

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

Amy Spector

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

By Amy Spector

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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WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

By Amy Spector

Photo Description

A man looks out from a black-and-white photograph. He is beautiful and shirtless, with a stubble-covered jaw and a hint of what might be a smile. He rests his hand lightly against his chin and cheek. He has clear pale eyes under heavy brows. Lips slightly parted, he studies the one behind the camera with an intimate gaze.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I signed up for this class to get my friends off my back. They've been bugging me to get out and try something new ever since my ex left me—right after cleaning out our joint checking account and half our belongings. Nothing says we're through like a negative balance and missing flat screen...

So I signed up for this photography class thinking I'd learn a few new tricks behind the lens. I wasn't planning on finding this man. He's gorgeous, smart, and so damn sexy I can't concentrate in class. Did I forget to mention he's the teacher? How the hell am I supposed to pay attention to exposures when all I want to do is run my hands over every inch of his taut body?

***The speaker here is a non-traditional student. The class can be taken at a university or community center he just has to be a bit older than the average college student (mid-twenties). Please, give these guys a HEA or at least a HFN. Other than that have fun!*

Sincerely,

Meredith

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: photography, loss of spouse, non-MC infidelity, comfort/healing, no sex, grief

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And thanks to Meredith for a prompt so appealing I just had to give it a try.

I also wanted to thank Aaron, who, even when personal tragedy struck and precious writing weeks lost, wouldn't let me quit.

This story is dedicated to E. I'd like to think we will meet again in a different life. But for now, your absence is felt keenly.

WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

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Chapter 1

I would have sworn I had only just drifted to sleep when my cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. I squeezed my eyes shut tight, easily convincing myself it was a wrong number, relaxing once it quieted. When it vibrated again, I groaned and worked to untangle myself from the sheets in the middle of the bed.

After four months, I had finally started to migrate over to Jason's side. I couldn't help but think that it was a good sign.

As I reached for the phone, I silently prayed it wasn't my mother, or worse yet, work. I might have been able to use the money, but what I needed was a few more hours sleep and, God willing, a short line for coffee when I did finally decide to get up.

I groaned when I saw the screen.

"Hello?" I answered, trying hard to keep the irritation out of my voice, but failing miserably.

"Don't get pissy with me, Mr. Pierce. Where the hell are you? I've been waiting for nearly thirty minutes."

Shit.

"Sorry Nicholas, Jason called me late last night, and I'm so tired I must have turned my alarm off in my sleep."

"Why the fuck would Jason be calling you?"

I let out a tired sigh. "I think it's his new hobby or something."

Nicholas was quiet for several moments before finally telling me to get my butt down to the diner.

"But I'm so tired." I knew I sounded whiny.

"Jacob, sweetheart, it's eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning for God's sake. I've waited longer for you than someone whose pants I want into." I could practically hear Nicholas roll his eyes. "Shimmy your fine ass into a pair of jeans and get down to the diner. We really do need to talk."

If I hadn't already been aware of my best friend's love of the dramatic, it would have sounded ominous.

"Fine. Give me fifteen minutes," I told him.

"I'm willing to give you thirty," he said before hanging up.

I decided to grab a quick shower, keeping it cool enough to help wake me up but warm enough to not be uncomfortable. One of the few changes I had made when Jason left, besides canceling his subscription to People and vowing to hit the gym more days during the week than not, was to crop my dark hair short, which made for a quicker morning routine. If I skipped shaving, I would be able to make it in less than twenty-five minutes without even pulling my Jeep out of the garage.

By the time I walked into the diner, I noticed that Robert and Evan had joined the corner booth, and I considered turning right back around. It felt more like I was walking into my own intervention than meeting friends for breakfast. When everyone at the corner booth grew quiet at my approach, I suspected I was more than half-right.

I slipped in, giving Nicholas a kiss on the cheek, the others an apologetic smile.

It didn't surprise me that it was Robert who spoke first.

"So Nicholas says that Jason has been calling you."

Of course Nicholas had.

"Yeah," I said, shrugging, "a couple of times in the last few weeks."

It had been six times in two months.

I heard Nicholas make an angry noise in the back of his throat.

"You don't want to get back together with him." It wasn't a question. It was always so obvious that Robert was used to everyone listening to him.

"Of course not." I spoke a little too loudly, and I felt myself blush as people in other booths glanced in our direction. "Last time I lost my television and ended up twenty-eight dollars and seventy-six cents short in my checking," I said, far quieter this time. "I'd probably lose a kidney a second go around."

I hadn't meant to sound so bitter; I was just really, really tired. Jason had gotten into the habit of calling and giving me a drunken recount of all the ways I had fallen short in the boyfriend department. If he had wanted me to fear ever getting my toes wet in the dating pool again, it was working.

I was saved momentarily from the conversation when our waitress approached to take everyone's order. The others had already ordered drinks,

having been there waiting for me for almost an hour, and had obviously made the decision to forgo breakfast for lunch, all ordering burgers and fries, except for Evan who ordered grilled cheese.

I thought, rather unkindly, that grilled cheese seemed fitting being that it couldn't have been too long ago since Evan had been ordering from the kids' menu. I felt instantly bad for the thought.

Evan had come into our group only three months back when he had started dating Robert. I had been friends with Robert for what seemed like forever, and there was no argument that he was a good-looking guy, even better looking now at thirty-one than he had been at twenty-five. But Evan was a very young-looking twenty-one, all big eyes and unruly black hair, and it seemed like such an odd pairing. Though you'd have to be blind not to see how much they adored each other.

Perhaps, at the moment, I was a little jealous.

Feeling guilty, I asked the waitress for the same thing Evan was having, and he gave me a shy smile, one I had no doubt won over Robert the moment he had seen it, then continued watching me in the quiet way he had that I found unnerving.

After a few minutes, it was Nicholas who spoke. "You need a hobby, like drag or something." I sometimes found it hard to follow my best friend's train of thought. "Maybe you could take a cooking class."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" The confused look on my face had Nicholas barking out a laugh.

"Since that dick of a boyfriend left, it's like you've been some kind of automaton."

I couldn't hold back my grin. "Automaton? Really?"

Nicholas flipped me off. "You know what I mean. A person can't just go to work and go home to bed and do nothing in between. You need to do something for yourself. And grabbing a meal or two a week with your friends does not count," he added quickly when he no doubt suspected I was about to argue.

I went to the gym too, but I didn't bother to say that. I knew he was right. Since the breakup, I had definitely withdrawn, rarely doing anything that broke from my daily routine. I hadn't even hit a club but once, a night three weeks

after the breakup, when the thought of my own company seemed unbearable. At twenty-eight, I was starting to feel too old for that sort of thing. Perhaps if every decent gay bar in town hadn't been so close to the university, the crowds wouldn't have always been so predominantly young.

"I don't know that cooking is my thing," I told him.

"Cooking should be everyone's thing," Robert said, exchanging a glance with Evan. This was obviously not a new conversation with them.

"They're going to be starting photography classes at the Cultural Arts Center," Evan said, his eyes down, running a finger through a ring of condensation left from his glass. When everyone quieted, looking at him, he looked up, quickly pulling a folded flier from his back pocket and handing it across the table to me. "I thought you might be interested."

Robert shot Evan an odd look, and Nicholas just shook his head. "That's already what Jacob does all day long, honey."

That was true enough. I worked in the art department of a marketing firm and spent much of my day shooting product—shampoo, shoes, things that resembled food but were in no way edible—so that it would look good through the lens. The remainder of my day was spent in front of a computer, perfecting what I'd taken. I was starting to lose my passion.

"That's all digital," Evan said, dismissing the concern with a wave of his hand. "These are art classes. Real darkroom stuff."

I looked at the flier then, liking the idea but not totally sure. I had spent a lot of time in darkrooms in college, and even some in high school but, it had been long enough ago that I wasn't sure how much I remembered and wasn't sure I wanted to make the commitment.

"Maybe, I guess." It was the best I could do.

"I don't know," Nicholas said, "I've always heard those chemicals can make you sterile."

"Well cooking classes could make me fat," I countered. The look those words got out of Nicholas had the whole table laughing.

Much to my relief, once the food was served, the topic of conversation moved away from my shell of an existence and on to other things: Nicholas complained about how slow the art museum gift shop counter had become with students gone for summer. Robert talked, about the short piece of fiction he was

working on for some magazine or other. Evan, as always, said very little but seemed content just to cuddle close to Robert's side, occasionally running his perfectly smooth cheek against the other man's shoulder. It was nice to watch, if a little depressing.

When we finally stepped out into the early afternoon sunshine, making our promises to meet up later in the week, Evan drew me aside to ask if I thought I might actually take one of the offered classes and seemed pleased with my answer. The instructor was apparently a widowed friend. He declined my suggestion that perhaps we find one that we could take together—it seemed only polite to ask—but said he was looking forward to hearing what I thought.

Surprisingly, he hugged me before we all went our separate ways, and I thought, begrudgingly, that I might have had a better understanding as to why Robert was so taken with him.

As I headed back to my apartment to grab a few hours of the sleep I had lost the night before, I changed my mind, deciding to do a little shopping instead. The weather seemed too nice to waste and, for once in a long time, I felt like taking advantage of it.

Chapter 2

On Sunday, I was feeling better than I had in weeks. While debating whether I needed to bite the bullet and go visit my mom, my cell phone rang. When a quick glance told me it was Nicholas, I silently thanked God for an excuse to put my mother off another week.

