



In Your
Veins

S.J. Eller

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

IN YOUR VEINS

By **S.J. Eller**

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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Photo Description

The black-and-white photograph captures a short, intimate moment. Two men lean over a pool table, holding a cue together. One has short, dark hair and stubble that reaches across his face. Behind him is a larger man, his hair longer. He holds his companion's hand over the cue, guiding him as he presses a kiss to the smaller man's neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

How did I get here, with him— it's so wrong... but it feels so right. He's asking me things I want to say yes to, but if I do my whole life will change. I've worked hard for what I have, life's not been easy but I knew which path I was taking and have marched down that road determinedly for years. Yet now I'm questioning everything I think I know about myself. One decision will alter my whole world.

These men have an interesting story to tell. I don't mind friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, GFY. I love UST. I don't want alien or sci-fi and do prefer contemporary but don't mind supernatural/fantasy/shifter. I do want an HEA (please).

Thank you author, I look forward to my story,

Sincerely,

Lori

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: blue collar, accountant, addiction drug/alcohol, some darker aspects, hurt/comfort, men with pets, tearjerker, angst

Content Warnings: detailed description(s) of drug use

Word Count: 18,990

Author's Note

A lot went into this. There are a small handful of people who helped me throughout writing this, who encouraged me even when I was afraid to write something so personal. So thank you to all of you, but especially Raevyn and Barb, who have been an indispensable support system. And thank you to Lori for allowing me to take her prompt and run with it.

Dedication

To my brother, who fought hard but lost the battle.

To addicts who are struggling or have struggled.

And to the silent victims—the families, friends, and loved ones,
who never give up hope, even when it seems like the world is
impossibly dark.

IN YOUR VEINS

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Prelude

They say that if you're not careful the city will eat you alive.

They're right.

A city has a life of its own. Beyond the old, decaying brick walls and the cracked pavement, beneath the bowels of the city, lies a world different from anything you've ever known. The city, with its flawed exterior and broken interior, holds more secrets and lies than any priest—more than any four walls or series of broken-down homes have any right to.

Still, people walk the streets, go down the dark alleyways, and pass the secrets, ignorant to the pulse of the city, the complete and utter destruction that it holds in the palm of its worn hand.

The city, in all its disgusting, but somehow beautiful glory, changes people.

Part I

There was never anything quite like the smell of oil and sweat in the morning, or at least that's what Kyle Black had come to tell himself each time he walked out his front door and into the sprawling heart of Cleveland.

His mother thought he was crazy, certifiable even, for leaving the up-and-coming Portland to go to a dying city so far from home. But that's exactly why he did it. After twenty-five years in Portland, twenty-five years of the "up-and-coming", hip scene, he needed a change of surroundings.

Sure, maybe the dilapidated furniture factory next to his apartment complex wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but Cleveland had a certain charm to it. It was just well hidden—very well hidden.

It had only been about a month since the tiring cross-country move, but Kyle had a roof over his head and a job he enjoyed. Working for one of the Big Four was a dream come true—for someone with a MBA in accounting, that is. Funny thing was, he didn't look like the type of guy who could get lost in a series of numbers and thrive under the pressure of a crazy tax season that left most people frazzled. Instead, he had boyish looks that allowed him to pretend he was less clumsy than he really was, as if he could catch a ball with more than just his face. Short brown hair and a baby face went a long way in the world, or it would if he worked anywhere but in corporate America.

His apartment was nice but sparse, just a few leftover boxes from the move scattered in various places, and a linoleum floor, which looked like beautiful hardwood, and gave the impression that he wasn't twenty thousand dollars in debt thanks to loans. It wasn't quite home yet, but it would be, one day.

And the apartment came with one thing that couldn't be bought, a close proximity to all the action Cleveland had to offer. He was just a block away from Cleveland State University, not too far from the Wolstein Center, and literally a walk away from some amazing restaurants and a thriving nightlife. He could even walk to work if he so desired. The apartment was small, quaint, in a good part of a sometimes-scary city—it was all he could ask for in a new start, and maybe just all he could afford, too.

Like most cities, Cleveland had to be built up instead of out. The building Kyle worked in, and all those surrounding it, displayed that fact perfectly. Most

of those buildings, just like Kyle's, contained rich and lavish offices for the upper-crust of society, putting on a prestigious front for visitors. But Kyle didn't work in one of those offices with a full wall of windows glancing down at the busy city. Instead, he worked among thirty-some other employees in his very own small cubicle, fit with only the essentials—an unfortunate-looking Dell computer, a chair, which looked comfortable but after nine-hour days was more of a torture device, and a small trash can that belonged in a posh bathroom where no one actually used it. The walls of the cubicle were fit with material that he was able to pin papers to, and most of the seasoned employees had pictures of family and cards from holidays past scattered along theirs, while his was mostly bare, sans a list of things he needed to do by the end of the week.

It was all just a statement to Kyle's newness, to his need to still find a place to fit in among all these overflowing cubicles and the noisy chatter of friendships already formed. And maybe even to his impermanence. After all, the city was constantly changing, and everything within it was just along for the ride.

It was Thursday, the end of Kyle's fourth week in the city. The day had been particularly stressful, and it seemed that everything that could've gone wrong did. He'd chosen to walk to work and avoid the traffic, but halfway there the sky decided to open up and tell him just what she thought of his brilliant idea to be "green". Of course, his large, black umbrella was at home, next to the door, in the small bin with his other umbrellas and rain gear.

By the time he walked into the office, he was damp and cold, and really, really not enjoying the feel of water in his socks. He ended up clocking in five minutes late and having to wait until his lunch break to do anything about the *squish-squish* of his feet. The day went downhill from there, with his boss having a near-mental breakdown and a deadline fast approaching with one of the company's top clients. So he took his lunch break an hour later than normal, had two saltine crackers, and came back to work only to have the fear of God put into him by a cranky supervisor who apparently hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, thanks to his two-month-old baby.

Thank God it was Thursday. Just one more day left before he could sit on his couch in his boxers and not have to worry about grumpy bosses, sleep-deprived supervisors, and fast-approaching deadlines.

At twenty after five, he was packing up and shutting down his computer when he looked up and caught two coworkers staring down at him with grins on their faces.

“Kyle, man, you’ve been here for, what? A month now?” Billy asked, the diabolical smile still plastered to his handsome face.

Kyle knew what they were up to. His coworkers had given him all of two days to settle in before they started asking him to go out with them for after-work specials, as they called them. Essentially, it was the time after work when everyone went to a random bar and bitched about the day while having one too many to drink. He’d gone once, and it was an affair he wished he could’ve forgotten, as apparently even top-notch businesses were not immune to a little hazing.

In the end, it was harmless, but he still couldn’t forget how he looked in the mirror the next morning with a stamp from the club pressed firmly into the center of his forehead. He’d worn a hat as long as he could, but when someone at the office noted that a Portland Trail Blazers cap wasn’t only unprofessional, but also scandalous in the home of the Cavs, he’d been forced to take it off and endure the looks of terror and amusement from his coworkers.

He wasn’t looking for a repeat performance, but Billy and Casey, the woman who worked in the cubicle next to him, had other ideas. “You’ve already been initiated, man. It’s about time you relaxed and came to have some fun with us.”

Casey must’ve picked up on his apprehension, because before he could get out a protest, she spoke. “I *promise* there will be no getting you drunk and putting club stamps anywhere on your body.” She looked pointedly at Billy, almost daring him to try something. “Just come out with us for an hour. It’s been a shit day, and we all need it.”

He couldn’t bring himself to argue with her, and their smiles both grew as Kyle nodded his head. “Okay, fine. I’ll be there.”

The bar was crowded, but Kyle should’ve expected as much, considering it was Thirsty Thursday, a favorite day for Clevelanders and the real hump day. If you made it to Wednesday, you were okay, but if you made it to Thursday night with some drinks, you were golden.

He couldn’t help but groan when he entered the crowded, musty building, only to have Billy hone right in on his presence and wave him over.

“Glad to see you didn’t back out on us, Kyle.” Billy’s tone, as well as his stance, was cocky. He was a nice guy, minus the fifty percent of the time when

he was an asshole. It was somewhat endearing, even if it did make Kyle want to pummel him.

“You’re in for a treat. It was my pick this week,” Billy said, raising his voice over the loud clamber of voices, with a symphony of bottles clinking and a heavy rock beat thumping in the background. “They’ve got great food and awesome beer from the brewery down the street. Make yourself at home.” He patted Kyle on the shoulder before going off to greet some other helpless soul.

A throng of people crowded the bar, each demanding drinks and filling the limited space, leaving Kyle pushed between a stool and two tall, sweaty men. And sure, he liked his men to be nice and tall, with a scent of hard work and masculinity, but between the stale piss smell that came with a bar, the heady note of liquor invading his nose, and the sweat, it was just a bit too much—like a trip he’d much rather *not* take.

He pushed his way to the back of the bar, waving awkwardly to coworkers. Two pool tables were in a small outcropping, the wood paneling aging the bar, and the dim light above the tables just barely gave away a patron leaning across the felt, cue in hand.

The man was tall, tan with dirt caked under the fingernails that were expertly wrapped around the cue stick. His plain white T-shirt was tight around his arms, black gym shorts hanging loose in comparison. Dark brown hair curled down to the bottom of his neck, whispering just slightly around the man’s ears. Whiskey-colored, golden-brown eyes focused on the ball at the edge of the table, looking up to a white ball precariously placed to the left of the pocket, just off to the side enough to make the move seem tricky to Kyle’s novice eyes.

There was precision that even Kyle couldn’t deny as the cue moved forward in a controlled, even stroke; the man’s eyes focused on some imaginary, seemingly magical spot on the white ball. There was a quiet moment of follow-through, and then a soft *clink* as the ball fell into the pocket, or so Kyle assumed. He’d been so fixated on moving his own eyes between the man’s face and his fingers to even notice the ball disappearing.

The man stood up straight, setting the cue on the table and turning to high-five one of the sweaty men from the bar.

“I’m starting to think you’re hustling me, O’Brien,” Sweat-machine said, his voice holding no real accusation, only humor.

“Yeah, yeah. I feel bad for your wife, the way you handle your cue balls makes me wonder about—”

“Hey now, don’t even talk about my balls.” The men laughed.

When the apparent winner turned back around, his eyes caught Kyle’s across the small area, a smile spreading across his lips.

Kyle could feel himself blush under the scrutiny, and he was sure that a vibrant red could be seen even beneath his day-old stubble.

The man walked toward Kyle, his steps sure and his body exuding confidence.

“Dalton,” came the deep, somewhat husky voice, and with it the man—Dalton—extended his hand.

