

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 1

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 1

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 1.

### Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

### Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

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## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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# 500 KISSES TO STEAL A HEART

By Anyta Sunday

## Photo Description

Two men are sitting close, a whisper apart, and their gazes are locked onto each other's lips. The light glows behind them, bright, like the chemistry between them. They are about to kiss...

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*These two men appear to be sharing a moment of affection and tenderness, and they seem so comfortable with each other's personal space. How did they meet or find one another? What has their time together been like? Is this the lead-up to their first kiss or is it the lead-up to their five-hundredth kiss? Is their body language a reflection of their long-time intimacy and knowledge of one another, or is this an early moment in their relationship? Any genre (paranormal, contemporary, sci-fi, etc.) is fine if it helps the story flow for you, and a range of heat or spice is great, as well.*

*P.S. If possible, I'd prefer something without extreme amounts of angst. Also, no non-con/dub-con/infidelity/cheating, please. Slow burn and romance would be great to read, and please give them an HEA. Thank you so much!*

Sincerely,

Marie

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, reunited, slow burn, camp, warring neighbors

**Word Count:** 20,286

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## 500 KISSES TO STEAL A HEART

By Anyta Sunday

### Dylan

It was a dark and stormy night—

And wasn't that cliché true right now?

Dylan Halsworth darted down the slippery gravel path to where his counselors and the thirty kids in this summer's *Camp Halsworth* huddled in their cabins.

Rain soaked into his jeans and through his hiking boots. Every running step was a squelch and a splash and a slip through deep puddles and loose stones. The storm pounded, hitting his camp hard.

An ancient chestnut tree had already been riddled with a million volts of lightning and snapped toward the dining hall. Right through the fucking roof.

The kitchen was totaled—the whole area would have to be cordoned off.

This was the second day of torrential rain now; already, half the parents had called him, wanting assurances the camp was running without hiccups. Most of them he'd had to convince not to come and pick their kids up early.

But now...

One of his counselors clipped toward him at a jog, cursing the downpour as much as Dylan was. He quickly zipped his mouth on the next f-word—banned in the campsite—and inclined his head. "Kids in cabins four to seven are all fine. A bit spooked, but laughing it off."

"One to three and eight to ten?"

"Ronald said all his kids are fine, but there is a small leak in cabin two. He ordered the boys there to pack up, and I told my boys in cabin five to expect company. It'll be all right for tonight. Heather said her girls are fine."

Water drizzled down the back of his neck, sluicing a path between his shoulder blades. So much good this jacket did. He was so wet he may as well have come out in his pajamas.



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“Good,” Dylan said, slapping his counselor on the shoulder. “Back inside with you. I’ll figure out something for the morning. Keep the kids away from the dining hall.”

Jeff nodded and was off.

When he was out of earshot, Dylan let out one of the many f-words flying around in his head.

He sprinted back to the dining hall and took another look at the damage. Well, shit. What was he going to do without a kitchen for the rest of the summer?

Thirty kids. Six counselors. And, well—fuck, right?

He couldn’t have his kids picked up. Not halfway through summer camp. He’d have to give partial refunds, and... well, summer was the time he made most of his money for the year. The debt on this property was out the roof since he’d had to remortgage the place to afford his father’s health care.

Summer camp kept his costs on track so he wouldn’t have to sell; he made an okay living the rest of the year as a teaching assistant at Trinity High, but he lived on prime land.

It cost a fortune.

And selling his family home for something smaller and more manageable... well, it was out of the question. This was where he grew up, where he learned to ride a bike, where he went to school, and where he kayaked into town in the afternoons and hung out at Mary’s café...

His father wanted him to keep it in the family. Just like he had for his father—Camp Halsworth had been around for generations.

It all meant he needed to find a solution. And fast.

He ground the heel of his boot into the sludgy soil—bleak, much like his eyes, hair, and situation.

He’d get contractors in first thing, but a mess like this... could take a while to fix.

If only there was a place that could provide them with a kitchen and an indoor hall for wet-weather activities.

Something close by...

Something big enough...

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Standing in the doorway looking out at the slowly lessening rain, he groaned, and made a call...

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## Chris

Chris Montgomery had forgotten his date's name. Cameron? Cole? Carter?

"I absolutely hate it," said he-who-could-not-be-named, "but my mom insists the name suits me. What do you think, man?"

Chris twisted onto his side, sheets tangling around his legs, and stared out of his large terrace windows. Thunderous rain pelted against the glass. Why did there have to be a raging storm tonight? It was well past the time this 'date' should have ended. Not because said date wasn't a good guy. He was, and that was the problem. He was too good, too sweet, too everything Chris wasn't. He'd made it clear this was just a bit of fun and nothing more. He-who-could-not-be-named had seemed like he was all for that, too. Until after their sweaty bodies were spent and Chris suddenly found an arm around his middle, a nose nuzzling into his neck.

And then that damn storm.

Talk about awkward.

His date—really, it was a one-night stand—prodded his side, lifted his arm and squeezed into another... well, there was no other word for it but *cuddle*. "Chris? You can tell me the truth, I can handle it. It's shit right? I should change it?"

Chris felt the nip of lips on his chest. He really wasn't feeling it. Never did go for round two.

Twisting onto his back and gently shoving his date off him, he sought for the kindest words he could use in a moment like this. "I, ah..." Words, words, where the fuck were they? Addressing him personally was the least he should do in this upcoming apology/dismissal—pre-emptive dumping?—"Nah, your name's all right." Surely if it were that bad, he'd have remembered it? "But, my honest thoughts? You're nearly thirty." *I don't think it's normal to be worried about what your mom thinks anymore*. Not that he knew personally. His parents had died in a car crash when he was in his late teens, and he'd been living solo ever since. Almost a decade. "If you hate it, you should do something about it."

He risked a sideways glance at his date. High-cheekbones, slender form. A good few inches shorter than his own six-one. Blond hair and blue eyes to his

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brown and brown again. Bouncy as hell, with a cute grin. His late mother would have given him the thumbs-up.

He wanted the thumbs-up—he did.

He wanted a lot of things.

Which was quite selfish of him really since he *had* a lot of things. Things money could buy, anyway. A mansion. Nine boats. Almost his own lake...

He never had to work if he didn't care to.

And most of the time, he didn't—unless it was restoring old boats...

Except this situation—in bed, with his date—was really starting to feel like the work he didn't care for.

“Yeah, sure, gotcha,” his date said. “You're so right, Chris. You know, you're different from what I heard about you.”

That caught his attention. He fished for a smile and faced the man. “What did you hear about me? And, color me curious, *where* did you hear it?”

His date bit his bottom lip and then blurted, “It's sort of all around town.”

Town. Population five hundred, swelling to seven over the summer. What was all around town? “Tell me.”

“Apparently you only ever do something if it's good for you; that it would be a blue moon if you ever did anything for someone else without expecting something back.”

So that was the rumor going around town about him. He rubbed a hand over his stubbly jaw. Well, as with most rumors, it was untrue.

Wasn't it?

He-who-could-not-be-named continued, “And also that...”

“There's *more*?”

“Yeah, but it's nothing I imagine you'd care about.”

Chris wanted to hear it anyway. “What?”

“You know that stretch of land by the river, with that haunted cabin of yours—”

Bennington Way. “I know the one.” Chris pushed himself up into a sitting position, muscles stiffening. “What about it?”

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“Mary says the lease is up for renewal at the end of July, and since she thinks you don’t care for it anymore, she’s going to lease it to the local hiking club.”

Chris jumped out of bed, snapping his T-shirt up off the floor and jerking it on. “Why wouldn’t I care about that?”

He-who-could-not-be-named blushed. “But... everyone says you never use it anymore. And the cabin’s so old and run-down...”

“Well not everyone knows what they’re talking about. I’m getting the lease renewed.” No matter what it cost him. That plot had been on a long-term lease to his family for over fifty years; his grandfather had built that cabin... and—

He swallowed back the memories. He wouldn’t let the hiking club get hold of it. They’d tear that cabin down and put up new, fresh cabins. Cabins that didn’t have history like his did.

His date shrugged. “Mary seemed really keen on letting more people use the land. Or maybe she just doesn’t think you’re looking after it well enough?”

The phone on his bedside table rang, saving him from continuing that thought. He lurched for it but didn’t answer.

“Who’s calling you at midnight?” he-who-could-not-be-named asked.

The screen said *Dylan*. Halsworth.

Chris groaned, and his date peeked at the screen, frowning. “Who’s *he*?”

No one. To hell if he would answer it.

His date raised a brow, and Chris slumped back to the bed. “He’s the guy across the lake.”

“Oh, your *neighbor*.”

He should hang up on the call. “Neighbor is too friendly a word for what we are.” Really. End call. Now. Go on.

His date shifted, cracking a grin. “Not the guy you gave the finger to as we docked earlier?”

Chris stared at the still-ringing phone. “The very one. It’s how we say hello. Been that way since we were sixteen. He runs summer camps. Still can’t fucking steer a boat.”

“Why do you have him on caller ID?”

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“So I can avoid his calls.” Not that he called often, just when there was something they had to do regarding the narrow stretch of lake that separated their properties. Like cutting back the long weeds. The last time Dylan had called, it was to tell him to replace the buoys at the end of the bottleneck. Dylan hadn't been polite about it.

'Course, Chris hadn't been polite about the floodlight Dylan had installed either. Glared right into his bedroom window, that beast. Could have lit a stadium.

Chris knew how to handle Halsworth though. He'd sailed over the narrow stretch of lake between them and stoned the damn bulb.

He smiled at the memory. Dylan had yelled for a solid twenty minutes when he saw the damage. Still didn't know it was Chris who did it.

He glanced out the window toward the rain pelting the lake. Large and hourglass-shaped, it took fifteen minutes to motor down to either end from his place. As a kid, he'd loved the fact that he and Dylan were separated by the narrowest stretch of water, but now... now he wished they lived at either end—where there wouldn't be constant reminders of their past.

“This Dylan guy might need some neighborly assistance,” his date said, shuffling closer. “The storm has been wild, after all.”

“What, and play the good Samaritan to him?” *Play the good Samaritan to him!* This could be a way to show Mary that he was a guy who could be counted on. A guy that could look after her property. Maybe if he showed her he was generous and giving, she might extend his lease?... “I mean, you're right. Maybe he just needs help.”

*Spread this rumor.*

He answered the call.

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## **Dylan**

“Sure. You and the kids can use my place. It's plenty big enough for you all.”

Crackled pause. Dylan frowned. He'd been preparing to humiliate himself by groveling. “Who the heck am I talking to?” Whoever this guy was, it wasn't Montgomery. Well, it was his deep, gravelly, arrogant voice, but... it sounded like the devil had mated with a unicorn, 'cause the shit coming out of his mouth was freaking rainbow-colored.

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Down the line, a voice murmured in the background.

Oh. That explained it then. The devil had just got laid.

Well, applause to the fella for accomplishing the impossible and making Chris civil. “Keep that one I hear you got there,” Dylan said, moving into his living room. From the corner window, he could see Chris’s mansion through the trees. Stately, impressive, and isolated. “Sounds to me like he might just be able to make a man out of you.”

“Halsworth,” Chris said, the sour detectable in the overly joyous intonation, “always such a riot. Of course you and the kids are welcome here. My place doesn’t blow over at the wolf’s first puff. It’s brick. I take good care of all my property.”

*Poor little piggy*—Dylan heard the unspoken snark, lowered the phone, and shoved his middle finger at it.

But it wouldn’t do to snap back at him now. The bastard was doing him a favor, after all. Even if it stank of ulterior motive.

Well, win-win right? Dylan grinned at the sudden image of thirty kids running loose in that bachelor-pad mansion...

This might even be fun. “See you at 5:30 then,” Dylan said.

“Wait—what? 5:30 tomorrow evening, right?”

“Breakfast is at six.”

A long silence stretched a bigger grin from him.

Chris said finally, “You know how much I just *love* rising early to help out a troubled neighbor.”

Dylan choked on a snort. The man never got up before ten if he could help it. “Good stuff then. See you bright and early, sunshine.”

Chris laughed at that; the lack of response and the sudden dead tone of the phone was the “fuck you, Halsworth” Dylan had expected.

*Until morning then...*

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## Chris

What the hell was that sound?

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Did he-who-could-not-be-named leave his cell behind when he finally got the drift and left last night? And what kind of sick time was this to set an alarm?

Chris grabbed the pillow beside him and shoved it over his head to drown out the sound. Shrill thing better stop soon. Couldn't even be six a.m. yet—

*Shit!*

He leaped out of bed, sheets cuffing one of his ankles and making him trip.

Hopping free with a stubbed toe, he grabbed his pants from where they lay strewn across the armchair and shoved them on.

The doorbell buzzed again—because that's what that God-awful sound was.

And he knew the bastard who was ringing it like it was Merry f'ing Christmas.

His T-shirt was crumpled and smelled of his date's aftershave, but he didn't have time to be picky. That bell was going to drive him insane.

Stomping down the wide hallway and into the foyer, he cursed and tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes. He yanked the door open. One part of him wanted to slam it back in Dylan's face because he'd changed his mind. He didn't want to be generous after all. It was just too damn early for it.

The other part had him leaning casually on the doorjamb. That was his driven part; the one that wouldn't forget the things his date had said: *you only ever do something if it's good for you; it would be a blue moon if you ever did anything for someone else without expecting something back.* And the most worrying: *the lease is up for renewal at the end of July, and since Mary thinks you don't care for it anymore, she's going to lease it to the local hiking club.*

And besides all that, he wouldn't let that smug, grinning, fresh-eyed Dylan win—it was like the man *expected* Chris to renege on his deal. That he couldn't handle his promise to help out.

“Looking great, sunshine,” Dylan said, his thumb still far too close to the buzzer.

“Well fuck—”

Dylan stepped up on the threshold, bringing them to the same height. “Better clog that potty mouth of yours, Montgomery. Kids'll be here soon.”

Over Dylan's shoulder, Chris caught sight of two women in bright blue caps hauling boxes of food from the jetty up the path to his back door—which he

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mostly used as a front door, since he preferred using his boat to get into town rather than the car.

“So, you going to let us in or what?” Dylan said. “Or do you just need time to find your voice this early? Or perhaps you’re waiting for your guy to get dressed first?”

Chris frowned. What was he on about—oh wait, *he-who-could-not-be-named*.

“No guy, just me.” He begrudgingly moved to the side. “And how the heck do you clog *your* potty mouth, Halsworth?”

Dylan folded his arms, stretching his bright blue T-shirt over a defined chest. If Chris didn’t know better, he’d think the guy was showing off. “Substitution,” Dylan said, and his smirk was growing. “But it’s not for you. Don’t think you’d be confident enough for it.”

Chris straightened and snagged Dylan out of the way to let the women in. “Kitchen’s through the foyer, down the hall, last room on the right.” Then he pinched Dylan through his sleeve and let go. “And I am f—*reaking* confident enough for it.”

Dylan smiled some more. Damn the man. “Well, snickerdoodles. Fancy that.” Snapping his boots over the polished marble floors, Dylan took himself off toward the kitchen.

Snicker-fucking-doodles? No way. He didn’t seriously mean he substituted *that* for shit, did he?

Chris shook his head and charged into the kitchen after him. This was *his* house; if a bunch of hooligans were going to go trampling through it, he was going to set some ground rules.

“I want those kids supervised at all times. No touching anything unless I say it’s okay.”

Dylan entered the large kitchen that Chris barely used—it really was too big for him. Besides, eating out was so much more fun. He didn’t have to cook or clean up after himself.

“This is perfect.” Dylan twisted and threw him what *maybe* passed for a grateful smile. “The kids will be great. In fact, I think you’ll like them.”

Him? Kids? Uh, yeah—*hardly*.

Dylan continued, “This kid Jason—honestly, he reminds me of you when we were fourteen.”



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Chris blinked. When they were fourteen... well, that was a long time ago. Hell, they'd been friends then. The best of. "You mean he's a right pain-in-the-ass?"

"No, that would be if he was like you right now." And with an amused lift of his brow, Dylan set his focus on the kitchen. The loads of cereal boxes and bread. Breakfast.

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Chris fought the urge to doze and made it his task to boil the eggs. All he had to do was boil the water—how could he screw it up?

He tensed at the sound of stampeding feet, yelling, and something akin to laughter. Which, at just past six in the morning, really didn't make sense. The shiny kettle reflected his tousled, sleep-deprived look; Chris ran a hand through his hair.

Caught by Dylan, he wrenched his hand down. "I look like snickerdoodles."

"Oh, I love snickerdoodles," some kid said, as a swarm of adolescents moved into the dining room.

"Grab a bowl of cereal, eat, wash your plate," Dylan said.

Chris waited for the first lot of kids to do the breakfast routine before he dared to squeeze into a spot at the end of his long dining table. He grabbed a boiled egg from the basket along with some toast and cracked it open. Hard-boiled all right. These things were dry and looked sorta green.

Dylan sat across from him chatting to some kid. He raised a questioning brow at Chris: *really gonna eat that?*

So Chris ate it anyway.

Conversation waxed and waned and was littered with so much 'like' Chris was cringing. Surely he'd never sounded so stupid as a kid?

Then again...

Okay, the kids could keep their 'like.'

"So, I'm telling you, like, it totally works." Chris looked at the young man lounging back in his chair, swirling a spoon in the air as he spoke. Every time he finished a sentence, he jabbed the spoon as if to emphasize his point.

"No way, Jason."

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Chris shifted, subtly angling himself toward the lanky boy with fashionably messy hair and a dimpled grin. So this was the boy that reminded Dylan of his fourteen-year-old self.

Jason jabbed his spoon again. “Yes, way.” He leaned in conspiratorially, looking to Dylan and the dudes on either side of him. “Five hundred kisses are all it takes.”

“Takes to what?” Dylan said, stealing into the conversation with a quizzical look, his elbows on the table and a piece of half-eaten toast pinched between his fingers.

“To steal someone’s heart. *Anyone’s* heart.”

Chris snorted and butted right in. “That doesn’t work. I promise you, if you’re not interested, you never will be.”

“I’d trust him on this, Jason,” Dylan added smoothly, snatching Chris’s gaze and holding it. “He’d know.”

The dig at his experience was obvious. Chris glared back at Dylan and answered, “Right, *I* would know.”

A sudden blush hit Dylan’s cheeks, and he stuffed the rest of his toast in his mouth, eyes quickly diverting.

Chris kept going, “I could be kissed till the cows came home and never feel a thing.” Well, not in his heart anyway. He was still a man.

Jason swung his spoon as he shook his head. “My brother did it to Chelsea—she hated his guts, too. And now they’re all lovey-dovey and crap. Been going steady, like, a whole month now.” He pushed his chair out, and the dudes next to him followed. Standing, Jason dropped his spoon into his bowl. He looked to Chris and then Dylan. “Five hundred kisses are all it takes.”

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## Dylan

“It *could* be true,” Dylan said, regretting the decision to stay and clean up. He should have dived in one of the boats and rowed back to camp with the counselors and kids. Couldn’t he just outline a plan for the next three weeks over the phone? Or, better yet, e-mail.

“No, it’s not.”

And why the heck were they debating what Jason had said? It was like they had nothing better to do—

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*Which for Chris might actually be the case.*

Dylan didn't have that luxury. After he was done here, he needed to ring contractors ASAP. He wrung out the washcloth with abandon before scrubbing down the kitchen surfaces. Milk, cereal, and crumbs were everywhere.

"Well," he said as Chris took the prepared cloth and wiped the adjacent bench. Dylan grabbed a second cloth. "Have you ever actually *let* the same guy kiss you five hundred times?"

A snort. "God, no."

Dylan turned off the faucet and began wringing again. "So you could be wrong."

In the corner of his eye, Chris paused, the cloth frozen in the middle of a puddle of milk. Then the guy's shoulders rolled back. He dropped his cloth and turned around. Resting against the countertop, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Nope. No way am I wrong."

Dylan rolled his eyes and wiped down the part of the bench Chris had neglected. "You're damn stubborn, Montgomery, you know that? Do you ever let anyone win besides yourself?"

"Hey now, who so generously gave up their place at *five-thirty in the* freaking *morning* to let some kids rampage his kitchen?"

Dylan glanced at the cocky smirk twitching Chris's mouth. "You are so working an angle with that," Dylan said, "and you know it."

"Me? Never." The smirk grew.

With a shake of his head, Dylan picked up Chris's cloth and dumped it with his into the sink.

He hated feeling like Chris was one up on him.

Someone needed to teach this egotistical prick a lesson.

Dylan spun on his heel and faced Chris squarely. "You know what? Prove it. Prove that you're right and Jason is wrong." He shoved a finger at Chris's chest. "Five hundred kisses with the same guy." He couldn't help it; he laughed. "I pity the fool who has to suffer it. But anything in the pursuit of truth, right?" Dylan leaned in a fraction, lowering his voice. "Unless you want to give up right now? Admit you could be wrong?"

Chris looked from Dylan's finger, still pressed against his chest, to his face. "No."

---

*And lesson in action.* Now to sit back and enjoy watching the one-night-stand-man try to claim five hundred kisses. Of course, Dylan didn't really believe the whole 'five hundred kisses to steal a heart' thing, but, damn, it felt good to force Chris into proving it. From all the rumors he'd heard, Chris only ever did casual dating; he rarely saw the same guy twice. Five hundred kisses would be nearly impossible for him to score.

Dylan started turning away—

"Just one thing, Halsworth." Chris's hand shot out; he grabbed Dylan's T-shirt in a fist and hauled him close. Firm lips planted hard against his mouth; teeth pulled open his bottom lip, tongue swept against his.

Chris pulled back an inch. "One," he said, breath whispering over Dylan's chin. "And positively gross."

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## Chris

Chris's lips were left tingling from the short, sharp kiss. He'd done it on impulse. Out of a need to wipe the satisfied look off the man's face. He'd done it because Dylan hadn't expected it. And look at him—standing there, frozen and speechless. With a grin, Chris went in for kiss number two. That one broke even quicker than the first; Dylan leapt back like someone had struck him with a thousand volts of disgusting.

"What the ever-living—?"

"Fuck? The kids are gone. You're safe." Chris crossed an ankle. "You told me to prove it."

"I didn't mean with *me*. So just stop that."

The way Dylan squirmed and shifted from foot-to-foot, obviously finding this extremely uncomfortable, was exactly what Chris had been after. Payback for trapping him into this bet in the first place. *Two can play at this game, sucker.* Holding back a laugh, he said, "Stop? Why? Scared you might just fall for all this?"

There went the furrowed brow and glowering eyes.

*Whallomp!* Dylan's body hit his hard and his lips were attacking. Three. "Hell no." Four. "Never." Five. "And Montgomery?" Six. "Wipe the smirk."

Chris shoved Dylan off him at kiss number seven. "Wait a second, if you know you'll never fall for me, then you must think I'm *right* that 500 kisses

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could never steal a heart. Sounds to me like this whole proof thing is null and void, Halsworth.”

Dylan quipped, “Sounds to *me* like you’re trying to get out of this. Scared I might just fall for you? Or perhaps you’re afraid *you’ll* fall for *me*?”

“No, just afraid of having to live through another four hundred and ninety-three of these God-awful kisses.”

Dylan grinned. “Just admit you could be wrong, and we can end it now.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” And because of that, Chris was willing to suffer through it. Let Dylan squirm and be uncomfortable. Make him regret suggesting he prove it. “How about instead, you admit I’m right?”

Make Dylan give this thing up first.

And he *would* crack, eventually.

Because Dylan was right about one thing: Chris was fucking stubborn.

Dylan’s jaw twitched, but he didn’t admit anything.

With a playful touch of his lips to Dylan’s jaw, Chris said, “Aren’t we just two peas in a pod?”

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## Dylan

Less than twelve hours later, Dylan slumped lengthwise onto his couch and muttered a curse into the cushion squished between his face and the seat. Didn’t he just have *screwed* stamped all over him? None of the contractors had been able to offer him the ideal solution to have his dining hall fixed yesterday.

He’d have settled for the end of the week, but both contracting companies estimated at least a month’s worth of work. Three weeks if he was willing to pay a heck-of-a-lot more. A heck-of-a-lot he didn’t have.

He complained again, and his hot breath bounced off the pillow and onto his neck.

In the distance came the yells and laughs of kids hanging out in the ‘free activity’ part of the day before dinner.

Dinner.

Peeking over the side of the pillow toward the clock, he found the time tick-tocking too quickly toward six. Toward Chris. Because he would be there—again—with his snarky comments, hard smile, and aggressive *lean*.

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And Dylan wasn't sure he was ready to see him yet. He'd been secretly thankful Jeff had taken responsibility for lunch so he could hide behind the task of employing contractors and calling his father, who was in a recovery spa in Hawaii. It meant he could pretend none of that other stuff had happened that morning—nor would it happen again.

With a groan, Dylan rolled off the couch and headed for his kitchen. His annoyingly-small, one-person-wide kitchen that was the reason he couldn't run meals in his own home. He grabbed a Mountain Dew from the fridge and cracked it open.

It didn't taste as crisp and delicious as it usually did.

It tasted like... like agitation and reluctance. He wanted to stay at home for the next month and not have to bother with Chris again. He could do it, too. He could have Jeff assume all of his tasks that involved talking to or seeing the man.

But...

But.

He gulped half the can of Mountain Dew until his eyes watered and the back of his nose itched.

But not dealing with Chris would make it look like he was avoiding him, which meant Chris—damn him—would assume he had a point about Dylan falling for him.

*So not ever going to happen; not in a million sex-less years, jerk.*

Tossing the can in the trash under the sink, he made a decision. He was going.

Just to show how little he cared for Chris and his kisses.

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## Chris

When Mary walked through Chris's door with a large pot and an even larger smile, Chris knew she was here early to speak to him. Perhaps his date had already spilled the beans about his generosity and maybe slipped in that line about taking care of his property?

"Mary," he said, welcoming her in.

"Where's the kitchen?"

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“This way. Say, look,” he said as he led her toward the kitchen, “I realize the lease on Bennington Way is soon up for renewal?”

She looked sideways at him. “You waste no time.”

He took the pot from her and settled it on the stove. “Should I turn it on?”

“Low.”

He set the burner to low and then faced her, arms crossed, leaning back against the bench. “I want to keep it.”

Mary’s expression flickered in surprise, and then she narrowed her eyes. “Really? Because you don’t seem to be using the place much.”

It was true; he didn’t use it much. He’d been through the woods a lot, nearly every month, but he never did anything but look at his old cabin—and *remember*. “Look, maybe I can buy it off you? Make you a really good deal?”

“I’m not after money, Mr. Montgomery. But the hiking club wants to extend their tracks, and this could lead to more visitors in town. Besides, it’s a lovely piece of land—it just seems a waste not to use it.”

“I do use it.”

Mary raised a disbelieving brow. Moving to the stove, she lifted the lid off the pot, grabbed a large wooden spoon from where it hung on the wall, and stirred.

Chris tried again. Letting out a slow breath, he said, “It has sentimental value.”

She paused mid-stir. “Sentimental,” she repeated. “Your parents...?”

Partly his parents, yes. The place encompassed so much of his childhood... “Is there some way, any way, that you’d renew my lease?”

She sighed. “I don’t want to be cruel, you know, but I want to be sure if I did that—”

“Thank you!”

“I said *if*. I want to be sure you’d care for the plot, and more than that, I want you to be more involved in our community.”

“You know I’ve never stopped hikers trekking through Bennington Way before.”

“More involved than that. And I don’t mean throwing money at things—time and effort, that’s what I care about.”

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If that's what she cared about, that's what he'd do.

Bennington Way had to stay with him.

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## Dylan

Dylan forced a slow, steady gait up the path to Chris's. Jeff and the kids were already eating inside. Wafts of rosemary potatoes and stewed beef hit the back of his nose as he passed through the open door into the foyer. He followed the kids' not-too-distant chatter into the kitchen.

There stood Mary, with her large double-dimpled grin, chef's hat, and apron. Dinner was always the best when she was on duty. Best thing he ever did, employing her to moonlight at the camp for Wednesday dinners. It was a pity she had a day job and couldn't do more for the camp. Not that he'd have been able to afford her to work full time. That and the locals would hate him; she ran the local café, selling her famous scones and self-roasted coffee beans. Had been as long as Dylan could remember. She was the town's keeper, really. She knew everything and anything, and the last say on anything town-related—from street development to town-ball theme—went unofficially through her.

She ladled stew into thirteen-year-old starlet Holly's bowl. Then, catching him approaching, Mary gave a cheeky, waggling-brow, "Hello". Her voice came out hoarse like it always did—from too much gossiping, likely. He loved her for it. "Looking good, handsome," she said with a delighted cackle. "Goin' against camp colors tonight? There a special occasion I ain't know about?"

The fridge door closed behind Mary, and there was Chris—in loose jeans and an open shirt, showing off his white tank top. He snapped open a Mountain Dew, and his brows arched, teasing. "I wonder what that *special occasion* could be?" he said as he walked by, pausing to add in a hushed whisper: "What game are you playing, Halsworth? It won't work on me."

Wait. *What?*

Dylan hadn't dressed up. He was in a pair of jeans and a—well, okay, a black button-up, but it was hardly *dressed up*. He'd been this way for the contractors, too. And maybe he should have changed into a camp T-shirt before heading over here, but he couldn't be bothered. Mostly he wanted this evening over and done with.

He shrugged off the annoyance and settled on a light laugh.



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To Mary, he said—loudly enough for Chris to overhear as he strutted to the dining table—“I can assure you there’s *nothing* special about what I’ll be doing tonight.”

A snort made its way from the back of the room, and then a bellowed “You won’t be *doing* anything tonight” came over the heads of thirty kids.

As if suddenly realizing how inappropriate his comment was, Chris blushed—honest-to-God blushed—and stammered, “I mean, you better not be. We have other plans, remember?”

If Mary picked up on the hidden meaning of their back and forth, she didn’t say anything. Instead, she poured him a bowl of stew and potatoes. “Wait,” she said. “That one there is for Mr. Montgomery.” She loaded up a second plate. “That one’s for you. Want all of you well-fed, not powering yourself on sugary filth.”

“Mountain Dew isn’t sugary—”

Mary stopped him with a wan smile. “Yanno I don’t want to hear it.”

Maybe she didn’t, but that didn’t stop Mountain Dew from being his favorite pop. Had been ever since the mountain hiking trip he and Chris’s family had made together when they were kids. Twelve-year-old Chris had been fun, adventurous, and, yes, he’d been sarcastic—but they’d been on the same team, then. Them against their folks. They smuggled those cans of pop into their hiking packs and drank them on the sly.

Chris even dared him to drink an entire can without stopping, and Dylan had done it. His eyes had watered, and his throat had stung, but he’d done it. Including the ripper-burp right after. The burp that got them and their Mountain Dew caught—pop was against his mother’s health-conscious rules.

The rest of that trip, the only mountain dew they got was the one that woke them up with its cold morning grip.

Lost in the memory, he made his way to the chorus of kid-conversation and snuck into a free spot at the end of the table, next to Chris.

Without a word, he set the bowl in front of his neighbor. The can of pop sat on the smooth table between them. Dylan glanced up to find Chris staring at the can. Was he also thinking back to that trip? Or did something else play in his mind? Like when they were sixteen, at the skateboarding park, both sitting on the edge of the ramp. Dylan had said something to make Chris laugh mid-gulp, and he’d spat the whole thing out in one misty Mountain Dew cloud.

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Chris jerked when he caught Dylan's gaze and grabbed the pop. He took a long drink and nudged the kid to his right. "What's this bet you guys are yapping about?"

The kid, Ryan, shook his head. "You never heard of Lantern Night?"

Chris frowned, and Dylan found himself explaining. "Two teams are pitted against each other to make the best giant lantern."

Jason tapped at the table across from Ryan. "My team killed last year, and it will this year, too."

"Whatever. Bring it on."

Suddenly a shadow descended. Mary glowered down at Dylan and Chris, staring pointedly at their untouched bowls of stew. Folding her arms, she said, "You guys better be eating that."

Dylan picked up his fork and dug in. Chris angled his position toward Mary, flashing her a grin. "This is way too good to inhale," he said, though his stew hadn't been tried yet. "I want to savor your amazing cooking."

Chris picked up his fork and delicately scooped up some beef. He chewed slowly and swallowed with a "Mmm."

Mary was far too smart for that. "Schmoozing won't work, Mr. Montgomery. Next you'll be telling me you love having kids around."

Chris plastered on a smile that reeked of fake. "But I do love having the kids around. They're always welcome in my home." He gestured toward the hungry mouths.

Mary exchanged a look with Dylan—like she was reading his mind: *Yeah, right. Who does he think he's fooling?*

Dylan finished another forkful of rich, hot stew, and then shrugged, swallowing a mean smile. "So then, you wouldn't mind if we held a few camp events here? Like our lantern-building contest? Because your expansive backyard would be perfect for it."

Chris's smile widened, *thinned*. Dylan almost choked on a laugh.

Glancing up at Mary, Chris nodded. "Absolutely. Go for it."

Mary clapped a hand on both their shoulders; Dylan wasn't sure how hard she gripped Chris, but she dug into his shoulder tightly, as if she was telling him off for the smirk he was *so* failing to hide.

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“That’s the stuff I was talking about, Mr. Montgomery,” Mary said. “And I’m glad to see you and Mr. Halsworth working together again. It’s been too long.”

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Dylan sighed. Well, it was almost done. The evening was almost over. *Almost.*

At the end of three rounds of dinner, the kids and counselors had rowed back to camp. Now Mary had finished packing her Chevrolet and was leaving them with a curious wink.

What was that all about? Mary sure was radiant tonight. Seemed she was the only one to really approve of Dylan and Chris working together... Dylan nervously shoved his hands into his pockets and ducked back inside the mansion. He didn’t look over at Chris; staring at his shadow on the polished floor was enough.

In the kitchen, Dylan finished wiping the long table. The *already-cleaned* long table.

*Just hurry up and get it done. Kiss him again. Prove you don’t care at all.* But maybe he’d make it long and hard and deep. Anything that might get Chris to give in, admit he could be wrong—have this thing over with.

Chris sighed, and the sound had Dylan pausing a moment. And then came the sound of footsteps drawing nearer...

Dylan scrubbed harder at invisible splotches.

Something brushed his ass. Before he could jerk away from it, Chris was pulling his back pocket and urging him around.

Dylan folded with it. *Here it comes then.* Quickly Chris withdrew his hand from his pocket and grabbed a fistful of Dylan’s shirt.

Lurching with the movement, Dylan met Chris’s lips with a bruising thump. The kiss was indeed long, hard, and deep, but not by his design. Dammit. The guy was trying what Dylan was supposed to be trying!

Well, wasn’t this a game of wills?

Chris pushed his tongue against his and leisurely explored his mouth. Dylan slid a hand to Chris’s neck and squeezed, drawing him in tighter. Locked into that kiss, he pushed his neighbor back until he hit the wall. Chests pinned together, Dylan drew back just far enough to study Chris’s face.

In the half-light playing over his cheek, his lips looked swollen, his cheeks flushed.

Dylan stared hard into his hard brown eyes and shook his head. *I will not be the first to give up.* “Eight.”

“And nothing special about it.” Chris cocked his head. “Are you really going to have your kids here for daily activities? And how long until your kitchens are fixed?”

“The rest of summer camp, unfortunately. As for the daily activities, if you don’t want us here, I’ll just tell Mary you couldn’t stand the kids after all.”

“Bastard.”

“Knew you were trying to impress her!” Dylan leaned in. Lowered his voice. “How about this: say you could be wrong. End this 500 kiss thing now and other than meals, consider yourself left alone.”

Chris twisted and shoved Dylan back against the wall. The breath knocked from him, Dylan didn’t have a moment to prepare for the ninth kiss. This one whispered at his lip before dragging over his jaw to below his ear.

“Ten” he said and nibbled a kiss on Dylan’s earlobe.

The shivers were so intense Dylan couldn’t help letting out a ragged breath.

Chris pulled away, grinning.

*Bastard.*

Maybe they really were two peas in a pod.

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## **Chris**

A week passed.

As did fifty-three kisses. Rough, hurried, long, deep, strong, soft, languid, heated. None of them meant anything, and each one was... was...

Chris stalked over his grounds, heading toward the boat shed like he did every night after Dylan disappeared in his rowboat and clumsily splashed his way back to camp.

Stupid kisses.

Stupid competition.

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Stupid stubbornness.

It bothered him that Dylan wouldn't give up.

It bothered him more that *he* wouldn't give up. What was wrong with him? Why did he love the torture so much? Why did he damn well dream of the pressure of those lips and that body pressed against his?

It was the challenge in it.

No, more than that. If it had been anyone else, he might have dismissed the whole thing. Shrugged it off. Whatever. But because it was Halsworth... Because it was *him*, he had to press on. Would until the end.

To think they'd ever been best friends!

Chris glared over the moonlit water toward Camp Halsworth. Why he'd ever snuck over there most nights as a kid he would never understand.

Though, back then... back then he'd thought Dylan could never hurt him.

But he had. He'd sabotaged the boat Chris had worked on every Sunday for a year.

And then... then when he needed someone most in the world, when his parents had died, Dylan wasn't there. He was supposed to have known he'd need him, no matter that they hadn't been speaking for three years. He was just supposed to know...

Chris stopped moving, his throat tight, fists clenched in his pockets. "Shit." He craned his head toward the bright, starlit sky.

Every now and then that loss swept over him. So painful it rooted him to the spot.

He ripped himself toward his boat shed, shoving back the memories.

Wind rustled through the leaves of a nearby weeping willow, crickets sang, and—

Was that the sound of hushed whispers?

And were they coming from his shed?

Yanking open the door, he called out. "Who's in here?"

"Oh, shit!" came a familiar young voice.

Chris switched on the light. There, in his unfinished boat, were Jason and Holly. Flushed faces and rumpled shirts explained the situation perfectly. Kids sneaking out of camp to make out.

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“Out of the boat,” he ordered.

They hurriedly complied. Jason muttered an apology to Holly under his breath.

“How’d you get here?” Chris asked, herding the two out of his shed.

“We rowed in the dinghy.”

“Then that’s the way we’ll go back.”

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## Dylan

“Yeah, yeah, just a sec.” Dylan hurriedly stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. The pounding at his door continued.

But it wasn’t the alarm the counselors were supposed to use in an emergency, so at least he knew it was nothing serious.

He dripped his way to the front door, checked the peephole, groaned, and opened. Chris.

“Keep your kids under control, Halsworth. I don’t want them on my property after dark.”

Dylan peered over Chris’s shoulder. No kids to be seen. “What are you talking about?”

“Jason and Holly were having a make-out session in my boat!”

“Where are they now?”

“Bumped into Jeff. He’s sent them back to their cabins.”

“Ah, crap.” This didn’t look good for his security. Of course, sneaking out happened from time to time, but... he’d set extra supervision on the cabins. “Look,” he said, running a hand through his wet hair, “I’m sorry about that. I can assure you, it won’t happen again.”

Chris pushed his way inside. “It’d better not.”

Dylan stared after him. He hesitated, and then shut the door.

Chris continued, “It was *awkward*.” He scanned the modest living room, and then settled his gaze on him.

Suddenly the towel felt too small, too thin, too everything.

Chris blinked and turned sharply, heading for the kitchen.

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Leaving the guy to whatever it was he was doing in his kitchen, Dylan grabbed some fresh clothes. He shoved on a pair of jeans and a linen shirt. Barefoot, he trod back to the living room.

With a can of Mountain Dew in each hand, Chris lounged on his couch.

“Here,” Chris said, handing one of the cans to him.

The pop cooled his fingers, his throat even more. Were they both studiously drinking to avoid conversation?

He should break the silence.

And say what?

Chris beat him to it. “What’s on?” Picking up the remote, he switched on the TV. Baseball. Pirates against the Twins.

*This* was awkward. The last time Chris had hung at his place was when they were sixteen. Then, they’d shared easy banter and disgusting jokes. Sometimes they spiked their Mountain Dew with vodka—

Which was sounding good about now.

He grabbed some from the freezer along with some glasses.

The Twins played. They drank. They shot the shit about anything that wasn’t related to them. Sports. Cars. Camping equipment. More sports.

“Safe, dammit. Clearly fucking safe!” Chris poured himself another vodka-Mountain Dew mix.

Dylan drained the rest of his glass and set it beside Chris’s for a refill. “If we drank for every bad call, we’d be as drunk as that time in your cabin.”

That had been very close to the end of their friendship.

“Worst hangover of my life,” Chris mused. “My dad blew a fuse when I came home. I think I was still drunk.”

Dylan chuckled, but the humor quickly drained away. Late Mr. Montgomery had been strict, but he’d been a great dad. Always welcoming and accepting. When Chris came out, there’d been no family angst, just two parents who nodded and embraced him. Dylan still got choked up remembering...

He missed the Montgomerys.

Taking the glass Chris held out for him, he swallowed. “When was the last time you visited the cabin? It’s known as the haunted cabin around here. Every

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summer the kids ask me if I'll take them into the woods to see it." Every summer, he said no.

Too many memories.

That, and Chris leased the land—even if most of the public hiked through it anyway.

Chris shrugged and looked down at his glass. "A while ago."

They finished their drinks as the Twins entered the last inning. Dylan set his glass down. That was enough for him.

*Cling.* Another glass met his on the coffee table. And the back of Chris's hand brushed his. An alcohol-induced zing rolled through him, and for a moment, it was like he was riding surf.

Chris looked at him. They were frozen like that for a moment, and then Chris leaned in and kissed him. He tasted of Mountain Dew. Aftershave lingered faintly on his skin. Dylan breathed it in sharply, and the kiss intensified.

Fifty-four. Fifty-five. Fifty-six... Sixty.

When they broke, Dylan was on his back, Chris a warm, solid weight on top of him. Their gazes clashed as they caught their breath, and then that smug grin was back.

"Nope," Chris said. "Still nothing."

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## Chris

Chris was fucking exhausted. Kids were hard work. Once this summer was through, he'd make sure to avoid them the rest of his adult life.

Okay, so maybe they also made him crack up and said stupidly endearing things from time to time. But still, he would avoid...

Well, if Dylan was *really* hard up for help, he *might* offer to assist again or something. But only for emergencies. And because, despite whatever the rest of town might think of him, he wasn't totally selfish and cold-hearted.

Chris tossed the baseball up and caught it. Did it again. Then he looked across the field to where Jason was readying his bat. The kid was a bit of a smart-ass, but Chris liked him all the more for it.



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Was this really how Dylan remembered him as a kid?

Full of charisma and fun?

He smirked and pitched the ball. Jason swung. Bat hit ball with a mighty echoing *thwack*, and it was out of here. Before running to first base—or all the way home—he dropped the bat and high-fived Ryan behind him.

Then slowly, deliberately slowly, he jogged his home run.

Okay: full of charisma, fun, *and* arrogant.

He gave the boy a lift of his cap in a show of respect.

Jason inclined his head in acknowledgment.

So maybe, *maybe*, on occasion—if Dylan really, really needed it—he could offer to run a few baseball games?

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## Dylan

Dylan ate another spoonful of pudding. Across from him, Jason and Chris were arguing about which baseball teams would make it to the playoffs.

“Hardly, not with a pitcher like that.”

“Think the Pirates will make it again this year? Or was that a one-hit wonder?”

“Please.”

Funny to see Chris so laid back, genuinely engaged. It suited him having kids around. Mellowed out the smug in him.

“What are you smiling at, Halsworth?” Chris asked, scraping the rest of the pudding from his bowl and then licking his spoon. “What?”

Dylan’s smile widened. “Nothing. It’s just a good day, is all.” Especially since the contracting team working on his kitchens had said they might finish earlier than the original quote. “Maybe I’ll tell you later.”

*Later* happened once the kids had cleared out, and Chris had backed him into a wall. A kiss tickled his bottom lip, and Dylan ran his teeth over the tingle to make it stop.

“Now, tell me,” Chris said, inching toward kiss one hundred and eighteen. “What has you in such a pleasant mood?”

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One hundred and nineteen. One hundred and twenty. “We’ll be out of your hair in just over a week. Contractors will finish early.”

Dylan expected a whoop of joy and a horribly relieved smile. Instead, he got a slow nod.

“Finish early?” Chris pushed off the wall. “I mean, yeah... great.” Then, after a pause, “Be good to have the place all to myself again.”

Chris and his bachelor pad mansion. This big, echoing mansion.

Dylan pitied him.

“Better race through the rest of these damn kisses, then,” Chris said, resuming his cocky lean. “Sooner the better.”

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The next day, Dylan stood between Jeff and Chris, shaking his head at Jason and Ryan playing Twister outside on the sprayed grass. Five girls surrounded the two boys in a crescent moon, with a grinning Holly at the board spinning the arrow.

So he and Chris weren’t the only ones who couldn’t say no to a challenge.

“Come on,” Jason said toward the grass as Ryan shoved his leg to red, knocking his ear. “We can handle your bet, Hols. But can you girls handle ours?”

Holly spun the arrow. “Left hand blue.”

Jason and Ryan crashed to the spray-painted grass. *Chris’s* spray-painted grass. But the guy had taken it better than Dylan expected—barely blinked when he told him the kids had defaced his backyard with red, green, yellow, and blue spots.

Jason picked himself out of the tangle and helped Ryan up. He slung an arm around his friend’s shoulder and nicked his head at Holly. “Me and my buddy here dare you girls to listen to our retelling of Red Ribbon.”

Holly snickered. “Think we’re scared of a stupid ghost story?”

A smirk twitched Jason’s lips. “Oh, you will be.” Then, turning, the boy snatched Jeff’s gaze. “Did you ask about camping at the haunted cabin?”

Jeff shoved his hands in his pockets and faced Dylan.

*Here it comes, just like every year.*

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“Well, you heard him,” Jeff said with a shrug, “should we set something up?”

“Spook-night. Spook-night. Spook-night,” Jason and Ryan chanted, fists pumping above their heads.

Just like every year, Dylan shook his head, and then stopped at Chris's arched brow and crossed arms.

“Why not?” Chris said. “What camp doesn't run a horror night for the older kids?”

*Camp Halsworth, that's what camp.*

The chanting grew into a chorus as the girls joined in. Even Jeff was tapping his foot along with the beat.

Dylan took Chris aside, out of earshot from Jeff and the kids. “The haunted cabin is yours, and—”

Chris snorted and gestured around them. “Mine? Hasn't stopped you using it yet.”

Dylan fished for another excuse, anything to keep away from the cabin—*those memories*. “I don't have enough counselors to take the eldest out camping for the night.”

“If you're *that* desperate,” Chris said, shifting from foot to foot. “I guess I could... come with you.” He followed it with a shrug.

Dylan blinked and looked around them. Chris hadn't spoken loudly enough for anyone to overhear. “Are you... *volunteering* to help us?” He checked again. Nope, no one who could spin this to the rest of town to gain Chris favor. Well, Mary would like it if she heard about it... Maybe that was his angle?

And yet, the way he was offering... it seemed more genuine than the times before.

Chris shifted suddenly. “Don't get the wrong idea, Halsworth. I just see this as a prime opportunity to scare the bejesus out of you.”

Jason came out of nowhere, ramming against his side with a hoot of laughter. “Yeah, scare the girls *and* Mr. Halsworth. This'll be epic.”

“Scare me?” Dylan said, readjusting his Camp Halsworth cap. “I've lived my whole life around campfire stories. I ain't been scared yet.”

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Scanning the hopeful, chanting chorus of kids behind them, he gave in. “Fine,” he called out to them, effectively silencing the crowd. “Friday we camp at the haunted cabin.” To Chris, he said, “Bring it.”

“Done deal,” Chris nodded his head toward the mansion. “Could I see you in private for a second, Mr. Halsworth?” To Jason he said, “We need to discuss the scary-ass details.”

Inside, Chris shut the door behind them and cuffed Dylan’s wrist, yanking him back. Dylan’s back hit the cool, hard wood. Chris leaned against him. Length to length. Nose to nose.

“One hundred and thirty-one,” Chris said as he hovered toward a kiss. Dylan’s hands went to the lapels of Chris’s shirt, and he pulled him that last half-inch to his mouth. Slightly chapped lips and rough stubble moved over his mouth and chin. Their tongues met in a hurried clash, and Chris was pressing harder against him.

Dylan drew his hands up over his shoulders to the back of his neck. With a fist full of short hair, he pulled. Chris answered with another thrust of his tongue.

“Yep,” Dylan murmured when they took a second to catch a breath. “Those are some scary-ass details.”

Chris pulled back. A grin stretched his lips, and his eyes were lit with amusement.

Dylan shared the moment with a grin of his own.

They broke apart. Chris ran a hand through his hair and then hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his shorts.

Dylan slowly peeled himself off the door. “Guess we should...” He gestured toward the backyard.

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “Yeah.”

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## **Chris**

Chris could tell his story had crept Dylan out. Could tell by the startled little jump he gave when the fire crackled, and then again when a twig snapped somewhere in the distance behind the decrepit-looking cabin.

Holding his smirk in check, he encouraged Jason to tell his story. Between him and the other counselors—Jeff, Dylan, and Heather—ten girls and boys

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huddled under woolen blankets. Holly kept trying to laugh off the boy's story, but her laugh grew strained by the end of it; she and some of the others—boys included—kept eyeing up the tents, as if they wished they could crawl into them and be done with the horror part of the evening.

Of course, none of them wanted to leave the group alone.

“...the red ribbon curled around the girl's neck, softly at first, so that she thought this was something magical, something good. And then she heard a whispering in her head, telling her to walk into the woods, telling her there was more magic waiting for her. All she had to do was step inside the haunted cabin and let out the ghost of Mr. Ripple. A sad, lonely man, who'd died alone in the woods...”

Susan shivered violently next to him, and Chris took pity on her. He whispered, “It's just a story.” When her teeth started chattering, he added, “I know for a fact that cabin is not haunted.”

“H-how do you know?” she asked him quietly.

He fished in his pocket for his keys. On it was the key to the cabin. “Because it's mine. I used to hang out here on weekends all the time, with Dy—” He swallowed. “The only reason it looks scary is because I haven't taken care of it.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Grew out of it.” *Didn't have anyone to hang out here with anymore.*

Looking over the fire, he found Dylan watching him. Chris clasped the keys in his fist and stuffed them back into his pocket.

“...each step the girl took, the ribbon shifted around her neck, comfortably, lulling... And then right in the middle of the woods, where no one but her friends could hear her thrash about—where no one could help her, the ribbon tightened, and tightened, and tightened...”

Holly screamed when Jason snuck a hand to the back of her neck and squeezed. Once she'd recovered, she glowered at a giggling Jason. “Just you wait,” she threatened, before the counselors broke up the storytelling and sent the girls and boys into their separate tents.

Chris sat alone on his log, unable to tear his gaze from the cabin. So easily he'd suggested they come out here, but why was that? How did the offer run so

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quickly off his tongue, when he'd not been able to force himself out here for years? Sure, this was exactly the type of thing Mary wanted to see from him, but that thought hadn't processed when he'd made the offer. Like that first kiss with Dylan, it'd come spontaneously. Without real thought.

The fire fizzled to glowing embers, and the chatter of kids in their tents slowly died down. Something moved beside him, and he turned expecting to see Dylan—

A large garden spider scuttled over the log.

Chris leaped off the log and over the ember pit, coming to a screeching halt in front of a quietly conversing Dylan and Jeff. He blinked. They'd been sitting there all along?

Dylan raised a brow. "You good there, Montgomery?"

Chris squared his shoulders. "Sure thing. Just off to my tent. Night."

Jeff wished him a good sleep.

Nothing came from Dylan but a knowing smirk and a pointed glance towards the log Chris had abandoned.

"Whatever," he said and rounded the guys.

Dylan watched him over his shoulder, and while Jeff was facing away, Chris kissed his middle finger and blew it over to Dylan.

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## Dylan

Dylan shook Jeff three times, hoping to shut off the snores, but it wasn't happening. The guy slept like a log truck over a gravel road, loud and solid. Nope, he wasn't having any more of this. He wriggled out of his sleeping bag, threw it over his arm along with his camping pillow and snuck out of the two-man tent. Save a whistling wind and Jeff's snores, the rest of the camp was quiet.

Crunching over grass and wilted leaves, he made for Chris's tent. He wasn't a foot away when there came a shuffling and a *ziiiiiip*.

Chris popped his head out and rolled his eyes. "Thought I heard you." He ducked back into the double tent and Dylan snuck in after him.

"Jeff snores like you wouldn't believe," Dylan said, hunched in the small space.

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Scooting back into his sleeping bag, Chris laughed. "I can hear it from here."

Dylan listened to the distant droning. "Yeah, that's nothing. Up close it actually vibrates." He dumped his sleeping bag on the ground. He couldn't crash with Heather, so this was his only option. "I'm setting up next to you in here."

A rather loud snort came in answer. "How about no?"

"No?" Dylan sank to his knees on his feather-down sleeping bag. He wasn't going back to snore central. No way. Luckily, he knew just how to play Chris into letting him crash here. "You afraid something might happen?" He jerked his thumb toward the rest of camp. "'Cause I got about a dozen reasons why they won't. The tippy-top of which being—*gross*."

Chris laughed. "Dude, that isn't the issue."

"Why not then?"

Milky moonlight filtered through the open tent flap, showcasing the evil grin that twisted Chris's lips. "I just like watching you suffer." Chris shifted further into his sleeping bag and rested on his side, head propped up on his hand. "Tell you what, though, my sadist side will be satisfied if you just admit to being scared *snickerdoodle-less* by my story."

Dylan rested his pillow at the top of his sleeping bag. "I was *not*—"

Chris snatched his pillow and stuffed it behind him. "You want a place to sleep or not?"

"You're cruel, Montgomery."

"Yeah, but you'll get me back for it. Two peas in a pod, remember?"

They both grinned.

"Fine," Dylan said, gesturing for his pillow back. "I got creeped out by your story. Good enough?"

"Hmm, not really. But I take pity on you." He threw the pillow, and Dylan caught it against his chest. "Don't ever say I'm not compassionate."

"Bastard." Dylan climbed into the sleeping bag, turning on his side to face away from the man.

Their quiet breathing turned out to be more distracting than Jeff's snores. Dylan's whole body was tense as he tried to convince himself to shut off, to not

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think of the man behind him or count his breaths to check if they were as unsteady as his own. After half an hour, he clenched his jaw and twisted to his other side—

Chris was watching him. When their gazes clashed, he had the audacity—and the confidence—to raise a brow.

Under his breath, Dylan let out an uncensored curse and leaned in to kiss him once more, hard and brief. Full of frustration. The frustration of not being able to sleep, that was. Nothing else.

Absolutely *not*.

He jerked back a couple of feet and slammed his head back down on the pillow. Chris's grin mocked him. "Not even tolerable in the dark."

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## Chris

Morning found Chris locked tightly around a warm and wriggling Dylan; a pleasant pressure rubbed against his morning-hard cock—

He froze. What-the-fuck?

He snapped away, knocking into the tent wall and making it wobble. Dylan stirred.

"Huh?" a groggy Dylan murmured. "What's happening?"

Chris didn't say anything about the reason for the sudden scuffle. Nor would he. Ever.

He willed his wood away. "Nothing. It's time to get up."

A laugh rumbled out of Dylan. "That coming from you?"

"Yeah, whatever. I just couldn't sleep with a big lug like you sucking up all the good air." Lie.

Dylan shifted into a sitting position and unzipped his sleeping bag. "Spooked out by the stories after all?"

Spooked out by *something*.

"Let's get this show on the road. I have things to do."

And other things to forget.

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Chris finished the fiberglass covering and stepped back to admire his handiwork. It'd taken a few months, but he was more than halfway done on his classic mahogany runabout. He ran his gaze over the bow and smiled. Looked authentic. Just like a past classic.

Next he had to install the motor and propeller shaft, and then deck the hull. He couldn't wait to take it out for a spin. Show Dylan how to really drive a boat—

From a distance, of course. He wouldn't actually let the guy sit in there with him.

A sharp frown cut into his brow, and he forced himself to focus on cleaning up. Dylan didn't belong in this shed with his beautiful boat. He didn't belong anywhere so close to him.

Fuck. He needed a break. Everywhere he turned, Dylan was there. Kids were in his kitchen three times a day, or out in his yard, or—well, he just couldn't escape the word Halsworth.

Grabbing his wallet, he made his way to Rosita, his utility boat, and motored around the lake to town. After docking, he made the ten-minute walk to the local café. The sweet smell of freshly-baked raspberry white chocolate scones hit his nose, and he followed it right to the counter. He resisted buying one and stuck to his usual latte.

"You having this here today?" Mary asked, looking toward his usual table in the corner of the cozy couch-filled room. It was rather strange of her to ask. When in the last ten years had he done differently?

"Just like every time," he said, and picked his way to the small, sunshine-yellow table that offered a view of the lake.

Mary's words followed him there. "People change their minds sometimes."

When she carried over his latte, she continued her little speech. "I had this guy who absolutely hated eggplant. Said he'd never in a million years try it." She rested her hands on her hips and grinned.

Chris frowned; he didn't get where this was going. "Okay," he said, picking up his latte and taking a sip.

"Well, he came in here the other day, didn't he? Ordered the savory-pie special. I didn't tell him there was eggplant in it, 'course, and he gobbles the thing up and orders a second. Some people just don't know what they like until

they taste the pie, you know? One little taste can make 'em see what they're missing."

"I like this spot, thank you," Chris said and resumed drinking.

Mary shook her head and retreated, muttering, "Thick, that one."

Thick? He wasn't thick! He glared in her direction, and a heavy laugh came from across the room. He swung his gaze sharply toward it. Marco, from the gym outside of Grand Rapids. They'd flirted, from time to time; they'd not jumped each other, but the tension was brewing there. "Hey, Marco. What brings you here?"

Marco made a path to Chris and squeezed into the seat adjacent to him. "Just passing through. Haven't seen you at the gym for a while now."

It was a question, of course. *What have you been doing? Is there still a chance for us to have naked fun?*

Marco added, "Actually, I have a day off today. Was going to go for a hike, but do you want to get a drink?"

Chris shifted uncomfortably in his chair, straining for a grin. He lifted his latte. "Already have one of those."

Marco didn't waste time. He leaned in, pausing with his mouth close to Chris's ear. "Not the kind of drink I was thinking of."

Setting his glass down, Chris shook his head.

A frown cut into Marco's brow as he rested back in the chair. "You with someone, Montgomery?"

"No. Absolutely not! But... I have a bunch of kids back at camp—it's just not a good time."

"Right. Gotcha. Another time, then?"

Chris blinked and shrugged. "I mean... yeah, sure. Another time..."

Marco winked and made a quick retreat.

Chris watched him go. His backside looked firm, tight; his jeans were slung just right. But—nothing. He just wasn't feeling it today...

