with bleeps to cover my cussing, and the newscasters stating that they had a translator working on the Italian.

I turned off the television.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Swans - Unkle Bob

9:45 pm

Dear Sis, I wanted to tell you that everything's gotten better with me since I moved to New York. It's so much different than Saginaw. After I graduated, I took an internship with a major vet here in upstate New York, but that fell through because the doctor wanted more than just my skills— he expected me to do so much more. I guess I was moving to New York with stars in my eyes. I was always so trusting... how can I say this? I may have graduated with honors, but all I've wanted to do was raise Seeing Eye dogs. For you. That's why I took on training Finn. But, a person needs something to fall back on and Dr. Bedford was so much more than that. I had saved a lot of money from that first two years with him, and then I was offered a column to write in one of the small dog magazines, so when Dr. Bedford showed his true colors at a vet convention and had gotten a little too hands on for me, I up and left.

Mom sent me the letter that said Pop had died, and I managed to live the rest of the time on my inheritance. It's a shitty thing to admit, but moving to the city was probably the best thing I could have done. Especially for me. I've had a few relationships, but nothing fit. I've been getting sick of my most recent boyfriend. He's a little too young for me, a wannabe artist, who can only create stupid T-shirts. His name is Finn Huck, really stupid; I've told him maybe he should change it.

The idiot shrugs his shoulders and kisses me on the shoulder to calm me down. I just sigh and rub Finn-the-dog's ears. This was the biggest mistake, getting together with this guy. But, he sometimes makes me happy. Oh, he just got home.

Shamanic Journey - Anugama

11:30 pm

Sis, I'm so pissed off, I had to put on some relaxing music just so I wouldn't yell and kick things. He's told me he's met someone else and he wants to break up. That I'm not doing it for him, that I'm not supporting him in the lifestyle he's accustomed to. Whatever. I have to admit, I was always a little embarrassed to introduce him to friends. We were never a good fit. I've got four deadlines on articles that need to be finished, and I'm sitting here listening to shaman music so I can calm down and not break shit.

Chapter Two

Marcello

Annie was the first person I called when I broke my ankle. I didn't bother calling my parents; they were in Rome, and it was just a broken ankle. The entire world saw the fall that did it, so it wouldn't be a secret. Even people that didn't watch sports saw it, thanks to the nightly news. I'd become the laughing stock of the world. I knew people were sending their translations of my Italian tirade to the network. Thankfully, most of it was drowned out by the crowd cheering the tackle and then the inward pull of breath as the crowd felt the impact of the three of us falling to the ground.

Annie had been my best friend since college, when in study group, she sat between Ryan, my longest lover, and me. It was a good thing for all of us, since for the entire last semester, anytime Ryan and I got together we'd spend more time fucking than studying. It was a wonder we ever passed our classes that year. The three of us became best friends, doing everything together. Well, not everything, obviously. Annie took control of the study schedules and always sat between us, especially after that first time, where my hand roamed a little too low and Ryan started kissing my ear. We knocked our chairs over, made it to Ryan's bed and started going at it with her still in the room.

"Guys, I'm still here. It's quite the show, I feel like maybe I should leave you a twenty on my way out the door. But, that's where you are wrong, because I have a scholarship I'm tending and we need to figure out the quadratic equation of a line. A line?"

She sounded so stressed out, but I was lost in the lines of Ryan's body; the way Ryan's skin felt under my hands as they slid down to his waist, the way his body ground into mine, our lips meeting perfectly, our tongues circling each other. It stopped being exciting the moment I felt her hand grip my ear.

"I'm telling you to stop, please. I'm begging. Put your hormones in check and study this fucking line with me for two hours, then you can fuck like bunnies and I'll go to my legal studies group." She was yanking hard, and I stood up, buttoning my shirt and returning to the chair on her left. Ryan buckled his belt and took the chair to her right. That was the way study group lasted the rest of the year. And amazingly we all got A's. So the next semester, we made sure we took more classes together.

It was great for everyone, but especially for Annie, as she managed to graduate *summa cum laude* with further studies available should she need them. However, she already had three companies who wanted her for internships, and choosing was the hardest part.

I had gotten to school on several LGBTQ scholarships, though they weren't needed. My parents had the money to pay for me, but I told them I needed to prove to myself I could do it. If I failed, it would be my fault, and I wouldn't have wasted their money. I excelled at water polo in high school, and that's what got me on the team at Harvard. I didn't see a future in water polo, other than trying for the Olympic team, but after that? So, I took journalism and communications classes, with the hope of becoming a reporter on ESPN. And I wanted to be out doing it.