“Hey, Nick. What’s up?” I answered, rubbing a towel over my hair.

Nicholas let out an exaggerated sigh. “They had a docent call off, and they need me to cover for her.”

I already knew where this was going.

“I’d be glad to give you a ride,” I told him before he could ask, dropping my towel and starting to rifle through my dresser for something to wear. Nicholas’s car was at the mechanic, again, for God knew what, and he wasn’t expecting to have it back until Tuesday.

“You are a life saver. See you in ten?” he asked, and as much as he tried to hide it, I could hear his excitement through the phone. It was a job he had coveted for more than three years.

“Ten,” I confirmed before ending the call.

I quickly pulled on a pair of old jeans and slipped into my favorite shirt, a soft cotton tee, now faded to a blue that all the women at work said matched my eyes. It was comfortable and just starting to fit snug enough in the chest and arms to make me feel proud of all the work I had been putting in with the weights.

Fuck you, Jason.

After pulling on my socks and my worn brown leather shoes, I grabbed my keys and wallet and headed for the door. Nicholas had always hated the way I dressed. Said I looked like I didn’t really care, though he claimed a well-tailored jacket would go a long way to cleansing me of my fashion sins. I figured today he would be too thankful for the ride to give me much grief about it.

I had met Nicholas my second year at CCAD, the local art college. He was a freshman and regularly modeled for my Friday morning figure drawing class. He wasn’t a nude model—those were all hired from outside the school—but a

student working to help pay his tuition. I had modeled my freshman year as well and had hated it. I'd been thrilled the following year when I'd managed to pull a position working a couple of hours a week in the bursar's office.

I was a photography major with no real interest in drawing and even less aptitude for it, but it was required, so there I was. Three whole hours. Every week. Nicholas was the highlight.

While everyone liked that he could sit still for what seemed like forever and, after a break, was somehow able to magically return to the exact same position, what I loved was that when he did take a break, he would wander around the room, looking at everyone's work, chatting happily with the girls and flirting shamelessly with the guys. He was entertaining as hell. Several inches shorter than my own six foot, with blond hair, gold-brown eyes, and pretty, pink lips, he wasn't half bad to look at either, if a little full of himself.

When, after already having sat for my class on more than one occasion, he walked over to peek at my work for the first time, I wanted to groan.

"You're not very good, are you?" he asked quietly, an almost apologetic look on his face.

I studied my easel a few moments. The too short limbs. The slightly elongated torso. The proportion from forehead to nose, nose to lips, lips to chin. None of them quite right.

"I think perhaps the model was in a horrible train wreck," I whispered back. "It's rather tragic. He would have been quite lovely otherwise."

Nicholas had let out a delighted laugh, all heads turning our way.

We had eaten lunch in the cafeteria after that and had become fast friends.

We had never dated. Nicholas was attracted to big men with even bigger muscles. I preferred my men to come with far less drama. Nicholas would never be that. And me? Well, I was tall, but not outrageously so, and while I had always been in shape, my muscles were not the hulking kind my friend preferred, more the kind developed from playing soccer and being active as a rule. And I was happy with just the companionship after the isolation of having grown up gay in rural Ohio, before moving north to Columbus.

When I pulled up to the apartment that we had shared (before I had moved out to "shack up", as my mother had put it, with Jason) Nicholas was already waiting outside.

“God, thanks so much,” he said, climbing into the passenger seat. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“Not really. I just was thinking of driving down to see my mom.”

Nicholas grimaced. “Well, good luck with that.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“If you can put it off for another couple of weeks, I’ll go with you.” The offer was more than appreciated.

It wasn’t that my mother and I didn’t get along—we did, more and more as I got older—but my mother had had me young. Sixteen years old to the seventeen years of a father I had never met. It always seemed that, though we aged at the same rate, as I got older our age gap grew smaller. She seemed far younger to me now at twenty-eight than she had when I was eighteen. The real problem was that she had never much cared for Jason, nor him for her. Neither afraid to vocalize it when it was just me and them. And even when I told myself that, with a little time, they would learn to love each other, time just seemed to concrete their opinions of one another.

When the two of us decided to move in together, she had not been happy.

So, when Jason and I had parted ways, I just hadn’t wanted to face her. I was still too fragile and heartsore from the breakup, and I hadn’t been up to facing someone who wouldn’t have been able to hide that they were more than a little pleased.

I had avoided her calls for months.

From the one conversation I had been unable to dodge, she knew Jason and I had broken up. She knew he had moved out of the apartment we had shared. But she didn’t know the details. She didn’t know that he had packed his things on an unseasonably warm February morning. That he had wrapped the delicate, cobalt blue, depression glass vase I had given him on our first anniversary in a newspaper sports section he had pilfered from the neighbor’s recycling bin. She didn’t know that as he gathered the rest of his belongings in our small apartment, I had walked down the street to the diner, trying hard not to think about the kid I had kicked out of my own bed not twenty minutes before.

She didn’t know that she had been right.

Even though I knew less than two hours would have found me sitting outside my mother’s house in Jackson, I grabbed onto Nicholas’s offer, and we

made loose plans for the last week of June. It would be nice to have Nicholas to hide behind. Him, she liked, if only for the fact that he wasn't Jason.

With my Sunday now free, after dropping him off, I decided to hit the gym early. I found it hysterical that both Robert and Nicholas, of all people, thought my new gym obsession was verging on unhealthy. That Nicholas, in particular, was *concerned* about the six pounds I had lost, the ones I was so proud of, actually made me laugh. And Robert? The man could have easily bench pressed his boyfriend. But with melancholy still nipping at my heels, I couldn't agree. I had yet to skip a workout. And, anytime my mind would flash to the twenty year old with the six-pack that Jason had felt was worth throwing away a two-year relationship on, I would find myself there, running on the treadmill, not a half-hour later.

Well, maybe there was a little bit of unhealthy going on.

Of course, my mom wasn't the only one who didn't know all the dirty details of our breakup. I had merely told everyone that Jason had left me, that it was over and I didn't want to discuss it. Much to my surprise, no one had pushed. I did truly feel I was over my ex, but I still found the whole situation humiliating. I was hard pressed not to think of Jason's infidelity as a reflection on my own shortcomings.

That evening, I pulled out the photography class flier that Evan had given me. For the first time, I wondered if my persistent dislike of Evan had more to do with Jason's boy-toy than with Evan himself. Evan had never done anything worse than be young and pretty, and I felt a shot of guilt at being such a hard sell when it came to accepting him into our little group. No one had ever said anything, but it was hard for me to imagine it had gone unnoticed, to Evan at the very least.

I thought for a moment about calling him. I knew an apology was in order. But instead, I vowed to buy him lunch and make my apologies in person.

I ended up signing up for a surprisingly expensive Monday night, beginner darkroom refresher course, opting to pay even more for darkroom and studio access on Wednesday and Friday nights. I had little else going on at the moment anyway, and I felt a small jolt of excitement when it was all said and done.

My week sped by after that. The office was swamped, so I worked a lot of extra hours and still managed to grab dinner with Nicholas on Wednesday. Much to his horror, I confessed to having been asked and declining a date with

the new sales rep from one of the printing vendors used by my firm, when he had asked about the man who he knew had been flirting with me for weeks.

He couldn't seem to understand that my decline was not me hiding away from the world, too afraid I'd be hurt again. But it really wasn't. Okay, maybe there was a bit of that. I knew that putting myself out there would be a risk, but it was a risk I felt I would be more than willing to take when I found the right person.

The fact that I claimed to be looking for something specific, when I couldn't put that *something* into words, did not help my case.

As I had left dinner that night, refusing to believe that Nicholas's hypothesis could be correct, I also wondered at what it was that I was really holding out for and whether I would ever truly find it.

Chapter 3

By the time I entered the Arts Center for my first photography class the following Monday, I had spent a small fortune. Even opting for a used manual Nikon SLR camera, once I added in two lenses, a dozen rolls of 100 speed film and a plain leather case, I had pretty much wiped out what little I had managed to save over the last few months. I tried hard not to think about all the times I had watched my grandfather blow a few hundred dollars on a new hobby only to see the tennis racket, golf clubs, fishing rod or whatever, collecting dust in his garage a few weeks later.

Still, I felt truly excited for the first time in months, having warmed up to the idea a little more with each passing day. Even the shitty weather couldn't bring me down.

The eclectic group of students were pretty much what I had been expecting. Though primarily young, late teens and early twenties, there was one woman around my own age and a couple well into their sixties.

I was a few minutes early and, not much in the mood for socializing, decided to grab a chair up front with the plan to look through the camera manual I had yet to crack open, when a portfolio on the instructor's desk caught my attention. Never able to resist such temptation, I walked over to take a quick peek only to find myself flipping through page after page of the most intriguing black-and-white images. An assortment of candid shots and portraits, they were all beautiful in the realistic depiction of their subject. No soft focus, no overexposure to obscure flaws. Just the rich detail of a fine grain, slow film. Here the imperfections weren't something to be hidden from view but a part of the whole, not something to be obscured but explored.

The complete antithesis of what I did every day.