He sipped his coffee. Fuck, he needed to hurry these last kisses with Dylan. The whole thing was screwing with his head. What they were doing didn't mean anything. He barely tolerated the guy. And the kisses were... Really,

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okay, yes, they were good. But that was only because Chris was such an expert. He could make Big Bird rock a kiss. It had nothing to do with *Dylan*.

Hell no.

Chris stared into his glass. The coffee was murky, just like his damn thoughts. Maybe he should finally admit to Dylan he was wrong. Jason and his 500 kisses *could* have merit. But if he admitted that, it might sound like the contest was affecting him. Like it was messing with more than outward body parts.

Which it wasn't.

He tipped the last of the coffee into his mouth and headed back to the counter. He planted twenty bucks on the counter. "Two scones to go please. Keep the change."

Mary returned bluntly, "And you keep up the good community work."

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## **Dylan**

"Two more days, you think?" Dylan asked the foreman, who settled his yellow helmet back on his head.

"Yep. Then we'll be outta here."

Dylan could've hugged the guy. Life would be back to its old status-quo soon enough.

Over the foreman's shoulder, through a gap in the trees, Chris's boat motored into view. It would have been an everyday sight, except the boat was angled toward his property. Curiosity getting the better of him, Dylan took his leave and arrowed for the jetty.

Chris docked. There was a short clash of acknowledging gazes as he tied Rosita up and gracefully leaped onto the jetty.

Dylan took in Chris's steady, confident gait, and his own step faltered. His skin prickled with every step nearer, and a shiver rippled through him.

Shaking it off, he cleared his throat. "What brings you to Camp Halsworth?"

Chris lifted a brown paper bag and stopped a foot from him. "I scored us some scones. Now I was hoping to score a little something else."

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The guy did have a way of making Dylan laugh. “You’re to the point.” He beckoned him down the jetty, to the bench he’d erected in memory of Chris’s parents. It overlooked their favorite part of the lake.

Chris looked at the embossed bronze plate, and his Adam’s apple jutted out with a swallow.

“Or we could sit somewhere else?” Dylan suggested suddenly. He hadn’t meant to hit a sore spot. In fact, it hadn’t occurred to him that Chris hadn’t seen it before. It’d been there so many years...

“Here’s fine,” Chris said and sank onto it, still blinking rapidly. He dropped the brown paper bag between them.

Dylan didn’t have a clue what to say. The tension between them felt heavy, taut—close to snapping point. He peeked into the bag and tried changing the subject. “You bought us Mary’s famous raspberry and white chocolate scones! I could kiss you.”

The words had flown out of his mouth in a teasing manner, but instead of lightening the situation, it felt like he’d only managed to add a layer of awkward on top of it.

Chris drew his gaze away from the lake to him, staring intently, as if searching for something. An answer. The old Dylan that was his best friend, perhaps. Then Chris seemed to jerk out of the moment. “Kiss me then,” he said, “that’s why I’m here after all. I just want to get the rest of them out of the way.”

Dylan was all for speeding things up and forgetting the whole thing, but... but... “What’s the hurry?”

Chris’s smirk didn’t seem to fit him right. Too large. Too wobbly. “What isn’t the hurry?” Chris said. “You dislike it as much as I do... right?”

Dylan paused. Dislike it... yeah, that’s what he thought of their kisses. What he always thought about them... “Right.”

Chris narrowed his eyes toward the scones, fished them out of the bag, and handed one to him.

Crunchy on the outside, fluffy on the inside, chocolate baked to perfection, and Dylan still couldn’t enjoy it.

When Chris wiped a loose crumb off Dylan’s lips and followed it with a light kiss, Dylan’s skin prickled all over again.

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“I guess that makes one hundred and forty-five,” Chris murmured, and Dylan found himself shaking his head. *Actually, it's not.*

He swiveled on the bench toward his ex-best-friend. “Really, it's one hundred and forty-six.”

“Are you saying I miscounted? Because I don't think so—”

Dylan interrupted him. “No, I mean, it depends on what you count as our first kiss.”

“You mean...” Chris laughed suddenly, but there was something panicked about it. “You still remember that?”

“I was sixteen; it was my first kiss. Of course I remember it.”

Chris broke a chunk off his scone and threw it into the lake, toward the lazily looping swans.

Dylan pushed. He had to; it was something he'd pondered for a long time. “One day there's the promise of your lips on mine, and then the next you were gone. Off courting your next conquest.”

Chris crumbled the rest of his scone and dropped it into the water. “You were my friend.”

“Exactly, I was your *friend*,” Dylan said. Friends didn't do that shit to one another.

Chris shrugged and looked out toward his boat, as if he were regretting coming over here. Typical Montgomery thing to do. Shrug off anything that was real. Anything that involved feelings.

“Whatever,” Dylan muttered. “Just go if you can't handle this.”

Chris swung his head back in his direction, and Dylan immediately swallowed his anger at the sheen in his neighbor's eyes. “We were too young. It never would have worked. I didn't... didn't...”

“Didn't what? Like me like that? Yeah, I got the message loud and clear when you stood me up on our supposed date.” They'd said they'd meet at the haunted cabin. Dylan had snuck out of the house to meet him there at midnight. He'd been so cheesy as to bring along a rose.

He waited until dawn, convincing himself Chris couldn't figure a way to sneak out, that he'd get out there eventually. Dawn came and went; Dylan slumped home. Redressed, went to school.

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Chris didn't spare him a single glance the entire day, and then... then when Dylan went to confront him, at the bike shed at the back of school—

Well, the guy had been there hadn't he? With his tongue down Joseph McHay's throat.

Dylan shook off the emptiness that consumed him remembering that day. He tossed the rest of his scone toward the swans.

Chris stumbled over his words. Not so suave today. "What I meant was I didn't..."

"Care?" Dylan said, shrugging his shoulders. "What, Chris, just spit it out—"

The man lurched to his feet. "I didn't want it not to work! Back then I thought... Jesus, I thought if we waited... But you wouldn't listen and then you *keyed my boat*. You knew how long I spent on that!"

Glued to the bench, Dylan couldn't move—couldn't even speak. And then he remembered how he'd taken his key to the haunted cabin and, in a fit of hurt, marked up the side of Chris's boat with the words 'man slut.' His voice crackled. "That was... what I did was out of line. I never should have reacted like that."

Chris stumbled back a few steps. Again with the indifferent shrugging. "Yeah, well whatever. You know what? It doesn't matter. We can take these kisses as slow as you like. I'm never going to feel anything for you. I'm never going to admit I'm wrong."

And with a dimpled smile that didn't reach the guy's eyes, Chris twisted and hightailed out of there, leaving Dylan alone on the cool bench with their crumbs. Crumbs of the past that they needed to brush away and finally forget.

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Two days later, the construction work was completed. The last of the subcontractor's trucks made dust clouds down the gravel path as they zipped out of there. Dylan folded his arms and watched the clouds slowly settle. He thought he'd be more relieved that they were done, and he *was*... but...

Well, he was ten thousand dollars poorer, now, wasn't he? *That* was why he felt unsettled; why too much acid gnawed at his gut.

Over his shoulder, he took in the dining hall, the roof repaired, its new tiles bright against the older ones. All he had to do was wait for the final inspection that afternoon, and once he got the thumbs up, the kids could eat at camp again.

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No more bothering Chris.

Dylan kicked at the gravel, sending it scuttling down the decline toward the lakeshore and the jetty.

Chris.

He'd avoided the man the last two days, sending Jeff to be in charge with the kids. It wasn't because he didn't want to see Chris, either. Because... well, honestly he was getting used to having the cocky guy around—seeing him wasn't such a bother anymore. And wasn't there, perhaps, a little more to him than snark and charm? How he'd looked at the wood and wrought iron, at the bronze plaque with his parents' names on it...

His stomach twisted again.

The real reason he avoided Chris was because... he was ashamed, wasn't he?

He'd tended toward self-pity in the past; had dwelled on all the ways Chris had hurt him, but... he'd been a part of it, too. A big, stupid part.

Staring over the lake to the edge of Chris's property, Dylan sighed and headed for his dinghy. It was time to man up and face him again.

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Dylan found Chris hammering at a loose plank on his jetty. He wore jeans and a tank top, and the sun beamed down on him, highlighting the sheen of sweat over his upper arms and brow. Dylan almost paused just to watch him—

Chris glanced up over the water. Their gazes met for a fraction of a second, and then Chris continued pounding away.

Jumping out of his dinghy, Dylan strode toward him. A dozen feet away, Chris dropped his hammer and stood. Shoulders set hard, like he was expecting resistance of some kind. "What do you want, Halsworth?"

Three feet away, two, one—

Dylan kept going until they were less than an inch apart. He wrapped his arms around the man's shoulders and hugged him. Hugged him for all he was worth.

Chris tensed in his grip, and Dylan spoke at his ear. "I was an ass. A complete ass to key your boat. I'm embarrassed, and I'm sorry."

Chris relaxed, resting into the embrace, and they stayed like that for a long while. Dylan should have let go already, but he wasn't quite ready. It felt

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comfortable holding the man like this, and his stomach had lost its acidic twist. Now it sort of fluttered. Light and at ease.

Breathing in a mix of sweat and aftershave, Dylan squeezed Chris again on impulse. A soft puff of breath hit his neck in answer, and a shiver rolled through him. Finally, he untangled them, and then leaned in and kissed Chris lightly on the mouth. This time he didn't jest about it being gross or how hard it was to suffer through it because this one wasn't. It was... an apology. He meant it.

"That's why I came over," Dylan said and slowly retreated down the jetty. "Just that."

Chris stood there with a frown cutting into his brow, a finger tracing the kiss he'd left on his mouth.

Dylan swallowed, jumped into his dinghy, and rowed home.

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## **Chris**

After the kids had cleared out, and the dinner dishes were done, Chris took Dylan's hand, threaded their fingers together, and pulled him into the living room. He kissed him at the door and again at the couch. Flicking on the television, Chris kissed him some more. So what, they'd gone from saying they hated it to just saying nothing? It didn't stop it from being true. Of course he hated it. It was just... saying it all the time was redundant. They both knew these kisses were nothing but numbers on the way to 500 and out of this competition.

Still, he couldn't quite shake off the shivery feeling Dylan had left him with on the jetty.

He'd been convinced Dylan would avoid coming over for dinner with the kids after that, but lo and behold, he'd been the first to arrive.

And, like always, he'd be the last to leave.

Chris smiled and dropped to the couch. Dylan lounged next to him in his jeans and a blue Camp Halsworth T-shirt that'd hitched at the side to reveal the red elastic of boxer-briefs.

"What're we watching?" Dylan asked, looking at him out the corner of his eye.

"Baseball. Should be any time now." In the meantime, since the commercials were so damn boring...



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He leaned over, snagged a fistful of that blue T-shirt, and brought those soft lips once more to his. His other hand curved around Dylan's back, and he dragged it slowly to that triangle of skin peeking out at the hip.

Dylan's breath hitched, and Chris wanted to make that happen again. It gave him goosebumps. Big, shivery goosebumps—

Dylan pulled away. "One thing, Montgomery."

Chris tensed. "Halsworth?"

"The inspector gave the dining hall the okay. The kids can eat back at camp."

"Oh." He grabbed for the remote and fumbled with the channel buttons. He hated commercials, dammit. The numbers seemed to blur, but he pressed anyway. "So that's it? None of those rascals coming back over here?"

"You're a free man again."

He shrugged. "Well, I... You know..." Fuck, his throat was tight. "They were always saying such ridiculous things."

*Why can't I admit one true thing? Why can't I just say, 'It was fun while it lasted' or... or that I'll miss the noise—the stomping, laughing, screaming...*

Dylan reached over and clasped his hand around the remote, their fingers touching. "You okay?" he asked. "The kids will miss traipsing around this big house of yours."

Big and empty house, now.

Fuck.

He shrugged and stared at the screen. "Maybe, I mean, you know, I might miss them a little, too."

Dylan pulled at the remote and plugged in the sports channel. "We're still going to use your yard for lantern night this Friday. Mary is hella excited about it."

Chris closed his eyes and nodded. He still had lantern night. Good, he'd be able to give a proper goodbye to the kids.

Standing suddenly, because his throat was too tight and his eyes were prickling, he said, "Mountain Dew? I'm just gonna grab some..."

He marched out of the room to the kitchen. The fridge opened with a squeal, and Chris lingered in the cool air, resting his head against the top frame, staring

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at the packs of pop. He was all fucking out of whack today. He needed to get a grip.

He snapped two cans free, straightened his shoulders, and headed back to the lounge. To his ex-best-friend turning... friend again?

The lump in his throat tightened.

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Lantern night. Though technically, it was only evening. The sun was setting slowly over his backyard. Sheets and sheets of taped cardboard stretched before him; kids sat on the grass, craft knives in action as they carved out their design. Their team had decided on a dragon theme, and—*wow*.

Chris had never seen anything like it. These kids were talented—the dragon cut-out displayed a long snout, spanned wings, and a snaking tail.

He worked alongside Mary and Heather and a whole bunch of kids he barely knew the names of. Except for Jason and Holly and Tom and Carlo and Susan and—huh, maybe he did know all their names.

Mary bumped her shoulder into his side. “What you day-dreaming about?”

He startled. “What? Nothing.”

“You were smiling.” She leaned in and whispered, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you love this.” She gestured around them to the kids, the lantern mess, and toward the other corner of the field where Dylan was laughing and rubbing his hands together.

Chris stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged, and Mary shook her head. “I like this Mr. Montgomery,” she said. “A kind, caring part of the community. I hope you keep it up after I have your lease renewed.”

He whipped toward her. “Really?”

“Yes, really—” She didn’t get to finish; Chris yanked her into a twirling hug that had her yelping and laughing at the same time.

“Stop the hugs,” Jason screeched. “We need the cellophane, take those and go, go, go!”

Holly tugged his sleeve as soon as he’d let Mary go. “Get there before we get left with baking paper!”

Chris followed his orders, racing to the end of the half-mile garden where the supplies were stacked.

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Running toward the supplies on behalf of the other team was Dylan. *Of course.*

These were the rules: counselors/adults fought for the materials; kids were the only ones allowed to work with them.

And of course, there was only one set of each material.

Mary had won them the craft knives, leaving the rival team to use safety scissors and their hands.

A glance over his shoulder indicated the other team was ready for the cellophane part of their lantern-making, too.

So it was a race. Game on.

He accelerated into a flat-out run. Dylan sped up, too. They shared a determined glance and zoomed their gaze in on the prize. The box of cellophane sat between a box of tinfoil and a box of string.

Kids chanted behind them, a chorus of 'Montgomery' and 'Halsworth'.

Chris grinned; he was a foot ahead. He'd get there first—

Dylan dove, tackling the box of cellophane and crushing it, sliding into Chris's legs.

Stumbling over the man, he cursed. Well, the kid-friendly variety of cursing, anyway. "Fudge snickerdoodles! You *dove*?"

A hard chuckle came in response, and Dylan hauled himself to his feet, arm hooked around the cellophane box. "Have fun with the baking paper, sunshine." He jogged off, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be back for the tape before you can blink."

Not going to happen.

Grabbing the box filled with rolls of baking paper he raced back, dumped it, and turned right back around again.

Dylan had already started on his run for the tape, but he didn't seem to be running as fast as before.

"Worn out already, Halsworth?" Chris called out as he charged for the supplies.

"Just giving you a chance to catch up, Montgomery. It's not as fun beating you otherwise."

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He laughed, and this time he did the diving. But not for the tape. He tackled Dylan around the waist, bringing him to the ground with a thump.

Dylan spat out a mouthful of dirt and grass. "Cheater."

Already off him and snagging the tape, Chris shook his head. "Not against the rules." He found the second best option for the rival team. String. He dropped it at Dylan's nose. "There you go. Now let's see who wins this thing."

Laughing, Dylan climbed to his knees and swiped the box of string. They stared at one another for a few long seconds, and Chris could feel his smile widening. It just wouldn't go away. Wouldn't even lessen.

Dylan pulled his gaze away suddenly. "Till our next round," he said quietly, and Chris wasn't quite sure he was talking about the lantern-making competition.

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Chris grinned and moved back up the path toward the gleaming lanterns. Their team kicked ass, in the end. Though mostly because Dylan's team had trouble stringing on their cellophane...

God, he was smiling like crazy. He wasn't sure when he'd last felt so... so elated. It was as if his blood skipped and danced, making his insides itch.

*Because Mary had agreed to renew his lease on Bennington Way...*

The counselors herded kids to the boats for curfew, and Dylan stayed behind to help clean up. As always.

Chris glanced at the silhouette in front of the giant dragon-themed lantern. Orange-gold flickered behind Dylan as he waved to the rowing kids just before they slipped out of view.

Chris cut across the grass toward him. "You love cleaning up, don't you?"

The silhouette turned to face him—except now, he wasn't just an outline. From here, the lanterns cast soft light on Dylan's sharp nose, strong jaw, arching brow. Arms folded.

"Why would you say that?" came Dylan's gravelly, amused voice.

"Why else do you always offer to help?"

"Someone has to do it."

"You could have asked any one of your employees."

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Close—half-a-foot close—Chris stopped.

Dylan looked out toward the shimmering navy lake. Copper strands in his dark hair glowed.

Chris's skin tingled and tension stretched between them, sudden and sharp. Dylan shifted and, slowly, he drew his gaze to him. His mouth opened, poised to say something. Chris flinched. Something serious gleamed in his neighbor's eye. Whatever he was going to say, it would be game-changing, and... and...

Leaning in, Chris took the words away.

His tongue stole inside Dylan's mouth, twisting, seeking, exploring. They grabbed each other, groins surging forward.

Chris fought the urge to liquefy in those strong arms and sink deeper into the embrace.

The kiss gained speed, gained need, and their hands were seeking flesh under their shirts. Chris's skin sang. Kisses with Dylan were intense. Never had they been like this before...

Hands tangled in his hair, and the slight sharp pull had him moaning. Resting their foreheads together, they both caught their breath.

Dylan chuckled. "One hundred and seventy-two."

Something pissed Chris off about that number. Like it was an intruder, and it didn't fucking belong there. Not *that* time.

But what-the-shit-ever, right?

He snagged Dylan into another kiss, and another: 173, 174, 175, 176... He kept going, languid kisses turning into hot, hard little nips on his lips and then over his jaw, down his neck. 188, 189, 190, 191, *more*.

His fingers roamed over Dylan's shirt; he undid the buttons, leaving kisses in their place against his hard chest. Shirt undone, Chris resumed kissing Dylan's neck as he drew his hands under the fabric and pushed it off his shoulders.

His lips moved back to Dylan's chest. God, his skin was so warm, firm, and yet... it pebbled with goosebumps under his lips. He liked that he could do that to him.

Reaching a nipple, he flicked out his tongue. A sharp intake of breath and a hand threading into the back of his hair had Chris taking the nipple into his mouth and sucking.

---

The moan that came had Chris's cock straining against his jeans. He shifted, dropping slowly to his knees, kissing a path down past Dylan's navel.

He reached to the belt blocking his path, hands poised to pull it off, and—  
And what the fuck was he *doing*?

Why did it pull at him so achingly to continue? To take his... *neighbor* in his mouth and...

*Make him yell out my name! My name from his lips...*

Chris jerked back, hurriedly getting to his feet. "Keep your fucking pants on. I still feel nothing."

*Nothing.*

Fuck.

He strode toward his house and didn't look back.

\*\*\*\*

## Dylan

Dylan grabbed his shirt and shoved it back on. The door slammed shut just as he began jogging after Chris.

He rang the doorbell, and when that did nothing, pounded on the hard wood. How he wished he had on him the key Chris had given him a few weeks back. "Come on, Chris. Open up. We're not sixteen anymore. We have to talk about this."

There came a shuffle from behind the door, and that's when Dylan knew the guy was right there, listening.

He stopped pounding, flattening his hand on the wood and leaning into it, as if he could whisper through. "Please, let's just talk."

Chris cracked his door open, but the chain stopped Dylan from pushing his way in.

"Thank you," Dylan said, content with something at least. But before he could continue, Chris spoke.

"You win, Halsworth. I give up. I'm wrong. Jason could be right. The 500 kiss thing doesn't as hell work for me, but it's not to say it couldn't work on some other guy. Now, we're done. Game over. Goodbye."

"Wait—"

---

The door shut in his face. Dylan leaned his forehead against it, his breath bouncing off the wood back to him. He wanted to tell Chris the rest. Wanted to tell him what he'd been about to at the lanterns, before their kiss.

Now it would have to wait.

Dylan retreated from the porch and turned off the lantern lights, but his stomach was knotted tight, and he couldn't shake off the ghost of Chris's kisses.

Damn, what he had to say couldn't wait long.

Picking his way to his dinghy, he devised a way to get Chris to listen...

\*\*\*\*

Crack of dawn the next morning, Dylan texted Jeff. Once he'd heard back, he took his pre-packed hiking pack and shoved it into his jeep. It would be quicker to row across the lake than to drive the ten minutes around it, but for his plan to work, he needed wheels.

In the driveway, he put the brake on and left the car running. House key in hand, he unlocked the back door and snuck inside. The foyer echoed his steps. "Chris? It's me," he called out as he beelined for Chris's bedroom—the same one he'd had as a kid, the one that faced the lake. And his place.

"...kidding me," came Chris's mumbled voice.

Dylan pushed the bedroom door open just as Chris shoved a pillow over his head.

"You need to get up, Montgomery. Something's happened to your cabin. There was a report of fire—"

That got Chris leaping to his feet. "What? Shit, what happened? Is anyone hurt?"

The pure concern on the guy's face almost made Dylan crack and confess there was no such fire. Almost.

He'd apologize later.

Chris pulled on some jeans over his boxers but didn't bother with any shirt over his dark vest. He shoved his feet into a pair of boots. "I have to get there—"

"My jeep's running, I'll get you there. Take your keys."

---

Chris barely looked at him, but inclined his head, grabbed his keys, and when they reached the driveway, jumped into the passenger seat.

Dylan drove quickly the fifteen minutes into Montgomery woods.

Wiping his eyes of sleep, Chris ripped out a yawn. “Shit, wait,” he said suddenly.

Dylan gripped the wheel tightly as he rounded the last couple of corners.

“Wouldn’t someone have rung *me* first? How’d you hear about...”

The silence betrayed the truth.

Staring hard at the dirt path, Dylan concentrated on driving. Nearly there, anyway.

“Halsworth, what’s the meaning of this? Are you”—the laugh that came then was incredulous—“kidnapping me?”

Dylan slowed the jeep to a stop just outside the cabin. He ran his palms over the grainy rubber steering wheel and focused on the cabin gables and trimming. “Adulnapping you, really.”

Chris rested his head against the headrest and looked at him. “You know I’m stronger than you, right? I could overpower you with my thumb.”

“In your dreams, Montgomery.” He might have been strong, but that would only make them well-matched.

“Come on. In high school,”—Chris pointed to the cabin—“I challenged you to ten pull-ups; you could barely do two.”

Dylan looked pointedly at him. “A lot has changed since high school. That was a very long time ago.” When their locked gazes got to be too much, Dylan glanced to the wood-surrounded cabin. They were parked close to the spot they’d last shared a tent. “Tell you what, I bet I could out pull-up you now.”

Chris snorted, but there was something nervous about the way he was fidgeting.

Dylan clicked open his seat belt and hopped out of the car. “Let’s do this thing.”

Within seconds, Chris was out of the car and—in faux confidence—charged past him to the cabin, keys jangling. “You’re on.”

Grabbing his hiking pack, Dylan followed. Inside, the cabin was musty. Light filtered through the windows, making the dust in the air glitter. There



---

were two sad-looking beds, with the patchwork quilts Mrs. Montgomery had made them for their sleepovers.

Their steps creaked over the wooden floorboards.

“Looks different,” said Chris, “but still smells of pine and honey and adventure.” He dropped his keys on the bed closest to the small rectangular windows.

Above them ran the long metal pole that they'd used for everything from hanging wet clothes, to making forts, drying pasta and—well, those pull-ups.

Chris seemed to have frozen in the middle of the room, their pull-up challenge momentarily forgotten.

Dropping his hiking pack at the side of the bed, Dylan quietly picked up Chris's keys, fingering through them to the right one.

Chris turned sharply toward him but didn't seem to notice the keys in his hand. “Long time since it's been you and me in here.”

Dylan held his gaze. Maybe he wouldn't need the keys? Maybe Chris would listen to him without them.

He stepped forward, but just as he opened his mouth, Chris jerked back, cutting over him. “Let's up the challenge. Twenty-five pull-ups. I'll start.” Turning his back, Chris reached for the pole and gripped. His muscles rippled as he heaved himself into his first pull-up. “One.”

Dylan clutched the keys tighter and after two pull-ups, snuck back to the door. Sliding the key into the lock, he twisted, locking them in.

“Three. Four. Five. Piece of cake, this. Six. Gonna crack me up watching you. Seven. Really think you can make twenty-five?”

Dylan unlatched the window, pushing it open as far as it would go, which wasn't much more than five inches. As he extended his arm out, the keys suddenly jangled.

“Eight—what the—?” Chris dropped, spinning quickly around.

Not wasting a second, Dylan flung the keys as far outside as he could.

“What the hell?” Chris jumped on the bed next to him, staring out the window to where his keys lay twinkling in a spot of sun. Then he leaped toward the door—

“It's locked,” Dylan said, calmly moving to the edge of the bed.

---

Chris tried pulling anyway, then with a grunt he jumped on the bed and tried to wrangle out of the window. The bed wobbled under Dylan with each of Chris's efforts to get out. The window was impossibly small for his broad frame, and with a grunt, he gave up. He slithered to the floor and paced the small space between the beds. "Why?"

"Because I want us to talk. Talk without one of us running away."

\*\*\*\*

## Chris

Twisting his back towards Dylan, Chris resumed his pull-ups. He pulled so high, his hair brushed the open beams above with every 'up'.

He had to work out the frustration. Shit. How could Dylan have locked them in and thrown away the key?

The air in here was thick with Dylan already. He was there wherever Chris looked around. Laughing in the corner by the fireplace, lounging on his bed reading a book, at the small table beating him at checkers, hunched on the floor with him sipping at pop and reading comics.

He didn't need to be locked up with adult Dylan, too. It was already too much.

"Eleven. Twelve..." Pull-ups weren't helping to erase the memories of the last three weeks, or of them as kids...

Those memories were why he couldn't bear the thought of Bennington Way being leased to anyone else... They were why he came out here and sat in his car, just looking...

A sharp breath tugged at him, and he struggled with the next pull-up. Gritting his teeth, he strained through it, adjusted his grip and continued.

Every time he counted his pull-ups, he couldn't help it, he relived each of their kisses. He swallowed, pulled up again, and forced out "Fourteen—"

Something tickled his hair.

Probably a dust bunny—

It moved, and Chris hung, frozen. "Dylan?"

Though Dylan had quietly let him steam out his aggression, he was quick to answer, bed springs groaning as he shifted. "Yeah?"

"Is there, um, like, something on my head?"

---

Chris willed himself to let go of the pole and shake his hair free of whatever it was, but he couldn't. He'd seized up, and the thought—the thought that it could be—

It moved again, touching his neck.

“Get it off, get it off,” Chris breathed.

Dylan was already behind him, he could feel his warm presence there. The fingers touching his side. “Just a second, almost got him.”

A shudder rippled through him, and those fingers tightened while others moved at his neck. “Please say it's not a spider. Not a spider.”

“It's... not... a spider.”

Halsworth couldn't lie for shit.

“Got it.”

When Chris heard the window shutting, he finally allowed himself to drop to the floor. He shuddered again. Dylan returned to his spot at the edge of the bed, resting his elbows on his thighs, and clasping his hands together. Slowly, he looked up.

Chris shrugged. “I mean, thanks. For getting rid of the spider.”

“Just your harmless garden variety.”

He looked all around him for more and then slunk just a little closer to Dylan. Closer still. At the hiking pack, he stopped. “What's in this thing? Just how long did you plan to keep me here?”

Dylan grabbed the bag and opened its clasps. “Just until this evening. I arranged for Jeff to save us around sunset.”

Out of the bag, Dylan pulled some sliced bread and cheese, apples, and—Chris laughed—a six-pack of Mountain Dew.

With a grin, Dylan tossed him one of the cans. They snapped their drinks open at the same time. Chris drank, but Dylan leaned back and rested his on the windowsill.

Gulping down the mouthful of liquid, Chris fiddled with the can ring. Then, sighing, he rested his drink on the bench adjacent to the cabin bathroom.

He slumped next to Dylan on the bed, shoulder-to-shoulder, but the mattress dipped, bringing them even closer.

---

To stop him from toppling off balance, Dylan braced a hand on Chris's leg, close to his knee. A strong, warm pressure. Chris stared at the hand as it lifted a bit and drew slowly, lightly up his thigh.

Dylan's shuddering breath whispered over his stubble...

Shutting his eyes, Chris felt himself leaning toward those lips. Dylan's nose was so close to touching his, he could feel the short distance tickling his skin.

"I'll be the first to admit it," Dylan said softly, words that had Chris opening his eyes again.

"Admit what?" he said, still hovering, still almost kissing.

"I like it. The kisses matter."

A shiver raced down his arms, down his legs, right to his groin. He felt each one of Dylan's words. Felt relieved to hear them.

Felt the same.

"I've thought it for a while now," Dylan continued. "Maybe even since the beginning."

Chris choked on a breath. "So... what, only two hundred kisses to steal your heart?"

Dylan leaned closer, lips pressed to the bottom of his ear. "Only *one*."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Dylan

Dylan fell back against the bed at Chris's shove. A hard weight settled on him, and lips dragged down his neck, peppering it with kisses. Salting them with little nips of teeth.

"I like it, too," he whispered into the curve between his neck and shoulders. "Fuck, but you are the most addictive, beautiful, frustrating man I've ever known and I... I want more of you. All the time. Row your dinghy to me every night and stay right at my side. Stay for breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. And..." Chris pulled Dylan's hands above his head and laced the fingers of one hand through both of his. He swept a kiss over his lips as he pinned Dylan down. "Don't leave me again. I couldn't bear missing you all over again..."

Dylan's voice came out rough, touched. "You missed me?" A wave of something tingly and warm settled close to his skin so Chris's next kiss sparked, like live wires.

---

“Hell yes. And when my parents died, I... got so angry that you weren't there. So angry at myself that I couldn't tell you I needed you.”

Dylan tried to sit up, but Chris kept him firmly to the bed. “Let me go?”

Chris shook his head. “No.”

“I want to hug you, Chris.”

“That's... why I can't let you up. I don't want to fall apart. I'm stronger than that.”

Dylan sighed. “Come down then.”

When Chris lowered a kiss on him, Dylan murmured softly against his lips. “I'll never doubt your strength. But you don't have to be strong all the time.” At his ear, he added, “I can catch you.”

Chris held himself rigidly for a breath, and then his weight sagged onto him. “I'm sorry, too, you know,” Chris said. “I hurt your feelings back then. I was stupid and scared, of *us*. I came here that night...”

Dylan stilled. “You did?”

“You were sitting on the porch with a single rose. You were beautiful, and I wanted to go over to you, but...” He cleared his throat. “I just couldn't. I knew if I did, I'd screw it up, and then I'd lose my best friend. I'm sorry about what I did to you. Sorry I didn't handle it well.”

“We were young and stupid, I guess. But did you really expect we'd still be friends after ditching me like that?”

“Yes—no. I mean... I knew you'd be mad for a while, but I thought you'd get over it. I was gonna say something, but I wasn't sure how, and then when you caught me kissing McHay... I felt stupid, and angry—because you got so mad, and I yelled at you to wait so I could explain but you didn't, and...” Chris loosened his grip on Dylan's hands. “I fucked up. I'm sorry.”

“We both did.” Dylan wrapped his arms tightly around him, keeping him pressed to his chest. They stayed that way for a few beats, until the heaviness of their apology evaporated. Because they were in the here-and-now—there was nothing to be done about the past, but the future, well...

Muffled, close to his armpit, Chris said, “While we're on a roll, I'm sorry about your floodlight, too.”

“That was you? Bastard!” But Dylan said it softly, against Chris's hair.

---

Chris pulled back up and grinned at him. “Actually, I think I have to take that last apology back because if you so much as think about replacing it, I’ll do it again. I’ve got great aim and a killer swing.”

Dylan grabbed a fistful of Chris’s tank top and yanked him into another kiss, this time arching against the man, letting him feel how much he ached for him.

Chris rubbed their hard groins together, his breath hitching.

Cool fingers crept under his shirt, caressing his skin, playing at the elastic of his briefs. Then slid to the belt. Undid it.

Buttons snapped open, those fingers dancing over his hard cock. He groaned, and a smug, beautiful grin lit up Chris’s face. He wriggled down his body, grabbing at his jeans as he kissed Dylan’s cock through the thin layer of material covering him.

“Stop teasing,” Dylan said, threading a hand in Chris’s hair and angling his head up until they were looking at each other. “Three weeks have been long enough, get inside me already. Condom is in my wallet.”

There came a blur of action and sensation. They peeled off their clothes with little ceremony, dumping them in a heap on the floor. Chris spent a moment swearing as he searched for Dylan’s wallet and then came back with a condom and a cocky grin. “And I see it’s lubed for our convenience.” He knelt between Dylan’s legs, his cock standing proudly hard. With another grin, he took himself in hand and stroked, dropping his head back and breathing a low “fuck.”

“Cocky, exhibitionist tease,” Dylan said, shaking his head. He grabbed his own pulsing cock. “Two can play at that game.”

Three firm strokes was all he got in before Chris swiped away his hand. Lowering that cheeky expression, Chris flicked out a tongue at the head of his cock.

Dylan twitched, but his next string of accusatory words was erased from him as Chris suddenly sucked him in deep. Hands explored Dylan’s chest and tweaked his nipples as wet heat enveloped him and tightened.

Dylan resisted the urge to thrust his way to a quick release. But damn, he wanted this to last. He wanted to come with Chris—

Chris nuzzled a finger at his entrance and worked his way inside to the rhythm of his sucking mouth.

---

“Seriously,” Dylan groaned. “Inside.”

One last agonizingly hot suck, finger fucking him in double time, and Chris drew off him, lips swollen, gaze needy with lust. He reached for the condom nestled at Dylan’s ass, ripped open the foil, and rolled it on.

“How much prep you need?” Chris asked, rubbing two fingers at his entrance.

“Forget that, I can handle it.” Dylan prepped himself enough on his own.

“Nevertheless. I love watching my fingers”—a blast of sparks flooded him as Chris slid two fingers into him, brushing against his sweet spot—“disappear into you.”

Dylan lifted onto one elbow and hauled Chris into a kiss, wet, hot, hurried. “Do you want me to beg?”

“Well, now that you mention it…”

“Bastard.”

They kissed again.

Chris landed a palm on Dylan’s chest and pushed him back against the quilt. There was a predatory look in his eyes as he positioned himself, and then a roared “Fuck, yes,” as he filled Dylan with his cock.

Fisting the sheets, Dylan panted. Chris was inside him. *Chris* was coming undone because of *him*.

“More,” Dylan demanded, and Chris snapped his hips into action, thrusting long and hard and hitting his spot with every stroke. “That all you got, sunshine?”

Lust deepened, and Chris growled. “Oh, I got more.” The bed jerked with the thrust, banging against the wall. “And it’s going where the sun don’t shine.”

Chris crushed him with his thrusts, and Dylan loved it. The hard, warm weight pounding into him, the slapping of their bodies, the grunts, the dirty, filthy words bouncing between them, making his skin shiver.

And then Dylan yelled, “Fuck, yes.”

Their gazes caught, and Chris stared down at him with passion and need and then something so tender—

Fully sheathed, Chris leaned forward and kissed him again. “Never get enough of your kisses.”

---

Dylan held him to his chest, their kiss slow, languid, speaking words neither of them could. *You're beautiful. Be with me. Let's make this work.*

Chris held the kiss for another moment before he couldn't hold back any more. He took Dylan's cock in his hand and stroked in time to his thrusts, working fast, faster, faster toward—

Chris came. "Dylan!"

Hearing his name combined with a gently twisted stroke sent Dylan over the edge, and his orgasm burst out of him, hitting both their chests.

Stickiness disregarded, Chris sank onto him, their bodies meshing, fitting just right together. As if he were made for Dylan and Dylan for him.

They stayed close like that; little breaths puffed against his stubble, his cheek, and it was a feeling he hoped he would get very used to.

Chris said, "We're not too young now..."

"Too young for what?" Dylan grinned. "Cause I'm not too old I couldn't go again... in like an hour."

Chris chortled and kissed his shoulder. "I mean, for it to work out. For us. I've never been satisfied with anyone—I was waiting to find another Dylan. Another best friend."

Dylan had no words; they were trapped behind a large lump in his throat. He drew Chris's face to his and kissed him. He'd lost count of how many kisses they were at now, but his bet was they had to be close to 500.

With a grumble, Chris rolled off him and found a picnic towel Dylan had packed.

When they were come-free and dressed in their boxer briefs, Chris snuck in another kiss. And then another. Dylan let each one soak into him like sun on a warm summer day. They lay next to each other sharing grins that reminded Dylan of their youth, when they would share the bed after freaking each other out with ghost stories.

Chris brushed a kiss on Dylan's shoulder. His gaze seemed to be focused on the windows. "What are you looking at?"

Chris shook his head. "I'm too damn stubborn sometimes. Thanks for locking us in here."

"I wasn't sure how I'd actually get you inside." Dylan laughed and bumped their noses lightly together. "I'm relieved you're so competitive. It really helped me imprison you in here."



---

Laughing, Chris slowly drew away, swinging his legs off the bed. "About that... we never really settled that bet."

Dylan shuffled into a sitting position. "Go on, then." Not like he could tire of watching Chris as his muscles flexed and sweat sheened his skin.

Chris jumped up, catching the bar. He smoothly finished his twenty-five pull-ups. "There," he said with a haughty descent. "Kiss that."

Perched at the head of the bed, back resting against the wall as he admired the view, Dylan laughed. "Nah, I'd rather just kiss you. I can still barely do two pull-ups. Nice watching you though."

"What? You mean..." Chris pounced on him, hitting his stomach and side with playful punches, like in the old days... "I'm stronger than you. I want to hear you say it."

"Nuh-uh, never gonna happen."

"Then I'm gonna pin you down for three seconds and prove it..."

They rolled around, each as determined as the other not to be pegged. Chris tumbled off the bed with Dylan on top of him, but he didn't find purchase for long. Twisting, turning, ducking, shoving, they kept at it until they were both exhausted, lying side by side.

"Truce?" Chris said. "I mean, for now."

Dylan rolled on top of him. "How about no?"

"Bastard."

But Chris didn't push him away. He drew Dylan nearer and nipped his lips. "One thing before we start round two."

"What's that?"

Chris blushed lightly and clenched his jaw, as if he knew he was red and hated it. "Can I help out at camp some more? I mean, you know, maybe run a baseball session or ten?"

A deep smile pulled at Dylan. "You really *do* love having kids around. Mr. Montgomery, you give me the best surprises."

"So that's a yes?"

"More than a yes, Chris. It's a promise."

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*CHRISTMAS – half a year later***Chris**

Christmas day had Chris dragging Dylan out into the snowplowed yard toward his boat shed. The shed he'd kept the man out of for months. And it was no easy feat.

"It's done? I can finally see?" Dylan asked, *again*. Seemed the guy was super-excited.

Chris swallowed his smirk and tugged Dylan into the shed. A tarpaulin cloaked his mahogany runabout.

"I never thought I'd see the day you'd let me in here," Dylan said, curiously rounding the covered boat. "Can I take a peek?"

Chris uncovered the beauty, but once he was done, his gaze was all on Dylan.

The man blinked several times, first in awe of the boat, and then as if he were choking on emotion. Chris knew exactly what had done it, too. He'd hoped for so much.

"You named your boat after me?"

"Because it's a one and only."

Dylan laughed, but it was the soft, touched kind of laugh. He reached out to touch the bow. "Can I?"

"Yeah. But I need you to promise something, Halsworth."

"What's that, *Montgomery*?"

A shared grin. And then: "I want to take you out in it sometime—"

His "but" got cut off at Dylan's enthusiastic: "Will you let me drive?"

Chris just laughed. "That's the thing I need you to promise me. No way ever will you drive my boat."

"What?" Dylan pouted, but he didn't seem too upset. Probably because he knew himself how uncoordinated he was out on the water. "Why not?"

"Dude, I love you, right—but you suck at steering."

Dylan faced him sharply. "What did you say?"

"I said you suck at steering."

---

Dylan backed him up against the runabout. Their noses met. The kiss curled Chris's toes.

“I love you, too.”

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*A born and raised New Zealander, Anyta Sunday has been exploring the literary world since she started reading Roald Dahl as a kid. Inspired, stories have been piling up in her head ever since. Fast forward to her mid-twenties and jump a few countries (Germany, America, and back again), and she started putting pen to paper. When she's not writing or chasing her kid around, she's reading, hiking, watching a Joss Whedon series, attempting pilates, or curling up with her two cats. Updates on her projects can be found at Anyta's website.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# ACCIDENTAL KARMA

By **Katies Crewman**

## **Photo Descriptions**

Two men:

Photo 1: The first is a slim young man in ripped jeans, black T-shirt, and hoodie. He leans on a chain-link fence, fingers gripping the wire, staring out at the camera. His strong face is framed by a mass of wavy, long, blond hair.

Photo 2: The second man is older, perhaps in his late-thirties, with short-cropped dark hair, and an elegant look, despite his sweatshirt and loose, casual jacket. He's turned to his right, smiling slightly.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*Everyday I take the train to school. When the warning lights and signals announce the train, he's there on the platform. I don't know where he comes from, maybe he does the park'n ride (I'm trying to not be too stalkerish). Always gets into the same car as me, usually one seat over and across. Still in his seat when the train reaches the university's station. He's never there on my trip home. I've smiled, he just stares, not a 'fucking fag' stare, I think it's a 'who me'?*

*Today I went to school early for a study session; I was sad to miss him, there wasn't many people on the platform. I had my board with me, as always, and when I stopped, I heard three claps. There he was, like he was stalking me. I know he probably thinks I'm a kid, but I'm twenty-two and I'm tired of this dancing around.*

*Sexy goofiness is good, no bdsm, please, very low angst if you must.*

*Thank you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Averin*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** age gap, grad student, humorous, injury, medical personnel

**Word Count:** 10,083

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# ACCIDENTAL KARMA

By **Katies Crewman**

It was all the motherfucking possum's fault. I swear!

Now if you were my dear, supportive dad, you might point out that noodling around on my skateboard on the el-train platform was a pretty stupid move. The thing is, it's not reckless if you're good enough. And I am that damn good. Nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand it would've been all right.

After all, I've been doing it right here almost daily for the last month, waiting for the train. I've found out where the crack in the concrete becomes just wide enough to snag a wheel. I know about the downhill slope to the north end of the platform. And when the warning lights and signals announce the train, I'm smart enough to pick up the board and carry it. I'm not reckless. But I was also not expecting God to drop a possum on my head.

It was early, and there weren't as many people as usual, so maybe I got a bit carried away. But every trick was working, sharp as glass, slick as ice. I'd just done a casual full Cab when I heard slow clapping. I turned my head, and it was him—the hot guy from the train. I'd figured I'd miss seeing him today, given that I was heading in extra early. But there he was, dark eyes shining with what looked like appreciation. I was so surprised I rolled closer to the stairs than usual, staring back. And then the possum dropped from a tree branch and landed right beside me.

God, I hate those things. It's Chicago, so you see them sometimes on a fence or in a yard. They look like giant mutant rats, all naked tail and pink nose and beady black eyes that stare at you bold as brass. Ugh.

So I yelled. Anyone would have. I'm not girly despite my long hair, but this was fucking freaky! I yelled, the possum hissed and darted in front of me, and I had the choice of running the board into it or turning toward the stairs. I should have flattened that damned possum.

I hit the top of the stairs trying to pop my board and catch it, and for the first time in eons I missed and went headfirst down the steps. And put my hands out to break my fall. Yeah, I know better than that, too—know how to roll with it

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and take the damned hit on a shoulder. But between *him* where he wasn't supposed to be, and God doing marsupial-dropping, my reflexes were shot to hell. I hit with both hands, and shooting pains went up my arms. I think I screamed then.

The next bit was a confusion of pain and thumps and the world spinning around, but when it settled, I was snuggled in against someone solid. A deep voice was saying, "Stop. Don't move. Don't try to get up."

I said, "Huh?" then realized my feet were scrabbling, trying to push up like they had a life of their own. I made them stop, and then the pain really hit. I managed not to scream again, but I had to pant though my teeth, little whines escaping my mouth.

The man said, "Easy. Just breathe. When you can, tell me what hurts."

I took a few more wheezy breaths, and then a few more, and managed to say, "My wrists."

"Okay. What about your head?"

I had a head? I tried to pay attention to something other than my arms. Head, yeah, okay. "Not much. Bumped."

A woman's voice said, "Should I call 9-1-1?"

My rescuer said, "Yeah. Do that."

"No! Wait." Broke graduate students don't have spare change for co-pays. I've wiped out enough over the years to know that sometimes the first shock and pain fades to just bruises. Although sometimes it doesn't.

"Make the call," my rescuer said in that lovely deep voice, then he lowered it to add softly to me, "You've broken one wrist for sure, and you have a big bruise on your forehead. You need x-rays."

"Fuck. Fucking damn it! I have a study session. I have..." *An exam Monday and papers to grade and an essay. Hell. Shit!*

"You have to hold still and get checked out." The man's hands on my head and shoulder kept me motionless on my side, pressed against his knees. "You'll just make it worse if you try to jump up."

Belatedly, I realized that this voice and those hands belonged to *him*. The guy I'd watched, morning after morning on the train, one seat over and one across. We'd never talked, never exchanged more than a quick look now and

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then, but I'd been aware of him for weeks. I was sure he'd been aware of me too, just from how fast he turned away if I smiled. And wasn't I making a *great* impression now?

There was a shaking rumble I recognized as the train coming in. I managed to say, "I'm okay. You'll miss your train."

"You're kidding, right?" He didn't move, although his grip on my head eased to more of a gentle rub. "I'm not just leaving you here. Are you going to hold still now?"

"Yeah." Experimentally I tried to move my left hand, and *hell, yeah, not moving*. "Ouchie," I said, trying for funny.

"I'm a doctor," the guy said. "I'm going to ease you down on my jacket and take a quick look, if you promise not to get up."

A doctor. It figured. I knew I'd been crushing on the out of reach older guy, but he had to be a doctor too. Although it was a bonus right now. "Okay. Not getting up."

He took his hands away, moved around a little, probably taking off his jacket, and then he slipped it under my head in place of his knees. I had an unreasonable impulse to cry when he shifted me over. I managed to mumble, "Thanks," instead.

"Lie still. I'm going to check you over." He lifted my eyelids in turn with a professional-feeling thumb, then moved his hands gently across my scalp. "Tell me what hurts."

"Arms." He pressed my forehead and I winced. "Okay, yeah, that."

"What's your name?"

"Dylan. Reddix." I tried to think past the ringing in my ears. "What's yours?"

He laughed slightly. "I'm Alasdair. What's your birthday?"

"Huh?"

His fingers trailed down to my neck, pressing here and there, and then over my T-shirt along my spine. "Answer the question. Birthday?"

"May sixth."

"Year?"

"1992."



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“Hmmm.” I wasn’t sure if that was in response to my flinch when he got to my hip, or to the fact that I’m twenty-two, which is older than I look. “What’s today’s date?”

“Friday, the twenty-something-or-otherth of October, 2014. I’ve lost track.”

“Who’s the president?”

“The good guy.” I flinched again when he manipulated my ankle, but it didn’t feel worse than your average crashed-the-board bruising.

He moved my foot slightly. “You feel that?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t hurt.”

He wiggled the other one. “That?”

“Same.”

“Can you move them just a little yourself?”

I tried, and yeah, I could, although moving anything seemed to go straight to my wrists. Still, Alasdair said, “All right. That’s good.”

“Will I lose the baby, doc?” I asked.

He snorted softly. “I think that’s unlikely.” The sound of sirens cut off whatever he was about to add, and he touched my shoulder. “There’s your ride, Dylan. You’ll be fine. I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I blinked hard, twisting a little to look up at him, wondering if I missed something.

“For clapping. Distracting you.”

“Hell, I barely noticed you past the act-of-God possum.” Man, even from this angle he was a damned good-looking guy.

The sound of running feet heralded the arrival of the paramedics. The next few minutes were a painful jumble of questions, of being moved carefully and painfully onto a gurney. One paramedic picked up my backpack, and they began rolling me toward the ambulance. I hurt too damned much to protest, but I caught sight of Alasdair over the other guy’s shoulder. I said, “Wait.”

They didn’t listen, but then Alasdair held up my board where I could see it, and I was able to relax and close my eyes. If he had my board, I’d have to see him again sometime.

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Sometime was about twelve hours later. I was lying in a hospital bed, eyes closed, wondering woozily how much of this the student health care insurance would cover, when someone cleared their throat from the direction of the door. Since the nurses tended to just barge in and stuff a thermometer in my ear without warning, I was curious enough to open my eyes and look over.

There he stood, my board in one hand. Looking damned hot, and it wasn't just the dizziness talking. Yeah, Alasdair was probably close to forty, but he wore the years fucking well. You could tell he worked out, not for bulk but for lean, fit muscles. I'd watched him for hours, in twenty-minute stretches, and he filled out a fitted shirt very nicely, not to mention the way he rocked a snug pair of slacks. Tonight was even better, because unlike the business casual he wore on the train, he was now in well-worn jeans and a T-shirt.

I rolled my tongue back into my mouth and said, "Um. Hi." Ooh, wasn't I a silver-tongued devil? I licked my chapped lips and tried, "Thank you."

"For?" He leaned in the doorway, not approaching.

"Caring if I was all right? Saving my favorite board?"

He glanced down at it, as if he'd forgotten he had it. "Mm. You'll have to check it. I think one of the wheel-bracket things is loose."

"Fuck. Still, it might be fixable. It's a pricey board, and I'd hate to lose it."

"You're very good with it."

It warmed me that he said so, even though I'd known he'd been watching me, a lot of mornings. "Thanks. It's a fast way around campus."

"You're a student?"

"Grad student."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, well, four more years of ramen noodles and grading papers, but it's a living."

"Leading to better things."

"Hopefully." I tried to reach up and rub the corner of my mouth, which felt icky and crusted, but I barely moved the damned wrist, and it zapped me. I wheezed, because I had no breath to yelp. Motherfucking ouch!

Alasdair came over quickly. "What do you need? Water?"

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I couldn't ask him to wipe my face, but water would be good too. "Yeah. Thanks."

He held a cup, aiming the straw between my lips. It tasted too damned wonderful to make flirty gestures with the sucking. Not to mention I hurt too much to even be thinking of sex. Every swallow was manna from heaven. Eventually I pushed the straw out with my tongue. "Thanks. Really."

He set the cup on the little table and looked at me with kind eyes. "How badly did you wreck yourself?"

"You mean how bad did the possum from hell wreck me?" I wasn't taking the blame for this one. "Broke one wrist. The other is just a severe sprain. At least three weeks in the left splint, six in the right cast." I wasn't sure which was more of a problem, frankly. The cast was less bulky than the straps of the splint and actually hurt less right now.

"Anything else? What about your head?"

"A few bruises and assorted nothing. They're keeping me under observation for a possible concussion, but my head is pretty hard." Thick as a brick, according to Dad. A damned good thing since I'd whacked the side of it on actual bricks.

"Better than it might have been." He reached out as if to touch my face but aborted the gesture. "You're going to have a nice shiner."

I tried a little laugh. "Maybe it'll make me look tougher. That might be a good thing."

"Why would you want to look tougher?"

"Well, I dunno. The hair. I like it, but some people think it's pretty girly. You know, faggy." I said the word deliberately, watching his eyes.

He frowned. "No one who actually looks at you would think you're a girl. And no one better say 'fag' around me. It seems like some of the young guys are trying to reclaim the word, but I'm old enough to just hate it."

Well, that answered half my questions. Definitely gay. I tried to catch his gaze and hold it. "How old?"

"Too old." He backed up a step, which wasn't my plan. "I'm glad you weren't hurt worse. Seeing you go down those stairs was..." I waited to see what word he picked, but he came out with, "startling." Which didn't seem encouraging.

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Still, he stopped there, two steps back, and didn't just go. Our eyes met, like they had so many times on the train, held for a moment, till one of us looked away. And met again. After several seconds he said, "So, when do you get out of here?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Who's picking you up?"

I sighed, because yeah, there was the rub. "No one."

"What do you mean?" The frown was back full force. "How are you getting home?"

"There's this thing called the el-train? Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"You can't ride the train with both arms in splints. Don't you have family? Someone?"

Unexpected tears came to my eyes, because no, I didn't, and the train was just the top of the list of things I couldn't do with both wrists immobilized. I had no idea what the *fuck* I was going to do about it, but I jerked my chin up. "I've been on my own for years. I'll work something out."

"Friends?" he persisted. "Where are you living? How are you going to manage? Do you have roommates?"

"I've got a room in a house. I wouldn't call the lady who owns it a roommate." Mrs. Campbell tolerated me because I was quiet, tidy, and my rent made it possible for her to stay in the little home that her retirement income wouldn't stretch to cover. But I was expected to keep to my tiny back bedroom and be invisible.

"You can't lift anything," Alasdair pointed out, as if I hadn't already got the picture. "Hell, it'll be tough enough just opening doors. You can't cook, can't clean."

"Thank you, Einstein, for that masterful analysis," I snapped, because my arms fucking hurt, and yes, I knew that. "I'm still working on how to wipe my own ass."

"Well?"

He looked at me as if I should be able to solve this. Which I might have, if I hadn't just moved to a new state, a new school, a big department where the grad students were busy and friendly, but not my personal friends. I'd barely

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been in Chicago a month. I missed Andy, and Sue, and Gloria, and Cody with an ache that made me nauseous. "I'll figure something out."

"You could hire someone."

I started laughing, because my stipend barely covered food and rent, and I might lose that if I couldn't student teach like I was contracted to, plus I already had more loans than I'd ever pay off, so no, I couldn't *hire someone*. My laugh began sounding odd, and the shaking made my arms catch fire, but I couldn't stop and I couldn't breathe and I managed to growl, "Get the fuck out of here," at him, before I totally lost it.

When I could open my eyes again, he was gone, and a nurse came bustling in and gave me a shot in my fluid line that I didn't want but didn't have breath to refuse. The night was a jumble of restless, nightmare-filled sleep, broken up by having my pupils checked, my finger pinched for oxygen, and my sanity checked. The sanity was questionable, but otherwise I was doing fine. By midmorning I'd been spoon-fed god-awful oatmeal that you could sell for glue, sponge-bathed, dressed like a giant doll, slings had been rigged for both arms, and I was waiting to get my promised discharge exam.

I wasn't sure how I was going to manage. For a few really soul-sucking minutes I wondered if I might have to call my dad after all. But he would insist I come back home and give up the grad-school nonsense if I wanted any help at all. I'd rather put up with a lot more than a few weeks of pain and fuck-awkwardness to stay here and stay out of that trap. I straightened my shoulders. I was resourceful. Innovative, even. And I had low standards for things like cleaning and eating. I'd get by.

The doctor showed up close to lunchtime, by which point I'd been reduced to seeing how long I could hold my breath before my vision went dark. I'd hit seventy-nine seconds when there was a knock on the door. I blinked hard and looked over. A woman in a white coat gave me a dubious look. "Hi, Dylan, I'm Doctor Toma. You're looking flushed. Is there a problem?"

"Oh. Um." I'm sure I got even more flushed. "No, not really. Just, um, hot in here."

"Really?" She came over to my bedside and pushed my call bell. "I'll just have the nurse check your temp again, before we discharge you."

Once we'd established that no, I didn't have some odd fever, she gave me a quick exam and declared me broken-wristed and useless-handed, but otherwise ready to go. I lied about having someone to help me at home, and they didn't

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demand details. The nurse went through the discharge orders. It seemed to be a lot of, “*Don’t do this with your wrist,*” and, “*Don’t do that with your wrist.*” Eventually she stopped and tucked a batch of papers into the pocket of my waiting backpack. “Make sure you go through that with your caregiver, so they know your limitations. And remember, if you feel nauseated, dizzy, have vision changes or confusion, or any of the other symptoms we discussed, get medical help. Your pain med prescription is in there too. Get that filled right away. Pain inhibits healing, so it actually makes you get better faster if you treat the pain.”

I said, “All right,” and “Uh-huh,” in the appropriate places, and slid a felt-tip pen around with my feeble fingers to make a kind of signature on six different pages. No doubt I was signing away my first-born child to the hospital for payment, but then I was never going to have kids. Finally she said, “I’ll have someone get you into the wheelchair, and when your ride arrives we’ll get you out of here, all right?”

I was about to tell her I’d meet my nonexistent chariot out front when Alasdair’s deep voice said from the doorway, “His ride is here now.”

I stared at him. “I wasn’t expecting...”

He gave me a sideways smile. “I know. But hey, I had the day off, and I own a car. So here I am.”

“Why do you ride the el then? If you have a car?”

He looked away. “In Chicago? Driving’s a hassle and parking’s expensive. Come on, let’s get this show on the road.”

I said nothing as the nurse arranged my wheelchair, and Alasdair hung my backpack on his shoulder and retrieved my damaged board from the little closet. But I had my doubts about that offhand explanation. Down in the Loop, sure, driving was crazy. But up here in Evanston, it was suburban enough. If I’d had wheels, you wouldn’t have caught me riding the el.

His car was a nice Lexus, boring but comfy as hell. He held the door and steadied my elbow as I got into the passenger side, then he put my stuff in the back seat and walked around. I watched him through the windshield. He was wearing jeans again, and they proved he had nothing to be embarrassed about in the ass department. I yanked my gaze away as he got in.

“Where to?” he asked.

I gave him the address, but he just sat there and didn’t put the car in gear. After a minute I turned, to find him studying my face. “What?”

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“Just. You’re really going to try to get through the next three weeks with no hands and no help?”

“I have hands.” Even if one was useless and the other almost.

He shook his head. “You’ll end up hurting yourself if you try to do too much.”

I had to laugh, because that made it sound like I had a choice.

He started the car then and eased out into traffic. I spent the fifteen-minute drive trying to make plans. I needed to e-mail my advisor and let him know what happened. E-mail my teachers and ask for extensions on the papers that were due. Ask how I could take the damned test on Monday with no hands. Ask if there was a way to keep my teaching assistant stipend if I couldn’t grade papers for three weeks. Or maybe that was something I could manage, if I wrote slowly with a felt tip. The memory of my signature, scrawled with my wrong hand, didn’t make me optimistic. Stock up on ramen noodles. At least those packages were light enough I could probably lift them...

