

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

RANDY'S GHOST

William Tate

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

RANDY'S GHOST

By William Tate

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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RANDY'S GHOST

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Photo Description

There are two photos to go with this prompt. The first photo is of a fit, young, shirtless man, with disheveled blond hair. He sitting, hugging his knees, with his eyes closed and eyebrows slightly drawn. Clearly, he has lost something or someone. He himself seems lost. The second photo is a man in a crisp dress shirt with dark hair and eyes. There is a sadness to him as well, as if he is waiting for someone that isn't coming.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

[Photo 1]

This is Randy, a 28 year old researcher. Ever since his car accident a month ago, he's felt completely lost. Wrong. He swears a puzzle piece from his soul is gone, but he can't explain it. He looks around his home and knows, down to his bones, that something is off. He can't sleep because of nameless nightmares and when he does finally sleep, he wakes up in the morning reaching for something that isn't there. That was never there. He knows he's losing it when just looking at the framed pictures in his apartment or knick-knacks that have no meaning, creates an unexplained anger. He wants to throw them across the room—destroy them. But only certain pictures, certain items. His anger makes no sense. Nothing makes sense anymore. His friends start to worry about him and think he needs to get out. Maybe meet someone. After all, he hadn't even gone out on a date in well over a year.

[Photo 2]

This is Chilton. He works for a med-tech agency from the future. When he was assigned the case to go back in time to obtain the info they needed (some data not recorded because it wasn't relevant in our time, but will be then: Ex. Experimental drugs for chicken pox, common cold, etc.) it was a simple task. Randy was researched and found to be the best person to infiltrate because he had access to the lab and it would cause the least ripple effect. After living with Randy for a year, it wasn't so simple anymore. With his assignment completed, Chilton had no choice but to return to his own time, and to wash Randy's and

everyone else's memory of him before leaving. Even his image was deleted from their pictures. But months after Chilton's return, the pain of leaving Randy behind is still with him. He'd loved before, but not like this. When an unexplained ripple is found, he must return and welcomes the chance to see Randy again, even if Randy can't remember him. He thinks if he sees Randy has moved on with a good life, he'll be able to move on too. So he goes back years (years in our time, not his) after he's left. What he didn't expect was to find that Randy had never moved on—with or without the memory of the time they shared—or that Randy's life is in a shambles it was never meant to be in. But, especially, the extreme pain of loss in Randy's eyes.

All Chilton knows or cares about is fixing it. But how?

Sincerely,

Jessa

Note to whichever wonderful author picks this: Okay, I know this was wordy and exact, but please feel free to change anything and have fun with it. I just want the general feel of what I've written but I'm be pleased as punch to be surprised too. The only thing I ask for is an HEA for poor Randy.

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: time travel, scientist, switch/versatile, masturbation, amnesia

Content Warnings: drug use, mild violence

Word Count: 23,959

RANDY'S GHOST

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He woke and reached out, Randy's heart seizing up as his hand made contact with nothing at all. There should be something... someone. There had never been a someone, a lover, so why was Randy so sure there had? He always slept in the middle of his bed, sprawled out. Nowadays he stayed to one side like he was making sure there was enough bed for... for... Who? His heart raced, his head started to pound, and he tried to remember what it was he had obviously forgotten, but no answers surfaced.

Every morning was the same.

Randy closed his eyes and tried to will himself back into the dream that he could scarcely remember. Back into the arms that held him so tightly, breath that rippled against the back of his neck, the lips that nudged and nuzzled at his ear. And the voice? Deep, calming. He never saw what the man looked like, but he could imagine from instinct alone. With any luck he'd meet a man like that someday.

When he woke from one of those dreams, he felt completely at peace, until he reached for his imaginary lover to bring him closer, to kiss him, hold him, and found only a bare, cold pillow. When had he gotten a second one? It didn't make any sense. Randy lived alone, always had. So many things didn't add up in his life.

Randy gazed over at his dresser at the photos he had on display. Why did he have a picture of himself sitting on a bench alone with the goofiest grin? He didn't ever smile like that. In another picture there was clearly an empty spot next to him in a group of friends. Empty like his heart.

Dragging his laptop onto the bed, he woke it up and went to the search bar. Typing in "gay men cuddle," Randy sifted through the images with a sad smile. He came upon more than one photo of a man cuddling a pillow. Not just any pillow though, one of those specially made ones meant to mimic someone holding you. Sleeping alone used to be a pleasure, now it was torture. He navigated through the sites until he found the perfect one. Now he was getting a boyfriend pillow? How pathetic could he get? But here he was, placing the order anyway. Would that make things better or worse, he wondered. Randy

imagined the feel of waking up with something at his back and an arm around him. It would be heaven. Then reality would set in, and he would recall that he was only ever someone's lover in an unobtainable dream. With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, Randy canceled the order and slammed his laptop shut. The only way to fix this problem of having no boyfriend and to cure his loneliness was to do what his friends said and get out there to search, meet people, and date. That or hit the sex store and get one of the blow-up variety. He wouldn't have to pretend to be attracted to or love an inflatable boyfriend.

On that note... Time to take a very cold shower before he could start his day. He didn't even have it in him to conjure the image of his dream lover or a celebrity or the guy at the Laundromat. What was the point? Taking himself in hand only reminded him of how lonely he was. Afterwards, Randy dressed for his job at the lab. As he fastened the last button at his throat, his head dropped.

There wasn't anywhere to go today or any other day. He's gotten so wrapped up in his daily routine that he'd forgotten he didn't have a job anymore.

He'd discovered he'd been fired after calling his employers to inform them of his need to take at least a few weeks off due to injuries sustained when he was hit by a truck. "Let go" is what they said. Something about him leaking testing results and stealing files. He had no idea what they were talking about, but the files were signed out under his name and had gone missing. Before he could investigate and try to clear his name, he'd been blacklisted in the scientific community, tossed out of chat rooms and research facilities. It didn't matter if he figured out how he'd been framed, which appeared unlikely in any case. Randy wasn't to be trusted, they said. He'd never work in a lab again.

A run was what he needed to clear his head, but he was still far from being able to handle one. Walking could be doable though. In retrospect, maybe he shouldn't have invited his friends along if he wanted to get away from it all. It had been awhile since they'd been together, though. He couldn't remember when the last time had been.

"You have to come with us tonight," Dan said.

Randy shook his head.

"We could hit a gay bar then, just for you. As long as you promise to say we're a couple if someone comes on to me."

Randy smirked but stuck with his decision. "No, I think I'll stay home."

"Come on, man, this isn't at all like you. Ever since that damn crash—"

"I bet he has a boyfriend." Michelle chimed in. "That's why he doesn't want to go out looking for a guy. He already has one. Where are you hiding him?"

Close, he thought, I had one. Without a doubt he had. It was the only thing that made sense. What had happened to him? Did he abandon Randy when he had the accident? Was that the guy he remembered leaning over him before he passed out? Had Randy kept him so secret that even his closest friends and family didn't know of him? Maybe they had a huge breakup right before the hit-and-run, causing his lover to clear out everything that belonged to him, inevitably forgetting a few things behind—the objects that Randy couldn't place. What had he said to him that was so awful he would disappear from the face of the planet? How could either of them have walked away from something this strong? For all Randy knew, he passed the guy on the street regularly and he didn't even say hello. What was he like? What had they been like together? Sometimes he wished he had died on impact when the truck hit him. Bystanders say he ran right out in front of it. He'd been tempted to have a do-over. The gnawing pain clawing its way through him must certainly be far worse than death. At least he wouldn't be suffering.

He heard his name break through the chaos of his thoughts and stammered an apology.

Dan jogged circles around him. "I said, 'Do you want to go to the movies with us?'"

"Nah. Really, it's cool."

"You gotta get out there," Dan said. Apparently his best friend was not on the Randy-already-has-a-guy bandwagon with Michelle. "How else are you going to meet someone?"

"I did," Randy said, then sighed when he realized it was out loud. Damn, he must seem insane to them. Who knew, maybe he was.

His friends exchanged a quick worried look, and Dan nodded once sharply, giving Michelle her cue to jump back in. "How about we come to your place then?"

"Guys? I seriously just want to be alone. Okay?"

"You say that now," Dan said, "but later you'll be rocketing through Tumblr trying to find the perfect video clip to jerk it to, and you'll wish you'd have gone out with your best buds, so at least you could add my fine ass shakin' it on the dance floor to that spank bank."

“Wow, Dan. Really?” Randy muttered shaking his head. He was right, though. Dead-on. That was exactly how his night would end. It was kind of disturbing that he knew it. “Am I that predictable?”

“Yep,” Dan said and moved right back into dictating how the night was going to go. “We’ll get a pizza and watch movies—”

Michelle raised her hand. “I’ll bring snacks!”

“It will be like old times.”

As much as he hated being alone, at least he could entertain the idea of this lover he had in his dreams, think about what his presence in Randy’s life had felt like. “I really appreciate everything you are trying to do for me here, but—”

“Nope,” Dan said flatly. “Not taking no for an answer, Randy. We’ll see you at seven.”

He looked from one to the other of them, Dan’s stern look, and Michelle’s rapid, smiling nod. He blew out an exasperated breath. “Fine.”

Michelle jumped up and down like a toddler, her dark hair bouncing, shouting, “Yes!” She broke into a fit of giggles when people sharing the sidewalk with the trio shook their heads at her.

Randy couldn’t help laughing with her. If he was a heterosexual man, he’d date someone like her. Full of life and love and joy, always making him laugh. People said he’d been like that once too. They’d have made a great couple back then, but Randy was gay, not bi, and Dan had a serious crush on her, even if he wouldn’t admit it to her or himself. “Okay. I’ll see you both tonight. You might get there before me. I have to pick up my laundry. You know where the key is, let yourselves in and make yourselves at home.”

His new way to sort laundry included a pile of whose fucking clothes are these? It was by far his least favorite trivia game of all time. Wondering about what kind of man would wear these things took up most of his concentration. Some of the articles of clothing might be his from the period of time he couldn’t remember, but not all of it. This one was not his style, that one not his cut, not his size. His phantom boyfriend left more than emptiness behind. There were clues everywhere that spoke of his existence. The question was, where was he now?

“Something’s wrong!” Chilton exclaimed, “He wasn’t supposed to remember anything. They swore.” Chilton stroked his fingertips lovingly over

the monitor displaying Randy going on with his life without him. "They swore, even with me interfering with his death, that he wouldn't remember a damn thing! I know him, Atric. He isn't going to dismiss that nagging feeling as a stupid fantasy. We fucked up. I fucked up. They pulled me out of there so fast, they missed more than they usually do during clean up."

"Yes," said Atric, his favorite field analyst, and the closest thing to a friend he had, quickly flipping to a screen with numbers and random data. "I know, C, but..."

He tilted his head back and breathed in deeply. "But recovering the rogue items now will only make him more suspicious when they go missing. I know. There has to be something that can be done."

"How does your father feel about your, for lack of a better word, entanglement with this target?"

"Randy. His name is Randy."

"Was. What you mean to say is 'His name was Randy.' Chilton, it isn't healthy to think of this one or any of them as being alive. They're all dead."

Chilton clenched his jaw. Atric knew not to use his hated first name when addressing him. People were always mutilating the pronunciation and Chilton preferred not to hear it in any case. He loathed the name his father gave him and insisted on calling him. He also refused to acknowledge Atric's statement and how cruel and detached it was. Targets were only thought of as exactly that: targets. "My father doesn't know. He can't know. Ever." He gave Atric a pointed look. "I can't risk what he would do to him."

"He would be none too pleased. Your secrets are safe with me. As far as I am concerned it is not anyone's affair but your own."

Chilton slowly exhaled a pent up breath. "Thank you."

"You know if I come across a loophole, something that makes it so that you can go back... would you?"

"In three shakes of a lamb's tail." When he looked at him sideways with a frown, he amended, "I would, in a nano, Atric. I'd give up anything to see him again."

"You time crossers and your fancy 'lingo.' You all say the oddest things after a long mission. I can barely understand you." Atric tease lightly, but mirth soon faded.

“I was gone a long time, wasn't I?”

“Longer than most. Shorter than some.”

Chilton nodded and silently pleaded for Atric to help him.

Atric sighed. “I cannot promise you anything.”

“The hope is enough for now,” Chilton murmured. He gave the field analyst a bow in deep appreciation, that the other man returned with an incline of his head, and briskly left the premises. They could both get into megatons of trouble for what they'd been discussing, as well as for Chilton's brief view of Randy. Any contact at all with a subject after the mission was complete was punishable. Not by death, that would be far too humane, but by exile. For one of his breeding, a time crosser—as close to a god as anyone got—being stuck in their own era, cut off from history and the rise and fall of future civilizations, was the worst imaginable punishment. For someone in love being trapped millennia apart—there was no greater torture. Except perhaps if they took him to Randy's grave or he was forced to watch his death over and over, and they brought the dust of his bones as a gruesome keepsake.

Every chance he got, he asked Atric to show him how Randy was progressing, much as it pained him to watch his nose dive into darkness. At least he is still alive. It was all that kept him going.

“I can't watch you destroy yourself,” Dan said. “You know I'm here, we're here to help you, but you have to want the help. I can't force you to get clean and stop making porn.”

“There's nothing wrong with what I do—with making porn. When did you get so judgy?”