“Kyle.” His own voice was much less strong. He clasped the proffered hand, feeling calluses old and new, the skin worn like leather—a texture that came only from physical labor. Dalton smiled at him again, and Kyle found himself babbling on, “What you did there, that was pretty cool. I mean, I’m lucky if I can hold a stick.”

He nearly cringed at the way the words fell out, a mess of nervousness put into a jumbled sentence. The tension eased a bit, though, when Dalton laughed and shook his head, removing his hand from Kyle’s, reminding him that they had been shaking hands for what was probably longer than strictly necessary.

“It’s not so hard. Here, I’ll show you.” Dalton moved back to the table, picking up his discarded cue and grabbing a small, blue cube, rubbing it against the tip of the cue. Kyle must’ve been standing there frozen, his face painted in shock, because when Dalton looked back up at him, he gave a more relaxed smile that pulled Kyle forward.

“First, let me see what you know already,” Dalton said, handing the cue to Kyle.

“I—uh,” *shit* Kyle continued internally. He grasped at the cue, looking around the room to see if anyone was watching the hot-mess about to happen, but only finding Dalton’s eyes on him.

He let out a breath, leaning forward. The length of the cue was awkward, and he wasn’t sure quite where to put his hand or set the butt of the stick. Someone had set up the table again while they were talking, and the large triangle of multi-colored balls seemed like a sure target. Somehow, in between

the time he pushed the stick forward, and glanced at the green of the table, he managed to miss completely. The tip of the cue clipped the green, the stick stuttering against where it sat on his shoulder. One of the balls moved slightly from the impact, but other than that that, the balls kept their taunting formation.

“Fuck,” Kyle muttered, not quite under his breath.

He looked up from the table, expecting to see Dalton laughing at him, or somehow otherwise amused by the ridiculous display he'd just witnessed. Instead, Dalton held the same friendly smile and shrugged his shoulders. “You'll get 'em next time.”

He came closer to the table, behind Kyle, and pressed himself against Kyle's back. “First off, you have to make sure you're balanced.” Dalton pressed his leg between Kyle's, pushing his legs further apart until they were just over shoulder-width. He urged Kyle's feet to turn slightly outward, instead of the straightforward they had been on his previous attempt.

“There, much better.” Dalton breathed against Kyle's ear, heat stroking across his neck.

Next, he reached for Kyle's hands. “Don't choke the cue, let it move with you.” Dalton's arms reached around Kyle, moving his arms so that one was forward on the green of the table and the other was back. “Good, now hold the cue with your back arm.” Even as he gave the instructions, Dalton moved Kyle's body seamlessly into place. “Rest the cue on your fingers—gently, there you go.”

When Dalton finally seemed pleased with his body placement, his chest still pressed firmly against Kyle's back, he spoke again. “Now here's the important part, don't tense up. You have to be fluid but solid. And look where you want to hit; imagine there's a bull's-eye right there, just for you.”

Warm lips pressed to Kyle's neck, sending a shiver throughout his body that Dalton must've felt if the deep chuckle was any sign.

“Now move with me,” Dalton said, his back hand wrapping around the cue and Kyle's own hand while his other arm pressed all the way against Kyle's. He leaned in, and Kyle leaned with him, his eyes set on the spot Dalton told him to focus on, and when Dalton stroked forward, cue driving toward the ball, Kyle moved with it, watching as the cue drove into the sweet spot he had picked and caused a clatter of balls to disperse around the green.

“Good, very good,” Dalton hummed.

“Dalton.” A familiar voice came from behind them, and Kyle felt the tension seeping back into his body as they turned together toward the source of the voice.

It was Billy, not necessarily looking angry, but certainly not happy either. “You—You two, ah, know each other?” Kyle asked, his voice wavering.

“Yeah, Dalton’s my brother,” Billy answered, and Kyle could feel Dalton tighten behind him, their bodies still pressed close.

“Oh, shit. Man, I’m sorry.” Kyle moved to pull away, but Dalton stopped him, his hand on Kyle’s hip.

“Nah, it’s all good. I was just showing him how to play some pool, Billy.” Dalton finally stepped away from him, walking toward his brother and giving him a hug. “It’s good to see you.”

Something seemed to change in that moment, and Billy’s stern expression eased slightly. “Yeah, it’s good to see you too, Bro.” He clapped Dalton’s back, their embrace strong and weird, considering they were brothers who lived in the same city.

They spoke in hushed tones when they stepped away from each other, Billy’s face spelling concern for a moment, and then something that looked a lot like anger, before Dalton held his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It’s okay. Really, I’m doing good.” Billy didn’t look all too sure of that statement, but managed a smile before looking back to Kyle.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m about to head out, but we’ll see you tomorrow at work,” he said, gesturing over his shoulder to where Casey stood, purse in hand.

“Yeah, of course,” Kyle answered, still confused by the entire interaction, if not the entire night.

“Dalton.” Billy again turned to his brother, a somewhat sad smile on his face. “I hope to see you around.” He again seemed hesitant with his words, like saying them would jinx him.

Dalton, unlike his brother, was firm in his answer. “Yeah, of course. I’ll be in touch.”

Billy walked back toward Casey, who waved at Kyle and didn’t seem at all confused by the exchange, not like he was.

A few moments had passed when Dalton spoke again, his confidence back and unmistakable. "You want a beer?"

Kyle wasn't sure how long they had been sitting in a shady corner of the bar, or how many beers Kyle'd gone through (or when Dalton had quietly requested that the bartender switch Kyle over to water instead), but suddenly it was nearly one a.m. and he had a six o'clock wakeup call.

It had been fun, talking to Dalton, *flirting* with Dalton. At some point in the night, Dalton's buddies came over and introduced themselves before heading out, claiming their wives would miss them if they stayed out much longer, when Kyle was pretty sure they actually missed their wives more than anything.

Dalton had asked him a lot of questions, not bothered by the short responses he originally got from Kyle. Eventually, the answers grew, and Kyle was practically telling the guy his life story—about how he was raised by a single mom who kicked ass, and that his older sister was in the Navy, somehow being super-mom all while serving her country.

He talked about Portland, and how coming out in a city known for its quirk wasn't nearly as hard as he had thought it would be at age fourteen, especially since his mom already knew, but refused to clue him in on the matter. They'd laughed when he told Dalton what his mom had said when he finally came out. "*Kyle, sweetie, if there's one thing I've learned with your sister, it's patience. This is something you had to figure out on your own, I only hoped it'd be before you were forty and still a virgin.*"

The conversation was nice and easy, but anytime Kyle would try to ask Dalton about his childhood or life in general, there was a change in tone. Dalton would brush it off, or suddenly find another "interesting" topic to ask Kyle about. Still, it had been the best night Kyle'd had in a long time, certainly since moving to Cleveland.

"I hate to do this, but I've got work in the morning." Kyle's voice betrayed his actual disappointment, and Dalton nodded in agreement, giving a half-smile.

"Me too. If I'm late, the boss will kill me."

Dalton walked Kyle out to where he'd parked his car, a single street light peeking over the parking lot and illuminating their steps.

“Do you want a ride home? I mean—” Kyle started, blushing in embarrassment for what it sounded like he was suggesting.

“No, I don't live far from here. The walk is good for me,” Dalton answered, taking a step toward Kyle. “But I'd like to see you again.” Dalton had Kyle against the driver's side door now, their chests close enough together to feel the rhythm of their hearts and the inhale of each other's breaths.

“I'd like that, too.” Kyle looked up at Dalton through half-lidded eyes. He wasn't sure who moved first, or how the distance dwindled so easily, but the next thing he knew, Dalton's lips were pressed against his, and Dalton's eager tongue traced the seam, dancing delicately until Kyle's lips parted in invitation.

It was a slow, burning kiss, filled with promise and desire. The attraction between them was clear, but with territory still uncharted, and a heavy heart, Kyle pulled back, his hands framing Dalton's face.

They looked at each other in silence, holding their glances like hands with fingers entwined. “How about tomorrow?” Kyle asked, and Dalton's smile was all the answer he needed.

If asked what he thought of fate or destiny, Kyle probably would've laughed. It was silly to put his faith in something so frail and intangible, like throwing a coin in a fountain and assuming the cure for cancer would just appear because of his one small action. He preferred numbers. Quantifiable little digits that always made sense. Not like fate or destiny, or God forbid, love.

With Dalton, though, things were different. It wasn't a simple dance of flirtation or just two guys having fun with each other. There was something more. That ridiculous, intangible thing that made Kyle uncomfortable with romanticized concepts also made him ache when he thought of Dalton. The somewhat mysterious, but incredibly confident man who held Kyle in his hands like a cue, moving him at his will.

The next day they met at a small coffee shop. The place was quiet; a nice departure from the hectic Starbucks he often had to visit at some point during his lunch break just to get through the day. Like the night before, they sat and spoke for hours on end, until finally the petite barista who served them each three cups of whatever random concoction she had magically created had to come up to their table and tell them that the coffee shop was closing for the night.

The pattern continued for well over a week. They would see each other after work, usually grab a bite to eat or take a walk through the busy and thriving streets of Cleveland. If they didn't see each other, they'd talk on the phone or exchange a slew of ridiculous text messages with enough emoticons to make up for half the teen population. It was absurd and fun and everything that Kyle had not expected to find when he moved to Cleveland.

Dalton had visited his house on two occasions, each time ending in a mess of tongues and hands, clinging to each other. It always stopped too soon for Kyle, thanks to the early mornings that work demanded of him, and oftentimes Dalton had a job site to be on the next morning too. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.

One night, about two weeks after they had met, Kyle picked up Dalton from a bus stop. He'd offered to stop by Dalton's house, made it clear that it was no problem, but Dalton insisted that they meet here and go from there.

Dalton looked good, his black button-up pressed and clearly just washed. He was wearing dark wash jeans that fit perfectly to his body, which Kyle knew from his own hands-on experience was just as cut and muscular as it appeared.

"Turn left here," Dalton directed. He was taking Kyle to a restaurant in Ohio City. It was a little place that specialized in burgers and had the most amazing Cajun fries, or at least that was what Dalton told him.

They parked the car on a side street; the houses lining it were old, their brick facades a deep red. Many of them had little details that gave away their age, like weatherworn wrought iron fences and stained glass windows that the fading sunlight danced off of.

On the outside, the place seemed to literally be a hole-in-the-wall, but with Dalton's hand resting at the small of his back and pushing him forward, they entered the building.

At first it matched its exterior, narrow and a bit dark, but as the waiter led them through the heart of the restaurant and to the back, it opened up into a beautiful patio-like setting. The ceiling was all latticework windows, and in the middle of the room was a spiral staircase, decorated with small candles and flowers all the way up to a door at the top.