Alasdair pulled over at the curb in front of the house and turned off the car. I glanced at him. “Thanks, man.” And realized I was trapped, unable to fit my hand into the door handle. “Could you...?”

He got out and came around to open my door. Getting out wasn’t too bad, but then I had to wait while he retrieved my backpack. He held it up, and I winged my sling-supported left arm out in invitation to hook it on. But instead he glared at me. “No.”

“What? My shoulder’s fine.”

“Yeah. Then you get to the top of the steps and have to get out your key.”

“Oh.” *Fuck*. “Might be smart to get it out first, huh?”

“I can’t let you do this.”

“Do fucking *what*?”

“I’m coming in with you,” he said, “And you can tell me what you need me to pack. And then you’re coming to my place for a week or two.”

“Now wait just a minute. Are you crazy?” I stared at him. “You don’t know me from Adam.”

There was a glint of humor in his face. “I’m pretty sure Adam was the guy who offered to blow me in a club last year.”

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I choked. That was totally unexpected, coming from Dr. Straitlaced. And it definitely meant he was out. And probably meant he was interested. Which would have had me cheering two days ago, but now gave me pause. “Just what did you have in mind?”

He shook his head. “Nothing like that. Look, you’re hot, but you’re much too young for me. I’m not coming on to you. But I can’t stand the thought of you stumbling around, trying to decide whether to use your broken wrist or the strained ligaments to open a damned door.”

“I’d figure it out.”

“I’m sure. But your answer would probably slow your healing and cause you a lot of pain.” He assumed a humorous tone. “I’m a doctor. That goes against my medical code of ethics. I couldn’t stand the guilt.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. Just that I can help. And I want to.”

“Oh.”

As I thought about it he added, “No strings.”

I still hesitated. Was it a sad comment on my life that I was certain anything I was offered for “free” came with a catch? Or was that just realism, to be suspicious when a hot, well-off, smart man was willing to give house room to a guy like me? I might have been eye-fucking him for weeks, but it was pretty damned scary to have my hands literally tied like this.

After another silent minute, his face fell. “Well, you don’t have to. Come on. At least I can get you settled at home.”

“No!” I hesitated. “I want to say yes, but it’s tough, you know? I don’t see what you get out of it.”

“Company, maybe? I’ve lived alone a long time, and it’s lost its charm. I wouldn’t mind a guest for a bit.”

“I’ll be one hell of an inconvenient guest.”

“But decorative. Or maybe it’s karma.” His expression turned inward. “I got help once and it made all the difference. I’d like a chance to pay that back.”

That made more sense. I wanted to believe it. “Okay.”

“And I wouldn’t mind getting to know you. The guy who can be reading Nietzsche one week and Spiderman the next has to be worth a conversation or two.”



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I hadn't realized he'd taken notice of my books. I'd been looking elsewhere, I guess. "Yeah. You too."

He reached in his back pocket and took out his wallet, flipping it open for me to see his driver's license. "There. Check it."

I peered closely. *Alasdair North*. So Alasdair was his first name. I hadn't been sure, but it suited him. A birthdate of March, 1970, which made him exactly twice my age. An address not that far from here, which fit with him taking the same train. "Okay."

"You can give someone my name and address if you like, for security."

I laughed. "You're the one who should be worrying. A grungy grad-student skater-boy? I might take you for every penny."

"I'm not worried."

"No?"

He smiled at me. "Remember that little kid, four or five years old, that you let try your board for a few minutes when the train was late?"

"Oh." I dropped my eyes. "He was a cute kid. I'm usually not interested in kids."

"Remember the woman with all the shopping bags that you helped carry on the train? Remember how you almost got shut out helping her carry them off at her stop?"

"Um."

His smile got softer. "I'm not worried."

He'd obviously been watching me as closely as I'd watched him. I turned away. "Come on in to *Chez Reddix*. Student living at its finest."

I told him which pocket the keys were in. He let us in the front door, then followed me to my room. When I fumbled with my door, which *was* freaking stiff, he reached past me and opened it. I eased in first, hoping that it wasn't too much of a pit. For a wonder, it wasn't, although I hadn't made my bed before running out early yesterday. But I'd done laundry Wednesday, so all there was on the floor was one pair of socks—pretty close to the hamper—and a T-shirt on the chair. And the trash had gone out Thursday, so it didn't smell too stale.

I looked around, trying to see it like he would. It was a bare little room. A single bed, to make space, even though at almost six feet tall I wouldn't have

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minded something bigger. A dresser, a little table with a microwave and mini-fridge. A kettle, because coffee is the elixir of life. A cheap mirror, because sometimes I do care what I look like going out the door. A bookshelf of cinderblocks and boards, with everything from textbooks to comics on it. Not much else. It was fairly tidy now, but when midterms hit, it wouldn't be.

“Looks like my first student apartment,” he said calmly. “But cleaner.”

“Oh. It's not bad. The rent is cheap.”

He nodded. “You have a suitcase?”

“Under the bed.”

He hauled it out and coaxed me into telling him what to pack. I'd have done my own underwear, thank you kindly, except that when he'd grabbed some T-shirts and a sweater from the top drawer, he pulled open the bottom one and started scooping socks and briefs without comment. At which point it would have looked freakier to yell “stop” than to let him do it. When we'd packed my schoolbooks, a couple weeks' worth of clothes, and my laptop, he paused. “Clean out the fridge?”

Before I could protest, he pulled it open. There was a quarter-jug of milk, an unopened package of bologna, half a loaf of cheap white bread, and a tub of margarine. He glanced at me. “A minimalist. Well, other than the milk, that all might keep a couple of weeks.”

I swallowed back explanations and excuses. “Yeah. You could dump the milk.” I pointed to the tiny stained sink in the corner of the bedroom.

He didn't even raise an eyebrow, just poured out the last of the milk, rinsed the jug, and tucked it into the trash, then tied off the bag and set it by the door. “Anything else?”

A sudden wash of dizziness hit me. “Wait. Just wait.” I sat limply on the bed.

Alasdair came over and squatted at my feet, looking up into my eyes. “Are you okay?”

I wanted to rub my face but fucking couldn't. “Why are you doing this again?”

“Because you look like you could use a friend. And maybe I could too.”

“Oh.”

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He didn't push, didn't say anything more while I sat there, blowing off the weird wobbles and spins my brain kept spiraling through. *He's crazy. You're crazy. He wants something. You're a suspicious excuse for an ungrateful brat. He has to want something. Couldn't it be pretty excellent, to be what he wants? And if not Alasdair, then who will give a rat's ass if you can't open your door in the morning?* Eventually I said, "I have a few things in the bathroom."

He stood easily, the muscles in his thighs flexing through the worn denim of his jeans, and picked up the suitcase and the trash. "Lead the way."

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On the short drive to his place, I kept taking little glances at him. His face was familiar, lean with strong bones and an elegant, narrow nose. His hair was cut short without any special styling, just neat with a hint of curl. If there was grey in it, I couldn't see it. There were a few lines at the corners of his eyes, and the grooves around his mouth were deep enough to be the remnants of years of laughter and tension both. But his skin was fine, his mouth thin but beautifully shaped, and he had those damned musician's hands, surgeon's hands, long slim fingers that I'd dreamed about more than once. He was hot as hell, for all his forty-four years.

His house was small, but set well back in a garden that was landscaped with expanses of bark-chips, big neatly-trimmed bushes and clumps of hostas. There were thick green hedges on each side, so when we pulled up to his garage, the neighbors were out of sight. I felt a momentary flash of anxiety again, but his smile was proud. "And this is what I call home." He drove into the garage, closed the door, cut the engine.

He leaned across me to pop my door, and for a moment we were close together, shoulders brushing, his hair inches from my mouth. But he sat back and got out like he hadn't noticed. "You take care getting out. I'll get your bags."

I eased out, straightened, and bumped the door shut with my hip, then followed him inside. The interior was a bit like the gardens, not large but cool and tidy. The floors were polished wood, the walls a soft cream color, the woodwork stained oak. It was like no place I'd ever lived, not Mrs. Campbell's little room, nor the crowded dorms, nor the knick-knack filled apartments and crowded townhomes I'd grown up in. It was peaceful.

"Doesn't feel like you could cut loose and make a racket in here," I said flippantly, to hide how welcoming it felt.

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His face fell. “Well, I’m not much of a racket kind of guy.”

“Neither am I,” I said quickly. “I don’t know why I said that. Well, I’ve been told I can get loud in bed.”

That put an easier look on his face. “Since that won’t be an issue, I guess this might suit you, then?”

“It’s great.”

“I like it. I’ve owned it for a few years now. Long enough to fix it up a bit.” He hefted my suitcase. “Come on this way. I bet you’re ready to lie down.”

I was feeling a bit like a used condom, limp and sticky and pathetic. The bed in the spare room looked really inviting, and when he pulled back the covers and helped me into it with his hands on my shoulders, I went willingly. He knelt to take off my shoes, and I lifted my legs up on the bed and breathed through my nose a few times.

“What script did they give you for pain relief?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.” I waved at the backpack where he’d set it on the floor. “It’s in there.”

“We should have made a stop.” He bent to get out the paperwork. “Percocet. I’ll head out in a bit and fetch it.”

“Too much trouble. This is good.” I closed my eyes. I wasn’t moving off this nice, soft bed anytime soon. *Nice* bed.

I heard him go out and was jolted when his voice came at my elbow. “Sit up for a moment.”

I whimpered at the pain that stabbed my wrists, and he said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Here, let me ease you up for a second.” I felt his closed hand behind my shoulder.

I sat up with his help and opened my eyes. He had a glass of water with a straw in it. When I was steady, he eased his hand from behind me and opened his fist to reveal a couple of capsules. “Take these for now.” He held them to my mouth.

There was no good reason for me to hesitate, except... except. He waited a beat, then smiled. “Suspicious bastard. But that’s smart, for a good-looking kid like you. Wait.” He left and came back with a bottle of ibuprofen, showing me that all the capsules looked the same.

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“I’m not a kid,” I growled.

As I finished speaking, he popped the medication in my mouth. “You are to me. Water.” He touched my lips with the straw. I drank, and then he eased me down again.

“I hate this,” I muttered. “I freaking can’t stand being helpless.”

Alasdair sat on the edge of my bed. “When I was fifteen, I fell off my horse—”

“You had a horse? I knew you were a plutocrat.”

“Big word.” He tapped my lip with a forefinger.

If it weren’t for the wrists from hell, I’d have nipped at it. “Columbia graduate. Scholarship. Dean’s List.” Maybe that sounded like showing off, but I really wanted him to take me seriously.

“What major?”

“Psychology, actually.”

“Mm. I can see that. You watch people.”

*I mostly watched you.* I just nodded.

“So anyway, I fell off my horse. Tore the ligaments in both wrists.”

“Wow, we’re like twins. We should totally have hot sex.”

He choked. “Not if we were twins.”

“What? Twincest is fucking hot.”

“Yuck?” He stared at me, looking momentarily at a loss.

“I’m messing with you,” I said. “Although if Joel and Benji wanted to take a break from their music and get it on, I would definitely watch.”

“I don’t need to know who or what that’s about,” he muttered. “Where was I?”

“Falling off your horse like a total spaz.”

“You fell down the stairs.”

“Maybe I’m a total spaz too.”

“So you want to hear this or not?”

I wanted to bug him some more—to see his eyes flash, and amusement chase across his features—but I didn’t feel up to it. “Yeah, shoot. I mean, talk

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on.” I almost did the airy hand-wave with that but was strongly reminded not to. “Ow. Fuck. Ouch.”

“Hold still, you dummy.” His palm on my shoulder was gentler than the words though.

I kept my eyes closed and breathed through it, as his fingers gently massaged my shoulder. “Yeah, okay. Talk.” I missed his touch when he sat back.

“Well, there’s not much more to it. Two wrist surgeries, and a month spent with my mother wiping my ass. Plus I’d just figured out I was gay, and I had a bunch of new stroke material. Except...”

I managed a chuckle. “No hands.”

“I got good at humping the bed, propped up on my elbows.”

“Where there’s a dick, there’s a way.”

He smiled. “Anyways, when I saw you at the bottom of the steps, with both wrists starting to swell, I remembered that summer vividly.”

I couldn’t resist. “And decided to save me from having to hump the bed for relief?”

Just like that, I’d gone too far. I could feel him pull back behind some formal curtain of Dr. North-ness. He stood quickly. “You should get some rest. I’ll check up on you in a little while.”

I wanted to protest his doctorly departure, but I didn’t have the energy or the inspiration. Not to mention, nothing of a sexual nature was possible until the pain in my arms went down a notch or six. So I closed my eyes and let him leave the room without comment. Except that as I heard the door begin to close, I called, “Thank you. Seriously.”

I don’t think he answered me.

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For the next two weeks, Alasdair was helpful and amazing and distant. Keeping me clean and fed and healthy was awkward as hell, even though he brought me the most amazing device from a medical supply shop. It was a toilet-paper holding, curved forceps thingy for wiping my own damned butt. I could have kissed him, even if I hadn’t already wanted to kiss him.

But still there was a lot he ended up doing for me. I found out that he was an ophthalmologist. That made me feel even worse about the nursing stuff, but he

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said he'd done his share of patient care in med school. He never showed any sign of distaste. Or desire, dammit. I had high hopes for the sponge bath, but he really meant bath. And since I was still too sore to get properly hard just from random touches, it was no fun at all.

The first Monday, he gave me a ride to campus, where I spent the day proving to various profs that I really was walking wounded and negotiating options and extensions. I told them all I fell down some stairs. I didn't mention either the skateboard or the possum. The one made me sound inept. The other made me either cursed or deluded. By the time Alasdair picked me up in the late afternoon, my head was throbbing almost as much as my wrists, and I fell asleep in the car on the drive home.

To his house. Not home. That quiet, comfortable little house with all the green around it was just a temporary refuge. One I was very grateful for. I kept trying to tell Alasdair that, and he kept muttering something about "*Pay it forward.*"

I spent most of the week in Alasdair's study, using his voice-to-text software to write my papers at a slug's pace. At least I was doing something though. In my own room I'd have gone crazy. Or starved to death first, since we found I couldn't even lift a cup of water without dropping it for the first few days.

"You really did save my life," I told Alasdair at dinner Friday. I was carefully raising a light plastic spoon full of food with my left hand, trying to use all shoulder and elbow motions. It was a messy business, and I had an old towel wrapped around my neck. I maneuvered the spoon to my mouth and sucked in most of the chili from it. "I'd have probably been found in my room, a withered, desiccated, ugly mummy."

Alasdair muttered, "And that would be a terrible waste."

When I grinned, he added, "Of a fairly bright mind, of course." But it gave me some hope.

After two weeks things were a hell of a lot better. I was down to taking just ibuprofen, mostly in the evenings when the pain flared up from doing too much all day. Still, I felt well enough that I started noticing the good stuff—the way Alasdair's thighs flexed when he squatted to clean up something I'd spilled, again. The way the lines at the corners of his eyes deepened when he laughed, making him look even sexier. The way his sweatpants hugged his ass when he bent to look in the refrigerator at breakfast.

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He was still doing ninety-nine percent of the work around the house, although I could at least look after myself better these days. I did what I could, spending time on the computer, awkwardly one-finger typing and using my pinky on the track pad, to find jokes and humor sites for him, and fluffy news items to make him smile. In the evening, when he was done reading journals and checking case notes, he'd sometimes come sit next to me at the desk and check out the stuff I'd found. He had the greatest laugh, deep and surprised, like being entertained was somehow unexpected.

We talked too, mostly about psychology, which he knew a fair bit of from some med school classes, but also other stuff. I managed to figure out that he'd been looking up skateboarding on the Internet since the first time he saw me, and I teased him about teaching him some moves as soon as my bones healed. He acted appalled that I'd ever get back on the board, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that made me determined to get him on one too someday. Even if he insisted on sixteen kinds of safety gear. I found him some good videos of guys doing hardcore tricks, to inspire him.

He had Saturdays and Sundays off. That third Saturday, we had a late breakfast, and then he said, "I'm going to the farmer's market. Want to come?"

I thought about it, but I had other plans. And seeing him spend the equivalent of a week of my grocery money on two bunches of kale would just wig me out. "Nah. I need to finish a paper." Which was true enough. I always needed to finish a paper.

He looked a little disappointed, which I secretly liked. "Well, I'll see you in a couple of hours then."

When he'd gone, I went into the bathroom and cleaned up as best as I could. I still couldn't shower safely, but I did a good wash-up in the tub—including an attempt at getting my hair clean—and put on fresh clothes. Brushed my teeth. I was trying to comb my damp, tangled hair and cursing, when he came in the front door. He called, "Dylan? You okay?"

"In my room," I yelled back. "Give me a minute."

"I'll put the food away."

He appeared in my doorway before I was done with the comb. I looked up at him from where I sat on the bed. "Hey, find any good legumes?"

"A few." He smiled and came over to sit beside me and took the comb from my awkwardly angled hand. "Here. Let me do that."



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I sighed in relief and turned away slightly, so he could reach the back of my head. This wasn't quite what I'd planned, but it might work. For a few minutes he worked the comb through my hair with silent concentration. I wear it past my shoulders, and it has some curl to it. Two weeks of an occasional pass with a brush had left it badly snarled. Alasdair's fingers tugged and smoothed as he worked.

After a while he murmured, "You have great hair. That was the first thing that caught my eye, you know. The contrast between this gorgeous, curly, wild mop and the kind of lean male energy you have on a skateboard. It was damned sexy." His hands stilled for a moment, as if shocked at what he'd said.

Before he could withdraw, I said, "You know what caught my eye with you? The style. The confidence. And the look in your eyes whenever you caught mine. You were sex and control, all wrapped in one package."

"I didn't mean to be," he muttered, but he went back to combing carefully.

"Why not? It was hot as hell. I jerked off thinking about you the very first night."

"You what?" He slipped, digging the comb into the back of my neck, but I managed not to make a sound. "Why? I'm way too old for you."

"Bullshit." I leaned back enough to get my shoulder against his chest. He didn't let me fall. "I'm not some virginal kid. Not sixteen or even eighteen. I'm a college graduate, and I've been having sex with guys for nine years."

"Nine!"

"I was precocious." I leaned harder. His hand was frankly stroking my hair now, though I wasn't sure he knew it. "I've always liked older men. Someone I could talk to, not just screw. I like their confidence and experience. I like being taken seriously. I've always been kind of old for my years."

"That goes with the brains," he murmured.

I winced, wondering if I'd made too big a point of being smart, trying to seem like his match. But he hadn't said it sarcastically. "Maybe. Anyway, guys my own age just don't interest me. But you?" I turned enough that we could look at each other. "You fucking mesmerize me."

For a second we just looked at each other, but when I leaned in, he didn't dodge. I kissed him slow and easy, giving him a chance to say no. Instead he made a soft sound and opened his lips. I slipped my tongue against his in soft

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exploration. A minute later his fingers tightened in my hair, and he took control.

I admit, sometimes I'd wondered how much experience Alasdair really had. He was so solitary, so self-contained. But someone somewhere had given him the advanced course in kissing. He took over my lips and mouth, hot and demanding. He controlled me with his hands in my hair, tilting my head so we fit perfectly together. When he finally drew back, I had to struggle for breath.

"Wow. Oh God, yes. I wondered if I was just imagining you were interested in me."

"Imagining. Hah." He kissed me again. Then he pulled me in and down tight against his shoulder, as if it was easier to talk to the top of my head. "That first day I saw you, I was hard for most of the ride to work. My car was in the shop, and I hadn't bothered to get a rental. That's why I was taking the train. Then there you were, with the sun on your hair as you rode that skateboard along the platform. The morning light showing off how you looked, how you moved. You and the damned board, all hard, punk tricks."

I couldn't help a little sound of satisfaction. "You liked that."

"Hell, yeah. You were way too young, of course. I figured you for eighteen. I told myself I could look at some straight skater kid for kicks and it didn't mean anything. Then you got on, stuck the board down between your feet, reached into your backpack, and pulled out *Maurice*. And gave me a look over the top of the pages."

I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder. "I remember. You looked startled to catch me eyeing you."

"More like stunned. There you were, hot, athletic, smart, and most likely gay. All the tumblers were coming up a winner. I could almost hear the slot machine bells ringing. And then the next day you were reading Nietzsche. Then you let that little kid try out your board. Well, it only took the shop four days to fix my car. But I kept on riding the train."

"Wow." I tipped my head up to kiss him under the jaw. He'd shaved recently, and the skin was silky smooth. "I'm flattered."

"You should be." He hugged me. "I was obsessed and trying not to admit it. I told myself the train was economical. Ecological. I told myself I was studying human nature. Hah."

"Well, you were. My nature, which was to get on the train behind you, so I could watch your ass."

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“And I watched yours getting off.” He sighed and loosened his grip. “I’m still much too old for you.”

“Fuck that.” I twisted around and slid off the edge of the bed to my knees. I was careful but still grateful when he reached down quickly to steady me. I said very slowly and deliberately, “I have wanted you since the first moment I saw you. And now I know you, I want you even more.”

“Dylan.” He put out a hand to touch my face.

I leaned in to nuzzle between his thighs, and he turned further, spreading his legs. I rubbed my lips over the bulge in his jeans and murmured, “About time I saw this.” I tried to use my mouth to open the button. Well, it’s not as easy as it sounds. Alasdair let me fumble for a minute, then slid his fingers in to flick the thing open.

I caught the tab of his zipper in my teeth and slowly, slowly pulled it down. Arching my neck, humming slightly. Catching my tangled hair in the fucking zipper teeth. I let go of the tab and tilted my head, trying to get free. Instead, I wrapped myself in tighter. “Fuck,” I muttered. “Fuck. Do not distract the guy combing your hair until he’s fucking done!”

Alasdair laughed and worked my hair free. He lifted the mass of it in one hand at the nape of my neck. “Go on, Rapunzel.”

I arched an eyebrow up at him. “You’re wrecking the seductive mood, you know?”

He arched his hips and the hard rise of his cock pushed his fly further open. “See anything looking wrecked?”

“Maybe not.” I bent to run first my lips and then the edges of my teeth along that cotton-covered bulge. He moaned nicely for me. I leaned in, nibbling and sucking over the head, tasting a first hint of salt through his boxers. But the angle was crap. I said, “Maybe if you stand up.”

“All right.” He pushed to his feet. I found myself too close in, my face jammed up against his groin. His thigh brushed my shoulder and I began tipping sideways, without a hand to catch myself. My nervous little yelp was definitely not a sexy noise. Luckily, Alasdair grabbed my bicep to keep me from face-planting on the rug.

He stared down at me, and I met his eyes. I’d bet my face was six shades of red. But he didn’t laugh. Instead he gripped my arm securely, went down to one knee beside me, and kissed me. “How about a bed?” he said huskily. “And naked. No zippers? No hard floor?”

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“God, you’re so fucking smart. No wonder you’re a doctor.”

He kissed me again. “I have plans for that mouth.”

With his help, I struggled to my feet, and we both lay down on the bed. Alasdair undressed me first, murmuring appreciation as he kissed my chest, my stomach, sucked over my hipbone. When I was naked, other than the damned splints, he paused.

“Now you,” I said.

“I’m twenty years older. Out of shape.”

“Bullshit again. I’ve seen you in a tight T-shirt. I’ve seen you working out on the rowing machine in the den. You may not have a six-pack, but neither do I. I’d put your abs up against mine any day.” I arched up enough to kiss him, even if it jarred my wrist when I dropped back. “In fact, I’d love to put your abs up against mine. But at least you have to let me see you. I’ve been waiting too damned long for this.”

He moved his fingers nervously over the buttons of his polo shirt for another moment, then shrugged and yanked the thing off.

“Oh, yeah,” I murmured. He had a very sexy chest. Not built and cut, but a great shape with small, tight nipples and a mat of dark curls across it. “Hair,” I said. “I love a guy with hair. I can’t believe all the idiots who wax it all off to look like Ken-dolls.”

Alasdair bent and kissed me. “Good. Because I’m not waxing even for you.” He slid off the bed and stripped the rest of the way while I watched. He looked great. Sure, his stomach had a little softness to it, but just enough to be mature and sexy and real. His legs were strong, and his ass curved from the base of his spine in just the right way.

“Someday, when I can actually use my hands, I want that ass,” I said.

He glanced at me, looking surprised, but then he grinned. “I think that could be excellent.”

“You bet your aforementioned ass it will be,” I told him. “Now come here.”

He took two slow steps over and slid in, propping up on one elbow beside me. “Demanding in bed?”

“Sometimes.” I tried to wriggle down enough to get my mouth where I wanted it. It was fucking frustrating to move like a spastic inchworm, but he figured out what I needed and got us positioned.

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“I can’t believe this is happening,” he murmured as I slid my mouth deep around his cock.

“Wha’?” I mumbled around a wonderful, hard mouthful.

“You, in my bed.” He stroked my hair, supporting my head on his hand. “You know, the Friday morning when you fell, I took the earlier train on purpose to avoid you. I’d decided it was time to quit obsessing. I was going to take the train when you *weren’t* on it. And if *economical* and *ecological* lost their luster without your sexy ass to watch, then I’d admit that I’d been in it just for the view. And go back to driving.”

“Mmm.” I hummed around him. *Damn, I’d almost lost this without ever having it.*

“But then there you were.” His hips were starting to pump, slow thrusts that pushed his cockhead deeper over my tongue. I tasted more salty-sweet precum and sucked harder. Alasdair groaned “And then you fell.” The breathless edge of his voice was sweet to hear. “And I just about had a heart attack. And then you needed me.”

I pulled off to say, “And wanted you.” I tongued into his slit, then sucked him down again. I wanted to cup his balls and rub his taint, but this time I’d have to let my mouth and tongue do the whole job. The way he groaned and bucked as I worked him against my palate suggested that would turn out just fine.

“And wanted. Me.” He was breathing harder now, his hands less gentle on my head. That was okay. I didn’t need gentle. I needed his taste and feel, his want and need, letting me have him this way. “God. Yes. Dylan. Oh, man, that’s good.” His voice was rough. “I just meant to help you. I was going to stay strong. But you didn’t let me.”

I pulled off again. “That wouldn’t be strong. Just pigheaded. And wrong. This is perfect. Now quit talking.” I plunged deep, sucking hard. If I did this right, he wouldn’t have breath for words. A few minutes later, I’d reduced my sexy, cerebral doctor to caveman grunts and occasional nonsense syllables. He gripped my skull, fucking my mouth fast and controlled, never deeper than I could take, but fast enough that I couldn’t swallow, could only suck and lick and drip and moan and take it and love it. At the last moment he pushed me off and came in spurts on my chin and neck.

He shook, and laughed breathlessly, muttering, “Oh, God! Oh, hell, yeah.” Slowly his grip on my head loosened, and he reached for tissues to wipe my face. “I made a mess.”

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“That’s okay. Although I’d have swallowed.”

He eased me up the bed to kiss me. “But until you get tested again, I won’t. And I wanted this to be fair.” We’d talked about that stuff early on, the doctor in him coming out. He got tested every three months, as a medical professional, even though as an eye doctor he rarely dealt with blood. My last test was two years back, though.

“I’m fine with your hand,” I said. I was about ready to hump the damned bed after all.

“I said fair.” He slid down the bed in his turn, far more gracefully than I had. His hand closing on my erection made me gasp and buck. Then his tongue slid up my shaft, and the perfect wet heat of his mouth closed on me. As he began to suck me, proving that he was expert at this as well, I thought that this was the best thing I’d ever known. This, right here. This place, this man, us in bed together. Not just the wonderful climbing tension of his mouth on me, but the sparkle in his eyes. The way he tweaked my nipple to make me gasp, and the way he smacked my butt to make me laugh.

So before the sweet, wet, deep loving he was giving me took me past the point of coherent thought, I decided that the next time God decided to drop a possum on me, I’d have faith that the good Lord knew exactly what He was doing.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Katies Crewman loves a challenge. Especially along the lines of “Can you write a story in twenty-four hours or less?” She happily plunges into the fray, creating guys, scenes, and possums, from the slightly warped recesses of her authorial brain. She has a great time getting them down on paper. The results have to speak for themselves.*

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# ACHIEVEMENT: TENTACLE LUST

By NK Layne

## Photo Description

A gorgeous man stands in front of a sea cave entrance while raising his bulked arms behind his head with hands clasped. He stands in the ocean's wave with squid limbs that are presumably his own. The ocean surrounding him is outlined by crimson.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*There is one smoking hot tentacle hottie somewhere in the ocean and he wants himself a mate! And he isn't asking too many questions about the willingness of said mate. He knows when the guy is right for him and that is all that matters.*

*I'm in for some hot tentacle porn and I'm okay with dub-con. If you get a whole story out of it, that's cool but good piece of PWP is alright with me too.*

*Just remember that there can never be too many tentacles!*

Sincerely,

Eepa (Eija)

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** tentacles, mythical creatures, interspecies, m/m/m, kink, spanking, bondage, orgasm denial, PWP

**Content Warnings:** dubious consent, graphic violence, a giant pile of smut

**Word Count:** 3,820

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My writing group: *Write Bitch Write*

Thanks!

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# ACHIEVEMENT: TENTACLE LUST

By NK Layne

The human's desperate chorus repeated itself again and again. Hungry for more, Tente moved his slimy tentacle out only to immediately thrust himself back into his human.

More moans filled up the space. "Oh, Jesus Christ!"

The brisk sea breeze flobbered Tente's squid mantle back and forth. Tente heard the bellowing *caws* of seagulls. The gulls' song was like an audience's applause to Tente's sex. It gave his exhibitionism something to fuck home about. The sea cave was nestled into a stony island at the edge of the ocean. Here, the water was shallow and each note could be heard in surround sound. It was perfect for kidnapping humans, so the Squids called it the Fertilization Dungeon.

Tente snarled through his sharp squid beak and entered his tentacles deeper into Alec's taut ass. The tightness swelled Tente's arms and clouded his vision so only Alec was focused.

The human's quivering vocal chords and belting moans provided a sensual soundtrack. Tente zealously added his heavy pants to the melody.

"Oh, you don't know what you are feeling, huh?" As a Dungeon Master, Tente was in charge of supervising the fertilization dungeon's activities. This was a safe space for sexually alternative Squids to copulate. Tente spent a lot of time in the dungeon to ensure its safety. In consequence, Tente grew a fuck list like no other. Yet he never heard notes like Alec's before.

The human's long hair floated in the deep sea, like squid arms in its own right. Tente tugged it backwards with his second arm, and with his third, he traced the human's gaping pale lips. Alec arched his back.

Tente's arm kept still inside Alec's tightness. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

Alec's forehead and nose were so scrunched up they created ripples on his skin. His neck jerked away from Tente, and he softly muttered something incomprehensible. At a brief glance, this looked like torture. Yet his cock was pink, his moans were guttural, and his nipples were hard.

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Tente pounded. His arousal flourished to its tipping point—the point where his suction cups started to bloom. Each one of his tentacles began to pulse a buzzing noise. The Squid gasped at the new warmth crawling up his body.

A long moan escaped Alec's lips.

Tente whispered into his ear, "Man, by the time I squirm all eight of my arms inside of you, it's going to be straight up supersonic." Alec's eyes rolled back as he groaned. The guttural notes caused Tente's buzzing vibrations to go up an octave.

It was breeding season, and Tente planned on celebrating. The intention was to probe some nice, tight human pussy. The problem was that humans all looked the same in their scuba suits. Plus, by the time Alec's cock hit the water, Tente stopped giving a fuck. His squid arms were throbbing and evolutionary science was no longer a priority.

Tente's buzzing tentacles nudged deeper. Alec started to growl.

Tente leaned into the human's ear. "I can stop, you know, and bring you back to your people. I can go away. Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Alec's eyes shot open. "No, please don't stop." Tente's bulging black eyes brightened.

Tente's first arm continued to fuck as a third moved towards the edge of Alec's asshole. The Squid's vibrating tentacle lightly outlined him. Alec continued to growl.

"Are you sure? You sound like you want me to stop."

Alec jerked his head. Tente's raised arm, the one that was formerly wrapped in the human's hair, pressed against his lips. Alec's cock grew as he sucked his first tentacle.

A high-pressured static took over Tente's nervous system and he melted a bit more. Tente intended on giving Alec the full Squid experience, but he didn't realize how naturally Alec would find his tentacle lust. Tente had five more arms to go and he was already hard, constricted, and ready to burst. The arm that was inside Alec squirmed out, only to penetrate his tightness again. Tente repeated, like a rhythm, with each thrust creating constricting tremors in all eight of his arms.

Alec's growls had by now dissipated into pants.

Tente's fourth arm wrapped itself around Alec's torso. But before he could grip Alec's cock, a figure from behind gripped Tente and flung him to the side.

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Tente's senses swirled midnight blue. The dizzy disorientation sucked the breath right out of his gills. He coughed out thick phlegm and his heart thumped a bit louder. "What the fuck?"

In the corner of his eye, he saw the dodging squirms of tentacles.

Tente rubbed his temples as anxiety sobered him up. It was time to play Dungeon Master and protect the fertilization dungeon. A protocol that always gave Tente chills at the start.

The Squid in question was moving their arms towards an obelisk-shaped shadow. Tente tilted his head sideways as he tried to identify this silhouette. But then those memorable moans started and everything came into focus. "Fuck, that Squid is fucking my human!"

A flush went up Tente's mantle, and he reached out, like a child reaching for their favorite toy. But a second pull interrupted him. It was lighter, yet Tente still felt as if his heart skipped a beat.

Tente turned around to face his aggressor and met a familiar foe—Squalo.

Squalo did not look like Tente. He didn't come with gangly cephalopod monstrosities. He was the fantasy that humans expected when they got kidnapped by Squids. Unlike Tente, Squalo wasn't gooey but instead incredibly buff. The top of his head didn't have a flabby mantle but was crowned with smooth human hair. And he didn't kiss with a hard, sharp beak but with plush, smooth lips. His only squid features were his eight tentacle arms. Squalo had everything human that made Tente hard and everything Squid that kept him erect—basically, he kept Tente in an erection overdrive.

Squalo noticed Tente's stare. He leaned into his fish-face to plant a cold one on Tente's cheek. Tente wiped it off with his suction cups. "What's your problem?"

Squalo smiled, full of pearly teeth and salty breath, but said nothing. He opened his mouth slightly, as if he were to respect Tente with an answer, but more silence. Squalo rubbed his stubble in mock-thought, as if he had all the time in the world.

Tente brusquely pushed him to the side. "Don't make this worse for yourself. Get out of here."

Squalo shrugged and wrapped his thick tentacle arms around Tente. Finally he spoke up. "Tente. I think I want him." He lifted an arm towards the shaking human.

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Tente tried to jerk towards Alec, but Squalo's bind was too tight. "You are ruining my fucking scene."

"What's up with you Dungeon Masters and your scene's sanctity? Did you ever think that if your kink is so vulnerable that my presence fucks it up, then your scene was probably already ruined?"

Squalo's snark caused fury to thump in Tente's head and lust to thump through his arms. "I'm kicking you out now."

Squalo shrugged. "But you need me, Tente, to mentor you. It doesn't seem like you know how to properly fuck a human."

Tente jerked again, harder this time. But mid-movement, Squalo let go of him, causing Tente to topple over.

"No, you don't get it, Squalo. I'm kicking you out of the dungeon for good. Invading a Dungeon Master's scene and personal space? You are straight up blacklisted from now on."

Squalo shoved the human, like a doll, into Tente's face. "I'm in heat. Do you even know what that feels like?"

"My arms are like eight scalding bricks, Squalo. I'm pretty sure I have an idea." Tente grabbed Alec with his own throbbing tentacles and pulled him towards his slimy center.

Tente wrapped an arm around Alec's limp cock. "Who do you want?"

Tente's gaze followed Alec's pointed finger and landed on Squalo's glowing crimson eyes. "Him."

"Well, congratulations. You've totally destroyed my dynamic. Fuck, this is why we have protocol."

Tente didn't even believe that Squalo was attracted to human beings. He just wanted to break some rules. The fact that a Dungeon Master was using the fertilization dungeon only made it better.

"You are so fucking self-absorbed, Squalo, it's like you were made with a human face, squid legs, and a shark heart."

Squalo's slimy arms wrapped around Tente's. "How about you relax with a nice fuck? Just you, the human, and me. I need to be involved for hands-on educational purposes, but hey, I'll cut you a deal. Won't charge you my full price."

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Heat squirmed through Tente's limbs. Squalo's face beamed and Tente growled. "Fuck off. Just take him, there are plenty more where that came from. Interpret it as a good-bye gift, as this will be your last fuck in any fertilization dungeon in this ocean. I'm going to make a large complaint at the next Dungeon Masters meeting. I have the full intention of keeping you out of our scene forever."

Squalo mouthed the word "complaint" with a smug grin as he brought Alec closer. The human's long hair tickled the side of Tente's face. "If you thought eight arms were too much, how about sixteen?"

"I only had four on me," Alec confessed.

Squalo scrunched his eyebrows and cocked his head at Tente. "Tsk. Tsk. What are we going to do with you?"

"I was interrupted," Tente reminded him.

"You go far too slow, watch this." Mid-snark, Squalo molested both Alec and Tente.

Half of his arms were crawling around the human, probing for entrances. Alec arched backwards as Squalo's tentacles cupped him. They did not vibrate, but they did release a crimson excretion allowing for an extra slippery texture. The vine-like arms wrapped around Alec's balls and inched up his firm and rosy cock. Meanwhile, Squalo's second and third arms were tackling Alec's thighs. They curled around each thigh and stretched them open, bringing Alec into a spread-eagle position.

And then that perfect moan as Squalo penetrated him.

Tente's breathing was high and restless like the yelping whiplash of the sea during high tide. Alec's blushing face and drooling mouth were enough to put Tente in a whirl, but then there was the way Squalo was handling him.

Squalo's remaining four arms had constricted around Tente's limbs and released more crimson ink. A slick feeling, like a long hot breath, massaged Tente's appendages from base to tip. Tente swelled up and groaned.

Squalo twisted Tente into his arms as if his arousal was calling his name. He pushed forward and entered Tente's beak with a long, steady kiss. Tente felt light-weight and precious, like an air bubble floating to the surface.

A guttural belt on the sidelines called out, "That's so fucking hot." Alec. Then that memorable growl as Squalo penetrated him.

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The human's approval caused Tente's arms to engorge, but they hit their breaking point as Squalo started to jerk off four of Tente's shafts. A squeal escaped Tente's beak every time Squalo's grip moved upwards, so he rubbed the tips of Tente's suction cups. Tente felt levitated, as if he could arch up to something more than that cold, wet place. Tente's suction cups bloomed and vibrated.

Squalo paused his fucking. He lifted an eyebrow. "I always forget that you are a buzzer."

Alec groaned at the threesome's sudden stop, and their shafts ached with heavy heat. Tente grumbled. "Not everyone hates buzzers. Alec really likes it, in fact."

Squalo released both Alec and Tente. "Oh, so that's the trick to fucking humans? Man, it is almost like you are the expert and I'm the one who needs mentoring."

"For a second, I forgot how much of a sharkhole you are."

"I know. My charm is an amnesiac. Lucky for you, I like repeating myself."

"You mean you like hearing yourself." Tente's whole face was twitching, from the tip of his pout to the arch of his brow, as he frowned. "You had your fun, Squalo. Now it is time to really make you leave."

Squalo put on an exaggerated pout. "You mean you aren't going to show me the strengths of a buzzer? Boo."

Tente recalled Alec's previously orchestral moans. Didn't they prove that the human was attracted to him, buzzers and all? Yet, if he had the evidence, then why did Squalo's dismissive comments burn, like a jellyfish sting?

"How about we ask Alec what he wants." Tente repositioned himself before Squalo could dismiss him. He moved forward so he floated face to face with Alec. "What do you think?"

Alec was drooped over, like a comma. "Can I go home? This fertilization dungeon makes no sense. No squid babies are coming out of me."

"We were actually thinking of mpreg-ing you," Squalo shouted from behind.

Alec's eyes shot open. "What!? You can DO that?"

Tente rolled his eyes. "No—don't listen to him." Tente cocked his head at Squalo. "He doesn't dig our sex anymore, Squalo. I want this to end now."

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“Tente,” Squalo said, as he leaned into Tente’s face with puckered lips, “I don’t really care what you want.”

Squalo’s tentacles invaded Tente’s spongy body with their crimson ink. Its slick moistness was like a toxic aphrodisiac: it aroused Tente and made him vibrate.

Tente heard Alec howl, and knew he had also been inked.

“Okay, Dungeon Master. Perform for me,” said Squalo.

Tente’s mouth was salivating, and his tentacles were reaching towards both Alec and Squalo, and he shook. But at the same time, he was enveloped by a heaviness in the pit of his core—Tente knew this wasn’t what he wanted or what Alec wanted.

Alec’s cock was stiff and rigid. However, his sounds were not in earnest. He didn’t moan with chaotic desire, like he had earlier. Instead, he whimpered.

Tente shook his head, back and forth, like a madman. He squinted his eyes shut as visions flooded in—visions of Alec whimpering, as he pounded deeper and deeper. But still, Tente stayed stiff.

“I would do as I say,” Squalo said.

Tente ignored Squalo’s threat. “Grab on to me. I’ll take you home,” he said to Alec.

Squalo squirted more of his crimson ink at Tente. “Fine then.”

It was a cavernous arousal, as if Squalo was carving a cock-shaped hole inside Tente’s soul. And then there was Alec’s swaying body, like a temptation dangling on a fisherman’s hook. It took all of Tente’s will to stay put.

Squalo approached the human. “I know things that can arouse you more than my ink.” Squalo’s tongue wrapped itself around Alec’s erect nipples and flicked at their pink core. Squalo winked at Tente’s buzzing tentacles before he bobbed his head and sucked the human’s chest.

Tente was at maximum horniness. His thoughts were nothing other than tentacles and cocks. Tente twisted himself to jerk off, but he only got three strokes in before Squalo delivered penance by inking him again. “Don’t touch yourself.”

Tente ached, yet he obeyed.

Alec was still drooping, bent over at the waist. Squalo raised three of his arms and slammed them on Alec’s exposed cheeks. The suction cups produced



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swollen circular welts, outlining the contours of his ass. And that's when Tente buckled.

Tente's first arm wrapped around Squalo's neck and up to his lips. He prodded so that Squalo moved his mouth away from the human's nipples and instead enveloped Tente's tentacles.

Squalo took Tente's arm so smoothly that Tente slipped in a second. Squalo sucked two of Tente's arms at once with the same vigor as Tente performed when he sucked only one. Squalo's tongue traced figure eights on the tips of Tente's heads while he throat-fucked him to the rhythm of his simultaneous spanking scene.

The layered soundscape was made up of buzzes, whiplashes, and expletives. Yet Tente was still searching for a note. His third arm gripped Alec's firm cock and pulsed vibrations up and down the shaft... but he still didn't hear it. Squalo's aphrodisiac had, in fact, coated Alec. The human's cock was hard, back deeply arched, and nipples pointed. But Tente was surrounded by a new noise. The static-silence was a shout in itself.

Tente jerked his arms away from Alec and Squalo with velocity and speed, as if he were exiting the orifices of pure evil.

Squalo opened his mouth, to probably say something horrible, but Tente cut him off and jumped on his face. It was time for him to take his Dungeon Master role seriously, and fight.

Tente had never assaulted a rule-breaker before. His closest physical attack had been a light shove. Community discourse and public shaming had always been effective in banning rule-breaking Squids from the scene. But Squalo was far more toxic than anyone Tente had ever handled before.

He pierced Squalo's neck with his beak. Breaking Squalo's thin human flesh didn't take much effort. For Tente, it was just a simple slip downwards. Squalo howled and tried to pull away, but the more he squirmed the deeper Tente entered. Squalo's russet-colored blood slipped out of Tente's snarling beak, outlining their embrace. Squalo tasted tart yet personal, like marking a day with a shot of whisky.

Tente's tentacles started to bloom with each sip but collapsed as Alec howled. "You octopi are never going to take me home, are you?"

"Well, technically we are squids," Squalo blurted out in between yelps. His snark wasn't as penetrable as his neck.

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Tente sneered at Squalo. Squalo met his sneer with a punch. He hit Tente square in the jaw, blurring his vision.

Tente jerked back, to orient himself, and in consequence freed Squalo from his bite. "You son of a bitch!" Tente's jaw throbbed.

Squalo floated in front of Tente. All eight of his arms were up and in fighting pose. And he sprang.

Tente caught some of Squalo's limbs mid-punch, a minor alleviation from the attack. Minor because for every punch he caught, he missed another. Tente's jaw felt unhinged and his mantle throbbed. Squalo was doing a fine job at beating Tente up.

"Bet you miss your cock throbbing now," said Squalo.

Alec moaned. It was not the earlier gutturally erotic tone, but one of quivering despair.

Tente used the distraction to whack Squalo right in the gut. Squalo doubled over. In this moment of advantage, Tente gripped the rest of Squalo's limbs and tied his own arms around them. Tente was using his arms to create a bind around Squalo's.

Squalo released his crimson ink. It was a desperate escape plan that he didn't think all the way through. Tente's arms did engorge, but Squalo vastly miscalculated Tente's strength. The tightness around Squalo's limbs increased, not lessened, therefore strengthening his grip. Plus, now that Tente was inked, he started to vibrate. In this binding, the two squid-hybrids had their suction cups padded into each other. This allowed each buzz to quake into Squalo's tentacles' soft cores.

For the first time, Tente heard Squalo's moan. It was a mixed note of hazy breath and high-pitched whimpers. It excited Tente. "What is that, Squalo?"

Squalo bit his lips in attempt to keep silent, but Tente's suction cups vibrated a bit harder. Squalo gaped open and groaned.

"Hey. This wouldn't happen to arouse you. Would it?" Tente tightened his grip a bit more. His vibrations teased circles inside Squalo's soft weak spots. Tente continued to tease as he floated to the cave's exit.

"Tente. Please," Squalo said in between pants.

"Please what? Jerk you off?"

"Please." Squalo nodded. "I'm sorry, Tente. For ruining your scene."

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“You must be really horny.”

“I need you, Tente. Didn't you want me to need you?”

Tente shrugged. He shifted his position to that of a torpedo, where his arms were out of the dungeon, but his face was still inside. Tente released Squalo. “I don't care what you think of me anymore.”

Squalo attempted to push himself back into the dungeon but, instead, whacked into its opaque security wall. He let out a high-pitched yelp as if he touched a toxic anemone.

“You are on the blacklist, so that's going to happen every time you try to enter my dungeon. Welcome to being banned.”

\*\*\*\*

“Can I go home now?” Alec had followed them to the exit and was waiting for Squalo to swim out of view.

“Are you okay?”

Alec tangled his fingers into his own hair. “If I don't answer—what will happen? Will you plunge your tentacles back inside of me?”

Tente shook his head. “I'm sorry—I didn't mean for this to go so awfully. I'm just kinky. That's why I wanted to fertilize you. A human. I didn't mean for this to be a nightmare.”

Alec rolled his neck. “That wasn't an accusation.”

“I thought you wanted to go home? That's totally an option, was actually what I was planning on doing anyway.”

Alec nodded. “I know. But please. I want it to be just you. Like before.” He bent over so the tips of his fingers grazed the sea's light waves. Alec's exposed asshole caused Tente's suction cups to buzz up again.

Tente wrapped two of his arms together, to create one big phallus, and plunged deep inside the human.

Alec moaned his deepest moan yet. “I fucking love tentacles!”

Alec was never going to shrug that feeling off. Thus one of Tente's intentions actually did come true. To give Alec tentacle lust.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*NK Layne sees the world through queer brushstrokes, infinite rainbows, demonic cartoons, gory afternoons, and a veil of moss.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# ADAM'S FLIGHT

Flint & Frost, Dragborn Series

By Penny Wilder

## Photo Description

A beautiful man with long flame-red hair and burning eyes stares ahead. His gaze is determined, deliberate, and his eyes are glowing as if lit by a fire within. He is magic, powerful. In the background, we see his other form, a red fire dragon illuminated against a sky on fire.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It was the loud sound of ancient bolts sliding free from their even more ancient locks that awakened Adam; then again, it also could have been the unbearable pain slicing through the back of his skull that had caused him to finally push through the fuzzy barrier that was unconsciousness. The dim lighting coming from one lone torch on the wall near his head was the only thing that kept his prison from being plummeted into full darkness, he heard low fierce voices coming from behind the large cracked oak door that opened the way to a freedom he'd probably never see again.*

*Once again there was the clicking sound of an ancient lock releasing from its mechanism, and then the door opened and with it came a creaking noise that suggested that the hinges had gone on far too long without a proper oiling and the awful sound also succeeded in making his head pound unmercifully. As the sound of the door echoed off into the blackness of his prison a short stout man that could've been a relative to an ogre stepped into the room dragging behind him a raggedy looking stool that surely would've collapsed under the cruel weight of this man.*

*However, as quickly as the man had entered was how quickly he'd left, as soon as the stool was properly placed. A short time later though, another man entered and once again he doubted the ability of the stool to hold this man's weight. This man was far more attractive with dark hair that might've trailed behind him if it hadn't been for the tiny leather band holding it back into a ponytail, his bright blue eyes almost pierced the darkness and took he took his seat with a gracefulness that surprised Adam. Still, his masculine beauty couldn't hide the cruelty rolling off him in waves of black.*

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*The man snapped his fingers and then another ogre-like man rushed into the room with another burning torch which he promptly placed in the other holder by the door. The taller man, who probably beat Adam's own height by just a few inches, then spoke in a voice that under normal circumstances would've made Adam's cock stand up and take notice in no time flat, but right now all that voice did was make him cringe.*

*"That's much better. We couldn't possibly have a proper conversation without more light. I always like being able to see my prey as well as seeing the fear I invoke in them."*

*That's one thing he wasn't going to see from Adam. His rage temporarily drove away the pain from his headache, and he could almost feel the man's throat in his hands; and he might have if it hadn't been for the damnable chains attached to his wrists. The man only laughed in that mocking way Adam despised hearing from anyone.*

*"Just tell me where she is, and then I'll be more than happy to let you go. Maybe after you cooperate we can get to know each other better."*

*Adam wasn't sure what made him sicker; the look he received from the man or the way he smiled when his eyes hovered longer than was necessary on Adam's crotch, but Adam swore to himself that he would bear anything he had to in order to keep Ellianna safe. Anything to make sure she married the man she wanted, even if that man was a dragon.*

*The man's shocking eyes narrowed at his silence and then he rose from his seat. Adam tried to brace himself for what he was sure was coming, but the shocking pain of the man's booted foot colliding with his bare stomach couldn't have been avoided even if he'd been able to read the man's thoughts. His attempt at breathing through the pain failed and when he could finally lift his head, the man was directly in his sight, anger pouring off him.*

*"Where is she?"*

*Adam didn't get a chance to respond because some commotion outside drew both of their attention to the door. Then screams and the sound of what might have been an explosion echoed throughout all of the dungeon. The man left Adam with a parting punch to his jaw that he knew would leave at least an ugly bruise.*

*After he was gone, Adam fought to hang on to consciousness, and if it hadn't been for the rumbling and subsequent explosions he might have succumbed to the darkness awaiting him. But the sound of crumbling stone and*

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more screaming had him staring at the far left corner of his prison. He could hardly believe his eyes as that entire sector began to shake and crash around him. He waited expectantly to be crushed under at least one hundred tons of stone but nothing happened, and when he looked toward what was left of that part of the dungeon, he noticed some sort of barrier protecting him.

“Adam!”

The sound of his name being called attracted his attention to the sky, which he could now see clearly through the large hole. It was his sister. She was on the back of an enormous ocean-blue dragon, but the wonderful sight of his beloved sister safe, and it seemed to him having the time of her life, just couldn't compare to the magnificent sight that was moving towards him.

The incredibly handsome man moving towards him seemed to resemble the dragon in the sky except for his color, and the fact that he was wonderfully human. His deep-red hair seem to shine in the light of the setting sun, but his hair wasn't only red as it seemed to spark and dance between several shades; from rose, to ember, and shades he couldn't even seem to put a name to. He looked like some magnificent god the way he rose up from the clouds of dust. When he at last stood before Adam, he noticed that even his clothing was a deep rich red.

The man reached to his side, pulled his sword free from its sheath and let it rise to just above Adam's head. Adam closed his eyes, even though that was the last thing he wanted to do, because if he had to die at this man's hand then all he wanted to do was remember the way he looked right now. He felt the rush of the wind as the stranger's blade was released to do as it wished. Adam knew that he flinched but then he could still feel his head attached to his shoulders.

He opened his eyes and saw that the stranger was closer to him now. Adam had thought that everything else about this man had been magnificent, but he'd yet to see his eyes that he knew what the best thing about this man was... his gorgeous eyes were an incredible mixture of fiery red and melted gold, with little to no emotion reflected within. Adam was so awestruck that he hadn't even heard the man speak until he spoke again, louder this time.

“We don't have time for this. If you want to keep breathing then you'll stop staring at me and move.”

Adam shook his head to rid it of the idiotic thoughts that were drifting through his head but he instantly regretted the action because his head began to throb again. The man turned to him and proceeded to pull him up by one arm

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*but that motion only made his headache worse. He tried to follow but that's when his legs came out from under him. The man was there in his sight again, only this time kneeling in front of him yet somehow holding him up. He was saying something, asking a question maybe, but Adam couldn't understand him. He could barely make out his face anymore but something in the stranger's eyes troubled him. The man almost looked concerned.*

*The stranger's incredible eyes were the last thing Adam saw before he blacked out.*

*Please give Adam and his incredible dragon a terrific fantasy story, thank you so much!*

*Sincerely,*

*Gabrielle ~ Bhlack Benevolence ~*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** fantasy, paranormal, steampunk

**Tags:** dragon shifters, gay, twins, mates, pansexual, transgender, magic users, prison/captivity

**Word Count:** 28,847

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# **ADAM'S FLIGHT**

Flint & Frost, Draqborn Series

**By Penny Wilder**

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## Chapter One

There was blackness. Blackness, pounding pain, and there were whispers. Everything hurt. Adam didn't know where he was, but he could feel grass and cool earth beneath him, and the air was clean. *Not the dungeon then, but where?* He kept his eyes closed, and listened.

“Shouldn't be long now.”

“Marin, when he wakes, we have to move. We have only hours till light touches these cliffs.”

“Can't fly much further anyway. The Order watch the Split, and the Nets they've woven make it too dangerous to fly. We'll have to sneak around them on foot.”

“Watchers?” Elli. His twin. *Thank the Gods.*

“Elli, it'll be fine.”

“His head, Marin, I don't know if we should move him.”

“Flint will carry him as far as we can go.” Adam knew that voice. Marin Frost. The memory of Elli sitting astride the great blue Dragon flickered in his mind. Elli's intended had risked capture and exposed himself as a Dragon in order to rescue Adam. *Gods, what happened when I passed out?* he wondered.

Someone snorted.

“Don't start, Flint,” said Frost.

“You asked for my aid, Marin. I'm giving it, and thanks to your stunt back there, every watcher in the Order will be on our tail all the way back to the keep.”

“Dammit, Ethon! If we had taken any more time, they would have secured Adam somewhere deep in the pits where we couldn't break in.”

Another snort. “Lucky for us that they were fools then.”

“Lucky for us there weren't any Gifted guarding him,” Frost retorted.

“That would have made things more complicated,” the other man agreed. Adam listened, still feigning unconsciousness, and silently agreed with the stranger. The Order had soldiers with special talents and abilities who were essentially “Gifted”. They had superior strength or could move things with their

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mind or levitate or possessed some other power. There were even a few Casters and Fairies who worked for them. The Order fortified their army with Gifted Forces. Many of the Order's Gifted were taken from their parents as children when their gift first manifested. The Order cultivated their talents and molded their minds, creating an army of soldiers who could do things like lift you off your feet and fling you into a wall without ever touching you.

Just then, there was something wet and rough, at his brow. *A cloth?* Adam thought. Delicate fingers brushed his cheek, dabbing around a cut on his forehead. The cloth stung, and Adam flinched as his eyes fluttered open. Above him was a dark, starless sky. His twin, Ellianna, was kneeling to his right, her dark eyes full of concern, and her waist-length, inky-black curls falling forward as she leaned over to clean his cut. Behind her, he could see the tall form of her mate, Ilmarin Frost, pacing back and forth, the flame from a glowing, blue lantern at his feet throwing wild shadows in all directions. On his other side, burning eyes and all, crouched the beautiful red-haired warrior who'd spoken to him through the crumpled wall of the dungeon before he passed out. *Flint?* Adam wondered as he stared.

"Ah, there he is." The warrior stared down at him. Adam stared back. The warrior's eyes... they flickered like fire and glinted like gold before fading to a steady amber hue. Adam had seen a Draq before—well, Marin anyway—but the Draq in front of him was nothing like Marin. His flame-red hair and amber eyes in contrast to his pale skin was almost jarring. He was eyeing Adam carefully, his lips pressed into a hard line. At the sound of the Draq's voice, Frost quickly knelt behind Elli and smiled at Adam.

"You had us worried, Mr. Byre," said Frost.

"Frost. Elli, hullo." Adam smiled weakly at his twin and her mate and flinched when the movement made his head throb. "Where... where am I?"

"We're on the cliffs not far from Eldor Falls." Frost noted the confused look on Adam's face. "We're safe for the moment. You were very far from home, Adam."

"Where—" he took a breath. "When you found me, where was I?"

Marin and the Draq exchanged a look, and Adam had a feeling, he wasn't going to like the answer. "New Quidel," said Marin.

Adam was speechless. New Quidel was an enormous city nearly two hundred leagues southwest of his farm. He looked up at Elli, Marin, and the warrior, his eyes wide. "You came for me," he said. "Thank you."

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“You are brother to my mate, Adam,” Marin replied. His outstretched hand gripped Adam’s shoulder. “As long as I draw breath, I will always come for you.”

“How’d you find me?” Adam asked.

Elli held up her left wrist, displaying her woven leather cuff, and Adam squinted in confusion. The cuff was old, with an intricate pattern pressed into the leather at the wrist. Its twin resided on Adam’s right wrist. “Grandmere’s gift, Adam, her magic. It saved you.” She squeezed his hand and pressed their cuffed wrists together, her eyes wide. “I felt them take you.” Adam and Elli had always shared a space in the other’s head. For as long as Adam could remember, he and Elli had been speaking to each other in psychic whispers and sharing flashes of feeling. His connection with his twin was a constant presence, burning brightly in the back of his mind. When they took him at the farm, he’d been knocked unconscious, and the connection would have been severed abruptly. He looked up at his twin who continued. “Everything went dark, I couldn’t feel you anymore, but the cuffs—the cuffs were still tied together in some way, and Flint was able to...” She glanced over at the red-haired Draq with a grateful smile.