Ryan, on the other hand, wasn't very excited about the prospects of spending the rest of his life as the partner of a successful sports reporter and wealthy bachelor of Gramercy Park. When he came home with me for the holidays, he saw the money, saw the luxury, and freaked. And strange as it sounds, being in the home of a family that accepted their son and his lover, with parents that had no problem with the two of us sleeping in the same bed, freaked him out even more. I thought Ryan would have been happy, or at least relieved, but this wasn't the life he was accustomed to. With Ryan's dad working sixty hours a week and his mom working two jobs just to pay for his education, he'd been too afraid to come out to them. Ryan couldn't do that to his parents. They almost lost everything they owned, and he felt he owed it to them to graduate and be successful. After holiday break, Ryan moved to a different seat and focused on his classes, and we never saw him at study group again.

Annie and I lost touch with Ryan, but remained study buddies and became best friends. And even now, she rents the basement apartment in my house. Annie told me once over drinks on New Year's Eve that she had a huge crush on both of us back then. She laughed and admitted to writing fan fiction about the three of us together. We both laughed long about that and she said, "A girl can dream."

Through the years, both of us had an array of partners. Most of mine were secret, backroom dealings. Annie had moments where she fell hard, head-over-heels in love, with a string of men who were useless buffoons. None of them were worthy of her attentions. Sometimes I think she likes them big and stupid.

That same New Year's Eve that Annie admitted to her crush, we kissed at midnight, a chaste, sweet kiss, and placed the paper we'd both signed in my secret hiding place on the roof. It was a promise that if neither of us were in a committed relationship by thirty, that we'd be together. Each year, in private, we'd toast the stone and each other. And each year, she'd place a gentle kiss on my cheek and whisper thank you. I kept up hope that I'd find someone or she would, because I knew deep in my heart that I'd follow through with the note, even if we both knew it'd never work.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Wonder-Dummied - Brooke Waggoner

10:00 am

Dear Sis, today I was arguing with Finn-the-artist, again, because I didn't have the heart to kick him out last week and I saw Finn-the-dog sitting in the corner, whimpering. I have to stop this shit. Finn-the-dog is so much more important to me than that fake Fuck. I can't do it on my own anymore. But, Finn-the-artist is the wrong one to help me. Damn it, I've done everything I wanted to do. Why can't I figure out what the fuck to do with my love life? I sit here laughing and crying because Brooke has it right, I'm wonder-dummied. I'm stuck in this time and place and know that at thirty-three, I deserve more than a T-shirt designer wannabe artist. He can't even bring in a decent wage. Let him go off and live with the banker he met at that bar. I've got the real Finn here.

2:00 pm

Hey Sis, So, he's packed a bag and taken it to see his sugar daddy in the Village. I've just thrown anything he left down the garbage chute, and I've arranged for a locksmith to come over tomorrow, since the fucker took the keys with him.

I've taken some paint he left and put a large two-month calendar on the wall so I can keep track of when I need to take Finn-the-dog back to the Center. I regret letting this fucked-up

relationship get in the way of training Finn. I'll write more tomorrow. I need to go for a run with Finn-the-dog. Relationships suck, Sis. I'm so glad you found Peter.

Chapter Three

Marcello

A couple days after my fall, Annie showed up with three newspapers and her Kindle that she'd been playing the repeat of my embarrassment on. I really didn't need to see any of them. The only thing I wanted to do was to shut the world out. I lay in the bed, my leg raised on three pillows, my head raised on six, and the remote in my hand. I looked a mess, wearing the same T-shirt I'd worn when she left me last.

"Alright, March. You are done being miserable. I've taken a little vacay from work. I've got plans." She pulled out her iPhone and spoke, "Siri... please bring up my Marcello schedule."

"You have a schedule for me?"

"Yes. You are to spend as much time sitting with the leg elevated as possible. Remember what the hot doctor said before we left? But you do need to walk for some exercise. So, I figure we can visit the lovely park down there once a day, lunch or dinner time." She continued through her agenda of places and times to do things. "Dr. Harlan suggests getting a bag to place over your leg so you can shower." She looked me over. "Don't you take care of yourself anymore?"

I laughed and let her take care of everything. I knew deep in my heart that if we did end up getting married, I'd be so pussy-whipped. Annie was gorgeous, but having sex with her? Just, no. In an hour, I was showered, groomed and dressed. It was the first week, I was given a plan to follow, and I was grateful for my little Asian organizer who'd brought me back to life.

"What was so important on that phone that caused you to think you were a rabbit?" Annie busied herself with making the bed and moving the furniture for easy access from my bed to the bathroom.

"Hmm... let's see. A hate-filled text from JS."

"I didn't think you were serious about him."

"It wasn't love, but I thought it had potential. And now it'll never be anything." I bent to tie my right shoe. "JS is a major-closeted athlete, so, if my phone had gotten into the wrong hands, it would've been bad for both of us. Mostly him."

“I was a little shocked when you told me you were seeing someone in the closet. You’ve always said you’d never do that.” She took my hand and led me to the stairs. “Do you need help?”