It was charming and unexpected, just like the man before him. "Wow, Dalton. This is amazing."

Dalton smiled at him, practically beaming. They sat and ordered, and for the first time since they'd met, Dalton spoke a little of himself.

“This is really great. Do you come here a lot?” Kyle once again threw him a line, a way to easily open up, and as he had become accustomed to, expected that line of questioning to be turned down, pushed aside like some forgotten bag of trash.

“No, not really.” Dalton paused, staring at his plate as if it would give him words. “I mean, I’d like to. I love it around here. But... well, you’ve probably deduced that I don’t have a car.” An unfitting color of red rose to Dalton’s cheeks with embarrassment, and Kyle reached across the table to squeeze his hand. He had figured as much. Between Dalton walking everywhere and the way he had hinted that it would be best if Kyle drove. “I mean, I have my license... just, you know. Cars are expensive.”

Kyle wanted to say something, to offer more comfort than with just a squeeze of his hand or by rubbing his thumb against Dalton’s palm. He wanted to tell Dalton there was no shame in not having a vehicle, that lots of people didn’t. This lack of confidence didn’t fit the man he’d gotten to know over the past few weeks, not at all. And he wanted to comfort him, make it all better right away. But he didn’t. Instead, he waited, watching the emotions and hesitation dance across Dalton’s handsome, sun-kissed face.

“I just—it sucks, having to ask one of the guys to pick me up every day. And not being able to take you out. That’s not right. I like you, Kyle, I want to take you places, not make you take me there.” Dalton let out a deep breath, looking up at Kyle briefly before continuing. “And construction is hard work. And I don’t mean physically, I mean... I live in fucking Cleveland. Winter in Cleveland and construction do not exactly line up. Sometimes I go months without getting paid.”

Kyle finally stopped him, bringing his hand to cup Dalton’s chin and tip it so that he was forced to look at Kyle when he spoke. “We’re here, aren’t we? Doesn’t matter who drove. And I like you, too. A lot. Let’s just take it a day at a time, okay? I’m not going to ditch you because you’re in construction and work is hard to come by thanks to three feet of fucking snow, or however much you all get around here.”

He smiled at Dalton, and finally the other man seemed to relax a bit. He nodded his head. “Yeah... yeah, you’re right. Sorry. That was stupid of me, to dump all that shit on you.”

“It wasn’t stupid, Dalton. I want you to talk to me.”

Dalton cleared his throat before picking up a fry. “So, what do you miss most about home?”

And the topic was right back to Kyle, away from whatever dark corners Dalton thought he had.

“You mean besides my mom and our dog Lola? The forests. I used to hike through them for hours, just Lola and me. It’s beautiful. And the water... nothing quite like hiking in Portland.”

The mood lightened after that, and between the meal, the discussion, and sharing some amazing milkshakes that would have Kyle coming back to the restaurant, the night only made him more sure that he wanted to pursue something with Dalton—this kind, if somewhat lost and completely silly at times, man.

There was something different when Kyle came into work the next week. It was a Monday, so as always, people were dragging, but Billy seemed especially drained. His face was pale, the tension clear on his face. And instead of waving good morning to Kyle like he always did, he looked away as soon as Kyle entered the room.

Casey seemed on edge too, but then again, Kyle suspected that was because she and Billy were attached at the hip. How some people were so blind to their “office romance” was a mystery to him, but it was obvious that whenever one was happy, the other seemed elated, and when one was down, well the other was at the bottom of the hole right there with them.

Still, if he had to pick one person to approach, it would be Casey, and after working on finishing a couple of files with her, he finally got up the courage to ask. And by finally, that meant he coughed a few times, kicked around the crunched-up paper at his feet that had missed the trash can, and looked away from her whenever she looked up until she finally said, “What the hell, Kyle?”

But it was an opening nonetheless, and unlike Dalton, he took it. “What’s up with you and Billy? I mean... God, this sounds so stupid when I’m not saying it in my head.” Kyle paused to collect his thoughts and looked up to find Casey with one eyebrow arched and her mouth slightly open, the corner curved upwards, like she was amused by his nervous antics. “Just—Billy’s been avoiding me all day. I went to get coffee earlier, and I swear he hightailed it out of there like his ass was on fire.”

Casey smiled at that before she answered, her voice soft, losing the rough tone that it had had in the past hour of their budgeting discussion. “He’s just struggling right now. I wouldn’t say it’s you.”

“Is it because I’m kind of dating his brother? I mean... sort of, we haven’t really talked about it, but I think we are.” If there was ever a time to hit one’s head on a desk, Kyle thought that was now, in this moment when words spilled without his permission.

“Kyle, you’re a nice guy. Billy likes you. I like you. But you need to talk to Billy about this, not me.” She said it like it was final, the end of the conversation, and so it was. She picked up the sheet of paper they had scribbled on and looked back at her screen, scrolling through the excel spreadsheet. “So what are we missing? This isn’t adding up.”

Kyle wasn’t quite... stalking Billy, not in the restroom. He really did have to go, and it just so happened that Billy had entered the same room a minute before. Coincidence, really. And if he had a choice, he certainly wouldn’t pick the men’s room as the place to corner the other man. There was something about urinating that was sacred, not to be disturbed. But hey, shit happens.

Billy was zipping up when he walked in. His coworker stopped halfway to the sink when he noticed Kyle, looking at him in the mirror as if he was going to be sick. Instead, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and proceeded to wash his hands. Rather thoroughly, Kyle noted.

“Okay, I know this is a really... weird time to approach you. But what’s up with you? I know I didn’t get the plague over the weekend, and I even wore that stupid Cavs hat you insisted on getting me.”

Billy turned to him, shaking his hands of the loose water. “There’s just a lot going on right now, Kyle. I don’t expect you to understand.” And his voice sounded as decrepit as he looked.

“Well, what did I do? You don’t seem to have a problem with that guy Joe from IT.” He knew it sounded silly the minute it left his mouth, but it went with the theme of the day, so he let it slide.

“Look... my brother—Dalton, he just... he has some issues, okay?” Billy took another deep breath before continuing, as if urging the air to give him strength. “You really need to talk to him about it, Kyle. It’s not my place.”

“But you made it your place when you decided to blacklist me, man.” Kyle didn’t know where the venom came from in his voice, but he felt it seep into his chest too. Not his place, but yet he put himself there? No.

Billy wouldn't look him in the eye when he spoke. "Dalton doesn't do things the easy way. Life wasn't necessarily hard for us growing up, but he made it hard on himself. Have you even seen where he lives?"

"No," Kyle replied. It didn't seem to hit him until then that it was always Kyle's place they would head back to. He had thought it may have to do with the insecurities of not having a car, but the more he sifted through his brain, the more he realized that Dalton had done everything and anything he could to keep Kyle at arm's length.

"Just talk to him, Kyle. You have to. You're a good guy, and I don't want my brother's problems to fuck with you."

Billy stepped around him, running his still-damp hands under the dryer before turning back to Kyle. "But... when you do, just keep in mind that there's always going to be promises and next times. He's just not too good at keeping them."

Kyle stood, confused, until the door of the bathroom shut, and he was alone with just his thoughts and questions.

That confusion sat in his gut for two days, low and heavy like an unwanted guest that refused to leave. He didn't want to doubt Dalton's sincerity, to put him in a place where it felt like Kyle had turned against him. Sure, Dalton didn't talk about his past, or even much of his present. He wasn't the most forthcoming with things, but he'd never actually given Kyle a reason to question him. He was private, simple as that. Kyle respected privacy, he did; he just didn't grow up with it quite the same way. His mother was always so open, so honest, and the tight-lipped Dalton was a conundrum to him.

And now, with Billy's completely evasive answers, Kyle only had more questions and doubt—that stupid fucking doubt.

It was late on Friday when he called his mother. Still, he knew she'd be up. One of the good things about the time change was that eleven p.m. for him was "curl up at the TV with a glass of wine" time for his mom.

"Kyle! How are you?" He knew from the instant she answered the phone that she was happy to hear from him, even though he had called her on Sunday, like he did every week since moving to Cleveland.

"I'm okay, Mom. Just..." he paused, holding his cell phone tightly in his hand, which for some reason was sweaty, even in the coolness of his air-conditioned room.

“Kyle? What’s wrong?”

Most of the time he wanted to reply *It’s nothing*, but she was his mom, and she always knew when nothing was really something. And he’d called her, after all.

“You know that guy I told you about, Dalton?” He heard her give the affirmative on the other end, then go quiet as she waited for him to continue. “Well, I told you I work with his brother, Billy—Yeah, Billy, the one who is dating Casey on the not-so-down-low,” he answered her before she could get the question out of her mouth.

“Anyway, that’s not the point. The thing is, he was acting really weird this week. Just not himself. So I kind of cornered him—I know, I know, it was a shitty thing to do.” His mom huffed on the other line, and he could practically feel her smile through the phone. “But, well, Billy kind of said that Dalton has some ‘issues’, whatever the hell that means. Then he said I just had to talk to Dalton about it.”

“And have you?” Ever the practical one, his mom asked it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“No,” he said, his head hanging low as if his mom was really there, scolding him for his silliness.

“Well, then you have your answer, Kyle. You need to talk to him. If Billy didn’t want to tell you, it’s probably because it’s personal, and you have to respect that, Kyle. The only thing you can do is talk to Dalton about this. You’re a big boy, all grown up, living on your own. Surely talking to him can’t be harder than moving across the country.”

At this point, he wasn’t so sure of that.

After finishing the call with his mom, he texted Dalton:

Want to hang out tomorrow?

The reply was almost instant, as if Dalton was waiting by his phone.

Yes! How does noon sound?

Kyle scanned through his mental calendar, coming up blank.

That works. Where do you want to meet?

The response he got surprised him, and he couldn’t help but smile when he read it.

I'll pick you up at your house.

Tomorrow, no matter what, he was going to ask the tough questions. Or, at least, he was going to plan to ask the tough questions, and hope for the best.

Kyle was changing his shirt, again, for maybe the fifth time, when a knock came at the apartment door. He looked to the clock, 12:01 p.m., right on time.

The nerves had been building in his stomach all last night, to the point where they almost swallowed him whole, and he had to get up to take a jog at six a.m., which was practically a sacrilege given that it was Saturday.

He'd showered twice, once after his jog and then again a couple hours later after he'd cleaned his bathroom, bedroom, and kitchen.

Whatever he had on at that moment, a black T-shirt and an old, but well-loved pair of jeans, would just have to work, as another knock sounded, this one more insistent. "Coming," he called, grabbing the jacket hanging over his couch before opening his door.