“Flint?” Adam prompted, squeezing Elli’s hand in return.

The red-haired Draq smirked at Adam and raised two long, willowy fingers in salute to greet him. “Ethon Eldhrimnir Flint, at your service. The cuffs were tied with a simple bonding spell, one that probably enhanced your awareness of each other as children. I could feel the trace of the spell enough to follow it to you.”

“You’re a Caster?” Adam asked, eyeing Flint. “When the wall fell, back there in the dungeon, did you...?”

“I shielded you, yes.”

“Thank you,” said Adam. Flint blinked at Adam and shrugged. He seemed uncomfortable and looked away from Adam, out into the night. Adam studied his profile and the tightness in his shoulders before turning his attention back to Marin and Elli.

“When Elli lost her sense of you,” said Marin, “she went into hysterics.”

“It was so sudden, Adam. I thought you were dead,” she confessed. He squeezed her hand and touched his mind to hers, reassuring Elli that he was going to be okay. He took comfort in their connection, which had felt distant

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and faint even before his capture, because Elli and Marin had been so far away. The relief he felt from Elli through their bond was palpable. He had missed his twin.

“They hit me on the head, El,” said Adam, wincing again as he tried to sit up. Marin reached out a hand to steady him. His head still pounded, and his stomach roiled, but he didn’t get sick.

“Can you stand?” Flint asked. Adam nodded gently, and they helped him to his feet. He had to grip Flint’s arm to stay upright, but he was standing. Marin turned to face Adam and hunched over, so he and Adam were face to face.

“Adam,” said Marin, “we have to move. The Order will find us if we linger.”

For a Draq, moving meant flying. Adam had dreamed of flying ever since he was a child. Grandmere had filled their heads with old Draq adventure stories. He looked over at Flint, whose face was perfectly blank as he acknowledged Adam’s stare with a quick nod. “Better tie him,” Flint said coolly.

Flint stepped away from Adam’s side and began removing his clothing. Adam’s eyes widened as Flint’s thin porcelain frame was revealed. What Adam could see of Flint in the flickering light was more than pleasant. His flame-colored hair was thick and fell in soft waves halfway down his back. His hip bones stuck out above the top of his pants, and his muscles... there wasn’t an ounce of body fat on the Draq. His muscles rippled beneath his pale skin, every inch of his thin frame chiseled and defined. Flint looked younger than Adam had thought at first glance, maybe not much older than Adam and Elli’s nineteen years, but how that translated in Draq years, Adam had no idea. A Draq lived eons longer than humans, so Flint was probably much older than him and Elli.

While Flint disrobed, he muttered instructions to Elli, who rushed to the pile of packs to pull out some kind of leather harness. He paused to look back at Adam and Marin, his hands hooked into his pants in preparation to pull them down. He looked at Adam, and there was a glint of discomfort in the Draq’s gaze. “I won’t hurt you,” Flint stated. Adam blinked and nodded, his heart beating faster as Flint’s eyes stared into his. With that, Ethon Flint turned away, shucked his pants, and shifted.

Adam, his head still pounding, and aided only by the dim lantern behind him, could barely comprehend what he was seeing. Flint dropped to his knees

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and fell forward, expanding into the shadows. He grew impossibly large. His neck shot skyward, and his skin glowed a fiery red. Scales covered his body in ripples, like a rush of fire. A spiked tail appeared, and great talons, wickedly curved and black, replaced his hands and feet. As Flint writhed and flexed his body, wings unfolded from his great red back. Within seconds Flint the Draq was gone. Flint the Dragon was bigger than Adam's house. As Adam watched, tiny curls of smoke escaped from Flint's flared nostrils. The only recognizable feature Adam could see, that connected the Draq to the great red Dragon before him, were the Draq's familiar burning eyes which flashed even larger in Flint's Dragon face.

After checking himself over and shaking his head, Flint turned his massive head towards Adam. Flint's eyes were still burning fire, and his nostrils flared. As he sniffed the air in front of him, little puffs of smoke escaped. Adam felt pressure on his lower back and realized that Flint's tail was wrapped around him. "What is he doing?" Adam wondered, slightly alarmed as the tail pulled his body slightly forward, and Flint stuck his snout directly on Adam's chest. A jolt of electricity shot through Adam at the contact. He forgot to breathe, and he trembled, his heart pounding.

"It's alright," said Marin. His arm was still around Adam's shoulder, supporting Adam even as Flint's tail pushed him forward and off-balance. He leaned in and whispered in Adam's ear, "He needs to be able to know your scent in this form. I'll do the same when I change as well."

Adam shook and warmth pooled in his belly, making him feel very strange as Flint nosed his torso. Flint, and the tiny puffs of smoke that wafted from his snout, smelled like burning wood... cloves, and *cinnamon*? Adam nearly laughed out loud. He had never heard of a Dragon smelling sweet before. It seemed at odds with Flint's rather terrifying exterior.

When Flint turned his head away from Adam and pulled his tail off of Adam's back, Elli stepped forward with the harness. It buckled swiftly over Flint's shoulders and around his forelegs. With the harness in place, Elli and Marin helped Adam onto Flint's back. Adam glanced up at Flint only to find the Dragon's burning eyes watching him. Despite the fog from the pain in his head, Adam was in awe. He couldn't believe that he was going to fly on the back of a Dragon. When Marin and Elli were finished, Adam's legs were buckled to the harness with two mismatched leather belts. He leaned forward and reached out with both hands, his fingers tracing over the rough row of spikes running down the back of Flint's neck. He could feel Flint beneath him,

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and he wondered, not for the first time since he awoke, if this wasn't all a dream. His head was still throbbing, so he closed his eyes. He was so tired.

He was drifting in a haze again when he heard the rush of Marin's shift. Adam felt a huff of cool breath at his neck and shivered at the icy chill. He opened his eyes and saw the head of the large ocean-blue Dragon that was Frost a few feet away. Elli was holding the lantern aloft and was once again seated on Frost's back of as she had been during Adam's rescue.

"Ready?" asked Elli. Adam nodded. With that, she snuffed the lantern and plunged them into darkness.

Adam gripped the harness he was buckled into tightly with one hand, and pressed the other hand to the rough scales on Flint's neck. He felt the ground tremble as Flint took off across the field in a great jolt, his limbs pounding into the earth, his wings making great whooshing sounds as they lifted off the ground. They passed the edge of the cliff they had been resting on moments ago, and were suddenly thousands of feet in the air. Adam could see tiny pinpricks of light and wisps of smoke from the chimneys of the farms that were spread across the valley beneath them. Above them he saw only darkness. Adam couldn't see any stars. He looked back over his shoulder, and very far in the distance, he could see a glowing, orange haze on the horizon. The glow, he knew, was from polluted clouds in the distance, reflecting the artificial lights that lit up the city of New Quidel. The city sat under a constant haze of foul air that covered all but the tallest buildings in the city. He shuddered, and turned away.

Adam could feel the wind rushing past them. They rose higher and higher. As they spiraled upwards, he felt the air grow colder. Wisps of moisture stung his cheeks as Flint flew through thick clouds. Quite suddenly, they were above the clouds, and Adam could see the stars twinkling above them. He gasped. He'd never seen the heavens so clearly before. Everything felt closer than it did on his farm, like he could reach out his hand and touch the stars.

Adam could see Elli and Frost not too far in front of them. Frost was flying low to the clouds so that his wings just brushed the cloud layer. Elli, his usually shy twin, was leaning forward, one hand on her harness and one hand skimming through the clouds beneath them. She was smiling and talking animatedly to Frost as they flew. Her cheeks glowed in the light of the stars and the moon, and her raven tresses streamed behind her in the rushing wind. She looked like she belonged there with Frost, Adam realized. He was glad to see

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Elli so happy, but he felt more alone watching the two of them than he ever had when he was really and truly alone on his farm.

He was jolted from his melancholy when Flint arched high into the air and dove straight down to skim the cloud layer behind Frost. The unexpected tilt caught Adam off guard, and his stomach jolted with the sharp dive. He pitched his body forward, leaning close to Flint's neck, and shifted his weight, learning how to adjust his body to match Flint's movements as he flew. It was sort of like riding a really fast horse through the air. If the horse could fly. No, riding a Dragon defied description, Adam realized. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced.

Flint and Frost circled each other, weaving lazy patterns as they flew north away from New Quidel. Far and fast they flew, so fast that the next time Adam thought to look behind them, there was no distant glow on the horizon from the faraway city, only darkness and the stars of the night sky. As they flew on, the world drifted in and out of focus for Adam. He slumped against Flint's neck, exhausted. He was grateful for the belts on his legs that were keeping him safely tied to Flint. His arms slipped to the sides of Flint's neck, and his head came forward to rest on Flint's warm, red scales. His last thought before he drifted off was that they must be heading due east, because there, on the horizon, were the first signs of morning light. A tinge of gray to the darkness that grew slightly brighter as they flew across the sky.

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## Chapter Two

Far away, in the city of New Quidel, a handsome man with long, dark hair, bright blue eyes, and a cruel mouth was kneeling on the floor in the center of a room. The room was lit by braziers that lined the cavernous hall, instead of the artificial lights that brightened most of the city. He was not alone.

“You disappoint me, Baker,” said the man’s hooded companion. “You had Byre in your custody for less than a day...”

“My lord,” the Baker began.

“...less than a day, and the twin we were searching for rides in on a *Dragon* to take him away right from under your nose!”

“We were taken unawares, my lord!” replied the Baker.

The hooded man chuckled at that. “The entire city was taken unawares, Baker, but tell me, how long have you known the Draq were not extinct?”

“My lord?”

“How long?”

“Since Westenfall, my lord.”

“Ah yes, Westenfall. Your failure,” the hooded man chuckled. “That was your first attempt to bring in the girl twin.”

It was the first time he had been thwarted by that cursed Draq as well. “Yes, my lord.” Elli Byre was unusual, but Elli held no interest for him. Her brother, on the other hand, was intriguing. He clenched his fist, still feeling the blow he’d delivered to that wide-eyed face just hours before.

“The Draqborn who was here in the form of the Ice Dragon, he’s the one that you encountered in Westenfall?”

“Yes.” The twin had been secured, ready for transport to the Order’s Gifted Conditioning Program, when that cursed Draq had managed to break into Westenfall and abscond with her in the night.

“You were aware of the connection between the Ice Dragon and the Byre twin?” The Baker nodded, and the hooded man’s face twisted in a sneer. “How is it then, that your guards were unprepared for such an attack?”

“The men that brought Byre here claimed they were not followed. His twin should not even have known that he had gone missing. Finding him should have been impossible.”

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“And yet, they had no trouble doing just that. Which means, we either have a traitor in our midst, or you greatly underestimated your quarry.”

“Yes, my lord.” The Baker kept his eyes on the ancient tiles that covered the floor of the hall.

“Since you alerted us to their continued existence, we’ve been gathering intelligence on the Draq.”

“Naturally, my lord.”

“Their numbers are unknown, but it is rumored they have a stronghold in Loras. So far our Gifted have been unable to pinpoint the location. You must intercept the Byre twins before they reach it. Bring them back here. Alive,” the man added.

“We leave within the hour, my lord,” the Baker assured him.

“Good. Do not fail me.” The hooded man turned to leave the room.

“Lord Chandelers?” The Baker chose his words with great care. “My lord, these Byre twins have clearly allied themselves with the Draq. That association alone, along with the damage wrought this very day on the city of New Quidel, makes them enemies of Domin. They are also far beyond the age when other Gifted are conditioned by our Order.” He shifted, his questions of, *Why? Why bring them back here? Why not just kill them?* left unasked. He kept his eyes on the ground as Chandelers’ stare bored into his skull.

Finally Chandelers sighed and said, “All I can tell you is that we have been looking for the Byre twins for a very long time.” As Chandelers spoke, the Baker noticed that he touched his hand to a pendant he always wore.

The Baker pondered his words. Chandelers often spoke in half-truths. “How long?”

Chandelers scoffed, “That is irrelevant. You have your orders, Baker. Go now, and bring them back to me.”

The Baker stood and bowed. “Consider it done, my lord.” He turned to leave.

“And Baker? Don’t underestimate them.” The Baker looked back and nodded as the heavy door closed behind him.

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Dawn was drawing near when they landed. Adam was still slumped over Flint’s neck, barely aware of what was happening. He heard Elli and Marin

speaking, their words rising slowly to the surface of his awareness, and then there was silence. Suddenly, Adam felt Flint shrink under him, shifting while Adam was still tied to his back. Adam slid to the ground beside Flint, his legs still tied to the harness which Flint easily shrugged off his much smaller Draq frame. As Flint stood, he picked Adam up and threw him over his shoulder. Adam's nose bumped Flint's lower back, and he blushed as he looked down at Flint's lily-white frame. The Draq's skin was unmarred except for a round brand of a Dragon in flight at the center of his back. It looked familiar, but Adam wasn't sure where he'd seen it.



Flint carried Adam to the center of a small grove of trees where he gently lowered him to the ground. Flint squatted in front of him, unbuckling the belts to remove the harness from Adam's legs. Adam didn't know where to look as the skinny Draq made fast work of the harness. There was no safe place for Adam's eyes. The Draq's entire body was hairless with the exception of his head and a shocking thatch of flame-red curls at his crotch. Adam's eyes drifted still lower, and he sucked in a quick breath before averting his eyes.

"Like what you see, do you?" Adam looked up quickly to find Flint watching him with a smug look on his face. Adam blushed to the roots of his hair, as Flint's eyes held his.

"Sorry," he murmured.

"It's alright." Flint reached forward to touch his fingers gently to the bruises on Adam's face. Adam winced. "How do you feel?"

"Like I walked for days, then was dragged through mud, and then beat up." Adam almost smiled at the concern on Flint's face. "I hurt all over," he admitted, "but I don't think anything is broken." He looked around. "Where are Elli and Frost?" he asked.

Flint coughed. "There was a farm about a league back. They're procuring breakfast, mounts, and a few other provisions, I suspect. They'll be back in a

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while. We should rest while we can.” He untied a rolled blanket from the harness and laid it beside Adam. Flint lay near the middle and pulled the other half of the blanket over his body. He held up his arm with the blanket and motioned Adam to crawl next to him. “There’s just the one blanket. I can share, if you can.” Adam blinked. Flint looked over at him, his arm still outstretched, a glint of... *is that amusement?* ...in his eyes. “Come here to me, Adam Byre, and rest.”

Adam gave this strange and beautiful Draq that he barely knew a hard stare, which Flint returned. He was straight-faced except for the twinkle in his eye, and Adam couldn’t tell if the Draq was serious, or if he was mocking Adam. He watched Flint for any further clues before he shrugged, deciding he was too tired to care one way or the other. Adam shifted himself onto the blanket and turned, so his back was to Flint. He carefully kept a few inches of space between him and the Draq. Flint eased the blanket over Adam, and Adam felt him curl up behind him. Flint sniffed and gave a satisfied sigh. “Sleep, Byre,” he murmured. Surprisingly, Adam did.

As he drifted on the edge of sleep, Adam fell into what must have been a dream. He felt a strong arm wrap around his waist, and a nose nuzzling the curls at the back of his neck. It was the nicest dream he’d had in a very long time. In his dream, the arms held him, safe and secure at last. He pressed back into the heat and let himself drift off.

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## Chapter Three

When Adam awoke, he was cold. Flint was no longer curled beside him, and the blanket wasn't enough to keep him warm. He squinted and forced his eyes to open in the now bright grove. Sunlight streamed in patches to the ground through breaks in the canopy of leaves high above his head. Wind rustled through the branches, and the chill in the morning air made Adam shiver. Adam's left eye was puffy. It was more swollen now than yesterday.

At the edge of the grove stood Flint. He was dressed and rubbing a cloth through his wet hair. Flint's eyes met Adam's, but he looked away and busied himself with digging through one of the packs. Elli was kneeling on a blanket not far from Adam, breaking large chunks off of a loaf of bread. His twin's long, dark curls were twisted up in a messy knot on her head. Dark tendrils escaped the knot as she worked to prepare their food. She was dressed in a simple gray traveling gown that accentuated her thin frame and made the dark blue of her eyes stand out in stark relief.

Elli set the chunks of bread next to four sausages. Adam's stomach rumbled, and he realized he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten anything. Not yesterday, certainly. He groaned and pushed himself up until he was sitting, still wrapped in the blanket. He saw Marin, off in the trees, tending to four horses.

He rubbed his eyes. His companions were all staring at him. "What?"

"Oh, Adam," Elli whispered, her eyes filled with tears.

"What?" he asked again.

"You look terrible, that's what. Gods, Adam, I am so sorry." She knelt next to him and took his hands in hers. Warmth and support filled Adam through their bond, but Adam could feel the fierce anger that Elli was trying to hide from him.

"You saved me, El. I'm here." He wanted to wipe the tears from her eyes, but his hands were filthy. He settled for pulling her close and hugging her. She sighed, and as she squeezed him back, he felt her let some of the anger she'd been holding in go. "*Good girl*," he thought at her. She glared and poked him in the arm.

"Adam, you should know that I hired Kinley to watch the farm," Elli said as she hugged him back. "And, before you ask, when we stopped there to pick up

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your trail, everything was fine. Kinley saw them take you, so he was already taking care of everyone.”

Kinley was a strange, quiet man whose small cottage was at the end of Adam's north field. Kinley only kept a small garden and some chickens, so he often helped Adam with odd jobs around his farm. Kinley hardly spoke, but he was big and strong as an ox and was a good worker. Adam nodded. “Orin? He tried to bite one of them, is he... did they?” They'd forced a sack over his head, so he couldn't see, but he'd heard his dog's angry barks cut off in a pained whimper, and he had feared the worst.

Elli squeezed him tighter. “They broke his hip and maybe a rib, but Kinley found him after they took you, and he patched him up. He's going to be fine.” Tears pricked Adam's eyes as he sighed with relief. His pup was okay. “Before you ask, everyone else is fine too.” Adam hugged El harder and winced as she pressed on a bruise.

“Thanks, El,” he whispered as he sat back and took a breath. “I need to tell you what happened, but first I need to eat. There wasn't much to eat where I was and...” Then Flint was there handing him the bread and meat. Adam blinked, and his hands shook as he broke off a piece of the bread.

“Go slowly,” warned Flint. As Adam ate, Marin crossed the clearing towards them, carrying a water vessel. He knelt at Elli's side and offered it to Adam who drank, greedily.

While he finished eating, the others ate their share. “Better?” Flint asked Adam when he was finished.

He nodded. Flint reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, round metal circle filled with white pills. He pressed three into Adam's hand. “Lorrow tree bark. For the pain.” Adam smiled gratefully and swallowed them down. He looked up and realized the three of them were waiting for him to speak. He turned to Elli. “They wanted to know where you were, El. There was a man who was questioning me, and he wanted to know where you were.”

“Can you describe him?” Frost asked as he put an arm around Elli and drew her closer to his body.

“He had black hair that was tied back with a piece of leather, and he had really blue eyes.”

Flint hissed and leapt to his feet. He swore under his breath, and looked over at Frost.

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“You know him?” asked Adam.

“The Order calls him the Baker,” said Flint, frowning. “We don’t know his true name.”

“Seriously, the Baker?” Adam asked, and Frost nodded solemnly. “Do we know why he’s called the Baker?”

All three of his companions shook their heads in unison. “Nope, not a ruddy clue, but probably because of something he did...” Flint answered.

“Or someone he killed,” inserted Frost

“Or that,” Flint agreed.

“Elli and I have encountered him before,” Marin explained. “He works for the Order, and he’s been seen with Gifted soldiers, but we don’t know much.”

“And what we know, we don’t like,” Flint added.

“He’s the one who tried to take Elli at Westenfall.” As he spoke, his voice a low growl, Marin kept his eyes on Elli who was staring pointedly down at her hands. Adam’s stomach clenched. *What had really happened at Westenfall, and why wasn’t he told about it?* He stared down at Elli, and reached out to her with his mind.

“*EI?*”

“*I’m fine, Adam. Marin saved me.*”

“*No, you’re not fine. I saw your face just now. Elli, what the hell happened?*”

“*Adam. Please. I will tell you, I promise, but not now.*”

“*I’ll wait if that’s what you want, but just so you know, I’m not letting this go.*”

Elli looked up at him, grateful. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “*Thank you, Adam.*”

Marin touched Elli’s nose, bringing her out of contact with Adam. She looked up at Marin’s ice-blue eyes, and gave a weak smile. Adam thought back to the dungeon and the shackles and wished he’d been able to bash them right between the Baker’s blue eyes.

“What else did the Baker want to know?” Flint asked. He was watching Adam warily, as if he might break at any moment.

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“I don’t know,” Adam admitted, frowning. “He’d just come in and started questioning me when the wall to my cell broke open, and you three were there.” He looked up and saw three very satisfied grins on the faces of his companions.

“Well,” said Frost as he picked up Elli and spun her around, “he knows where we were last night,” Elli laughed as he drew her in close to his broad chest, and he kissed her hair gently before continuing, “but, he doesn’t know where we are right now, eh?”

“They didn’t follow you?” Adam wondered.

“They tried,” said Frost.

“Men on horses rode through the gates and tried to follow us. I could see them in the distance once we were clear of the smog, but they couldn’t keep up,” Elli explained.

“They sent a mechanical bird too,” said Flint, “but Marin tore it to pieces.”

“How did the city fare?” Adam wondered. Marin looked a little shamefaced. He cleared his throat but didn’t answer.

“In terms of Dragon damage, it was relatively mild,” said Flint. “Only a few buildings were crushed, and there were very few casualties.”

“Casualties?” Adam asked, feeling a bit sick. For a moment no one spoke.

“There was a guard on the ground with a harpoon cannon aimed at Frost,” said Flint, his voice quivering a bit. “There was no time. The spell I cast blew up the cannon, and he...”

Adam was horrified that someone was killed during his rescue, but he was oddly glad that it mattered to Flint. Dragon damage sounded ominous, and he needed to know what happened after he collapsed at Flint’s feet in the dirt. “Can you tell me how you three got me out of that place?”

“Well let’s see...” Flint said smirking. “I snuck into the city, tracking you.” Flint snapped a twig from the ground and drew two circles on the ground, one inside the other. The city of New Quidel sat on a peninsula that dipped into the Radyn Sea. The city was the southernmost point of Domin and was perfectly round. The inner circle, a jumble of giant towers extending into the sky, housed the privileged classes and government. The outer circle housed the populace and was divided into four quadrants, North, South, East and West. Adam had visited the city once as a child, and he remembered the foul air and the black stuff that came out of his nose after they left. Most of all, he remembered the



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empty expressions and cold stares from the people who lived in the city. Flint tapped his stick to top of the inner circle he'd drawn, pointing to the wall in the middle of the North Quadrant. "When I found you there in the dungeons, I sent up a signal to Marin and Elli."

"The dungeon was inside a wall?" Adam blurted.

Flint nodded and turned to Marin. "I meant to mention, Frost, it looks like the Order kept the underground passes from the old city of Quidel intact, including the passages under the old Citadel. They just built that monstrous tower right on top of it."

Adam had no idea what underground passes Flint was talking about, but Marin's eyes widened. "How did you..." Frost began.

"I had a few minutes while I was waiting for you and Elli to arrive." Flint shrugged. "I leaned up against the wall to the inner circle, and cast a few mapping spells. There weren't even any wards," he scoffed. "The only part of the inner wall that showed any sign of use was the dungeon."

"Once we had you, we got out of there. I carried everyone, flew low between the buildings, and shot up the outer wall, so the guards posted on the outer wall above the smog couldn't see us till it was too late," explained Marin.

"Thank you. All of you." Adam paused, his mind racing. "What will this mean for the Draq?" he asked them. "A Dragon flew into the biggest city in all of Domin, broke me out of a dungeon, and flew away with me."

"We don't know, Adam," Elli said softly. "The Order already knew about Frost because of what happened at Westenfall. They already knew the Draq were not extinct."

"And now the folk in North Quadrant of New Quidel know too," Adam said.

"If the Order doesn't have a way to wipe their memories, then yes, Byre," Flint stated. Adam hadn't thought of that.

Marin sighed and rubbed his hand over his forehead. "We don't know what it will mean for the Draq as a whole, Adam, but I do know what it means for the four of us."

"What?" Adam asked.

"We're being hunted."

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The stream was cold, but clean, and Adam was able to scrub himself from head to toe and rinse away the filth that had accumulated since his capture. He was standing in the deepest spot, which was almost up to his waist. He ran his fingers over the bruises that covered his arms and torso, testing for tender spots. He could also see his reflection in the nearly still water around him. Closely cropped dark curls framed his dark blue eyes. He had a bruise under his right cheekbone, and another dark purple contusion covered the right side of his jaw. He poked at the bruise on his cheekbone and winced.

“Byre.” Marin was on the bank with his back to Adam. Guarding him. As if he were a small child. He felt a bit off-balance around his future brother-in-law. Of course, Frost frequently turned into a giant Dragon with breath colder than the north winds. Since Adam had only known the truth about the Draq for mere months, he supposed that couldn’t be helped.

Adam jumped, but he didn’t turn. “Yes, Frost?”

“I’m sorry to have to ask this, but we need to know. Were you... did anyone...” Marin took a breath before he continued. “Do you have any injuries from your captivity that are internal? Did anyone...”

Adam flushed when he realized what Frost was asking. “No, nothing like that.” *Thank the Gods.* He adjusted the cuff on his wrist. It was wet from the stream. Amazing that such a little thing had saved his life. He sent a silent thanks to his grandmere for making them all those years ago.

Marin’s sigh of relief was audible. “Good. That’s good.” He remained silent as Adam trudged to the edge of the stream to retrieve his towel.

Adam dressed in clean clothes, borrowed from Flint’s packs. The trousers were a bit snug, and the sleeves of his shirt a few inches too short, he observed, as they made their way back to Elli and Flint, but they were clean. That was the important thing.

Marin was silent as he trudged through the forest with Adam, so Adam took a moment to study his sister’s mate. The man was huge. Tall and broad, with pale brown skin smattered with freckles, and long thick hair, only a shade lighter than his skin, that he wore tangled in messy dreadlocks tied back from his face. His eyes were a shocking pale blue that contrasted with his coloring. When Elli had first introduced him to Adam, those eyes, Frost’s eyes, had instantly revealed him as something other than human. Flint’s were the same way. Frost had explained that other people didn’t see what Adam and Elli saw, because they could mask the glow from most humans.

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Back at the clearing, the horses were ready and waiting. Flint had forgone the gold-trimmed, wine-colored warrior garb that he had been wearing when Adam first saw him. He was dressed in shades of brown: brown leather pants that clung tightly to his figure like a second skin, and a tattered peasant shirt. At his wrists were leather vambraces, and Flint was tucking a small arsenal of knives into all kinds of hiding places in his clothes. A set of tinted goggles sat across his head, pushed up in his hair, which was covered by a brown wrap. Adam hadn't thought of that, but Flint's hair, as bright as it was, probably stood out like a bloody beacon wherever they went.

"Adam." He turned at his twin's voice. Elli, who was already sitting astride her horse, held out a long, brown cloak that matched her own. "Put this on and cover your head. If we get stopped, act like you have a cold, and keep your face covered. Don't let them see the bruises, understand?" Adam nodded.

Marin spoke. "We're thirteen leagues from In'Mai. We should be able to cross the Split there without notice. If we can make it to the city, we have a friend there who may be able to help us. If we are stopped before we reach the city, follow my lead."

Adam nodded again. "Then, after we cross the Split, where do we head?"

"The only place I know where you and Elli will be safe, where the Order won't get you. Our home, Edan Keep, on the Isle of Sera."

"It exists?" The Isle of Sera in his childhood stories was the birthplace of the Draq. He never dreamed that it was a real place!

Frost dipped his head in confirmation. "Aye."

Flint handed a knife to Adam with a thin sheath and strap. "Tie this so it's hidden inside your boot," he ordered. Adam tied it to his right calf while Flint watched him. Flint held the reins of Adam's chestnut mare while Adam swung himself up into the saddle, then handed the reins to Adam, and swiftly mounted his own horse, a gray stallion.

"All set?" Marin asked from atop his mount. "Let's ride."

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## Chapter Four

The road through the flatlands was a creek of mud. Trees covered in leafy vines crowded the road, and the smell of the forest, heavy, wet, and green, was thick in the air. They'd been riding for half a day. Adam's head had started to throb after the third league, and it had been raining since partway through the fourth. There was just enough of a gap in the canopy above their heads that they were all soaked to the skin.

"Tell me again, why couldn't we fly closer to In'Mai?" Flint grumbled as he tugged at his head wrap. "Even if we were seen, it's not like they could catch us."

Adam, who was riding behind Frost, saw Frost's shoulders twitch in irritation. "Seriously, Flint?" Frost sighed, "Because they would have an entire army waiting for us in In'Mai, that's why. I'm not convinced that we can sneak around the Order, but I'm certainly not going to risk the safety of my mate by exposing us or flying anywhere in an area where Nets are known to have been."

"Nets?" Adam queried.

"The Order has webs of spells that extend into the skies near the Split. They've been there since the Uprising fifty years ago. You can't see them, and if you fly into one, there's no give. The spells the Casters put on the Nets can stop your heart. Not enough to kill a Draq, mind you," Frost said somberly, catching the look of alarm on Adam's face, "but a fall when you're up that high, you're likely to break a great many bones when you hit the ground. A friend of ours was nearly killed not far from here when he flew into one. He was discovered by a boy playing on his family's land. The family took him in and hid him from the Order while he recovered."

"He was flying too close to the Split, Marin. We're still leagues away," Flint protested.

"Drop it, Flint, we're not shifting in daylight, and we will be too close to the Split and the Nets by nightfall."

Flint glared, first at Marin, then up at the sky. He cursed. He yanked the wrap off his head and twisted it, wringing out the water. He proceeded to carefully retie it. Adam watched as all of Flint's bright hair disappeared again under the wrap. When he was done, he turned to Adam with a self-deprecating smile. "I know, I'm a grumpy bastard. I despise being wet in this form," he

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explained with a flippant grin. “Scales are so much more water resistant, and I have a built-in heater. How are you holding up, Byre?” Adam noticed his tone changed ever so slightly.

Adam shifted in his saddle. He hurt everywhere. He wanted to go to bed for a week. He wanted to be dry, warm, and safely tucked away on his farm. Which was impossible right now. He glanced over at Flint and saw concern on his face. “I’ll be okay, eventually. There’s nothing for it now.” He kept his face blank as he tried to straighten up in his saddle, which elicited another twitch of pain from the bumps and bruises he had amassed in the last couple of days. Flint nodded in understanding, but his eyes flickered behind his tinted lenses, betraying some emotion that didn’t show on his stoic face. He turned forward, and they rode side by side in the rain, in silence.

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They didn’t stop for lunch. Elli passed out soggy hunks of bread as they continued on. Late in the day, the rain finally stopped, and the clouds parted, which raised everyone’s spirits tremendously.

Adam, though weary, did improve as they day went on, and another round of Flint’s white pills after their noon meal eased the pain in his head. He was still quiet, even after the rain stopped, usually giving one-word answers when Flint tried to engage him in conversation. He could feel the Draq watching him though, and the awareness of those eyes kept a prickle at the back of his neck. He wished Ori were here, trotting alongside the road. He sighed.

“What is it, Byre?” asked Flint.

“Nothing. I miss my dog, that’s all. Wish he was here. Orin, Ori for short.” Flint nodded.

“Ah. I met him. Frost and Elli had me meet them at your farm. Ori wasn’t moving around all too well, your neighbor...”

“Kinley.”

“Right, Kinley had him bedded down in the barn since his leg was in a splint. He’s a right smart pup, though. Knew right away that Frost and I were different, but calmed as soon as Elli brought us over for him to sniff us.”

Adam smiled, picturing it. He took a deep breath. “Will I ever be able to go back there? We’re leaving Domin in a day or so and going to Sera. Half a year ago, I thought all of the Draq had died in the Uprising, and now...”

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Flint looked at him and lifted his goggles for a second, so that Adam could see the glint in his eyes as they flared a deeper red. "Now you're running for your life, escaping Domin with two of them?" He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Byre, I don't know if you will be able to go back. We don't know why the Order wanted you or Elli. Either way, you and Elli are no longer safe in Domin."

"I know that. I just wish..."

"I know." Flint paused and then cleared his throat. "I know it won't be the same for you, Byre, and it probably doesn't seem very comforting, in light of losing your home indefinitely, but please know that you will be welcome to stay in Sera for as long as you like. Whether that is until this business with the Order is finished, or longer, is entirely up to you."

"Thank you," Adam whispered, "and thank you for helping to rescue me."

"I'm glad I decided to help," Flint said quietly.

No one noticed the tiny metal bird sitting in the trees to the side of the road.

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The glasses clinked together, vibrating with the sway of the ship. The constant sound was grating on the Baker's nerves. He didn't like these new contraptions. If he ever met the man who invented the flying ship, a ruddy great balloon with a ship cradled beneath, he would probably cut the man's throat. However, the ship was not without merit. It was, he had to admit, much faster than a horse and probably the only way to catch up to a bloody Draq. Thanks to the detailed intelligence the Order had provided to his captain on the location of the Order's Nets, they could move through the sky unencumbered by the barriers. He sipped his bitter spirits, and glared at the useless file the Order had on the Byre twins. Chasing down Gifted far past the usually impressionable ages that their gifts had manifested hardly seemed to be good use of his time, especially now that the Draq were involved. *Could the Order even train the twins at their age?*

"Sir?" The timid voice from outside his quarters was that of the first mate.

"Come in," he barked. "Report."

"They were seen, sir. Finch 1572 on the merchant road to In'Mai."

"Are we sure it's them?"

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“Yes, sir. The watcher was certain. The woman was also seen on the same road with the tall one near a farm outside of Yuri early this morning. Finch 826.”

The Baker stood. He leaned over the desk to contemplate the charts in front of him and frowned. “They’ll reach the city tomorrow, ahead of us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Telegraph the garrison stationed at the In’Mai crossing. Tell them to increase wait times through the checkpoints. Tell the warders to enforce their Nets.”

“Yes, sir.”

“A diversion at the crossing would be too obvious... What else is going on in the city at the moment?” The first mate frantically flipped through the stack of papers in his arms. The Baker had come to revel in the discomfiture his presence produced in his subordinates.

“Sir, it is the opening week for the market fair in In’Mai. It draws quite the crowd, and there are many performing acts, in addition to the merchants. There are often minor skirmishes and arrests from excess drinking.”

“Good. Get our people into key positions to watch for them. They’ll know they’re being watched, from the moment they enter the city anyway, but it will be much harder for them to move about the streets when they are filled with revelers.”

“Sir, we also received a missive from the Butcher.”

The Baker grimaced. “He’s arrived then?”

“Yes, sir. He’s in the city, and he says that he’ll be watching for them.”

“Excellent.” The Baker schooled his features. He would have preferred not to involve the Butcher in this mission, but for some reason Lord Chandeler had insisted. He drummed his fingers on the table.

“Will that be all, sir?” The first mate shifted uncomfortably.

“No.”

“Sir?”

“I need someone I can trust. Can I trust you?” The Baker stared coolly at the first mate, who stopped shifting and stood at attention.

“Yes, sir.”

“Lock the door.”

“Sir?”

“Lock the door, soldier, and I will tell you what I need.”

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## Chapter Five

When they finally stopped, it was nearly night. They ate a cold supper and kept the fire small. Elli cleaned Adam's cuts and scrapes and re-dressed the wounds on his head. Marin passed around a flask of spirits he'd procured that morning. When they had all taken a few sips from the flask, he looked stoically right at Adam and Elli and said, "We need to talk."

Elli rolled her eyes at her intended. "So talk, Marin."

"It's about your twin bond, your connection. I've been trying to figure out what the Order wants with you two. I've met a few Gifted Talkers in my travels. They talk to people using their minds in a telepathic link, like you and Adam talk to each other. So, I know you two can talk to each other in your heads, but have you ever tried to talk to anyone else that way?"

Adam looked at Elli. It was something they had not done, not spoken of, in five years. El gave him a small nod for permission. Adam took a deep breath. "We have. We did it when we were kids sometimes."

"Talked to people inside their minds?" Frost clarified, tapping a finger to the side of his head near his temple.

"Yes. It was usually people close to us, like Grandmere and a couple of the hands that worked on the farm," added Elli.

Adam nodded and continued, "It wasn't just talking. Sometimes, I think we influenced people by mistake, or sometimes people near us could tell how we were feeling, like once Elli pushed Mr. Miles, the general store owner, to give her a doll for free..."

"Adam! That was not on purpose!" Elli's voice was indignant.

"I know, El, you just really wanted it. We were what, five?" Adam paused and took a deep breath before continuing. What they had done, however inadvertently, five years ago, still frightened him. "Then, when we were fifteen, we... we did something by accident. Grandmere was sick, it was awful. When she left us, when she died, we... we released our gift, without even realizing we were doing it."

Flint squinted his eyes. "How? I mean, what did you do?"

"We're not sure exactly. There was a blast of grief that radiated from us. Just pure energy. It rippled out in waves. We found out later that everyone

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within a few miles of us, including folk in the town nearly five miles from the farm, stopped right where they were. Everyone, all of them, stopped whatever they were doing and began to cry. It was a phenomenon that people talked about for years.” Adam could still feel the pulse that had radiated from them, their minds connected, the ugly twisting pain of loss screaming in their heads, as tears streamed down their cheeks. He remembered the ache in his chest, not being able to breathe, and through it all, holding tight to Elli’s hand. They’d eventually anchored each other and regained control of their grief, containing the howling rush of agony they’d unknowingly unleashed on the unsuspecting world, back in their own bodies.

Adam looked over at Flint and Frost. They both looked a little pale. “No one knew?” Frost questioned.

“The doctor who was treating Grandmere... he was in the room with us when it happened. He fainted in the blast. He was closer in proximity to us than anyone. It gave him a nosebleed. He’d known about our gifts since we were babies, but this, it terrified him. He told us to never do it to anyone again.” Adam had been horrified. They had promised him, never again.

“He told us, we had to control it, keep it secret,” Elli added. She tucked a dark curl behind her ear.

“Was he afraid you would hurt someone, or afraid that the wrong person would find out what you could do?” Marin asked them, his arm encircling Elli’s waist protectively as he spoke.

Adam shrugged. “Both, probably.” His cheeks heated. He could feel Flint’s gaze on him, and he felt off balance. What did the Draq, a Caster himself, think of them hiding their powers? He wished he understood the flicker in Flint’s amber eyes.

Marin rubbed his freckled forehead with his free hand. “I suspect that the Order knows about your gift. It would explain why they wanted you and Elli.” He glanced at Adam and Elli.

“You think they want them for the Gifted,” Flint said. It was a statement, not a question.

Marin nodded. “If you were members of the Gifted Forces, the Order could use your gifts as powerful weapons.”

“But I thought...” Adam paused. He had not even considered that the Order could want their gifts, probably because they so rarely used them. Hardly at all, since Elli had left the farm two years ago.

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“You thought they were after me. That they wanted Elli only to get to me,” replied Marin.

Adam nodded. “I did. I mean, during the war, didn’t they kill all of the Draq? That’s what they teach us anyway.” Flint snorted.

“There were not many of our kind who survived, no,” said Flint. “Those who did made sure to disappear. The Order presumed them dead. Extinct.”

“They will come for the Draq, Byre. It’s just a matter of when,” Marin stated. “This, however, your capture, what happened to Elli, and Westenfall is not about the Draq. I think we’re secondary. I’m certain the Order wants you, I’m just not entirely sure why.”

“If they catch us, would we have any choice at all about what happens to us?” asked Elli.

Marin placed his hand over hers. “No, El. They won’t give you or Adam a choice. If they want you for the Gifted, then they will reprogram you and make you one of them.”

“Well, screw that!” declared Elli. Frost chuckled. “I mean it, Marin. We are not getting dragged off by the Order. We are not being forced into becoming Gifted soldiers. So, what do we do?”

“We keep going and get the hell out of Domin. We get you both to Sera, where the Order can’t find you, and the Draq can protect you.” Frost pulled Elli close and kissed her forehead. “Agreed?” he asked, looking at his three companions.

“Agreed,” they answered.

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After that, Adam drifted in an uneasy haze, enjoying the fading buzz from the spirits and a full belly, but full of worry about sharing their secret. The others seemed to be trying to put it out of mind and distracted themselves with raucous jokes and outrageous stories. Then, after the fire had dwindled to embers in the pit, and they were all quiet, Frost pulled Elli to her feet, announced that they were going to “walk the perimeter” and led her off into the woods. They sauntered off hand in hand, Elli’s cheeks tinted pink as she smiled up at Marin. They were practically glowing. Adam watched them go, forcing himself to keep his mouth shut. If El was happy, that was what mattered, right?

Flint smirked at him from his perch on a fallen log. “Are you going to go dashing after them to protect her virtue?” he asked.

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“No. Elli knows her own mind.” Adam frowned.

“Knows her heart too, Byre.”

“They’re not wed yet,” he retorted.

“They’re mated, Byre. With Draq, the wedding is merely a formality.” Flint’s amber eyes were steady, and he was studying Adam intently.

Adam rubbed his eyes. “I know that. It’s just that I worry, because...” He paused, not knowing how to proceed, unsure of what Elli and Frost had shared with their companion. Had he been told? Had Elli shared her secret?

“Adam, I know.”

“You do?”

Flint nodded. “Marin told me. He worried that I would figure it out for myself, and he didn’t want my reaction to hurt her.”

Adam was quiet while he thought about the implications of Frost’s revelation. He and his sister had been born as identical twins. Identical in *every* way. Despite their outward identical appearance as babies, Ellianna had insisted that she was a girl, not a boy. Adam, who had been linked to his twin’s mind since before he could talk, had always thought of Elli as a girl, because that was how she thought of herself. Grandmere was the most wonderful parent in the world. She had seen and understood. She let Elli be *herself*. As Elli grew up, Grandmere found her pills to take to stop her voice from dropping. Her frame stayed smaller and more delicate than Adam’s, her figure became curvy, feminine, and she felt comfortable in her own skin. “Will other Draq who meet her be able to tell?” Adam asked.

Flint nodded his head in affirmation. “Yes, they may notice that she is different. Our senses are more acute than humans. Marin told me before I even met her, so I’m not sure what I would have noticed otherwise.” Adam’s face twisted in concern. “It won’t be a bad thing, Byre.” Flint smiled. “She is the mate of Ilmarin. She is also, as anyone with eyes can see, a beautiful woman. What body parts she does or does not possess is immaterial. Either way, Frost won’t let anyone hurt her. The Draq in our clan will eventually be told or will figure it out for themselves, because she is different.”

“If anyone hurts her, I swear to you...”

Flint reached out and grabbed Adam by the chin, tilting it so they were eye to eye. “Anyone foolish enough to hurt her will answer to her mate, Byre. In the

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end, it does not matter. Man, woman, or somewhere in between, she is the true mate to our brother, and she is a blessing.”

Flint's thumb was strong against his chin. Adam stared back at Flint, his gaze heated. He was not sure what reaction he had expected from the Draq regarding his twin, but it was not this. “What about children?” he asked.

Flint flushed at this and released Adam's chin. “What about them?”

“It won't bother them that she cannot produce an heir?”

Flint coughed. “Byre, the Draq are known for their... let's say, varied taste in mates, and we are not human. Not really. There are options for couples who wish for a babe. The gender of the mate does not matter.”

“Truly?” Adam was astonished, and hopeful. The idea that Elli could have a child with Frost if she wanted was a miracle.

“Not that the process is easy, but truly, Byre.”

“Does Elli know?”

“I did not think it was my place to ask that question, Byre.”

“It's Adam.” He blushed when he looked up, and his eyes met the Draq's. “I hope she knows, she'd be thrilled.”

“Adam,” Flint smiled. His eyes flashed a bright orange flame, and Adam felt something, something that had been off, a gnawing in his gut, halt. Something inside stopped and clicked back into place the moment Flint said his name. “Call me Ethon.”

“Ethon,” he agreed. He smiled, and his eyes held Flint's, staring into their glowing heat, until he had to look away. He could feel the heat in his cheeks.

They laid out their pallets next to each other, their heads facing towards the dwindling embers to catch the last of their glowing warmth. Adam sighed and curled up on his side, facing away from Flint, and closed his eyes.

Sleep didn't come. Adam's whole body felt awake. Eventually, Adam rolled over on his side, so he was facing Flint, and sucked in his breath in a quick gasp when he found Flint in the exact same position, nearly nose to nose with him. All Adam could do was stare. Flint's eyes reflected the embers glowing in the fire and were focused on Adam's mouth. Adam instinctively closed his eyes as Flint leaned closer, and his breath fanned Adam's face.

When no lips brushed his own, Adam opened his eyes. What Flint did next surprised him. Instead of a kiss, Flint pulled Adam close and tucked his head

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under Adam's chin. Adam's heart pounded as his arms instinctively went around the Draq. Flint's hair was soft and smooth against Adam's fingers. Those same fingers fluttered and clutched at Flint's hair as Flint rubbed his nose in the hollow of Adam's throat. Adam bit back a groan. Flint sighed contentedly. "You still smell hurt, but better than last night," he murmured. "Byre... Adam," he sighed. "Night." Flint tilted his head back in one great yawn, and then, with his fingers laced in Adam's shirt, his head resting with his lips just touching Adam's throat, Flint began to snore.

Adam held the snoring Draq, his hand stroking Flint's soft hair. He was both astonished and frustratingly aroused. *What was this?* He had no frame of reference for whatever was occurring between them. Adam tilted his head down to brush his lips over Flint's hair, which smelled of the forest, sun, and burning wood. "Night, Ethon," he whispered. He closed his eyes, settled himself against Flint, and let the sound of Flint's heavy breathing lull him to sleep.

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## Chapter Six

The Split was a great gaping wound across the land. The chasm spanned from the northwest to southeast and served as a clear and visible division between the countries of Domin and Loras. There was no official record of what had caused the Split nearly fifty-five years ago. It had been declared a spell gone wrong, but everyone knew that the Order had somehow caused the Split. They knew this, because in the aftermath of the devastation and social unrest that engulfed the continent, the Order quickly rose to power.

Key members of the military threw their support behind the Order, helped the Order usurp the Council of Quidel and arrest and imprison the royal family. The school children of Domin were taught that Nimir Alad, then head of the Order, became the first true Emperor of Domin. His public vision for the people of Domin was one of progress and stability.

Behind closed doors, according to Flint and Frost, the man called Emperor and his Order cared nothing for the people of Domin or their progress and stability. There were hushed-up killings, bribes, and constant propaganda campaigns. The people rebelled, and the Draq sided with the revolutionaries. When the Order first created the Nets, hundreds of unsuspecting Draq were killed. From then on, it was only a matter of weeks until the Uprising was systematically crushed.

The Split itself had been opened further and further in the last half century as the Order mined the chasm, stripping it of ore, digging deeper into the earth. The land they had traveled had been barren for the last two leagues. The wind blew dust in Adam's face.

On the western edge of the Split, on a peninsula extending far over the breach, stood the city of In'Mai. There was a single, long bridge that ran across the Split from one side to the other, from In'Mai on the Domin side to the city of Milloren in Loras.

"I hate this part," Flint said.

"Will we cross right away?" Adam wondered. He hoped it was true what Frost had said, that they'd be safe once they made it across.

Flint shook his head. "It's too late in the day, and too few people are crossing for us not to be noticed. Also, you and Elli need new papers. We have

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a friend who will put us up for a day or so, while we get the papers we will need to cross.”

“Adam, remember to keep your head down and look sick,” Marin reminded him. He pushed his tinted glasses as far back on his nose as he could.

“If someone gets close to you, just cough in their face.” Elli grinned. Adam rolled his eyes. He adjusted his hood to keep his face in shadow, covering his bruises. Flint placed a hand over his briefly. The contact caused his hand to tingle. Adam had awoken that morning with Flint wrapped around him, and Elli and Marin looking down at them, eyebrows raised. He had managed so far to avoid Elli, and therefore any lecture or advice she would have given him. All he really knew at this point was that being close to Flint felt, well, better than anything had in a long time.

Flint's thumb brushed the back of his hand. “Alright, Adam?” Adam figured he didn't have anything to lose, so he placed his right hand over Flint's. He looked over at Flint and nodded. They sat like that for a moment, until they began to move forward and had to separate.

The gates of In'Mai were open, and a steady stream of people were entering the city. Adam was careful not to look at the guards, because it would be as obvious as screaming in a quiet room. He didn't relax until they were at least a block past them. Then he looked around. There were colored flags decorating many of the buildings, and Adam could hear music playing in the distance.

They made their way toward an area of the city with huge houses. Marin stopped in front of a large house with a giant marble balustrade and pillars looped with marble rope. He dismounted and motioned for the other's to follow. They led their horses through the open gate and into the carriage loop in front of the house. A boy ran forward from the side of the house.

“Mister Summer! Mister Winter! You're back!” He called to Flint and Frost. Adam started a bit at the names but kept his face impassive.

“Aye lad, we're back.” Flint handed off his reins to the boy and patted him on the head. “Is the Captain in?”

“Yes, he is. He's entertaining this evening. He'll be glad you're back, sir.” He turned to the rest of the party. “Pire, at your service, sirs and lady,” He tipped an imaginary hat at Elli. “Please let me take your mounts.” He took the reins for two horses in one hand and two in the other. “They look like they've had a right time of it. Did you make them swim in mud?”



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Frost chortled at the lad's cheek. "Aye, lad, they had a rough road in the rain yesterday, and they need a bit of sprucing up."

"You can count on me, sir." With that he led their mounts around the back of the house.

Flint turned to Frost. "Entertaining?" he asked.

Frost only shrugged and said, "Let's find out, shall we?" before leading the way up to the door.

The footman who opened the door gave Flint and Frost a nervous nod in greeting and quickly ushered them into a small parlor. The interior of the home was ornate, and very nearly everything in the parlor was covered in ruffles and lace. There was also, Adam observed, an awful lot of pink.

Adam opened his mouth to speak only to have Flint put a finger to his lips. Flint shook his head, eyes wide as he gestured to the walls and pointed to his ears. Someone was listening. Adam nodded. Flint stepped back from Adam just as the door burst open, and a man with silver hair slicked back to his collar and a handsome, albeit rather distinguished face, stepped inside.

"Mr. Winter, Mr. Summer, so good to see you at long last." There was a slight note of overemphasis on the names "Winter" and "Summer", which made Adam think that he knew they weren't really their names.

"Captain," said Frost, nodding his head in greeting.

"You're looking well," added Flint.

"Yes, well... I'm hosting a little soiree tonight. Just two dozen of my closest friends and associates. One can't be too shabby with one's friends, am I right?" The Captain turned to Adam and Elli. "So are you going to introduce me?"

"Of course," said Flint, "Captain, meet our dear friends, Aaron and Lily Green." Adam nodded his head, and Elli dropped a brief curtsey.

The Captain took Elli's hand. "Enchanted, milady." Elli blushed.

Frost cleared his throat, and stared hard at the joined hands of the Captain and Elli. "Actually, Captain, Lily is soon to be Mrs. Winter."

The Captain's eyes widened. He appeared startled for a second but quickly recovered. "But that's wonderful news! I can't wait to hear the story of how you two met, but that is probably best left for later." His eyes swept to the walls as he spoke. "So tell me, how were the mountains of Kita?"

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“Rather blustery,” said Flint, “and we may have brought the weather with us, I’m afraid.”

The Captain visibly paled at that. “Never a dull moment, is there?” He smiled at the four of them, the first real, genuine expression that Adam had seen since the man entered the room. “You’ll stay for dinner, of course?”

“Of course,” agreed Frost.

“Where in the city are you staying? The Blue Ox, was it?”

“The Prancing Cat, actually,” said Frost. He had one eyebrow raised, but the Captain waved his hand dismissively.

“Well, let’s get you freshened up!” As the Captain clapped his hands, he ushered them out of the room, and into another room, just down the corridor. A servant was standing in one corner of the room. “Ah yes, Miles, is everything in order?” Miles nodded and stepped from the room, closing the door behind him.

The Captain turned back to them. “Please forgive me. We found a recording device in that parlor a few months ago. I’ve left it alone because so far, it has kept devices out of the rest of the house. I may need to send my men to pay for rooms at a few different establishments to throw them off your trail, but you’ll stay here of course. Rooms have been made ready for you. Go prepare yourselves for dinner, and we can talk more after the guests leave.”

“Is the rest of the house clean?” asked Flint.

The Captain nodded. “It was searched this morning. Even so, use discretion. That goes for in the city as well, there are eyes everywhere.”

“Captain, can Lily and I speak to you for a moment before we go up?” Frost asked. He looked over at Flint, who nodded.

“Of course,” the Captain agreed. He turned to Flint and Adam. “You can go on up. You’re in the same room as before, Master Summer, and Mister Green is in the room right across the hall.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Flint said as he exited the room and turned to the stairs. He placed his hand on the small of Adam’s back to guide him. Adam felt the light contact like a brand, and his breath sped up.

“Oh, and Summer?” called the Captain from down the hall.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Dinner is at six. See that you are ready and properly attired. We’ll have guests, so I expect you to be well rested.” Flint rolled his eyes at the Captain. He turned, grabbing Adam’s hand, and pulled him up the stairs.

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“Come along, Mister Green,” Flint said. Flint pulled him past servants, a few of whom raised eyebrows at their joined hands, as they made their way down the massive corridor to a door at the end of the hall. Flint’s hand tingled against Adam’s palm.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Flint turned toward Adam and gestured to the room on the right side of the hallway.

“That’ll be your room,” he said. As he spoke, he still held on to Adam’s hand. “There’s hot water piped up through the walls to fill the tub in there, so you can get cleaned up.” A bath sounded like heaven. Despite bathing in the stream, Adam felt like he was covered in grit. “So... I’ll be right here if you need anything,” said Flint, gesturing at his own door.

Adam nodded. “Thanks, Flint.”

“Ethon.”

“Right. Ethon, sorry.” Flint was staring at him. Adam met his eyes, and when he did, Flint’s pupils widened, and the solid amber color he’d held steady throughout their jaunt into the city flared to a glowing gold.

“Go. Get cleaned up.” Flint abruptly released Adam’s hand and turned to enter his room. Two seconds later, Adam was staring at the closed door to Flint’s room, his hand still tingling from the contact. *What was that?* Flint confounded him. He turned with a sigh and opened the door to his own room.

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Adam decided that hot water in pipes was the best invention in the world. He had finished his bath and was stretched out on the bed wrapped in a towel. He was lying there contentedly, when there was a quiet knock at his door. “Adam? It’s me, Ethon.” He jumped up, flailed, and cursed, nearly tripping over his towel as it dropped to his feet.

“Just a moment,” he called. Adam’s eyes fell on the dress clothes laid out on the end of the bed. He grabbed the trousers, pulled them on, and hurriedly buttoned them. He stopped at the edge of the bed, cleared his throat and called, “Come in.”

Flint opened the door and closed it behind him. His long hair was wet, and his shirt was only partially buttoned over his pale chest. He looked at Adam’s shirtless frame, a small smile hovering around his lips. “I couldn’t sleep,” he admitted. “I wanted to see how you were, if you needed anything.”

Adam flushed. He wasn’t sure what to say. Flint’s eyes halted at the bruises along Adam’s ribs, and he hissed.

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Adam looked down at his side. He traced the tender skin with his hand. The bruises on his ribs were still angry and purple, the edges tinged in green. Flint stepped closer to Adam, covering Adam's fingers with his own, and Adam's eyes snapped up, gazing into Flint's. Anger flickered in Flint's eyes.

"S'okay Ethon," Adam whispered.

"No. No, Adam. They hurt you. It is not okay." He sighed and removed his hand. "You should be resting. Come." He gestured to the bed.

Adam looked at him, bewildered and a little frustrated. Where did Flint get off ordering him to do anything? "I don't understand you," he said quietly.

Flint looked at him. "I know. I can explain. I'll feel better if you're not in pain from holding yourself upright while I do, though. Please, Adam," Flint pleaded.

Adam was tired, and he didn't have any energy to argue with Flint, not when Flint looked at him all concerned and so caring. He climbed up in the bed, not bothering to pull the covers back, and reclined against the pile of pillows propped against his headboard.

Flint watched him settle in and then gestured to the bed. "Is it okay if I sit?" he asked.

They had slept cuddled against each other the past two nights, so Adam acquiesced with a tilt of his head. Flint settled himself on the edge of the bed near Adam's hip. He studied Adam for a moment before he spoke.

"What do you know about Draq and their mates, Adam?" Flint said it very softly. He was watching Adam carefully.

Adam thought about what Elli had told him, when she and Marin had come to the farm to introduce his twin's mate. "Not much," he shrugged. "Elli told me that Draq know their mates instantly, an instinctual knowledge. Elli said that Marin knew the very first time he saw her. Then there are the stories, I suppose. Is it true that before the Uprising, Draq just claimed their mates on sight and dragged them off to a cave somewhere?"

Flint snickered. "You make it sound awfully barbaric." Adam raised his eyebrow skeptically, and Flint sighed. "It was a different time then, and I'm quite certain that no one was, as you put it, dragged off to a cave against their will. Draq hold their mates in much too high regard to ever harm them in any way. You are right though, about the Draq knowing their mates instantly. If a Draq ends up mated to another of their kind, the mates both know instantly. It's very simple for them. If a Draq is mated to a human, however, what the human

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experiences is a little different.” He cocked his head to the side, studying Adam. “Did Elli tell you what it was like for her when she first met Frost?” he asked.

Adam nodded. “She said that she was drawn to him. She said, she was incredibly attracted to him, but that more than that she felt safe with him. She...” Adam broke off. He realized that he could just as well have been describing his own feelings for Flint, not Elli’s for her mate. Adam was too stunned to move or speak. He just looked at Flint with wide eyes, his heart thudding loudly.

“Ah. So you understand where I was going with this.” Flint pushed his wet hair back from his face and kept watching Adam’s expression. “You’re my mate, Adam. I think it’s how I could find you through your bond with Elli from so far away. I could see the trail of the spell so brightly. Usually there are wisps of the magic that I see, flashes of clarity. Following the trail to you was like following a white-hot wire. I didn’t know it until I saw you, but when I did, it was like a kick in the gut. When you passed out at my feet, starved and beaten, I very nearly unleashed my Dragon on them for what they did to you.”

Mates. It explained the attraction, the inexplicable connection he felt to Flint. It explained Flint’s behavior as well. He blinked and looked up at Flint. “We’re mates?” Flint reached up and ran his fingertips over the bruises on Adam’s face. His hand lingered, cupping Adam’s chin, and Adam shivered at the touch.