A man, his shaved head nicked and scarred, stared out at me, a stump of a cigarette smoldering between dirty, blunt fingers. A young girl smiled prettily for the camera, her bruised and scratched legs sticking out from a pale, checked dress. An intimate shot of a lovely man, his head of dark hair pushed back from his heart-shaped face, a dark-haired child in his arms. And, though they both stared out at me with the same deep eyes, smiling a smile so much the same, one face spoke of infinite possibilities, the other of hidden heartbreak. So many images, and each as intriguing in their own way as the others.

It was an extreme close-up of a very old couple, the lines of age worn like badges of honor, that had me mesmerized. The man smiled happily into the camera, the woman with eyes closed, pressed her cheek to his. Her arms around his neck. It was somehow reminiscent of an image that existed of my own grandparents, and no doubt countless others as well. An image where they were unimaginably young, arms wound tight around each other. My grandfather in an army uniform as new and perfect as the love they shared.

The image inexplicably made my heart hurt. But somehow, as I studied that particular photograph, I understood the truth. I had never felt that kind of love for anyone. Not even Jason.

The realization was both devastating and freeing in turn.

I don't know how long I looked at that image, certainly more than a few minutes, before I became aware of someone standing quietly in front of me. I looked up, self-conscious of the gamut of emotions that this stranger had undoubtedly witnessed in my expression, to look into the face of one of the most handsome men I had ever seen.

"They're both so beautiful," I managed to say in lieu of an apology. Whether for being so obviously emotional or for pawing through what I assumed was this man's work, I didn't know.

He only gave me a hint of a smile, studying me intently with pale-green eyes. "You must be Jacob."

I nodded my head and, no doubt, failed miserably in my attempt to smile. He touched my shoulder reassuringly for a moment before politely shooing me away to my desk, giving me a genuine smile of his own.

He introduced himself to the class as Elijah Fall, hopping up to sit on his desk at the front of the room, asking everyone to call him by his first name, as he planned to call us by ours. He wore a black suit jacket over a red T-shirt with dark jeans, and when he crossed his legs to reveal honest to God black Gucci rubber boots, still slightly damp from the rain, I thought even Nicholas would have approved.

"I'm going to make this quick," he said, tossing a stack of saddle-stitched booklets onto the desk of the person on his left, asking them to take one and pass the stack on. "Of course, this is all online." He stopped, seeming to laugh at himself. "But old habits die hard."

“This is just a refresher course, so everyone should already be familiar with at least the basics of film processing, print making and darkroom procedures.”

He looked around the room, seeming to take a mental tally of the attendees.

“We have a lot to go through and only nine weeks to do it. With that in mind, we additionally will only be working on burning and dodging techniques, the use of darkroom filters, and correction of both negatives and prints. Also, if there is time, we can work with dyes, and I can demonstrate hand tinting for anyone who might be interested.”

It was then that the booklets landed on my desk, having traveled around the room. I grabbed mine and, feeling silly, stood to hand back the remaining books. He reached out and claimed them with a quiet “Thank you.”

“Oh, and for anyone in my Wednesday or Friday night labs, as long as I’m free, we can work on any additional tricks you want. Within reason,” he qualified with a grin.

He slipped off his jacket then, laying it over his now closed portfolio, and hopped to standing, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s get started.”

The class went by in a bit of a blur. With the request that everyone shoot a roll of film by the following week, either on their own or in one of the adjacent studios, we skipped film processing and went straight to print making. Elijah demonstrated the mixing of each of the chemicals, grabbing a couple of the younger men to haul the five-gallon buckets and the two older students to measure the water. It had been almost eight years, but the memories came trickling back.

Elizabeth, the only other student around my own age, and I were drafted into setting up the chemical trays in the two trough sinks in the middle of the darkroom.

I tried hard not to notice how well Elijah’s jeans fit his backside as he crouched down to mix the chemicals but failed miserably. When Elizabeth looked over to waggle her eyebrows at me, we both laughed.

Elizabeth and I set up identical tray layouts in each sink. Developer first, used to bring out the image on the exposed paper, stop-bath second, to stop the developing process, fixer third, to set the exposed print, then water to wash all the other shit off. The overpowering white vinegar smell brought back memories of sneaking into the darkroom in college to kiss my first real boyfriend.

Without actual negatives, Elijah walked us through the printmaking review by having the class work with photograms. I tried hard to harness my inner-Man Ray, but sadly everything just came out looking like unidentifiable squiggles.

Elizabeth and I chatted throughout, deciding to grab enlargers that sat next to each other. By the end of class I had learned that she was an elementary school teacher, had been married almost four years, and that we were both in complete agreement that the sound of our instructor's voice was the hottest thing about the man. And that was saying a lot.

Once the lights were back on, Elijah let out a shrill whistle to get everyone's attention. "Make sure you grab your prints. There is another class in here tomorrow, and I can't guarantee they'll be here waiting."

"And," he called over the sound of students gathering their possessions, "fair warning, if you are here early, you will be helping mix chemicals."

After class, Elizabeth and I decided to walk across the street to an all-night coffee shop, each grabbing a cup and taking a seat near the window. Looking back across the wet road to the center's doors, we watched as people spilled out at different intervals.

"So, what's your story?" Elizabeth asked, taking her first sip.

"Well, I work at Blue Stone Marketing, live just west of the gallery district and was bullied by friends to *take up a hobby*." I made quote marks with my fingers.

"Wow, Blue Stone. That's a pretty big deal," she said, and I shrugged.

"So, no boyfriend?" Elizabeth asked grinning.

"And how do you know it wouldn't be a girlfriend?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

She raised a brow. "Well, you called Fall's voice *sultry*," she made quote marks with her fingers this time. "and the fact you were watching his ass like it was reading the lottery numbers. All that was a bit of a giveaway."

I couldn't hold back my laugh. It was nice talking with someone whom I hadn't known forever. "Yeah, there would be that." I couldn't help but smile, and soon we were both snickering.

"So, boyfriend?"

I'm not sure if it was the fact that she didn't really know me and had no vested interest in my life or that I finally just needed to talk, but I found myself spilling the vault of my secrets concerning the demise of my last relationship and my lack of a life since.

"Well, your ex sounds like a fucking asshole."

I laughed. "You teach second graders with that mouth?"

"Third, and yes." She grinned. "So, four months is a long time, and our teacher is pretty hot."

I shook my head. "Assuming he's even gay, I'm thinking he might be a little too hot." I didn't mention that Evan had said he was widowed. A fact I was finding hard to reconcile with the man. "I'm thinking he's probably a bit out of my league."

"I don't know," Elizabeth said, looking me up and down and making me blush, "you're pretty hot yourself."

I laughed again, burying my face in my arms on the tabletop. "Shut up."

Her whispered *Speak of the devil* had me looking up again to watch Elijah Fall making his way across to our side of the street.

He met my eyes through the plate glass window, and he flashed me a smile, lifting his hand in greeting, before taking a right and heading to the parking lot just north of where the coffee shop sat.

We both waved back.

"If I were you, I wouldn't waste too much time thinking about it. Real estate like that goes pretty fast."

Chapter 4

When I showed up to the first Wednesday photo lab I was a little surprised at the crowd. Most of the students filled the adjacent studio, observing, assisting, or setting up shots of their own. I couldn't help but watch Elijah for a moment as he moved between the three wall-separated enclosures, helping to adjust lighting, read meters, and answer a barrage of questions about this and that. Forcing myself to turn away, I headed in the direction of the darkroom. I had spent an unusually long day in the studio, and though mine was far less claustrophobic, one you could easily pull a van into, I had no real interest in spending my night in one as well.

At the moment, I was more interested in the binder I held in my hand.

After the Monday night class, I had lain in bed, my thoughts drifting to my new instructor and to the photograph of the aging couple, when inspiration had hit. Two in the morning found me digging through boxes in my closet until I found a binder full of negatives salvaged from my grandparents' house after they had both passed away. I had always planned to scan the negatives, still did, but I loved the idea of making prints directly from them.

It took me a moment to find a medium-format negative holder for the enlarger, since the majority of the photos had been shot in 120mm, but after that, it was easy, the chemicals already mixed and the trays already set up.

The only other students in the room seemed to be wrapping up for the evening, a rush project at work having kept me late and causing me to miss most of the lab. Anyone else who might have been there appeared to have already called it a night. I was a little disappointed that Elizabeth was not there to keep me company and wondered if she had already come and gone. I made a mental note to text her, having exchanged numbers that first evening.

Looking through the negatives, I found the one I wanted. It was of my grandmother as a woman in her late twenties sitting on my grandfather's lap. He sat on one of the same painted white metal chairs that still sat on my grandparents' porch the day I had gone off to school. My grandmother laughing, a hand up to playfully bat away the one taking the photo, my grandfather, a wolfish grin on his face.

I had to stumble through making three test strips, a test print in which the image is exposed to photographic paper in narrow strips, each exposure

increasing in length, before I was able to determine the best time for the final print. When I had finally submerged my first true print in the developer, the others had gone, and I was blessedly alone, relieved not to feel the need to rein in my excitement.

I stared at the sheet, bouncing slightly on the balls of my feet, waiting to see the first shadow of the image start to darken its surface. It was like every seventies private detective show I had ever seen.

“I feel like James Garner.” The quiet laughter from the direction of the door told me I was no longer as alone as I had thought. I didn’t even have to look to know who it was.

I should have been embarrassed, but when I looked over to see Elijah smiling as he approached, I could only grin back. Today he wore a black tie with dark trousers and a vest over a white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up. He looked tired and slightly ruffled, and I found him more appealing in his imperfection than I had two nights before.