Dalton was there, a bright smile on his face. He seemed excited, but somehow a bit nervous, worry marring the edges of his lips just slightly.

"You ready to go?" The deep voice broke Kyle from his thoughts, and he found himself nodding, probably a bit like a bobblehead.

"Yeah, you bet. Let's go." He hoped his voice sounded more sure than he felt.

He locked up and followed Dalton out to the parking lot, where a large red truck was parked. "Borrowed it from Kev at work," Dalton said, anticipating the question that had been working its way up Kyle's throat. "But it has to be back by ten. Curfew and all that, apparently Kev's worried about it getting pregnant or some shit."

Kyle snorted as he got into the passenger seat, unable to hold back the smile and excitement that didn't quite mix with the still looming sense of dread.

"Where are we going?" Kyle asked as they pulled out onto the busy street.

"It's a surprise, but I think you'll like it," was the only answer he got before the topic changed, and they were on their way, to wherever and whatever Dalton had planned.

It was a beautiful day. The sun was high in the sky, filtering through the trees that lined a small town on the outskirts of Cleveland. There were kids throwing footballs, people walking their dogs; it was truly a serene little place, hidden by its close proximity to the city. Almost like a jewel, hidden in a pile of rocks and dirt.

They drove on, past a few other small towns much like the first, until finally there was a thick layer of green lining the roads around them. The trees stretched into the sky, their branches like arms reaching toward the sun. The light flickered down, creating intricate patterns on the thin, paved walkways going through the trees, dancing across the ground in an eager display.

There was a small parking area to the side, just enough to provide a place for visitors to stop without disturbing too much of the natural habitat around it. Two other cars were there when they turned in and parked.

"This is beautiful. Where are we?" Kyle asked, still looking around at the densely packed woods.

"The Metroparks. I know it's not quite Portland, but you said you missed the forests... and well, this is kind of as close as we get here."

"No, this is perfect," Kyle said softly, just barely loud enough for Dalton to hear. He climbed out of the truck and spun around, the excitement overcoming him and blanketing the foreboding feeling he'd had earlier that day. It was temporary, a Band-Aid on a wound, really, but it would do for now.

They began to walk, with no particular goal in mind, just a curious sense of wonder carrying Kyle every step, Dalton following closely behind. They talked quietly, about life, and nature, and how much Kyle loved losing himself in the green and brown of the untouched world. Every once in a while they'd pass another person or two, sometimes walking their dog, or one time even someone on a horse, but ultimately, it was quiet and serene, a secret that the city had held from him.

"When we were little, my dad would take Billy and me out here after dinner a lot, just to walk. He always said it was important to understand your surroundings and appreciate the world." Dalton surprised Kyle with his stories. There was a clear sense of nostalgia, and the memories practically painted portraits in Dalton's words. He hadn't talked of his father before, but it was unmistakable in that moment how much the man meant to Dalton.

"What happened to him? Your dad, I mean." Kyle couldn't keep himself from wanting to delve deeper into this side of Dalton, the sentimental side that was so heavily shielded by his sense of confidence.

“He passed away when I was fourteen. Billy was twelve, then. Car accident... around here, actually.” Dalton paused, looking toward the road that was barely visible through the trees, a sadness settling across his face. “It gets dark out here at night, and sometimes the winding roads are a bit rough, even for people who know where they’re going.” Dalton looked back at Kyle, shaking his head, mostly to himself, before reaching to clasp Kyle’s hand, tangling their fingers together.

“He was coming home, and it was raining pretty hard, but he loved going through the Metroparks, even if it did add about ten minutes to his trip.” Dalton chuckled, squeezing Kyle’s hand and slowing his pace to a near standstill. “Someone from out-of-town wasn’t used to the roads, and they just... collided around a curve. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really. Dad always said these roads were dangerous.”

Kyle felt his heart thud in his chest, a heavy rhythm that sunk deep into his bones. “Thanks for telling me,” he whispered and was pulled toward Dalton, heavy, tanned arms wrapping around his waist.

“Thanks for listening,” Dalton mumbled, closing the distance between them and pressing his mouth to Kyle’s. The kiss was tender, an exchange of words without any sound. Their tongues embraced, curving around each other as Kyle ran his hand through Dalton’s hair and down to the base of his neck, clutching at the heated skin there.

When they separated, the air between them didn’t seem to move, still holding their intimate exchange in its invisible hands.

“Let’s head back to the truck. I have one more thing I want to show you.” Kyle would’ve thought that words would break the spell between them, cause it to fizzle into nothing, but it didn’t. That thread that now connected them didn’t snap, but held strong.

The thing that Dalton had to show him was a small beach, deep in the heart of the Metroparks. There was a dock off to the side and a small wall dividing the sprawling grass from the start of sand. It was clear that it was often used for special events, but today it stood mostly empty, a few people passing through on trails leading back into the trees.

“C’mon,” Dalton urged him, grabbing his hand. In his other hand was a small wicker basket, and a red and black plaid blanket was tucked beneath his arm.

Kyle followed him to the edge of the sand, where the cool water had tinged the light brown, leaving it looking almost burned, as if the water had kissed it with fire. Dalton spread the blanket out before settling down in the middle, patting the space to his left for Kyle to join him.

Once Kyle was settled, they took off their shoes, sticking their feet into the soggy sand. For many people, it may have felt gross, having sand outlining their feet and delving in between their toes, but for Kyle it was wonderful, like nature wrapping its arms around him.

“Whatcha got in that basket?” Kyle asked, resting himself against Dalton’s shoulder, their bodies meeting all the way down.

“Ah, that’s our lunch... dinner, linner?” Dalton laughed, pulling the basket to him and opening it to expose the contents.

Before Kyle could say anything, Dalton continued. “Now, I didn’t say I was much of a cook, but these here are some pretty kickass PB&J sandwiches, if I do say so myself. Made with premium Jiffy, and spread with Welch’s delectable strawberry jam.” He pulled out the sandwiches, which were in see-through bags. “And here, we have some awesome kettle cooked chips. I didn’t make these, but they are pretty awesome, too.”

Kyle snorted in response. “And how about for a drink?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Well here we have some grape juice, also pretty good. Also, it was on sale, and I’m a man who knows deals when he sees them.”

The laughter continued throughout their “linner”, more stories of Dalton’s childhood emerging.

“And this one time, in Little League, I was so ready to go, you know? Pumped for the game. I hadn’t quite hit my growth spurt then, but I could tell it was coming. But, anyway, here I am, in left field. This monster of a kid, I think his name was Bucky or some shit, comes up and just whacks the ball. It’s heading in my direction, and I practically pissed myself in excitement.” He paused to laugh, shaking his head at himself, a gesture that Kyle had often seen him do. “And the ball is coming. I’ve got my mitt up, and I’m running toward it, and I’ve got this. It’s mine. And the next thing I know I’m getting hit right between the eyes. I fell down, freaking spread-eagle, and my coach came out on the field and told me right then that my baseball career days were numbered.”

It was perfect, the best date Kyle had been on, but in the back of his mind, he knew he still had to keep his promise to himself.

They had just finished eating and were lying back on the blanket when the words slipped out. "Can I ask you something, Dalton?"

"Yeah, of course." The man next to him seemed so relaxed, his guard down, and Kyle hated the feeling he got from knowing he was probably about to screw that all up.

"Well, I was talking to Billy the other day..." Dalton's smile fell with the words, tumbling faster than Kyle had imagined possible. "He um—he said I should talk to you about some things—said there were things I needed to know, but had to ask you about."

Dalton abruptly sat up, leaving Kyle staring at his tense back. "So this is you asking?" Dalton's voice dropped, sadness seeping into his voice, unlike the sadness of earlier when remembering his father. This sadness was different, lonelier somehow. It held no hope, only dread.

"Yeah. I guess I am." It was too late to back down now, so Kyle pushed forward, finding himself looking off across the lake at no particular thing, lost.

"He's right. You do deserve to know. But Kyle, when I told you I liked you before, I wasn't kidding. I do. I just... I don't want to ruin *this*, whatever this is, with my past."

Kyle sat up then, pressing his shoulder back against Dalton's, right where it seemed to belong. "If it'll help me understand you, then I want to know." It sounded clichéd, stupid even, but it was the truth.

"Yeah, okay." Dalton took a deep breath, looking anywhere but at Kyle. "When I was sixteen, I got in with a bad crowd. I did some things I'm not proud of, and I made choices that I have to live with." His fingers closed into a fist at his side, begging to be held, and Kyle grasped on, offering what little support he could, much like at the restaurant weeks before.

"So, I ended up doing drugs. I'm not talking like a little marijuana here or there, I was hooked on some pretty tough shit. I was in over my head. That's what I was." Again, he shook his head, this one much more tight and self-deprecating than any time before. "My life went to hell. And it's not like I had a bad life to begin with. Yeah, I missed my dad, but my mom's a really great person, and Billy was always pretty cool too. I don't know. Somewhere along the line, I just lost all of that."

There were a few minutes of silence before Dalton continued. "I was—am so ashamed, Kyle. I threw away a lot of good things so that I could get my

drugs. Nothing else mattered. It got to the point where all I had was a garbage bag with my clothes, my guitar, and whatever cash I managed to hang on to from odds-and-ends jobs to get some more heroin. And eventually, I even had to sell my guitar.”

Dalton finally turned, pulling their connecting hands into his lap. “I went through so many times of quitting, and thinking that was it. I was done for good. But this last time, I don’t know. I feel like this is really it.”

The earnestness in his eyes cut Kyle to the bone, seeping throughout every inch of his body. Billy had said that Dalton made promises he couldn’t keep, and maybe this was one of those times, but dammit, Kyle wanted to believe him, *needed* to believe him.

“How long have you been clean?” he asked, holding Dalton’s gaze.

“Three months, two weeks, five days.” A small smile crossed Dalton’s face for just the smallest of moments, a sense of pride along with it. “I know it doesn’t sound like much, but it’s the longest I’ve gone.”

Kyle didn’t know how to respond, wasn’t sure quite what one would say to that. He’d never dealt with addiction before; he’d never had to worry about someone falling back into old patterns and destroying themselves, not like Billy had meant with the few words he’d said to Kyle.

When Kyle didn’t respond, Dalton spoke, as if the silence caused him discomfort or pain. “I know it’s a lot to take in. But I’m really working on things now. I love working with the construction crew. They’re great. And I’ve been saving money to get a place—”

“A place? What do you mean?” Kyle interrupted him.

“I’ve been living in this homeless men’s shelter. It’s... it’s not a great place to be. But we get a bed and a small room. I didn’t want you to have to go there, or know that about me. But I didn’t expect to like you as much as I do, and now you have to know.”

“So that’s why you never invited me over and wouldn’t let me pick you up?”