“You feel it too.” It was a statement. Flint’s hand stroked his neck, his fingers tracing Adam’s collarbone.

“I...” There was no denying it, Adam realized. “Yes,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. Flint smiled and pressed his nose to Adam’s neck. He gave a happy sigh and opened his mouth on the base of Adam’s clavicle. He kept his mouth open along Adam’s neck up to Adam’s chin. “I feel it. I... Gods, Ethon, I can’t think when you do that.”

“No thinking, mate,” Flint grinned. He took Adam’s head in his hands, suddenly serious. He leaned forward slowly, giving Adam ample opportunity to stop him, before he pressed his lips to Adam’s.

Adam’s eyes closed, and his lips parted wide against Flint’s. They both sighed in relief as their mouths came together. Flint’s tongue was petite, lithe, and he repeatedly licked into Adam’s mouth like he was trying to taste every inch of it. Adam wrapped his arms around Flint and kissed him deeply.

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Adam had never really been one for kissing. There was usually too much teeth-gnashing or too much saliva and no spark. His experiences had mostly been quick fumbblings and not very memorable. With Flint, his kisses were incredible, and holding Flint felt so gods-be-damned good! He moaned as Flint sucked on his tongue.

Adam let go of everything around them and lost himself in the sensation of Flint's mouth on his. They kissed until the kisses became slow and lazy. Finally, Flint pulled back, and Adam was surprised when a whimper escaped his mouth.

Flint leaned forward and placed several tiny kisses on Adam's bottom lip. "Soon," he whispered to Adam, smiling. "Very soon." He leaned his head against Adam's throat and let their breathing slow, and their heartbeats stutter back to their normal rhythms. Flint took a deep breath, and his expression became quite serious. "Adam, you know little about me or our world. I won't mate with you until you are certain of what you want as well. The connection between mates is permanent. When we get to Sera, there will be time for us to get to know each other. Will you stay with me?"

Adam nodded, feeling a bit overwhelmed. He brushed Flint's bright, damp hair back from his face. "I'll stay with you."

Flint kissed his forehead. "Good." He smiled at Adam and settled him back on the bed. He kissed Adam on the mouth and then turned on his side to curl up in the crook of Adam's arm. "We should rest before we get ready for dinner." He yawned.

Adam, now becoming accustomed to Flint's ability to fall asleep quickly, chuckled when a minute later Flint was snoring at his side.

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## Chapter Seven

Adam stared somberly at the dead cow's head sitting artfully on a platter in front of him. He'd come to the conclusion that rich people had decidedly horrid taste in food. Either that, or the Captain had deliberately chosen dishes to discomfit his guests, which wouldn't really have surprised Adam either. Every meat dish on the table, from fish, to boar, to duck, was plated with the head attached. Adam had found himself consuming an inordinate amount of vegetables in order to avoid having sad, dead eyes stare up at him from his plate. The Captain had introduced their party as *Misters Winter, Summer, and the Greens*. The guests made small talk but mostly conversed among themselves. They occasionally stared down their noses at the four companions as if they were curiosities instead of guests. It was off-putting. Adam pushed his food around on his plate and listened quietly to the chatter around him.

Finally, to Adam's relief, the plates were cleared, and everyone was served a sweet berry ice cream. It was divine. He closed his eyes and savored the sweet mixture as it melted on his tongue. He opened his eyes to catch Flint watching him intently from his place beside Elli on the other side of the table.

"You have a beautiful home, Captain," said a pale woman with angular features and a mass of brown curls piled high on her head. Her eyes scanned the great dining hall, taking in the odd collection of taxidermy, weapons, and paintings displayed on the pink satin wall coverings of the room. Her lips were pursed in disapproval.

"How sweet of you to say so, Lady Williams. I'm very fond of it myself," replied the Captain. His eyes twinkled as he sipped his wine.

"Such a unique collection of animals you have here, Captain," remarked a portly gentleman with a mustache.

"Ah, yes. I'm afraid I cannot take credit for the animals. My grandfather, Admiral Harold Tiggs the First, amassed the collection in his travels during the Uprising. I'm afraid too, Lady Williams, that I cannot take credit for much in the appearance of my home. My mother did a great deal of the decorating."

"Very fond of pink," Marin murmured from his seat next to Adam, causing Adam to snort into his wineglass.

Somehow, all the way at the end of the table, the Captain heard him. "Quite so, Mr. Winter," he called. "As some of you know, the admiral was one of the

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first to settle in In'Mai when they began to rebuild after the Split. Used to be part of Milloren in Loras before the Split ripped the city down the middle." He shook his head and sighed. "Tragic. When the Split opened up, so many folk fell into the chasm and perished. Both from Loras and Domin. Where was I? Ah, yes. Grandfather was one of the city planners, you know. During the Uprising he traveled a great deal and was of great assistance to the Order. His daughter, my mother, Lizzie was her name, was left here on her own. She used to surprise him by renovating various rooms in his absence. He once returned to find that she'd repainted the library in amaranth and poppy and the servants' quarters in lavender."

The entire party chuckled at that. Adam pushed his mind out to Elli, who raised her brow at the contact. "*The Captain, his grandfather worked for the Order?*"

A small frown crossed Elli's face. "*Marin explained that, during the Uprising, it was the only way he could help the people. The Captain used to work for the Order too. Marin says, they've only ever worked to help people, and they've always been friends with the Draq.*"

So the Tiggs-men are double agents. *Interesting.* He nodded. "*El, what's amara-what and poppy?*" he asks.

"*Shades of pink and red, silly,*" Elli shrugged. Her eyes drifted over to Flint, and she turned back to glance questioningly at Adam. "*You two looked rather cozy this morning,*" she thought at him, a small smile hovering on her pursed lips, as she sent Adam a flash from her memory of her looking down at Flint and Adam, asleep with their arms wrapped around each other.

Adam flushed and snuck a glance at Flint, who was watching their exchange. He realized that he and Elli were making faces at each other, even though they weren't speaking out loud. He carefully schooled his features. "*Not now, El.*"

"*Later?*" she pleaded.

"*Later,*" he agreed. He shoved the last of his sweet berry ice cream into his mouth and sat back in his chair.

The Captain stood up from his seat and clapped his hands. "Spirits and cordials will be served in the conservatory, friends. It's all the way down the hall on the left. Chartreuse upholstery. Can't miss it." The guests began to file out, but Flint and Frost remained quietly seated. Adam and Elli saw them and



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did the same. The Captain turned to them. "Ah yes, Mr. Winter, Mr. Summer and the lovely Green twins. Miss Lily, you look most fetching."

Elli, who was wearing a pink satin dress that the Captain had lent her, blushed. "Thank you, Captain, you're too kind," she murmured.

"Nonsense, my dear. So sorry that you won't be able to stay for the rest of the festivities." The Captain spoke loudly, his voice carrying down the hall, as he motioned for the four of them to stand. Flint stood and rolled his eyes. "Are you certain you can't stay? Well, nothing for it then." While he spoke, the Captain walked over to the far wall and gestured to the butler's pantry adjoining the dining room. They followed behind him. The Captain popped open a door at the end of the pantry. It opened to a very purple hallway. He smiled widely at them and nodded to Frost. "He's expecting you," said the Captain. He turned and swept from the room, only to stick his head back through the doorway a moment later. "Four hours should do it, I think."

"Thank you, Captain," Frost replied.

*Four hours of what?* Adam wondered. He followed behind Elli, as Frost gripped her hand and led them through a series of winding passages. They took steep staircases that led down, and down again. Adam watched his feet to avoid the hem of Elli's satin brocade dress as it trailed down the steps behind her. *How deep into the ground did the Captain's house go?* Adam wondered. They had gone underground with the first set of stairs. Adam had seen the grass at the edge of a window they'd passed.

At the bottom of a flight of narrow, wooden stairs was a stone room with a green door. There was a sign above the door, a bright blue placard with the words "JAM RESERVE" painted in white. Adam burst out laughing. "Jam reserve? Seriously? Is he worried about a shortage?"

"Captain likes to hide things in plain sight." Flint smirked.

"And he's got an odd sense of humor," Frost agreed.

"This is the strangest house I have ever seen," said Adam.

Adam stared up at the odd sign, and Flint's hand caressed his back. "You have no idea," Flint said softly in his ear. Adam shuddered as Flint's breath brushed his neck. He subtly pressed back into Flint's warm hand and Flint chuckled. Frost ushered them under the JAM RESERVE sign, and Flint closed the door behind them. They wove through the rows of dusty shelves, past neat rows of preserves with faded handwritten labels. Adam traced his hand along

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the tops of the jars. A thick layer of sticky dust came off on his hand. *Ugh*. He wiped his hand discreetly on his dress trousers.

They caught up with Frost at the back of the pantry. He stood, studying the jars, one arm stretched to the back of the shelves. With a click, the shelves swung into the room. Elli gasped.

Behind the shelves was an arched opening. Adam could just make out a set of stone steps leading down into the black. It looked like a pit. *Where in the Gods were they going anyway?* Frost grabbed two lanterns from off the shelf and looked over at Flint who waggled his fingers and the lanterns sparked and lit. Adam blinked. That was going to take some getting used to. Frost grinned at the stunned look on Adam's face and handed one of the lanterns to Elli. She gave Frost a fond look, gathered her skirt in her other hand and stepped down into the darkness, her lantern illuminating a small area around her.

"Where..." Adam began. His heart pounded. The black darkness beyond the electric lights of the cellar room seemed ominous.

"Shhh. One moment," said Frost. He gestured for Adam and Flint to follow Elli.

Once they were all inside, Frost swung the bookcase closed behind them. There was a click, the sound of a bolt sliding into place. That was it. With the click, Adam started to shake. He knew it wasn't the dungeon, but it felt like the dungeon. His chest felt like it was going to explode. He couldn't breathe...

Strong arms wrapped around his shoulders and cradled him. "Breathe, Adam. Breathe. I have you, I won't let anything hurt you. Breathe, love."

The world spun out of focus. Black spots swam in front to Adam's eyes, and he closed them. He heard nothing over the rushing sound of his own heartbeat. Strong, solid hands grasped his wrists tightly. Somehow, the hands tethered him to reality, and he heard Elli's voice. "Adam. Adam. Listen to my voice Adam, we're in In'Mai, beneath the Captain's house, on steps made of stone. The stones are gray and cold. I'm here and Marin and Flint. You're safe. Can you feel the steps?" Adam gasped and shuddered, taking in a great gulp of air, before he nodded. "Flint is holding your wrists, can you feel his hands?" Adam nodded again. He felt the cold stone beneath him and against his back. He felt Flint's hands holding tightly onto his wrists. Breathing became less of a struggle. He uncurled his hands, and his fingers touched silky hair, and stiff fabric.

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When Adam opened his eyes, Flint was crouched in front of him. Adam's hands were pressed against Flint's chest. Flint's worried gaze held his, and suddenly the fear that had brought him to his knees no longer seemed important. He pressed himself against Flint, and he felt Flint's hands release his wrists as his arms wrapped around Adam. He clung to Flint like a small child and buried his face in Flint's shirtfront.

"Sorry." Adam murmured, speaking into Flint's chest. "So sorry. This place, it made me think of the dungeon." Flint cursed and held Adam tighter.

"Do you want to go back, Byre? We can find another place to hide, but we've got to be quick about it," Frost asked.

Adam lifted his head from Flint's chest. "I'm okay. It just took me by surprise, that's all." He wiped his eyes and looked up at Frost. "Why are we hiding?"

"We need to pick up something too, but the Captain thought, if we were seen today entering the city and were followed to the Captain's, someone from the Order might come by looking for us. We decided the best thing we could do, for his sake, was leave for a bit," Frost said softly.

"We're not in the Captain's house anymore?" Adam asked.

"Not technically, no. We're under the Captain's house at the moment, but the place where we're going is under the city," Frost explained

"Adam." Flint ran his lips over Adam's hair. "Shall we go?"

Adam nodded, and Flint and Elli helped him to his feet. He was unsteady, but Flint followed behind him, keeping one hand on the back of Adam's neck.

Adam followed Elli forward through the long, narrow corridor. He stared at her lantern and tried not to think about the darkness around them. At the end of the corridor was a large metal door, at least six inches thick. They pushed the door open and were in some kind of enormous library. There were gas lights glowing dimly near the doors. Flint reached out and turned them up. As the lights lit throughout the room, Adam forgot about the dungeon, forgot about being locked in a small, damp stone room and just stared.

"What is this place?" asked Elli.

"The Captain's private collection. His grandfather helped hide information during the Uprising. The Order was controlling the flow of information. When they occupied a town, they would ransack the libraries. The histories and

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genealogies of entire generations were lost,” Frost said, a slight tinge of anger escaped with each word he spoke. “He started working with towns to move their valuable books and records in advance of the occupation. The histories of half of Domin are in this room,” he continued, the rage in his tone subsiding.

“From what he’s said, the Captain’s grandfather became one of the city planners of In’Mai, and he moved the collections here,” Flint explained.

The library was tremendous. There were files and shelves as far as the eye could see. Balconies encircled the room at four levels. There were also worn couches, chairs, and tables, as if people studied here regularly. “Who knows about this place?” Adam wondered.

“Few. Very few.” An unfamiliar voice sounded across the chamber. The words echoed in the vast space as a man stepped out onto one of the upper balconies. “Welcome to the Analects. I’ll be with you momentarily.” There was a pole just off the edge of the balcony. The stranger hooked an arm around it and dropped out of sight. His feet echoed when they landed, and he crossed the room to greet them. “In this place I am called Vero. I do not need your names, only what you want to be called.”

Frost stepped forward. “You can call me Winter. This is Summer, Aaron, and Lily.” His voice softened when he introduced Elli, and she blushed as their eyes met. “The Captain sent us to you because we need papers for Aaron and Lily, and all four of us need endorsements for travel to Loras.”

Vero looked them over and gestured for them to follow. There was a small room off to the right of the large chamber which held a table piled high with official-looking papers. He and Frost sat opposite each other and began conversing in low tones while Vero ruffled through the stacks in front of him, pulling together small sets of papers from the stacks. Flint followed them a moment later. As he walked away from Adam, he ran his hand over Adam’s shoulder and down his arm. Adam rubbed the place on the back of his hand where the ghost of Flint’s caress lingered on his skin.

“Adam?” It was Elli. She stepped up next to him and touched her cuff to his in a familiar gesture.

“Hullo, Elli.”

“You okay?” Adam nodded. “Why don’t we find somewhere to wait while they work with Vero? It looks like it could be a while.” Elli hooked her arm through his and steered him to a battered velvet sofa propped against the wall.

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Adam sat with a sigh. The nine days since the Order took him off the farm had caught up with him. He leaned back, exhausted.

On the other side of the room, Flint was talking animatedly with Frost and Vero. As Adam admired the striking figure Flint made in his fine dress clothes, Flint shifted on his feet as he spoke and gestured wildly with his hands. Vero and Frost laughed heartily at whatever he said, and Adam couldn't help but smile at Flint. He turned to see Elli eyeing him knowingly. He blushed, but he ignored his twin and turned his head to watch the Draq and Vero. Flint was bouncing about as he acted out what appeared to be Adam's rescue from New Quidel.

After watching Flint for a while, Adam turned back to his twin. "Is it always like this?" Adam blurted out. Elli blinked at him, confused. Adam gestured to the Draq, who were still talking animatedly with Vero. "I feel like we've been running for days and those two? They don't stop, ever." *Except to sleep*, thought Adam, as he pictured Flint curled up beside him. "I'm exhausted just looking at them sometimes."

"No." She smiled at him. "No, it's not always like this. When you were taken, Marin and I had been staying with a friend of his who lives up in the mountains of Kita. It was really peaceful, actually. But you are right. Draq tend to be pretty intense." Elli smiled, and Adam looked over at Flint as Elli continued. "Since the Order took you, we, none of us, have stopped. I know it must seem like Marin and Flint are just great bodies of unending energy, but they do know how to slow down. I swear they do. Just, when they have a task, and they think it's important, they focus every ounce of their energy on it. It's rather endearing, actually."

"I hope we get to slow down soon. I know that we can't stop until we're out of Domin, Elli, but Gods, am I tired."

"I know, Adam. You need to heal, and the days on the road are not helping you do that. We should be in Sera in two days, and then you can rest."

Adam sighed. He looked back over to Flint and saw him running his fingers through his long, bright hair. He caught Adam watching him and gave a knowing, little smirk. "Can I ask you...?" Questions about being the mate of a Draq churned around in his head.

"Anything."

"With Frost, did you know right away?"

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“The first moment I saw him,” she glanced over at Frost, who was deep in conversation with Vero and Flint, and smiled.

He sighed. He'd never believed in fate or destiny, but this pull he felt towards Flint seemed inevitable. “Same.” Elli grinned wide at that.

“I made Marin court me, you know. I didn't just let him carry me off into the woods and wrap me in a blanket.” She poked him in the ribs. She was teasing, he knew, but that wasn't fair.

“I... I had a head injury. Nothing happened.” Well, not then anyway, he thought. His face felt warm.

Elli snorted. “Uh-huh.” Adam blushed. She probably felt something when Flint kissed him earlier. When Elli met Frost, she had been near Kita in the northern mountains, half a world away. Even with all that distance between them, Adam had dreamed of Marin and Elli. When he woke from the dream the next morning, he knew his sister had found her mate. He looked down at his leather cuff. He wouldn't ever regret his connection with his twin, especially not since it saved his life. For good or ill, they were stuck with each other. He studied his sister. Her profile was so similar to his own, but smaller. She looked spectacular in the satin brocade dress the Captain had provided her, feminine yet strong. She had always been so strong. “Elli, are you happy with him? Is he good to you?”

Elli smiled and grasped Adam's hand, her palm smooth and cool. Adam felt their minds link, and Elli unlocked her memories, showing Adam flashes of Marin and their life together.

The flashes came so fast that he couldn't describe or detail them, but they were beautiful, and Adam was overwhelmed by the utter happiness that radiated from his twin in waves. By the end of Elli's last memory, tears had blurred Adam's vision. His only thought as he wiped his eyes was, *Grandmere would be thrilled*. She'd worried that Elli'd never find this.

“He's so good to me, Adam. You know, before I met him, I didn't think that I would ever have this. He's the first person, other than you or Grandmere, who simply accepted me without question. He's the best thing that has ever happened to me.” She wiped her eyes as she finished, and they sat there smiling at each other.

“I'm glad.” He gripped her hand tighter as he began to speak, “Flint says I am his mate.”

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Elli grinned at him. “We kind of figured that. Marin’s positively gleeful because he’s never seen Flint act like this before. He’s a loyal friend, but he tends to be very closed off from people when he first meets them. With you, I see how he looks at you.” She squeezed Adam’s hand. “How do you feel?”

*So much more than I should feel. So much that it’s bloody terrifying.* “I’ve known him for less than three days, El.” She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and Adam caved. “I’m so attracted to him, El,” he confessed. “What I feel is...” He trailed off, unsure how to put it into words.

“Intense?” she whispered.

Adam nodded. “So much that it scares me. I’m not sure what will happen once we’re safe. He’s asked me to stay with him when we get to Sera.”

“Good. You can help me plan my wedding. Be my person of honor.”

Adam smiled broadly at the thought and hugged his sister tightly. “Of course, El, I’d be honored.”

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It was late when Pire came down to the Analects to tell them the coast was clear. Adam had fallen asleep next to Elli and awoke in Flint’s arms, being carried up the stairs through the now dark hallways. Adam pressed his head into Flint’s shoulder.

Flint carried him into Adam’s room and set Adam gently on his feet, leaning against the wall. Flint smiled up at him as he closed the door. Adam heard the lock click, and then he was pressed against the door. Flint was rubbing their noses together, running an open mouth over Adam’s jaw, his neck. He groaned as Flint’s mouth skimmed the hollow at the base of his throat. “Ethon,” he gasped.

“I want to bite you, Adam,” murmured Flint as he nuzzled the hollow of Adams neck with his perfectly turned-up nose. “From the first moment I saw you, and you fainted at my feet, I’ve thought of nothing else. I’ve wanted to hold you down and bite you, put my mark on you, and make you mine.”

“I... mmmmp,” Adam tried to speak, but all that came out was a garbled moan. He was on fire. Flint pressed his hands against Adam’s chest, and Adam’s arms instinctively moved to cup Flint’s head and hold him in that exact, perfect spot, lips against the hollow of his neck, that nose, that sweet little nose, rubbing against Adam’s throat, his fingers tangled in Flint’s soft,

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thick mane. Keeping their lips fused together, Flint propelled Adam off of the door, into the room, and over to the bed. Adam fell back. Flint quickly divested them of their boots. He growled in frustration as he wrestled with his belt, and he had to stop and pull ten—Adam counted—ten knives from hiding places all over his body. *He wore ten knives to an elegant formal dinner?*

Flint crawled forward to straddle Adam's hips, the position pressing their stiff lengths together. They both groaned, and Flint released Adam's mouth to arch his back and rub his cock against Adam's.

Adam watched Flint's flame-red hair sway as Flint's tongue darted out and licked at his lower lip. He reached with a shaking hand to cup Flint's jaw. As he brushed his thumb over Flint's lower lip, out darted that tongue again. Flint leaned forward and plundered Adam's mouth. Adam arched under Flint's touch. Flint made a purring sound in his throat. He unlaced Adam's shirtfront and pressed kisses to the flesh he uncovered.

His hands brushed the waist of Adam's breeches, and he looked up at Adam, his eyes flashing fire, and his hair a tangled mess of brilliant red. Adam reached a trembling hand to Flint's face. Flint made mewling sounds in the back of his throat and nuzzled into his hand. He leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. As their heads touched, Flint sighed and relaxed into Adam's hold. Adam groaned. He was so hard, they both were, and now the man was lying there like a bloody cat, which would have been amusing and adorable if he wasn't so completely aroused and on fire for him. "Ethon," he whispered, and Flint pulled back and studied his face.

"I want you so very badly, Adam Byre." Flint said, his pale cheeks pinking, "I was told that my mate's scent would be like a drug to me, but I truly did not know what they were talking about." He smirked. Adam smiled up at Flint, and Flint leaned down to brush his lips against Adam's. "We should rest now. You're still healing." Adam groaned and glared up at Flint. He pressed his hardness up against Flint's own, and Flint groaned. Adam captured his lips once more, and Flint kissed him deeply before pulling away.

"No," Adam whimpered when Flint's lips left his.

"Hush," said Flint, brushing his lips to Adam's once more. "Soon," he murmured. With that, he lifted Adam, and settled him under the covers. He crawled under the covers himself and curled against Adam who wrapped an arm around Flint, and they both slept.



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## Chapter Eight

“So, here’s the plan. Along with your new papers, Vero made endorsements for Aaron and Lily Green to visit their convalescing Aunt Chloe who lives in Milloren. The Captain says he thinks the house is being watched, so we’ll go out one of the back exits from the Analects. The exit runs into a sewer main and comes out about a league away from the bridge to Milloren.” Frost pointed to a map of the streets of In’Mai as he spoke. He was tense. “The fastest way to get you across is to split up. We’ll be a few minutes behind you.”

There they were: Adam, Elli, Flint, Frost, Vero, the Captain, and Pire, seated at one end of the Captain’s enormous dining table. Everyone was dressed to look their parts for the day. Adam’s face itched. Elli had sat him down earlier and used creams and powders to cover his bruises, so they could avoid questions at the border crossing. It worked, but he wanted to rub his face in the worst way. He dug his fingers into his leg, forcing himself to keep still.

“I’m sending Pire to walk near you through In’Mai. If anything happens, we’re hoping he’ll be able to report back to us,” the Captain explained to Adam and Elli.

Frost cleared his throat and continued, “Summer and I have our own endorsements. We’ll be going through the crossing separately. I will be driving a cart of goods belonging to a friend of the Captain’s that are going to the market in Milloren. Summer is posing as a scholar and has endorsements to access the University Library in Milloren. If we all get across, and everything goes to plan, we’ll connect here.” He pointed to the map. “The market square of Milloren. There is a tavern off the square that is owned by a friend. It’s called The Dragon’s Den. If you need help, or if we don’t show, go in and ask for Boreus. He’ll get you to Sera if we can’t.” Frost looked at both of them to make sure they understood.

Adam bit his lip. There were so many things that could go wrong today. All he could do was pray that they could make it to Milloren unscathed. He watched as Frost gathered the maps and handed Adam the papers for him and Elli. The Captain, Pire, and Vero left the room to collect some last minute provisions.

“Before we go, I want to ask you both something.” Flint put his hands on the table and leaned forward. He looked at Adam and Elli. “If you have to, use

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your gifts to contact us. If the Order catches you, we'll have to get to you fast," Flint instructed.

"Call out to us," added Frost. "Call out to us, and we will come to you."

Elli looked up at Flint and Frost and nodded. Adam hesitated. He was afraid.

"Promise me." Adam saw the worry in Flint's eyes. "Promise us, you'll call out to us." He stepped forward and reached up to cup Adam's face as he stared into Adam's eyes.

Adam stared back. "I promise," he vowed.

"I promise," Elli echoed.

With that, Flint pulled Adam forward into a rough kiss and held him tightly. They stayed locked together until Pire knocked to tell them that it was time.

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The sewers beyond the passages of the Analects were foul-smelling and cramped. Thankfully, there were walkways along the waste canals, so they didn't have to trudge through excrement. Flint, Frost, Adam, and Elli followed Pire in a single file. When they reached the ladder to the street, they paused, each twin embracing their mates one last time before they departed.

"We'll be right behind you," Flint whispered.

He could hear Frost murmuring similar reassurances to Elli. "I love you, Marin Frost," she said.

Frost picked Elli up off the ground and crushed her to his chest. "And I you, Elli Byre."

"Ethon, I..." Flint kissed his forehead and stepped back.

"I know, Adam. Go, and I'll see you soon."

Pire clambered up the ladder and poked his head out of the cover to the sewer. He climbed all the way out, and gave a knock signaling the all clear.

Adam and Elli followed him up. The alleyway they were in was dark, and all of the windows were boarded up. They could hear the bustle from the market and busier streets nearby, but the street they walked out to was empty.

Pire spoke to them, "Mister Green and Miss Lily, I am going to walk ahead of you. Captain gave me a message to deliver, so I'll just pretend I'm on my

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regular errands. I'll go along the path you have to take to the crossing, and you can stroll behind me a ways like you don't know me. If it's not too forward to say, I wish you well on your journey."

"Thanks Pire," Adam smiled, and with that they were off.

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The Market was mobbed. Elli and Adam were having trouble keeping Pire in their sight as he weaved in and out of the crowds, occasionally stopping to greet people. The market was nearly a mile long, and they would have another mile to go past it to reach the bridge for the crossing. Adam kept feeling someone's eyes on him, but every time he turned to casually scan the marketplace for anyone suspicious, he would find nothing. It was unnerving.

Elli leaned into him. "Do you see anything?" she whispered.

Adam shook his head. There was nothing.

The nagging feeling of being watched stayed with Adam as they exited the market and made their way east to the border crossing. They walked up the crest of a hill. Just past the marketplace, the fortress that surrounded the bridge at the Split rose up in front of them. The burnished helmets of the border guards, who stood atop the wall, glinted in the morning sun.

There was a line to cross the Split. It extended through the gate, to the fort, and up the street, winding through several blocks of neatly kept row houses. Adam and Elli joined the line of folk and carts bound for Loras, which moved sluggishly forward. Finally, they made it up to the fortress where they had to pass through the giant gate at the entrance. Before they went inside, Adam looked behind him to see if there was any sign of Flint or Frost. He scanned the faces of those in line, but there was no hint of familiarity.

Elli tugged on Adam's right wrist. "Adam," she whispered. "They're not there. It's too soon." Adam nodded, and they stepped through the great gates. He felt off-kilter without Flint nearby. The Draq had become a constant in the past few days and being separated from him felt wrong.

The inside of the fort was, if anything, more intimidating. The Order's soldiers stood at even intervals along three stories of balconies that surrounded the fortress, giving the appearance of an amphitheater to the folk on the ground, who were passing through to the bridge.

Everything was fine, until a merchant cart far in front of them was searched, and a child was pulled out of a trunk by his hair. There were cries of dismay

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from the cart owner, followed by shocked gasps from the crowd when the man holding the child screamed in pain and released his hold on the boy. "Bloody hell!" cursed the guard. "Get Evers here now, the kid just zapped me." The child tried to dart through the crowd, only to run smack into a man dressed in black and wearing a green top hat. The man touched two fingers to the child's forehead, and the child slumped to the ground unconscious. Adam wasn't sure if he possessed magic or was a Gifted himself, but he was clearly dangerous.

The man looked back at the guard. "A Gifted?" he asked the guard.

"Little bugger zapped me. Shot pain right through my hand and out my feet. Good thing you were nearby, Evers, that really hurt."

"Hmmm. It sounds like the boy may be a Static. It's a rare gift." Evers stared down at the boy on the ground, his face cold. "Bring him," he ordered the guard, who lifted the boy. "I'll have to contact the Order." They carried the boy out of the square. Not one person in the line moved or protested. The merchant who owned the cart, the boy had been hiding in, was arrested, and his cart and horse were moved out of line and confiscated.

Elli was squeezing Adam's arm so hard, she was cutting off his circulation. He laid his left hand over hers where it tightly gripped his forearm. He was afraid to look at her, afraid that the impassive expression he had schooled on his face would falter if he did.

"*This is wrong, Adam.*" Elli thought at him. Of course, it was wrong. That boy could just as easily have been him or Elli as children, and it was very, very wrong. Adam wondered how many Gifted children met similar fates at the foot of this bridge and never made it to the other side. He didn't answer her, he just patted her hand, offering what little comfort he could.

The line moved forward. When Adam and Elli reached the front of the line, he handed over their papers which were stamped, approved, and handed back to him with barely a glance. He looked up to see a guard at the foot of the bridge motioning for them to cross.

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The Split was nearly half a league wide, and the bridge, though made of metal and wide enough for carts and horses, swayed slightly in the wind. Adam was glad when they stepped off the other side of the bridge onto the solid ground in Milloren. Before entering the city, Adam had to present their papers to the Milloren guard for stamping, and then they were through.

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The city of Milloren was quiet. A handful of folk wandered through the colorful market square, but it was nowhere near the crowds that he and Elli had forced their way through in In'Mai. They had made it to the end. *Thank the Gods*. There, at the far end of the square, stood The Dragon's Den. Their salvation was a rather squashed-looking building, pressed into the space between a milliner's and a bookstore. Adam sighed in relief and tugged Elli forward.

Suddenly, a wind whipped through the square. The cloak of a man who stood to their right flapped in the wind and revealed the golden crest of an Order soldier on the man's chest. Elli saw it too, and she cursed under her breath. "*Adam,*" she thought sharply at him.

"*I saw, El. Stay close,*" he instructed. Adam glanced over his shoulder. There were three other men in identical cloaks spaced throughout the crowd. "*Three more behind us,*" he thought at her. He tugged on Elli's arm as she turned to look. She stopped and stared at him.

"*What should we do?*" she asked. Adam didn't know. *Were the soldiers here for them?* Adam's heart pounded in his chest as his eyes scanned the crowd. No one even looked in their direction, and it seemed deliberate. "*We have to get out of here,*" he told her. He squeezed Elli's hand, and they walked, as slowly and as casually as they dared, down the block, away from the square.

As they walked, Adam scanned the buildings around them for places to hide. There were a few narrow alleyways, but if someone followed them, they'd be trapped. "*Can we get to Boreus?*" Elli wondered. Adam sighed and shook his head. The risk of being stopped by the soldiers while trying to enter The Dragon's Den was too great.

When he and Elli turned the corner at the next road, Adam realized that the moment they'd set foot in the square, they'd walked into a trap. The blue-eyed man, *the Baker* loomed in front of them. By the Baker's side stood a mountain of a man who looked like he could crush Adam and Elli with his bare hands. Adam hissed, and Elli cursed under her breath. He and Elli pivoted on the spot. They turned to run but froze after two steps; their exit also blocked.

Spread out across the road back to the market, were the soldiers they had seen in the square. With them was the man with the green top hat—*Evers?*—from the bridge crossing in In'Mai. They were surrounded. Evers was smiling a sickly sweet smile of victory.

Adam felt Elli press her left wrist to his right, so their leather cuffs were touching. "*Ready, Adam?*" she spoke inside his head.

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Adam wasn't ready. He and Elli hadn't used their gifts intentionally on anyone else since before Grandmere's death. He was so far from ready. He was afraid.

Behind them, he heard a soft footstep, and Adam knew they had no choice. None. He opened his mind to Elli. He felt a rush of power, and in that moment, he could feel Elli like they were one person. In concert, they raised their joined hands, Adam's left, Elli's right, and together they called out to Flint and Frost.

The sonic pulse that radiated outward with their telepathic cry to Flint and Frost was so intense that it knocked a few of their captors to their knees.

Suddenly Adam's connection to Elli was ripped from his mind, and he reeled from the shock of the loss, even as he watched Elli fall to the ground unconscious. He knew he had only seconds before he would join her on the ground. "Flint! Flint!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, as well as in his mind, his cries echoing. Then something hit his head, and everything went dark.

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The Baker looked down at his two captives. What the hell had the twins done before he knocked them on the head? Two of his soldiers stumbled up from their knees with a trickle of blood coming out of their noses. Next to them stood the Butcher, in a ridiculous green top hat, who also peered down at the twins.

"A club, Baker?" The man in the green top hat glared angrily at the Baker and held up two fingers. "One touch, just one, and I could have kept them unconscious for hours and controlled when they woke up! Now, thanks to your club, it will be left purely to chance."

"You didn't appear to be in any hurry to stop them, *Butcher*," retorted the Baker. "What the hell were they doing anyway? They knocked me off my bloody feet."

"It's *Evers*, please," the Butcher snapped. "My nickname is too conspicuous here. They were calling someone. Probably their Draq companions."

The Baker let out a string of curses. "We need to move. NOW!" he ordered. "Get them out of here. Take them back to In'Mai and put them in the tower. We have to wait for nightfall for the ship to pick us up. And you!" He pointed angrily at the Butcher. "Stay with them. If either of the Byre twins wakes, put them back to sleep."

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Within moments, the twins were loaded into a sleek, black carriage, and the streets near the Milloren market were empty.

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An hour later, the Baker pushed through the doors of The Dragon's Den, and everyone in the Den looked up at him. He ignored the hard stares and crossed to the bar. This was the place all right. He'd seen Adam staring at it when the twins first reached the square. He'd overseen the twins' transport as far as the bridge back to In'Mai, but something in his gut had stopped him from crossing with the unconscious pair. He didn't know why the Lord Chandeler wanted the twins, but he suspected that there was more to it than just conditioning them to be Gifted soldiers. More importantly, he knew how this would end. It was inevitable. The Draq would not stop coming for the twins. The Draq would recover the twins, and this time, they would kill anyone who got in their way. The Baker didn't know how he knew this, but he was certain of it. He knew what he had to do. He leaned on the bar and addressed the barkeep, "I need to talk to the owner."

"You're looking at him," the rugged man behind the bar said, eyeing the Baker warily. He pushed a tangled haystack of wheat-colored hair off of his face. "Who wants to know?"

"Nobody important," the Baker replied. "Some friends of mine might stop in here, and I wanted to leave them a message."

"Do they have names?" The barkeep eyed him skeptically. The Baker noticed that the man had exceptionally bright green eyes.

"I think you know them, or know of them. The first is brown, freckled, and impossibly tall with ice-blue eyes. His friend is short, with long orange hair, white skin, and amber eyes."

"A pair like that I would remember, *friend*. I've no idea who you mean." The man was lying, the Baker could tell. He glared at the barkeep. He reached into his purse and pulled out two gold coins stamped with the Order insignia. He slid them across the bar.

"Look, just keep an eye out, and if you *do* see them, can you give them a message?"

The barkeep looked him up and down. "Aye, *friend*, I'll give them a message. If I *see* them, what do you want me to say?"

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“Tell them that I’ll be going away for a bit, and that the friends they were meeting, were detained. They can meet up with them at the Order’s Guardsmen Station in In’Mai.”

The barkeep snorted at this. “You know those two don’t really need your help to find them, right?”

The Baker smiled. “Oh, I know,” he said. “I just thought some information might expedite the process.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!” called the barkeep. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

The Baker paused at the door. “You don’t,” he said as he left. If he had turned back to look at the bar, he would have seen the tall man with ice-blue eyes and the man with orange hair as they stepped out of the shadows and stood behind the barkeep.

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## Chapter Nine

Adam woke up chained to a wall, his head pounding. The room was lit by a single lantern. He could see Elli, also chained, to his right. Curled against the wall, hands and feet tied with ropes, was the little boy who'd been pulled from the trunk that morning at the bridge crossing. The boy's eyes were closed, and he appeared to be sleeping. *Were they in In'Mai?* Seated in a chair opposite them, was the man with the green top hat. The wall behind him held two windows that were shuttered closed. Elli looked over at Adam, her eyes wide.

"The Byre twins, we meet at last." The man smiled coldly as he stood and walked toward Adam and Elli. He stopped a few feet from the chained pair, and looked them up and down. His gaze lingered on Elli, and he licked his lips.

"Where are we?" Elli spoke, her voice raspy.

The man smiled. "I can't tell you that."

"What is this place?" Adam asked.

"Just a short stop on our journey. It's immaterial." He leaned closer. "I was supposed to call someone as soon as you awakened, but I thought we should chat for a few moments." His smile didn't match the twisted cruelty in his eyes.

"Why? Why should we talk to you?" said Adam.

"Do you know who I am?" the man asked. "I am a recruiter for the Order's Gifted soldiers. I sometimes go by other names, but most people call me the Butcher."

"What do the Gifted, or the Order, want with us?" asked Adam.

The Butcher snorted. "Based on your display in Milloren this morning, I should think that would be obvious."

"We're not children. You can't..."

"Can't what? Take you away from your friends and family and train you to obey me? Commit your lives to the Order? If you think I cannot, if you think the Order in its infinite wisdom and power cannot, you are sorely mistaken. I can break you down; I can pick your minds apart."

He ran his hand up Elli's cheek and wound his finger in one of her ringlets. "You, for example, hate it when people call you by your given name, don't you, *Elias?*" Adam gasped, but Elli was stone-faced, refusing to acknowledge the

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name that had never been hers. Gods knew, and Adam knew, she'd heard far worse than that when they were children. The Butcher set a finger under her chin and tilted it up. Elli kept her face blank, and he chuckled. "No. I see you don't like that at all. I can make you do anything. While you are in my care, you will answer to Elias, is that understood?" When he received no response from Elli, he coolly backhanded her across the face.

"Leave her alone!" Adam pressed against the chains.

"I've read your files. I know all about your strange proclivity. The boy who lives as a girl." He scoffed, looking her up and down. "I have to say, I'd never know you were a boy by looking at you. You look just like a girl."

"I am a girl, idiot." Elli glared at him. Adam felt sick as he struggled against his shackles.

The Butcher laughed. "Oh, *Elias*, I'm going to have such fun with you. We'll have to find you something more suitable to wear... the Order uniforms worn by male officers, perhaps?" He smiled wickedly. Adam looked over at Elli. Her eyes blazed with fury, but she faced the Butcher bravely, proudly, a small smirk on her face. That was when, over the pain that pounded in his head, Adam felt it. A pulse. Elli still called out to Flint and Frost. Then he felt another. Adam could feel it now, and he was amazed that the Butcher couldn't, but the Butcher was preoccupied with getting a rise out of Elli.

"When we get back to New Quidel, I'll be put in charge of training you two. I'll be your instructor. I will control what you wear, when you sleep, what you eat, and who you talk to. I can punish you however I see fit, and I can make you obey me." The Butcher pulled a knife from his pocket and pressed it against Adam's throat. He grinned at Elli. "Now, tell me, *Elias*, what name I should I call you?"

From the doorway came the sound of a throat being cleared. In came the Baker, and he walked very carefully into the room, glaring at the Butcher. "What are you doing, Evers?" he asked. "I told you not to talk to them without me."

The Butcher shrugged. "You have your orders, and I have mine, Baker."

The Baker glared at the Butcher, but didn't argue. "Our transport will be here in an hour. Make sure they're ready to move." He glanced to Adam and Elli. "I'll have the guard send up something for them before we embark." Adam stared after him. There was something off. The last time he'd met this man,

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Adam had been starved and beaten. The Baker had obviously been looking for Elli as well, but now he was not acting like the same cruel, sadistic man he had encountered in New Quidel. *What was going on?*

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The Baker stepped outside the cell and turned to the soldier, a man from the local squadron, who was standing guard at the door. "No one goes in or out without my say so, understand?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. My men and I will leave within the hour."

The Baker signaled to two of his men who were also waiting at the door, and they followed him. He led them up the winding stairs of the tower and out onto the turret. The turret was at the top of the Order's Guardsman Station in In'Mai. It was the tallest structure in the city. At the wall of the turret stood a man who looked out over the city with a spyglass. The Baker leaned over to the man. "Any sign of them?" he asked. The man shook his head. "Only a matter of time," murmured the Baker. Then in the distance there was a loud crash. "Time to go. They're coming," he called. His loyalty to the Order only extended so far, and one thing it did not extend to was sticking around to be eaten by an angry Draq.

At that moment, a ladder descended from the clouds above the tower. The Baker took hold, and one by one, he and his men climbed upwards to his balloon ship. When he finally reached the deck one of the men rushed to help him up.

"Sir." The first mate saluted the Baker.

"Time to go," barked the Baker. "We need to get out of here as quickly as we can."

"Where to, sir?"

"Kita is always nice this time of year." The Baker smiled.

"Yes, sir. What of the prisoners?"

"The Draq will be coming for them. I thought it best for our rather flammable ship to get clear of the carnage."

"And the Butcher, sir?"

The Baker shrugged. "Collateral damage."

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The Baker had gone, and the Butcher had once again placed his knife at Adam's throat. "Now, where were we? Ah, yes. Elias." He grinned.

Adam glared at the man holding the knife to his throat. "What orders?" he asked.

"What?" The Butcher looked surprised that Adam was speaking.

"You said to the Baker 'You have your orders and I have mine,' so what orders?"

The Butcher chuckled. "I already told you. I'm supposed to bring you back to New Quidel, of course, and I will be in charge of training you. That starts here and now. Far too important to wait till we're back at the training facility."

Adam looked over at Elli. Her face was set in concentration as she continued to call out to Flint and Frost. "I don't understand. What makes you think we'll accept your training? And why are we so important?" he asked, keeping the Butcher's attention on him.

"You will accept the training. I can make you," the Butcher asserted, holding up his index and middle fingers. "The reason you are so important to the Order should be obvious. We want you because of who you are." The Butcher cocked his head to the side. Far in the distance, there was a loud crash.

"Who are we?" Adam asked. "Is it because we're Gifted?"

The Butcher grinned then. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"Who you are." The Butcher pulled the knife back from Adam's throat and laughed. Then he looked at both of them. "She didn't tell you?"

"She?" Adam asked.

"Your mother."

"She died giving birth to us," said Elli.

"Ah. Well, that explains it then." The Butcher paused. "We thought you knew. The Order would probably have approached you differently if it had known. They despise inefficiency, you see. Well, I suppose it's up to me then. Or would you rather wait till we get to New Quidel?"

"Please, tell us," both Elli and Adam pleaded.

"Very well, this is going to be such fun." The Butcher smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Mind you, if you don't behave, I'm going to wipe it from

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your memories, understand? I might do that anyway, butcher your memories, just for fun, so I can see the looks on your faces when I tell you again.”

*The man is insane*, Adam realized as the Butcher continued. “Well then. Twenty-one years ago, there was a Gifted soldier who fell in love with a prisoner in his care. When he discovered that the woman was carrying his child, he betrayed the Order and helped her escape. He died helping her flee.”

Both Adam and Elli were shocked. “Our mother was a prisoner of the Order?” Elli whispered, stunned.

The Butcher nodded. “In a manner of speaking, yes.” There was another crash in the distance. The Butcher glanced in the direction of the sound.

“Who...” began Adam. “Who were they? Our parents.”

“Your father was called Cal. Callum Byre. I’m told he was possibly the most powerful Gifted the Order has ever seen. The Order assigned him to keep all of the prisoners under control. These prisoners weren’t kept locked in the dungeons, you see, so monitoring them took special care. You two clearly inherited his gifts. You’ve only begun to touch your powers, you know. I can’t wait to see what you’ll be capable of after a little training. Your mother, she was special too.”

“How?”

“You know your history, yes? Remember how the Order imprisoned most of the council and the royal family when they took charge of the government in Quidel? Your mother was Princess Illariya Stanhope, youngest daughter of King Lucius the First. She was born after the Uprising when her mother and father were in the custody of the Order. When she ran away, she was nineteen years of age and betrothed to one of the Order’s finest, Lord Chandelier. Though you are not legitimate, you are now the last surviving members of the royal family. Then, though I don’t believe in such things, there is also the prophecy.”

“Prophecy?” Adam asked.

“Some garbage about fire and ice and mated twins. Rubbish really.” Another crash sounded outside, closer this time, and the Butcher, who had opened his mouth to continue, paused. He stepped over to the outside wall and listened as the crashes grew louder and came ever closer. Elli released another pulse, and the Butcher noticed it. He turned to her. “You are a clever one, aren’t you? Calling for help. You’re going to pay for that.” He flipped his knife open and advanced on Elli.

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Suddenly, right outside was a tremendous roar. There was an enormous impact against the building that shook the entire structure. Adam nearly collapsed with relief. Flint and Frost had found them.

The Butcher cursed and ran toward the door of the cell as the outer wall of the room collapsed. He ran out just as Flint's Dragon head peered through the opening. Flint's eyes followed the Butcher, and he breathed a flare of fire that shot through the doorway after the man. The flames found their mark, and Adam heard the Butcher's howl of agony.

Frost was there too, and Adam felt a tangible relief flow from Elli when Marin climbed up Flint's neck and slid to the floor. Frost ran to Elli. "Are you hurt?" he asked, his hands betraying his concern with a slight shake as he checked her for injury. She shook her head. Frost murmured in relief and brushed a quick kiss to her lips. "Hold on," he said. Frost turned his head and stepped over to the great metal peg that anchored Elli and Adam's chains to the wall. Frost grasped the peg with both hands and pulled. The peg came free, and he pulled the chains from the twin's shackles, releasing them.

Adam fell down when Frost released his shackles. He pushed off of his knees and stumbled over to Flint. He touched him on the snout, placing his palm between Flint's nostrils. Flint huffed, as if in relief, and pressed his snout to Adam's chest. Adam closed his eyes for a brief second, reveling in the closeness of his mate.

When Adam opened his eyes, Frost was releasing Elli from a tight embrace. He then took Elli by the hand and led her over to Flint. "We'll get the shackles off later," he explained to Adam and Elli, "there's no time. Let's go." He directed them towards Flint's back.

Adam was about to climb up when he hesitated. His eyes searched out the small boy tied in the corner. The boy was awake, and he stared at the Dragon with big eyes.

"Come with us!" Adam called to the boy. While Adam and Elli climbed on Flint's back, Frost raced to the boy's side and used a small knife to cut his bonds. He leaned in and spoke softly to the wide-eyed boy who nodded, and Frost pulled the boy to his feet. He picked up the boy and settled him on Flint's back between Adam and Elli.

Marin climbed up on Flint's back behind Elli and made fast use of their shackles, threading Flint's harness through first Adam's and then Elli's, before he took the ends of the harness himself. Elli wrapped one arm around the tiny

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boy in front of her and leaned forward, whispering words of encouragement into the boy's ear. "Hold on!" Frost hollered.

With that, Flint roared. He launched himself off the building and soared into the air. There was a terrifying moment when they were suspended high above the city and then dropped swiftly down. They all clung to Flint for dear life. Flint flew frighteningly low to the ground, between the buildings, as he wound through the streets. Adam wondered where they could fly to when the Nets in the sky were blocking the Split. Suddenly Flint swerved around a corner, and Adam saw the fortress at the border crossing and the bridge to Milloren looming before them.

The gate to the fortress was closed, but that didn't stop them. Flint sailed over the high walls of the fortress and landed in the courtyard, facing the gate to the bridge. The gates were also closed, the entrance to the bridge over the Split blocked. Flint gave a huff and charged the gate. The guards took one look at the great, red Dragon as it catapulted towards them and hurled themselves out of their way.

Flint breathed fire on the gate to the bridge and smashed the heated metal with his head like it was made of wood pulp. He charged through it at full speed, and they raced over the bridge. Flint's nostrils flared, and his wings were tucked close to his body. Adam heard someone racing up the bridge after them, but they were too late. Flint was already thundering down the other side of the bridge. Adam looked up and was astonished to see that the guards of Milloren had opened their gate and were beckoning them through. Flint took a great leap and dove through the gate. His claws scraped against the stone pavement, and they slid to a stop inside the courtyard of the border crossing fortress in Milloren.

The guards of Milloren were cheering as they closed the gate behind them. Adam looked around. No one was frightened, judging by the grins on their faces, so this was clearly not the first time the guards had seen a Dragon. Loras was very clearly different from Domin, and Adam wondered what else he and Elli had missed growing up in Domin under the thumb of the Order.

Flint turned his head to look back at the three of them, and his eyes glowed with satisfaction. His breath was heavy, and a little puff of smoke escaped his nostrils. Adam leaned forward and rubbed Flint's neck. Frost smiled, leaning forward to hug Elli. He fixed his ice-blue eyes on Flint and said, "No more Nets, Ethon. Take us home."

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Flint huffed exasperatedly and looked pointedly at the little boy on his back. Frost chuckled and nodded. The boy, who was still wide-eyed, stared back at the Dragon. He reached out a small hand, and Flint leaned forward to press his nose to it. While he watched the boy pet his mate, Adam overheard Elli quietly telling Frost about the boy's capture that he and Elli witnessed that morning at the border crossing. Frost's eyes widened, and his features softened as she explained. "What's your name, boy?" Frost asked.

"Jas," came the soft reply. The boy had strangely green eyes, sandy hair, and a great many freckles.

"Elli tells me you were trying to cross to Milloren this morning, and you were stopped by the guards," Frost continued.

Jas nodded. "Yes."

"Do you have a place to go, or were you just trying to escape?"

"My cousin's in the village of Halon. My mum sent him a note before she passed." Jas had a forlorn look on his face when he mentioned his mum.

Marin nods. "Would you like us to take you to him? We can if you like."

"Truly?" Jas seemed excited by the possibility.

"Truly, Jas. You could come to Sera with us, but if your cousin is expecting you, you should go to him." Frost smiled as Jas nodded.

"Please then, sir..."

"Forgive me, Jas. I'm Frost, and this is Elli, Adam, and Flint."

"Please then, Sir Frost, could you take me to Halon?"

"Of course, lad. Flint?" Frost eyed his Flint who had kept his head turned and watched the whole exchange.

Flint gave a satisfied huff, smoke puffed from his nostrils as he looked to the sky. He leapt into the air and flapped his wings. As they rose higher, Adam, Elli, Jas, and Frost waved to the guards and folk of Milloren, shouting their thanks. Milloren shrunk and disappeared below the clouds as Flint flew higher, soaring above the clouds and to the East, towards Halon and Sera at last.

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## Chapter Ten

### *The Isle of Sera, Fortress Edan Keep, Sixteen Days Later*

The Isle of Sera was a tiny island off the southeastern coast of Loras. The great fortress encircled the entire island, including the fields where food was grown, in thick, great walls of stone. The heart of the isle, Edan Keep itself, was a series of tall gray spires. The strangest part was that the Keep didn't actually exist. Flint had tried for hours to explain the series of spells and unravel the magic that protected the enormous structure of the fortress, but in Adam's mind, what it came down to was that no one who wanted to harm the Draq would ever even know it existed.

It was all too much for Adam at times. They were safe here, but they didn't tell the Draq leaders everything. Adam and Elli, their minds reeling from the events in the tower, had told Flint and Frost what the Butcher had revealed to them about their lineage, and what he had mentioned of the prophecy. The four of them had decided that for now, they were keeping that information a secret. Flint and Frost didn't trust that Aeolos and the Council of Edan Keep wouldn't try to use the twins for their own gain. Frost had taken to spending his days in the library pouring over old prophetic texts, searching for some mention of fire and ice and mated twins. So far, he had found nothing. Adam and Elli grieved for the parents they'd never known and again mourned the passing of the woman they called Grandmere and wondered if even she ever knew who their parents were.

There were hundreds of folk who called Edan Keep their home. Mealtimes where loud and boisterous affairs, and children, Draq and human alike, ran in loud, merry packs down the castle corridors. There were fifty manifested Draqborn or full grown Dragons, nearly thirty Draq children, thirteen Draq mates, and a great many fugitives from Domin.

On top of everything, Adam and Elli's revered status as Draq mates within the strange hierarchy that was Edan Keep took some getting used to. Mates were revered, deferred to, treated like royalty. It set Adam's teeth on edge. All he wanted was to spend time with Flint, but all of a sudden nothing was that simple. There were so many rules of courtship and archaic protocols for treatment of unclaimed mates; none of which Flint and Frost had bothered to follow before arriving in Edan Keep.

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To make matters worse, the Council of Edan Keep insisted that unclaimed mates could not share a room or a bed. Adam barely slept his first few nights alone in the fortress. Elli and Frost, already being mated, bypassed these ridiculous rules. Adam and Flint, however, were not so fortunate because Adam was as of yet “unclaimed”.

For three days, Adam was forced to sit through lectures on Draq history, Draq law, and Draq customs. For three days, he was only allowed to see Flint at mealtimes in front of hundreds of people or to go for walks with him in the garden accompanied by a stuffy chaperone. By the fourth day, Adam was ready to claw everyone’s eyes out. The learning was all-important, Adam knew that, and despite his irritation with the chaperone, he treasured those walks in the garden with Flint. He loved talking to him for hours, but he missed Flint’s touch so badly. He felt irritated and on edge.

On the fourth night, Flint’s eyes flashed fire when they met Adam’s across the dinner table, and Adam knew that Flint was done, just as done as he was with waiting. *Soon*, Flint mouthed, smirking at Adam. That night, Flint came to him. He flew up onto the parapet of Adam’s tower, shifted and strode through Adam’s balcony door and into his chamber, wearing only a smile.

Adam launched himself into Flint’s arms, his legs wrapped around Flint’s waist, and they clung to each other, mouths sealed together, as Flint carried his mate to bed. They spent the night wrapped in each other’s arms and the next and the next. They explored every inch of each other’s flesh, fell asleep in each other’s arms.

In the morning, no one from the council said a word. Adam wondered if they actually expected him and Flint to follow the rules, or if they just wanted them to appear to be following them. They behaved exactly as expected during the day, but the nights became their own.

A small part of Adam was still unsteady because, for all of their intimacy, Flint had not claimed Adam. The tenth night that Flint came to him, when Adam and Flint lay panting and sated, Adam reached up to run his fingers through Flint’s fiery hair, a sad look on his face.

Flint stopped Adam’s fingers with his own. “What is it, love?”

Adam ducked his head, burying his face against Flint’s chest for a moment before responding. “You said soon,” he whispered. His face heated, but he didn’t move until Flint gripped his chin and forced his gaze up to meet Flint’s eyes.

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“I did, Adam, and I meant it too, but I also meant it when I said that I would wait until you were ready.” Flint leaned forward, and brushed his lips against Adam’s. “Adam Byre, mate of my heart, are you ready to mate with me? To claim each other?”

Adam nodded.

“Words, Adam,” Flint purred as he nipped at Adam’s neck. “Use your words.”

Adam groaned. He pulled back from Flint and held him by the shoulders, suddenly serious. He began to speak the oath he’d been taught in one of his many classes. “Ethon Eldhrimnir Flint. I claim you as my heart, my Soulsword, my mate. I will join with you, for the rest of my days... Ethon, please make me yours.”

“You are already mine, Adam Byre. Since I first saw you, you were mine, my heart, my Soulsword, my mate.” He held Adam’s hand to his heart, and Adam felt the steady pulse against his hand. “Before I claim you, Adam, before I make you mine, I want you to claim me.”

Adam ran his hands up Flint’s arms to cup his face. “I’ve never...”

“We’ll do it together.” Flint leaned forward and kissed Adam. They went slowly, kissing as Flint rolled, so he was straddling Adam. Flint reached for the small jar of scented oil on the nightstand. He used the oil to prepare himself, stretching himself with his fingers and liberally coating Adam’s length. He braced himself and slowly sat down, taking Adam inside him, pausing with a gasp before slowly sinking down his length with a sigh. “Mate,” he whispered. Then he began to move, and Adam couldn’t help but move with him.

Adam groaned into Flint’s mouth as Flint rode him. Flint growled and mewled with Adam’s thrusts. He started to shake as he watched Flint ride him. The tight heat was like nothing he’d ever felt, and he wasn’t going to last. “Ethon!” he cried.

“Go, Adam, go. I’ll join you soon,” Flint whispered. Adam groaned and shot inside Flint who gripped his erection tightly as Adam came apart inside of him. Still hard, Flint leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Adam’s, licking Adam’s mouth with his tongue. He made a purring sound as he rocked forward, and Adam felt his cock slip free.

Flint kissed him everywhere, traveling down his body—nose, lips, tongue, and throat. Flint scooted down and buried his head in Adam’s crotch. His nose

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and mouth brushed Adam's curls, and he moved lower, leaving behind a trail of heat. He lifted Adam's legs up and traveled still lower, his nose coming to rest on Adam's taint. Adam whimpered. Then Flint's tongue darted out to lick along Adam's crease. When Flint's tongue trailed over the puckered flesh of his hole, he nearly lost his mind.

"Ethon!" Adam gasped. His hips bucked, his cock started to fill, and he could feel, bloody *feel*, the answering grin on Flint's face against his thighs as he darted in to lick again.

Flint murmured a litany of "My... mate... my Adam," between kisses, sucks, and licks. His tongue circled Adam's hole and pressed inside, making Adam shudder. Flint settled back between Adam's thighs with the bottle of oil and used his fingers to open Adam up. Adam rocked against Flint's slender fingers, moaning when Flint hit that spot inside him. Flint coated his own length and positioned himself at Adam's entrance. He paused to look Adam in the eye before he thrust in. "Soulsworn," he growled as he surged forward.

As Flint moved inside him, Adam's whole body surged with a prickly heat, radiating from where they were joined and running throughout his entire body. Adam watched Flint's face and knew the Draq couldn't hold back much longer. Flint's rhythm stuttered, his nails lengthened, and the tips turned black. As he came inside Adam, he wrapped his arms around his mate, and Adam felt a sharp pinch as Flint bit down on his shoulder. Ecstasy flowed through his body with the bite, and Adam cried out as he followed Flint.