“You look tired,” I said, speaking the thought before I could think to hold it back. The words seemed too intimate somehow for a near stranger.

He only laughed, running both hands through his hair. “Exhausted.”

He studied me for a few heartbeats before lowering his hands and gesturing with one toward the tray. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.” He took a place across from me, standing on the other side of the island sink, just as I lifted the print out of the developer to deposit it into the stop-bath.

He leaned down to study it for a moment before asking how long the exposure had been. The question confusing me at first, the man’s proximity making it hard for me to think.

“Twenty-seven seconds.” I finally managed to get out before the gap between question and answer became too awkward. “They’re my grandparents.”

He smiled then, looking up at me. “It’s wonderful. Do you have many more?”

“A whole binder.” I couldn’t hide my excitement.

“And why did you choose to print this image first?” he asked and met my eyes again when I didn’t answer right away. There was something about the

way he seemed to study me that gave me the feeling that my answer had meaning far above the sum of its words. "If you don't mind me asking."

I didn't mind, of course, but I didn't want to give him a pat answer that would have normally slipped from my lips. I wanted to give him the real one.

"When I was young, my grandfather kept a copy of this photo hidden in the top drawer of his desk."

Elijah squinted at me, confused. "Hidden?"

"Yes." I laughed. "He kept it hidden in his desk drawer because my grandmother absolutely hated it. Said she looked fat." I used the tongs to indicate my grandmother's stomach. "See? She was four months pregnant with my mother and was just starting to show."

He smiled. "I think she looks absolutely beautiful."

I used the tongs to lift the photograph out of the stop-bath, letting it drip a moment before placing it into the fixer. "I think so too."

"You look a lot like her." The logical side of my brain knew, just knew, that this man was not flirting with me, even as I felt my pulse pick up.

I cleared my throat. "I've always thought I looked like my grandfather."

He looked back down to study the photograph again. "I guess I'd need to see you with a woman on your lap."

I threw my head back and laughed, and Elijah pushed away from the sink with a grin. "Ten more minutes before lights on," he told me, walking backwards, still grinning, hands shoved into his pockets, "then I'm kicking you out."

When I got home that night, I found myself restless. I turned on the television, flipping through the channels to find nothing on but a *Law and Order* rerun I had seen twice before. *The husband with Alzheimer's did it.*

Turning it off again, I grabbed my phone to text Elizabeth to exact a promise that she would be at the lab on Friday. That done, I took a deep breath and, before I could talk myself out of it, called Robert's cell.

"Hey Jacob."

"Hi, Rob. Can I speak with Evan?" There was a shuffling sound and some muffled voices before I heard Evan speak.

“Hey, Jacob. Is everything okay?” The slight confusion in his voice and the genuine concern there made me feel terrible.

I am such an asshole.

I asked him to lunch the following day, and after only a moment's hesitation, he agreed.

We made plans, me promising to pick him up at their house just before noon, finally asking for and programing Evan's cell number into my own phone.

After I ended the call, I undressed and climbed into bed. I laid there for a long while, finally rolling over to study the photograph of my grandparents that I had placed on my nightstand. I was unable to hold back a smile. I loved the image, loved the class and was starting to like Elijah Fall, no doubt, a little too much.

Chapter 5

With the long hours I had put in the day before, I had no problem arranging to take off half a day of work and eleven forty-five in the morning saw me driving to Robert and Evan's house. I was worried that the lunch would be awkward. Evan always so quiet, me, a little too nervous to make small talk. When I was pulling up to the curb at their house, I saw Evan peek out of the curtains, only to then slip out the door, locking it behind him, all before I even had a chance to get out of the car.

I hoped it wasn't a bad sign.

The two of them lived together in a small house in Old Towne East, a historic neighborhood that sat just east of the city. It was a pretty, little Craftsman style house, in cream and varying shades of brown, the wide porch lined with hanging ferns. When Robert had purchased it cheap a few years back, it had been on the verge of falling apart. The entire neighborhood had been. Now it sat among an ever-growing number of renovations, and buying into Old Towne East had become an expensive proposition.

The silence in the car was awkward at first, but eventually Evan asked how I was enjoying the darkroom class, a subject I knew would come up.

"It's going well, and I like it, I think. It's all starting to come back, and I've met this woman named Elizabeth in the class who seems like a lot of fun," I said, stealing a glance at him, and he smiled, pleased.

Once we arrived at a dark little restaurant on Mohawk Street and grabbed a booth, conversation moved on to other things, Evan chatting happily away, giving me a chance to gather my thoughts before finally broaching the subject I had wanted to discuss.

"Listen, I asked you to lunch so that I could apologize."

"Oh." He had obviously been expecting something completely different. "Okay."

I wasn't sure what I had planned to say but somehow, having already told Elizabeth, I found myself sharing the humiliation of my breakup. Evan listened, pale, hands covering his mouth during parts of the confession, hands grabbing at my own at others.

"Listen, Robert doesn't know all this. Neither does Nicholas for that matter, but I know I have been taking my hurt and anger out on you."

He nodded his head, but had a look on his face that told me he didn't really understand.

"I think I haven't given you a fair chance because all I saw when I looked at you was your age."

Evan squinted at me. "So you thought me being young meant I was a man stealing hussy?"

I was silent, not sure what to say.

"I'm just giving you shit." Evan said with a wide grin before slapping the table between us. "You're forgiven."

I couldn't help but laugh. "We can be friends?"

"Of course." He jumped up to lean across the table, pulling me into a brief hug, before dropping back down on his side of the booth and leaning in close.

"You mean a lot to Robert and, while I hate to admit it, even when you were being a complete prick, I still liked you."

"Why?" I couldn't understand why he would choose to look past that.

"Well," he said, pausing to think for a moment, leaning back in the booth and crossing his arms. "I could tell something was going on, here." He tapped the place on his chest, just over his heart. "I even thought you might have had feelings for Robert." He held up a hand when I started to say something. "That suspicion lasted for, like, two seconds. Anyway, sometimes I'd see these flashes of who you were underneath, you know, before you'd remembered to be an asshole again, and it made it hard for me to dislike you."

I groaned, covering my face with my hands, and Evan laughed. "I am such a terrible person."

"No," he said, leaning forward to touch my arm, serious again. "I've never once thought that."

We talked about other things then. About Evan's job at an antique store, walking the floors, opening up cases and answering questions, my job, and about how Robert's second novel would be out in hardback before Christmas. I fought against the desire to ask him about Elijah Fall. About how they knew each other. About the spouse that had passed away. About whether my suspicions were correct, and he was gay.

As we were finishing up, Evan's cell rang. He stared at the screen a moment, debating, before he answered, shooting me a hesitant look. When I

saw he was about to get up, I waved him back down and excused myself to the restroom, giving him a few minutes privacy and me a moment to think. Having finally made my apology for my behavior, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, even more so because he had accepted it with such grace. That he promised without prompting to keep my humiliation a secret, even from Robert, said even more about him. I sincerely wanted to be the man's friend.

When I returned to the table, Evan had finished his call and was ready to head out. We slipped out the door and started down the street to where my Jeep was parked at the curb, quiet until Evan brought up my photography class again, this time asking what I thought of Elijah.

I concentrated hard on not embarrassing myself, but I knew I blushed and had no doubt Evan had seen it, though he was kind enough not to say anything.

"Your friend's a great photographer," I said, and Evan gave me a bright smile. "I kind of took the liberty of peeking in his portfolio." I grimaced, and Evan laughed.

"Caught, were you?" he asked, and I nodded my head, laughing.

"His work is wonderful. It's like he..." I trailed off, momentarily at a loss for words.

"Like he isn't just seeing the outside," he supplied.

"Yes. Exactly." I wasn't sure why those words set an ache off inside of my chest. "It's like, because he can see everything, he can see the beauty other people can't."

"But you saw it," Evan said, smiling. "I thought you would."

For some reason the words pleased me, and I smiled. "Well, sometimes it takes me a while," I said, and Evan's grin grew wider.

When I stopped to drop Evan off at his house, I retrieved my camera bag out of the cargo area, and he permitted me to take his photograph, my first for the following week's film processing review. I had been trying to get back into the habit of carrying a camera on me, like I had done years ago, without success.

He stood at the top of the steps, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, head tilted, embarrassed.

I took that shot along with another, one where something I said made him laugh. I packed my camera away, declining an offer to come inside to wait for

Robert, driving off, seeming lighter somehow. With the rest of the afternoon free, I stopped to pick up some groceries and to run a few errands before heading home to clean and do laundry, chores I would have normally saved for the weekend.

Once all my running was done, I headed out to hit the gym. Since Friday and Saturday were normally too busy, I always worked out on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. I actually entertained the idea of taking off a night for a minute or two, the concerns of my friends ringing in my ears, but even as I knew that my exercise kick had been triggered by my ex, I also knew it was becoming more than a way to outrun my depression.

When my cell phone rang as I pulled into the lot, and a glance showed me it was Jason, I declined the call and left the phone in my passenger seat.

Chapter 6

When I arrived at the Cultural Arts Center on Friday, I noticed Elizabeth waiting outside its doors. I gave her a wave as I crossed the street and we went in together, chatting, our footsteps echoing in the high ceiling of the hall as we headed to the photography classrooms.