“Dude. Randy. I'm not judging you or anyone else. You all have your reasons for doing it. We all have our reasons for watching it too. It's hot. I'm just saying that this is not the way for you. It's killing you. It's literally killing you, and we can't sit by and watch it happen. You need to get out of it before it's too late, before you catch something or get jumped when you're fucking in an alley.”

“What are they going to take from me that isn't already gone?!” Randy shouted back.

“I know you think you lost someone—”

Randy scoffed. "I did. How many times do I have to tell you? I have the proof!"

"Randy, buddy, that's all in your head. There was never a man. He doesn't exist. You haven't had a boyfriend since that brief fling you had just before college. Unless you count the time you got drunk and felt me up."

"No. He was here. He was. I can see him sitting right where you are now. And he said... he said... he told me..." Randy growled as the memory must have slipped down and out of sight, banging his palm against his forehead repeatedly. *"Come out! Come out of there, I know you are in there!"*

"Have you considered getting a psych eval or checking yourself in?"

"I don't need to be thrown in the looney bin."

"Maybe you do. They could help you there, Randy. They could take care of you. Get you clean. Get you off the streets and away from some of the scum I've seen come in and out of this apartment, and you wouldn't have to worry about the rent or anything else except getting well!"

"No fucking way. You all think I'm crazy. I'm not. He was here. He was. I can feel him... I hear him. I see him. He isn't just a ghost. Would a ghost leave all this behind?" He tossed clothing at his friend from the pile in the corner of his room. *Chilton's clothing.*

"No, but those dudes you screw would."

Chilton, watching the exchange from hundreds of years in the future, hung his head. Randy's life had spiraled out of control after they had attempted to erase Chilton from his mind.

"This pile of shit was here before them."

"Then a shopping trip you forgot about."

"Not my size."

"Hell, I don't know, maybe you took them out of the lost and found."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"To freak us the fuck out like this. Is this one of your stupid, not at all funny pranks?"

"No! I swear to you, Dan. I swear there was someone, more than someone, he was 'the one,' as sappy as that sounds. He was everything to me. I can feel

it.” Randy quickly spun around, staring wide-eyed at the chair in the corner where Chilton would sit and watch Randy pace around the room, talking him down from being nervous about a report he had to give at work. “I see him now,” Randy whispered and walked toward the ghost of Chilton’s memory he apparently saw there. “He’s here. Dan, can you see him?”

Dan’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Randy, I’m sorry. There’s nothing there.”

Randy slumped and slid to the ground

“Let me help you. You have to get help.”

Randy nodded numbly. “No one there. Never was. Never will be.”

Chilton backed away from the screen and said, “I’ve seen enough.”

“Someday,” Dan said softly, “you’ll find someone.”

“No one there, never was, never will be,” he repeated several times more rapidly and rocked back and forth.

“Atric, turn it off!” Chilton shouted.

“Michelle!” Dan yelled over Randy’s chanting. “Call them. Tell them we’re bringing—”

The screen went dark, but Chilton couldn’t switch off the images he’d subjected himself to.

He’d spent so much of his life telling, even begging people to call him anything other than his first name. Randy though, the way he said it had made Chilton’s chest tight with grief. Grief for the parting that was coming, and soon.

“Chilton,” he gasped as his body arched gracefully off the bed, his head thrown back.

Not yet, he thought, stay with me. He moved to his knees and slipped his arm under Randy, pulling him up, their mouths meeting in a frenzy. Carefully, he sat back, losing the warmth of his lover only for a moment before Randy settled himself onto Chilton’s lap, meeting his eyes as he slowly took him deep inside of himself. Chilton groaned, the sound shaken by his shuddering.

He’d miss this most of all, the moment when their bodies meshed together, and Randy’s clear blue eyes peered into his, pleasure etched into his features. Nothing but pleasure and joy. What would he look like, Chilton had thought at

the time, if, after I'm gone, he knew that I had existed? Would he go mad? The answer was far worse than he could have imagined. Worse than the most skilled extractors had witnessed or anticipated.

They slowly rocked together, Randy's hands sliding up and down Chilton's back, fingers digging in every few seconds as the pleasure built up again. Randy's eyes rolled back and fluttered shut. Chilton kept his own open, watching and memorizing every expression that came over him. He wanted to remember this forever, long after Randy forgot his name, and even after his bones decayed.

Gripping his ass, he guided Randy to lift up and down as Chilton began to thrust upwards a little more urgently. Randy's erection was trapped, grinding between their stomachs, and leaking now. His arms tightened around Chilton. Their lips found each other, the deep kisses only breaking for harsh grunts and moans traded back and forth.

Chilton switched off the memory enhancer device. He didn't need to see the rest; he knew what came next. Powerful orgasms for them both, and he'd cried on the inside as they'd lain in each other's arms afterwards, because he knew what Randy could not. That it was the last time they would ever come together.

There had been three more last times during that night.

They had taken turns until they were both sore and achy inside and out. As Randy had drifted into an exhausted sleep with the most satisfied, content smile on his face, he'd murmured, "Chilton... I love you." Long after he'd thought Randy was asleep, he'd whispered those words back. The truest ones he'd ever spoken.

Chilton hadn't slept that night or any other since.

He'd pulled this same job a few times before, his extensive training in the era Randy lived in made him an ideal candidate for missions conducted during his time period. He always went in thinking it was no big deal. It wasn't like he'd get attached even after all the time he and the target spent together. No point to anyhow, since soon enough he'd be zapped back to his time and leave his generous host behind with zero memory of their time together.

He'd made the mistake of falling for the first assignment. Leaving him behind had broken Chilton, and he'd sworn to never allow himself to be that vulnerable again. With Randy, he'd failed to keep his own promise. Had he loved outside of the missions? Yeah, once or twice, but again, nothing too terribly serious. Mostly he'd done what his mission entailed: befriending men,

and sometimes women, to infiltrate their lives and gain access to something they held the keys to.

It wasn't unlike what Randy was doing now when he used those men. For sex, for drugs, for money, or shelter and food. He didn't care about any of them; how could he when his heart was elsewhere? Even though they'd attempted to thoroughly remove all traces of Chilton from his life and memory, it seemed something in him knew that there had been a someone for him, and now he was gone. Chilton could relate, except he knew what he was missing. The ache in his chest was the gaping hole in his heart Randy once filled. The twitching of his skin was from waiting for a touch that wasn't coming. The throbbing deep inside his body from yearning to be joined with him. How was he supposed to move on, especially knowing that Randy never had and was suffering without understanding why? You can't fill a void you can't see, and you can't mend a heart you don't know has been broken.

Surely going from the peaceful, bright, optimistic, intelligent man he'd met to this mess of a human being he'd become was enough of a ripple to warrant going back. He seemed to be aging right before Chilton's eyes. He couldn't last long like that. How long had it been since he ate a proper meal or had a night of rest? For that matter, how long had it been for himself? And the drugs, the powders, pills, and the needles. If he hadn't contracted something already, it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out. His life was never supposed to turn out like this.

They'd met in a Laundromat, a rather strange place to meet the love of a lifetime. Then again, Randy Porter was only supposed to be one of many targets, not someone to affix his soul to. Randy would soon be instrumental in healing thousands of people from Chilton's own time. The research he was doing would be seen as completely useless by Randy and the world he inhabited. It wouldn't be reported or written about anywhere other than in his meticulously kept notes. People were dying, and Chilton's directive was to retrieve everything he could from the lost files of one Randy Porter. The easiest way to do this was to insert a spy into Randy's life, someone that could get close enough that the target would let his guard down and ideally invite the agent into his laboratory.

It had started with an innocent comment about Chilton's cinnamon-flavored candies. He'd discovered them on a previous mission and was obsessed with the flaming-hot treats. Randy, it seemed, hated them with a fiery passion. He'd

said as much when he'd spotted the box as they did their laundry side by side. It wasn't a coincidence, of course, that they were meeting.

Chilton had popped several candies into his mouth at once, grinning at him, and immediately regretted the decision to show off. He teared up and ran for the drinking fountain. Randy bent over double, laughing at his misfortune. Once he stopped, Chilton returned to his station, feeling a lot less confident about gaining Randy's interest. That is, until Randy introduced himself and shook his hand, which Chilton held on to longer than was necessary.

"I'm Chilton. It's pronounced Shil-ton, but it is spelled with a C-H. You know what? Don't worry about it. I hate my name. Call me C. Everyone else does."

Randy's nose wrinkled as if the suggestion carried with it an awful stench. "C? I don't think I can do that, man."

"Why not?"

"It's a letter of the alphabet, not a proper name. Do you have a middle name?"

"Yeah. But all parts of my name sound terrible and start with C."

"Humor me."

"Cordell. Chilton Cordell Chillemi."

"That's not so bad."

Chilton scoffed. It absolutely was that bad. He'd never liked his name and never allowed anyone to use it. His father used it regardless of his annoyance over it, or maybe because of it.

"It's a good thing it isn't spelled with a K. Three Ks? That would be a disaster." Randy smiled at Chilton's obvious confusion. "Hmm... I could work with Cordell. Let's see. Cor. Corey. Dell? Any of those sounding okay?"

They all sounded fine to Chilton. Randy could've called him anything he wanted, especially if he smiled like that. However, it didn't matter. No matter how Randy saying his name made him feel inside, in a few months he'd be long gone.

Randy looked up at Chilton when the silence stretched out between them. "I'm sorry, am I getting ahead of myself?"

"What about you?" Chilton said, abandoning the shirt he was attempting to fold and turning to study the target. "Do you prefer Randy?"

“Yup. I don’t use my middle name. It was my dad’s name, and he walked out on my family when I was still pretty young. Not something to divulge to a perfect stranger though, huh?”

Chilton laughed softly. “You know my full name and that I hate doing laundry and love flaming-hot cinnamon candies”—he stuck his tongue out to display the red stains. He’d be bringing a case of these back with him—“and now I know you come from a broken family and don’t like your father.”

Randy got busy sifting through the clothes in his basket. “It’s not that I don’t like him. I don’t even know him.”

He nodded. “I understand how that can be. I see my father nearly every day, but I don’t know him. Not like a son should.” He frowned, thinking about the last thing his father had said to him before his jump. “You know what he said to me the last time we spoke?” Hundreds of years after you will be dead and buried, he thought. Thinking about that was going to put a major damper on this mission.

“What did he say, Chilton?”

“He said, ‘Perhaps you will finally be of some use after all.’” Chilton clenched his jaw and stared into Randy’s clear blue eyes. “I’d say you and I are past the complete stranger phase of this relationship now.”

He’d thrown that word—relationship—out there on purpose, hoping to get a reaction from Randy that he could use to wedge himself deeper into his life. With any luck he’d manipulate Randy into giving him what he came for and get back to his own time stream before something serious developed between them. Randy seemed like a good guy, someone that, if things were different, Chilton could see himself with for real. Major ripple or no, he hated to be the one to send the other’s life off course. The quicker the mission, the better.

As Randy’s hand patted his shoulder and stayed there, squeezing reassuringly, Chilton knew he was already in too deep.

In the end, Randy decided to call him Chilton, no matter how many disapproving glares he got from him. But Chilton hadn’t yet stormed out, so he figured Randy assumed he’d get over it. Randy was right.

They chatted as they each folded their laundry, Randy holding up the conversation mostly. Chilton was more guarded, although friendly when he did respond. His attention was divided between absorbing everything the guy had

to say and trying to figure out how to further things along without completely ruining his chances.

“Hey, Chilton?” Randy said. “Do you wanna maybe, I don’t know... go grab dinner with me?”

“Yeah, sure.” Chilton responded after a stunned moment. Randy had seemed more the type to wait for someone to ask him, or at the least get to know someone better before asking them out. “You know, I was going to ask you to point me in the right direction anyway. I’m starving, and I have no clue where to get a good meal in this town.”

“Not a date then. Got it.”

He almost seemed disappointed. Chilton opened his mouth to correct him and let him know it could be a date if he wanted it to.

Randy blurted out, “Do you like burgers?”

“Who the hell doesn’t like burgers?”

Randy shrugged. “I don’t know... Vegetarians?”

“Well, thankfully for you, I’m not a vegetarian. I definitely like my meat.” He could hear Randy swallow nervously. The unintentional message had been delivered. He hadn’t meant it the way Randy took it, but why correct him if it got him exactly where he needed to be?

“Okay, then,” Randy chuckled nervously. “Leave your basket here, we can pick it up later. I know the perfect place.”

It really was perfect. The food not so much—not when you were used to getting whatever you wanted at the push of a button—but the company was excellent. Beyond compare. Randy was everything Chilton might have looked for in a lifelong partner. Smart, funny, witty, kind. He’d held the door for so many people it was a wonder they ever got into the restaurant. He’d also overheard one of the customers lamenting about not having enough cash to get her child a drink or herself a meal, having left her money in a different purse. Instead of ignoring the child’s wailing and turning away or staring and rolling his eyes like everyone else, Randy paid for their entire meal. And Chilton knew in his gut that this wasn’t an act to impress him. It was the way Randy was.

He commented on it, telling him what a great thing he’d done. Randy shrugged it off like it was nothing.

“They needed help,” Randy said, “and I was able to help them. Anyone would do the same.”

Not so, Chilton thought, but he didn't want to dash this innocent boy's view of the world. He couldn't see the ugliness even though it was all around them. Even now, there were people watching them as they sat together. Were they laughing too much? Was it that his hand came to rest on Randy's for just a moment when he talked about his dad? Why were people so intimidated by a simple touch?