I shook my head, resisting for a moment, but then sighed in submission. “Yeah, I do.” She wrapped an arm around my waist, and I leaned into her while we managed the stairs. “Closets are a pain, but, I kept hoping he’d come around. Though, ‘Fuck you faggot,’ makes me think not anytime soon.”

The journey down the flight of stairs to the living room was uneventful and slow. When we got there, the small French doors out to the balcony were already wide open.

“I’m going to go out for a few things,” Annie said. “Go check out the little set up I arranged for you.” She nodded towards the balcony. “I’ll be back soon.” With that, she handed me my crutches and left me alone in the living room.

I hobbled to the balcony to see what she meant. Annie had placed a table and chair halfway on the small balcony so part of it was in the doorway. I looked at the arrangement and saw a tablet on the table beside the breakfast tray that had a now-cold cup of coffee, two carafes, an empty bowl and a box of Froot Loops. There was a note taped to the tablet.

March, you can have one bowl of cereal. The blue carafe has milk, the black has coffee. Rest! Dr. Harlan told you rest and keeping your leg elevated will do the job. Just look out on the city, maybe write. You used to love to write. In fact, write me a story about the people out your window.

—Annie

I laughed and filled the bowl with cereal, poured the milk and ate as I took notes on what was happening in front of me. In this small part of town, no one ever talks to anyone else unless they’re visiting. It’s comical, or maybe sad. I don’t even know any of my neighbors. Perhaps living in Gramercy Park afforded me the pleasure of not having to meet anyone I didn’t want to meet. My parents bought this house when I turned twelve and Athena, my sister, sixteen. We grew up in the beauty of the neighborhood. I remember days spent in the park, playing with my best friends, Sam, Billy and Sara. I laughed as I thought of the day we all picked flowers and sold them. It was on that one Saturday in the fall when the gates were swung open and the great unwashed were allowed entry into the park. I never knew what it meant back then, but us

kids would sit and decorate our little booths where we sold our flowers. My parents gave the building to me when they moved to Italy and my sister Athena got married. It basically made me the most eligible bachelor in town, if I cared about such things.

Chapter Four

Marcello

From where I sat, I didn't have a direct view of the park, and what I saw past the gates was mostly covered up by foliage. So, I watched what went on around the what-seemed-like-a-prison in front of me.

I saw six people walking their beasts, which Annie referred to as dogs. Only one of the dog walkers caught my attention. He was wearing really loose grey shorts and a grey and green T-shirt with a Spartan on the chest. The man would greet every dog walker he came upon, almost as though it were a ritual of his while walking at this time every day. I also saw men and women in sweats running around the park, and three runners who I noted were running very slowly—they'll never get fit from those slow times. There were also two male and three female couples holding hands, four women pushing strollers, and an old lady walking around with a clipboard. It had been an exciting four hours.

Around lunchtime, a nice policewoman ticketed three cars in front of our building. I turned my head away when she gazed oddly upon my sitting and sipping coffee. I don't know why I cared what she'd think of me. *It's my balcony, my broken ankle.* Maybe she was trying to figure out why I looked so familiar.

When I got up to go to the bathroom, I noticed a man in an orange backpack sitting on a parked car. When I'd returned, he'd set up a canvas and was painting the park from the spot on the car. I didn't know if it was his car, but did it really matter? He wasn't very far from me and from what I could see, the painting wasn't that good—the proportions were all off. The colors lacked a certain city quality, and his trees looked as though they were bleeding, whereas the picture I painted in my head was of life living on the other side of the leaves.

That is what I saw. It was very structured and not artsy at all, save for that moment with the tug of war I had in my mind with the painter. As night came on, the artist packed up.

I called down to him, "Excuse me?"

He looked up and turned. "Hmmm?"

"Are you showing anywhere?"

He looked at his zipper, then back to me, shrugging.

“What’s your name? If I want to look up your work?”

“Finn Huck.” He turned and walked down the street.

“What kind of name is Finn Huck? It’s just Huckleberry Finn flipped around.” I turned back to the tablet and wrote, ‘Don’t look for the artist Finn Huck. He’s shit.’

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: True Colors - Jules Larson

2:30 pm

Sis, I'm sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry that you had to go through all that pain. I can only hope that... I am just sorry. I was stupid showing off, and I learned my lesson, I'm so sorry. I don't even drive much anymore. I moved to New York so I wouldn't have to get behind the wheel. I feel it's my duty to train the dogs; it's... what I was called to do. I still remember that day when you got Buster, and you were so happy. The way he came when you called him and he licked your fingers. It was like you were seeing all over again. Norah, I wish it had happened to me; I wish I were in your place. And because I'm not, I will do everything in my power to bring that same love to the world.