I couldn't help but peek into the studio as we passed and was rewarded with a quick glimpse of Elijah standing with his back to me, his folded arms pulling the fabric of an olive-colored T-shirt tight across his shoulders, as he spoke to a handsome man I didn't recognize.

"You look good." The man's voice was hushed, but it carried to where Elizabeth and I stood. "I was surprised when I heard you were slumming it at the Arts Center." The stranger's words and step into Elijah's personal space making my heart sink.

As if sensing our presence, Elijah stepped back and turned his head. Giving us a small smile, lifting a hand.

"You two need a studio? I've got one empty," he said, gesturing to the stall to his right.

"Say yes. Say yes. Say yes," Elizabeth chanted in barely a whisper behind me, tugging on the back of my shirt.

"Not tonight," I said instead, lifting my arm to show him my binder.

"Well," Elijah paused, letting out a breath. "I'll be back and forth again between the two rooms if you have any questions. Oh, and contact sheets or prints you make from those old negatives, I would love to take a look at them." He gave me an even brighter smile then, before turning back to resume his conversation.

"I think he might have wanted you to stay," Elizabeth whispered as we continued to the darkroom.

"I doubt it. Did you see that guy?" I asked, and she just looked at me, confused. "He was fucking gorgeous."

"I don't think he likes him," she shook her head, "but he seems to light up when he sees you."

"I should be so lucky." It was easy to confess things to Elizabeth that I wouldn't have to my closest friends.

Elizabeth just frowned at me. "You're making the whole thing too difficult."

"It's a little more complicated than that," was all I could say, and to my relief she let it drop.

We chose enlargers side-by-side again and, whether because he had expressed interest or because I wanted them for myself, I couldn't say, but I found myself starting to make contact sheets for each sleeve of old negatives. It was a rather boring process where a negative sleeve is laid directly on a sheet of photographic paper and exposed to light, so that in the end you have a single print with small proof images of every negative in a sleeve. With 35mm that would normally have meant thirty-five images per print, but since I was primarily working with 120mm, it was far less.

As he had promised, Elijah was in and out all evening, spending most of his time helping students I did not recognize and that I suspected were from the Tuesday night beginners class. Elizabeth and I found ourselves doing so as well, when Elijah was out of the room and I assumed back in the studio. It was fun, especially when helping the high-school-aged kids that were still so excited about the whole process.

Between chatting and helping out, Elizabeth and I accomplished very little and as the room started to empty, we finally began working on our own projects in earnest, me working with my old family negatives and Elizabeth printing shots of her third grade students from the previous year that she planned to include in letters she hand wrote to each of them, praising their accomplishments and wishing them a happy summer.

I thought that sounded sweet.

Toward the end of the night, Elijah came to stand close to my side, watching as I made a test strip for one of my proof sheets.

"Do you mind?" I found it nice that he always asked, and I told him that I didn't, quite liking the feel of him by my side, the thought making me blush and feel utterly hopeless.

He watched as I went through the monotonous, and totally uninteresting work of making a test strip, before finally speaking. "Would you..." he stopped as if debating something before continuing and asked if I would be interested in grabbing coffee or something after class. "I may be forced to draft you into helping put away the chemicals, but it would be my treat, and I'd get a chance to look at your proof sheets."

It took me a moment to answer the question, as distracted as I was by the way Elizabeth was less than subtly watching us out of the corner of her eye. "That would be nice."

"Great," he said, smiling before moving away to oversee the other students and eventually heading back to the studio.

"Didn't I tell you?" Elizabeth asked in a whisper.

"I'm sure it's not like that," I told her, not sure at all actually. "We have a friend in common."

"Oh, coffee together is a given then." She rolled her eyes and smirked.

We both continued to work after that, and Elizabeth kept up a quiet but steady stream of conversation, peppering it with the occasional *you two would make the prettiest babies* type comments that I chose to ignore but secretly enjoyed. I was rather nervous at the prospect of having coffee with the man, even if it was only to look at my prints, but worked hard to hide my nerves.

I was only on my fifth contact sheet when Elijah finally came back with our ten-minute cleanup warning before disappearing again.

"You don't have to go home, but..." Elizabeth's impression was a terrible one.

"I heard that," Elijah called back from the other room, and everyone laughed.

When he returned, I was the only one left and was retrieving the last of my prints from the dryer, Elizabeth having left a few minutes before, giving me what she explained the following week was apparently the universal *text me* signal. I had thought maybe her thumbs had gone numb.

Elijah and I worked side-by-side, storing and discarding chemicals and putting the room to rights, chatting about the following Monday's class. When we were finished, we each grabbed our things and headed across the street. Stepping into the coffee shop and being hit with the smell of coffee and pastries, we sighed in unison.

"These labs are exhausting," he said as he studied the late night offerings. "I'm thinking of suggesting they separate the studio and the darkroom labs."

"You do seem to run yourself a bit ragged," I said and watched as Elijah ran a self-conscious hand through his hair.

“God, I’m sure I’m a mess.” He let out a tired sigh.

“No,” I assured him, “you always manage to look like you just stepped out of a magazine.” I blushed the moment the thought was out of my mouth.

He just grimaced and looked embarrassed. He went back to studying the menu, hands shoved into the pockets of a pair of chocolate-brown chinos, head tilted, and I flashed to an image of Evan as he stood on his porch looking down at me. I found it odd that men who were so entirely different in every other way would have such similar body language. Evan with his blue eyes, pale complexion and black hair and Elijah who was all golden skin, caramel-infused brown hair, and pale-green eyes. Eyes that made my heart pound against my ribs when he looked at me. But the tilt of the chin, so identical, told me it wasn’t just a coincidence.

“So, how exactly do you know Evan?” I asked, trying to make sense of their connection.

Elijah looked over, slightly surprised. “He’s never said?”

“No,” I answered, shaking my head.

“I guess I know more about you than you do about me.” His comment was accompanied by a look I couldn’t read, and I wasn’t sure what to say. What had Evan told this man about me?

Elijah was quiet for a moment before answering. “He stayed with me for a while shortly after my David died,” he said, watching me closely as if trying to gauge my reaction.

“Your husband?” I asked, even though I figured I knew the answer, and he nodded.

I wasn’t sure what else to say. I hadn’t lost anyone close to me except for my grandparents, and at that point, I had lived two hours away so, as much as I missed them, their passing didn’t affect me on a daily basis. The thought of his loss was heartbreaking.

“I am so sorry,” I told him sincerely, knowing the words could never be enough. “Was it very long ago?”

He said nothing more specific than that it had been a while back and nothing more to clarify his relationship with Evan. Not that he was under any obligation.

When we were finally called forward, me gesturing for Elijah to order first, he stepped up and asked for some decaffeinated specialty drink and a vanilla bean scone. I ordered a simple black coffee, and we took our place at the same table where Elizabeth and I had sat the previous Monday.

He asked if he might see the contact prints I had made that evening, and together we sifted through the different images, talking about those that caught our attention. We both enjoyed the image of my grandfather in his brand-new army uniform, hat slightly cocked, aiming a rifle in such a staged shot that even the subject couldn't keep a straight face and the image of him standing, arms thrown over the shoulders of two other men I couldn't identify, a smile that screamed *three sheets to the wind*.

"Your grandfather has a great face," Elijah commented. "Very expressive. Do you know which print you'll make next?"

I looked through the sheets again, scanning quickly to find the image of both my grandparents sitting on the roof of an old Ford. My grandmother in her late teens-early twenties, wearing jeans rolled to the calf and leather shoes and ankle socks. My grandfather leaning back on his elbows in a checked flannel shirt, dark hair slicked back from his face. My grandmother's smile was all teeth, but my grandfather's closed-mouth smirk and his arched eyebrow made you wonder what had actually been going on behind the camera.

"I love that one." Elijah smiled at me. "There's a story going on there that we're not privy too. That look," he said, pointing down at my grandfather, "it's priceless. That look makes it more than a photograph but a frozen moment in time. Or does that sound silly?"

"No, not at all. That's it exactly." It was like he had read my thoughts, and I couldn't help but grin at him. "It makes me wish I could have asked my grandfather what had been going on." He held my gaze just long enough for my heart rate to kick up. Studying him in the brighter light of the coffee shop, I could see that Elijah was a few years older than me, probably in his mid-thirties, with faint lines that had started to appear at the corners of his eyes. I couldn't remember ever being so attracted to someone in my life. But it was more than his looks. It was the way he seemed to view the world around him.

He finally broke eye contact, looking down to glance at his watch, one of those heavy-looking stainless steel ones with a black face. God, you just never saw watches anymore, everyone used their phone, and for some reason I found it extremely sexy. Maybe because it drew attention to forearms that I had just realized I had a surprising desire to touch.

“Well it’s getting late.” He let out a resigned sigh. “Thanks for having coffee with me, I enjoyed it.”

I thanked him as well, and we walked out to the parking lot in companionable silence. We said our good-byes and when I was about to head to my Jeep, he touched my arm, stopping me. “So, you’ll be in class on Monday?” he asked, but I would have sworn that had not been what he was going to say.

I nodded, telling him I would, and he gave me another one of those sexy half smiles before he let his hand fall away.

I watched him as he walked to leave, heading to some sleek, black convertible parked on the far side of the lot. I didn’t know much about cars, but I knew expensive when I saw it. And that was the crux of the problem really, wasn’t it? Elijah Fall was BMWs and GQ fashion. I was old T-shirts and even older Jeeps. No matter how strongly I was drawn to the man or how much I hoped the interest was returned, how could it be? Even if it was, I doubted I could hold his attention for long. I hadn’t been able to hold onto Jason’s, and he hadn’t been nearly as perfect on the outside or as beautiful on the inside as Elijah Fall appeared to be.