Warmth swept through Adam, and they lay there gasping, holding fast to each other. The mating bite on his shoulder tingled as it swiftly healed. As it healed, the connection between them grew until Flint was a bright spot in Adam's mind. His eyes widened, and he stared at Flint.

"Elli tried to explain, but it's so much more," Adam whispered.

"Soulsworn," Flint replied, his fingers tracing over the bite before kissing Adam deeply.

"Soulsworn," Adam agreed as he curled up against his mate. Flint curled around him, burying his nose in Adam's hair as he promptly fell asleep.

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"We should check on Jas soon," Elli announced as they wandered through the garden the following day. Adam smiled. In the brief time that Jas had traveled with them, only a day, he'd made quite an impression. When they'd

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delivered him to his cousin's in Halon, all four of them had walked the boy into the small village and left him safely in the arms of his cousin Fiona, before they said their goodbyes.

"We should," Adam agreed. He wondered about Jas's gift, and he worried about how the kid was coping with it all by himself. The Order would have turned him from a sweet child into a Gifted killing machine, but being the only Gifted out in the middle of nowhere probably wasn't the best thing for him either. "I've been wondering if we should offer to let him stay here. We could work with him on controlling his gift?"

"Adam, I see your point, but we hid for so long, we can barely control our own gifts."

"I know, El. We need to train too, but we can't just leave him there to figure it out on his own. Plus, there are Casters here. I know magic's not the same, and Jas's gift is different than ours, but you, me, and Flint could help him with control at least."

She sighed. "I know. We'll think of something." Adam smiled and absently rubbed a finger over the roughened flesh on his shoulder from Flint's bite. "Stop picking at it," Elli ordered.

Adam stopped. "Where is yours, by the way? I never thought to ask."

Elli's cheeks pinked. "Somewhere you can't see it." Adam raised an eyebrow, smirking. "That is all I will say about it." Elli blushed brighter, and Adam laughed. "Are you worried about what the council will say about your mating?"

Adam shook his head. "You know, for all of their interfering, Flint didn't seem worried. You know, if they hadn't thrown all of those stupid rules at us, it would have taken us much longer to..." Elli looked at him, a growing look of surprise on her face. "Those manipulative bastards!" he declared.

Elli laughed so hard, she fell off the bench. Adam glared at her. "I wondered why they were fussing so much over the two of you when they didn't so much as bat an eye at me and Marin," she admitted, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Gods, El. I feel like an idiot. I was so angry at all of them."

"But you love him, don't you? His cute little nose, his luxurious red hair, I know how your mind works, brother mine."

"Shut it." He grinned, and poked her in the side.

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“Tell me, I’m right.”

“It’s wonderful, you’re right, but if you don’t stop, I’m going to compose a sonnet about Marin’s braids and his ice-blue eyes to read at your wedding,” he said as he grinned wickedly.

“If you’re happy, and you’re not worried about Flint getting in trouble for mating with you, what is bothering you?”

“Flint said that the Order may have captured a Draq. I’m worried he’ll be sent back to Domin.”

“He won’t make the decision to go without asking you, you know that, right?”

“I do. We talked about it. Part of me wants him to go too, but not yet. Not till I’m strong enough to fight at his side. It’s not over, El. The Order’s still out there, and people like the Butcher. I want to help the Draq. I want to learn how to fight. I want to learn how to use our gift.”

“What about the prophecy?”

Adam rubbed his forehead. “The Butcher could have been making that up, you know. All of it, El. Even our parents. I don’t think so, but I think we need to go talk to Vero. It’s a place to start anyway.”

“And the farm?”

“The farm will be there when all of this is over. I hope. Maybe when we go back, I can pick up Ori. I really miss my pup.”

Elli was silent for a moment. Then she smiled. “You know...” she said, nudging his shoulder, “our gift does seem to work better when we’re together.”

Adam smile answered her own. “You and Frost would come with us?”

“Well, I’ll have to talk to Marin about it, but those two work better as a team anyway. I want to help too. And find out the truth,” she added.

“First we get you married. Then we train, and we’ll see what we can do, okay?”

Elli squeezed his hand in affirmation.

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Adam took the steps up to his room in the keep two at a time. The council meeting should have ended by now. He burst into his quarters and found Ethon

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sitting on the bed, wrestling with his boots. He paused in the doorway and watched his mate.

“Adam.” Flint looked up. His face lit up at the sight of his mate. Adam grinned back. He’d been smiling so much today his face hurt.

“Hey. What happened at the meeting?”

“Aeolos is sending Brant and Keegan to investigate,” Flint answered. Adam let out a relieved huff and sat next to Flint to take off his own shoes. “I spoke with Aeolos. About going back to Domin. He wants to assist with your training.”

“Really?” Flint leaned his head on Adam’s shoulder. “I told Elli today, and after the wedding she wants to help. She’s going to talk to Marin.”

“Mmm. Good.” Flint rubbed his chin on Adam’s shoulder and then kissed up his neck to Adam’s mouth. He nipped Adam’s lips. “Marin’s already in, we talked after the meeting. Missed you today.” He laid back on the bed and pulled Adam on top of him. Adam wrapped his arms around his mate and pressed kisses to Flint’s soft lips.

Flint brushed his finger over the bite mark on Adam’s shoulder. “How are you feeling today? Any regrets?” Adam glared and hit him with a pillow which led to wrestling, which led to many kisses, which led to more vigorous activities.

When they were finished and cuddled together, Adam answered him. “No regrets, Ethon. Not a one. This, with you, it’s everything.” Adam blushed as his eyes met Flint’s.

Flint’s eyes grew wide as he looked at his mate. “It’s everything to me too, Adam Byre, mate of my heart.” He kissed Adam, and they held each other close. Whatever dangers would come, and Adam knew they would come, they’d face them together.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Penny Wilder is an avid reader and sometimes reviewer of romance and erotic novels. She lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her amazingly supportive husband and three cats. She works for a nonprofit by day and by night, in addition to reading way too many books, moonlights as a blogger, artist, illustrator, and also sometimes as a business manager for a fledgling theater company. She has spent a good deal of her life working in theater, either onstage as a performer or backstage doing just about every job imaginable. Her love of writing dates back almost as far as her love of reading.*



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# AFTER THE RIDE

By Siôn O'Tierney

## Photo Description

A man stands alone in near-darkness. He is stripped to the waist and wrapped tightly in heavy ropes. The dim light illuminates the lines of a well-trained body. His arms are relaxed, but bespeak great strength. His head hangs down and he leans heavily against the ropes, as if he has just finished an attempt to tear himself free, or perhaps he's storing up energy for another try.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*They think they broke me. They think it's working. They think I am finished. I am not.*

*I will fight. I will be free. I will get back to him...*

*\*\*This is not a BDSM story. This man is not a sub. He has been captured. Why? For whom he is? For what he knows? For whom he loves? That is up to you to decide. Please, no shifter or vampire stories. Dystopian, Historical, Contemporary, or even Sci-Fi are okay. However the story comes to you. Please just help this man find his way out of the dark place he is and make his way to his HEA (or at least a HFN).*

*Thank you so much!*

*Sincerely,*

*Alison*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** rodeo, cowboys, kidnapping, friends to lovers, sweet/no sex, subtlety

**Word Count:** 6,000

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## AFTER THE RIDE

By Siôn O'Tierney

I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Paul and he's asking if I'm ready. I start the check. Hand—I reset my grip on the rein; the tape is helping, but the wrist hurts like a bitch. Boots—heel-deep in the stirrups. I stand up a little, put some weight on them to make sure they're all the way in. Thighs—locked tight around the swells of the saddle. Back—core tight but loose, in control. Head—I roll my neck as far as it will go. Mouth—guard set in my teeth, I bite down hard.

“Cowboy up!”

Paul's voice echoes in my head, but it doesn't last. Dad's training kicks in. I push my hat down tight on my head so I won't lose it.

“All right folks—”

I can hear the drone of the announcer. He sounds like every man who's ever stepped up to the mic. They're all the same: same face, same voice, same clichés and tired jokes. I guess there's a familiarity there. They make every rodeo remind you of your first. That's worth something.

“—coming to you now out of chute number three is a young man from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, named Chidike McCord. That's a mouthful, but I'll let you in on a little secret: his friends call him 'Truck.' He's been burning up the circuit and people are saying he's got a good shot at Rookie of the Year in saddle bronc riding. I have seen this boy ride a few times, and let me tell you, he knows how to get the job done. Truck has done well for himself this weekend and was in third place coming into tonight's competition. If he scores well here, he could be walking away with one of these fine buckles and a pile of prize money. Tonight, he's riding Nitro, one of—”

I make eye contact with the man on the gate, to make sure he'll see the signal. Slow—like I always do it—I look up, staring at the night sky for one long moment. Then I give a quick nod and snap my head down. Chin to my chest; keep it tight. Vision narrow.

In the periphery, I see the movement; the gate's swinging open, and my free hand comes away from it, lifted into the air. The horse coils beneath me and

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comes unwound with a powerful lunge. I almost lose my breath on the landing, but not my mark. I never miss my mark. My spurs are locked in the horse's shoulders until I feel him lunge again, turning into a spin. I lean into the turn and begin spurring: stroke and set, stroke and set, with the rhythm of the horse's movements. The crowd, the lights, the announcer, it all falls away and it's just me and Dad, out in the pasture. I'm on the barrel and he's pulling the ropes. I bounce and jar, but I've felt every twist and jink a hundred thousand times before and I know just what to do.

The horn blares and I'm back, the crowd is roaring. I grab the saddle with my free hand and kick loose from the stirrups. When I turn my head to look, a pick-up man is a few steps behind, but I'm coming off before he can get to me. Suddenly, the horse folds right under me and I'm flying back. Then my head is ringing. I'm flat on my back in the dirt. I can see the pick-up men guiding Nitro out through the gate and there's a man standing above me, giving me a hand up. Someone shouts nearby and I turn. A pretty young blonde in jean shorts stuffs my hat through the bars of the fence. There's blood on the brim. The girl's not bleeding; it must be mine.

The man points to a nearby section of fence, and I jog toward it. I get halfway over and my friend Royal is there giving me a hand down. He walks me over to the EMT, who checks my head and finds the bleeding. He bandages me up, and then he wants to check for a concussion. I don't have to look at Royal. He knows.

"How many fingers?" the man asks, and I can't quite make it out. It's all a bit blurry, but Royal is pressing two fingers into my back.

"Two?" I ask. I wish that hadn't come out as a question. I feel so tired. I need rest, I need to check my score, I need to get my gear. Someone will have it off of Nitro by now. The crowd is so goddamn loud.

The EMT shines a light in my eyes, and finally, seeming satisfied, pats me on the shoulder, and turns to go back to his station.

"Great ride, Truck." It's Royal. He tells me he'll grab my gear and make sure Paul gets it.

"Score?" I ask, unable to string a longer sentence together.

"Eighty-seven."

Royal grins at me and I smile back. 87. That's enough for prize money, and depending on the others, it could be enough for the buckle. Paul will get that for me, too.

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“I’m going to the truck,” I tell Royal. “See you in Cheyenne?”

I don’t catch the response, and then I lose him in the crowd. A fan congratulates me on the ride, and gives me a beer. I thank him and down it in a few swallows. It helps dull the ache in my head, dull the roar from the stands. I find the Dodge and drop the tailgate; climbing into the bed, I make a pillow out of a loose gear bag and cover my eyes with my hat. The sound of the rodeo seems to drift away from me as I fall asleep.

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Everyone called my father either “Dad” or “Mr. McCord”, so it was easy for me to get used to calling him “Dad”. I don’t remember my birth parents. They died when I was very young. Some sickness or another. I was raised in an orphanage. They taught me English. That’s where I met Dad. He was on a charity mission. Even back then, before he retired, he had time for that kind of thing.

I remember liking him. He was funny, and strange. He worked hard all day, and then when everyone else stopped for the night, he kept working. I followed him one day. He had a barrel that had once been filled with water, but had started to rust. I watched him curiously as he took a hammer and began to smash the sides in. He used the claw to bang holes into the top and bottom on one side. Then he took a heavy coil of rope and started cutting it into pieces.

When he was done with the rope, he put it in the barrel and I followed him to a grove of Afara trees near the river. He stopped in a small clearing about twenty feet across and he called to me. I thought I’d been sneaking well, but he must have known I was there all along because he didn’t even look up.

“Chidike,” he said. “Come help me with this.”

I entered the clearing nervously, but I was very curious about what he was doing. He took the lengths of rope out of the barrel and handed me one of them.

“Do you know how to tie strong knots?” he asked.

I nodded. I knew many good knots.

He pointed to one of the trees. “Climb up there and tie one end of that rope above the second branch.”

I was confused, but I did as he instructed. After repeating the process several times, we took the barrel to the middle of the clearing and he began to

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tie the ropes to it. In the end, the barrel was hanging between four trees, about two feet off the ground. I looked at Mr. McCord, wondering why we'd done all this, and he grinned like a little boy.

He lifted me off the ground and sat me on the barrel. I perched there, bouncing, still not understanding. He took the last piece of rope and tied it around the middle of the barrel in front of me. Then he showed me how to hold on to the rope, and balance myself with my free hand and he told me to hold tight with my legs. Then he went to the ropes tied to the front of the barrel and he started to pull on them.

At first, he only pulled them together, so that the barrel bounced up and down, but then, he pulled one harder than the other and I was so surprised I let go. I went flying from the barrel and landed on the ground so hard that it knocked my breath out. I laid there on my back, smiling and laughing as soon as my breath came back. It was exhilarating; I loved it.

The light was almost gone by then, so Mr. McCord and I picked our way through the bush back to the main house. I didn't sleep at all that night. I just relived that moment when the barrel bounced me off, over and over. Flying through the air. Landing in the dirt. Staring up at the stars as they came out.

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It takes me some time to figure out where I am. It's dark. I'm cold. I can't see anything, but I can feel the ropes. I've been stripped to the waist, and I'm tied up. The bandage is still wrapped around my head; it's a little too tight. I'm wearing my jeans, my boots, and my chaps—they're unbuckled, I don't remember; I must have undone them before I passed out. I lean against the ropes, trying to pull, but I'm nowhere near strong enough to break them.

What the hell is happening to me?

I remember the ride. I remember the EMT. I remember the truck. And then I was here. There's nothing in between.

"Paul!" I shout for my friend, even though it seems foolish. All I can hear are the sounds of the highway. My eyes are adjusting to the darkness. Cars, semis, the road. I'm in a horse trailer, but why? How? No one can hear me, not on the highway like this. A horse whinnies, the sound high and reedy, and turns his head to look at me—concerned to see me, I imagine. He's only a few feet away.

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Despite the breeze through the opened airflow vents, the stink is awful. I have to doubt this thing has ever been cleaned. The horse is set up at an angle to me, I guess there's probably another beyond him, and on a curve, when headlights from oncoming traffic slant into the trailer, I can see I was right. I crane my neck to peer at the wall behind me. The trailer is a bumper pull, not a gooseneck. Is someone playing a joke on me? It doesn't seem like Paul's kind of joke, but...

My phone! I remember, I dug it out of my bag right before I laid down in the bed of the truck. Did I put it in my pocket? My legs are in shadow, and the pockets of my jeans are obscured by my chaps anyway. I wriggle my leg around, trying to tell if my phone's in there. Nothing.

I'm sore, both from hanging tied here in these ropes and from my ride. I need sleep. Real sleep.

If it isn't Paul, who could it be? And why? Dad has money, but there's easier targets. If I know Dad, he'd get one of his hunting rifles down off the wall of his trophy room (since Mom never let him keep them anywhere else in the house), and go vigilante on a kidnapper. I don't think anyone who knows anything about him would make a mistake like that.

None of my friends on the circuit would take such poor care of their animals. The state of this trailer is a disgrace. I absentmindedly struggle to free my right hand while I keep puzzling over the question of who might do this and why. A car in the passing lane matches pace with the trailer for a while, illuminating the closer horse. I can't tell the sex but I get a good look at the facial markings. I can memorize facial markings pretty well, it helps me remember the horses I've ridden. Hair is black... or a very dark brown. Irregular blaze that doesn't quite connect to a broad snip.

I close my eyes and think, running through all the horses I remember. I've seen this horse, I know it. But I can't quite seem to place it. Definitely not the horse of a friend. I know those all by name. None of them have these markings. An image flashes in my mind and my eyes snap open. I strain in the dark, but I just can't tell.

Then the whole trailer is lit up for a brief moment by the light of a truck stop as we blow past. There it is. High white stocking on the front left leg. I know the horse. I know the owner. Ethan Rush. That goddamn shit-eating asshole.

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I met Paul Dunn at my first junior rodeo. He was a senior, seventeen I think. Dad, being friends with Paul's family, pointed him out to me.

Dad wanted to watch from the stands, he was always big on independence, on being your own man. I liked that. I can see how some people would be scared by it, but for me it was thrilling. I felt strong and confident. It was Dad's influence, no question.

I must have been wandering, looking a little lost, because I was back behind the chutes and Paul caught my sleeve. Maybe someone pointed me out to him, too... I dunno.

He grinned at me. "You can dump your stuff here."

I shook my head irritably, but dropped my bag in the dirt by the fence, and laid my saddle on top of it.

"You mind?" Paul asked, but he didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he crouched down and began an inspection of my saddle, poking, pulling on straps. He stood with a nod and a grunt. "First time?" Another question he didn't want or need an answer to. "I'll help you on your horse if you like." With that he turned back to his own bag, focused, readying himself.

I could see into his bag. In addition to his saddle, he also had a rigging for riding bareback. I knew there were a lot of guys who did more than one event, but two rough stock events seemed like asking for an injury.

I dug in my bag for my iPod, stuck in headphones, and started to get into the headspace. Dad always encouraged me to do it on my own—he tried to get me to meditate and shit with him, but I couldn't manage it. I needed music. Hang drum worked best. There was something about the rhythm, the timing, the melodic patterns. It made me feel like my whole mind, my whole life, was narrowed, focused into a razor-sharp point, driving forward into what came next.

I got my chaps strapped on tight, rosined them up. I sat down in my saddle there in the dirt, made sure the stirrups were just the right length.

The horse I'd drawn wasn't anything special, but Paul had ridden him before. He told me everything he remembered as he helped me strap my saddle on the horse and get down into the chute. The second I was seated, the horse got a little pissed and laid hard against the gate. My leg was trapped. It went numb in a few seconds. They tried to get him to settle, but he wouldn't. When I



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nodded, they swung open the gate, but the horse didn't move. A judge shouted to me that the mark out rule would be waived, so I dropped my feet from his neck.

I guess that was all the horse needed because he started to buck then, and hard. It was like the barrel, but not. It was all I could do to hold on to the rein. The way he moved under me was so much more complex than the patterns of the barrel. I knew them so well, but this was a whole different beast, so to speak. My brain must have shut down, because I grabbed the saddle with my free hand. Instant disqualification. I stayed on 'til the buzzer sounded, though. That was something.

I didn't want to get off, but then the pick-up rider was beside me and I kicked out of the stirrups, slid across the back of the man's horse, and tumbled in the dirt. Looking up at the sky, I couldn't see the stars through the blazing lights of the arena, but I could see them in my mind. I jumped to my feet.

Paul was grinning at me when I got back behind the chutes with my saddle. He slapped me hard on the shoulder, and I grinned back at him like an idiot.

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I don't know why, but my thoughts keep circling back around to Paul. It's been hours. Drifting in and out of consciousness. We may have stopped for a while. I can't really remember. My head is swimming. Such a headache. Time doesn't seem like it's moving forward. It feels like it's jumping every which way, like a wild horse under me, trying to throw me. Like I'm living my life out of order.

I was right. I heard them talking when we finally pulled off the highway. I knew it had to be Ethan and his asshole brother, Troy. Team ropers and, as if being team ropers weren't bad enough, the Rush brothers were... *notorious* is probably the most accurate word, and maybe the kindest as well. They won a few times, but mostly, they couldn't get their act together. One show after the next they'd come out chasing their steer and almost every time they seemed to find a way to screw it up. I never saw such a pair of out-of-sync individuals. And now isn't any different. They're outside the trailer, yelling at each other. I can only pick out a few words. I hear Paul's name, and something about a phone.

Why were they talking about Paul? Did they have my phone? I'm sure they could have wrangled his phone number a dozen ways, but I'm also sure he

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didn't give it to them. Whatever this is... Paul has no part in it. He couldn't... right? I shake off the question, but it bothers me all the same. If Paul is in on whatever stupid plan these guys have cooked up on their kerosene camping stove, he's not the man I thought I knew. Not the man I—

The side door of the trailer bursts open, and the morning light that floods in blinds me. Ethan is there in the doorway, looking at me. The asshole is wearing a bandana, like he's a train robber or something. Like I can't see his bald spot when he takes his hat off, or the tattoos on his fingers, or a thousand other ways I could ID him to the cops. I think, at first, maybe he'll let me loose, maybe he'll let me use the restroom, but without a word he turns to the horses—giving them water and grain. I'm so thirsty right now that I'd stick my head in the bucket and drink right alongside them.

Strangely, I need to piss almost as badly as I am thirsty. I don't know how that works. Maybe it doesn't really make sense, but just now I figure if I have that much goddamn water in my bladder, and I'm thirsty, then my body should really get on using it.

When Ethan comes back for the water bucket, he forgets at first to pull the bandana up. He realizes it real fast though, and throws a look my way after he fixes it. I pretend to be unconscious. It's not far from the truth.

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After I finished high school, there was no question what I was going to do. Dad never pushed me into anything. He encouraged me, sure, but only to pursue things I had already demonstrated an interest in. I never had a lot of interest in college, but I decided that while I was on the road, I could take a course or two online from the local community college every semester. It was always in the back of my mind—the question.

There's a lot of guys who'd stare at you blankly if you asked them, a lot of idiots who are so full of themselves, they believe there's no injury they can't come back from. But the other camp is bigger than you might expect. I know I was surprised. There's a lot of idiots in rodeo, but there's dreamers and philosophers as well.

Paul and I stayed in touch after that first year. He texted me every now and then from the road, and I couldn't get enough. I couldn't wait for the road to be my life. It gets old for some people, I guess, living out of hotel rooms and cars, crisscrossing the country, travelling from one town to the next, one rodeo to the

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next. For me, it couldn't come soon enough. Paul and I decided we'd drive together. He'd lost his main driving partner to a broken leg a few months back. You can enter in more rodeos if you have a partner to drive while you sleep and vice versa; there just aren't enough hours in the day otherwise.

I think it was rough on him, being alone for those months. He started texting me almost every day around that time. I could almost hear the sadness even through his words on the screen. Or maybe I just imagined it, because our first few months on the road were the happiest I'd ever seen him.

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I started to get woozy, I don't know, a few hours ago? We haven't gone anywhere—I don't think—and I haven't heard anything from the brothers Rush for a while, but I haven't heard anything else either. I think we must be somewhere isolated. I can't hear the highway. I can't hear anything except, sometimes, birdsong. Whatever their game is, I guess they're getting a little smarter at least.

The ropes are the only thing keeping me on my feet now. Every time I start to drift off to sleep, I fall. There's just enough slack in the ropes that the weight of my body nearly wrenches my shoulders out of their sockets when I'm brought up short. I don't sleep, but I think I may have passed out from the pain. It's hard to say. The way I move between thoughts sometimes could be anything, it could just be drifting, or it could be sleep or unconsciousness. There seems to be very little difference.

I decide it's time. Ethan and Troy are probably sleeping. If I can escape, it has to happen now, before I'm too far gone. Before I'm too weak to try. Those assholes think they've broken me. They think I'm done, but I'm not.

I kick my leg up and over the left rope, thinking to get some leverage, or maybe to see if by some miracle I have my multi-tool in my boot. There it is. I guess I rode with it in there. I shake my boot for a while, wriggling, trying to get the tool to drop down into my waiting hand.

When it falls, I feel it brush past my fingertips, then it's on the floor of the trailer and I'm pretzeled up here for nothing. It takes me a while to get my leg back down. My spurs are still strapped on and the rowel gets stuck in the rope. With a painful twist the leather strap pops off and the spur comes free and I'm standing on two feet again.

Now I'm pretty much fucked. I catch the heel of my left boot with the toe of the right and pull the boot free. They're tight, so it takes some doing. I stomp

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down, trying to catch the sock, but I get my big toe instead. It takes a lot not to curse aloud. I try again. More gingerly this time.

When the sock is off, I pick up the multi-tool with my toes, but no matter how I try, I can't get it close enough for either hand grab it. Then I drop it again, and it goes spinning down the gentle incline of the trailer. The far horse snorts and kicks out at it as it slides past. My hope drains away. I hang my head. Resting. Trying to make a new plan. Wishing that Paul were here.

We've spent a lot of time together this last year. "Buddies" on the trail.

He's a good friend.

A good man.

I rely on him.

Maybe too much...

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Ethan's back. At least, I think it's Ethan. I can't get a good look at him. I'm so tired I can barely open my eyes. Every time I do, it takes an eternity to focus my vision. Whoever it is, he's got a water bottle, giving me some.

That's not water; it tastes like moonshine. Some of it slides down my throat, burning the whole way down. The rest I spit in the man's face. I have no hope left that I can escape, but that doesn't mean I have to be cowed.

I detect a blur, but even if my head were clear, I can't move far enough to do anything about it. The blow lands right in my solar plexus. I struggle to breathe. Every failed effort to suck in air makes the pain worse. Then I puke; there was nothing in my stomach but bile and that bit of moonshine, but it's enough. Ethan turns and flees the trailer. I can hear him outside the door, retching. I smile. A small victory is better than none.

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I hear a voice in the darkness and turn my head, trying to find the source. It's familiar. It's a voice I know. Not Ethan or Troy. Not Dad, but it makes me feel warm all the same. I blink, lick my lips; they're badly chapped. It's hot in the trailer. And so goddamn dry. I'm so thirsty. But at least I don't have to piss anymore...

Oh.

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My vision clears, and I can see the outline of the speaker. The first thing that comes into focus is the hat. It's a felt cowboy hat, beat all to hell. Black, with a braided gold band. It feels every bit as familiar as the voice, but I can't place it.

I see a flash of silver in the dim light and jerk away. It's the blade of a knife.

The voice continues—it's soothing—as the knife severs the rope holding my right arm, my body goes slack and I'd fall to the floor if not for the arm that slips around me. The voice's owner is strong; he holds me aloft and trades hands with the knife behind my back so that he can cut the other arm free.

As soon as both arms are freed, he eases me down to the hard floor of the trailer. Then I'm weightless, floating above the ground. He's lifted me—carrying me—and finally I'm out of that goddamn trailer. Free of it.

It's Paul, I realize finally. I still haven't understood a word he's said, especially now. That sound—sirens?—is getting so close, it's starting to drown him out. My eyes finally focus on his face and I reach for him. My arm is like a limp rope, but I manage to lift it to his cheek. My fingers fasten on his ear, and with all my strength, I pull him down close to me and kiss him. Every part of my body is numb, but the pressure of his lips on my own—I feel the chapped skin crack under the force of the kiss. I'm not strong enough just now to manage that on my own. I taste blood and I know, he must be kissing me back.

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Does the truth change when you're asked the same questions over and over again? No? Even if you're asked by five different people? But what if they ask the questions in a different order? In a different room? With a different tone of voice, a different demeanor? They stopped for about an hour, while a nurse helped me get cleaned up a bit and into a gown, but the Feds seem prickly and impatient. Like they're irritated with me. But through the whole ordeal Paul's been here, holding my hand.

They took him away for a few minutes; he told me he'd be right back.

The lights of the hospital are blinding. I ask if they can turn them down, but my nurse, a soft-spoken giant of a man, explains that there are other patients, and the doctors need to be able to see, in order to examine them.

Paul comes back. He seems less angry than when he left. I guess they worked some things out. I don't really have the energy to care about any of this.

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By the time the Feds are done with me and I leave the hospital—pleasantly stuffed from hearty helpings of IV fluids and Jell-O—I'm so tired that I really don't want to leave the comfort of the wheelchair. At the door though, Paul starts to buck it, gently, under me, and I admit defeat. He helps me stand, and I lean on him all the way to the Dodge. I've never been so grateful for an elevator in a parking garage. He's so warm. After he helps me up into the passenger seat, I can't believe how much I miss his strong presence by my side.

Paul tells me his story. After his ride, he picked up my buckle—I got first, but just barely. Then he found my stuff: vest, shirt, and hat in the bed of the truck. He figured I'd gone for a piss, so he sat down to wait. After a while, he called my phone, and someone else answered, trying to distort their voice. They asked for a ransom, and at first he thought someone had just stolen my phone. He said he almost hung up on them, but they sent a picture. I must have still been unconscious. It scared him—a lot.

He told them he'd pay, and they planned an exchange in Cheyenne. He thought that was weird, but since he was already heading there, he agreed. Then he called the police. They promised to look for me, but Paul's not the kind to just wait around. He tracked my cell with the app we use to find each other whenever we get separated in a town we don't know well.

He found the Rush brothers' trailer at an old campground and went straight for me. The brothers had been sleeping. They were alerted by the sirens, but they didn't make it far into the woods before being caught.

Someone had told him that Troy confessed, he rolled over on his brother, said it was all Ethan's idea and he was just along to make sure Ethan didn't hurt me. Paul had heard why they did it, and if I weren't so tired, I would die laughing. Goddamn entry fees. That's all they were after. But the stupid fuckers took me across the border with them into Wyoming, and now they'll have to deal with the FBI and federal charges.

The one good—and I use the word very generously—thing about this whole situation is that the Rush boys were headed to Frontier Days, just like Paul and me. I guess they must have known that's where we were headed after last week in Utah or they would have had a pile of trouble trying to arrange an exchange.

We're a day late for our reservations, but Paul found us another hotel. One room open. The honeymoon suite. We laugh; it's not awkward. We'll share the bed, but I can't imagine we'll do anything but sleep right now.

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Once we're up in the room, Paul helps me out of my jeans and into a new pair of boxers. It's hard to believe how comfortable I am being naked in front of him. I can see the lust in his eyes, and I realize it's always been there, I just didn't recognize it for what it was.

He's gentle though; he restrains himself. His hands are strong, guiding me into bed, tucking the covers around me; then he's warm against my back. I melt into his embrace, slipping through his arms into a deep sleep.

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I guess I slept about two days, all told.

Paul wakes me to let me know he's taking a shower before heading to the arena. He wonders if I want to join him. I climb into the shower and, as the water washes all the grime from my body, I begin to feel strong, rejuvenated. Paul grabs me from behind; I can feel his enthusiasm. I turn and kiss him, then I push him away so that I can finish getting clean. I'm still wobbly, but I think I might just manage a ride tonight.

Hell.

I've got the money for the entry fee...

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Siôn O'Tierney is a philosopher and a gamer, but above all else, he is a consumer of stories. This is why the best decision he ever made was marrying his high-school sweetheart a week after graduation. For the stories, and the sweet, sweet author monies. These days, Siôn lives in Kansas City with his wife and writing partner, Raine O'Tierney. His free time, when he has it, is spent editing and walking the dog (maybe that's not free time after all).*

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# AGILE MOVES

By JC Shelby

## Photo Description

A man naps on his back on a daybed, a floral sheet pulled up to mid-chest. His right arm is curled around a white bull terrier, whose head and paw rest over the large winged tattoo on the man's chest. A smartphone is clutched in the man's right hand. His ears, nipples and right nostril are pierced. Tattoos can be seen on his upper chest, shoulder, and all down his left arm.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've always been the good kid, did everything I was supposed to. I never partied and I always earned perfect grades. Then I went to college straight out of high school and earned my degree. I always do whatever is asked of me, I take care of everyone now, including my parents. I'm twenty-five and I'm so busy taking care of everybody else's lives I have no time for one of my own. My social life consists of my rescue beagle and two cats, but one night a friend from work made me go with him to a party where I meet Kyle. He's covered in tattoos and piercings, and he's the bad boy of my every fantasy, the type of guy I'm absolutely not supposed to want. Or at least that's the way he appears. And he seems to be looking at me just as much too. Please tell me how we got to this point, how I was able to see this sight in front of me, and how he made me fall in love with him.*

*Please give these two a HEA, or at the very least a HFN, the rest is up to you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Raylynn*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** men with pets, men who cook, accountant, agility dogs, tattoos, coming out, hurt/comfort, sweet/no sex

**Word Count:** 44,949

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# **AGILE MOVES**

**By JC Shelby**

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## Chapter One

### *Starting Position*

Pets have no respect for alarm clocks or their human's need to sleep. But, when one had an energetic, young beagle and two hungry cats, did one truly need an alarm clock? Long before Dan wanted to even think about getting up, Rebel placed his paws on the mattress and tugged at the blankets, followed by an I-want-out-soon whine. Nisaba and Maat took this as an invitation to scamper noisily in from their favorite nighttime spots and pounce on the bed. Nisaba used Dan's back as a springboard to the other side, before she curled up near his head and began purring, while Maat sat near his feet, trilling and talking to herself. Or maybe to him. Who knew? At this hour, who cared?

Despite his best efforts to fall back to sleep, when Rebel's whines grew less polite, as they increased in volume and threatened to morph into barks or perhaps an all-out howl, Dan caved. He opened his eyes and blinked at the clock. Only five thirty. Fifteen minutes of prime sleeping time lost.

Someday, if he ever got his own house and not this little rental, he might install one of those smart pet doors that would let Rebel in and out with a radio key on his collar. Although he would need to research them carefully. He was not convinced the cats wouldn't figure out how to dash outside with the dog. Both could be very sneaky about doors. And he did not want the cats outside, especially at night when coyotes and an occasional bobcat hunted up and down the washes and utility roads. Outdoor cats often vanished without a trace, and even small dogs were at risk. Just last month, the cute little Chihuahua mix that lived three blocks over had been killed by a bobcat.

Stumbling out of bed, he made his way to the kitchen and opened the back door to let Rebel out. The automatic coffeemaker turned itself on as he closed the door. Was he even supposed to be awake before the coffee had finished brewing? Maat brushed up against his ankles, as Nisaba jumped on the shelf near the wet-food bowls, giving a long plaintive meow, pretending she hadn't been fed in a week.

"You still have dry food, silly cat. And I am not feeding you until six thirty, no matter how much you yowl. That's the rule." Dan kicked a little plastic ball and sent it across the floor, bell jingling. The tortoiseshell cat gave chase,

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batting it, as he picked up Maat, stroking her soft gray fur, tapping her white paws, scratching behind her ears.

Still cradling Maat, Dan opened his Kindle Fire—his one extravagant Christmas present to himself—and brought up his favorite online news app. He was listening to the stories as he played with the cats, occasionally glancing at the screen, when his alarm clock radio started playing in the bedroom. Sighing, he went to swat it off before he pulled on sweats and sneakers.

He sipped some coffee, feeling his brain engage a little more. He and Rebel left for their usual half-hour morning walk. By the time he'd fed the animals, eaten his own breakfast, showered and dressed for work, he felt almost ready to face the day. Almost.

For a moment, after he finished fiddling with his tie, he looked in the mirror. Some days he woke up wondering if he would still recognize himself. Even with his trio of pets, he often just felt lonely. And lost. As if he had misplaced some essential part of Danilo Zanetti long ago, and couldn't remember where. Every day, he half-expected to see some sign of change, something to mark the discontent and restlessness.

But he still looked the same: dark brown almost black hair, courtesy of either his Italian-American father or Mexican-American mother; brown eyes, probably from both, although perhaps more consistently from the maternal side; light olive skin, probably his mother, but maybe both; and completely average height of five-ten. Fortunately, he tended towards slim rather than muscular or stocky. Seeing nothing in his reflection that showed any visible sign of his inner turmoil, Dan turned away.

Grabbing his gym bag from its designated chair and his lunch from the refrigerator, he left the house precisely at seven to drop Rebel off with his parents for the day.

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Just before eight, Dan parked his car in the far reaches of the parking lot of Goldheim, Emrich, and Mendoza, as far from the covered parking spaces belonging to the senior partners and upper administrators as it was possible to get. His ten-year-old Corolla—with its sun-damaged, flaking, silver paint job, duct-taped side mirror, and assorted nicks and dents acquired from time spent in the close confines of the university garages and lots—likely brought down the average value of the vehicles driven by the employees of the prestigious

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midsize law firm. Or perhaps their combined worth was so great that the mediocrity of his car scarcely made a dent. *Get a grip, Danilo. What is with you today? Snap out of it.*

Inside the building, he waved at Heather, sitting behind the reception desk as she talked on her headset and took notes on her computer. She gave him a distracted smile. He made his way through the public area, past the lounge and client meeting rooms, to the maze of rooms housing the support staff. He shoved his lunch in the break room fridge before he slipped into the tiny suite shared by the three members of the Finance and Accounting Department.

He sat down at his workstation and put down his travel mug of coffee. As his computer booted up, he took a moment to admire the backdrop of photos and magazine clippings of some of the monuments and landmarks and creatures he hoped to one day see: the Giza pyramids in Egypt—although maybe not with the current political unrest; vibrantly-hued birds in tropical rainforests; hard-to-reach places such as Machu Picchu or faraway mountaintop monasteries; the sand dunes in Namibia; medieval castles and towns in Europe; wondrous fish along the Great Barrier Reef; and—closer to home—spectacular photos from national parks and wildlife preserves within the United States and Canada. So much of the world to see, and he had never been outside of Arizona and California. Not even to Mexico, despite living for twenty-five years only an hour north of the Mexican border. How abysmally pathetic was that?

He then looked at the photo of his family, taken the last time Sergio was in town, and finally acknowledged the source of his discontent. In the photo, the four siblings—Sergio, himself, Rafael, and Tara—stood in the back, while Dad, Mom, Adrianna and the babies sat in the front on a couch. Rafael rested a hand on Adrianna's shoulder as she held their two children on her lap. Mom had pleaded for a family portrait—who knew when Sergio would be in town again, after all—so everyone else had acquiesced. Dad had refused to be photographed in his wheelchair. And everyone smiled, as if each person was part of one big, happy, functional family. And just maybe, for a brief moment suspended in time, they had been. But too often it seemed to Dan as if that moment was a lie.

Dan placed the photo facedown and tried to focus on his work. Numbers were safe, predictable. Numbers didn't fight. Numbers wouldn't hurt. But today numbers could not distract him enough to escape the memories.

*Dan dragged Rafi away from the yelling. His younger brother was only six. Dan wondered what was going on between Sergio and Dad, even as he wanted*

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*to protect his sibling from the fight. He just hoped the shouting didn't wake Tara. Dan made Rafi stay outside with him, despite the heat and Rafi's whining, until Mom came for them and called them inside.*

*After dinner, when Mom came to his bedroom, he asked her, "Why did Sergio say Dad wasn't real?"*

*Mom touched his forehead, "Sergio didn't say your dad wasn't real, mijo. He just found out your dad isn't his biological father."*

*"What's that?"*

*"I'll explain when you're older."*

*"Mom, I'm nine! You can tell me."*

*And Mom had explained that before she married Dad, back when she lived in Los Angeles, she had been married to Jorge Santiago, Sergio's blood father. Jorge had died when Sergio had been only a few months old. "But your father adopted Sergio, Dan. Sergio is as much your father's child as you or Rafi or Tara, do you understand?"*

*"Then why is Sergio so mad?" he asked, but Mom didn't answer that question.*

*Understanding did not come for years.*

*"Dan, do you wanna know how my real dad, 'scuse me, my bio-dad, died?" Sergio asked, in a tone that dared him to wimp out.*

*Eleven-year-old Dan shrugged. He didn't like this new sarcastic attitude of Sergio's. His response didn't matter, because even if he said no, Sergio would probably tell him anyway.*

*"He was killed in a bar fight. With a knife." And Sergio spun out a long and gory tale of his biological father heroically and singlehandedly taking on a whole gang. Dan was impressed but dubious, not sure whether to believe it or not. Probably not. Sergio had been making up a lot of wild stories recently.*

*A week later, Sergio was suspended for several days for fighting in school. A month after that, he got locked up in the juvenile detention center for a weekend for having drugs in his backpack. Mom spent the whole time crying.*

*He asked Dad if there was anything he could do to help her, to make her feel better. "Just help keep Rafael and Tara entertained. You're a good boy, Dan. I know I can count on you to help out."*

Dan recalled having to “help out” more and more over the next few years. As Sergio continued to fight with Dad, Mom pleaded with Dad about Sergio, and Mom pleaded with Sergio to listen to Dad. And throughout it all, his parents absently counted on him to be the good kid, to not cause them any trouble.

*Dan did not cry the day Sergio left for basic training. Tara, picking up on Mom's emotions, had started to cry and given Sergio a watery hug. Sergio had patted the seven year old awkwardly on the head and then given eleven year old Rafael a friendly punch on the shoulder.*

*To Dan's surprise, Sergio gave him a rough hug and whispered, “Take care of Mom, brat, and please try to get into trouble once in a while. Being perfect isn't good for you.”*

And now, almost eleven years later, Dan wished he had listened. Maybe he should have tried to rebel in high school. But no, he had become obsessed with always doing his best, to make up for Sergio being such a hotheaded screw-up. At least *he* could make his parents proud. As long as they never learned his secret. Never learned that he was gay.

When Dan had started feeling an interest in his male, rather than his female, classmates during his freshmen year of high school, he suppressed his urges as much as he could. His parents did not need grief and drama from him. Dr. Emilio Zanetti was a conservative Catholic, and Dan knew he wouldn't approve of his firstborn being gay. So he kept his mouth closed and his pants zipped.

Unfortunately, the habit of obedience to his family had become so ingrained and second nature that he did not argue enough when he should have.

*“But, Dad! It's only two hundred a month. And the other guys aren't party animals or anything. Jeff and Aiden are both in business school with me and Jaime is a sophomore getting straight A's in chemistry. And the house is only ten minutes by bike from campus.”*

*Dan felt desperate. After four years of hard work and little social life in high school, he had graduated with the honors his father had expected. He had counted on college being a time of escape and travel and, he hoped, finally getting to explore and act on his attraction to other boys. And he had been excited when he was accepted at a number of prestigious out-of-state colleges. But his parents looked at the cost and the lack of available financial aid for a middle-class family, and said no. Secretly, Dan thought his mom just didn't*



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want another son to move away. When he reluctantly agreed to stay in Tucson and attend the business college at the University of Arizona, he had thought he would at least be allowed to leave the house. Apparently not.

*“Dan, we also have Rafael and Tara to put through college. And don’t try to tell me no other college freshmen are living at home with their parents.”*

*Since Dan couldn’t honestly tell him that, he said nothing.*

*“And you won’t have to worry about shopping or cooking. Your mother can still do that for you.”*

*Dan didn’t bother to point out that he liked cooking and usually took over in the kitchen at least twice a week. He already sensed he was not going to win this argument, at least not today.*

*“Fine.” He stalked away, dismayed. How was he going to get a boyfriend when he lived with his parents and didn’t dare bring one home? He had already cited classwork as an excuse to stop going to church services—he was tired of hearing that he was a sinner—but tomorrow he was going to go out and get a job. If his parents didn’t want to pay for him to live elsewhere, he would pay his own way.*

Dan had considered himself lucky to get a job at Costco. He saved almost every penny he earned. He loved his parents, but he had wanted out from under their roof and watchful eyes. And he also wanted to travel—the world was so diverse and there were so many places to see. So he had started a secret money market account for his future travel and rent, and put as much money into it as he could. And dreamed. And schemed.

He made plenty of friends among his classmates, but had looked outside the business school for his first tentative relationships. At least one of the department’s professors golfed with his father, and Dan had been determined to keep from outing himself to his family. As a result, his attempts to date had been furtive, unsatisfactory, and not fair to the other guys involved. He’d kept sane by telling himself that maybe once he graduated he would have the guts to tell his parents the truth.

*“Where are you going again?” Tara asked, as she watched Dan packing clothes into a large duffle bag.*

*“We’re driving through Vegas, then over to California, up the coastal highway all the way to Seattle, then east through Idaho and down through*

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*Colorado and New Mexico. Aiden, Stu, Paulo and me. Although we are leaving Paulo in Seattle.”*

*“Where will you be staying? Won’t it cost a lot?”*

*“Sometimes with friends. Usually we are going to be in youth hostels or camping, but we’ll stay at cheap hotels if we need to. With four of us, they shouldn’t be too much per person. And Aiden has an annual pass for the National Parks.”*

*Excitement hummed through Dan. He was twenty-one. Only one year left in college. And finally, he was getting his chance on this three-week road trip to go places, see new things and experience life. Just two more days until they left. And then when he got back next month, he could finally move out of this house. He had enough money saved to cover most of a year’s rent, even after paying his share of trip expenses.*

*And how could his parents possibly object to him leaving when Rafael had already left, within two weeks of his high-school graduation, to move in with his pregnant girlfriend? No matter what obstacles or arguments his parents tried to raise, nothing could stop him from finally making his belated escape.*

*His cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID. Why would the hospital be calling him? Unless they were trying to reach Dad? Dan didn’t think Dad was on call tonight, but Dad would have turned off his cell when he and Mom were at their show. Which had ended an hour ago. Actually, he was surprised his parents weren’t home yet, unless they stopped for dessert somewhere.*

*“Hello?”*

*Two minutes later, the cell phone slipped from his hand to thud on the carpet, and Dan sank down on his bed next to Tara.*

*“What’s wrong? Dan? Dan?” Fear laced Tara’s voice.*

*“We need to go to the hospital. Now. Mom and Dad were in a car accident. Dad’s in the ER. Maybe Mom, too.”*

In an instant, everything changed. A drunken idiot had run a red light and precipitated a multi-car accident. For the past four years, Dan had assumed much of the responsibility of taking care of his family. Duty kept him chained to Tucson. He had put the needs of his family above his own desires, giving up his dreams of travel, of a boyfriend.

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And in all those years, he still hadn't worked up the courage to tell them he was gay.

Dan turned the photo back over, staring at his family. He drank his coffee. And shoving the memories into the past where they belonged, tried to convince himself he was content. And knew he lied.

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“Hey, Z! Got a minute?”

“Just a sec.” Dan didn't bother to look up. Even if he hadn't recognized Jacob's voice, no one else used his last initial as a friendly nickname. He double-checked the information on the new client's credit card receipt and retainer contract with the data he had entered into the worksheet and saved his work before he turned to his friend. “What's up?”

As one of the two IT men, Jacob could get away with wearing dark polo shirts and khakis, much to Dan's envy. Although he sometimes had to crawl around on the floor playing with cords and cables, or do battle with toner cartridges and photocopiers. Maybe it all evened out. Jacob hovered in the door, blond hair backlit, a deviant angel always ready to divert his friends with an amusing anecdote. Dan had not seen him much this week, because software upgrades for the lawyers and their assistants had kept Jacob busy on the upper floor.

“Leo and I are having a party tonight at our place. We've both had crazy weeks and want to unwind. We've invited a bunch of friends. You should come.”

Dan was about to offer an automatic refusal, when Jacob continued, “Before you say something about your parents, your sister, or your pets, tell me this. When was the last time you did something fun, just for you? And going to the gym, the dog park, or a company picnic doesn't count. When did you last have a night out with friends?”

Dan thought back, the weeks and months blurring together in an almost unbroken pattern. Tara's seventeenth birthday dinner and Rafael's twenty-first birthday barhop still both counted as family events. His few “evenings out” had been more about a basic need for adult interaction, not necessarily about fun. Hell, was going to the gym across the street from work actually the most social thing he did?

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“If you can’t remember, it’s been too long.” Jacob gestured at the pictures of exotic places tacked to the wall behind Dan’s monitor. “You might not be able to go to those places tonight, or even next week, but you can certainly drive twenty minutes to our house, eat some food, have a beer, hang out with friends, relax, and enjoy yourself. You can even bring your dog.”

“Who else is going to be there? From here, I mean.”

“Heather and Joe, for sure. Maybe Natasha. Maybe Chris. Don’t worry, no one will be there who might slip and say something if they even guess your secret.”

Unlike Dan, Jacob Riley was out and proud. He didn’t flaunt being gay, but he didn’t hide it either, talking freely about his partner Leo Gresham, inviting the man to company events. But Jacob also understood the reasons for Dan’s silence and didn’t criticize him for it. Jacob was a better friend than Dan deserved, his best friend here at the firm. Hell, with the dispersal of Dan’s former classmates across the country, he was probably Dan’s best friend in Pima County. *I haven’t been keeping track of my friends or treating them very well recently.*

“What time and what can I bring? I still need to pick up Rebel and feed the cats first.” Dan squelched the feeling of guilt that surfaced as he planned to skip out on dinner with his family. *I have no reason to feel guilty. Just an evening with friends.*

Jacob grinned and scrawled a phone number across a piece of paper with a map on it. “Ask Leo. He’s in charge of food.”

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## Chapter Two

### *Double Jump*

After Dan parked at his parents' house, he went directly into the backyard. Rebel, having heard his car, scabbled impatiently at the patio screen, baying his welcome. Dan laughed as he opened the door and Rebel bolted out, jumping up against him. "Did you have a good day chasing squirrels? Did you scare away all the doves?" He rubbed and scratched Rebel, as the beagle moaned his approval and bragged about his exploits. Grabbing a plastic newspaper bag from the box in the enclosed patio, Dan cleaned up after Rebel's daily activity and tossed the waste in the trash barrel.

For a minute, he considered just bolting with Rebel and not going inside the house, but years of good manners and filial obedience prevailed. As always. He entered through the back door, leaving Rebel outside.

His dad sat at his desk in his office, reading papers. "That damn dog was barking at squirrels all day." He didn't even look up. "Had to bring him inside to keep him quiet."

"He likes being with you. And being inside with people. Rebel's a dog. They chase squirrels." *And you thought it was funny yesterday.*

"Well, you need to train him up better. He leaves his toys everywhere. I almost ran over one this morning. You spoil him."

*Not as much as you do.* "I'll try." The online dog training videos he'd watched hadn't covered how to keep a dog from acting like a dog, just basic commands. Maybe he needed a copy of 'Dog Training for Dummies.' *Is there even a command for Don't Leave Dog Toys in the Path of the Wheelchair?*

"Weeds are popping up in the front yard. Take care of them before Monday."

Dan didn't argue. "I'll come by on Sunday."

His father's attention returned to the article he was reading. While Dad hadn't been able to resume employment as a surgeon, following the accident, or find a wheelchair-accessible golf course, his current job as an editor for a medical journal seemed to satisfy his need to be doing something useful with his mind and his training. *If only he would apply the same effort to his physical*

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*therapy, he could get out and about more. Regain some of the mobility in those legs. Maybe even play some golf. He needs to focus on what he has now, not what he lost.*

Dan went to the kitchen and kissed his mother on the cheek. As she cooked, she watched TV, enrapt by whatever story-of-the-week had the blonde Headline News anchor in histrionics. Dan winced as the TV host's voice grew more strident. "Dinner won't be until six thirty. Rafi and Adrianna are coming with the babies. Tara is spending the weekend with Eden. They're working on a class project."

"Well, since Rafael and Adrianna are coming, I know I can leave you in good company. I am meeting up with some colleagues from work for dinner. So I need to get home and feed Maat and Nisaba." *Colleagues. Yes, that sounds professional. As long as I don't add something about networking. That might be stretching it. Although, Jacob. IT. Computer networks.* Dan decided to leave before he started babbling, and his mom thought of a reason to detain him or asked questions he didn't want to answer. "See you Sunday."

He dashed out without looking behind him and grabbed Rebel's travel harness from its spot near the back door as he left.

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Jacob gave Dan a rough hug, held out a hand for Rebel to sniff, then gave the dog a quick head rub. "Hi, Z. Come in! The other dogs are out back, go introduce yours. And yourself."

"To the dogs or the people?"

Jacob laughed. Dan passed over a bag containing fresh local tortillas and a brick of extra-sharp cheddar.

"Great! We don't want to run out. If Leo and the others get too carried away, we are going to be having an impromptu salsa contest to go with the quesadillas. Never ask 'can someone please make more salsa?' when three cooks or wannabe cooks are in the kitchen at the same time. Maybe I can get one of them outside to man the grill before blood is spilled."

"Want me to do it?"

Jacob looked skeptical. "I'd trust you with a lot of things, Z. My taxes, my secrets, my bail, if I ever need it, maybe even my investments. But not my protein. Not until I have proof you actually know how to grill."

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“How hard can it be?” he teased.

“There are people in this house who would tell you grilling is an art. An art! And others who would say it is a science. Or both. But all would agree it requires skill gleaned only by many hours slaving over the heat.”

Dan choked down a laugh at the pretend dramatics. “Real poetic. I will let a true master burn your meat to a crisp, then.”

Jacob dragged him through the house and into the back yard, performing quick introductions to some of the people Dan didn't know. Although law firm staff and Leo's physical therapy coworkers made up about a third of the group, once their significant others and children were included, along with Leo's cop brother and Jacob's vet tech sister, and other friends whose connection he didn't know, Dan soon felt overwhelmed. The problem with not having a social life was being unable to meet people in small batches over time, like wading into the shallows. Getting tossed in the deep end could drown a person.

Dan took refuge with the dogs wandering around the spacious walled yard. As he let Rebel off the leash, he spotted a plastic crate of dog toys at the edge of the patio. He searched through an assortment of balls and chew toys until he found a worn but serviceable tennis ball. He started by tossing the ball just for Rebel, but soon other dogs wanted in on the action. In addition to his beagle, a black lab mix, a boxer, a corgi, and some sort of spaniel also got into the action as he tossed toys to the far end of the garden. Only an aging greyhound curled near a heat lamp ignored the ruckus. He occasionally lifted his head from his paws to watch the younger dogs, before resting it back down again. The furry scramble soon drew attention and laughter. Other dog owners came to join him, and some of the older children helped throw the toys.

Once the little pack was petted and panting, Dan snagged a bottle of a local microbrew from the cooler and took a seat at one of the metal tables on the patio. Rebel wandered around the yard, sniffing, trying to divine the stories of each new scent, occasionally glancing at Dan.

“Is that your beagle?”

Dan turned in his chair to look at the man standing next to him. And froze. Tattoos. Everywhere. The man wore a black muscle tee, and his sleeveless arms were covered with tattoos. Even the back of one hand. Dan's gaze traced the tattoos up the man's body, not even noticing individual designs, just an impression of colors and patterns. He had never seen so many tattoos before in

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his life, total, let alone on one person. Or if he had, he couldn't remember it now. Sure, he knew people who had one or two. And he had seen a few on guys at the gym. And girls. But never this many.

Who was this guy? A biker? A thug? Surely he wasn't part of a gang or something. Weren't their tattoos more subtle? Maybe a bartender or a rock musician or something? An undercover cop? Not with that tattoo job. An artist who created twisted things out of sharp objects? An ex-con who had acquired all his tats in prison? Dan was so busy staring in fascination at the tattoos that it took him a moment to raise his eyes higher. Golden-brown hair cropped close to his head. Silver earrings. Was that a piercing in his nose? Ouch!

Dan blinked, finally looking into amused blue eyes. Could the man tell what he was thinking? Part of his brain knew the man had asked him a question, although Dan had forgotten what it was, and the other part wondered how much the tattoos had hurt. And why he suddenly couldn't seem to breathe.

Rebel ran up to Dan, yipping once, breaking the spell. Dan looked down into the soulful brown eyes of his dog, trying to shake off the images of blue eyes and tattoos.

He swallowed, as the question belatedly registered in his brain. "Yes, this is Rebel."

Tattoo God knelt down to greet Rebel and praise his beautiful tricolor patterns. Dan had an excellent opportunity to observe the man's tight blue jeans and scuffed leather boots. Rebel closed his eyes, the epitome of canine contentment. Dan swallowed. He wanted to say something else, but the ability to speak eluded him.

Leo came outside, carrying a tray of meat and a bundle of fabric. He placed the tray down by the grill, then came over to them, nodding a greeting. "Hey, Dan, great to see you. Glad you could finally make it. Kyle, here's an extra sweatshirt."

Tattoo God—Kyle—stood, and Dan almost moaned in disappointment when the tattoos disappeared from sight beneath the gray material. But as the spring night was rapidly cooling, Dan couldn't blame him for wanting a warmer layer. Kyle smiled at Dan, leaned over to rub Rebel once more, and followed Leo over to the grill. Dan watched as the two men chatted quietly.

He took a couple gulps of his beer before setting the bottle down. No more alcohol on an empty stomach. He was never going to run the risk of driving



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under the influence. And he kind of felt impaired right now. Flushed. Maybe aroused. Hell, who would have thought all those tattoos would be so hot? He had never thought he harbored any bad-boy fantasies, but now... oh God, maybe he should take Rebel and leave.

Before Dan had a chance to panic, Heather dropped down beside him, blocking his view of the men at the grill. *Probably better that way.* She started chatting about work, and Dan hoped he was making appropriate responses. Joe soon joined them, carrying plates of chopped veggies, tortilla chips, pita bread wedges, fresh guacamole, and hummus for the three of them to share.

Soon more people flooded the backyard, unfolding tables and chairs. Plates, utensils, and cold food started piling up on an improvised buffet table made of an artistically painted old door resting on white sawhorses. Latin-American jazz began playing softly in the background. Jacob circulated around the yard, chatting, charming, at ease with everyone, as Leo presided over the grill and occasionally shouted back and forth through the open window with people in the kitchen.

When Jacob's sister, Louise, came outside, Rebel recognized a purveyor of canine treats and abandoned Dan to cast an imploring look up at Louise. After a quick glance at Dan for permission, she made a show out of searching for a treat, before producing one from the pocket of her jeans.

"Traitor. Fickle dog. You leave me for another, and all for a tiny snack."

"What do you expect when you are obviously so mean to him?" Louise winked. "Anytime you want me to take this handsome fellow off your hands..."

"You had your chance."

"That's not the way I remember events."

Jacob came up behind her and tugged her blond ponytail. "No harassing Z. You already have enough dogs."

Louise laughed and wandered off to pay her respects to the elderly greyhound.

People mingled, talking and laughing. The inescapable topic of college basketball and the Wildcats' chances in the NCAA tournament arose, followed by discussion of the university baseball and softball teams. In some miracle of timing, containers of steamed tortillas and a platter of hot cheddar-filled

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quesadillas appeared at about the same time as plates of grilled marinated beef and chicken, now roughly diced. The spread also included bowls of shredded pork, seasoned rice, lettuce, chopped tomatoes, sautéed onions and peppers, sour cream, black beans, and the promised selection of homemade salsas.

As Dan piled food on his sturdy picnic plate, he wondered if this party had really all been planned in just one afternoon, or if Jacob had waited to invite him at the last minute to give him less time to back out or second guess his acceptance. A mound of coordinated food, borrowed or rented tables and chairs, close to thirty guests. Thinking back on the other invitations of Jacob's he had declined, or accepted then backed out of, he began to think that a legitimate possibility. Despite the temptation, he refrained from asking Heather and Joe when they had been invited. He didn't want to put them in an awkward position.