Chilton craned his neck to view a very affectionate, young couple, a man and woman, kissing a few booths over. He did see one or two looks of disgust, but most people ignored them like it was normal or secretly smiled behind their menus.

He decided to push it and leaned over the table to get closer to a stunned Randy. His face was near enough that Chilton could feel Randy's breath on his cheeks, sweet from the soda. He had intended only to get close and judge the reaction of the other people in the restaurant, but this near to him, he could care less what others were saying or thinking. If there was to be a kiss, Randy would have to make it happen, Chilton was as far across the table as he could get without climbing on top of it.

Randy's gaze dropped to Chilton's mouth. There was a sharp short breath, and his eyes drifted back to the plate in front of him. "Um I..."

Well, shit. He'd scared him. Chilton moved back to his side of the table and laid into his own burger, cursing himself for messing up their friendly dinner. Should have kissed him anyway. Stabbing his fork into his fries violently, he jammed the whole lot of them into his mouth.

He heard a soft laugh and looked up to see Randy smiling at him. "You could have just kissed me," Randy said, echoing his thoughts.

Finishing his mouthful, Chilton swigged his soda and wiped his mouth with the napkin. "Am I too late?"

"Um, yeah. The moment is pretty well dead, Chilton. Better luck next time."

"Determined to call me by my first name, eh?"

"Guess so."

"Next time?" He studied him closely. "I thought I'd killed the mood." *Which would make it impossible to complete his mission.*

Randy shrugged and picked up a fry, twirling it between his fingers, watching it thoughtfully before making it dive into his ketchup puddle. "I'm an optimist," he said and popped it into his mouth. "Within reason."

Chilton walked Randy home. Actually, it started out as Randy walking Chilton home, but they passed Randy's place first.

He set his laundry basket down and indicated the building with a sweep of his arm. "This is me."

"So, I guess I can just find my way from here. It looks familiar. We must be close to my apartment."

Chilton could feel the heat coming off of Randy as he moved closer, and Chilton reached out to shake his hand. Instead those blue eyes gave him a slow down-up gaze, Randy's chest rose and fell once, and then he leaned in, placing his mouth close to Chilton's ear.

"Do you want to come up for a drink?"

It was a cliché move, but quite effective as it turned out. Chilton nodded and followed him up the steps. The moment that the door to Randy's apartment closed behind them, Randy dropped his basket of clothes, and Chilton did the same. Randy advanced, backing him up a few steps, and then Chilton had found himself flat on his back on what must be a couch, Randy on top of him.

"Oh, shit," he gasped as Randy's hips collided with his and started to grind.

"I need this," Randy said, leaning down and taking his mouth hostage with his lips and tongue. "I don't usually do this," he continued breathlessly, "not so soon, but I need this."

"I do, too," Chilton groaned, as he gripped Randy's ass and tugged, causing even greater friction. He was reeling from their first successful kiss. Heated and frantic, it hadn't been the kiss of true love, more like pure lust, but he'd loved it. He'd take anything Randy gave him, he only hoped he could give back half as much before it was over. "I'm going to come if you keep doing what you're doing," he said with some amount of surprise. Chilton hadn't thought they'd be this into each other and definitely not from the beginning. No one had ever keyed him up this fast.

"Then, come," Randy said, completely unabashed. "You can always take a shower after."

"No, I couldn't impo—"

"Play your cards right and you might not have to take it alone." Randy grinned and started humping against him in earnest.

Hard to argue with that. Hard. Yes, they were both rock solid, and a shower would be wonderful. A shower with Randy's naked body pressed to his. The

hot water and soap, slippery skin and, fuck yeah, you better believe he was going to at least thrust against him and grip him in his hand. Pumping between his thighs and licking at his ear, his neck, he'd bite gently until they both—with a loud shout, Chilton came, followed shortly by Randy, their seed caught on the insides of their pants, chests heaving against one another.

"Next time," Chilton panted when he caught his breath, "we're doing this naked." There would be no need for the inner fantasy reel then.

"You're so sure there will be a next time all of a sudden. What's gotten into you?"

"You." At the slight frown Randy gave him, Chilton added, "Your joy. The way you're looking at me now, it's different than before. It's telling me to trust this feeling that you're glad you invited me up, and that even if I leave right now, we haven't seen the last of each other." He smiled and laid his palm on Randy's cheek. "Do I have a reason to believe that?"

Randy nodded. "Hmm, you do." He leaned down and kissed Chilton. Not the frenzied attack of earlier but a slow brush of lips and tongue, prying him open—not that there was much resistance on his part. Chilton welcomed him in, opening his mouth slowly to let Randy inside and wound his arms around him. Their tongues stroked together, pulling a deep moan from Randy, and he began the measured, even thrusts against Chilton. "Again," Randy said. It wasn't a question nor a demand, merely a simple fact stripped of politeness. We are doing this again.

But, this time, Chilton had other plans. His hand ran down Randy's back across his hip and into the front of Randy's pants where he grasped and squeezed the head of his cock.

Randy froze then began hurriedly unfastening his pants and tugging them down. He started on Chilton's next.

"What about that shower?" Chilton said

"After this. Might as well be good and messy, don't you think?"

Chilton's mouth went dry.

Things went on like that for longer than most men would allow in his experience; weeks of the teasing strokes and lots and lots of kissing too, but not taking it any further than that first encounter. There was plenty of between-the-

sheets action, with each of them letting the other have the occasional orgasm to let the pressure out. The majority of the nights they got together, though, were spent hanging out like they were old buddies meeting up for the first time in years, but with a good amount of groping thrown in when the mood hit. Tonight might be different.

Chilton was in the shower, and he was running late. By now he should be dry, dressed, and ready to walk out the door to wherever they decided to venture this evening. Randy would be there any second, and there wasn't any time to prepare for his arrival. He soaped up his hair and quickly rinsed it out right as the knocking began. Turning off the water and wrapping a towel around himself, he went to open the door.

Randy took one good look at Chilton and laughed. "It would have been okay to let me wait, or yell out that you were in the shower."

"Did I miss some?"

"Yeah, it doesn't look like you rinsed at all. Actually, it doesn't look like you let it create suds before trying to wash it away."

Chilton ran his hand over his hair and felt how slick and slimy it was. "I was in a hurry. I didn't want to risk you getting bored and leaving or thinking I forgot about you."

Randy smiled, shifting in a way Chilton had come to understand was his way of adjusting a painful hard-on. "Can I?" Randy said, moving closer to the threshold.

Chilton stepped aside to let Randy in. "Hey, I'm just going to get back in and finish up. I'll be right out."

Chilton left Randy in the living room and returned to the bathroom. Jumping back into the shower, he gave his hair a more thorough washing.

Randy shouted over the running water, "I brought food and movies. I thought we'd stay in tonight."

"That's a great idea!" he called from the bathroom. "I'll be right with you."

Seeing Randy—especially the way his eyes lingered as they swept across him, and the slight shift he did that meant he was getting aroused from seeing Chilton in his dripping wet state—he hardened and throbbed. That would be no way to greet the other man, especially if this was only friends hanging out. He was never certain with Randy. Sometimes they had a charge between them and

couldn't keep their hands off each other, and other times Randy played the innocent, the friend. Maybe he should have answered the door naked, that would have shown Randy what kind of mode he was in. He let himself think about it, taking himself in hand and stroking to that fantasy. Answering the door, soaking wet and bare as can be. Randy would drop the food and DVDs and launch himself at Chilton, the door getting slammed shut behind him. Together, they'd rip off Randy's clothes. No barriers. Skin on skin, wet, sliding...

His pants grew harsher, echoing off the shower tiles, and he was mortified to think that Randy might hear him. As his groans started to become more uncontrolled, Chilton bit hard into his arm to silence them or at least dampen the noise.

Finally scrubbed clean, emptied, and dressed, Chilton came out to join Randy.

"What happened there?" Randy said, gesturing to the angry red mark on his arm, only partially hidden by his T-shirt.

He should have known that Randy would notice it. "Oh, that?" He cast about in his head for an explanation. "Dog bite?" It sounded much more like a question than he liked, but maybe Randy wouldn't pick up on it.

The other man's look challenged him, playfully. That gleam in his eye, the slight smirk, it only made him want to go back into the shower, dragging Randy with him.

"You don't have a dog."

Chilton wondered if Randy would get that look if he wrestled him to the ground and—"Ran into one walking home from work." He didn't have a place of employment yet, but Randy didn't need to know that. Courtesy of the agency, he had a bank account and papers in place that would ensure his well-being for at least a few months. After that, he needed to get his own money.

"Musta been a big dog to get you there."

"Yeah, I mean, not really. I squatted down to pet him, and he bit me. Dog must not have liked my hair or something."

"Uh huh... Listen. I know those marks are human. You don't have to hide from me."

"They're not like... no one did that to me. I'm not hiding someone in my bedroom or something."

“Self-biter, then? Nothing to be ashamed of. You know, we all jerk off. I did just before I left my apartment.” Randy shrugged and finished setting up the meal, opening containers and scooping rice onto both plates. That was not helping; the image of Randy cranking one out minutes before coming to his door. “I hope you don’t mind though. My friends Michelle and Dan will be over in a few hours. I promise I didn’t tell them where you lived, but they followed me here the other day, and they need to make sure you’re real. They’re giving us some time to ‘get to know one another better’”—he put air quotes around the suggestion—“eat, and watch one movie. I can cancel their invasion with one quick text, but I’m only allowed to do that if we’re... unable to accept company.” Randy grinned. “No pressure. Honestly. I’m good with whatever you want.”

The inside of his boxers rubbed and massaged him as he crossed the room and took Randy into his arms. “Well, I don’t know. Start with dinner and movie and see where it goes?”

“You know, I could have taken care of that for you.”

“I’ll remember that. Next time, I’ll ask.”

“Next time,” he echoed.

“Randy?”

“Hm?”

“I really like being able to count on a next time.”

“Me too, Chilton. Now eat before it gets cold, I’ll start the movie.”

He let him put the movie in but set his plate on the table. Grabbing Randy around the waist, Chilton tugged him into his lap. “Food can be reheated and eaten when your friends get here. I can’t have my way with you in front of them.”

“I don’t know if that is true. Michelle would think it was hot!”

Chilton chuckled. “Regardless. I want you all to myself. Besides, I don’t need your friends watching and calling me out on how awkward I am.”

“I think it’s sweet and trust me, they wouldn’t be correcting you, but would damn sure say something about my sloppy execution.”

Sloppy. Slippery. Saliva dripping down his cock. “I like the sound of sloppy.”

That gleam appeared, lips pulling up at one corner. Randy got down on his knees in between Chilton's legs and bypassed everything. Biting just above the top of his shorts, he clamped his mouth onto his cotton-clad dick. Chilton groaned, his muscles bunching, lifting him off the couch.

"Easy, baby, I'm just getting started."

Chilton sought out his eyes, watching them closely as Randy unwrapped him. His eyes widened, and he let out a soft gasp, reaching down to adjust himself. Taking him in hand to stand his cock up straight, Randy shifted and hovered his mouth above it. Those lips he enjoyed kissing lazily, feverishly, and everything in-between, and that he'd fantasized and thought about encircling his passion-thickened cock—they did just that. He turned his head quickly, without thought, biting hard into his own bicep as he shouted.

The smile in Randy's eyes seemed to say, "Dog bite, eh?"

Waiting for Chilton's verdict, Randy held his finger over the button to hit send on the message telling his friends to find other plans. They hadn't replaced all of their clothing yet. The meal laid untouched, the movie long since over and stuck on the main menu.

Chilton bit Randy's lip and dragged it between his teeth. "Will they mind if I kiss you in front of them?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On where your hands are, and how sloppy the kiss is."

"Mmm..."

He laughed. "You really do love that word, don't you? Will you cream your jeans if we go out to eat and order sloppy joes?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"On if your hands are under the table or you meet me in the bathroom."

"Cramped and gross. No thanks. I'll just get you worked up and take you home to my nice clean sheets."

"What's wrong with mine?"

“Nothing. In theory,” he added in a mutter.

Chilton frowned and waited for him to elaborate on his answer.

“I still haven't actually seen the inside of your bedroom, you know.”

“Oh. We are changing that right now,” Chilton said, picking Randy up, his legs automatically locking about his waist. “We've got a few minutes.”

Randy laughed, and Chilton matched it. No one had ever made him feel this full to bursting with joy. A little voice in his head nagged and reminded him that it wouldn't last. Precious few moments like this would be afforded them, but for now he would enjoy every second.

A rap on the door had his head whipping to the side.

“Chilton?” Randy guided his face back to look at him. “They can wait out there.”

Yeah, they could wait out there the rest of the night. He kissed Randy and blindly fumbled for the door knob, pushing through and laying Randy back onto his unmade bed. Towering over him, Chilton practically purred, “I like the sight of you in my bed.”

“You'll be seeing a lot more of it,” Randy said, wiggling out of his boxers. Chilton gripped himself and started tugging.

“Chilton, no more fucking about. You have a condom?”

Chilton's brain short-circuited. He stared down at him dumbfounded and unable to form a thought. Tonight would be different after all.

“It's alright. I've got one in my wallet. You never know when you'll need one.” He sat up, and Chilton pounced, pressing him back into the mattress.

“You stay,” he whispered, brushing his tongue over Randy's slight pout. “I'll get it.”