Chapter 7

“It’s like riding a bike,” Elijah said, laughing from the front of the classroom as all the students tried to load practice film onto the stainless steel reels that had been passed out with developer tanks. He walked around the room, stopping to help with technique, eventually walking back to his desk at the front. I hadn’t hand developed film in years but at least when I had, I had developed hundreds of rolls. In the well-lit classroom, I didn’t find it too difficult, but I knew that once it was the real thing, when I had to thread my film into the reel in complete darkness, I might feel differently.

“I know that plastic reels can feed a little easier but the steel reels really last, and they do become easier with practice, I assure you.” He hopped up onto the desk, and I couldn’t help but enjoy seeing him in a tie again.

I looked away and, pulling my practice film free, closed my eyes. I failed at my first and second attempt at threading the film without looking, the film ceasing to move freely, a sure sign that it had been misfed. If that happened during the real thing, the developing chemicals wouldn’t be able to develop any parts where the film wrapped and touched other parts of itself and those parts of the negatives would be lost. The photograph ruined.

Keeping my eyes shut, I pulled the practice film free, unable to fight an answering laugh when I heard someone let out an expletive from somewhere to my right, and attempted to load it again. I found it difficult to concentrate with the buzz of the other students, so I focused hard, trying to block out everything around me. Calling on muscle memory from years ago, worrying a lip between my teeth as I had done hundreds of times before, working to not over-think my movement or move faster than my rusty skills would allow me to control the film. This time it loaded without so much as a snag, and I couldn’t stop my smile.

It was then that I became aware of the feeling of being watched, like an electric current running up my spine and wasn’t surprised to find Elijah looking at me when I opened my eyes. He sat cross-legged on his desk, elbows resting on his knees, the thumb of one hand stroking his lip, seeming deep in thought. I wasn’t sure at first if he was seeing me or seeing through me. When he smiled and looked away, I wasn’t sure what to think at all.

The classroom had one film-developing darkroom we had toured our first

night. It was a small room, roughly six by seven feet, and had a counter that ran the length of one wall, a sink at each end. You entered the room through a metal revolving door that allowed no light to enter, so once you were inside and the lights were switched off, it was just dark. Not the kind of dark where your pupils eventually adjusted but true blackness. The room was small enough that Elijah had to take the students in small groups of two or three, walking each group completely through the process for loading the film into the developing tanks to the moment they hung the film into one of the negative dryers that lined the wall opposite the counter.

I worked in the printmaking darkroom waiting until I was called, with two others, to develop the film we were asked to shoot the week before. Even with other students in the room with me, once the lights had been turned out, I became acutely aware of him in the darkness.

He verbally walked us through using the opener to pop off the end of our roll of film, using the scissors to cut off the film's lead and after it was loaded onto the reel, cutting it from the film canister spool. I loved the warm timber of his voice, more so now that I had spent time with the man, and by the time he flipped the lights on so we could start developing, I was certain I was flushed.

I had completely forgotten about the importance of temperature and the need for thermometers, and it was enough to bring my focus back to what I was doing. And I tried not to worry the entire time that I would ruin the roll of film I had shot over the last few days.

Besides the images of Evan the day when we had gone to lunch, I had shot photos of Robert and Evan together at the diner Saturday morning, of Nicholas while shopping that same afternoon and even shots of my own quiet street early Sunday morning before restlessness had sent me for a run.

The shots of Robert and Evan had been my favorites. As much as they contrasted one another, they also fit together perfectly.

My developing group was the last for the night, and after we had hung our string of negatives in the dryer and left the room, individually taking the revolving door into the main classroom, I noticed it was late enough that students were starting to gather their stuff. I was sad to see the night end.

I went to my enlarger to pack up my things with no real desire to go home to my lonely apartment. I hoped that I might find a moment to catch Elijah alone so that I could ask him to have coffee with me again, but when I emerged

into the classroom, he was not there, so instead I managed to catch up with Elizabeth and we walked out together. She showed me a photograph of her husband she had printed that evening, a handsome man with a mane of dark hair and a gap-toothed smile. He was quite handsome, and they made a cute couple.

As I opened the door to her car, I shot a look back at the Center doors.

“You should ask him out,” she said. She said it in a way that told me she really wasn’t trying to push, and that somehow made it easier to confess my fears.

“I really like him.” I stopped, debating, finally giving in. “But he was married once, and his husband passed away.”

She looked surprised.

“I’ve known about it since before I met him. Evan told me, that friend we have in common.” I looked back at the doors again. “I don’t even know how long ago it was.”

She slipped behind the wheel, rolling down her window as I shut the door. Reaching out she grabbed my hand through the window. “Maybe the timing sucks, maybe it doesn’t. You’ve got nothing to lose, Jacob.” She was so earnest, I couldn’t help but smile. I leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, and I bid her a goodnight, watching as she drove out of the lot.

I loaded my things into my Jeep, hesitating a moment before looking around and spotting Elijah’s car still parked at the far end of the lot. Taking a deep breath, I headed back into the Arts Center and to the classroom, focusing on slowing my breathing in an attempt to bring down my heart rate. I couldn’t remember ever being so nervous. While I hadn’t expected the classroom to necessarily be empty, I was disappointed to find Elijah sitting up on his desk at the front of the room, his back to me, the man from that night in the studio leaning in close.

“Come on Elijah, why won’t you go out with me? Hell, say the word and twenty-four hours could have the two of us in our own private bungalow, the beach just a few steps away.” His voice was almost a purr. “I’m sure you could use the getaway as much as I could.”

Even as guilt assaulted me, I stepped back into the shadows of the darkened hall but didn’t leave.

I watched as Elijah folded his arms, shaking his head. "Gabe, how many times do I have to say this?"

"I know, I know," he cut Elijah off, standing up straight again and taking a step away. He looked like a man who was used to getting his way. "So," he seemed to be searching for something to say, "I've never really gotten why these sorts of community things are so important to you," he said indicating the room around him.

"And that's just one of the problems," Elijah said with a laugh.

"God, you are so beautiful." The man stepped closer again, and I watched as he lifted up the silk of Elijah's tie, letting it slip from his fingers.

Elijah stiffened, and before I could stop myself I stepped into the room, a bright smile plastered to my face.

"Oh, sorry, Elijah, didn't know there was anyone here with you. Hope I'm not interrupting." Even as I said the words, I didn't stop my progress toward the two men.

The flash of relief that crossed his face was obvious. Elizabeth had been right, Elijah did not like this person.

"Not at all," Elijah said. "Jacob, this is Gabriel Marks. He used to work with my David."

I walked forward, reaching out to shake hands when what I really wanted to do was ask him to leave.

"Anyway," Elijah stood, forcing the man to step further away, "I hate to run you off, but Jacob and I have plans."

"Oh?" Gabe squinted at me, looking me up and down as if assessing me as a possible threat. His smirk told me he didn't find my old Converse and tight black tee much of one.

"So, where are you two heading?" Gabe asked, continuing to watch me.

Elijah flashed me an almost panicked look, as if saying that the two of us having plans was the only thing he had in his lying repertoire. I, on the other hand, was under no such disadvantage.

"We're going to the movies to watch the 1974 *Sugar Hill*." The man just looked at me. "You know, Marki Bey? Zombie revenge? Twizzlers?"

"I'm not familiar," he said, looking less than impressed.

“Really?” I shook my head. “They’re like a braided licorice candy. I think they’ve been around since the eighteen hundreds or something.” I smiled at the man, a patronizing smile like I thought he might have been a little slow, and he narrowed his eyes.

“I know what Twizzlers are.” He sounded irritated.

I feigned relief, managing to keep a straight face, even as I saw Elijah struggle to keep from laughing.

Admittedly, it was an old joke, and I was being a bit of a dick, but how often does a person get such a perfect set up? Really?

Elijah managed to school his features before Gabe looked in his direction.

“I like the cherry ones,” he offered, trying to sound natural. It needed some work.

When Gabe finally bid us both a good evening, touching Elijah’s shoulder lightly before heading out of the room, and the sound of his footsteps had faded down the hallway, I turned to face Elijah.

“You are quite possibly the worst liar ever.” I couldn’t hold in my snort of laughter.

“And you are a little too good,” Elijah said, covering his face in embarrassment but unable to hold back his own answering laugh. “Oh my God, Jacob. I am so sorry to put you in that position. I don’t know how, but I’ll make it up to you.”

“First of all, I grew up gay in rural Ohio. It was a matter of survival to lie well, but I certainly don’t make it a habit. Secondly, I already know how you’re going to make it up to me,” I told him. “Do you have to be anywhere early tomorrow?” Elijah shook his head. “Then hurry up and grab your stuff, we have a movie to catch.”

After some debate, Elijah lost his tie in the passenger seat of his car and, leaving it in the parking lot, I drove us both down to a small cinema on Indianola. Being that it was a Monday night during summer break, the odd little theater, located in an older neighborhood just northeast of the OSU campus, was nearly empty, and we were able to claim seats without a problem, even as the movie was already starting.