Two physical therapists and an Air Force sergeant, either the husband or boyfriend of one of the therapists, joined their table, and the six of them traded amusing anecdotes about their work, their pasts, their pets, or their jobs. Dan may have snuck two or three glances at Kyle. Okay, so maybe more like a dozen. And occasionally, he could have sworn Kyle looked at him, too, even though he didn't think he had been caught staring. Dan tried to be subtle, pretending to just be looking around the yard.

Kyle sat engaged in a serious discussion with Vince Gresham, Leo's big brother, a burly Tucson Police Department detective. For a few seconds, Dan wondered if Vince would arrest Kyle at the party, but then shook off the fanciful idea. Kyle was obviously a friend of Leo's, and therefore extremely unlikely to be a hardened criminal. Besides, at some point Vince began cradling his young daughter in his lap, and even passed her over to Kyle to hold when he went to refill his plate. Dan crossed ex-con and gang member off his mental list of potential jobs for Kyle.

After consolidation of the depleted food on the buffet table, an eclectic assortment of donated desserts appeared: cookies, assorted ice creams and sorbets, mystery pastries, candied nuts, and some bizarre chocolates. Dan passed on the wasabi-sesame chocolate and the lime leaf chocolate caramels, but took a piece of the chili chocolate bar and a pink-pepper lemongrass truffle, along with vanilla ice cream and mango sorbet. Joe and Heather grabbed a few cookies and left to catch a late movie.

Jacob beckoned Dan over to where he sat, chatted with him for a few minutes, and then abandoned him on the pretext of needing to check on

something in the kitchen. As Jacob rose, Kyle sat down across the corner of the table from Dan.

“I don’t think we were ever introduced. Kyle Magnusson.” A hint of an accent, possibly Southern, lingered in his vowels.

“Dan Zanetti.”

“Zanetti? Italian?”

“My dad. Pennsylvania to California to Arizona. Mom is from Mexico, naturalized as a child.”

Kyle picked up a piece of extremely dark chocolate—maybe that scary lime one—and bit into it. “Is your last name why Jacob calls you Z?”

“Sort of. When I started, the firm already had an associate attorney named Daniel Hill, an office manager named Danni, and another Dan on their marketing consultant team. For a while people tried, ‘Dan Z’, but that started getting confused with Danni. So for some of the people, I am either Z, Zanetti, or Dan from Accounting. Jacob just calls me Z because he likes the way it sounds. As long as no one calls me Danilo, I don’t care.”

Kyle glanced at Rebel, now snoozing at Dan’s feet.

“Have you done any obedience training with him?”

Dan shook his head. “Nothing formal. Just the basics. Walk. Sit. Heel. Lie down. My dad wants me to teach him not to bark at squirrels. I swear sometimes the things perch on my parents’ fence just to taunt him. He behaves well for me, but I leave him with my parents while I’m at work.” He stirred his spoon around in the melted remnants of the ice cream and sorbet. “I am afraid their behavior—my parents, not the squirrels—might be inconsistent and confusing. Mom can move quickly from cursing him out to sneaking him treats. And Dad can be moody. But they are doing me a favor by taking him in. I don’t want to crate Rebel all day. That’s not good for him.”

“Definitely not for that long,” Kyle agreed. “Although crate training has its uses, especially if you will be travelling with your dog a lot.”

Jacob rejoined them, and after a short conversation, Kyle excused himself with a “Be right back” and disappeared inside.

“So you and Kyle seem to be hitting it off,” Jacob teased.

Dan shrugged. “We were just talking about dogs.”

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Vince, holding his sleeping daughter against his shoulder, came up to say goodnight to Jacob. Leo and Kyle came out onto the patio. Kyle had replaced the sweatshirt with a light black leather jacket. *The jacket looks much badder, I mean better, on Kyle, but the tattoos are still hidden. Damn it.* Dan wanted a chance to examine them now that his initial shock had worn off. Leo sat next to Jacob and squeezed his hand.

Kyle looked at Dan. “Do you have any plans for tomorrow afternoon?”

Dan paused. Were groceries and laundry a plan? Should he make something up? Did he want to?

He had hesitated too long, because Kyle flashed him a quick, wicked smile. “Too late.” He handed Dan a piece of paper. “Come here about one o’clock tomorrow afternoon. Do not bring Rebel. Plan to be outside. My cell phone number is on there if you get lost.”

“What is it?”

“A surprise.” Kyle looked at both Jacob and Leo, perhaps in warning. “You’ll like it. But you’ll have to come to find out.” Then he left.

Dan continued to stare after him, until Jacob cleared his throat.

“He sure has a lot of tattoos.” Dan blushed. He had not meant to say that out loud. He waved the paper at Jacob and Leo. “Do you know what this is about?”

Jacob adopted his most innocent expression. “A surprise, Z, didn’t you hear? I don’t want to spoil it.”

Leo chipped in. “You are stuck in a rut, Dan. Time to get moving again. Sometimes that takes a nudge or a push. You don’t know Kyle well yet, but you do know Jacob and me. Trust us when we say you can trust him, and take a leap of faith.”

*Or a leap in the dark, he thought. Who knows what waits on the other side?* It took him a moment to recognize the almost-forgotten emotions buzzing through him as anticipation and excitement.

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## Chapter Three

### *Tunnel*

Dan drove west past the interstate and over the dry Santa Cruz River bed, as the flat city gave way to rolling hills and the linear streets turned into curving roads. Small areas of tight residential communities were interspersed with larger properties that dotted the hills and hugged the washes. He relaxed as he drove, enjoying the scenery and the scents carried on the breeze through his open window. When had he last been out this way?

Visitors to the Sonoran Desert often seemed surprised by the amount of vegetation, but remarked on the monotony of color. Perhaps for much of the year the predominant landscape consisted of various shades of dull, light-green plants and trees against a backdrop of sun-bleached soil. But spring always brought a rainbow array of colors. Didn't spring signify rebirth, renewal, inspiration, hope?

Dan pulled into a turnout, pausing for a moment to take in the scene. Yellow blossoms shone bright on the brittle bushes and a few early-flowering palo verde trees. Large, oversized magenta and pink flowers decorated the prickly pears. Orange flowers burst from the tips of the tall spindly branches of the ocotillo. Many ocotillo grew higher even than the saguaros that had stood for centuries, arms reaching up towards the sun, like silent sentries standing guard over the desert. The silvery-white spines of the teddy-bear cholla gleamed in the sunlight, inviting the unwary to come and touch. Dan spotted clumps of coyote fur clinging to a cholla branch. As Dan watched, he saw a lizard running up a young mesquite tree, cactus wrens and hummingbirds darting around, butterflies flitting from plant to plant, and a Harris hawk perching on a pole, surveying the ground below.

How could anyone think the desert boring or lifeless? People just didn't have the patience to sit and look, to search out the hidden colors. Was Kyle patient? Would he wait for the real Dan to emerge from underneath a pile of family issues and repressed emotions, and would he like what he uncovered? *And why am I obsessing about a man I only met once? Maybe we won't even get along today.*

Dan resumed driving until he spotted a post with colorful balloon dogs tied to it, above an arrow pointing to the right. He obediently turned onto a private

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lane that ended between two pillars. Fuchsia bougainvillea plants grew up against the fence on either side. A large permanent sign announced obedience and agility training, along with a name, credentials, a website, and a phone number. Iron bar gates, one decorated with a sitting dog, the other with a dog jumping over a creek, had been opened to allow visitors to enter.

He followed more arrow signs and soon pulled into a crowded gravel parking lot at the back of the property. He got out of his car, gazing around in amazement. The seeming chaos took several minutes to resolve into some semblance of order. In the center of the activity, portable aluminum bleachers rested on three sides of a large rectangular area. However, people stood between him and a clear view of what was inside.

At the end of the parking lot, a registration table stood under a tent. Dan spotted an itinerary on the corner and picked it up. He had missed morning classes on the pipe tunnel, the collapsed tunnel, and the dogwalk, whatever that meant. As well as ring time for eight inches, twelve inches, and sixteen inches. Dan assumed the measurements referred to dogs, but who knew. He was just in time to take A-frame and hurdles classes and learn how to read a course map, should he so desire. And soon he would be able to watch the twenty-inch something or other. Below the events was a price list based on number of events and membership in Pima Agility and Obedience.

“May I help you?” asked the woman behind the table.

“Um... maybe. I'm looking for Kyle Magnusson. He invited me to come here today.”

“Try the east practice area. I think he was helping with the A-Frame class.” She gestured to the area to the right of the bleachers.

Dan headed in the indicated direction, stopping to gaze into the rectangular “ring”. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It took a minute for his brain to process the eclectic assortment of equipment: jumps of several configurations, some isolated, others in a line; a tire suspended vertically; a line of narrow vertical poles; a see-saw; a plastic tunnel; a narrow board with a horizontal area in the middle and ramps to the ground at either end; a wide blue-and-yellow A-frame; a small square platform raised off the ground, and a long piece of fabric lying on the ground, with a short, barrel-shaped opening at one end.

Dogless people wandered around the ring, looking at sheets of paper. Dan saw a similar piece tacked to the outside of the ring near the entrance and

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looked at the various squiggles and symbols and numbers, trying to match them to what he saw inside. Finally, he shrugged and continued on his way.

Behind the ring, two large ramadas provided shade for picnic tables and camp chairs. About forty yards away from either side of the ring, colored rope strung between poles designated other work areas. In each area stood several pieces of similar-style equipment of different sizes or heights. Not all areas seemed to be in use, while groups of people clustered around others. Past the farthest ramada, an array of pet tents and foldable pet crates spread out like a colorful undersized campground.

Dan finally spotted Kyle, standing inside one of the practice areas watching as a teen urged her black lab up one of the larger A-frames, several times, in both directions. A quick word of praise from Kyle, and the girl smiled as she leashed her dog and rejoined the people and dogs waiting just outside the area. The next dog, a brown poodle, seemed to need encouragement from its handler to touch the yellow area at the bottom of the descent, although Dan wasn't certain why that was important. Evidently jumping over the yellow area as a result of eagerness to finish was considered a bad move. Dan watched as more dogs and people took their turns, noting that only one dog at a time was allowed to be off leash.

“Okay, folks, it's almost one thirty. Time for the next group to take their turns in the ring. If you prefer to practice instead of watching, please remember to be courteous and take turns.” Most of the class participants led their dogs away.

Kyle looked around and Dan knew the second Kyle spotted him, because he smiled broadly and crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides. Today, Kyle wore a sage T-shirt sporting a silhouette of a dog leaping over a hurdle above the words “Pima Agility and Obedience” and “STAFF”, khaki shorts and cap, and garish multi-colored all-terrain shoes. A silver dog biscuit stud gleamed in one ear and a little silver dog in the other.

“You made it! Have you ever seen a dog agility show before?”

“Maybe in passing, on TV. Not since getting Rebel, so I never paid attention.”

“Come watch.” Kyle led Dan over to the bleachers, and they climbed up into an upper tier. “This isn't a real competition. Agility Fun Day. Today is geared mostly towards less experienced dogs and handlers. We combine classes

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for newer members with a full ring setup for those wanting practice in a competition-like environment. It's a good day for people who have questions or want feedback from more experienced handlers. These events are also used, both to recruit new members, and as fundraisers to maintain equipment and sponsor more events."

Kyle pointed out the names of the obstacles, describing the order and directions in which they ideally needed to be performed today. However, he qualified that with, "Not every dog here is trained on all the obstacles yet. So some people will modify the course to suit their dogs. They might choose to do one obstacle multiple times, or run a shortened version of the course in both directions. As long as both handler and dog get some experience and have fun, it doesn't matter."

"How often does this happen?"

"Usually once every four to six weeks from September to April for these outside events. In the summer it's too damned hot to be standing around in the sun for hours. Inside, they hold regular classes that focus on just one or two obstacles, which alternate days and times to accommodate people's schedules. And there's an indoor ring that is available for member use at set times, with height and layout changing regularly. It's all posted online. Many people buy or build their own agility equipment to practice with at home, but taking classes and participating in events is useful. Besides getting your dog used to traveling, behaving in large groups of dogs, and competing is critical for anyone wanting to do this for more than just fun."

Dan cheered on the dogs, laughing at some of their antics after they finished the course. He watched the handlers, listening to the commands and observing the gestures they used to direct the dogs. Not everyone used the same commands. He was aware of Kyle next to him, occasionally glancing his way.

"So, what did you think?" Kyle asked, after the last dog in the group had finished the course, and they watched as several people worked efficiently to reset the course for the next height class.

"Seems like fun. Complicated, but fun."

"No one learns everything all at once. Not dogs, not people. It takes time and effort. And lots of patience. More so with some breeds of dogs than others."

"How long have you been doing this?"



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“I started when I was sixteen.” Kyle looked pensive, absently rubbing a tattoo of a black-and-white dog on his lower right arm. He gestured to a small knot of teenagers. “I like working with teens, getting them interested early. Even if they don’t stick with it, they will be better dog people in the future.”

He moved abruptly, jumping off the bleachers. “Let me show you around.” He pointed out the two “dog-walking” areas and led Dan into the building that had once housed an indoor riding ring but now was used for dog classes. It also held a small canine first-aid station and three unisex bathrooms—one of them wheelchair accessible, an extra sink, and a storage area for equipment and chairs. A pet shower area was located outside the building.

“How much did all this cost?”

Kyle shrugged. “No clue. My understanding is Miriam Ibarra—she’s the owner, you saw her out by the ring—inherited the property in the early nineties. Sold all the horses. She bred dogs for a while, but became more interested in training dogs for competition. Many of her dogs, or dogs she has trained for others, are highly ranked in the USDA and AKC agility rankings. She also trains for AKC obedience trials.” Kyle gestured towards a wall of photos of dogs, both close-ups and action shots from dog competitions.

Dan admired the display and looked at the array of ribbon winners and other competitors spanning nearly two decades.

Kyle continued, “She must be at least breaking even with the classes. I know she charges a lot for private classes and serious competitive training. And for the big events, those held off-site that the general public attends, she often gets sponsors from the local pet stores or pet supply vendors or other organizations.”

They went back outside and took shelter in the closest ramada. Dan took a seat at one of the picnic tables as Kyle poured two glasses of water from the cooler. Kyle pulled off his cap and tossed it on the table, running his fingers through his sweaty hair. He pulled a couple of slightly squished energy bars from his pocket. He offered one to Dan, who cautiously opened it.

After taking a moist, yet dehydrating, bite and rinsing it down with large mouthful of water, Dan asked, “Do you have a dog right now?”

Kyle’s face lit up. “Kiko.” He took a smartphone from his other pocket and, like any proud parent, showed a series of pictures of a mostly-white bull terrier with a few scattered black patches. “She came with me this morning, but I took

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her home at lunchtime. She's not the fastest agility dog ever, but she listens to cues and loves to perform."

"How time-consuming is the training? I have... family obligations."

"Depends on you and your dog. You don't want to overwhelm beginners—dogs or people—or make training seem like a chore. Also, Rebel is still less than a year, right?"

"Ten months."

"A lot of dogs shouldn't start jumping with much height until they are at least a year. Besides, the first step isn't agility, but basic obedience on and off the leash. Especially off. Why don't I teach you some basics to work on gradually, and you can practice at home, maybe a little each day?"

"How much will it cost?"

"For you, nothing. At least not unless you want to join the club eventually. I was thinking you could come over to my house. Maybe once on weekends, and perhaps another evening during the week."

Dan looked at Kyle in surprise. The man seemed sincere. His eyes flicked down to the dog tattoo and back up to the man's face. Was Kyle just offering to help him train Rebel, or was Kyle interested in *him*? Was Kyle even gay? Had he guessed Dan was, or had Jacob or Leo told him? And what about his family? Dan had a duty to them. Jacob's words from the day before came back to haunt him: "*When was the last time you did something fun, just for you?*"

The question had apparently lit the embers of the fire of rebellion. *I deserve to have a life. And I want this. And I want Rebel to have it.* And, if he were honest with himself, he wanted to get to know Kyle better, too. Much better.

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## Chapter Four

### *Dogwalk*

Dan pulled up the weeds poking through the gravel in his parents' front yard. He wondered what it would be like to live in a climate where people had grass lawns in their yards and had to mow them on a regular basis. Probably more tedious than periodic weeding. Dan felt eager, full of anticipation. He wanted to finish this chore, grab some lunch, and head over to Kyle's.

As Dan worked, he sang along, probably off-key, to the latest album from The Fray. Rebel lounged in the sun nearby, gnawing contentedly on a new rawhide bone. So far, the dog didn't seem to realize he was on the hated tie-out. Dan didn't trust Rebel to stay put if an enticing scent teased his canine nose. He knew all too well from his research, and even Rebel's own past, that beagles readily followed scents for miles, oblivious to dangers such as roads and cars. Fortunately his dog's sense of melody and tune were not as discriminating as his sense of smell.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up from his kneeling position as his mother approached. He paused the music and pulled out his earbuds.

"Dan, I've been thinking," she began.

*Oh no. Conversations that begin this way are never good.*

"About what?" he asked cautiously.

"I think Tara should stay in Tucson for college. I want you to tell her she should go the U of A."

*Fuck, fuck, FUCK! NO! NO! We already had this battle.* Dan stabbed the weeder violently into the ground, then let go before he pulled it out and hurt someone.

Rebel, sensing his tension, dropped his bone and whined.

Dan stood, kicking aside the kneeling pad, so that he was looking down at his mother rather than up at her.

"Mom, she's already accepted the offer at ASU." Dan and Tara had worked hard to convince their parents to allow Tara to go to Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University in Tempe. Dan would do whatever it took

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to ensure his sister at least could experience college unencumbered by parental oversight. “She has a scholarship and financial aid and the money from Dad’s parents. She even has an inexpensive place to stay with Aunt Nicci.”

“I don’t want her so far away. I’d worry about her. I’d rather have her at home than with Nicci.”

*You realized you don’t want to lose your in-home assistant. And you hate Nicci this week.*

“Mom, she’ll be less than two hours away. Tara has straight A’s. She’s brilliant at science. She’s been developing original and winning science fair projects since she was twelve. She’s earned this chance. She deserves it.” *One of us has to escape.* “She can take care of herself. She won’t get in trouble.” *But if she does, I hope she has fun doing it.* “And Aunt Nicci’s a biochemical engineer. She understands Tara’s nerdy scientific stuff better than the rest of us ever will, including Dad.”

“I think you should care more about what could happen to your sister.”

*Me? Me care? I drove Tara to high school every day for two years because you were too stoned on pain meds or sleeping pills or antidepressants to be reliable or trusted behind the wheel of a car. Hell, I even drove her to medical appointments and to hang out with her friends. I made sure her school paperwork was in order. I taught Tara to drive.*

He contemplated lying to his mother and telling her Tara had missed the application deadline for the U of A. Instead, he looked around for a distraction.

“Want me to prune the lantana? It’s looking scraggly. If I cut it back, say about a third, it should look nice and bushy in just a couple of weeks. And what about the bougainvillea? Do you like the out-of-control look, or do you want it more contained?”

As his mother turned to inspect the yard, Dan worked out a plan.

*I need to call Aunt Nicci and warn her Mom might call to say Tara won’t be coming after all. And not to believe her. I doubt she would. She has no patience with Dad or Mom at the moment.* If Aunt Nicci could help settle things, he would have one more reason to be grateful to her.

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Dan was not in a particularly good mood when he pulled into Kyle’s driveway three hours later. Frustrated and discouraged, definitely. After

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completing the yard work, he returned home and stretched out on the couch. Both cats snuggled up against him within minutes, while Rebel dozed on the floor nearby. He had first called Aunt Nicci, and after some hesitation, Tara. Aunt Nicci uttered some cutting but true statements about his parents and promised Tara her support. He tried not to feel as if he were betraying his parents with that phone call. Tara engaged in a mercifully short bout of teenage hysterics before she calmed, and they concocted a basic plan to thwart any moves Mom was likely to make, especially before determining Dad's position. Dan was not sure whether to be reassured or scared when his sister warned him she would try to think of some other ideas.

Although Dan had thought about canceling on Kyle, he knew if he did not go this first time, he would find it all too easy to never go. Plus, he couldn't do much with scent training and hunting in Tucson, at least not with his time constraints and family commitments, even though he knew those were both activities at which beagles excelled. Agility training might be something else Rebel would enjoy, even if it did not involve his nose. And it would give Dan an excuse to see Kyle again. He didn't think he could bear not seeing where this... whatever... with Kyle went.

Kyle's house was located east of Tucson, just past the city limits, up an isolated road that ended on the west side of the Tucson Mountains in a small group of moderately expensive homes spaced out on large hillside lots. Dan realized Kyle lived not too far from the PAO facility of the day before, although much higher in elevation. As Dan stood outside his car, he looked back out over the city in the distance. Odd. He was perhaps no more than fifteen minutes from downtown and twenty-five minutes from the University, yet so far from the chaos and the noise. He unbuckled Rebel's harness from the car restraint and let him scramble out.

Dan led Rebel up a flagstone path curving gently through a carefully-groomed front yard featuring purple prickly pear, yellow-spined round barrel cacti, a saguaro, an octopus agave, and two Mexican bird-of-paradise plants, all rising from a sea of desert-red gravel. Lavender and white verbena spilled out of a large shallow concrete planter. An egg-shaped hummingbird feeder hung in front of the large window overlooking the yard.

Dan rang the doorbell. Several barks sounded from within, either in warning or greeting. A few seconds later, Kyle opened the front and screen doors to let them in. The two dogs engaged in customary butt-sniffing get-to-know-you

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behavior. Dan immediately noticed that Kyle wore another tank, this one of blue mesh, but instead of ogling the tattoos, Dan met Kyle's gaze.

As Kyle greeted Dan, he gave him an assessing glance. "We'll be discussing some rules as we go along. Rule One is don't try to train when you are angry or impatient or rushed. You won't be in the right mood, and you don't want your dog to think you are mad at him. You need to be able to spend some quality time together. Bad day?"

"Family stuff." Dan sighed, hoping Kyle wouldn't call the afternoon off.

"Before we start with the dogs, maybe you should try to de-stress." Kyle looked at the dogs. Rebel was eagerly exploring new scents, within the limited range of the leash. Kiko had retreated a few paces, standing protectively over a toy ball made from interlocking, rainbow-colored rubber rings. At a signal from Kyle, Dan unleashed Rebel, who immediately followed his nose across the room. Kiko picked up the toy and trotted down the hall.

"She's going to bury it in one of her blankets or hide it under the daybed. The dogs should be all right, but we'll keep an ear out."

Kyle led Dan past the living area and down a hall. Kyle stopped in a laundry/utility room to scrounge a clean pair of exercise shorts and a threadbare tee from a drying rack. After handing them to Dan, Kyle pushed open the door to the hallway bathroom, "Put those on and join me in the last room on the left."

Dan obeyed before joining Kyle in a room which apparently doubled as an office and workout room. Free weights and books were stacked side-by-side on the floor, except for a rogue dumbbell being used to hold down a stack of papers on the desk. Dan did not have time to look at the books before Kyle unfolded two blue exercise mats on the floor. Kyle's method of lowering Dan's stress and putting him in a calmer mood involved leading him through a short warm-up, making him do a seemingly endless number of sit-ups and pushups, hold side planks until his whole body trembled with the effort, and then showing him a series of slow stretches. By the time Dan finally lay on his back, panting, his anger and tension had dissipated.

"Feel better?"

Dan took a few deep breaths. "Mentally, yes. I think the rest of my body is going to hurt pretty badly. Do you moonlight as a gym instructor?"

Kyle laughed. "No, I moonlight as a dog trainer. Speaking of which, shall we get started before the dogs stage a coup? Or start fighting?"

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“I don’t think Rebel would know how to stage a coup. My cats on the other hand... a definite possibility. Maat has the regal bearing to be a figurehead monarch and Nisaba has the devious cunning to be the power behind the throne.” Dan sat up, feeling much looser, especially in the muscles he had used while gardening.

As Kyle stood and stretched his arms overhead, Dan noticed the outline of nipple rings on his chest. *Oh God*. Rings in addition to all his other piercings? Dan knew he had been distracted when he arrived, but how had he missed those?

In the kitchen, Kyle filled two tumblers with ice and added water. Then he reached into an upper cupboard and pulled out two bags of small dog treats. He put one in his pocket and handed the other to Dan.

“You will need to figure out what treats your dog likes. Rebel may have different favorites than Kiko. Always carry them with you when you train. I use different treats for training than for other times, but it’s probably not necessary. But you don’t want to rely only on treats. Praise and affection are necessary, too, and often need to replace treats. No treats are allowed in the ring during competition.”

Outside, Dan and Kyle sat at a table on a flagstone patio, drinking their water and talking about some of the early stages of training while Rebel enthusiastically explored all the new scents, and trotted eagerly around the large dirt yard, with frequent pauses for more prolonged sniffing. Kiko gave Kyle a “how-could-you?” look, before she followed Rebel.

“Is she keeping him company or guarding her turf?” Dan asked.

“Maybe some of each. If they spend enough time together, they should eventually accept each other. Kiko is social enough with other dogs away from home, she’s just not used to them in her territory.”

Dan examined the fencing separating the large dog-accessible area of the backyard from the lot beyond. The fence, some sort of decorative black welded-wire mesh, seemed so much nicer than the basic overly-shiny chain-link fence surrounding his rental. Beyond the fence, he saw a couple of large, caged garden areas. Other than that, the land appeared undeveloped, perhaps just cleared of obviously dead and flammable underbrush. The only vegetation within the fenced area was a grapefruit tree and a lemon tree.

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“How much land do you have? You must get a lot of wildlife.” Dan decided not to speculate on how this man, probably not too much older than him, could afford a house like this one.

“Just under two acres. Mostly hillside, as you can see. I cleared a rough path up to the ridgeline. I see all the usual birds, of course. Quail, doves, cactus wren. I have hummingbird and finch feeders set up.” Kyle gestured farther up the hill towards the next property. “One of my neighbors is a birder, keeps a bird diary of what he sees in his yard and around the neighborhood. He would know some of the less common species. I see at least one javelina herd regularly. I hear coyotes more than I see them. Occasionally I see mule deer and rabbits—mostly desert cottontail, I think. And several species of lizards, even a horned lizard once. But the rarest thing I ever saw was a desert toad, last summer after a monsoon. The thing was huge. Bigger than a grapefruit.” Kyle held out his hands far enough apart to encompass a cantaloupe.

Dan might have thought he exaggerated, except that he had seen the toads himself. “I hope Kiko wasn’t with you. Those toads have enough toxins in their skin to kill a dog that picks it up or even licks it.”

After Kyle and Dan judged Rebel had explored enough to be willing to pay attention for a while, they leashed the dogs. Kyle pulled a chair up to the edge of the patio and had Kiko sit next to him.

“Show me what you already know.”

Dan and Rebel went through three rounds of heel, walk, sit, down, and stand on the leash. Then Dan unleashed Rebel, and they demonstrated stay and come. Kyle watched impassively. Then he traded places with Dan. He led an unleashed Kiko through the same moves, with a series of vocal commands combined or reinforced with gestures.

Since the next rule was not to do too much at once, especially at the beginning, they stopped after a short while. The men went inside, leaving the door open enough that the dogs could come and go.

“You both did a good job today,” Kyle commented, as he pulled a plastic container out of the cupboard and passed it to Dan. He grinned and winked. “Your treat.”

*Dark chocolate chip almond cookies?* Dan took one, polished it off too quickly, and took a second to savor.



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“Do you have to be anywhere else this evening? I know you have family obligations.”

Dan shook his head. “Not tonight.”

“Then stay for dinner.”

Dan sat at the kitchen island as Kyle began pulling bowls from the fridge without even waiting for a response. Kyle must have done most of his prep work ahead of time, because he did not spend much time chopping up anything except some herbs. Soon, he had three different sauté pans on the stove top. Tantalizing smells kept Dan glued to his seat, as he watched in fascination—not only at the food on the stove and Kyle being domestic, but at the tattoos.

Finally, finally, he had the opportunity to observe them as Kyle was otherwise occupied. On the back and front of his right arm: the black-and-white dog—Dan saw the “white” was actually bare, uncolored skin—in two different poses, and a ribbon and a trophy with some writing on them. On his right shoulder and bicep: a portrait of a middle-aged man with some family resemblance to Kyle. On his left arm: animals and symbols from a mix of cultures—Celtic, Egyptian, and Chinese or Japanese at a minimum—nestled in among a full sleeve of colored swirls and abstract designs.

Dan frowned. Hadn't Kyle had a tattoo on his left hand on Friday night? He looked again, checking out the right hand as well. No sign of a tattoo on either hand, or even tattoos anywhere below the cuff line. He tried to remember if he had noticed Kyle's hands yesterday. Could a person just lose tattoos?

“Did you have more tattoos on Friday?” The words rushed out before his brain could censor them.

Kyle shot him an enigmatic glance, then grinned. “Yep. I save the hands and wrists for customizable temps. So I can put on a long-sleeved shirt and look respectable when I need to, and enjoy variety and change when I don't. Sometimes, I even put them on my neck or face.” Kyle looked down as he mixed seasonings into his vegetables. “If you want to try a temp tattoo sometime, let me know. We can sneak it in somewhere it won't be seen at work. I have a good assortment.”

Dan swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. He had no idea how intimate applying a temporary tattoo was, probably not very, but just the idea of Kyle putting one on him set his heart racing. And actually wearing it, hidden under his clothes, when he was at work or eating dinner with his family, a secret only they knew... He reached for his water glass and drained it.

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Dan let Kyle refill his water, and waved off the suggestion of wine or beer.

“Are you willing to talk about your family? Or should I mind my own business?”

Dan contemplated for a minute, thinking. He had not known Kyle for long, true, but he felt a connection. And probably trust. Or was that lust?

“Will you tell me about your tattoos?”

Kyle smiled. “Eventually. Maybe not tonight, though. Each one tells part of a story. But I will tell you when the time is right.”

Dan nodded. And as meat and vegetables and rice sizzled, as spices and cooking aromas mingled and teased the air, Dan told Kyle about his mother and her first husband, about his parents’ marriage, about Sergio, and the barest outline of the accident. He didn’t mention his dashed dreams.

“So because Sergio was a fuck-up as a kid, you got saddled with an overly-developed sense of responsibility and a desire to please?”

Dan blinked. “Um. Something like that. I wouldn’t have used those exact words.”

“What about your other siblings? What do they do? Isn’t your younger brother old enough to help?”

Sighing, Dan shook his head. “Sometimes I am astonished Rafael can even take care of himself. He’s a musician. Plays both alto and tenor sax. He went to a high school with a decent music program, at least.”

“You didn’t all go to the same school?”

“Tara and I both tested into UHS.”

“Where?”

“University High School.”

Kyle shook his head. “I’m not a local.”

Dan laughed. “It’s one of the top, free college-prep schools in the country. You have to take a test to get in.” He paused. “It’s an excellent school, and an honor to be accepted. Dad took it for granted that we would all get in, but Rafael didn’t even bother trying. Knew he couldn’t handle the work. His talent is in music, not academics.”

“Not everyone excels at academics, even within the same family.”

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“I know, but Dad was disappointed. Anyhow, Rafael might be a musical genius, but he has less financial sense than a flea. Actually, probably less common sense most of the time, too. He managed to get his girlfriend pregnant while still in high school and moved in with her just before the accident. So he escaped our parents’ house before me.”

“Ouch. I bet that stung.”

“You have no idea.” *Of course, the mere fact Rafael had a girlfriend also irritated me, because it meant my younger brother had a much better and less secretive sex life than I did.* “And yes, I was jealous he got out of the house. He used the excuse of supporting Adrianna through her pregnancy for not helping much with our parents and Tara. Although, I think Adrianna’s extended family did most of the supporting of both of them. When Rafael did come to the hospital, he often had Adrianna and her mother Carmen in tow, since Carmen acted as their chauffeur at the time. Adrianna was calm enough, but her mother is very dramatic and loud and given to insulting everyone in Spanish. And she doesn’t particularly like men.”

Kyle started plating the food.

“Now that I think about it, maybe Rafael didn’t benefit much by moving in two houses down from his mother-in-law.” Dan smiled at the thought.

“Probably not.”

“Within three years of graduating from high school, Rafael fathered two children he could barely afford to support. He is twenty-two now. He takes music courses at Pima Community College and plays gigs in a jazz band at local events. He supplements his income as a waiter for a catering company. Adrianna managed, mostly with the help of her own mother and sisters, to juggle caring for the children with attending hairdressing and cosmetology classes. Now that she has her license, she works part-time at a local salon. She, at least, has a grasp on financial reality, but it doesn’t help much when Rafael’s tastes exceed his income, and he has no concept of restraint or self-denial.”

Kyle put the plates down on a nearby table. “I imagine you have had to become very good at both restraint and self-denial.”

*Don’t think about self-denial. Don’t think about self-denial.* “Um. Yes.”

Dan distracted himself from thoughts of everything he denied himself by taking a bite of the food. Flavors zinged across his taste buds. “Wow! I can’t

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believe you cooked this. If I hadn't watched you, I would be asking where you bought it." Dan loved curry, although it was not a spice he cooked with himself. Fresh zucchini, broccoli, red and yellow peppers, mushrooms, and currants, lightly sautéed with minced ginger and garlic and maybe a hint of citrus. And a rice blend with an element Dan couldn't quite figure out.

"What's in this rice?"

"A fifty-fifty mix of brown rice and riced cauliflower."

"Cauliflower, really?" Although Dan could taste it now he knew it was there. "More vegetables. Sneaky."

The dogs wandered in together, Kiko leading the way. Dan was surprised when Rebel, often a bottomless pit, didn't immediately beg for food. Instead, he dropped down near Dan and rested his head against Dan's leg.

"So your sister attends the same prep school you went to?"

"Yeah." Dan described Tara's college dilemma without mentioning his mother's former addiction issues.

"Nothing wrong with living with an aunt or an uncle."

"No. I don't know Aunt Nicci too well—I don't think she likes Dad a lot of the time. She once told me that she had settled in Phoenix, rather than Tucson, when she decided she could not tolerate another long cold winter. She claimed she wanted warmth, but hated the humidity of Florida. However, she said one hundred miles was about as close to her younger brother as she could tolerate for more than a few days."

Kyle burst out laughing.

"Personally, I think she just followed her lover there. Although I am not sure she can tolerate him all the time, either. They have been not-living-together in separate residences in three cities for close to twenty years. Anyhow, she didn't care for us kids much when we were small, but we became closer to her as we got older. Tara is the one she really likes." Dan ate a few more bites, savoring the food as he thought about his aunt. "Nicci can be blunt and often acerbic. But in the aftermath of the accident, she was the first one to help us out."

Other relatives had floated in and out with high emotions and drama and dire predictions. Completely unhelpful. Throughout those first couple of weeks, Nicci had been a welcome voice of sanity and calm. "She is used to living

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alone, yet she volunteered to open her home to Tara. So even though she often irritates me, I still appreciate her.”

*Maybe now more than ever.* The last time he had seen her around Christmas, she had said “*Stiffen your spine, Dan, and stop coddling everyone. They should be perfectly capable of fending for themselves most of the time.*” Maybe he should have listened.

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## Chapter Five

### *Tire Jump*

Dan racked his weights and found a corner to stretch in. Thirty minutes on the treadmill and another thirty with strength training had put him in an excellent mood. Time to pick up Rebel and walk the dog around his parent's neighborhood, then head home and feed and play with the cats. Maybe he could get Tara to walk with him and Rebel, see how things had gone with Mom.

Jacob intercepted him before he could reach the locker room.

"Did you have a good time Friday?"

Was that only three days ago? "Excellent. Thanks for the invite and the persuasion. I'm glad I went." Dan paused. "How long were you planning it, really?"

Jacob adopted his best angelic look. "What, you don't believe all those people just happened to have no other plans on a Friday night?" Dan gave him a skeptical look, and Jacob relented. "A couple of weeks. But you were always on the invitation list. I just tried a new tactic."

They both laughed.

"So how was your date, um, day with Kyle?"

"My afternoon with Kyle at the dog agility event went just fine. It was not a date." *Although yesterday may have been, sort of?* "How long have you known Kyle?"

"Since soon after he moved here. Maybe three and a half years?"

"Is he, you know, gay?" Dan thought Kyle was, but wanted to make sure he wasn't imagining signals.

"Yes. And before you turn red thinking of how to ask, he is also single. He was casually involved for a couple of years with a co-worker of Leo's, that's how we met him, but Brad deserted him for greener pastures in the big city last spring. And he wasn't right for Kyle, really. A decent man, but not an animal person deep down, and he resented the time Kyle spent training Kiko and teaching agility classes. We kept Kyle as a friend after Brad left."

"Kyle is going to help me train Rebel. First obedience and later agility."

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Jacob grinned. "Awesome! When are you seeing him again?"

"Wednesday." Dan felt proud he managed this without even a blush. "Kyle said he and Kiko will be near my part of town on Wednesday afternoons. We are tentatively aiming for one weekend day at his house and Wednesdays at mine. So I don't have to drive so far on a weeknight."

He paused as a thought occurred to him. "I didn't even consider Maat and Nisaba! Damn. Rebel grew up with them as the dominant pets. I wonder how they will feel about Kiko. I need to go research bull terriers and cats."

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Rebel greeted Kyle and Kiko with a friendly woof and showed no sign of aggression towards the other dog.

The cats growled and hissed. Nisaba's tail bristled, doubling in size, as she arched her back, but she stood her ground. Maat retreated, pacing back and forth, tail swishing with agitation. She hissed occasionally, willing to attack if needed.

Kiko, held firmly to Kyle's side, took the hostility in stride. She was probably used to the posturing and tantrums of other animals, more so than the cats were to strange dogs.

Dan picked up Nisaba, trying to soothe her even as she struggled. Eventually she responded slightly to his petting and comforting words, especially as Kiko made no threatening moves. After several uncomfortable minutes, Kyle and Kiko continued through the house and out into the backyard, where Dan and Rebel joined them.

After some thought, Dan had decided not to try to bribe the cats with food to calm them down. He didn't want them to associate snacks with this behavior, even if it was perfectly normal, instinctive, and probably a smart reaction to a strange animal. And Kiko, while small for a bull terrier, was significantly larger than the cats and Rebel.

Dan showed Kyle how Rebel had improved since Sunday with the off-leash commands, even lying down and staying down for specified periods of time. The cats watched suspiciously through the window.

Kyle went back to his car for a short, straight piece of tunnel, nothing nearly as long as the curved tunnels the dogs used in competition.

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“With a short tunnel, they can see the other end. Start by getting him used to going through.”

Kyle had Kiko go through it a couple of times, as Dan watched. “Kiko, tunnel.” She trotted through.

“Eventually you need the dog to enter from whichever side you indicate. For now, though, try to just get Rebel to go through. Have him stay at one end, then go to the other and call him through with *come*. Later, you can work on the association with the word *tunnel* or *through*. For now, you want him to learn the idea of going through. We will work up to longer, straight tunnels and shorter, curved tunnels gradually.”

Fortunately, the beginner tunnel did not faze Rebel. He came through willingly, many times, enjoying the praise and the treats. After the lessons ended, and they turned the dogs loose to play, Kyle reached into the pocket of the jacket slung across the back of his chair. He pulled out a zipped plastic bag containing dog-shaped shortbread cookies and handed them to Dan.

“What’s this for?”

Kyle grinned. “Your reward for doing well.”

Dan laughed. “Am I supposed to bark or wag my tail?”

“Only if you want me to question your sanity. Actually, I made a batch for a fundraising event. But I thought you would appreciate a few.”

Dan turned away to pet Rebel and to hide his expression. It had been a long time since someone had taken care of him, a long time since anyone outside of work said “well done”. Most of his family seemed to take everything he did for granted. Emotions swelled in him. Dan felt unwanted tears threatening. He blinked them back. This was supposed to be a light-hearted moment, sharing a joke, not him dissolving into a mess because a sexy man was nice to him and thought of giving him a token gift.

He wasn’t sure how well he could do with the hopeful-puppy look, but he turned back to Kyle and tried, even cocking his head like Rebel. “Do I get treats even if I don’t do well?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

“I’d return the favor, but my kitchen doesn’t lend itself to baking cookies. I know where to buy excellent local ice cream and gelato, though.”



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Leaving the dogs out in the yard with plenty of water, Dan and Kyle went inside.

Dan put on water for pasta and handed Kyle an open can of cat food and showed him the long shelf where he had made cutouts for the food bowls to rest in, so the cats couldn't shove the bowls off while they ate. "I used to feed them on the floor, but the cats like to savor their food. At least Nisaba does. And I didn't want Rebel eating theirs. He'll eat anything he can reach."

At the merest clink of spoon to can, the cats were underfoot, plaintively meowing about their starvation, the stress over a new dog in their territory forgotten. "Put a quarter of the can in each bowl. Then pet them each a few times, so they get used to you."

"Hope they don't bite me." Nisaba, who always meowed the loudest for food, ate her usual three bites before turning away, spurning the remainder of the food in the bowl. She leaned into Kyle's touch, purring as he stroked her head and scratched behind her ears, raising her head so he could caress her under the chin. Her eyes closed to sleepy half-slits.

Meanwhile, Maat finished gulping her portion down as if she would never see food again. She came over, seeking her share of affection. Kyle turned his attention to her. "Wow! Her fur is so soft. I've never felt anything like this." He seemed entranced as he ran his fingers through the gray fur. "The angora rabbit of the cat world."

"Have you ever felt an angora rabbit?"

"Well, no. But I imagine they would feel like this. Has her fur always been this soft?"

"Ever since she was a kitten." Dan experienced an odd emotion as he watched Kyle interact with his cats. Not jealousy—he wanted his cats to like Kyle. And at least tolerate Kiko. Dan watched Kyle's hands, one on each cat. Maybe he was feeling envy. He certainly wouldn't object if Kyle wanted to pet and stroke him instead.

"I'll go get dinner together." Dan had cooked an enormous batch of homemade pasta sauce the night before, since it was a dish he knew he cooked well. And it was always better the second night, once the flavors had a chance to mature. He tossed fresh pasta in the boiling water, and as it cooked, he quickly prepared salad with mixed baby greens and cherry tomatoes and parmesan-garlic croutons. He had bought a couple of bottles of wine to have on hand, one red, one white. He would let Kyle pick.

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Kyle loved Dan's pasta. "I can see we are going to spoil each other with our cooking. This is one of the best sauces I've had since leaving Chicago."

Dan smiled, more shyly than he had expected, both at the compliment, and at the implication they would be eating more meals with each other. "Secret family recipe. Dad taught me when I was in high school. And I managed to weasel a few more recipes from Aunt Nicci as well. I like to cook Italian food. And try my hand at Greek and Middle Eastern fare. And American, of course. My attempts at Chinese never match my expectations. I also love Thai, Vietnamese, and Cuban, but I can't cook them."

Kyle blinked. "Not Mexican?"

"Want to know a secret? I don't cook Mexican if I can avoid it, because it's a family staple. I know how, but my mom cooks it, and my sister-in-law and her family cooks it. Hell, even Jacob and Leo can cook it. I end up having dinner with my parents and Tara more often than I like to admit. My life has no shortage of Mexican food."

"Huh. Never thought of that. I never had much before moving to Tucson, and when I did it was mostly the generic Tex-Mex stuff. Nothing like the variety and quality that I have experienced here. I know there were decent Mexican places where I lived, I just didn't eat at them."

Dan tried to explain the difference between the dishes that originated in different parts of Mexico, finally concluding that Kyle had never had decent *mole* or *pozole*. As Dan had experienced the other night, Kyle liked to cook vegetable-heavy stir fries, but also Irish, Indian, and Polish foods. Some of his favorite restaurants served Thai and Middle Eastern foods. Kyle also liked to mix some organic vegan meals into his diet, and Dan was mildly disturbed by the mention of "green smoothies." Kyle laughed and told him to give the drink a chance before he said no.

"I would love to travel around the world and experience new cuisines," Dan remarked, wistful.

They chatted about favorite and least favorite foods for a while longer, before the topic turned to, what else, their dogs.

"So how did you get Rebel?" Kyle asked. "Didn't you tell me he was a rescue dog? Or maybe Jacob mentioned it."

Dan's smile disappeared. "Poor Rebel." He sighed, took a sip of wine, and looked to where the dogs sprawled on the floor.

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“Once upon a time, not so long ago, maybe even as recently as last August, a careless college girl from California wanted a dog to take with her as a pet when she went back to ASU up in Tempe. So her parents bought her a cute little beagle puppy without bothering to learn that maybe a beagle was not the best type of dog for an apartment or a single room in a shared house. In fact, maybe the parents even lied to the breeder about where the puppy would be living, or ignored what they were told.”

“Idiots.” Kyle sounded disgusted.

“Yep. So the cute, little beagle puppy went off with the college girl, who spoiled him when he was being sweet and yelled at him when he was following his nose and getting into her stuff. And she left him alone in her room in a house she shared with other girls, and he got lonely and howled mournfully, and bayed, and whined. And didn’t understand why everyone yelled at him. And the college girl began to regret having the puppy, but didn’t want to admit to her parents she couldn’t handle him.”

Kyle rolled his eyes, and Dan nodded in agreement.

“About this time, in our fair city of Tucson, another girl was visiting her grandparents, because she wanted to see them before she left to go abroad, with the Peace Corps or some similar organization. While she was visiting them, the older couple reminisced about their dog that had died recently. A Cavalier King Charles spaniel mix with some Boston terrier thrown in. A nice quiet dog, well suited to seniors living in one of those over-fifty-five communities, where the seniors live in small houses—mostly mobile home style—close together on small lots. They missed him, but they had not been planning on getting another dog. The granddaughter didn’t know it, but they had been thinking about adopting a middle-aged cat from one of their neighbors.”

“Let me guess. Somehow Peace Corps granddaughter meets California college girl.”

“Exactly, the granddaughter went to Tempe to visit a friend, who was a housemate of California girl. The housemates, including California girl, lied and told Granddaughter that dogs weren’t allowed in the house, but she hadn’t known that when she brought it with her. The puppy was asleep and looking harmless and cute, and when he awoke, acted playful and cute. And was remarkably quiet. Granddaughter became convinced her grandparents needed this puppy, and without asking them, agreed to take the dog from California

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girl, even paying her some money for the dog's bed and crate and toys and such.

“After a long ride in a car with a stranger, the poor beagle found himself deposited in the house of two more strangers, with no introduction. A new location, new people. And the grandparents found themselves in possession of a puppy with little more from Granddaughter than ‘Here’s a present for you. Have to run! See you when I get back.’”

“What a mess. And how thoughtless.”

“The grandparents did their best, but they were no match for an energetic and loud young dog. They tried for a few days. They called their granddaughter, but couldn’t get through to her phone. They had no idea who the original owner was or where the beagle had even come from. They were on the verge of having him taken to Animal Control or the Humane Society or posting a notice online when he escaped their yard, probably following his nose, and disappeared.”

“He’s lucky he didn’t get flattened by a car. Or get overheated.”

“Or killed by a coyote. Fortunately we’d just had rain from the monsoons. He probably found puddles to drink from. The next evening when I went to take out the garbage, I saw him wandering the service road behind my house. Maybe eight miles away from where he had started. He was all scratched up and filthy. No collar, no tags. I brought him inside my yard and called Louise.”

“Jacob’s sister?”

“Yeah. I thought that since she works for a vet she would know what to do. She came over with food and a crate and medical supplies. We bathed him. She checked out his injuries and said they were all superficial. By the time he was dry, he had fallen asleep in my lap. She offered to keep him overnight and take him with her to work in the morning, to get checked out by the vet. I said no, said I would keep him with me. I spent a long time petting him and talking to him. At first, he didn’t like the crate, poor guy, but I didn’t want him running around until I dog-proofed the house, nor did I want him hurting himself or chasing the cats.

“I needn’t have worried about Rebel and the cats. When I got up at two to take him outside, Maat was perched outside the crate watching him and Nisaba was stretched out on top, purring. Not like the way they behaved with Kiko tonight. Maybe they sensed he was injured, or young, or couldn’t hurt them. From the beginning, they treated him like their kitten.”

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Kyle grinned. "I would have liked to have seen that, but I can picture it."

"The next day, I took him to Louise's vet. The vet checked for more injuries, put some goop on the deeper scratches, and stuck a cone on his head for a few hours. The scan found an ID chip, which got traced back to the college girl's parents in California. Natasha, do you know her? Our firm's investigator? She volunteered to help and within a couple days pieced together the whole story, after the housemates and the granddaughter's parents all got involved.

"The Tucson couple had never wanted him, although they were relieved he had been found. The college girl no longer wanted him. Her parents wanted to be reimbursed for what they had spent on him. By then, one of the firm's younger lawyers had heard the story, and pointed out that their daughter had sold him to the other young woman and given her all his stuff as well. After they relented, I offered them a token amount just so that I could get his papers."

Kyle smiled, a secret smile, touching his dog tattoo. "Just luck that you were in the right place at the right time to find him. Fate."

*Fate?* Dan had never thought of it like that. "Well, it wasn't easy. Even though Louise had helped me, she and the vet doubted my ability to handle a beagle pup with my full-time job. A member of one of the dog rescue outfits wanted to take him and place him with a family, because supposedly they would be better for him than just me. I referred them to the law firm. Even my parents questioned whether I should keep him. And the more people who said I couldn't, the more I was determined to. Besides, within a couple of days, he and the cats had bonded. Over the course of one weekend, I made the house as dog-proof as I could, although not enough, of course. Trial and error and experience fixed that.

"In the end, my parents came through for me when I asked them to take care of Rebel during the day, even if just to play with him once in a while and let him outside when he needed to go. And perhaps the unintended consequence is that I believe taking care of Rebel has really helped both my parents, given them something to think about and interact with when they are home all day. Plus, it gets me over there twice a weekday like clockwork, which they appreciate. And while they both complain about him to me from time to time, I know they love him."

Dan checked the level in the wine bottle, thought about having another half glass, then decided against it. He offered the bottle to Kyle, who shook his head. Dan shoved the cork back in.

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“After I received his papers, I paid twenty-five dollars to change his registered name with the AKC.” He paused, looking at Kyle. “I was still seriously pissed with a lot of people for saying I couldn’t do it.”

“So what is his official name?”

“Danilo’s Rebellion.”

Kyle laughed. “Perfect. I wasn’t expecting that. And what was his name before?”

Dan looked at where the dogs slept and whispered, “We don’t talk about that.”

Kyle shook his head in mock sympathy. “That horrible, huh? You know, I will get the name from you some day when the dogs aren’t around.”

Sitting up straight, Dan tried to adopt a challenging and stern expression, a task made difficult when he was suddenly hiding amusement and suppressing the urge to grin. “You may try.”

Blue eyes glinted as Kyle silently accepted the challenge.

They cleared the table, and Dan served a simple dessert, just fresh strawberries and vanilla ice cream. With the dog cookies on the side.

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## Chapter Six

### *Winged Hurdles*

The following Friday night, Dan walked into his parents' house and plunged into a cacophony. Dad had his office door closed, but Dan could hear classical music clearly through the door. In the deserted kitchen, meal preparations had been abandoned, but the TV blared a commercial at twice its normal volume. Dan picked up the remote, turned the sound down to a sensible level, then muted it. Only then could he hear what his mom had sought to drown out. From the den came the sound of several teenage voices, all raised loudly in cheerful but heated debate.

He walked into the den, nearly tripping over a backpack. Had a small library exploded? Textbooks and notebooks and papers were strewn across the room. Tara and four of her classmates were seated around the room, some on chairs, some on the floor. One of the girls sat on the lap of one of the boys in a public display of affection almost guaranteed to give his mom a stroke, especially if it had involved Tara. As it was, she was probably off praying for the pair. Or phoning their parents. The occasional groping did not deter either of the teens from voicing their opinion of whatever topic was being debated, probably something from the AP US Government class.

Dan thought the other girl, Tara's best friend, Eden, and the other boy, whose name Dan could never remember, had both been on the debate team. Any rules of debate etiquette had been thrown out the window and run over multiple times, as everyone talked over each other, proudly displaying a speak-loudest-and-longest strategy.

Tara looked at him, winked, then said to her friends, "Well, we won't agree. Let's talk about the English Lit assignment instead."

A very brief silence followed as one set of textbooks was cast aside, in as disorderly a fashion as possible, in favor of beat-up paperbacks and e-readers. Then they began arguing about a book Dan didn't remember reading, for which he was grateful if everything the teens said about it was true.

Dan opened his mouth to ask them to quiet down, but Tara glared at him and shook her head. Eden saw him, smiled, and waved, and continued explaining why the world in which the story took place portrayed a

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stereotypical caricature of a dystopian society, but could never happen. Forgot-His-Name pointed to his T-shirt, emblazoned with the words "Method in Madness". Dan threw up his hands in a surrender gesture and retreated.

Mom was back in the kitchen, wearing ear protection gear of the type worn by shooters or heavy equipment operators. She looked angry and miserable. As soon as she saw Dan, she grabbed his arm and dragged him outside.

"Danilo! Make them be quiet! Tara invited them here to study, but they are so loud."

Dan wasn't sure what to say to pacify his mom and not ruin whatever plan Tara had, especially since he wasn't sure of the point of his sister's little scene.

He mumbled something about seeing what he could do after he checked on Rebel. Then he asked his mom where she had found the ear muffs.

"I borrowed them from Luis next door."

He braved his Dad's office to snag Rebel, who seemed to be oblivious to the chaos, and shooed him outside.

He returned to the office.

"How's Maria holding up?" Dad asked, surprising Dan.

"She borrowed some ear muffs from Luis next door, but she is spitting mad." *Like my cats when they first saw Kiko.*

Dad shrugged. "Why don't you go take Rebel for a walk before you encourage the kids to be on their way?"

"You *want* them to stay?"

"I might be in a wheelchair, Dan, but I am not always blind to what happens around me. Tara's plan needs more time."

*You know what her plan is?*

Dan wasn't sure if it was amazement or obedience or cowardice that had him taking Rebel for a leisurely walk. When he returned about six, the teens were already packing up and leaving.

"Bye, Ms. Z, thanks for having us over."

"Thanks, Mrs. Zanetti! Hey, Tara, what time are we coming on Sunday again? Was it three or three-thirty?"

"See you Sunday, Tara! Good luck on the calculus!"



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Mom cast a desperate glance at Tara. "They are coming back Sunday?"

Dan looked in the den. Even though the books and people were gone, the room was littered with plates and glasses and cookie and chip crumbs.

Tara joined him, grinning. "Don't worry. I'll clean it up once Mom gets a good look at it."

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Tara phoned Dan on Sunday afternoon, just as he was getting ready to head to Kyle's.

*Please don't let there be a problem. I can't deal with it today.*

"Guess what? Mom agreed that I can go to ASU! Well, she agreed again, but this time it's final. She said that Aunt Nicci would be a better person to help me with my studies." He heard giggling in the background. "By which she really means that she hopes my friends and I are as annoying to Nicci as we were to Mom, even though she couldn't say it. So you don't have to worry about that anymore, me going to ASU, that is."

"Um. Good. Glad you took care of the problem."

"Hope you don't mind that I took matters into my own hands, but sometimes you just aren't as good at standing up to Mom and Dad."

*Ouch.*

"Anyhow, we're supposed to be going to Eden's to study instead of our house, but I think we're going to stop first and grab some pizza to celebrate. Catch you later."

*'You just aren't good at standing up to Mom and Dad.' Is that really how she sees me? Is it true?* For the second week in a row, Dan headed over to Kyle's in a mixed-up emotional state, but this time he packed his own workout clothes as a precaution.

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March turned into April, as yellow blossoms covered more of the palo verde trees that abounded along the washes, in undeveloped areas, in parking lots and along sidewalks. Dan always associated them with the changing of seasons, the transitioning from the pleasant days of spring to the beginning of the pre-summer heat. Kyle remarked that he was still accustomed to regarding yellow trees as a sign of autumn, not spring.

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They met without fail twice a week, at Kyle's on Sundays and Dan's on Wednesdays. Sunday afternoons started earlier, and always with the pattern begun on that first day. A short workout and maybe some meditation exercises to clear the mind, followed by dog training and dinner, and then maybe a little television. Wednesday evenings, they walked the dogs around Dan's neighborhood, although not always together because Kiko liked a more vigorous walk with less sniffing stops than Rebel. Then they brought Kiko through Dan's house and let her and the cats scope each other out, pleased when the cats' antipathy lessened with each visit. More training, slowly growing more advanced. They both played with the cats, although for the first few weeks they shut the cats out of the kitchen and invited the dogs inside while they ate dinner.

During the second week, Dan learned that Kyle was not a full-time, or even a paid, staff member at Pima Agility and Obedience. He helped with some of the beginner group classes as a favor to Miriam, and his "salary" was used for a partial waiver of the fees for some of the poorer teen members.

Nor was Kyle a bartender, or a rock musician, or a biker, or any of the other things Dan had once imagined. His badass leather-wearing tattoo-covered companion was an *assistant professor* at the University of Arizona, in the Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences Department.

In addition to teaching classes and doing research, he was a trained speech therapist. Kyle said his particular area of interest was on how hearing loss affected speech and language development. While most therapy sessions occurred at the clinic, he made home visits on Wednesday afternoons to a child who had lost much of her hearing between the ages of two and three. She was now six and wore a hearing aid, but she was being home-schooled until her speech improved and she felt comfortable being in a normal classroom environment. She did much better understanding speech and isolating sounds one-on-one than in a larger group.

"She adores Kiko," Kyle said. "Her lessons always go better when I bring Kiko along. Her parents don't mind, since they can't cope with a full-time pet right now."

After that first night, they did not discuss many heavy personal topics. Kyle did volunteer that his interest in his chosen field stemmed from his uncle becoming deaf as a teen, but had not said much else about his past.

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They cooked creative meals for each other, talked about music, movies and television, and travel. Kyle had more of a tolerance for music with country influence than Dan, but they both enjoyed many of the current British rock bands. Dan liked more world music, especially Spanish music, which he could generally understand. Despite loving vocal music, neither of them liked American Idol or similar shows. They both liked some of the popular crime shows, but Dan also liked travel shows, while Kyle leaned more towards science shows.

Dan showed Kyle his collection of travel magazines and the used coffee table books and guides he picked up cheap at the public library book sales. He talked about places he wanted to see, and Kyle, who admitted he had never been outside of the United States either, or to any western state other than Arizona—except for a quick drive-through—joined Dan in discussing the pros and cons of different locations.

Dan loved Kyle's house. Unlike his tiny rental, Kyle's house was large, open, and uncrowded. Dan was used to houses with warm southwestern color schemes—tan, golden-yellow, orange or salmon, possibly dark-red accents, with aqua or forest green featured as the predominate cool color. Kyle had very little southwestern décor, other than a set of five Hopi kachina dolls, the type often given as housewarming gifts. His walls were on the pale blue side of neutral, with accent colors consisting of dark and medium blues, deep greens, and a touch of plum. To Dan, the house felt cool and inviting, soothing on the eyes.