Chapter Five

Marcello

I'd been told by Dr. Harlan that the ankle would probably be healed in six weeks, but could take as long as twelve. I knew I didn't have twelve weeks of sitting on a balcony in me. I was used to movement; sitting in the same spot, barely able to walk around, was driving me crazy. Hell, I was bored the second day, and by the third I was calling the park regulars by code names. But what else did I have to do?

There was this old woman who was The Prison Guard. She'd walked around the park, tapping her key on the gate as she'd walk. She had a clipboard in her hand and would stop patrons to verify they had a key, even though she saw them every day. And every day the people she asked would have a silly look on their face— she'd just asked them the day before, but they would humor her just the same. There was the lesbian couple, who I was pretty certain didn't live together. They always entered the park from opposite ends, but would laugh when they reached the gate at the same time and reach for the knob at the same time. The blonde one always giggled first. It was a ritual, I imagined. There was Patches, the cat that always managed to get into the park no matter how many times The Gardener threw him out. And there was Orange Backpack, and Beardy, and Big Sweater, and Stains. But my favorite, of course, was The Spartan, the guy with the dog.

The Prison Guard actually walked across the street today, and was knocking on doors. When she got to the gate at the top of the stairs down to my door, I started to get up, but then noticed The Spartan had arrived.

It was too nice of a view to leave. The Spartan bent down to pet his dog—the most well-behaved dog I'd ever seen, but then... It was a dog. Dogs... No matter how I tried, the bad memories wouldn't go away. All it took was seeing one and I remembered the time— remembered how I used to love playing with Toby, but how my fears far outweighed my sadness for Uncle Mike, who lost his companion.

I wiped at the tears that had sprung up and saw the old woman walking determinedly down the stairs towards my door. I called out to her before she could get further and knock on the door. Apparently, she was taken aback by the fact that someone would actually be sitting outside enjoying the air.

“How may I help you?” I leaned over the balcony and shouted to her.

The Prison Guard appeared under the balcony and scowled at me, looked at her clipboard and then back up at me. “I’m just verifying that you are Marcello Morosini and that you have one key only.”

“Yes, ma’am. One key only.”

She checked off a box, and turned away from me, I raised up onto my crutches for her, but she stalked off to the building with the elaborate ironwork next door. There was no answer, and as she left, I made notes about The Prison Guard’s strange visit in my notepad. She’d had pearls around her neck—thick fake white pearls. I was pretty certain I could see the plastic tabs on them.

I shook my head and went back to watching the park. I could have sworn The Spartan was looking my way, but probably not. The man knelt before the dog, rubbing its face. They looked so cute together, but still I couldn’t get over the possibilities of what that dog could do to my face. It looked like at any moment he could bite those hands. Most dogs that were walked in the neighborhood were little yappy things, that if they weren’t on a leash would get run over by the first cab that barreled down the street.

Beardy came around the corner, his loud radio swinging at his hip. It was the first time that he would be passing the dog/man duo. I was afraid for The Spartan, and hoped the sudden loud music wouldn’t cause the dog to bite his master. But nothing happened. They passed, and everyone ignored each other like proper New Yorkers.

Later that afternoon, thinking of The Spartan, I began looking into cynophobia, the fear of dogs, to see if I could do anything, or learn anything about how to get over it. I found a video, The Dog Whisperer, about dog trainer, Cesar Millan, and I printed out articles on everything from getting a puppy, to watching dogs play, to doing what I’d been doing—just watching.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Foolish Love - Jules Larson

7:15 pm

Sis, I saw him looking at me again, the guy on the balcony by the park. This is so dumb; I’m trying to figure out why he looks

so familiar. Finn called the other night, left a message that consisted of, "I wish I hadn't been so..." and then he hung up. Truth be told, Norah, it was the best thing to have ever happened. I mean, what the hell was I thinking? An artist? And he was just a cute guy who nine times out of ten couldn't even do what he set out to do. Couldn't sell his art, which, by the way, was the worst shit I ever saw. I mean, why do we do stupid things?

Today I took Finn-the-dog with me to the gated park. We ran around it and I got to thinking, he's a Seeing Eye dog, he needs to deal with all sorts of shit that's thrown at him.

But, he shouldn't have had to deal with what I put him through. I think part of the reason I even started seeing the artist was because I thought it was cute that his name was Finn. Dumb, huh? I should have known that he was bad news when Finn-the-dog backed away from him. I think the foolish-love side of me was so excited by the fact that I found the one man in NYC named after my dog. I need to use my head the next time I find a possible partner. One who loves dogs as much as I do, one who wants to be happy. Hell, maybe even get married.

Chapter Six

Marcello

On a warm, sunny day about two weeks after my accident, Annie brought out plates full of sushi, and sat with me on the balcony. “You have been missing this, my friend, I know.” She looked across the table at the printouts while I was watching the tail end of the video by Cesar Millan. “What’s all this?”