“Yeah. It was shitty of me to keep it from you, but I want to be different with you. I don’t want anything between us to get fucked up by my past, and I sure as hell don’t want you to deal with my mistakes.”

It was all so honest, every word that Kyle heard. There was no denying that Dalton believed it, believed that *this* time was different for him. Kyle just

wasn't so sure if he could do it; potentially risk all he stood for, all he'd worked for, and gamble on this one person. But Dalton was right—they did have something, something Kyle felt was worth that risk. He just had to have a little faith in Dalton, take a leap, and hope for the best.

“Okay,” he said, a smile breaking across his face. “Yeah, let's do this.” Do what, he wasn't sure, but whatever *this* was, it held a sort of promise he'd never encountered before, a possibility that seemed so wild. He didn't love Dalton, not yet, but he could, and that intangible thing that scared him so much pushed him on, for better or worse.

They stayed out at the beach for a long time, people passing them by in waves. Mostly, it was quiet, peaceful—just them, the water, and the feeling of complete serenity. It was a feeling Kyle wasn't necessarily used to, completely foreign in how it sat at the base of his spine. It felt a little like sitting on a merry-go-round, spinning to the sound of laughter and joy. Strange, but not unwelcome.

Between kisses they talked, shared little pieces of their lives. Dalton still shied away from some of his darkest moments, that much was clear to Kyle. Though he casually brushed over the topics like he was talking about weather, it didn't escape Kyle that Dalton's time on the streets had been a horror, or that he blamed himself for ruining his relationship with his family. When they were on the verge of something that was just too much, bared too many scars, they sat in silence. There were times for humor to lighten the load of the world, and there were other times when humor would only make it seem so trivial and wrong. This was one of those times.

The sun had set, painting a vibrant shade of purple and orange behind the trees and beyond the lake, and finally they made their way to the truck, hands clasped.

The drive home remained quiet, their hands still entwined over the center console. By the time they drove up to Kyle's apartment, it was nearing nine p.m., and somehow, the past few hours had simply vanished. His concept of time when he was with Dalton had faded, the tick of a clock no longer mattering in an otherwise busy world.

“Time to get baby home to her dad. Better hope he doesn't greet me with a shotgun,” Dalton said as he turned to Kyle, the streetlight illuminating the smile on his face.

“We wouldn’t want that.” Kyle laughed, squeezing Dalton’s hand once more before reaching for the door. “Do you want me to follow you and give you a ride back?” Kyle asked. He wasn’t sure how far out Kev’s place was, and maybe it sounded a bit like another ploy to try and see inside the four walls that Dalton called home, but mostly he just didn’t want the night to end.

“Nah, it’s okay. It’s a nice night out. I can walk home.” With that, Dalton leaned forward, pressing his lips to Kyle’s. The kiss was meant to be a simple good-bye, but lasted much longer, the tangle of tongues hard to resist when Dalton’s mouth tasted like peanut butter with a tinge of sweetness mixed in.

“Mm, okay. I really gotta go now,” Dalton said as he pulled away, his hesitance loud and clear in every small move.

Kyle went to open the door, and as he stepped out, he turned back, his heart beating a little faster than normal. “Thanks, Dalton. This has been the best day I’ve had since I moved here.”

Dalton nodded in response, and Kyle could still feel his eyes on his back as he walked to the door of his section. The sound of the engine didn’t come until he was inside, out of sight.

Kyle looked at the clock, stirred from his sleep by a knock at the door. The digits read 12:32 a.m., an ungodly hour for some random guest.

He managed to crawl from the bed, his hair skewed to the left from how he’d slept, the white shirt he was wearing in tatters from years of use. Between his hair, the hole in his shirt that revealed his entire armpit, and no doubt the scruffy look of sleep set in his face, he was sure any guest would flee once he opened the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Hold your damn horses,” he grumbled, rubbing his eyes with one hand as he unlatched the lock and pulled open the door with his other.

Dalton stood on the other side, his coy smile doing nothing to hide the desire etched in every line of his body. “I’m sorry. I should’ve called, but I was walking home and—”

He was abruptly cut off when Kyle pulled him into the apartment, turning him toward the bedroom and pushing the door shut with his foot. The latch clicked against the frame, but between the delectable man in front of him and a lock, there was no real competition for his attention.

Kyle led, or more accurately, he pushed Dalton into his bedroom and back against sheets that were rumpled from his own sleep.

He crossed his arms and pulled the shirt from his body, the slow movement purposeful and teasing. When the shirt was tossed somewhere, probably onto his dresser if the sound of pictures falling was any indication, he crawled over Dalton. The man was just staring, practically gaping at Kyle.

“Well? Are you waiting for a written invitation, or...?” Kyle teased.

That was all it took for Dalton. He reached up, his hands digging into Kyle's hair, the hold tight as he brought Kyle against his chest.

“Mmm, too many clothes,” Kyle mumbled between kisses, spit slick between them and coating his lips.

Their hands met, working in unison to pull Dalton's own shirt off, then unbutton the jeans. That was a bit harder with two sets of fingers, both trying to dig at the same little space. But somewhere between the door and the bed they'd left their common sense on the floor, likely laying next to another random item of clothing. Efficiency was a foreign concept. It didn't matter how, as long as it was *now*.

Finally Kyle managed to pull Dalton's jeans down, the other man's hips coming up from the bed to assist. A soft thud came twice as Dalton kicked off his shoes, and finally it was just them. Kyle in his stupid plaid boxers, Dalton in boxer briefs that fit him like a dream, molding perfectly to the heavy curve of his cock.

“God, Dalton. You're beautiful,” he whispered, crawling down Dalton's body just enough to be able to comfortably lick a line over the hem of Dalton's briefs. He explored, encouraged by the deep, throaty sounds as he licked around Dalton's belly button and up to his nipples. He licked the left first, alternating between sucking on it and then biting it lightly, until the little bud stood up, a deep violet color against Dalton's skin. He repeated the same to Dalton's right nipple, all the while rolling his body against Dalton's hip, humping against the firm body.

“Kyle—” Dalton gasped, murmuring words that didn't quite make sense.

A wicked sense of satisfaction filled Kyle to the core, and he couldn't help but smile as he pushed himself back down, between Dalton's now spread legs.

He pushed his face into Dalton's crotch, rubbing his nose along the outline of Dalton's cock, and then brushing his cheek against him.

Dalton breathed in loudly when Kyle finally opened his mouth over the fabric-covered cock, licking and sucking through the cotton.

“Please—Jesus. Oh God,” Dalton huffed. “Please.”

Kyle was only happy to oblige. He pulled the fabric from Dalton's hips, pushing it down just far enough to get to his cock, thick and red, with a drop of precome seeping from the tip.

Kyle moaned at the sight, licking the underside of Dalton's cock, all the way to the tip where he sucked it into his mouth, pulling the bead of precome forth and savoring it as it hit his tongue.

He looked up, his eyes meeting Dalton's own desperate gaze, the beautiful color darkened like an ocean. “I've got you,” Kyle spoke, his voice hushed. Somehow it meant more than just this and now, but he didn't give Dalton time to ponder it, as he swallowed him down, slowly taking inch after inch of Dalton's cock into his mouth.

He gagged as it reached the back of his throat, his eyes watering with the sensation. For just a moment, he pulled back, one of his hands coming up to pull at Dalton's nipples, while the other cupped his balls, rolling them in his palm. Then, when Dalton was arching up, chanting Kyle's name like some kind of prayer, Kyle took his cock back in until his nose touched Dalton's pubic hair. The gagging sensation remained, a burning in his eyes a constant reminder of what he was doing, pleasant and driving Kyle mad.

“Fucking *fuck*, Kyle. Fuck.” Dalton's hands had long ago found their way into Kyle's hair, holding it as he bobbed. One hand slid down, over Kyle's face. The fingers danced across Kyle's lips, pressing where they curved around Dalton's cock, and over his cheek, rubbing the obvious shape inside Kyle's mouth. Then, suddenly, he pulled Kyle back.

“Not yet,” Dalton groaned, pulling Kyle to him. They kissed for a moment more, as if trying to delve deeper into each other than humanly possible. “Do you have one?”

It took Kyle a moment to realize what “one” was, his brain a jumbled mess.

Instead of answering, he reached over them, pulling the drawer of his bedside table open and feeling inside, finally managing to pull out a small tube of lube and a condom.

Dalton reached for the items, but was stopped by Kyle. “No, let me,” Kyle said, sitting across Dalton's stomach. The click of the cap was loud, even in the noise of their own breathing.

Kyle slathered his hands with the lube, reaching to coat Dalton's cock first. "When I'm ready, I won't want to wait," he said, as if it held the answer to the world's most confusing questions. His hands slipped across the package as he tried to get to the condom, and just when Dalton again tried to help, Kyle put the package to his mouth and tore it open.

"Got it," he whispered, smiling down at Dalton.

Carefully and deliberately, he rolled the condom down Dalton, before reaching back behind himself. He groaned as he pushed the first finger in, circling it around his hole and delving it back in.

He was just pushing a second finger in when Dalton spoke. "Turn around, I want to see." It wasn't a request.

Without removing his fingers, not allowing the pleasure to deaden for a moment, he turned and spread his legs so that Dalton had a perfect view. Almost instantly, Dalton's hands came up and pulled his cheeks apart, further exposing Kyle.

"Keep going," Dalton said, authority present in his voice.

Kyle fucked himself against the two fingers, moaning and aching to reach for his cock. The third finger was overwhelming for a moment, like a heavy weight taking his breath.

"Enough." Kyle obeyed, despite the overwhelming feeling of loss when he pulled his fingers out.

It was seamless, the way Dalton rearranged them. He pushed Kyle to his back and stared down at him, reaching to bring Kyle's legs over his broad shoulders.

It was slow, so fucking slow, when Dalton finally pushed in. Slow and smooth and unbelievably torturous. He reached over Kyle's head, their fingers entwining there. It seemed like hours had passed by the time Dalton was fully seated, their bodies pressed so close that Kyle could feel Dalton's heart pound when he pressed their lips together, practically folding Kyle in two.

The first few thrusts were tentative, like exploring something new, trying to memorize it for another time. Then, eventually, Dalton seemed to break. Gone was his nerves, and in its place was the confident man Kyle had first met. His thrusts were sure, decisive, and every twist of his hips seemed to have some fucking purpose, one that Kyle was sure had to be to drive him insane.

The bed creaked beneath their weight, lightly tapping against the wall at first, then knocking, and finally, pounding. The quake of the steel moved with Kyle's heart, throbbing at a persistent rhythm.