In the living room, he could hear two people, a man and a woman, arguing over who would top and who would bottom. Chilton wondered himself but was happy either way Randy wanted to play it. “We're coming, just give us a second,” he said shakily.

“I don't think you are. I don't hear any screaming,” a female that must be Michelle said.

“Geez, Michelle. Don't scare the guy off. Seriously though, Chilton, is it? Just do your thing.”

“And listening!” The two of them fell into excited discussion about Chilton and Randy’s sex life.

Chilton came back into the room to find Randy lazily stroking himself, his eyes hooded.

“Did you find it?”

“No, I...” Chilton watched Randy touching himself, moving his hand up and down. “They’re out there waiting to listen in on us. But I think we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“They won’t mind, trust me.”

“And, look, I didn’t want to say it before and risk sounding all attached and whatever.” He sat on the bed next to him. “I don’t want to have to rush it if we—”

“When.”

“What?”

“You said ‘if’. It’s not ‘if’, Chilton, it’s definitely ‘when.’ When we have sex.”

“Okay... when. When we have sex, and I hope it’s soon.”

“Now?”

Chilton grinned. “Not now. Moment’s over. Not that it needs to be perfect or all romantic or anything. But that’s not to say I don’t like you like that.”

“I really like you, too,” Randy said. “If that wasn’t obvious enough.”

Chilton leaned down and gave Randy a long, drawn out, passionate kiss. Not that he had much choice now that they were here, but Chilton decided he wouldn’t mind the extra company. The chance to show the people that mattered most to Randy—that cared about him—that he cared too. It was a dangerous game, adding in more people to the overall lie of their relationship. When had it become a relationship exactly? No matter. It was now, Chilton thought with surety. Pulling back slowly, he opened his eyes, watching Randy peer at him, seeing the same amazement in his eyes that he was experiencing. “What about now?” Chilton murmured, playfully.

Randy laughed and dragged him across his body. “I’m good with waiting, I know you want to. And really, I would rather we didn’t have,” here he raised his voice, “the obvious audience.” Everything went quiet in the hall. “That

doesn't mean we can't enjoy ourselves a little." He glanced down his own body to his raging erection and ground it into Chilton with a loud moan.

Chilton groaned in response. "How long before they bust the door down?"

"Few minutes, maybe, if we stay quiet. They'll think something is wrong if they don't hear some action, and they will in break in to rescue me."

"Well, let's not disappoint them." Chilton immediately moved down Randy's body, kissing the tip of his arousal.

"I'm clean, I promise."

That wasn't even a concern for Chilton. He took the head of his cock into his mouth. If Randy didn't care, that his friends were listening in, then he sure as hell wouldn't either. Especially since it wasn't Chilton's moans they would be hearing, not this time. That honor was all Randy's.

Chilton sat in the chair in the corner of Randy's living room, watching him pace and talk on the phone. It seemed that his lover had to leave and was none too pleased about it. He ended the call, hung his head, and sighed.

"I have to go in to work," he said and looked up at Chilton, "I'm sorry, the movie will have to wait. Again."

"That's alright, it happens. I guess, call me when you get back?"

"No, forget that. You can stay here. I'll run to the lab, get the tests in, and I'll come back, and we'll finish the movie."

"You sure? I mean, yeah, I'm okay with that if you are."

"Yeah. No sense in you having to leave and come back." Randy walked over and helped Chilton up. "Because, I'd definitely," Randy kissed him softly, "want you to come back. I'm going to make last night up to you."

"Last night was amazing."

"It could have been." He wound his arms around Chilton's waist.

"No, Randy, really, it was. All of it."

"I should have told them to go, shouldn't have let them come over at all."

"I liked meeting them. They're very nice."

"They really like you, in case that wasn't glaringly obvious." He chuckled lightly. "They'll probably dump me and keep you."

“Don’t even think it. I can tell you are all very close.”

“Yeah. Pretty close. Do you have anyone like that back home?”

“No, I don’t.” Chilton hugged Randy. He didn’t really have anyone, not anymore, except for one of the data analysts, Atric. He was a friend, though they weren’t nearly as close as Randy was with his friends

“I sense a story there.”

“I’ll tell it another time.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry I have to go.” His arms tightened around Chilton then abruptly let go. “Okay, I’ll be back. I trust ya not to rob me blind.” Randy winked. Chilton flinched.

The door closed, and Chilton stumbled back to the couch. Robbing him was exactly what he had in mind. He glanced over at Randy’s laptop, which was purring and throwing off way too much heat on the table in front of him. It was open and running. No password required, all he had to do was point and click and steal everything he had. He had to for the sake of all of those people, but could he do it after what Randy had said? He hated himself. He hated the system he worked for, but he didn’t have a choice. They were all counting on him to deliver. If this held what they were looking for, Chilton would be recalled, probably before Randy could make it home to him. He’d never speak to him again. They would never get the chance to make up for the interruptions of the night before, never hold each other again. More than likely, though, they would leave Chilton there to collect all of the notes that he kept at the laboratory as well.

He removed from his pocket the small device they’d given him in case an opportunity like this arose. It was slim, metallic in color and makeup, silvery in the light, and it could hold the data to a thousand super-computers, supposedly. It had other uses he wasn’t privy to knowing. Such a small trinket, and yet it could bring down or restore worlds depending on the whim of the user. Chilton stared at it, then finally set the device next to Randy’s laptop and watched the theft occur.

Waking to Randy’s kiss was interesting. One moment he was dreaming, the next Randy was peppering him with kisses, working his way from shoulder to his mouth and focusing his attentions there.

“Mm... hi. I hope you don’t mind I fell asleep.”

“No, no, of course not. I took much longer than I thought I would, sorry about that.”

"It's not a problem," he said and smiled sleepily. "I'm glad you're back." He swung his legs over and sat up, running a hand through his hair. Taking in Randy's haggard appearance, he said, "We can do this another time. I'll get going now, so you can get some rest."

"Come to bed with me."

The edge in his voice, the hardness, clarified the reason he wanted Chilton to stay. He didn't know how to respond to Randy's raw need. He'd been hoping for it, begging for Randy to have a burning desire for him, but faced with the flames, he wasn't sure he'd make it out of there unscathed.

Clearly mistaking his silence for tiredness, Randy helped him stand and stepped back to give him room to stretch. "If you can't keep your eyes open, we'll just go straight to bed, and you can sleep."

"Suddenly, I'm not all that tired," he said.

"Then maybe we'll pull an all-nighter." Randy smirked and took his hand, leading him to the bedroom.

Everything looked the same as it had the last time they'd managed to make it to this room, except for the large box in the middle of Randy's bed.

"I made a detour on the way home last night. Well, we made a detour. Michelle and Dan insisted on coming with me." He urged Chilton forward and sat on the bed, taking off his shiny, black dress shoes. Chilton reached for the box and lifted the top. Inside was a pillow. He took it out and looked over at Randy, puzzled.

"I wanted you to be comfortable when I finally persuaded you to stay overnight." He smiled and started to unbutton his shirt, which Chilton's eyes tracked. "Keep looking, there's more in there".

"I rather like what I'm looking at now."

Randy playfully rolled his eyes and stopped stripping, much to his disappointment. "Please, look in the box, Chilton."

Chilton grumbled, but he turned his attention back to the gift box, finding a long cozy robe and basic toiletries inside of it.

"There were matching slippers, but I didn't know if you were a slippers kind of guy or what shoe size to get."

Saying nothing, Chilton tossed the pillow onto the bed, put the rest of the items into the box, and came over to take over where Randy had left off with

the buttons. Before long they were both naked and stretched out together, happily kissing, laughing, and rolling about the bed.

This was it. He was it. And yet they wouldn't last through the change of the season. How fleeting their love affair would be, sweeter because of it. He had to think of it that way, or he wouldn't be able to deal with the knowledge that it would be over before it really began. He wouldn't be able to enjoy himself, revel in the love he found regardless of its tragic fate. Their love would be staying here—in the past... and it would be forgotten. He couldn't change any of that, he only had an impact on the here and now, and even then, only as long as this mission lasted.

“Chilton?” Randy said with a cautious narrowing of his eyes. “Where are you in your head right now? You seem miles away.”

Light-years and centuries, he thought. “I'm sorry. It's nothing. I'm here with you.”

“You better be. After all we went through to get here.” Randy grinned.

Chilton chuckled, and the pair wrestled some more, Chilton winding up on top with Randy's hands pinned above his head. He gazed down at Randy for a long moment before placing a sweet kiss on his lips.

“I rushed home to you.”

Chilton really liked the sound of that, and he smiled warmly.

“I may or may not have broken a few speed limits on the way.”

That, he did not like. “Randy... While I do like the image of you hurrying home to be with me, please, don't put yourself in danger. If something were to happen to you...” Chilton let go of his hands and stroked his cheek tenderly. What could he say? “I'd be lost.” That was the truth. The mission would fail, and he'd lose someone he deeply cared about. He'd never be the same. “It's reckless. You could get killed or kill someone else or—”

A warm, strong hand wrapped around his awakening erection and squeezed possessively. Chilton stopped lecturing, gave a pained moan, and dropped down to kiss Randy, forcefully delving into his mouth. Later, they would talk about Randy's disregard for his own safety and his very unfair way of deterring Chilton from making his views known. However, as his lover so eloquently intimated, it wasn't time to argue.

Chilton shifted off of Randy enough to slide his hand down to play with his cock until it too grew and hardened, then moved his fingers down to rub around

his rim. Very slowly he pushed the tip of his middle finger in while kissing him, sucking lightly on his tongue. Randy whimpered. Chilton took it as a sign to continue and went further, slipping the finger in and out of the tight channel.

Randy fumbled blindly in his bedside table and produced a bottle of lubrication and a condom. It appeared to be the very same one he'd come so very close to using the night prior. Taking his hand away from Randy's ass long enough to apply lubrication to it, he reinserted his finger, slipping a second in and gently pumping and massaging his gland. Randy bucked and undulated his hips, begging for more with his moans. He was ready, and Chilton couldn't wait a minute longer to finally feel his tight chute around him, to be one with him. Chilton rolled to the side, kissing him, nibbling his lips. Quickly and efficiently, Chilton slid the condom on and covered it with a generous amount of the lubrication.

"I don't think I've ever wanted anything as badly as I want this," Randy breathed.

"Mm. Then I better not keep you waiting any longer." Chilton pulled Randy's leg up and to the side and prodded at his ass a few times before he found the right angle. He apologized for fumbling, worrying that he'd hurt him.

Randy kissed him softly and said, "We'll work on that. Through lots and lots of practice." He grinned, and they both laughed lightheartedly, sharing several more deep kisses while Chilton tried and succeeded in sliding into Randy all at once.

Chilton shouted, Randy groaned harshly, and they both held that position, hips flush with one another, Randy's walls encompassing his entire shaft. Chilton lowered himself again to curl his arms under and around Randy and gave him a series of featherlight kisses; Randy linked his hands behind Chilton's head. Then they began moving together.

With slow, shallow thrusts from Chilton and the wave-like motions Randy met him with, what were soft kisses gained pressure and heat. Chilton opened his eyes to find Randy gazing at him in a way he'd only dreamed he would. He was in love. It might be weeks or more before Randy knew it himself, and even more before he would say it out loud, but it was clear that he was already feeling it. Chilton couldn't stop it now, even if he wanted to. He closed his eyes again and softened the kiss, sighing happily, and leisurely making love to him. It was a new experience for him, this gentle, steady climb into heaven itself. He usually preferred it a good deal more rough, and certainly, they wouldn't always be so sweet with one another, but right now, his soul was crying for it.

Every tender sweep of Randy's tongue or skim of his fingertips across his neck as they made love brought him closer to being whole.

Hitting a plateau that could have gone on forever, Chilton increased the pace and intensity only enough to get Randy moaning once more. He repeated the pattern of sweet kisses, then rougher ones, then back to sweet, then kicking up the speed of his thrusts. When Randy began writhing under him, and they were moaning into each other's mouths, Chilton pushed himself up and really let him have it, railing into him again and again. Randy moaned continuously, gripping his hips and grinding against him. The muscles of his ass squeezed him as Randy drew closer to orgasm, but Chilton beat him to it. He gasped, his balls drew up tight, and he yelped as if in pain as lightning struck his spine and shot through his cock. Erratically, he pumped into his lover, groaning loudly as he spilled load after load. He collapsed on top of Randy, sprinkling kisses across his chest and throat. Thank you, he thought with each press of his lips. Harsh breaths blew across his heated skin, and Randy's fingers sifted through his hair. Neither of them spoke, afraid to ruin the moment, but they were far from done, at least as far as Chilton was concerned. He didn't leave lovers hanging, and Randy—though he'd obviously thoroughly enjoyed what they were doing and wasn't complaining—had not climaxed. As soon as Chilton recovered, he discarded the used condom, tore open another, then slipped it on and pushed back into Randy.

The deep purr of satisfaction Randy let out as he filled him hardened him in record time, and soon they were panting again. Chilton sat back and tugged Randy's legs over his shoulders. This change in position let him shove further into his ass and nail his gland more effectively, as was evidenced by the sharp increase in Randy's volume, the loudest he'd heard him yet. Mere seconds later, Randy blew, spattering wetly against his own abs, his body bending and twisting. He was beautiful to watch, and the display catapulted Chilton to the brink. He pulled out carefully, ripped the barrier free and stroked himself off, painting Randy's still twitching abdomen, their essences pooling together. A shower would definitely be needed after this, which was absolutely perfect. Attempting not to smear it further, Chilton dipped to seal their mouths together, kissing him through the end of his groans.