We shared popcorn and Sno Caps, it having turned out that neither one of us cared much for Twizzlers, in actuality, and we chatted quietly throughout the

movie, me amazed he had never seen it before, Elijah amazed that I had seen it so many times. We both agreed that Diana "Sugar" Hill looked fantastic poured into that sweet, white jumpsuit.

When we emerged back out onto the sidewalk, it was nearly midnight. The breeze blew cool as we made our way slowly down the tree-lined street, and I fought the desire to reach out and take his hand. I wondered what would happen if I gave in, just reached out to twine our fingers together.

I stole a glance his direction and saw him deep in thought, his hands shoved into his pockets. I shoved my hands deep into my own and cleared my throat.

"Want to tell me about that guy?" He didn't speak right away. "Or not."

He looked confused for a moment. "Oh, yeah, Gabe." Elijah waved a dismissive hand. "He worked at the same firm with David and has been after me to go out with him." He sighed. "He doesn't take no well, or at all really."

"And you're not ready to date again," I said, and Elijah looked over at me for a long moment.

"I'm not sure." He was quiet for another moment or two before he spoke again. "It's partly that, I guess. But it's more that..." He seemed to be searching for the right words.

"Gabriel Marks is a tool," I supplied, and Elijah laughed hard.

"Yes. That about sums it up," he said, smiling and looking up into the branches we were passing under.

After a moment, he turned to look at me again. "Thank you for asking me to go tonight."

"Thank you for saying yes." We both spoke quietly, the late hour seeming to require it.

When I dropped him at his car, we managed no more than a moment of awkwardness as we said our good-byes. I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him. To brush away the hair that fell into his eyes and to run my palm over the heavy stubble of his jaw, to press my lips to his. But his words from earlier helped me rein in my own desire. I understood not being ready to move on.

He held my gaze that extra beat that always started my heart racing before saying a quick good-bye and climbing down from the Jeep. I waited there until

he was in his own car and had it started, only then pulling out of the lot, his headlights glowing in my rear view mirror.

Chapter 8

“Could you have picked a day that was any fucking hotter?” Nicholas called out as the two of us pushed open Robert and Evan’s door. He carried a boxed and bowed lemon tart from his favorite bakery, me, a case of beer.

“That’s what the pool is for, Princess.” I heard Robert yell from the kitchen.

“Where do you want this stuff?” I asked, poking my head into the room where I saw Robert making a salad.

“Just take it out to the patio,” he told me, pointing out the small window with a salad spoon, “and then feel free to hop in. Michael is already out there with Barry or Larry or something or other with a y.”

Our friend Michael went through men too quickly for any of us to really learn their names, and as horrible as it sounded, we had all pretty much quit trying.

“Where’s Evan?” I asked, setting the beer on the table so that I could lift the camera that I had slung over my shoulder, and snap a few pictures of Robert in full-on domestic mode. He flashed me a smile, indulging me.

“He’s in the far end of the yard talking to Elijah.”

“Elijah’s here?” My excitement had Robert raising an eyebrow.

“Who’s Elijah?” Nicholas said, standing on his toes to peer out the kitchen window into the backyard.

“He’s a friend of Evan’s, and Jacob’s photography teacher,” Robert supplied, still looking at me curiously.

“Oh? Is there something going on I should know about?” Nicholas asked with a wide grin, teasing.

“No. Nothing like that. We just get coffee together,” I told him. “And we went to a movie a couple of weeks ago.”

Both Nicholas and Robert’s eyes grew big, glancing at one another, and I regretted the confession. Elijah and I had not repeated the date since that night. And, even though neither one of us said the word, we both knew it had been a date. But in the days since, we had grabbed coffee after every lab and class. Not always on our own, sometimes Elizabeth or other students joined us, but we

both made an effort to catch a few minutes alone on those nights—me, showing up early whenever possible to help mix the chemicals, him, sometimes standing outside by my car, for as much as an hour after everyone else had driven away, just to talk.

I was absolutely crazy about him. And even as a little internal voice inside my head warned me that I was going to get my heart utterly broken, I couldn't stay away. I couldn't help but hope.

Nicholas and I slipped outside, dropping our contributions to the cookout onto the table. We both waved at Michael who sat on the edge of the inground pool talking to a cute blond bobbing in the water in front of him. The man turned out to be Terry. Spotting Evan and Elijah speaking intently about something by the back gate, I lifted my hand to wave.

They both waved back, Elijah's smile making my chest tight.

Nicholas slipped off his T-shirt, tossing it on a chair, before throwing himself into the pool, making me have to jump away or get soaked. We had both worn white T-shirts and matching square cut raspberry trunks. They looked great on Nicholas, but now that I knew Elijah was here, made me want to blush, wishing I had opted for a slightly more conservative cut, if not color.

We had been shopping together that morning, and Nicholas sometimes could talk me into doing the silliest things. Of course, matching swim trunks was one of the least ridiculous.

After a few minutes, Evan and Elijah joined me on the patio. Evan taking a chair next to mine, Elijah across from me. Evan introduced Elijah to Nicholas, who greeted him happily from the cool water of the pool.

Elijah wore light aqua shorts that sat just above the knee and a white button-up linen shirt, as always, impeccably dressed, and I had the hardest time not staring at his bare feet and the light dusting of hair on his legs.

After a light lunch, I spent some time in the pool, having grown tired of the curious looks I was getting from Nicholas for having spent the bulk of my time at Elijah's side, and throwing a football around with Michael and Robert in the grass. A few beers had me more relaxed, and I eventually pulled out my camera again, snapping shots of a grinning Michael and Terry, of Nicholas and Evan cuddled together into a single lounge chair like two contrasting kittens from the same litter and of a beautifully shirtless Elijah.

Later on, in the darkened living room, Evan lay on the couch, a beer on the

floor at his side, and I sat slumped lazily in a chair. We could hear Nicholas and Robert laughing in the kitchen, everyone else having already said their good-byes. Even though the house was cool, and the temperature had dropped with the sun, the heat of the day, the food and the swimming had made me drowsy.

“So, do you care about him?” Evan’s voice was quiet, and it took me a few minutes to answer.

“Of course, but it’s not that simple.”

“It’s never simple.” Evan said, his eyes closed.

“I don’t suppose it ever is,” I responded.

After a moment, Evan spoke again. “What has Robert told you about me?” he asked, and I opened my eyes, surprised at the question. He still laid there, eyes closed, his arms folded behind his head, and I studied him a moment before answering.

“He’s told me very little.”

“Well,” he started, taking a deep breath and finally opening his eyes to look at me. “My dad kicked me out of the house, you know, when I told him I was gay.” I nodded, not because I already knew, but so he knew I was listening.

“It’s this huge fight. He’s so angry it gets physical. Like it was just me rebelling, you know? So, anyway, I’m on my own for the first time. Ever. And it takes me a few days to figure out what to do. Eventually, I show up at this youth shelter on Parsons in the middle of the night. I’ve got no money, a black eye and what I found out later was a fractured wrist. And there was Elijah.”

At Evan’s confession, I had the strongest desire to grab him tight to my chest and protect him. I wondered if Robert felt that same way every minute of every day.

I watched as he closed his eyes again.

“He was the director there at the time, which, if you listen to him tell it, pretty much meant his whole day was spent trying to collect donations to keep the lights on. Anyway, I’d been on the street for more than a week, it’s starting to get cold as shit, and every bed is taken. And somehow Elijah is able to see past it all. He sees past the black eye, the fucked up wrist, the dirt and the fear. He’s able to see past the fact that at that moment I would have probably pushed an old woman down the stairs for a fucking sandwich, and he actually lets me sleep in the guest room of his own house.” Evan shook his head and opened his

eyes to look at me again. "My father couldn't even see past me liking boys, and he'd known me all my life."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing.

"David had died a few months before in a car accident," Evan continued, pushing to prop himself up on his elbows. "His husband," he added, and I nodded my understanding. "David had apparently been a big lawyer specializing in family and emancipation law, so Elijah lives in this beautiful old house full of things I could so easily have stolen, but he chooses to trust me.

"He hands me sweats and a T-shirt that are huge on me, points me to his guest room with its own bath, and I take my first shower in days. Afterward, he wraps my wrist and feeds me and then I get to sleep in an actual bed, the door locked because I'm scared to death. And the next morning I wake to the smell of breakfast cooking."

Evan's smile tells me that despite the horror of the situation, the memory was a good one.

"When I woke up, I'd forgotten where I was. I think I'm home for a few minutes before I open my eyes and remember. And when I do, I can't stop crying. Elijah shows up, holds my good hand until I finally pull myself together enough to go downstairs, and he makes me an omelet, gives me some weird-tasting soy bacon, orange juice, and actually makes me take a multivitamin." Evan laughed at the memory and the sound of it made me smile. "I was seventeen, just about to turn eighteen, and I lived there with him for more than a year, until I had my feet under myself, a job, a place of my own. And as much as I needed him, I know he needed me too."

We both sat there quiet for several minutes, and I struggled to understand why Evan was telling me this. After a moment, Evan pushed himself up to sitting and leaned toward me, his voice quiet.

"Listen, Robert doesn't want me getting involved. Says it isn't my place, and I know he's right."

I nodded, though to what, exactly, I didn't know.

"I knew something bad had gone down with you and your ex. Your hostility toward me. The weight loss you didn't need. Here you were, this great-looking guy, and I could tell you couldn't see that. Sometimes we are so damaged that what we need in order to see ourselves again is someone else who can see us too. Not the outside," he said, gesturing up and down my body with his hand.