"More, more," Kyle repeated, and Dalton so generously gave. With one small angle of his movement, Dalton hit a spot inside Kyle that lit up the room, driving his vision to a milky white and pushing the sounds of his moans out louder and more scrambled.

Dalton's hand came around Kyle's cock, freeing Kyle to grab at the headboard, careful not to crush his fingers in the haste of their movements.

He pulled once, twice, three times, and Dalton drove in deeper, harder than before, pressing in like he wanted to crawl inside. Kyle could barely make out the shape of his face, just able to see his mouth wide open in a silent scream. That was all it took for him to come, the orgasm seeping through his pores like static, his skin tingling as he painted their chests white.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed there like that, Kyle's legs just barely falling off Dalton's shoulders, Dalton's face pressed into the crease of his neck, heavy breathing the only sound in the room.

"Jesus fuck," Dalton spoke, his voice harsh like he'd had one too many smokes. There was a heaviness around them, a closeness that seemed to stitch them together in that very moment. Intimacy, Kyle decided it had to be. Intimacy like he'd never known before.

He watched, transfixed as Dalton brought his come-coated hand to his mouth. Finger by finger, he licked Kyle's come from his hand, looking as if he was starving for it. Then, with a wide smile, he laughed.

"Cherry, Kyle? I didn't take you for a flavored lube kind of guy."

Kyle snorted, his face flushing a deep red. "Shut up. It was on sale."

Part II

A sense of normalcy and routine took over Kyle's life. There was a pattern to his days, something reliable and grounded, something to build his life on. For all the times he was told he was crazy for moving to Cleveland, for *wanting* to, it was all worth it. He was making Cleveland his home, but more importantly, he was making Dalton a part of his life.

Most weekends they lazed around Kyle's apartment, alternating between the bed and the couch, somehow finding time to eat in between. In the past two months of taking a chance on Dalton, he'd learned a lot, both good and bad. Good: Dalton made a mean breakfast, a feast. If he woke up before Kyle, and he usually did, Kyle would wake up to the smell of bacon, and come out to have his small kitchen table covered with plates of pancakes, eggs, toast... all the fixings for the perfect start to the day. Bad: Dalton hated doing the dishes, especially after finishing making enough food for both of them and the rest of the complex. Good: He more than made it up to Kyle afterwards, when they once again found their way into bed.

In all, the good outweighed the bad, and little by little, Dalton was becoming more permanent. First a pair of work shoes by the front door, then socks and underwear in the top drawer, next to Kyle's, and finally a toothbrush that magically appeared on the bathroom sink one afternoon.

It was... nice. And somehow, even Billy seemed to be warming up to the idea of having his brother around. There was always a lingering doubt there, clear in the hesitant way Billy would make plans with Dalton or hug him a little loosely. It was obvious to Dalton too; and some nights he'd lay awake, holding Kyle close like a life preserver that had promised safety, until finally he dozed off or got up and left for an hour or two. Kyle never knew where he went, didn't ask. Dalton was the kind of person who just needed space at times, room to breathe and to scream and to let everything out. And Kyle, well, he didn't always understand, but he accepted it.

Before Kyle knew it, the greens and bright colors of mid-summer had faded quickly into deep shades of browns and reds, with hints of yellow curling along fallen leaves. Soon, those too faded, crinkling like aged paper and covered with thin layers of snow, first pristine white, and then darkened and marred by time. With the snow came the holidays, something so consistent and yet so new. Some traditions had made their way to Cleveland, others were left behind,

waiting to be replaced by new ones—new ones to be made with Dalton, Kyle hoped.

He had promised his mom that he'd come home for Thanksgiving. Being new at work put him at the bottom of the totem pole as far as vacation time, and with everyone vying for more free days around Christmas, Thanksgiving was his best bet for a flight home.

Dalton had been working longer hours the week leading up to Kyle's departure, coming in late and leaving early. It was apparently all part of the shifting jobs of construction that came with the winter. With their initial conversation about finding work in the winter months, and those that had followed as their relationship grew, Kyle was wary to ask for details, afraid to put pressure on Dalton when he was already putting so much pressure on himself.

It felt strange leaving at a time like this, when Dalton was uneasy, and Kyle was still getting his footing in the city, but he missed home—missed his mom, and Lola, and their small cottage that always smelled strangely like cinnamon, even in the peak of hot July afternoons.

The morning he left was remarkably ordinary. It was Saturday, too early for even the die-hard joggers to have made their way into the surrounding parks. Dalton got up early, made him a small breakfast, and kissed him greedily over the kitchen sink. The darkened snow had been covered with a new layer, sparkling white in the streetlights and hiding the mess beneath it. A familiar, completely ordinary day.

The drive to the airport was slow despite the clear streets, ice and snow enough to warrant caution. Their hands were clasped over the console, fingers wrapped tightly together. They'd planned it all out ahead of time, or Kyle had, at least. Dalton would drop him off and take his car to work for the next week, and Kyle would get a cab ride back to the apartment when he landed next Saturday morning. Plans normally made Kyle feel more safe and secure, but he somehow felt unsettled as they pulled up to the drop-off line.

Dalton was first out of the car, opening the trunk and retrieving Kyle's bags before he'd even exited the car. His speed wasn't the sign of being eager to get rid of Kyle, but instead, that of someone nervous to say good-bye.

"So this is it," Dalton said, the bags under his eyes telling of the nights he'd come home late, only to toss and turn for hours while Kyle lay awake next to him.

"I'll see you in a week. Don't sound so dramatic." Kyle's tone gave way, not quite emitting the playful tone he'd intended.

They were silent for a moment, the world on fast-forward around them. People coming, people going, the sound of a plane taking off. "I'm going to miss you," Kyle finally said, stepping closer to his lover.

"Me too." Dalton pulled him close, the kiss not greedy like the one earlier that morning, but softer and with more heart.

As it was, time didn't quite stop, and the clock ticked, forcing Kyle to pull back. "See you soon," he said, grabbing his luggage and reluctantly moving toward the automatic doors.

"Kyle," Dalton shouted behind him as the door opened in front of him.

He turned, watching as Dalton leaned against the car, playing nervously with the keys. The minute stretched beyond sixty seconds, and Dalton looked as if he had the cure to all the world's ills, before finally the look fell, and all he said was, "Have a good time with your mom."

He nodded, pushed out of his own daze by the people moving around him, bumping against him as they tried to get inside and out of the cold.

It wasn't until he was on the plane, staring out at the stark, white landscape as it began to soar that he felt a foreign pang in his chest, dizzying and intoxicating and maybe a little bit like love.

The feeling stayed with him for most of the trip, a shadow that was there even when not in his conscious awareness. But like with most things, it dulled, never leaving but becoming less unsettling and more comfortable, like it belonged.

His mom met him at the airport, her arms opening as soon as he spotted her, wrapping him up tight. The entire drive home consisted of her filling him in on the neighborhood news. Who got a new dog, who got a divorce, who was expecting. Funny thing was, living where they did, their nearest neighbors were actually quite far away. His mom had apparently been attending yoga sessions in the town center, which she highly suggested to him. "I'm telling you, Kyle, I've never felt so young! I didn't even know I could get my leg there."

He buried his face in his hands, biting back laughter. It was good to be back, even better to be greeted by his eighty-pound dog, despite her pushing him back into the snow and getting them both soaked.

“So tell me about Dalton,” his mom said later that night at dinner.

Granted, Kyle had already told her about Dalton a few hundred times since they started dating, but if his mom was good at anything, it was pretending she had selective memory, just so she could watch him as he said everything all over again.

“He’s great, Mom.” He took a bite of her famous (to him), super cheesy lasagna, blowing around it as it scalded his mouth.

She gave him a look, one he knew well. It was all wide blue eyes and an arched eyebrow, which in sum basically said, “*How many times do I have to tell you that food tends to be a bit hot when removed from the oven?*” The look came after she did indeed tell him just that about thirty times.

“And...?” she prompted further. Apparently his age-old bad habit hadn’t distracted her from the subject at hand.

“And he’s good to me. I feel like he always wants to make me smile and see me happy. Like, I don’t know, me being happy is more important to him than anything else.” He refused to look at his mother, eyes downcast at the steam coming from the melted cheese. “I think what I admire most about him is how shitty—uh, sorry, rough, his life has been and how he just keeps going. I don’t know if I’d have been able to get through some of the things he has. Honestly, I don’t think I’d want to.”

“How do you feel when you’re with him?”

Part of him wanted to answer with a childish, embarrassed groan that sounded a bit like *Mooooom*. But somehow, the embarrassment gave way to a lighter feeling. “Loved.” Sure, he could go into detail, talk about how light and free he felt being with Dalton, how excited he was to get to see him at the end of a long day, but even all of those things couldn’t quite capture how truly loved he felt. That alone hit him like a ton of bricks, the now-familiar ache in his chest throbbing.

“And do you love him, Kyle?” His mom’s voice was soft, patient, and understanding.

“I think I’m beginning to.”

The revelation was still seeping in when he called Dalton that night. He settled against his pillows, staring out at the walls of his childhood room. In the

corner was an old soccer trophy, a few other little tokens of his youth scattered on either side of it. All things he was once so stupidly proud of.

It was ten at night in Portland, nearly one in Cleveland, but recently between coming to Kyle's late and an increase in his walks or whatever he did in the early morning hours, it wasn't unusual for Dalton to still be out. But with each ring of the phone he felt a childish hope that Dalton would answer.

"Kyle," Dalton answered, his voice heavy with what sounded like sleep.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be home yet," Kyle said. He was unable to resist the smile that hearing Dalton's voice brought to his face.

"I wasn't feeling too well after I dropped you off this morning. Ended up leaving work early."

"Are you okay?" Worry was evident in Kyle's tone. He wished he could reach through the phone, across the thousands of miles to touch Dalton, to comfort him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." The answer was less than firm but left no room for questioning.

They talked for a while longer, Dalton's voice growing heavier with the passing minutes.

"I should get some sleep," Kyle said, more so meaning that Dalton should be the one getting sleep. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay? And Dalton? I miss you."

"Me too."

Kyle put his phone on the bedside table, staring up at the ceiling, then again around the room. He could smell the cinnamon and hear his mom moving down the hall to her room. And in that moment it hit him. Somewhere in between the chaotic days of work, when he was drowning in numbers and reports, and the time he spent with Dalton, things had changed. This place would always be a part of him, but home—that was in Cleveland, with Dalton.

The days that followed were filled with fun. It was nice to be able to walk aimlessly, not having to worry about cars or other people, and having Lola at his side as he ran through the snow-packed woods made it all the better. His mom had him doing various things throughout the house and outside it, somehow finding someone to visit nearly every day.