He dropped to his knees on the shower floor to take Randy into his throat. Randy obliged willingly, but after a few thrusts he stopped Chilton.

"I've been dreaming about fucking you. Spinning you around in the shower, grabbing your hips, ramming into you, and fucking you hard. Are you interested?"

"Oh, yeah."

Randy gave him a hand in getting to his feet. "I'll go easy since it's our first time. I can't promise I always will."

"I hope you won't."

"Oh, shit." He frowned. "I forgot the condom. But I'm clean, I swear."

"I believe you, but I don't know if I am or not." He could be carrying something deadly from the future or have picked it up during a previous mission, an illness innocuous to Chilton but a death sentence for Randy. "I'd rather be safe, Randy, I'm sorry."

He nodded. "It's okay, I understand. We could go down and get checked out together to make sure. Since we're probably going to be doing this a lot."

"Yes. Absolutely, yes."

"I'll still wear one for you. Loosen those hips for me." He winked and stepped out of the shower, not bothering to grab a towel. "I'll be right back."

While Randy went to get protection and hopefully some waterproof lubrication, Chilton put his hands against the wall and scooted out, bending slightly at the waist, feet moving apart. He gyrated his pelvis slowly in each direction, swung from side to side and front to back and around in circles.

"Good boy," Randy said upon coming into the bathroom and witnessing his blind obedience.

Chilton peeked over his shoulder to see Randy jacking himself slowly and started to turn.

"No," came Randy's firm command. "Stay just like that. Keep moving your hips."

Chilton complied, getting a surge of pleasure from being ordered around by him. He hated when others barked orders, but from Randy it was hot.

Randy slipped in behind him, his hands soaped and gliding over his body. "Grip your dick in your fist and pump it five times, then, no matter how good it feels, let go of it."

With Randy touching him like that, his hands getting closer and closer to that tight ring Randy had expressed great interest in impaling, only five strokes turned out to be torture. By the fifth, his body was convulsing. Randy's fingers pulled him apart, his thumb popping in then out again several times. The sound of the condom packet being torn open rent the air. The crinkle of it being taken out and rolled over Randy's cock set his heart racing. A few clicks and a squirt later and cold gel coated his opening.

"Please..." Chilton whimpered.

Stretching him gently with his fingers, Randy curled them, pressing right on the pleasure epicenter then pulled out. Chilton barely had a chance to moan before it was over.

"I hope I was worth waiting for," Randy murmured, cock nudging at his ass, his lips dragging across Chilton's shoulder. Kissing the back of his neck, Randy took a deep breath and inched in.

Chilton groaned, "Uhn... Ah, yes, more than worth it," he panted, "So much more than worth it."

Randy was exceedingly better at this than Chilton had been or at least the position gave him an advantage. It wasn't awkward at all when Randy slowly pushed into him. Randy's arms locked about him, hand tilting his head in order to kiss and suck at his lips. Gliding smoothly inside of him, Randy pulled all the way out and shoved back in. Chilton pushed his ass back into Randy on the next thrust, their bodies slapping together harder. The moan that came out of him made Randy growl and ferociously slam into him, and he didn't let up after that, jackhammering his ass. His breathing sounded like a speeding freight train against Chilton's ear. As Chilton gripped his hand tightly in his own, Randy's other hand came around and grasped him loosely, soaping up his dick and slipping his hand up and down the length—first slowly then in time to his punishing thrusts. Chilton struggled to breathe. He tipped his head back, and when he finally did breathe, it was to shout Randy's name as he came violently, shooting against the tiles, and his seed mixed with the soap on his skin to make a thick froth. Randy frantically kissed his neck and jawline and held him around the waist to keep Chilton from collapsing into a heap on the shower floor. Suddenly Randy's body stiffened, ramming even harder into Chilton, and his groans became louder. He jittered to a stop, heaving a breath, then drilled him again a few times before pushing in to the hilt, tremors wracking him.

Once Randy's erratic breathing evened out, Chilton slowly stood and let his lover fall from his body. Turning to face him, he gathered Randy into his arms

and swore to himself he would never let him go. How he wished he could have honored that oath

“Stay here tonight,” Randy said some time later, pulling Chilton into his arms. They’d cleaned up in the shower after Randy had that orgasm. Chilton still wasn’t sure how he had started out on his knees, sucking in Randy’s length, and ended up with it buried in his ass. Now, they were back in bed, holding each other in a more intimate manner than they had before. Randy kept nuzzling his neck, and his hand was lying across Chilton’s chest as if trying to keep his heart from flying out. “Don’t get up and leave after I fall asleep. Promise me. I want to make you breakfast.”

“I promise,” he murmured and kissed the hand covering his heart.

“If it isn’t obvious, this means we’re definitely not just messing around.”

“I gathered that from the mounting evidence. I swear to you, I never was.” It was the truth. He’d never pretended with Randy, and this was always more than physical for Chilton, more than the assignment as well.

“Good to know.” Randy pulled him in more snugly. “Ignore him,” he said and adjusted himself so that his dick wasn’t poking Chilton anymore. “He has this insane idea that we’re going to have hot, steamy sex again.”

“Are we?”

Randy yawned. “I would love that, but I don’t think I have any more energy.” Randy nibbled his ear playfully. “I’m getting old. Not a teenager anymore, as they say.”

Chilton knew, if he was looking at him, he’d see his smirk and that mischievous gleam in his eye. “You are most certainly not old. I’m older than you, and you have your whole life ahead of you still. But suit yourself,” he taunted. “Goodnight, Randy.”

He counted down in his head, three... two... one... and Randy flipped him over, their lips crushing together. His lover found that burst of energy he claimed to not have. Chilton had never had a better night’s sleep before or since.

The memories came faster now. Each blissful night and day blurred into the next, lingering during moments that stood out more than others, such as their last moments together.

It was only a handful of weeks after that first time that it all came to a screeching halt. Perhaps it had been closer to four months, five? He'd lost count. All that mattered was how happy they'd both been. Sure, there was the occasional mild scuffle, but it was never for more than a few minutes and always ended in outpourings of affection. That last night Randy had finally said what was in his heart, and the next day Chilton had left him bleeding in the street.

Chilton watched Randy check and recheck the lab notes in front of him, his brow furrowed in concentration, the pencil *tap tap tapping* at the paper.

As if he sensed his eyes on him, Randy looked up and smiled, holding up one finger before turning back to the task.

Lunch could wait. Science couldn't.

Randy often said that. He was right. While Chilton was playing house with Randy, people were suffering back in his own time. When he returned he wouldn't be coming in at the same time he left. There was always a displacement period ranging from a few hours to a few months or, rarely, years, so any time he spent frivolously here in the past was robbing another person of their very life. He'd had to make sure he was really wedged firmly into Randy's world, so that he'd let his guard down, and Chilton could swoop in to take the rest of the files he was sent to retrieve.

After another minute had gone by, Randy unlocked the door to the lab and motioned for Chilton to join him. The moment had come. All he had to do was take that blue, overstuffed folder that was sitting right on the counter, and he'd have everything he came for.

How, though? How could he take that folder without Randy noticing? Randy greeted him with a discreet pat to his arm and picked up the object in question, opening a drawer and placing it inside.

"I brought clothes. Pull up a chair and wait for me here. I'll get changed, and we can head out, alright? I'll let them know I'm taking an extended lunch." He lowered his voice, putting his mouth close to Chilton's ear. "Maybe we can make use of that nice clean bathroom I scoped out at the restaurant." He jerked upright and headed for his locker, leaving Chilton devoid of senses. Then he thought of his directive and sprang into action.

Chilton had to avoid Randy until he could stash the folder somewhere he could pick it up after Randy went back to work. Simple enough in theory, hell

in practice. As soon as they were free of the building, Randy's professional demeanor fell away, and he kept purposely colliding with Chilton, groping him. Luckily, the folder was tucked into the back of his pants, hidden by his shirt, and so far he had been able to dodge any major advances. But they'd been apart for too many hours. Randy backed him into the first alley they passed, and before Chilton could blink, Randy had Chilton's jeans undone and falling off his ass. The files tumbled out onto the dirty pavement.

"What's this?" Randy demanded in scarcely a whisper.

"Randy, I'm so sorry," he said and tugged his pants up.

"That's it? That's all you have to say? I let you into my apartment, my bed, my—We—" His voice choked off. Chilton closed his eyes. "And you were only after my work this whole time?!"

"I'm going to explain everything, Randy, but very soon you won't remember any of it."

"You're crazy if you think I'm just going to forget that you've been stealing from me. Fucking me to get to my research. And here I thought I'd found someone I could..."

"I did too, believe me," he whispered in vain.

"No, I'm sorry. I won't be forgetting that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work before they notice there's been a security breach." He shoved past Chilton and crouched down to collect the scattered documents.

"Hate me. That will actually make everything easier," Chilton muttered then bent to help him. "I have to tell you something."

"I don't want to hear it, Chilton. Just go and leave me alone."

"I will. After I tell you. I know you don't want to hear it, and soon it won't matter, but I have to say it anyway."

Randy rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh.

Chilton took the little file-stealing machine from his pocket and showed it to Randy. "I was sent here from the future. My mission was to retrieve these files to save people from my time that are dying from several very common illnesses. The entire contents of your laptop is on here, but I'm also supposed to bring your physical notes back. Something in your research holds the answers to saving them all. I don't know the details. I was given a directive and sent here, to you, to carry it out."

There was a long silence then Randy turned to him. "Help me clean up the files, so you can get home to save them."

"How can you believe me so easily when I just told you that I've been lying to you since the day you met me?"

Randy went on picking up his notes, pursing his lips in thought. Chilton left him to his thoughts, and once they had the folder back into some semblance of order, Randy stood. Confusion and also grief flickered in Randy's eyes. "I don't know if I do or not but you see, I don't have a choice. My boyfriend—who is all kinds of, well, not normal, and who has never seen most movies or shows I can come up with—takes out some weird futuristic-looking device and tells me he isn't from my time. He's on an important mission to save his people, and I'm supposed to, what, tell him he's crazy and blow him off? What if you are telling the truth, and I don't help? Do people die?"

"Randy, I—"

"Do. People. Die?" he repeated with emphasis.

"Yes, they will die without the information I have collected from you. You are their best chance. If I failed the mission, I would be sent somewhere else in time in an attempt to retrieve it or..." Chilton set his mouth into a grim line. They'd kill Randy for it if they had to, especially if his father or those in his employ had any say in it

"Or what?"

"It will not come to that. I won't let them hurt you."

"Death threat or not, I choose to believe. Why would you make up something as ridiculous as that? Take them," he said and handed his research over to Chilton.

"You are a remarkable man," Chilton said, pride infusing the words. "I'm honored to have met you."

"You did much more than meet me."

Chilton smiled softly and bent to lean the file against the brick wall of the alleyway. "I did, and I'm forever grateful to you for allowing me to be in your life. I'm sorry I had to lie to get there."

"You didn't." He shrugged slightly. "The way I see it, we were both exactly where we wanted to be. You wanted to be in my life, regardless of the reasons, and I wanted you there."

There wasn't any time to argue with him and anyway, it was pointless. "Randy, there's more. Any moment now, you're going to begin forgetting things like me coming to the lab or how we got here. My team is going to erase everything. It will be as if I was never here."

"But... How can they do that? I don't want to forget."

Chilton shook his head. "It's out of my control."

He frowned. "How much time do we have left?"

"It's hard to say. It could be a few hours or one or it could be seconds. Now that you know, the mission has been jeopardized, and they will be looking to extract me with the files as soon as possible to keep anything else from being disrupted in time and creating a ripple." Chilton continued listing his sins to an increasingly flummoxed Randy. "I was supposed to infiltrate your life and acquire the files. It wasn't by chance that we met or that I wanted to be with you. It was my mission, and now it is complete. I know you will probably lose your job for this, and for that I am deeply sorry."

"No, I know you cared even if you want to play tough, now. And I don't care about the paperwork. I would have given it to you." At Chilton's stricken look, Randy said, "I get it. You couldn't take the risk that I wouldn't understand. If it saves even one life... A job is nothing. Don't even worry about me, I'll get another one."

"You will. You're brilliant, kind, funny, smart..."

"Are you listing qualities or trying to convince yourself to stay?"

"You know I would if I could."

"So do it."

"Randy, I can't. I don't need convincing, though." Chilton smiled and took his face in his hands, tears starting to pool. "I'm all in with you. I'm yours forever."

"But I won't remember?"

Chilton shook his head and croaked out, "No."

"How much time do we have left?"

Déjà vu. Chilton stopped breathing then let it out on a mournful sigh, dropping his hands, and shook his head again. "It's already starting."

"What do you mean?"

“We already had this conversation.”

“No, we... We did?”

“It works backwards, but it isn't a perfect line... Soon you will forget how we got here, then our last night together... I've been told you won't feel it at all.”

Randy laughed a short bark. “Not possible.”

“You won't even know something was taken.”

“I want to remember. Don't let them do this to us.”

“Randy, listen to me. Go back to work, get to your car, get in, close the door, and drive away. You're going to wake up tomorrow a clean slate. You can find someone else, I know you can. Someone who doesn't ever have to lie to you or use you.”