I looked up from the video and sighed. “I saw a guy in the park, around the park. He’s here every morning when I set up, at lunchtime when I bring out my sandwich, and usually at night when I’m getting ready to pack it all up. And, well, he’s fucking hot.”

“How come I’m only just learning about this now?” Annie shoved a ginger-covered unagi into her mouth.

“Because it wasn’t worth mentioning. I’d approach him, but he’s got this big dog and uhm...” I took a bite of unagi and slowly chewed. “When I was about nine, I’d been playing with my Uncle Mike and his dog Toby in his backyard. Well, Mike threw the ball and we raced to the wall to retrieve it. Toby got there first and I grabbed the ball out of his mouth. I remember laughing and rolling around on the ground. This big blue-black Great Dane slobbered all over me, nudged me with his head, tried to take the ball away from me, and I laughed and laughed, and then I hear the scream. It’s my mother. She screamed bloody murder and Toby bit down, but not on the ball, on my head. I was crying so hard, mostly because I was in shock, and I saw my Uncle Mike kicking Toby. It was scary. My mother was screaming so loud, screaming that there was too much blood, and that I was probably already dead. But, I wasn’t. I was saying *Mom... Mom... Moth... Mother*, but she couldn’t hear me over her own screams.”

We both sat in silence for a couple seconds, Annie with this horribly sad look, as she studied my face.

I pointed to above my eyelid and behind my left ear. “These are the scars. I had twenty-one stitches in my head. He’d clamped down pretty hard, but I was fine. No permanent damage, nothing. It would never have happened if Mother hadn’t screamed and caused a scene. Uncle Mike took Toby in to be put down. It was sad for everyone, even me, because I really loved Toby. But, ever since

then I get so scared whenever I see a dog. I have dreams of being chased down the streets of New York with dogs yapping at my heels. Just waiting for the next bite from the next dog and knowing it'll take me down.”

Annie had finished her plate. She pulled out one of the takeout menus and began folding it. “I never told you I do origami to calm down, did I?” She slowly went through the motions, making the folds that would turn the black and white paper into the cutest little wiener dog origami. “I give you your first pet. It won't bite, I promise, though it might sting if you get a paper cut. It wants to love you.” She smiled and picked up her plate and offered to take mine. As she walked into the kitchen, I saw The Spartan walk down the street to the gate of the park.

I half-whispered, half-yelled, “Oh my god! Annie, he's here. Just walked into the park.”

She ran out to the balcony as fast as she could and glimpsed the man in shorts closing the gate behind him. “Do you want me to be your Grace Kelly and go investigate?”

I looked at her. “What?”

“It's just that this feels so much like *Rear Window*, except you're in the front window and you're spying on your garden instead of your back neighbors.” She laughed, “Anyway... I'll be right back.”

She ran back through the living room, down the stairs and was out the front door before I could stop her. I watched as she skipped across the street in next to no time. She got to the gate and turned around to look at me, holding out her hands to show that she'd forgotten the key to the gate. Annie shrugged and pulled out her phone. I didn't know what she was doing until I saw her take a picture of the sign on the gate, and then a selfie of herself with The Spartan over her shoulder. She was a shrewd woman, taking clandestine photos of the dog owner. He was getting closer, but then at the last second The Prison Guard walked up beside Annie, nudged her out of the way, and demanded The Spartan remove himself from the park. Annie stepped back and began filming with her phone.

“Sir, who let you in the park?”

“I did.” He knelt beside his dog.

The woman glanced around him— looking for what, I couldn't tell— but she was so obviously angry. “I demand that you leave. If you got yourself in, you can get yourself out, correct?”

The Spartan rose, in his uniform of baggy shorts and college T-shirt, producing a key. He unlocked the gate.

Annie jogged back and into the building. I couldn't pull myself from the scene. I watched The Prison Guard hand him a paper. I didn't like the worried look on her face as Annie plopped down in the seat across from me. She played the video for me on her iPhone, and even on its little speaker I could tell The Spartan had a very sexy voice. Then she enlarged the photo, pointing to the yellow harness on the dog. "Guide Dogs of America... He's blind."

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Can I Cross Your Mind - Trent Dabbs

5:45 pm

Dear Italian man on the balcony, I saw you again today— three times, in fact. I think you only spied me once, but strange things happen. Finn was walking slowly beside me when your friend took the pictures and filmed the fiasco with that old bitch. She ticketed me for taking my dog into the park. I've got a case, and so I won't have to pay.

I also saw your picture on the news. I watched and re-watched everything that happened. I also talked to my old buddy back east about what the translation was. People said you were shouting something about your amigo, but I hope it was your boyfriend you were arguing with. I know that's cruel, but you are so beautiful I find myself not going anywhere near the park and just standing at the edge, teaching Finn small prompts so I can look up at you. I want you to see me just so that I can cross your mind.