In that time, Kyle's worry for Dalton grew. They spoke on the phone every night, but Dalton's voice seemed heavier and heavier each time. It was like the weight of the world was on Dalton's shoulders, pulling him down. And there was nothing Kyle could do, not from Portland.

Wednesday morning was especially busy. The day before Thanksgiving always was. His mom would run around, barking orders about oven temps and prep time. Thanksgiving with his mom was more than just a day filled with food; it was pretty much a forty-eight hour celebration of cooking and eating. With everything going on around him, Kyle didn't think much about not getting a response to his good morning text to Dalton, busy helping with yet another pie crust for the third flavor of pie his mom had decided to make (because she just couldn't pick between apple, pumpkin, and blueberry).

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he grumbled, trying to pull it from his pocket with just his pinkie and his thumb, the rest of his hand caked in batter.

"Shit." He dropped the phone on the crowded table before making his way to the sink to wash his hands.

The phone stopped ringing as he dried them, but started again just as he set down the towel. Whoever was calling was persistent; he'd give them that.

The caller ID surprised him. "Billy?" he answered, his mind busy searching for why Billy would be calling him now, with him knowing that Kyle was in Portland.

"Kyle." There was something in Billy's voice that set off alarm bells, a heavy feeling of dread settling into Kyle's gut.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked before Billy could continue.

"Listen, I don't know. I don't even know if anything *is* wrong." Billy sounded frustrated, borderline angry, even. "But have you talked to Dalton today? His work called me. Something about him not coming in to pick up his last paycheck the other day. They wanted to know where they could send it." There was a pause, and Kyle was sure Billy was taking the time to collect himself on the other end of the line. "Do you know what's going on?"

Kyle had no idea where to even start. Last paycheck? That made no sense to him. Dalton hadn't mentioned leaving the construction company, or even being out of work for a while... but then again, maybe it did make sense. Dalton's long disappearances at night, the near-constant look of desperation that had settled onto his face.

“Shit. I’ll try and call him.”

Kyle went to hang up, but Billy’s voice stopped him. “Hey Kyle, just remember whatever happens isn’t your fault, okay?” And the distinct click of the line going dead followed.

Kyle was frantic in his attempt to reach Dalton. Two calls to Dalton’s cell phone, two messages left, five texts, no reply, four more calls, still no answer, and on and on. The sense of panic clouded his judgment, until finally he called the construction company Dalton worked for.

It was the day before a major holiday, but Dalton had always said that construction seemed busiest when all others were quietly tucked in their homes or with relatives. Still, the woman who answered was far too happy in contrast to the dread filling Kyle’s every fiber.

“McGregor and Sons, Vanessa speaking.”

“Yes, hi, this is Kyle Black. I’m, uh, *shit*. I’m Dalton’s boyfriend. Is Dalton on-site by any chance?”

The tone in her voice changed almost immediately, less chipper and more concerned. “Dalton hasn’t been in since early last week, Kyle. We had to let him go for the season. Not enough work for the entire crew.”

A chaotic explosion of expletives went off in his head, some making their way through the phone. “Sorry. I just—can you call his brother or me if you see him?”

“Sure, Kyle. But is everything all right?”

“I don’t know yet. I hope so.”

They ended the call, the new information alarming. He called Dalton again, and again, and again, until finally his mom came in the room, her apron caked with sugar and jam, and took the phone from his hands.

“I went upstairs and repacked your bag for you. I just have to wash my hands, and we will leave.”

Kyle stood stunned as the minutes passed. She was taking him to the airport, despite the mess in the kitchen and his promise to be home, she knew where he needed to be, even when he couldn’t put the pieces together himself.

The airport was crowded beyond belief. It seemed like everyone was trying to get somewhere, all at the very last minute. A few of the planes heading out to Buffalo and other cities in the Snow Belt were delayed due to weather. By the time he reached the front of the line to purchase his ticket the relief he had felt that they had a place for him on the plane was short-lived, as the flight to Cleveland was grounded for at least another hour, thanks to the stupid fucking snow that Kyle had always found so beautiful.

His mother had left him off a while ago, worry in her bright eyes marring her pale face. He had hugged her tight, grasping on to her shoulders as if she were the only thing keeping him afloat. It seemed true, as he felt himself drowning further and further into his own horrifying scenarios of what had happened to Dalton, barely coming up for breath long enough to call Casey and ask her to call local hospitals.

Finally the plane boarded, and the lengthy trip back home was nothing like the one he took just days before. No, this one was like sitting and waiting to hear the worst news imaginable, or waiting for the blade of a guillotine to fall, all the while watching it dangle just over your head.

Landing in a connecting airport was even worse, anxiety heightened as he sat in the second plane. He wasn't even sure where he was, only that it was still too far from Cleveland, too far from Dalton.

When the pilot finally announced the descent to their destination, the relief mixed with his fear, a combination something akin to hard medicine and even harder alcohol. Dizzying, constant, like he was going to be sick.

He nearly forgot his luggage in an attempt to get out as quickly as possible. Gone was the carefully respectful man who waited for the people in front of him, and he was sure he might feel bad eventually for jumping in a taxi in front of a young couple, but not today.

Kyle gave the cabbie his own address, pulling out his phone. Everything seemed to be conspiring against him—his phone was on two bars of battery, traffic was hell, the drive took twice as long as it should have.

As soon as he was able to, he got out of the cab, shoving a wad of money the cabbie's way and grabbing his luggage before running to the door. Part of him hoped to find Dalton, curled in bed with a bad case of the flu or some other bug that left him out of order, the naïve part, but a part nonetheless.

That hope was quickly dashed when he pushed into his apartment. Everything looked just as he'd left it, with the exception of a couple of extra

dishes in the sink. The bed was unmade, the hamper nearly full. For as much as it looked like it was occupied, Kyle had an eerie sense that it felt un-lived in within the past few days.

He ran out to the parking lot, looking for his car. His stomach dropped when he saw it, snow-covered and clearly undriven. The area around it was barely touched, small animal prints the only sign of life.

It took an irritatingly long time to get the car clear, and it was bitter cold when he got in and pulled out onto the street. He drove around aimlessly for what felt like ages, pressing the brake whenever he saw someone with hair that curled around their ears or had broad shoulders and a steady walk. None of them were Dalton.

After about an hour, he found himself in the parking lot of an old factory, long ago shut down and forgotten. The building had windows that seemed to weep open, the brick a startling contrast to the frost that spiraled around broken glass. The building felt tired and aching, or maybe that was just him looking at the sad, decrepit building and somehow seeing himself.

The sound of his phone ringing shook him from his stupor, a fog of desperation crawling through his mind as he pleaded for Dalton to be on the other end. He didn't even look when he answered, "Hello?" He was sure every ounce of emotion read in his voice like a novel, word after word.

"Kyle." The voice was all wrong. Not comforting and deep, not the voice that made him feel warm and safe.

"Billy."

"Have you heard anything yet?" Billy asked. He sounded as tired as Kyle felt.

"No. I've been driving around, but I haven't seen him anywhere. I don't know what to do." The admission hurt him. Kyle liked answers, liked being able to put things in perfect order that made sense. None of this fit that.

"Okay. Did you check the bar?"

"Yes," Kyle groaned.

"What about his apartment?"

"Fuck. No." It seemed stupid that Kyle wouldn't have thought of that first, but for the past few months, Dalton had practically lived with him. They'd long ago dropped the topic of Dalton showing Kyle where he lived. It didn't seem to

matter anymore, or it didn't at the time. "I—I don't even know where it is, Billy. *Shit.*"

It was a miracle that he even heard the address that Billy rattled off, even more so that he drove there without incident, the ever-present dread thickening, wrapping its heavy arms around him and pulling him tight.

He stepped out of the car, looking at the building and life Dalton was so ashamed of. Unlike the building from earlier, this one wasn't worn from age, but from neglect. Trash littered the small area in front of the house; the door hung open, half off its hinge. Two men stood outside, smoking but not talking to one another.

Kyle approached them, uncaring of the neighborhood he was in, or that it was one that most people avoided at all costs.

"Can you tell me where Dalton's apartment is?"

The men laughed at his question, as if what he had asked was the most hysterical thing they'd ever heard.

"Dalton's *apartment* is up the stairs, second door on the right," one of the men answered. His voice was scarred by smoke, thready and uneven.

The stairs creaked with Kyle's every step. The walls were yellowed, wallpaper folding in on itself, even spiders fleeing the horrendous smell of piss and sweat.

He knocked on the door, unmarked except for scuffs at the bottom where it looked like someone had tried to kick it in. "Dalton. Dalton, are you in there?"

Kyle continued to pound on the door, twisting the handle, surprised when the door drifted open with a wretched screech.

The inside was even worse. Sparse in every way. There was an old card table with dirty plates on it, tilting with the weight. The kitchen area was caked in mold, a small guitar the only pristine thing in the open room. A door was open to the bathroom, a nauseating smell causing bile to rise in Kyle's throat. Finally, he turned, and in a just-hidden corner was a stained mattress, Dalton laying half on it, half off, his arm reaching out across the wooden floor, practically begging for Kyle's help.

He ran to Dalton, calling his name into what felt like a void. Dalton's eyes were cracked partly open, his irises blown wide. The sight was a living nightmare, Dalton's normally tanned face pale. The coolness of the room hit

Kyle suddenly, and he pulled Dalton into his lap, juggling with his phone to dial 9-1-1.

The conversation was a blur, and at one point, he let the phone drop as he held Dalton closer. He was still warm, just barely. His breathing was ghost-like, slow and nearly non-existent.

“Dalton, baby,” Kyle pleaded endlessly, bending forward to kiss Dalton’s forehead, closing his eyes tight and willing it all to disappear. “Stay with me, okay? Just a little longer. You can do it.” It was like a mantra, on and on. He wasn’t sure when the paramedics arrived, hadn’t registered the loud clatter of footsteps up the stairs and into the room, or the man’s voice telling him to give them room.

The other paramedic pulled him from Dalton, away and further into the corner, the distance stabbing him over and over.

One of them injected something into Dalton, pulling free the band that had been wrapped around his upper arm and carefully avoiding the small pile of items at his side; a stark white cotton ball sitting next to a lighter and a stained spoon among the trash.

They worked quickly, leaving Kyle sobbing in the corner as they situated Dalton’s body onto a stretcher, calling out vitals as they went.

The same one who had pulled Kyle from Dalton turned back to Kyle now. “We’re going to carry him out now. Are you coming?”

Kyle nodded his head, following them down the stairs and out into a world that suddenly looked different. Gone was the pretty white snow, the calming noises of cars and people talking. Everything was loud and ugly and unbearable. Everything he had worked so hard for, everything he was, slowly slipped through his fingers, and he didn’t do a thing to clutch them.