“No goodbyes then? I'm just supposed to take off into the sunset without you?”

“To you, I was never here. None of this,” he gestured between them, “was supposed to happen. I'm not the guy you are meant to be with. You'll meet him someday.”

“Don't give me that 'we never belonged together' bullshit, Chilton. That couldn't have all been an act. I mean last night. You thought I didn't hear you, but you said it back. You waited 'til I'd been totally still for a long time, and you whispered it to me.” His eyes widened. “Last night... Oh, God. That was your goodbye? Chilton? You were going to leave and not say anything at all, weren't you?”

“I was, yes. It's what I do best, using people, stealing their secrets. It's why I was sent to do this. I'm good at it. You must think I'm a monster,” he said, hanging his head, unable to meet the other's pained gaze.

Randy stepped close and put his hands on his shoulders, leaning in and pressing their lips together. “Never,” he murmured. “I will never think that of you.” His mouth brushed over Chilton's tempting him to open and accept a more passionate kiss.

It was filled with all of the things left unsaid between them, all that they might have been. Chilton could look for the rest of his life, in any time, on any planet, and never find another man to match Randy

He placed his hand against Randy's chest, feeling the strong beat of his heart, then gave him a little shove to disengage. "You have to go before you open your eyes and are kissing a stranger." He'd look right through him. He'd look at him with distrust and mild disgust. Chilton wouldn't survive that. "You have to go."

"I don't care. Let me have whatever time we have left."

Randy lunged forward with a sweep of his tongue, and Chilton allowed it, taking him into his arms one last time, rubbing his back and dragging his fingers through his hair. "I hope you can forgive me for what I've done."

His forehead wrinkled in concentration. "What are you talking about, Chilton?"

He swallowed the lump in his throat and backed away. "Randy..." This was it, now or never. I love you, he thought as he felt his heart begin to tear in two. No, it was much too late to profess his emotions and would only make the parting harder on them both. "I promise I will never forget you," he said instead, his voice breaking. He retrieved the folder and turned so as not to see the betrayal plain on Randy's face. He might not have any idea why, but he seemed to understand he was being dumped. Chilton broke into a sprint, cringing each time Randy called out to him, hurt and confused. Why hadn't they extracted Chilton yet? Was he being punished?

Randy ran after him, so focused on catching Chilton that he didn't see it coming.

The truck seemed to come from nowhere, even when Chilton viewed the footage later. It struck Randy and sent him flying. Chilton had heard the deafening screech of tires locking up on the pavement, and the thud he'd later found out was the impact of the vehicle to Randy's right hip.

"No," he whispered in utter disbelief, then shouted it, "No!" Dropping the files to the pavement, he dashed to the crumpled form of his lover, tripping over his own feet more than once. He knelt next to him, assessing the damages. "Someone call an ambulance!" he yelled just like he'd seen in the movies he and Randy watched together. The only way he was going to live without him was if Randy had a full and happy life. "Stay with me," he pleaded and touched his face with a shaking hand. If he died here—

"Chilton?"

He was alive! “Shhh, it’s okay, baby, I’m here.” He smiled through tears, so many different emotions running rampant inside him. He darted down and kissed Randy full on the mouth. Alive and he remembered who he was—

“You’re that guy from the Laundromat,” he said, forehead furrowed as he tried to bring up other memories.

—vaguely. There was so much blood, and Chilton was afraid to move Randy to figure out where it was all coming from, but he needed a doctor, immediately.

Randy groaned. “What happened?”

“You got hit, Randy. The truck—I—I couldn’t—I’m sorry. I’m so damn sorry.” Randy’s eyes rolled back, and unlike when they did that while Chilton was pleasuring him, this time it chilled him to his core. What was left of his own heart shattered.

“You can’t fucking die on me!” he shouted and shook his shoulders. When he remained as still as the dead, Chilton choked on a sob and threw himself over his body. “Stay with me, Randy. Please, stay with me.” The distant sounds of sirens was his cue to get out of there, but he couldn’t leave him alone like this. “Randy, please don’t do this to me,” he cried and kissed him again. Under his hand he felt his heart beat faintly a moment before Randy gasped a breath.

“Who…” was all he managed to say before wheezing then moaning in pain.

“I’m no one. They’ll take good care of you,” he said, and smiled sadly. Randy’s breathing wasn’t right. Had his lung been punctured? It looked like his legs were almost definitely broken and had he hit his head? Would he remember his own name? “I know they will. You’re going to be alright,” he lied. He couldn’t resist pressing one more kiss to his soft lips, rejoicing in the thump from his chest and the breath in his lungs. Without another word he stood, pushing his way through the crowd he had not noticed was gathering around them. After collecting the research notes, he disappeared around the corner of a building. Leaning heavily into the brick and clutching the folder to his chest, Chilton closed his eyes. When he opened them again the town had disappeared to be replaced by the cold, hard light of the facility and echoing applause.

Numbly accepting the praise and bows, he handed over the small device loaded with Randy’s computer data and the battered folder, then shook the hands that were extended to him. Now they all had Randy’s blood on their

hands. That was almost the price of obtaining this information, Randy's life, but his love was much tougher than he looked. Dan and Michelle would see to it that he'd pull through. Would Chilton survive?

One day after watching Randy get jumped for the drugs he was carrying, Chilton was ambushed outside of Atric's station, knocked out cold. When he came to, he was in hell.

"See right here?" his father said, pointing to the view of Randy crumpled on the pavement after the truck hit him. "This is what was supposed to happen to your plaything. Why do you think I sent you back to get his research? Because he never finished it. It died with him." He showed Chilton the hit-and-run as it was meant to happen with Randy dying, the hit-and-run with Chilton calling for help, then the way he was now, worn out and defeated. He scrolled through the images on a constant loop.

"At least he's alive," he said softly through swollen lips.

"You think this is living? You think the target would CHOOSE this over a quick nearly painless death? You're deluding yourself. You did this to him. You destroyed his life and the way everyone that loved him will remember him. He'll die alone. Do you want to see just how well things will turn out for him?"

Randy was alone, dying in an alley, dirty, sunken, drugged out, pants around his knees, gasping for breath, and bleeding from what must be a knife wound. But even without that wound, there was no way he was going to survive long, and he'd clearly been attacked and raped, unless he'd willingly—

He gritted his teeth. "Shut it down."

"Oh, but you enjoy viewing him, don't you?" His father had his worker hold him still while he searched around and found the memory enhancer in Chilton's pocket. "Every time I hear you were looking at these, every time I so much as hear a rumor that you are walking by the data center or looking for a way back, I will drag you down here to watch him die. Again and again." He flipped between the two deaths, truck, alley, truck, alley. In either case, the blood poured out of Randy, and no one came to help him. "You are hereby stripped of your rank and banned from jumping."

"Father, please."

"You are not my son."

"You can't do this! I have to—"

“You’ve done enough. It’s time for my crew to go in and do a much more thorough cleansing.”

“No! Don’t touch him!”

“Be thankful you haven’t been banished.” He motioned to a guard. “Strap him in.” Chilton fought but the guard was stronger and soon had him trapped in a chair facing an enormous screen filled with Randy’s suffering and death.

“I have a new mission for you, Chilton. I order you to go back to your lover and kill him yourself.”

Everything seemed exactly how he’d left it, but Chilton knew better. Somewhere in the city, there was a brilliant mind clouded by dark thoughts and drugs. Somewhere Randy was yearning for something he didn’t know he’d had once, trying to fill the holes in his heart with anything that gave him the slightest bit of pleasure and doing whatever it took to forget the agonizing ache of loss.

It wasn’t only Randy that was affected by the botched retrieval. Several people his lover had interacted with were changed now. His mother, those he had relations with, Michelle and Dan, all of them had been subtly or not so subtly nudged in a direction they were not meant to go.

The problem was Randy. He’d gone from a bringer of joy to a black hole of despair. Instead of lighting up a room with his smile, he now drained it and spit out more darkness. Chilton’s new mission was to eliminate the anomaly, but merely executing him or forcing him into committing suicide wasn’t going to fix it all, so in addition, history would be turned back to before Chilton met him, before they’d interfered. With the damaged Randy dead, and the original innocent one never marred in any way, they could ensure there wasn’t going to be any further ripples. Randy was going to die twice. Once in this depraved future by Chilton’s hand and once in the past where regardless of Chilton’s non-involvement in his life, he would end up in the same place at the same time to get hit by that truck. With Chilton not there with him, to call for help and give him a reason to hang on, he’d perish before help could arrive and take him to the hospital. Exactly how he was supposed to have died, a beloved son and friend, a brilliant up-and-coming scientific mind. How you were remembered was everything to some cultures.

They would help him, his friends. It might take some convincing but ultimately they would because they did know and trust Chilton, they just

couldn't recall why. It would seem irrational, yet they wouldn't be able to help it, especially since they were unaware that he had, in fact, betrayed their friend and left them all.

Michelle answered the door and regarded him suspiciously. Hidden in her subconscious was the memory that they'd met before, he could see that flicker of recognition in her eyes.

"Do I... know you?" she asked, looking him over.

"You did, Michelle. It is a very long story."

"What do you mean, 'you did'?"

"I cannot adequately explain my plight, nor yours, I am afraid."

"Try me."

"All I need from you is for you to tell me where Randy is." She heaved a sigh and averted her eyes but didn't answer him. "You do know, don't you?"

"He's not in a very good place. Last I knew—"

"Last you knew? You two are friends."

"How do you know that? How do we know each other?"

"I told you it's complicated."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. Look... uh..."

"Chilton."

"Chilton. I don't know where he is staying, but I can tell you where he is usually hanging around. Hint: it's not The Ritz."

"I don't understand."

"You're better off looking for him in seedy motels or the dirty back room of a gay bar or a busted-to-shit crack house."

"Has it become that bad?"

"Yeah, well, when you lose your job, and your friends try to have you committed because you think you lost the love of your life, who by the way doesn't exist—"

"I do."

"You do what?"

"I do exist. Randy isn't crazy. Or at least, he isn't when it comes to me." Her eyes narrowed then widened in surprise. "I told you it's complicated, Michelle, and I don't have time to fill you in. I have to find him and make him remember me, so I can fix all of this. If I don't find Randy and contain him, someone else from my team is going to assassinate him." Never mind the part where he, himself, was supposed to kill him, his father had been clear on that. He wanted Randy dead by Chilton's own hand or he'd be spending a long time imprisoned then banished.

"No! Why would they do that? He's misguided and stupid but not dangerous, at least not to anyone but himself."

"That's enough for the people I work for."

"Who do you work for?"

"Who I work for is not something I can divulge, I'm sorry. He's already negatively affected you and Dan, his mother, and anyone else he's touched. I've been tasked with making sure this spreads no further."

"You talk about him like he's got a disease."

"In a way, he does, and it is only going to get worse for him and everyone else. What he has will consume him and spread just like a disease. Michelle, please, if you know anything, anything at all that can help me... He was never supposed to have a life like this. I ruined him, and I have to make things right. I created this mess, but I can still save him."

"Michelle?" Dan said from somewhere inside the house. "Don't make him stand out there, let him in."

Michelle stepped aside, and Chilton entered their new home. Dan was sitting in a chair in the living room and beckoned for Chilton to come in and do the same.

Dan studied Chilton, not taking his eyes off of him as he spoke to Michelle. "Tell him what you know, what you told me."

An hour later, he left the home of Randy's former best friends with far more information than he'd entered with. It was a shame that they wouldn't remember him dropping by once this was all over. Other than the subject matter discussed, it truly had been great to visit. Then again, if everything played out how his agency anticipated, to the knowledge of everyone else, Chilton wouldn't meet any of them in the first place.

He scouted for Randy in the worst place Michelle and Dan had told him about, first. If he wasn't there, he could breathe a small sigh of relief, count his blessings, and move on until he found him.

Imagine his disappointment then, when he swung open the busted up door, and there in a chair was Randy, preparing to shove a needle into his arm. His hair was short, spiked, bleached; unwashed like his clothes, a piece of rubber tubing was tied around his arm.

"Please, you have to stop."

"Name isn't 'Please.' Who the fuck are you?" he said, laying the needle on the table in front of him without having administered a dose, "My dad?" He sneered, seemed to consider that thought seriously, then shook himself.

On the table nearby was the abandoned needle and several of its brothers, a mirror with white powder dusted over it, rubber tubing, and empty pill bottles

He's going to kill himself. Chilton swallowed hard. He knew it would be difficult seeing Randy again with him having no memory of Chilton, and he knew it would be tough to see how far he'd fallen from his original path. Still, he was taken aback by the brash manner in which he now spoke and the life he led and that vacant look he was giving him.

"Are you ever not on drugs?"

"What the shit is it to you?" Randy said and leaned forward to pick up the syringe.

"I care about you, Randy," Chilton said, approaching slowly.

He grunted. "No one gives a flying fuck about me." He tapped at his arm, no doubt searching for a good vein to puncture.

"I came here to tell you something." Chilton blurted, lunging closer. Randy gave him a disinterested glare and went back to destroying himself. "You're in danger."

"No shit. Tell me something I don't know."

"You are all in danger."

"You're wasting my time. Unless you've got drugs to share or you're going to fuck me, get out."

Chilton didn't have to take a second to think of his answer, he removed his shirt and toed off his shoes. Randy didn't have a clue who Chilton was, but his

body would be able to retrieve what his mind was only vaguely aware of: the intimacy they had once shared.