It's really stupid writing in my journal about hoping I would cross your mind. I did discover that your name is March Morosini. I'm in love... with your name, with your face, with your sad broken ankle story. I wonder if I can get the courage to approach you. At least you're successful, unlike some of the losers I've had. Though, with a broken ankle you're probably not going to be reporting anything for a while. Oh well, more

time to spend with me until you are finally able to walk. I know, I know... like we'll ever meet. You've probably got bigger thoughts on your mind than the dog trainer who passes by your balcony every day, sometimes three times a day.

Chapter Seven

Marcello

Rituals were what I'd picked up on while peeping on my neighbors. I began to daydream about the people I saw and had elaborate fantasies about them. I even dreamed up wild stories about The Prison Guard and The Gardener, of the trio that had the picnic lunch, of the lesbian couple who met and hid in the shrubs to kiss.

Oh, and then there was The Spartan, with his muscled arms and thick chest, and legs I imagined wrapped around my waist.

I kept notes for Annie on the people I saw.

The Prison Guard – Sharp, fake-pearled lady, old and rigid, holds a clipboard and stops all frivolity from occurring around the park or inside.

The Gardener – Older man, with panama hats and an apron full of gardening tools.

Pinkie – Cute little old lady in a pink cashmere sweater.

Bruises – Runner with lash marks on back.

Runners – four of them, two men and two women who run/walk at various start times. They seem to run around the park only, as I've timed them and they either run a fast run, which I doubt, or the security of a park, even one they can't run in, makes them more comfortable.

Leather – Every night for two hours leans against the fence outside my building, in full leather regalia, with chains that make a tinkling sound when he walks.

Sweatshirt – She comes from somewhere near my building, not in it, as I'm the only one here save you. She kneels at Leather's feet and places her head on the toe of his boot. I've assumed she's got her tongue there.

Beardy – He masturbates in the morning in front of my building. I've never seen any police come and stop him, so it's a ritual everyone on this side of the block who wakes up at four a.m. experiences.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Relax (New York Mix) - Frankie Goes to Hollywood**12:30 am**

Sis, this Italian, he's dreamy. Did I just use the word dreamy? I think I'm losing my mind. When I heard Finn on the voicemail, I took Finn-the-dog on another run down to the park. It was late, nearing midnight. It was foolish, I know, thinking about it now. I stopped right in front of his building and he wasn't on the balcony. What was I thinking? That he'd be there for me every minute of every day? I hung my head and sat against the gate, waiting to see if he'd appear. There was a light in the basement apartment, then another light on the third floor, and I glimpsed him hobbling to what I can assume is the bathroom. I haven't gone over the edge yet, Norah. No floor plans to help me track him. Hmm. No, not there yet. But, I perked up and so did Finn. He lifted his head from my lap and we watched the Italian move unsteadily through the room. He'd obviously gone this route several times, as it appeared like he had tables and chairs moved to just the right place for his hands.

From where I sat, I could just make out his beautiful body. He had on pajama bottoms and nothing else, just moving from the bed to the opposite room. I couldn't help myself but sit and watch, and about ten minutes later he slowly walked to the bedside and then an undignified plop onto the bed. I laughed a little— what can I say, it was cute. I sat for another minute before I stood up and walked back to the apartment, knowing my Italian was safe in bed.

Chapter Eight

Marcello

There are several ways I like to get woken up. One used to be the feel of Speletsky's hard body pressed against my own. Another was the tingly feeling of a tongue following the line of my body. But, the way I was woken up every day this week, the piercing shriek of my house phone, was not one of them. I remembered making the ring tone high and sharp because I used to work on various floors throughout the house, and wanted to hear the phone wherever I stood. Now I hated it; in fact this morning was the last straw. I unplugged the phone from the wall, took a deep breath and felt calm for about ten minutes. Then my cell phone started twittering and beeping, and my email pinged on the computer.

It had been five weeks since the break, and there was an article in the tabloid naming names and outing me— or trying to. The emails were from concerned friends, coworkers and reporters trying to get the inside scoop. Even Annie commented when she came in with a tray of food and about ten newspapers.

“Well, you got a royal fuck up going on here.” She handed me the coffee from her favorite shop.

“Oh? I thought things were going splendid. A broken ankle, almost six weeks holed up in my house, in love with a man who doesn't know I exist, trying to get over my fear of his vicious beast. What more could go wrong?”

Annie stood and stared at me like I was an idiot, then pointed to the newspapers. “You've been outed.”

“Annie, they can't out the willing. Besides, my bosses knew I was gay when they hired me. I've been out since I got caught sucking off the water polo captain, Malcolm, in high school,” I said, laughing.