“That’s like a puff of smoke. Gone in an instant. But see the things about us that really matter. The things on the inside.”

“Evan,” I said, my quiet tone matching his, “I’m good. Really. I’ve made it past that dark place, you know?”

Evan shook his head, reaching over to place a hand on my knee. “You’re not the one I’m talking about.”

With that, he stood up, heading to the kitchen with its bright light and its sounds of happy chatter, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 9

When I arrived early to class on Monday evening, I could tell instantly that something was wrong.

Elijah was there, already starting to set up the darkroom chemicals for the evening, dressed flawlessly as always in a dark blue Henley and rust-colored jeans, but there was something about his movements that gave it away. When I approached, his red-rimmed eyes and the dark smudges that sat underneath them made my heart sink.

“Something’s happened.” I fought the urge to touch him, reaching out and pulling back, to reassure him in some way, maybe even more to reassure myself that he was okay.

“No Jacob. I’m fine.” He worked to avoid looking at me, and I had a sinking feeling for a moment that I had done something to upset him, though I couldn’t think of what it would have been, but he waved off my concern.

“It’s nothing.” He took a breath. “I’ve got this in here, do you mind checking to make sure I didn’t forget to turn the dryers on in the other darkroom?” He was still not meeting my eyes, and I knew he wanted his privacy, so I slipped away, leaving my things on the enlarger I normally claimed every week.

By the time class began, he had pulled himself together, seeming to all the world to be the happy, enthusiastic man he had always appeared to be. I supposed that only someone who had been watching Elijah Fall as closely as I had for all these weeks would have noticed any difference.

The class, which normally seemed to fly by, ending way too soon, dragged on, the ninety minutes testing my patience. I just wanted everyone out so I could have a private moment with the man without the threat of an impending invasion by any one of fourteen other people. And though I worried that I had no real right to ask what was going on, at that moment I didn’t give a damn.

Elizabeth shot me a look, the worry on her face evident, and I just shook my head. Her brow wrinkled, but she didn’t say anything.

We covered little that was new, and Elijah broke out the sepia for everyone to play with, but I couldn’t get myself to do anything, just standing there staring at my enlarger like I had never seen one before. Eventually, I excused myself to

spend the remainder of the class sitting on the steps of the Center, watching the occasional car that drove by.

I was still sitting there when the class ended, and students came flooding out, many stopping to ask if I was okay. I told everyone that I had a headache and had needed some fresh air.

When Elizabeth emerged, she dropped down at my side.

“Are you two fighting?” Her question surprised me, but I understood the logic that had gotten her there.

I just shook my head.

She gave me a look I couldn't read before patting my knee and telling me to check on him, that everyone else had gone.

I didn't move at first, just sitting and watching her as she left.

I heard the closing of cabinets and the running of water before I was through the last turn of the corridor that led into the darkroom. He was busy washing and drying his hands, and I had a moment to study the man unnoticed. His slim-fitting, blue shirt was tucked into jeans that sat low on his narrow hips, the silver buckle of a thick leather belt catching the light. In that moment, running a tired hand up the shorter hair at the back of his neck, the longer front that was normally tamed, now starting to fall into his eyes, he was so aesthetically perfect, I had to fight the urge to turn right back around. How could I possibly hope to have any claim on this man?

It was the distressed sound that slipped from his lips that stopped any thought of retreat. I watched as he closed his eyes, sliding to the floor to lean against the center island, knees up, pressing his forehead against the arms that he rested across his knees. Seeing him there, like that, I couldn't stop myself from going to him.

My sneakers squeaked on the floor in my hurry to reach him, skidding the last few inches as I dropped down to my knees in front of him.

He looked up with a start, distress so obviously etched on his face.

“I know you don't want to talk about it. Just tell me you're okay, that there isn't anything I can do to help, and I'll leave you the fuck alone.” I watched him, watching me, and saw him smile.

“You have a rather foul mouth, Jacob.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed.

We were both silent for another few minutes, just looking at each other, before he spoke again. "Sometimes it's painful to let go."

"I know."

He was silent again, those beautiful eyes studying me, and as crazy as it was, I found myself fighting not to say words that I was sure he wasn't ready to hear, whether I felt ready to say them or not. But before I said anything, before I said any of the million words of devotion running through my mind, he leaned forward, and he kissed me. Not aggressively, but a soft kiss, an unsure kiss, a hand raising to touch my cheek, the warm fingers as gentle and uncertain as the kiss itself, and I melted into him.

He deepened the kiss slightly then, my mouth opening in response, and I couldn't stop the moan that slipped from me, the desire for him that had been building for weeks becoming an overwhelming need. Unthinking, I reached out to slip a hand into the silk of his hair, drawing us closer and another to touch the skin of his throat. It had been so long since I had felt warm skin beneath my fingers, and this was so much more because it was him.

As we kissed, I could hear little more than the roar of my own pulse in my ears and the squeak of my shoes on the floor. I longed to taste the salt on his skin and smell the lemon that always lingered faintly there from his cologne, but there was only the overpowering acrid smell of chemicals that seemed to cling to every surface, in my nose, in my mouth and the air itself.

And still, the kiss was perfect.

He pulled back then, resting his forehead on mine, our noses bumping. "I forgot to ask if you minded," he whispered, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"I think," I confessed, a finger playing with the hair at the back of his neck, "I think that I've wanted to kiss you since the first class when I looked at your photographs." I was unable to stop the smile on my lips. "I know that sounds crazy, but I felt like I could see your heart, and as gorgeous as you are Elijah, it's still the most beautiful thing about you."

He smiled then, a smile that lit his eyes, tugging me so that I sat, a knee on either side of his thighs, his arms wrapping around me to pull me close. "I think maybe I wanted to kiss you since the day a picture in my portfolio nearly made you cry," he said in a whisper, his lips moving against mine as he spoke.

We both laughed quietly together, there on the hard linoleum, only the buzz of the overhead lighting to accompany the sound. And in that moment, with the

feeling of his arms around me and the texture of his hair beneath my fingers, I couldn't remember ever being happier.

Epilogue

“You’re going to make us late. You know we can’t be late.”

I groaned and rolled over onto my back to see Elijah, standing above me in boxer briefs, just starting to get dressed.

“I can’t do this. It’s too much pressure,” I groused, though looking at the man made it impossible to hold back a smile.

“You can,” he said, smiling back at me as he slipped on his shirt, starting to button it.

I sat up against the headboard, the cream sheets that pooled at my waist luring Elijah over to straddle my lap. The feel of his hands on my chest enough to make me forget what we had been talking about.

“You’ll wrinkle your shirt,” I chided him as I began the process of undoing the buttons that he had just closed. “We don’t want that.”

Elijah started to object, but my lips on his neck quieted any protest.

I pushed him over onto the mattress, climbing on top of him and taking his mouth, the man always feeling so perfect under me. I raised up again to look into those beautiful eyes a moment before bending to kiss him again. I felt his fingers tangling into my hair, hair that had now grown out into an unruly mess of brown waves. He had only just wrapped his legs around my waist, using his thighs to pull me tighter against him when there was a quiet knock at the door. I could feel Elijah smile against my lips.

“That would be room service,” he told me, laughing at my groan.

He let his legs fall, and I gave him one last kiss before hopping up to grab the jeans I had left on the chair the night before. Slipping them on, I walked out to the sitting room to open the door to the hallway. A young man in a pressed, white shirt pushed in a trolley holding several covered dishes, smiling brightly at the two of us when Elijah emerged from the bedroom, now nearly dressed. I gave him my best *why are you not naked* look over the kid’s shoulder, and he just laughed.

After accepting his tip, the attendant wished us a good day, and we were left to our breakfast of fruit, eggs and toast.

“They didn’t have veggie bacon,” Elijah said as he sat next to me on the

love seat, “but I’ll just have to do my best to endure.” I just laughed. I had never been much of a carnivore, but in the last year, with Elijah’s fantastic cooking, I had pretty much dropped meat completely. That is, except for the occasional White Castle, the fact of which made poor Elijah turn green.

He watched me as I picked at my food. “Are you really that nervous?” he asked, studying me.

I sighed. “Yes. I wish we could switch places. This is so important, and I know you would do such a wonderful job,” I told him.

“I’ll tell you what,” Elijah said with a smile as he stood up to add fruit to his plate, “next time around, I’ll be the photographer, and you can be the best man.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Elijah in his dark tux, standing at the front of the small church by Evan’s side as he made his vows to Robert. Looking at Evan it was hard to imagine anyone happier, except me. Definitely me.

When he returned to take a seat next to me again, I grabbed his waist to pull him down on my lap instead, nearly upsetting his plate of breakfast, and kissed him.

“I think,” I said, pulling away and running my thumb over his lower lip before looking into his eyes, “next time we should agree to both be grooms.”

Elijah gave me that half smile, the one that drove me crazy with wanting him, before he spoke.

“I think perhaps you’re right.”

The End

Author Bio

Amy grew up in the Midwest. She spent far too much of her time in clubs—gay and straight alike—and far too little time in her photography classes. That is until, she met a boy with cute hair and great taste in footwear. Now they live together with a number of small, rather noisy children and a dachshund named after her favorite horror actor of all time. She runs a number of sadly neglected blogs, and even though she has a lovely job that requires her to pick up a camera every now and again, she would still rather be reading.

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