“Now we’re talking,” Randy said, leering at him. He untied the rubber tubing and put down the drug, flexing his fingers with a quiet groan. Randy stood, tore his shirt off, he was barefoot so there weren’t shoes to remove then led him down the hall to an unoccupied room.

Chilton could hear others shouting, bed springs creaking, and some of the doors were cracked or flung wide open, so he saw his fair share as well. Was he living here, in this filth? After Chilton stepped inside the room at the far end of the hall that Randy had walked into, Randy closed the door and locked it. He turned and looked Chilton over then backed him toward the bed, his hands deftly unfastening Chilton’s jeans and shoving them down. He didn’t wait for Chilton to rid him of his own pants and did the honors before pushing Chilton onto the bed. Dust puffed up from the bare mattress as he landed, but Chilton barely noticed the state of the room. The man in front of him was far more decrepit and ruined than the building. Coming around the side of the bed, Randy climbed up there, taking hold of Chilton’s shaft and pumping it in his fist. He’d picked up new techniques somewhere, and they had Chilton on edge in no time at all.

“Stop,” Chilton gasped. “You,” he growled, “get up here and lie on your back, so I can get you ready to take me.”

The order didn’t even faze Randy, who obeyed, lying back and lifting his legs into the air to receive a pounding. Chilton took him in hand and stroked him just how he liked it, with a little twist and squeeze.

Randy gritted his teeth. “Just do it already.”

Chilton ignored him, dropped his cock, and took his time exploring all of that glorious skin, tasting and touching what he thought he would never be allowed to again. His inner thighs were extra sensitive. Chilton kissed and sucked up his thigh to the crease of his leg and worked his way back down, avoiding all obvious areas until he found himself kissing just under his testicles. Randy squirmed and panted, all notions that they should hurry up and fuck were replaced by the hunger and longing in his eyes.

“You know, Randy,” Chilton said, gently. “You don’t have to receive. You can be inside me... if you want to.”

“You don’t seem so sure.”

“Oh, I’m very sure I want you to.” Coming together like they had before could unlock his emotions and eventually his memories of their time together. Could, Chilton reminded himself. Nothing was definite.

Rolling to the side, Chilton brought Randy with him, maneuvering until he was lying on his back with Randy peering down at him skeptically. Then, Randy shrugged and kissed Chilton, his hand moving immediately between his legs, teasing between his ass cheeks. He probed at his ass then sat up and reached into a drawer for one of a few large bottles of lubrication. He probably didn’t remember buying it and the others with Chilton when their sex drives got out of control and they’d burned through the small supply he’d had. Why else would one of them be cinnamon-flavored? Randy hated cinnamon.

With the lube slathered onto his hand, Randy worked his fingers into Chilton, one after another, while Chilton squirmed and groaned. It was wonderful to have someone touching him, pleasing him, again. It wasn’t the same imagining it while you did it to yourself. He’d only tried that one time. When making himself orgasm left him cold inside, he’d given up trying.

Randy grabbed for a condom. He stopped, turning it in his fingers, like he did when he was lost in thought or trying to think of the best way to say something. “It’s been awhile since I got checked,” Randy said, and Chilton flinched.

He hated that Randy would have a reason to worry about it at all. He’d exposed himself to multiple partners and those horrid needles with very little regard for his health and well-being. From what Chilton could gather, he didn’t care if he died, seemed to welcome it even. All of it, and whatever else would befall him, sat squarely on Chilton’s shoulders.

“And, hey, I don’t know you from a hole in the wall,” he continued with a frown, “but my gut tells me you’re one of the good ones. So, listen, we don’t have to do this. I told you it isn’t going to mean anything.” He didn’t seem quite as sure of that as he had when Chilton first approached him. “You seem like the type that needs sex to mean something to your partner.”

“It’s alright,” Chilton replied, sadly. “I think we both need this.”

Randy nodded once and stroked Chilton’s walls for several more moments before pulling out to slip the condom on. “Last chance to back out,” he said as he got in position and laid down on top of him, lips hovering over Chilton’s mouth, waiting for his answer.

Chilton jerked up, making their mouths meet and groaned at the familiar feel of his lover's tongue twisting with his own. He'd thought Randy would impale him, seeing that Chilton wasn't shying away, but he held himself still, brow furrowed in concentration or maybe confusion, kissing Chilton for all he was worth. When more breathless minutes went by, and Randy still hadn't taken the initiative, Chilton reached down and gripped Randy at the base, nudging the tip of his cock at his entrance and making it sink in. Randy gasped and their lips parted. "Do it," Chilton whispered, gruffly.

The quiet insistence made Randy pause and look more closely at the man underneath him. He didn't even know his name, but this stranger knew far more than that about Randy. It was his eyes that gave it away. He was hardly able to look at him at first. The intensity in his gaze burned him, but he'd eased himself into it, making eye contact and then glancing quickly away or down away from his face. It afforded him the chance to appreciate his physique, and he wanted to touch it all. Every muscle. So he did. He propped himself on one elbow and let his free hand travel over the stranger's skin, not teasing or trying to provide pleasure, more like comfort. The muscles under his hands rose and fell and twitched. His eyes traveled upward from abs and chest to the other man's handsome face. Chiseled, one might say. He could see someone wanting to carve his image from stone, to preserve it forever.

"Randy...?"

Randy lifted his gaze further and settled on his rich dark eyes, locking there. His hand still exploring, Randy spoke softly, "I'm about to fuck you, and I don't even know your name. That's actually normal for me, but that's because I usually don't care to know." He frowned. He seemed to be doing a lot of that around this man. "I want to know yours."

"Chilton," he said, and he gave a pained smile. "Other people, they call me C, but to you I was always 'Chilton.'"

"What do you mean, to you?" A dull throbbing started at his temples, like the headaches he got after dreaming. "I've never seen you before. We've never met."

Chilton sighed, and it was a very sad sound. It made Randy's chest ache and had him scrambling to think of a way to apologize for whatever he said or did that made his eyes dim like that.

“Please, forget I said anything,” Chilton said and reached up to stroke a thumb over his cheek, smiling more genuinely now. “Focus on this: You want me, I want you. The details are inconsequential. We’re here, Randy, that’s all that matters.”

He let it go. The man, Chilton, was hiding something, for sure, but he was right. Nothing mattered right now except how badly he wanted to be in the present, touching him, kissing him, pushing inside of him. Randy moaned as his hips did exactly what he wanted them to do, jutting forward to enter Chilton’s body, pressing in, inch by inch. Legs splayed wide, Chilton then hooked them around his waist, his arms warm and embracing as Randy began to slowly thrust in and out of him. It was a giant contrast from all the guys he’d ever fucked or let fuck him. This guy was concerned for his well-being, beyond whether or not they got off. It didn’t even seem to be the point for Chilton. To escape the pity and hunger, the absolutely torturous longing in those dark eyes that were boring into him, he bent to kiss Chilton and doubled his pace.

Fingers tangled in his hair, Chilton’s tongue swept deeper into his mouth, and it was all accompanied by the most erotic moans. He wouldn’t last long at this rate, so he slowed and varied his thrusts, keeping them both guessing. This wasn’t one of his pornos; there was no need to break the land speed record of fucking and getting him to explode immediately, nor to deny himself forever in order to switch positions or partners several times. It took the edge off the pain, the ache, the bitter loneliness like nothing else could, but it didn’t last long.

Bottoming for cash was easy, in that you just had to lay back and take the pounding. Sometimes you didn’t even have to worry about faking the orgasm or sucking the other guy off. Plenty of jobs, you just let the top do all of the work. It filled his wallet and that was all he cared about. Not that he could keep it full with the rent for his shitty apartment and his new drug habit. Multiple habits.

It only took the mere thought of his dreams—his ghost touching him, his breath at his ear—and he was hard and ready. He felt... he felt something. As opposed to nothing. Not whole. No, not ever whole. For a moment, though, he could pretend, long enough to some small physical comfort from another human being. But this was something completely foreign. There was no pretending or drugs or people watching calling out the graphic suggestions from the sidelines. Just him and this man called Chilton. Randy liked that.

Ending the kiss with a last round of torrid tongue wrestling, Randy looked down at him and smiled. A shadow of a smile but at least it was there. He felt like he hadn’t had a reason to smile in years. “Chilton...” he began. He wanted

to ask him why he'd come to him and what he'd accidentally done to be rewarded like this, but as soon as he spoke the name, his heart gave a painful squeeze. Randy shouted in alarm, hand flying up to cover it, and the smooth glide of his hips faltered.

Obvious concern flashed in Chilton's eyes, his hand coming to rest on top of Randy's. "Stay with me, baby, it will pass. Don't give in to it. Keep looking at me, Randy. Don't worry about anything else, do you hear me? Nothing else, except you and I and what we are doing. We will talk about this, and all of the questions you have, I will answer, but not right now. Now, what I need, and what you need, is for you to make love to me."

Randy shook and drew in a shaking breath or two. Is that what they were doing, making love? Was he really making love to someone he met only minutes before? It didn't feel like he was with some random guy off the streets, although technically that's what this one was, but he was different, and Randy felt different being with him. More put together. His crazed thoughts weren't whipping up to lash at him, the emptiness and despair not so bleak. You know this voice, Randy, he thought (it was crazy, but he knew he did), let it guide you back to yourself. While he continued to keep his eyes glued to him, as Chilton had asked, and as the words sank in, he felt his barriers dissolving and awareness blooming.

"I'm right here," Chilton said, sweeping his thumb under Randy's eye.

Was he—Why was he crying? Randy blinked back more tears, embarrassed to be shedding them not only in front of a stranger, but mid-sex with said stranger. He closed his eyes as more words flowed from Chilton, and he slowly lifted to disentangle from him. The time for screwing had to be over now that he'd disgraced himself. Chilton stiffened his muscles and kept Randy where he was, pulling him in deeper with the press of his feet. His voice stayed calm, coaxing, even if it cracked with emotion. What the hell was going on?

"Randy, baby, listen. I know nothing makes sense, but you feel it, don't you?"

"It's not possible."

"There's something extremely familiar about me and being with me feels natural, doesn't it? Trust that. Trust your gut feelings. Trust me."

"It's you. From my dreams." He moaned pitifully. "You're not really here. I'm seeing shit again."

“Does this feel like your imagination?” Chilton rolled his hips. Randy moaned and reflexively began moving between his thighs.

Not stopping, he replied. “If it is, I have a pretty fucking vivid one.”

“That’s it,” Chilton groaned, “let it all go. Forget everything else. Be here with me, now.”

Neither of them spoke after that. He doubted he could form words if he tried. He half expected to wake up, humping the nasty mattress under them, but Chilton, or this ghost of him, was right. He needed to let everything go and enjoy it while it lasted. Imagination or not, he hadn’t felt this good since... well, he’d never felt this good, and it wasn’t the drugs talking. Or was it?

Chilton called out his name when he came, his cheeks wet with tears. “Randy, oh, baby, oh, God, Randy!”

Only a breath behind him, his orgasm boiled up and overflowed. He gasped for air. Chilton’s ass pulsed around his spilling cock, and Randy dove down to taste his lips and feast on his moans.

Coming down from the natural high, he did something out of character and cuddled the man. Chilton moved though and made him lie in his arms, holding him almost protectively, his breath ghosting over his ear. It was too familiar.

“You’re from my dreams. How could you be here?”

He didn’t deny it. “I can explain that. I can try to explain everything. The question is, will you believe it?”

“No,” he said and shoved his way out of the stranger’s arms and sat up. “I can answer that on my own, I’m hallucinating! That’s it! Or Dan and Michelle—did they put you up to this?! They want me to go crazy, they want me to think I’m bonkers, but I’m not. He was real!”

“They would never do that. They’re still your friends. Calm down, Randy. Stay with me...”

He kept saying that. The man at the crash site had said the same thing in exactly that way, the illusion of calm but holding grief and sorrow and genuine concern. “How the hell do you know them?” Randy remembered the feel of his lips, the look of longing, love, terror, concern all mixed up in his attentive gaze, and it made him angry for reasons he couldn’t explain to himself. “You were there! And now you, what? Think I owe you?! That’s sick! They had you pretend to be my boyfriend, to come here and fuck with me.”

“Randy, listen, that man—”

“Shut up! Don’t you dare!” he shouted. Then, dropping his voice, he added in a whisper, “He was real.”

“He’s me! I’m real. I’m here.” He sat up and held Randy tightly, his fingers stroking through his hair. “You aren’t going insane. I’m sorry, baby, so sorry. I’m right here.”

Chilton wasn’t the only one. The door crashed open, and what Randy could only think of as ninja assassins poured in holding small gun-like weapons. Randy shouted for them to leave, but he didn’t know if they were even real. The cocktail of awesome he’d taken was completely messing with his head. The intruders ripped the two of them apart.

“Randy... I failed you,” the man called Chilton said from somewhere far away, then they were on him too. It was just like when cops took a dangerous perpetrator down in the movies. They weren’t gentle, pinning his neck to the bed with a knee, clamping down his legs. One of the assassins said something about them both being contaminated, and the pressure at the back of his neck increased until he almost lost consciousness. They didn’t need to put in so much effort; he wasn’t going to resist.

“Hold him down!” Something, a thick-ass needle if he had to guess, jammed into his neck and flooded his veins with fire.