“Yes, well that may be all good with you, but they're speculating that you were cussing about your...” she made little quote motions with her fingers, “‘friend’, if you know what I mean.”

“I was cussing about Speletsky. He texted that I was a fucking faggot. I told you that.”

“Well, Hank caught you on film, remember? Nice Italian, even with the New York accent. Your father would be proud. Your mother would not.” She laughed and opened the *Village Voice*.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Wicked Game - Phillip Phillips

4:30 pm

Dear Sis, I've fallen in love with that Italian who sits on a balcony in Gramercy Park. I see him every day. Soon he might notice me, since Finn and I have been almost stalking him. I know that sounds crazy. According to what the tabloids are saying now, he got in some sort of text fight or something with his boyfriend, and started cussing in Italian right before he was caught in a tackle. So, at least I'm 98% certain he's gay. I've decided I'm going to introduce myself. In a few days I'm taking Finn to the Center. I'll take the time to do it later that day. I'll never know if I don't do it. He's just so perfect. I'm talking nonsense, I know. I love you, Norah. Someday I'll have the courage to say this to your face.

Chapter Nine

Marcello

Annie, you wanted me to document the city before me. I have been sitting on this balcony at all hours of the day. Thank you for my constant pet companions, by the way. The stuffed Great Dane you brought the other day was just named Toby. And I've watched the video with Cesar Millan every night before bed, and listened to tapes on how to get over my fear. Now that the cast is off, if The Spartan is still around, I will walk out, look into the eyes of the vicious beast, the dog, and introduce myself. I know it's what I need.

So, I started this daily ritual where I hobble slowly to the balcony, pour a cup of coffee and spend the day notating the people I see. And thank you for encouraging me to write again. It's been interesting. The people in New York, though not like any other place in the world, are so very similar. We all have these rituals we do. The same runners I mentioned that first day, are still out running at five, and a couple of them at six, every morning. They are all still running slowly, but one of the four has actually lost weight and she runs with a new spring in her step.

The Prison Guard starts her rounds at seven forty-five and meets with The Gardener. They walk together around the inside of the park. She picks up trash and places it in a doggy poop bag, while she orders the man about and tells him how to do his job— at least that's what I'm assuming she's talking about as she points to shrubs and flowers, and the tree in front of my balcony. I've thought of getting binoculars so I could trace her whereabouts, but that makes me feel a little stalkerish. Do you think that if I were a photographer, I could use the Jimmy Stewart telephoto lens trick he utilized in Rear Window?

Hey, I could watch The Spartan that way too. Speaking of, he just showed in the park. You'd think I could come up with a better name for the man I've fallen in love with from afar, the man I'm willing to do everything in my power to change the

way I feel about dogs for. I think I'm going to start calling him The Lover, since I'm in love.

I stopped writing to watch him walk across the park. Our eyes met and I couldn't break away. I had butterflies in my stomach and it took everything in my power not to cry that he noticed me. Or, at least, I'm almost positive he did. Which would mean he's not blind. I finally looked back down and picked up my tablet. If he could see me, I didn't want to be caught staring.

Annie, if I didn't know he was blind, I would swear our eyes met just now.

I looked back up, but he was gone. I sighed, disappointed, and got back to writing to Annie.

He didn't have the dog with him, so maybe... wait...

There was a noise coming from right under me. "Annie? Are you moving things down there?" I leaned over the balcony, and there he was, arranging trashcans so that he could... Oh, holy shit, he was climbing up on top of them. He *did* see me. Oh god... I'm scared. No, I'm not. Oh, please.

He shakily raised his hand to me, so I leaned over and grasped it, confused about what was happening, nervous and excited all at the same time. And then... *and then*, he lifted his lips to my hand and kissed my knuckles.

"I'm Noah Wright, and I think I'm falling for you."

And the words that came out of my mouth? "I thought you were blind." He laughed and started wobbling on top of the trashcan. "Get off of those. I'll come down to you." I walked as fast as I could; thank god I'd gotten the walking cast put on the other day. It was much easier to get downstairs. Faster than the fastest runner I'd seen, I opened the door to his beautiful, smiling face and gorgeous green eyes, sparkling under a tousled shock of black hair.

"I'm Marcello Morosini. My friend's call me March." In a crazy, impulsive move, I raised my hand to his face, slid my fingers behind his neck and pulled him to me. I could smell him, something spicy, as I lingered in his arms and slowly, gently, our lips made contact. It was soft and then it wasn't. It wasn't anything I'd have ever thought. It was so much better.

I looked around, behind him, at his feet, and up the stairs towards the street. "Where's your dog?"

"Oh, I turned Finn in to the Center. I was training him, and his training was over."

“You aren’t blind, you’re a trainer...” And then I forgot about the dog as our bodies entwined once more. We stood there for what felt like hours, kissing, hugging, till I finally remembered I lived there.