He didn’t remember the trip to the hospital, or when Casey and Billy arrived and told him they’d picked up his car. Time played endless games with him, drawing on impossibly long, the tick of a clock piercing his awareness.

Doctors came out periodically, going to families who would either sigh in relief or crumble in despair. There seemed to be no middle ground, and the pattern continued until finally a doctor approached them and spoke to Billy.

“We have him stabilized. The paramedics were able to administer Naloxone, but it appears that he had ingested some other substances as well,

which caused some problems with his heart. Luckily,” the doctor said, turning to Kyle, “you found him when you did.” It went without saying that if Kyle had been any later, the scene would’ve been different. He was kicking himself for not going there first, not realizing the obvious.

“Do you know what happened?” Casey asked beside him, her hand clutching Billy’s.

“How long has Mr. O’Brien been using?” the doctor asked.

“I don’t know, maybe eight years? Nine?” Billy answered.

“But he’s been—was clean for over eight months.” Kyle was quick to defend, the shock of the day still not quite registering.

“It’s likely that when he relapsed, he went back to injecting the same dose as he was previously using. This is very typical of many heroin overdoses we see. The user doesn’t account for their body’s response. It takes time to build up to tolerating such a high dosage, and when one relapses, their body doesn’t have that same level of tolerance.”

Every word felt so clinical, distant from him and reality. The images of the needle, rolled off to the side, the band around Dalton’s arm, the cracked sound his lips made when Kyle brushed his fingers across them. Pain blossomed in his chest, greater than ever before.

“I—I need to go,” he said to no one in particular, ignoring Casey’s plea for him to wait. His feet ran of their own accord, one in front of the other, until he was gripping onto a bench just outside the hospital, heaving for countless seconds.

“Kyle?” Billy’s hand caused him to jump forward, out of its reach. “Kyle, I’m so sorry.”

He finally looked up at Dalton’s brother, tears painting his cheeks and dripping into the snow. “Please don’t say it,” Kyle pleaded. *Please don’t say I told you so.*

The sadness aged Billy’s face, lines that Kyle had never noticed cracking at the corner of his eyes and across his forehead. “It’s not your fault.” He knew Billy wanted to say more, to let him know that this was just how these things worked, but was appreciative for the effort it must’ve taken to withhold those words.

“What do you want me to tell him if he asks about you?” Billy finally asked.

"I... I don't know," Kyle said before he turned and left.

Kyle didn't go home. It was useless. He wouldn't be able to sleep in a bed that smelled of Dalton, wouldn't be able to stand in a room that held so many good memories. Dalton was alive; he was going to be okay. As much as that knowledge was welcome, it confused him as well. He knew going into the relationship that there was a risk, that this *thing* they had could all fail at the drop of a dime. But why? Why now? Questions circled, and Kyle had answers to none of them. One of them unsettled him more than the others, ate him from the inside. *What now?*

It was growing late, the sky fading into a dark blue. And Kyle drove. His fingers felt frozen around the wheel, the quiet hum of the engine the only sound he could hear. He didn't know where he was going; he just drove, until finally he pulled up to a familiar area.

The trees of the Metroparks were so still, white powdering their branches as they reached out over the roads. It wasn't green like the last time he'd been here, but this was the place, their place. Kyle walked forward, across the snow-covered beach, staring out at the frozen lake in front of him.

This was where it all started, the undefined thing between them. This was where he realized he could love Dalton one day, and standing there now, it's where he realized he hadn't just started to, he did. Dalton had burrowed himself deep within Kyle's soul, and he was as much in Kyle's veins as the drugs running through Dalton's. Slowly and without warning, Dalton had become a part of him.

But this, a life with an addict, knowing that a relapse could be just around the corner? Kyle wasn't sure that was a risk he could make, wasn't sure that he could put his heart on the line like that again.

He sat on the ground, ignoring the cold that pulsed through his clothes. His phone had ticked down to one bar of battery, just barely clinging to life. He dialed a number he knew well, as if on autopilot.

"Mom," Kyle said once she answered, and without another word, he wept.

When he had finally calmed, his face red and his body numb, she spoke. "Why did you take a chance on him originally?" It was a seemingly innocent question that held a lot of weight. "Just think about it, honey," she said before they hung up.

After a while he spoke into the darkness, "Because some things are worth taking risks on."

The hospital was busy, post-Thanksgiving incidents galore. It hadn't even registered with him that yesterday had come and gone, and with it, Thanksgiving. He was thankful for many things, but none of them seemed to hold a candle to knowing that Dalton was alive.

The nurse directed him upstairs. The door to Dalton's room was cracked open, a bright light bleeding out into the hall. Through the door he saw Casey, her eyes sunken and her expression sad. She looked up, a small smile lingering on her lips before she quietly walked out of the room.

"I'm glad you decided to come back," she whispered. "He's sleeping. Billy just went to get some coffee and call their mom. He's going to bring her down later. Didn't want her to drive down in the bad weather."

Kyle nodded, unsure of what to say. The warm hand touching his face, forcing him to look at Casey surprised him. "Hey, it's okay." She reached forward and hugged him tightly. "You're allowed to be everything you feel right now. Don't get mad at yourself because you feel angry. Billy learned that the hard way."

Anger... that was the feeling that had crept up on him slowly. Anger at himself for not being there sooner, for not doing more, but mostly, and what Casey was likely referring to, anger at Dalton for doing this—not just to himself, but to them.

"You're a good man, Kyle," Casey said as he pulled away. "I'm going to go see if I can get some coffee with Billy."

She walked off without allowing him to answer. He slipped into the room, his eyes finding their way to Dalton almost immediately. He was still so pale, the shade so wrong for his skin. He had an IV in his arm, the machine beeping every few seconds.

He stood there and stared for a while, until a tired voice came from the bed. "Kyle." It was more of a croak than anything else.

Kyle made his way to the bed, squeezing his lover's cool hands. "I wasn't sure you'd come. Billy wouldn't tell me." The man in the bed was only part of the one Kyle knew and had grown to love.

“I wasn’t sure either, to be honest.”

He pulled the chair up beside the bed and handed Dalton the cup of water. Everything felt... wrong. It wasn’t quite uncomfortable, just off, as if both of them were afraid of what happened next.

“Why’d you do it?” Kyle finally asked.

“I had just gotten enough money to get out of the men’s home. Or, I was close to it. And then I went to work one day, and they said they had to cut back on workers. Business was slow.” Dalton didn’t look him in the eyes when he continued, “I wanted so badly to be something more for you, Kyle. I wanted to be better. I tried for days to find another job. I even applied to fucking McDonald’s. Nothing. It seems no one wanted to hire an addict with a record.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I always told you that I never wanted you to be a part of this. My life is so fucked up, but with you it felt like I had a chance.”

“You *do* have a chance, Dalton.” Kyle’s voice was assertive now, the anger curling around the edge of his words.

“I don’t know, Kyle. It’s just—you weren’t here, and I couldn’t pull myself up, so I let myself fall.”

The beeping of the machine filled the room for what could’ve been the next ten minutes or the next hour, Kyle wasn’t sure.

“Please give me another chance, Kyle. I know I don’t deserve it, but I’ll go back to rehab. I’ll do it for you. I love you.”

The words that should’ve brought him joy only brought sadness. “I love you, too, Dalton,” he said, watching the light come to Dalton’s eyes, “but you can’t do this for me. You have to do it for you. No one else is going to be able to save you from yourself, Dalton. If you go to rehab, you need to do it because it’s what you want, not because of me, or your mom, or anyone else.”

Dalton seemed stunned by the words, taken aback. Kyle watched him look around the room, anywhere but actually at Kyle. When he did, it was with conviction, enough to reach his voice when he spoke. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll do it. But you need to know that I’m not going to be perfect. Some days I just get the urge so bad that I want to lose it... I don’t know if I’ll never use again. I... I’ll try.”

“That’s all I want. We’ll figure the rest out.” Kyle leaned forward, their lips pressing together. “Let’s do this.”

Epilogue

Two years had come and gone since the Thanksgiving relapse. He went into rehab shortly after being discharged. It was a long, tiring battle, one he returned to three more times afterward. Kyle was beginning to learn that what is said about addicts, about always being an addict, was true. Dalton never claimed to be cured, never lied and said he didn't crave his drugs. The local AA meetings helped. At first, he'd go four times a week, then get down to one. That number went up with each relapse, up to five, back down to one, up to six, down to two. When he wasn't able to make AA meetings, he'd go to a NA meeting. A sometimes tiring cycle of back and forth. He was still trying to find a balance, some period of time where he could go but also learn to be strong for himself.

The hardest thing about rehab was also the best. The time apart taught Kyle a lot about himself. In a city so filled with people in desperate need, Kyle questioned a lot of what he had chosen to do with his life. Just a couple of months after Dalton came home from rehab, Kyle quit his job and began going to Al-Anon meetings, desperate to connect with others who understood the struggle of living with someone who has an addiction.

Suddenly, everything had changed. Working for the Big Four wasn't his dream. He wanted to count, to matter and make a difference. He started to work with a foundation in Cleveland that worked to give money to non-profits and other worthy causes. It was smaller in size, but big in its impact.

Winters were still the hardest. Between the chill of the weather and the lack of jobs, Kyle often watched Dalton struggle. But he stood by what he said; Dalton needed to be clean for himself, needed to fight forward in life because it's what *he* wanted. And that was perhaps the hardest thing—to watch someone he loved suffer, to watch them face challenge after challenge, and only be able to offer his support and love, all the while not making it suddenly all better. That, *that* was hard. But as Kyle had come to learn, the most worthwhile things are often the hardest. Dalton had shown him that each and every time he had a bad day or relapsed and went back to his support meetings, more often and ready to try again.

Kyle came to Cleveland, naïve to the reality of a city, ignorant to the secrets and pain housed within the city walls, but he knew now. Slowly but surely, Dalton was crawling his way up from the depths of the city, out of the hole that had swallowed his life, and Kyle was there at the top, waiting for him to emerge.

The city changed them, became a part of them—lived within them, and they wore its scars with a sense of pride. Whatever came next, they'd made it this far, and they'd keep going, no matter how dark the path seemed, because within the city are people who love and hate, who cry and laugh—within the city are people, who despite all odds, continue on.

The End

Author Bio

S.J. Eller is a young author who wrote her first published work in last year's Don't Read in the Closet event. She is from a small town, but has big aspirations and hopes to make a difference in people's lives. In her (not so spare) spare time, she enjoys reading a good book, spending time with her family (especially her dog), and having a good laugh. She is also adept at graphic design and various forms of coding and enjoys a good challenge.

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