Okay, so maybe he was trying to resist arrest. He’d tell them where all the drugs were, do his time. He’d cooperate now. But they had his lover. No. The stranger, Chilton. The pounding in his head increased until he was groaning louder than when he came.

Across the room Chilton was hysterical, his mouth open wide. Shouting? Screaming? Fucking singing? Randy couldn’t hear anything over the rushing in his ears. They grappled with Chilton as he flailed and tried to break free. One of the men punched him in the gut. Randy growled, “Don’t touch him!” Where did that come from? Chilton broke free and dove for Randy. He heard a shot fire, and Chilton went down next to him. His hand reached out to Randy then went limp as his eyes glazed over. He’s not moving! Randy’s vision blurred with sudden tears, then went black.

“What’s his condition?” Atric asked, coming up and placing a hand on Chilton’s shoulder.

Chilton sighed and uncrossed his arms to touch the healing pod housing Randy, effectively shrugging the technician's hand off. It was Atric's fault he was in there, needing to recover consciousness. They were burning the diseases and filth out of his blood, the same as they had Chilton. "He's stable. They think he's going to pull through, but that dose they gave him to knock him out? It almost killed him."

"Chilton."

He flinched at the use of his name.

"C, we've been over this. He was supposed to die. What's the tally now, three times? Your father almost killed you both, and everyone else Randy met after he met you. Remember that, when you seek revenge. Remember who your true enemies are."

"I know. Your crew was only following your orders. I know it had to look real. I understand that now, but they didn't need to be so rough with him."

"It worked, did it not? We got you out alive. We brought your father to justice for his attempted murders."

"I don't mean to be ungrateful, Atric. When I see those brilliant blue eyes gazing back at me, I know I will thank you properly."

"I can respect that, my friend."

"I told Randy I didn't have any friends," Chilton said, sadly.

"I trust your answer will be different the next time he asks?"

"That depends on whether or not he lives to ask it."

Atric nodded. "In any case, take as much time away as you need and fear not, your position still stands, if you want it."

Chilton kept staring at Randy's blank face. He wasn't going anywhere, not without Randy.

"Think it over," Atric said gently, as he touched his shoulder in another show of sympathy, and then spun on his heel to leave him to his vigil.

The drugs would take longer to leech out of Randy's system but after that, it was anyone's guess what had been done to his mind. Between the memory wipes and various chemicals permeating his organs, Randy might never recover. Chilton had to be prepared for that. If he managed to live and to fight his way out of the dark, he might not remember anything at all. There was also the possibility that his brain had sustained irreversible damage.

The Randy he'd met and fallen in love with was likely gone, but he'd take this version of him and count himself blessed, no matter what kind of shape he was in. If he would only open his eyes!

The thousandth time was the charm.

Randy's eyes struggled to open, but they did, and Chilton moved in to lift the lid of the pod. He focused on Chilton and smiled. Chilton was afraid to speak. He trembled as he waited for Randy to show any sign that he was going to be alright—that he really was in there.

"Chilton," Randy said and reached for him. "I had the most bizarre dream."

He kissed him, laughing then crying.

Randy stopped kissing him back. He swept his gaze around the facility and let out a low whistle. "Not a dream after all then?"

"No, baby, I'm afraid it wasn't." Chilton took his hand and explained the situation to Randy, who stayed quiet through the entire description of their predicament. "You were never supposed to live past that accident, Randy. I found out later that you were destined to die that day. I'm sorry. Me being there, changed it. You living while I disappeared screwed up your whole world. It wasn't supposed to. It was supposed to be a flawless extraction. Part of you held on to what we had so hard that it destroyed you. You've been living on borrowed time, that's another reason why everything unraveled, your sanity included. I didn't want to leave you, I swear. They extracted me from your time, and the scars I left behind didn't close up like they should have. It wasn't all neat like they'd planned, sewn up and perfectly seamless. It was a jagged, poorly stitched wound that festered and rotted you from the inside out and spread to everyone you interacted with. Now you're dead to them. But you're still here. Here with me. That is, if you want to be."

"What will happen to my family? Dan and Michelle?"

"They'll remember you as you were before that day, but without me. The rest of it—it never happened, Randy, not to them. This is how it was always supposed to go. You are supposed to be dead. But here you are, safe from the ravages of displaced time. You can't do any damage to anyone. Your footprints in the far past won't stay behind, and the ones you make in the distant future, past the limits of the human lifespan, won't stick either."

"In other words, all we have is now."

"Not exactly. We can live anywhere, at any time, hundreds of lifetimes together, if that is what you want."

"But they won't matter."

"They'll matter to us. We'll have lived them, even if no one else ever knows."

Randy smiled. "We'll be like time-traveling ghosts."

"Very much so, yes."

"You were my ghost. I could feel you, but I couldn't see you or touch you myself. You were always there, hovering on the edge of my vision. I felt that something was haunting me, but all along I was a ghost myself."

"I was afraid, so afraid you were gone or that you would wake up only to remember nothing or worse..."

"Shhh, even then, when you came to find me, I might have forgotten what you looked like and the things we did, but I never forgot your voice or how much I loved you."

"I love you too," Chilton said

"So, where do we go first?"

"Easy there. You have a lot of healing left to do, and you might like to tour this place once you're able before we take our first journey."

"I'm in no hurry to go anywhere." He smiled wider and it morphed into a smirk.

"What is it?" Chilton asked, grinning at him. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking this pod thing is big enough for both of us."

"You need to rest. We have all the time in the world."

"I don't want to waste another second of it without you." Randy tugged him down on top of himself and closed the pod around them. "Chilton?" he said after lazily kissing him.

"Hm?"

"Let's test the sound proofing on this thing."

"I found it," Atric said to Chilton some hours later as he strode into the medical center.

Chilton was monitoring Randy, making sure that his condition didn't decline while he slept. Randy had begged him to rest, but try as he might he couldn't get his mind to still enough. "Found what?"

"The way to slip in and take Randy before any of this"—he motioned to the pod where Randy was sleeping—"ever happens, and without creating another ripple."

"But that would mean..." He cast a longing gaze at Randy.

"Yes."

"I don't know if I can do that, take one Randy for the other. Atric, I love him."

"And you will love the other."

"It's akin to murder. You stopped my father from doing it, but now you're asking *me* to murder the man I love."

"You can't murder someone who never was."

"No."

"C, you must."

"I said no, Atric. I won't do it!" Randy stirred in his sleep, and Chilton stood, herding Atric away from his healing tank. Lowering his voice, he said, "I can't lose him again. I promised."

"Time will be mended, C. With the blight removed it's only natural that it will heal itself. We've done what we can to help it along, reversed the damage, and we've stopped Randy from being killed under your father's orders. But he was supposed to die. He will die. It's inevitable."

"Atric... isn't there another way?" he said defeatedly, already knowing the answer to his question.

"You know there is not." Atric laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "We were fools to think we could keep him here and with nothing ill coming of it. This is it. Your one chance. The ripple is closing, my friend. It's not something that we can control. You take advantage of it now or—"

"Or lose them both." Chilton sighed. "I understand." He took one last, long look at his damaged lover and turned away, never to see him again. Taking him before his downward spiral would spare him all of the pain and suffering he'd endured. Nothing good had come from his extended life, except maybe how

close Michelle and Dan had gotten, but if they loved each other, they would find another way. Love always did, and Chilton had to follow where it led. "How can this be done?"

The mission, the most critical of his life, was to get to Randy before the ambulance took him away and before the last bit of his memory of Chilton evaporated. With luck they could restore it fully, but Chilton could only approach after his other self left the scene of the accident. He would only have seconds to secure Randy and bring him back to the healing center. The clean-up crew would take care of the rest, making it look like he died, as he was supposed to before Chilton changed his fate. With Randy removed from his own time line he was as good as dead, and history would return itself to normal.

"What if he doesn't remember?" Chilton had asked Atric

"If there is a way, you and I will find it."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then you'll have to start over."

Chilton nodded. "But he'll be alive." *And he won't have suffered any more than he was meant to.* His mind would be intact, his heart. If, in the end, Randy chose not to be with him, it would crush Chilton, but it was worth that risk.

Atric had asked him what he would do when Randy remembered the betrayal. He'd sighed then said, "I'll tell him before that. He had faith in me when I told him the truth of it, I have to believe he will choose to understand." Trust: it was all he had.

Stepping onto the jumping pad, he nodded to confirm he was ready, and in an instant Chilton was at the scene of the accident, watching his nightmare unfold. Atric had warned him that he'd only get one shot at this, two at most, and that odds were, even after he got Randy back to the facility, he might not recover his memories. It was even a danger that he might die before they could get him to force his body to heal itself. He had to go through with letting Randy get hit. He had to ignore his instinct to keep him safe from harm, couldn't jump in front of the truck or push him out of the way. Randy had to appear to the onlookers to have expired, so that his team could more efficiently fake his death. They were going to break the laws of nature.

Chilton crept closer, waiting for the moment that his past self was well away from the site. He stopped as close as he could get without being seen, his muscles twitching and bunching. *God, will I make it in time?* He wanted to

punch himself for leaving Randy crumpled in the road. How could he have done that? To hell with the laws, he should have stayed with him!

The devastated past version of himself dashed out of sight, and that was his cue to sprint into action. Chilton ran like his life depended on it. It didn't, but Randy's did, and that made him wish he possessed super-human speed. Time crawled, the distance between them seemed insurmountable.

Chilton slid into the throng of people and took Randy in his arms. Randy labored for breath and struggled to speak.

“Ch... il...”

The pain he must be in. “Don't try to talk, baby. Listen, Randy. You have to trust me. You have to hang on. Hold on to us, alright? Hold on to me.” He lifted him and stood, despite the protests of the onlookers and the blare of sirens approaching. Chilton pressed his lips against his forehead just as Randy's eyes rolled back and the hand reaching up toward Chilton's face dropped like a stone. He'd fallen unconscious. They were running out of time! Squeezing his eyes shut Chilton held Randy close and prayed he wasn't too late to save him.

Days blurred into one another and still Randy hadn't woken up. The medical team, Atric, all of them, kept reassuring Chilton that he was stable and mending well, it would simply take a while to bring him around, much like last time. He never left his side. “When he wakes you should be the first face he sees,” Atric told him. Of course he would be. He waved away all of the insistences that he find his rest to make sure he was there when Randy began to regain consciousness.

Randy's arms snaked around him from behind, his lips grazing Chilton's ear. Chilton tilted his head back to accept a demure kiss. Bit by bit the memories were filtering in, coming faster the closer Randy allowed Chilton to get to him. As soon as Randy was coherent, he'd explained how they'd come to be where they were. That he'd infiltrated his life in the name of the greater good of his people, betrayed him, used him, but that he'd take it all back if he could. Randy had been confused but trusted that little spark of feeling he perceived between them and as his remembered emotions surfaced, he started actively feeding the flames.

“Randy, there's still so much I have to tell you.”

“I know, Chilton, I love you too.”

“No. I was—”

“You don't?” Randy let go of him and stepped away.

“Wait, Randy, I—” Chilton could feel the pain he'd caused in his carelessness. He spun around to take Randy's face in his hands. “Yes! Of course I do. I love you, Randy.” He smiled, and waited for Randy to return it, then gave him a passionate kiss. “You have no idea how much, but you will. I'm going to tell you everything.”

Randy crushed him closer. “I'll hold you to that.” His gaze wandered toward the healing tank he'd spent far too long in. “Now what do you say we test the sound-proofing on this thing?”

Déjà vu. Chilton smiled sadly at the memory of being taken by Randy's other self only a few days earlier. Randy had complained that there wasn't enough room to give him the pounding he deserved. “I have it on good authority that it's a little too cramped for what you have in mind. I have a far better idea.” He took his hand and led him into the heart of the agency, where all time travel took place. Randy had been unconscious both times he'd been brought through the facility, now he took it all in, silently and with awe. As they neared the jumping pad Chilton turned to face him.

“Pick a place, Randy, anywhere, anywhen at all, and I'll take you there.” They'd already had the discussion about Randy not being able to return to his time, but he could tell by the way his eyes misted that “home” was on the tip of his tongue. “I'm sorry. I can't take you back.”

“I know...” Randy squeezed Chilton's hand tighter. “Even if I could, even with everything I'd have to leave behind, I wouldn't go back if it meant losing you.”

“You never will.” Chilton said. As he took Randy into his arms and their lips met, Chilton knew this time he would keep his promise. He would never let him go.

The End

Author Bio

William Tate is the M/M pen name of writer Jennivie Wirries. She claims that William Tate is as much a part of her as her own female self. Jennivie has lived in the same town on the outskirts of Detroit almost her entire life, having been born there, and currently residing only miles from where she grew up. A stay at home mom of a five year old son, in her spare time she writes, reads, draws, watch movies and Anime, knits, crochets, role plays online, or engages in other activities that unleash her creativity. Writing is something that Jennivie has always been passionate about and she's used it to cope with problems she has faced over the course of her life. Her summers as a youth were spent perusing library shelves and reading some of the works that influence her writing today. As a writer and reader, she indulges in mostly gay romances in several different sub-genres, and paranormal romances, but is open to anything. In recent years, her biggest achievements have been finishing the Nanowrimo.org challenge to write a novel in a month (three years in a row), committing to writing something every single day, and getting published in a few anthologies. Jennivie and William both have several novels and novellas in the wings just waiting to be shown some love.

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