Chapter Ten

To say it was a whirlwind romance would be completely true. I mean, it took us six weeks to finally lock eyes at the same time. It took stumbling through miscommunication from Annie with the Seeing Eye dog/blindness thing. Noah's a veterinarian, but currently writing freelance stories about training Seeing Eye dogs. He told me about his failed relationship with a stupid artist who nearly ruined all the training he'd done with Finn. I laughed when I heard the name of the dog and relayed the horrible artist that had painted the bleeding-leaves painting in front of my balcony. And we both said "Finn Huck!" at the same time. It was little moments like that that made me realize this might actually work.

Annie had to mysteriously go out of town the night after we met, and I asked him if he'd go with me to get the walking cast taken off and have a final check in. He helped me as best he could, and it was sweet. After the appointment, we went to lunch at Gramercy Tavern and sat at a table by the window to celebrate.

"Are you sure? It can be pricey and very visible."

Noah laughed and said, "I've got money and I want people to see you with me."

"You know, people might assume you are the guy from the initial break," I laughed nervously.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure they won't even think that. And even if they do, who cares? I'll be too busy staring into your beautiful eyes to notice them."

The lunch was amazing. There were photographers who captured the two of us, leaning in and leaving a kiss. It was weird to think I'd become someone noteworthy enough to take a picture of, all because of a stupid fall. And the fact that Noah really didn't seem to care? I walked away from that date on cloud nine. I think he knew what that kiss meant to me, what it would do to me, and when we got back to the townhouse, I was surprised we still had any clothes on when we reached the bedroom.

"Well, Dr. Harlan said I need to exercise," I laughed as we fell to the floor. Within seconds, there were hands and toes and fingers exploring, and kisses everywhere. The tip of my tongue slid circles around his navel and up to his

nipple; his hands slid down my back and over my ass. We were in unison, as though it was this practiced dance we'd done for years.

After, I led him to the bathroom where we stood in the shower, bathing each other, and the kisses... Oh, the kisses lasted forever. The embracing, the teasing and tickling, the loving.

The next morning, Noah brought me breakfast in bed and presented me with the *New York Post* open to page six, with a picture of the two of us, leaning in to kiss.

Another Break for Morosini? Inquiring Minds Want to Know Who the Mystery Man Is.

“Do you think I should call them?” Noah climbed into bed beside me.

“Well, I hope your family is aware of your life.” I laughed, then looked at him more seriously, “They are, aren't they? Oh god, did I royally fuck up...”

He stopped me from saying anything else with a hand over my mouth. “It's all right. My family knows. Though, I can't wait to see who calls.”

Chapter Eleven

One morning at breakfast, Noah brought out some brochures on the Center along with coffee.

He knelt beside me and took my hand, kissing it just like that first time. “March, I know you’re frightened of dogs. The best way I’ve been told to get over the fear is to get a puppy of your own, to raise one. I’m willing to go slow with you and the puppy. We’ll go at your pace, let you pick out the one you want, the one you feel comfortable with.”

I sighed, kissed his hand and smiled. “All right, I’m ready for this. I know the dogs make you happy.”

“It’s not that they make me happy. I mean, they do, but it’s also because I feel responsible for what happened to my younger sister, Norah.” He sat in the chair beside me. “I was sixteen and a half, and had just gotten my license and a rusted red Volkswagen bug. It was a sixty-nine,” he chuckled. “I loved that number, even then. Anyway, there had been a blizzard that came through town, but I volunteered to take my sister to school. She was only twelve. Things went well at the beginning, because they’d salted the roads that morning, but I got brazen and started showing off for Norah. I took my hands off the wheel and was steering with my knees when we hit some black ice. I lost control of the car and we flipped like four times, our seat belts barely holding us in place. When we stopped, we were upside down and Norah was screaming. At least we were alive.”

It was my turn to kneel beside him. I placed my head on his hand and kissed his knuckles.

“We later learned that Norah had broken bones in her face, a traumatic brain injury, and damage to her pituitary gland and optical nerves. She lost her sight because of it. It was so unfair, because I just had a broken leg and hand—nothing wrong with my brain, nothing wrong with my eyesight. I feel it’s my duty to give to the world what I took from Norah. I’ll never be able to make it up to her for what happened. When I saw how happy Buster, her Seeing Eye dog, made her, I vowed to do the same thing for as many other blind people as I can. It’s silly, I know. I can’t save them, and I can’t save Norah. I just need to do this.”

I stood, pulled him into my arms and kissed him madly. “I can’t wait to meet Norah and our new puppy.”

The End

Author Bio

I've grown as a writer since Resistance, my submission for last year's anthology. I see many more stories in my future, and thanks to my two beta readers, I've gotten the confidence to write again.

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