Art consisted mostly of paintings in bold colors and various objects—vases and carvings and such—that looked to Dan's inexperienced eye as if they might have been collected a generation or two or three ago. A variety of high-quality wood furniture was distributed throughout the house, some of it showing marks from a teething puppy. An intricate iron daybed—with a sturdy canvas slipcover patterned with dark blue, light blue, green, gray, and rose triangles—rested in a place of honor with an excellent view out the east window. Kyle told Dan it was one of Kiko's favorite lounging spots.

Most houses in the main part of Tucson were single story and without basements, given the prevalent cement-hard caliche layer that discouraged below-ground construction. Because Kyle's house was built on a slope, the main part of his house rested above a small lower story which consisted of a three-car garage, furnace, water heater, a utility sink, and an open area currently being used for storage of all the agility equipment.

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The much larger main floor consisted of an east-facing deck directly above the garage, a huge high-ceilinged living room area on the east side of the house which continued unimpeded by walls to a dining area in the northeast corner, and into a large kitchen which overlooked the backyard and hill slope to the north. The kitchen might not be a professional chef's wet dream, but it was more than ample enough to satisfy any cooking aspirations Dan had ever had, with a cooking island, counter and cabinet space galore, and a spacious, organized pantry. In the west half of the house, the master bedroom and bathroom were in the northwest corner, with a small library in between the bedroom and kitchen. In the middle of the western portion were another bathroom accessible from the south hall, the laundry room, and a giant, cedar-lined, walk-in closet accessible from both hallways—and the master bedroom already had a smaller version! On the south side, were three bedrooms: two sparsely-furnished guest rooms and the room Kyle used as his study.

The one oddity seemed to be a strange hallway-room running along the center of the west side of the house, connecting the north and south hallways. Too wide to be considered a conventional hallway, yet too narrow to be of any use for furniture, it had narrow doorways and a wide, built-in window-seat style bench running its length. An extremely wide windowsill ran the length of the room at chest height.

One day Dan asked Kyle about it.

"You have no idea what this room was used for?" Kyle countered, adopting an enigmatic yet teasing expression. "Here's a hint, the original owners had it custom built."

Dan looked around the room, then out the window across Kyle's side yard, full of Mexican honeysuckle and Baja fairy duster and other butterfly and hummingbird attracting plants, and up the hill towards the neighboring house. "Other than maybe plants on the windowsill, not really. Unless they hung religious art on the wall and sat on the bench in contemplation and made this into some sort of shrine."

"Which members of your household would appreciate this room the most?"

Dan could easily picture his cats lounging regally upon the windowsill, either napping or surveying the world beyond. "Maat and Nisaba."

Kyle grinned and pulled open a sliding wood pocket-door at one end of the room, to reveal a cat flap at the bottom. He gestured towards a similar door at the other end.

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“They built this room for their *cats*? Are you serious?”

“Amazing, isn’t it? I think they had several cats. I have pictures from before. The wall had cat towers at each end with a walkway connecting them, scratching posts, cat caves, water and food bowls on the floor, and two covered litter boxes.”

“A perfect cat retreat.” Dan shook his head in amazement. “And yet, being cats, they probably ignored this room whenever their people most wanted privacy, determined to be underfoot, or on laps, or participating in every project.”

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When Dan walked into the house to find Rafael and Adrianna fighting, he almost walked out again. If alcohol weren’t banned in the house, he would be seriously tempted to grab a beer and watch the fireworks. Or maybe dump it on both their heads. They only came over to have dinner with Mom and Dad and Tara once every two or three weeks. Surely they could wait to fight until they were in their own home. *Or maybe they want to fight here so they have an audience.*

“I can’t believe you bought a motorcycle!” Adrianna yelled at Rafael

“I didn’t buy it! I just told Rene I was interested in trying it out.”

“You don’t even know how to drive one! If you crash, who is going to take care of the kids?”

“For the last time, I didn’t buy it.”

“But you were planning to, I could tell. Without thinking about how you would pay for it. And you know we don’t have money for that.”

“Stop yelling or you’ll wake Cori.”

Right on cue, Corinna started whimpering, and the whimpers quickly changed into a wail. Adrianna snatched her out of the carrier and glared at Rafael, muttering a couple of her mother’s favorite Spanish epithets.

Both his brother and sister-in-law spotted him at the same time. They stared at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to intervene or take a side. Silently, Dan shrugged and left them to it. Three-year-old Tomas sat in his booster seat at the kitchen table, eating macaroni and cheese and baked carrots under Mom’s watchful gaze. Rebel lounged nearby, apparently nonchalant, but

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watching for food to fall to the floor. He had gobbled up a lot of the boy's food over the past few months, despite Dan's protests about some of it being bad for dogs. Rebel was not as finicky as Tomas. He was perfectly happy to swallow anything potentially edible and occasionally vomit it back up if it wasn't.

Dan took Rebel into the den. He tossed an old blanket over the couch, sat down, and let Rebel jump up with him. Slowly stroking his dog, Dan leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Maybe if he fell asleep, no one would wake him for dinner.

No such luck. Only Corinna, drooling in her carrier, and Tomas, sitting in a child bean-bag chair and watching *Cars* on Tara's laptop, received a reprieve from listening to adult conversation. Tara described in detail all the upcoming exams and term papers she still faced. Adrianna tried to outdo Tara with stories about clients from hell, which normally were amusing, but came out whiny instead, since she was still mad at Rafael, and her mood was not particularly cheerful. Rafael seemed worried because one of his band members was moving away—the guy trying to sell his motorcycle. Mom got stressed because Rafael was unhappy. *She never seems to care or notice if I am.* Dad remained silent, although he did smile politely, if absently, at one of Adrianna's stories.

At first Dan absorbed it all, trying to determine if any of the complaints people had involved a problem he would be expected to solve. Then he tuned it out by trying to decide what to do with Rebel tomorrow morning. He had started going to sleep half an hour earlier and getting up fifteen minutes earlier. He found that if he shortened their walk by five minutes, afterwards he could sneak in ten minutes of training on just a single apparatus. And give a few more minutes of attention to the cats, so they didn't feel left out.

He lost track of the conversation until he heard Mom say, "Dan can do them for you."

"Do what?" he asked, abruptly aware he should have been paying more attention.

"Their taxes."

A married couple with two kids, irregular childcare, one student who played in small bands for irregular pay, much of which he probably didn't keep track of, and a hairdresser who probably made some of her money from tips and likely had undocumented business expenses. Oh joy. And who knew what receipts they kept from medical expenses, or whether they had bothered to buy tax software when it was on sale.

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“No.” Five pairs of eyes stared at him in astonishment. They look stunned, like people swept off their feet when the carpet they stood on suddenly decided to yank itself out from under them.

“I will do it *with* you both. Not *for* you. I am not this family’s slave. I will *help* you figure out what information you need and where it goes, and you will *both* sit there the entire time. Adrianna, you will enter the information as I go through the program with you and show you what is needed. If either of you leaves, I stop. And Tomas and Cori need to stay with someone else while we are working on the taxes. No distractions. Adrianna, I know you can manage a budget, you are perfectly capable of learning how to do this.”

Adrianna recovered enough to give him a tentative smile. The rest of the family still sat in shock. *Maybe Tara’s right. I don’t tell them “no” enough.* Dan stood, picking up his dishes. “And it will have to be on Saturday. I have other plans for Sunday afternoon. I’ll email you a list of papers you need to get together before we start.”

“What are you doing on Sunday?” asked Rafael, sounding surprised.

“Classes with Rebel, obedience training and such. Dad suggested Rebel needed more training.” *That much is the truth.* “And I know this may astonish some of you, but I do actually have a life away from this house.” *I think Kyle has taught me disobedience. Better leave before I say something I regret.*

He smiled as he headed towards the kitchen. “Call me so we can set up a time. Bye Mom, Dad. See you tomorrow.” He put his dishes in the dishwasher, called for Rebel, and made his escape.

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## Chapter Seven

### *A-Frame*

Dan looked at himself in the mirror, hardly recognizing himself. And smiled. He had actually gone shopping Thursday evening, splurging on new clothing not intended for work. Black boots, tight charcoal jeans, and an unbuttoned burnt-gold-and-black short-sleeve shirt over a form-fitting maroon tee. In a moment of daring, he had applied one of the temporary tattoos Kyle had given him. He pushed up the left shirtsleeve just enough to admire the mystic knot, clearly displayed between his T-shirt sleeve and his elbow. Even if no one else could see it unless he showed it to them, he knew it was there.

A careful application of styling gel allowed him to produce carelessly spikey hair, wonderfully different from his usual conservative look. After a brief hesitation, he added a gold chain necklace. Then he pulled on his new ultra-soft, black suede jacket. Hot weather would be here soon enough that he wanted to wear it while he had the chance.

A few weeks ago, Dan had looked in the mirror and thought a part of himself missing. He was not sure where the lost part had gone, but whatever he had found was so much better. He felt enthusiastic, excited. Okay, maybe a little apprehensive, too, but... happy.

*My first night going out in public with a group of gay men. My first night "out"? My first "outing"?* Dan hoped it was only nerves, and his mind would stop with the lame puns.

He jumped when the doorbell rang. He put on some music for the animals—classical combined with sounds of nature—and went to the door. Time to stop regretting the years he had missed, and focus instead on what he had now. Time to reach out and reclaim his life. And what better and more normal way than a Saturday night dinner with friends? *And maybe my first real date with Kyle?*

Kyle wore black slacks, his leather jacket, and a shirt spanning the spectrum between ice blue and royal blue. No earrings today, but he did have a tattoo of a blue-and-purple dragon flying across his left hand.

The men stared at each other. *Do we really have to go out? Maybe we should just stay in.* Kyle looked as if he agreed with Dan's thoughts, but pulled



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himself together enough to speak first. “Love the hair and clothes. You look... hot. Did you shop all day?”

At that, Dan laughed. “Wish I could have.” He stepped outside before lust overtook what few brain cells he had left. “Spent all afternoon helping my brother and sister-in-law finish their taxes.”

“Cutting it kind of close, aren't they?” Kyle asked, as he started the car.

“Yeah. I am at least satisfied they won't raise any Audit-Me-Now red flags. Otherwise I would have made them file an extension. Fortunately for me, Adrianna has been keeping records for both of them. Unfortunately for me, her cousin did their taxes for them last year, but she is deployed right now.”

“Too bad.”

“Yeah. Which is why I got stuck with them. But she did impress on Adrianna what to keep at least. It wasn't the total nightmare I expect anytime my brother and money come together. At least, as long as no one ever tries to track down if and how much his band got paid in cash on various nights at forgotten venues. I would tell Rafael he owes me a few beers and dinner, but he is too busy sulking that I made him watch part of the time.”

“How cruel and heartless of you.”

“Apparently so. I was going to make him sit there the entire time, but then thought Adrianna and I didn't deserve that. She made him do some other chores he has been putting off *and* promise to help with cleaning my parents' garage. And she gave me a quart of her homemade *carnitas*, which I may even share with you on Wednesday.”

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Dan and Kyle joined Jacob and Leo and two other guys for pizza at a restaurant on Fourth Avenue. Dan had met the other men only briefly at the party last month. Tony, a former IT classmate of Jacob's, worked for one of the city utilities. He had compensated for an early tendency to baldness by shaving his head and growing a goatee. He looked as if he could give professional wrestlers or bouncers a run for their money. Tex, a short, slender, eternally youthful type—who would probably get carded into his thirties—projected an air of wide-eyed innocence and spoke with a deliberate country drawl. Dan was immediately taken with the flamboyant and energetic pediatric nurse, with his purple-streaked platinum hair and irrepressible sense of humor.

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“So how did you end up working with Jacob?” Tony asked Dan, after they all placed their drink orders.

“When I was in college, my parents were hit by a drunk driver. In between my junior and senior years. Dad was badly hurt and Mom couldn't cope, so I had to spend a lot of time dealing with the lawyers. Thomas Emrich, a golfing buddy of Dad's, offered to help my parents, both with the civil claim against the drunken imbecile's insurance company and representing their interests as victims in the criminal case. I spent a lot of time talking to him that year, especially while we were waiting for court hearings. He told me he was impressed at how I handled everything, juggling classes and family, even graduating on time with almost unimpaired grades. When his law firm had a job opening in the finance department, he invited me to apply.”

“Accounting?” Tex looked interested. “I tried to take an accounting course once. Maybe because I had a youthful crush on the instructor. Even he wasn't worth staying in the class for, alas.”

Everyone laughed, and Dan added, “I like my job, for now, but in a few years I might want to get my MBA. I can do that online.”

After the salads arrived, Jacob prodded Dan. “Tell them the story about you, Roz, and the kittens.”

“Who is Roz?” asked Kyle.

“April Roselle,” replied Jacob. “Mr. Mendoza's assistant. She has been called Roz for years, but after the movie *Monsters Inc.* came out, apparently she started wearing glasses as similar to the character Roz from the movie as she could find. On purpose. And when she says your last name—*Mr. Riley, why is the Internet not working? Again?*—you tremble in fear.”

Dan eyed his friend skeptically. He had never seen Jacob show fear of Roz or anyone else. Although Dan had once been afraid, well nervous, of Roz, so maybe Jacob had once felt the same way. He continued his story.

“The first day I arrived, my supervisor told me to avoid her if I didn't like animals. I shrugged it off, and had completely forgotten the warning when I was summoned upstairs two weeks after I had started.”

“Fresh blood.” Jacob shook his head knowingly. “She always assesses any new employees, then strikes once she knows their weakness.”

“I was scared when I approached Mr. Mendoza's office. I wasn't sure if I had done something wrong. She frowned at me until I was worried I had spilled

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coffee on my shirt or something. Then she told me to go into the small conference room. I had visions of getting axed.”

Dan paused for dramatic effect and stabbed a tomato with his fork.

“I opened the conference room door... and heard something I never expected.”

He took a slow drink of his beer, then added, “Meowing.”

Dan felt himself almost glowing as people laughed right on cue.

“Instead of a firing squad, I faced a collapsible playpen full of kittens.” It had seemed as out of place in the staid lawyer’s office as a polar bear in the tropics. “My relief was over too soon, because Roz—who is a tiny lady who appears deceptively harmless—began grilling me about my life, where I lived, how I felt about my furniture, and what I knew about cats. I think she had been taking lessons in interrogating people from the lawyers.”

“Or it comes naturally,” Jacob offered.

Dan looked at him. “Dare you to say that to her. Anyhow, she invited me to take a look. I knew I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t resist. Brought down by tiny balls of fluff. Five minutes later, and I was in love. Just as I was attempting to extricate my trousers from a soft furball with claws, Mr. Mendoza peeked into the conference room. For a couple of seconds, I was terrified he would be angry, but he just smiled indulgently, and said, ‘Another victim, April? Don’t fight it, Zanetti. And take two. They can keep each other company.’”

Dan laughed ruefully, remembering the outcome of his first meeting with Roz. Before him, she had already managed, through persuasion and guile and an uncanny knack of matching animals with people, to place fifty or more animals just with the employees of the firm, or their friends and family. No one who could benefit from an animal companion remained petless for long.

“So how many did you end up with?” Tony asked.

Dan pulled out his phone, showed them a picture. “Meet Maat and Nisaba. Maat was the Egyptian goddess of law and justice. Nisaba was the Sumerian goddess of accounting, math, and grain. Seemed appropriate for an accountant in a law firm.” *They brought laughter and joy back into my life.* “How was I to know that creatures that cute and cuddly were actually little minions of destruction?”

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“Cool names!” Tex gasped, after he managed to stop laughing. “But keep Tony away from this Roz person. He has no willpower when it comes to cats. I can’t trust him in a pet store on adoption days.”

Tony blushed.

“How many cats do you two have?”

“Five.” Tony pulled out his own phone and showed them a picture of Tex, dressed in purple scrubs, asleep on a couch, being used as a bed by five felines. Then more pictures of a sunroom that seemed to be devoted solely to the needs of the cats—as much if not more so than the unused cat room at Kyle’s—with two cat towers with caves, cat walks along the walls, cat perches on a window ledge, a cat self-grooming station, and an array of cat toys on the floor. “All rescue cats.” He pretended to glare at his partner. “And Tex loves them, no matter how much he pretends otherwise.”

The pizza arrived and conversation turned to a discussion of food, best pizza places in the city, best and worst local breweries, hot—and not—actors, pro-gay and anti-gay legislation, and whether the new streetcar running from the university through downtown would be operational on time and actually make any money. Tony and Tex described their recent trip through Jerome in north-central Arizona. The historic mining town, built vertically on a steep hillside, was now a historic landmark and tourist attraction, with tours and museums and galleries and even a couple of decent wineries.

After the best evening Dan could remember having in months, even including the party at Jacob and Leo’s, the three couples split the bill and parted company. Dan and Kyle decided to go for a stroll. They left their jackets in the car, as the night was still mild, and wandered north to University Boulevard before turning east towards the university.

In a slightly darkened area between businesses, Dan took the opportunity to show Kyle the mystic knot tattoo.

Kyle leaned close and whispered, “I like it. Looks perfect on you. I just hope that some time when you want one for a while, you let me help you put it on. And take it off.”

Dan’s mouth went dry. He couldn’t speak for fear of either stammering or squeaking or something else as undignified, so he settled for a quick nod.

Kyle’s right hand traced lightly around the tattoo, then slid down Dan’s left arm. Kyle’s fingers tentatively ran along Dan’s palm. Dan’s hand tingled and

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he convulsively clutched Kyle's hand, then loosened his grip. For a moment he stared into Kyle's eyes, then turned and continued down the street, heading into the stretch of University Boulevard populated by students—bars, restaurants, stores. Holding hands. He had never, would never have, dared to hold a boy's hand when he was a college student frequenting some of the same establishments they now strolled towards.

Now here he was with a *professor*. He stopped. "What if we run into one of your students? Or other faculty?"

Kyle shrugged, continuing. "Not a problem. I am not blatant about my orientation, but it isn't a secret, either. I refuse to live in the closet."

*You must not have had Catholic parents.*

Kyle sensed his withdrawal and squeezed his hand. "Hey, it'll be okay."

They walked along the south side of University, pausing momentarily to debate whether they had any room left for ice cream, but concurring they had eaten too much pizza. Then they walked back along the north side. No one stared at them. No one gave them dirty glares, or knowing looks, or paid them any attention at all.

Back at Kyle's car, Dan took stock of his emotions. "I am not sure whether to feel relieved that nothing happened or annoyed that it was no big deal."

"Hey, it was a big deal for you." Kyle seemed to understand what Dan was feeling. "Normally I might suggest we go for a coffee or something, but I think we should be responsible pet owners and get home to our dogs."

Dan agreed, although he did not want the evening to end.

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All too soon, Dan and Kyle stood outside Dan's door.

"We never had dessert," Kyle murmured.

"I didn't want anything sweet."

"Really? Are you sure?" And then Kyle kissed him.

What began as tentative and sweet soon gave way to urgency and heat. Hands clutched, roamed, groped as their bodies pressed together. Closer. He needed to get closer. Dan melted into Kyle. Any space between them was too much.

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Rebel's greeting, sounding clearly through the door, trickled like ice water over their mutual passion. Slowly, reluctantly, they peeled apart, mouths separating, hands still lingering on each other.

Kyle swallowed hard. "Going to be fucking hard to drive. See you tomorrow afternoon." He rested his forehead against Dan's, gave him a bone-squishing hug, then turned away. He looked back only briefly as he got in his car. Dan stood frozen to the spot until Kyle finally drove away and his taillights disappeared.

Dan entered the house, seriously regretting being a responsible adult. He loved his pets, but sometimes they got in the way of... well, actually, normally they didn't. What had just happened? He'd had sex before, mostly no-strings encounters. Maybe he didn't have a ton of experience, but he wasn't a virgin. But he had never brought a man into his home, probably because he'd never had a boyfriend and was locked in his self-imposed closet. And when had Kyle become his boyfriend? Tonight? Weeks ago, even if tonight was the first time they had acted on their attraction? All Dan knew was that he could not remember ever feeling this hot, this needy, this desperate, even when he was a teenager with more hormones than brain cells.

He let Rebel out back and stood in the kitchen, splashing cold water on his face.

He needed to think. He had opened the closet door tonight. Stuck his head out and looked around. Maybe it was time to get all the way out, and damn the consequences.

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After dinner the next night, Dan and Kyle sat together on one of the couches, much closer than they had on previous Sundays. Kyle draped his arm over Dan, as Dan leaned against him.

"Before we go any further I want to, that is, I need to, uh, come out to my family. I meant to years ago, but I never got up the courage to do it, I guess." Dan touched Kyle's free hand. "I let things drift, made excuses about family first, but I think I was just afraid. But I don't want to hide any more. You... we... us... means too much. Did that even make sense?"

"You will feel better being out, because you want a relationship based on honesty?"

"Exactly!"

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Kyle reached out a hand, ran his fingers lightly through Dan's hair. "I would never have demanded it of you, but I admit I'm glad this is your choice. Mainly because I want you to be happy, and I am not sure if you will be otherwise. But I hope coming out doesn't come between you and your family, or mess up your relationship with them."

"What happened when you came out to your family? You never talk about them."

Kyle's hand stilled, then resumed its light caress. "No. I'm sorry that I haven't. It's time though. I'll tell you all about me, about my family, before you talk to yours. All about the tattoos, too. Not tonight, though. Wednesday."

"Wednesday."

Neither of them moved for a long time.

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## Chapter Eight

### *Pause Table*

Kyle had offered to bring Thai takeout, his version of comfort food. None of their animals would try to steal it, an added advantage. Dan agreed. He knew, without the words being spoken, that at least part of Kyle's story was not going to be pleasant. Whatever the man needed to get through it, Dan would provide if he could.

They did not add anything new to training that night, just running Rebel through the obstacles he already knew. As Kyle paced around Dan's backyard, he pondered aloud whether using scent to lure Rebel up and over the dogwalk and A-frame for the first time would work. Then he said they could add the dogwalk into the mix next week, although they would need to build a modified one, but shorter and lower would be a good thing for a beginner anyhow. Dan didn't remind him they had already had at least part of this discussion the previous Wednesday.

Kyle finally stopped pacing when Kiko whined. Kyle stared at her, then looked at Dan where he sat scratching Rebel's head. "Am I rambling?"

"A little. It's okay. Let's feed the cats. Then do you want to eat first, or talk?"

Kyle thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll get through the hard part, then we can eat."

After the animals had been fed, everyone crowded into Dan's little den, Kyle and Dan on the couch, the dogs at their feet. Even Maat and Nisaba came running into the room, springing nonchalantly over the dogs. Nisaba settled in Dan's lap, while Maat curled up in Kyle's. Dan wondered if the animals sensed something was up. Kyle pushed aside the iPad he carried to make room for the cat. With one hand clutching the tablet and the other petting Maat, Kyle began.

"I was born to conservative Southern parents and baptized James Kyle Williams, but always called Jimmy. My parents were God-fearing and gay-hating. I was raised in a small town among other people just like them. And many of them were quite small-minded. I think I was twelve when I realized I was gay, and, like you, I tried to hide it. Unlike you, I was a little more daring and was caught kissing another boy my sophomore year."



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Kyle paused, and his voiced roughened. “My dad beat me. Badly. No broken bones, but a black eye, split lip, and plenty of bruises on my ribs and back. I heard my parents talking about where to send me to ‘cure’ me. So I grabbed my backpack, some clothes, the little money I had, and ran. Out through my window and down a tree.”

“Did you have a plan?”

“To find my grandparents and uncle somewhere in Chicago. Unfortunately for me, the address book was in the kitchen with my parents, and I didn’t dare go in there to take a look. I had no clue how large a big city was. Or how difficult my search would be.”

Kyle stared at Maat, but Dan had the impression he didn’t see her, only his memories.

“I was still a toddler when my grandparents and uncle moved to Chicago, which my father viewed as a den of liberals and sinners. They had visited us when I was younger, but health problems had kept them away, and they couldn’t visit after I was eleven or so. I hadn’t seen them in at least four years. They had invited me to visit them in Illinois over vacations. My parents always said no. Still, I knew they *wanted* to see me. So when I ran, my first thought was to go to them. I knew better than to even think about approaching anyone on my dad’s side.”

Kyle fumbled for his iPad, careful not to dislodge Maat, and scrolled to his pictures folder, showing Dan a few pictures of his grandparents taken over the span of a decade or so. One picture showed the older couple and the man portrayed on Kyle’s shoulder tattoo standing together in front of a colorful mural.

“I spent the night in my best friend’s barn and caught his attention when he came out to do chores the next morning. Mason snuck me food, a blanket, a little more money, and told me my parents were looking for me. His older brother caught us, sent Mason off to school. I was so scared Grady was going to beat me up, too, since he always spouted anti-gay crap in public. Instead he looked at my face and sighed. He patched me up, gave me something to rub on the bruises, which was good because I hurt really badly by then. Even gave me some concealer for the black eye, saying he had borrowed it from their sister, although I’m pretty sure she never knew.

“Grady brought me a better pack, more food, an old sweater, a couple of good water bottles, and gave me a lift to the bus depot forty miles away. He

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even paid for my ticket to Chicago and gave me fifty bucks. I offered to pay him back when I could, but he told me not to look back. He told me: 'Pay it forward when you can. Move on with your life. Get out of here while you still can.' Then he wished me luck and watched me board the bus." Kyle took a couple of deep breaths, and continued, "That was the last time I saw my hometown."

"Did you ever see Mason or Grady again?"

"I made contact with Grady once on Facebook, years later, not to add as a friend, just to thank him, tell him that I had done as he asked. Grady replied that Mason had been injured in Afghanistan, but was recovering, and was married with two kids. And Grady wrote that he had moved away, also. I saw by his Facebook profile that he had left the farm, moved to Atlanta."

Dan connected the dots. "He was gay?"

Kyle shrugged. "Perhaps. Or he knew people that were. He never said, merely implied. As far as I know, he never married. We aren't friends, really, not even on Facebook. I will probably never see either of them again. But I told Grady to let me know if I could ever do him or Mason a favor." Kyle tapped the small Eye of Horus tattoo on his upper left bicep. "This one is for Grady. My protector, however briefly. I think without him, my escape might not ever have happened, certainly not been as smooth at the start."

He traced the swirls of blue and green down his arm, to where they circled a raven. "A raven can mean so many things. A dark omen. A symbol of death, perhaps the end of the old life. A symbol of travel, as the Norse god Odin may have used ravens to travel the world and tell him what they saw. In some Native American lore, crows and ravens are helpers and guides of mankind, in some ravens are tricksters, and in some they are tied closely to creation myths."

Dan knew that some of the southwestern tribes viewed the raven as the bringer of light and sun. "And for you?"

"A little of everything. The beginning of the end of Jimmy Williams. The journey to a new life. A way out of the impending darkness." Kyle shivered, lowered his right hand to his lap.

"At about ten the next night, after a couple of bus changes and a long wait at one of the depots, I arrived at the Chicago Greyhound station. I found a pay phone, but it didn't have a phone book. I tried information, but without an address they couldn't help me. Apparently there were too many possible

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matches. I didn't know what to do. Should I ask a guard for help? Would they ask who I was and send me home? I had been so focused on getting to Chicago and remaining unnoticed on the trip, I hadn't thought through what I would do when I got there."

"Understandable."

"Well, certainly typical of an impulsive teenager, I guess. As I was standing there panicking, an older girl approached me, asked if she could help. Karla helped me find a phone book, but I had no luck finding a listing for either my uncle or my grandparents. Karla said she didn't think the phone book covered the entire Chicago area. I was astonished, because it was the fattest phone book I had ever seen. A security guard or cop headed in our direction, and Karla grabbed my arm and hauled me out of there. She said she had a place to stay with a bunch of other teens, and I could crash with them for the night and look for my relatives in the morning."

"You just went off with a stranger?"

"I know in retrospect it was a brainless move, that I could easily have been picked up by a gang or traffickers or something. But I was fifteen, alone, afraid, and probably country-boy naive. Fortunately her offer was legitimate, in its own way. As we took a long, cold walk, she volunteered the information that she had run away from home because her mother's boyfriend had fondled her and kept trying to rape her. Her mother didn't believe her when she told. Some of the other kids were CPS runaways. She never asked why I had run away.

"Karla finally led me down a dark alley in a part of town that was probably only moderately sleazy, but scared me witless at the time. The house was abandoned or damaged, and had been boarded up. She showed me how to get in through a low basement window and onto a couple of crates. About a dozen kids were living there, ranging from twelve to seventeen, I imagine. At night, they kept warm with a fire in the fireplace, but during the day they couldn't light it for fear someone would see the smoke.

"Karla found me an empty spot of floor in the main room. All the kids stayed there, because the fireplace provided the only heat there was. My spot was near an outer wall, but I had a blanket and a couple of layers, and at that point was grateful just for a place to lie down. I had not been prepared for how much colder Chicago in November would be. I used my backpack as a pillow to keep what little I had safe. At least I had been smart enough to have already

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distributed my money between my different pockets and my shoes and other hiding places.

“In the morning, the kids surreptitiously removed a couple of the alley-side boards to let in some light. I am not sure whether the water had never been turned off or a more enterprising member of the squatters had turned it back on, but the cold water in the bathroom and the kitchen both worked. However, the bathroom was scarier than almost anything else I had seen.” Kyle shuddered. “Teenage boys are not the most fastidious people, but that was gross by any standard.

“When we left, we snuck out of the house alone or in pairs, never too many at once. By daylight, I could see the house had once been a pale blue, although time and lack of care had turned it into a dingy bluish-gray. The kids called it Sky House. I bought a cheap breakfast for Karla and me, and she took me to the nearest public library. The Internet was down and none of their phone books had what I needed. She suggested we go to the library of the closest university for a better chance at having a good Internet connection.

“As we left the library, I heard barking and growling and yelping and whimpering. A little black-and-white dog was getting chased and bullied by bigger dogs. I scared them off. I knelt down and reached out to him. At first he cowered away, but when I fed him some stale crackers I had in my pack, he let me pet him. He was skittish and hungry, maybe injured. His fur was matted, and he had no collar. I could see his ribs. Karla said if I fed every stray in Chicago I would starve, but I reminded her I was a stray, too. I made a collar out of a bandana and a leash from a cut-up pair of socks knotted together. We found a park with a spigot where we could wash him off, even though it was cold. I got him some cheap dog food. Probably crappy, but better than the nothing he had been eating. We decided to go back to Sky House with the dog and warm up and tackle the university library the next day.”

“That’s the dog tattooed on your right arm?”

Kyle nodded. “I learned later he was a McNab collie, specially bred in California to herd cattle. From Scottish Border Collie stock. Some people must have brought them back to the Midwest to work on farms or as pets, otherwise one would not have ended up abandoned in Chicago. Do you ever wonder about fate, about a moment in time that changed everything? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had left the library ten minutes earlier, or ten minutes later? If we hadn’t found the dog, if we had gone to the university that day, if I had tracked down my grandparents that afternoon.”

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“What did happen because you found the dog?”

“As I said, we decided to go back to Sky House. I used some of my dwindling money to buy us a little more food. Some of the kids still went to school and others were out working. And by working, I don't mean legal jobs. I am not sure if any of them belonged to established gangs, but some of them definitely worked on the streets and others were probably shoplifters. I am not sure what Karla did for money. Most of them wandered back by early evening, and many went to sleep early. Not much else to do but sleep in a cold, dark house. Especially when most of them were underfed.

“A few had scored some low-quality drugs and used those. Two pairs of kids had sex right there with everyone else in the room at the same time. Even if it was pretty dark with only the firelight, we could all still hear. An older boy hit on me, but didn't press after my stammered refusal. I was afraid it was only a matter of time before I became like them. I just lay there in the dark, holding the dog, and praying I could find my grandparents and uncle before it was too late.”

Kyle fell silent again. Dan pictured him, young and alone and afraid: afraid of his parents, afraid of being alone, afraid of being raped or having to sell himself for money, afraid of getting hooked on drugs and losing his hope.

“I woke to screaming and barking. To chaos. Something had been placed too close to the fireplace, or embers had drifted out. Not sure what caught on fire first, but one of the girls woke up with her blankets on fire. In her haste to throw them off, she spread the flames to someone else. Soon half the room seemed to be burning. Everyone was frantic to get out, but with the boarded up windows and doors, and only one small exit window in the basement, it seemed to take forever.

“The room smelled of smoke, and pieces of the floor above were falling into the basement. I was last in line, because I had the dog and my pack. A piece of something burning hit my arm, only singeing my clothes but hitting the dog. I was holding him as he struggled, trying to keep him quiet, to keep him from running back to where there was no exit. I finally managed to push the dog up through the window opening, and hands grabbed him. Then a firefighter smashed open the basement door, and I was hauled out that way.

“The other kids had all scattered, trying to get away from the authorities. I stayed put. I had no place to go, no idea where to go, and I wouldn't leave the dog. The kids had put the fear of the police into me, in only a day, so I asked

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the firefighters for help. Told them I needed a vet for my dog and help finding my family. One of the other firefighters had a wife who did social work. They notified her.

“The firefighters kept the police off me as we waited for the social worker. She took me with her, saying our first stop would be at an emergency vet clinic. When the vet asked me for the dog’s name, I said didn’t know what his old name was, but his new name was Scorch.” Kyle’s fingers traced the dog tattoos.

“An appropriate name.”

“Yeah. My brief spark of brilliance. The firefighter and the social worker were licensed for foster care. Usually they took care of younger children on an emergency short-term basis until permanent placements could be found. Even though I was older, she took me in for the night, saying it was too late to find another place, and they would help me in the morning. Well, later in the morning, because by then it was close to three a.m.

“Around noon, the police came. I told my story, explained why I couldn’t go home. They made me show them the bruises and black eye, then made me go to a doctor for a physical and photos. When I got back to the house, I was told the police had located my grandparents and uncle. They had moved away from Chicago, which was why they weren’t in the phone book at the bus station and why information hadn’t been too helpful. I don’t think my mother ever bothered to tell me they had moved, although I am sure she knew.

“My grandparents and uncle arrived shortly before dinner.” Kyle scrolled to another picture of them on his iPad. “My grandfather was Lucas Laurence Magnusson, although most people called him Laurie, my grandmother was Annette Silver Magnusson, and my uncle was Keith Lucas Magnusson, and he went by Lucas. I didn’t realize until they introduced themselves to the other adults that Laurie and Lucas both went by their middle name. I felt like a light had turned on inside me. I said I didn’t want to be Jimmy Williams anymore—well, I probably said *I don’t wanna be Jimmy Williams no more*—I wanted to be Kyle Magnusson. They said they would call me Kyle, but I might not be able to change my last name until I turned eighteen.”

Moving carefully, so as not to dislodge a sleeping Maat, Kyle pulled off his shirt. Across his chest, a phoenix rose from a bed of flames. Traces of light blue appeared behind the flames and outlining some of the feathers. “Sky House burning. I like to think of it as the night Jimmy died, and Kyle was born, or reborn. And even though I didn’t get this until I was in my early twenties, this was my first tattoo.”

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“Did they hurt? The tattoos?”

“Some more than others. But I was smart and did what I was told. No alcohol, no aspirin, and so forth. Nothing was a whim. Each piece was carefully planned. But I welcomed the pain as part of my transformation, as part of my memory of events I never wanted to forget.” Kyle touched the rings in his nipples. “I think these hurt more going in than most of the tattoos.” He stomach rumbled as he pulled his shirt back on. “Dinner?”

Dan suddenly realized he was starving. They microwaved the takeout and sat down to eat. After eating in silence for a while, Kyle continued with his story.

“My grandparents were retired and lived in a nice peaceful community with plenty of other retirees. My uncle lived about ten minutes away by car and fifteen minutes by bike, twenty-five minutes on foot if I cut through a couple of neighbors’ yards. So, close enough my uncle could be available if needed, far enough away they could live separate lives.”

“Didn’t you tell me once your uncle was deaf?”

“Yeah, Uncle Lucas had a series of ear infections and other illnesses as a child. He got chicken pox later than most kids, caught the flu a couple of times, and had meningitis when he was about ten. The doctors aren’t sure whether one of those, or a combination, led to the deafness, but his parents started noticing it when he was eleven or twelve, and he was almost completely deaf by the time he was eighteen. He never let it slow him down, though. He made enough money on the stock market and in real estate that he could indulge in his favorite activities: designing and painting enormous murals, driving fast cars, and having sex with medium-fast women.”

“Medium-fast?”

“The kind that would spend the night, but not with a minor in the house? And who didn’t expect commitment? I spent every other Friday night and some Saturdays away at my grandparents. At least until I made new friends, then sometimes I had overnights with them.”

“How did you communicate if he was deaf? Must have been hard.”

“It was a little tricky at first, but we managed. Lucas could still speak fairly well—especially when he needed to yell at me—and could lip read fluently. I learned how to sign adequately and write a decent shorthand that I still use in my own note-taking.”

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“Anyhow, I enrolled tentatively in the local high school shortly before Thanksgiving, while waiting for my papers to get transferred. The principal of my old school even had all my reading assignments and exams faxed to the new school so I could complete the semester. I remember not being too thrilled with that.” Kyle made a face as he recalled his teenage reaction, then sobered.

“I had meetings with a new caseworker and a child advocacy lawyer. I had to appear at a hearing and talk to a judge. My parents were present telephonically, so I did not have to see them. After a few weeks and probably a lot of legal maneuvering and posturing I wasn't aware of, Lucas was appointed my guardian until I turned eighteen.”

As they ate, Kyle told Dan about growing closer to Lucas and his grandparents, shared memories of their first Christmas together, and his struggle to adapt to a long, snowy, bitter winters. He laughed when he explained he and Lucas had often gone to foreign-language films together, because they had subtitles. Kyle and Lucas had also bonded over a shared love of Scorch.

“Lucas loved that dog as much as I did, maybe more. He was the one who suggested we go to dog agility classes with Scorch. And Scorch sensed from the beginning that Lucas couldn't hear him, always found other ways to communicate with him. A paw, a nose, a tongue.”

Kyle's love for his uncle and grandparents and Scorch came through clearly as he told stories of finishing high school, of the training they had done with Scorch and the competitions they had won. Kyle showed Dan photos of the truly stunning murals Lucas Montgomery had designed for buildings and other structures, often pictures of him standing with prominent business owners or public officials. Not just in the Chicago area, but all over the Midwest and sometimes beyond. In the summer, Kyle had often travelled with his uncle on his projects.

“On my eighteenth birthday, all four of us went down to the courthouse. I changed my name legally to Kyle Lucas Magnusson. I told my grandfather and my uncle that this way I could have a piece of both of them, and I already knew that Kyle had been Annette's father's name. So now I had something of all of them in my name. We had a totally awesome celebration lunch, although I think my grandparents were a little sad about my mother's absence from their lives. She had rarely talked to them since I moved there, and I far as I know, she never asked about me. I have no idea whether they told her about me



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anyway. I was just glad I got to apply to college and graduate from high-school as Kyle Magnusson.”

Kyle talked about going to college and grad school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the closest university to where his grandparents and uncle lived. Unlike Dan, he had wanted to live with his family for the first couple of years because of sharing Scorch with his uncle, but they all encouraged him to move out on his own if he wanted to.

“My college years were much less tame than yours. I think I absorbed my uncle’s wildness, and unlike you, I didn’t have to hide being gay. I worked hard in college, but I also partied hard and regularly went clubbing. Probably too much. Never drugs, though, not when I saw how they messed up friends and caused delays and disabilities in children born to drug users. I had all my piercings by the time I was twenty, but never more than toyed with the idea of a tattoo.”

His grandparents had lived to see him graduate from college with a degree in speech-language pathology, then died within a week of each other the following July.

“Mom came for their funeral, even though she had not bothered to visit them in the last eleven years. Or seen me for almost seven. My grandparents split almost everything between Lucas and me, though.”

Lucas took his parents’ death hard, and decided to spend some time travelling, often with his current lover and ASL translator in tow. When Kyle began his graduate work, he and Scorch took up residence in a small apartment over a tattoo shop. And although he had become good friends with the tattooist, and spent hours talking about tattoos and symbolism with the man, Kyle had actually received his first tattoos from the man’s mentor, who had made several trips down from Chicago to work on Kyle and a few other special jobs for his protégé. Even though Kyle did not say so, Dan suspected he and the younger tattooist had been lovers.

After he completed graduate school, Kyle moved closer to Chicago, doing a clinical fellowship “to get my certificate of clinical compliance—CCC—in speech language pathology” and then do some post-doctoral work.

“Meanwhile, Uncle Lucas had returned to Illinois. He had done all manner of dangerous thrill-seeking activities—racing at high speeds on closed tracks, white water rafting, skydiving and hang-gliding. He had even accidentally

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walked within twenty yards of a grizzly bear while hiking in the mountains and come away unscathed. All while taking mural commissions and building up his investment portfolio. Damned overachiever.”

Tears glistened in Kyle’s eyes. “He always said he would rather go out in a blaze of glory, as long as he didn’t take anyone with him, than die slowly of a disease in his old age. He had been sick enough as a child.”

Kiko pawed at Kyle’s leg, whining. He reached down to scratch her.

Dan reached his hand across the table. Kyle grasped it, tight.

“Lucas was finishing a mural in Indianapolis. It was almost done. He was just doing a few final touch-ups. The building face had trees on either side of it, and some bees had decided to nest in one of them. Must have been new hive migration season, or something. No one knows what he did to set them off, or if they just didn’t like something about him, or he got too close. Maybe, being deaf, he didn’t hear them or have any warning. They swarmed him, stinging him repeatedly. He was tethered to the scaffolding, to keep from falling, but the tether also kept him from running away. He was allergic to bees, so he went into anaphylactic shock. I hope he lost consciousness quickly. The medical examiner thinks he did. Other people who saw the attack risked both stings and falling to get him to the ground. He was dead before the paramedics got to him, probably even before the ambulance got to the scene. His epinephrine injector was found in his jacket on the ground. Even if it had been in his pocket, though, it might not have done any good. I was told he was probably dead within ten minutes and unconscious within five. But I’ll never know.”

Tears trickled down Kyle’s cheeks. Dan sprang up from his chair and went to Kyle, holding him close.

“I was so pissed at him for a while. Stupid, pointless death,” Kyle mumbled into Dan’s shirt. Then he looked up, and surprisingly, managed a small laugh.

“But he might have been amused. His story made the newspapers in several regional cities. A coffee-table-book publisher put together a posthumous book of all his paintings and murals, along with short articles and letters from people who had known him. Many of his prominent patrons wanted to attend his funeral, one of them even volunteering his assistant to help me organize it, in a much more ostentatious fashion than I had ever planned. My only requirements were that I be allowed to talk, and that Scorch be allowed to attend. The funeral was open to the public, and I think a whole bevy of his former flings appeared.

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Everything was interpreted in ASL for the deaf community. People spoke about what an inspiration he had been. I hadn't realized how much of an impact he had made, not just to me but to other people, until he was dead."

*Did your mother come?* Dan wondered, but he didn't ask. Instead, he tugged Kyle back to the couch. Kiko jumped up next to them and put her head on Kyle's lap, while Rebel rested his head on Dan's knee. Maat and Nisaba had climbed to an upper shelf, and watched over the proceedings from above, with occasional breaks for grooming.

"After the funeral, once Uncle Lucas was buried next to Laurie and Annette, I made plans to leave Illinois. I applied for jobs all over the west and northeast. I came out for the job interview at the U of A and was intrigued by the contrast in climate to anything I had ever known. Scorch died shortly after I accepted the job, before I had moved down. He was twelve by that point. I cremated him and kept half the ashes in a little urn and buried the other half over Lucas's grave, on the sly.

"I started getting the tattoos on my right arm before I left, although I made two trips back to finish the job and wrap up loose ends." He touched his upper arm on the outside. "My uncle Lucas." A tattoo band around his arm above the elbow. "A ring of laurel leaves for Laurie." On the inside of his upper arm. "A Celtic five-fold for Annette, since it was her favorite symbol by far, and has so many meanings. I like to use this one as a temp also." He ran his hand down to his lower arm. "Two of Scorch."

Kyle leaned against Dan, for once seeking strength and comfort instead of providing it. "As I drove here, I stopped from time to time to visit friends. I picked up Kiko from the new boyfriend of a female classmate of mine. Purebred from show dog stock by a trainer needing a few identical dogs for a movie. Kiko was the mismatched runt of the litter, and the trainer offered him to the boyfriend, who already owned several show dogs. He didn't need another, and offered to give me Kiko after he saw us together. I knew when I took her that she would never have the natural ability to be the agility dog Scorch was. But she was herself, unique. And we bonded from the moment I picked her up."

Kiko whined gently, as if in agreement, and burrowed closer into Kyle.

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## Chapter Nine

### *Teeter-Totter*

At first, Dan wanted to come out immediately. Having finally made the decision, he wanted it over with as soon as possible. There were two problems with this plan. First, a Friday or Saturday would be best, so that if things went badly, he would have a couple of days to recover. After some internal wrestling, Dan decided Easter weekend was perhaps not the best time for his big revelation. Why did it have to fall in late April this year, and not in March? Second, Kyle was going to be out of town attending a friend's wedding, and he had asked Dan to wait until he got back.

Unfortunately, the delay gave Dan more time to worry and agonize and imagine worse-case scenarios. Kyle must have mentioned something to Jacob, because he soon was immersed in what he privately called "Operation Distract Dan". Kyle's nightly phone calls were not unexpected. However Dan was surprised, and usually grateful, when his other friends, and even new acquaintances, also went out of their way to keep him busy.

On Friday, Heather and Joe invited him to their usual late movie night. Natasha joined them with her current fling. After the movie was over, they went out for ice cream and coffee and dissected the bizarre plot, until they came up with scenarios and interpretations never intended by the writers or director, but which made no less sense than anything in the movie. Joe tried to determine which drugs the writers had been high on, and Heather commented that the studio execs had probably been using, too. Dan pretended to lament that beautiful scenery had been ruined by gratuitous action shots. Natasha compared the chemistry between the actors to that existing in a pile of rocks.

On Saturday—a beautiful, cool, slightly overcast day—he went to the Desert Museum with Jacob, Leo, Tony, Tex's pre-teen half-siblings, and Vince and his family. They managed to catch one of the last raptor free-flight shows of the season, watching the birds soar over the desert. Everyone admired the lizards, both the colorful iguanas and the sand-colored natives that blended into the desert landscape, the coati hiding in the trees, the birds in the walk-in aviaries, the prairie dogs and the burrowing pygmy owls, the juvenila herd, the wildcats, and the sleeping gray fox. Brightly colored butterflies abounded at the pollination gardens and hummingbirds darted everywhere. Everyone agreed

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that it was a shame Tex had to work, except perhaps his brother and sister, who had wheedling Tony down to a finely honed science.

On Sunday, Dan's family joined Adrianna's much larger family at a local park for an Easter picnic of epic proportions, complete with games and prizes for the kids and way too much American and Mexican picnic food. Even Dad and Mom seemed to have a good time; Dad held Cori much of the afternoon, as Mom spoiled Tomas. Would this be the last time he was welcome in the group?

Rebel eventually got overly stimulated by the noise and the smells, and children kept offering him unhealthy foods. Dan used that as an excuse to leave early. He contemplated going over to Kyle's to train alone, since Kyle had given him a key and the alarm security code for just that reason, but instead went home. He napped with the cats, trained and walked Rebel, and fixed a light dinner. When he found himself watching one of Kyle's favorite TV shows instead of his own travel show, he knew he was in trouble. But he didn't change the channel.

On Monday and Tuesday, his friends dragged him into the employee break-room at lunch, and Jacob made Dan go to the gym with him after work. At night, Dan drew strength from talking to Kyle on the phone, mostly about mundane topics, but sometimes as the hour grew later, they were more willing to discuss a few of the darker items and fears they found it hard to talk about face-to-face.

Kyle called on Wednesday morning to say he had picked up a stomach bug, hopefully only one of those forty-eight hour things, and would not be able to come over that night. Dan offered to bring him some food. Kyle responded that he appreciated the offer, but didn't want good food to go to waste. Nonetheless, Dan went over to Kyle's after picking up Rebel, bringing most of the items on the BRAT diet list as well as some other easily digestible foods. Poor Kyle, a man who loved spicy food was going to hate this.

Dan let himself into Kyle's house. Rebel and Kiko greeted each other, friends now after all these weeks. Kyle woke long enough to blink at him sleepily, then nodded gratefully when Dan said he would walk Kiko, before curling up and closing his eyes again. Dan cast a cautious glance into the plastic-bag lined wastebasket by the bed, but it was mercifully empty.

He refilled the water bottle on Kyle's nightstand. As he was putting it back, he observed the nightstand on the other side, which he had once noticed in passing had been piled high with books and papers, was now empty except for

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a lamp, a second clock, and a box of tissues. He smiled at the implication. Perhaps, soon. He hoped. He quietly slid the drawer open. The necessary supplies were all there, unopened and brand new. Excitement bubbled. Something to look forward to once he got through this last step. He needed to stock up at his house as well.

Then Dan attempted to master the art of walking both a slow have-to-sniff-everything beagle and a some-sniffing's-okay-but-let's-move-along bull terrier. About the time Kiko seemed to realize Rebel would not be hurried and started sulking, Rebel caught the scent of something interesting and lunged up the hill, with Dan and Kiko hurrying alongside. Normally Dan would have checked such behavior immediately, but he was still struggling to figure out how to best manage two leashes. Rebel was extremely displeased when Dan didn't let him follow the scent across a neighbor's property. However, farther along, the beagle found a new scent, which he and Kiko both checked out, and communed over, before adding their own marks. They both looked at Dan in unison.

“Um, no, guys. That's your thing. I don't want to get arrested.”

They returned to the house to find Kyle awake, mixing a spoonful of sports recovery electrolyte powder into a glass of sparkling water. Kyle tentatively sipped the concoction. His sweat-matted hair clung to his head.

“Why don't you take a shower while I'm here? Call me if you need anything. I'll feed Kiko.”

Kyle accepted the offer with as much energy and gratitude as he seemed capable of mustering. He managed the shower on his own, somewhat to Dan's regret, emerging shakily a few minutes later to sip at his drink again. He still looked unnaturally pale. He looked through the items Dan had placed on the counter, picking up the carton of “all-natural free-range low-sodium chicken broth” with an appreciative smile.

“I know you care when you don't want to assault my system with artificial junk. Although maybe I could use a preservative or antibiotic or two.”

After Kyle consumed half a cup of microwaved broth, which seemed to be staying put inside him, Dan helped him back to his bed, propping him up with pillows. Kiko came and jumped up beside Kyle, ignoring her designated bed on the floor. Rebel wandered restlessly around the room. The men chatted quietly for a little while, until Kyle was on the verge of sleep, then Dan kissed him gently, collected Rebel, and returned to his own home.

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On Thursday, Kyle called Dan around ten to say he was heading in to try to give a lecture and pick up papers he needed to read. If Dan never heard from him again, he could assume the worst. Shortly before three, Kyle reported he was home safely and capable of walking Kiko. Dan stopped at a drugstore on his way to pick up Rebel. He and Kyle talked on the phone that night, as Dan lay on the couch with Rebel and Maat snuggling against him, while Nisaba perched on the couch arm, purring. Kyle told Dan to call the next night, whether or not he came out to his family, no matter what time it was.

Friday was almost here. Tomorrow. Only a day away. Finally. Oh, God, already? Dan felt he had been waiting forever, yet he dreaded each minute slipping by as much as he welcomed them.

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Dan choked down his breakfast, nerves making him so queasy he wondered for a moment if he had caught Kyle's stomach bug. He told his mother when he dropped off Rebel that he needed to talk with her and Dad tonight about something important. Safely seated in his office, he did his work on autopilot, continuing straight through lunch, and left an hour earlier than usual. He went home, showered, and changed clothes.

Then he played with the cats. Nisaba preferred chase games, so he pulled out her favorite feather toy for a while. Even Maat played, although in a more half-hearted fashion. Maat preferred toys that made noise when batted across the floor. Because of her habit of playing with them at two in the morning, Dan tried to remember to put them in a drawer before he went to bed. Now he picked up her favorite bell-in-ball, jingling it, watching her eyes follow as he moved it back and forth. He tossed it across the room. *Sproing!* The game was on.

After the romp was over, he brushed and cuddled both cats, cursing himself for not doing those before he changed. A lint roller got rid of most of the fur. He left them with dinner and fresh water and a variety of their safe toys.

When Dan entered through his parents' back gate, he saw Tara seated at a table in the back yard, chatting on her cell. *Thought she was having a sleepover with Eden.* He had hoped to catch his parents alone. Well, maybe she just hadn't left yet and would be gone by the time he came back from walking Rebel. Even if she stayed, he could still find time and space for some privacy with his folks.

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As he walked Rebel, he practiced various versions of his speech, boring his poor dog, who had heard it too many times already. If only he knew the best way to begin. *I have something important to discuss if you have a moment... I need to tell you something... I know this will come as a surprise...* He would have to wing it. Dan felt he finally understood the idiom about butterflies in the stomach. He had not even been this nervous before his CPA exam. He sent a text to Kyle. "Wish me luck. Call u soon."

Upon his return, Dan was dismayed to find Adrianna's car now in the driveway as well.

"Thought your band had a gig tonight," he said to Rafael, as he unclipped Rebel's leash.

"We traded days with another group. We still haven't found a drummer to replace Rene. Mom invited us over, is that a problem?"

*Yes, because I told Mom this morning I wanted to talk to her and Dad. I wanted to tell them first. And didn't particularly want to tell you yet. And definitely did not want Adrianna's whole family to know, which they will as soon as she does.* "Of course not," he lied. *Guess I will have to wait until after dinner.*

At least Tomas and Cori weren't there. *Why couldn't they have taken advantage of a baby sitter to go on an actual date? Maybe because they would have to pay for dinner. Okay, that's mean. Or maybe Mom told them to come, after I talked to her. Great, now I am being paranoid. She probably just didn't get that it was important. Chill. Deep breath.*

Dinner dragged on. Dan picked at his food. With the butterflies holding a circus carnival in his stomach, or maybe building a roller coaster, he wasn't entirely sure how much of his dinner he was going to be able to keep down anyhow.

Finally the conversation turned from Tara's high school graduation and Rafael's recital, both scheduled for next month, although not the same day.

Dad focused on Dan. "When are you going to clean out the garage? We want to be able to put a second car in there."

*Why? Mom hardly ever drives the one you have. Only Tara uses it. Or are you going to let Tara get her own car now that she's heading to college? In which case, she can lend a hand.* "Depends on when Rafael is free to help." Dan glanced over at his brother. "Maybe next Saturday?"



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“Sorry, bro, we got plans to try out a drummer.”

*All day?* “The following Saturday then.”

“I got a thing for school in the morning, and Adrianna’s cousin is having an afternoon thing.”

“Then I guess we will just wait until mid-May, or even June after all your classes are over. Going to be a furnace in the garage by then, so we will have to start early.” Dan looked at his Dad. “Sorry, you might need to wait a while longer.”

“Dan,” Mom interjected, admonishing. “You need to do it. Rafi is still in school. And he has the children to look after.”

And finally Dan cracked, jumping to his feet. “So what? When I was his age, I was in school full-time, and taking care of you and Dad and dealing with the lawyers and the doctors and driving Tara to school every fucking—sorry Tara—day. And did I complain? No. I did what I had to. And where was Rafael? Always too busy to be bothered. For *four years*. Four years in which I ran errands and did all the home maintenance and all the yard work. So what if he has kids and school? I have a job and pets. And you know what? I want to have time for a life, too.”

He turned away, not even wanting to look at them. Ran both hands through his hair and pulled it. Wondered vaguely if everything ought to be tinted in a red haze, because he certainly felt the way he always imagined *seeing red* felt like, but if anything, the world was just out of focus and hazy. He turned back.

“I did what you asked, did their taxes on the last weekend before they were due, and Rafael *promised* to help with this *one* thing, cleaning the garage. And why shouldn’t he help, when half the crap in there is his, anyhow? I’m giving you fair warning right now, Rafael. If you blow this off and leave me to do it alone, I am throwing every single *thing* of yours onto the curb for the first person who comes along to take. Assuming anyone even wants it.”

For a few seconds, only his harsh breaths sounded in the room as he struggled for air.

Then Mom gasped “Danilo!” in an appalled and hurt tone, while Tara grinned and flashed him a thumbs-up sign. Rafael was red, either with anger or embarrassment. Dan found he didn’t care which—he was done protecting Rafael from the world. Rafael could grow the fuck up and face reality and responsibility like the rest of them. Aunt Nicci was right, he did coddle them.

Dan couldn't read all the emotions on Dad's face, but anger gave way to acceptance, and his voice was surprisingly quiet when he ordered, "Sit down, Dan."

He sat, resisting the urge to either bury his face in his hands or apologize. He wouldn't mean the apology, anyhow. He picked up his water and drained the glass. Maybe that would drown the butterflies. As he refilled it from the pitcher, his hand trembled.

"Are you all right, Dan?" Adrianna asked gently. "And my husband *will* help clean the garage." She glared at Rafael. "Two weeks from tomorrow."

Dan sighed, managed a weak smile for Adrianna. Despite the tendency she and her family had to gossip about everything, he liked her. Especially for putting up with Rafael.

"All I wanted to do tonight was have a word *in private* with Mom and Dad this evening. I was not expecting the whole family to be here. I thought Tara was going to be at Eden's and didn't expect you and Rafael to be here either."

Tara gasped. "Mom told me after school I couldn't go to Eden's until tomorrow morning."

The butterflies had found some scuba gear. Dan glanced at his mother, who looked guilty.

"Well, I thought if you needed to discuss something important the whole family should be here," she defended.

"Without asking me?" Dan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. Whatever. You know what, I don't care anymore. I'll tell everyone and get it over with. Why drag this out or ease into it? If you don't care about privacy or family secrets, why should I?" *Even if it is my secret. If I'm going to be out, why not be as out as possible? Then there will be no going back. Not that I want to.*

Mom began to look alarmed. "Dan? If you would rather not..."

"I'm gay."

Everyone looked at him, then at each other. His siblings shrugged.

Tara was the first one to speak. "Right. We know that. And?"

"And what? Wait... you *know*? All of you? *You all know*? Since when?" They all knew? Knew the secret he had been keeping for ten years? Knew the secret he had tried to protect at such cost to himself, to his college relationships, to his happiness? *They knew?*

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Dan had prepared himself for a variety of reactions—denial, disbelief, anger, grudging acceptance. He had doubted they would kick him out, but he had even been prepared for that. After all, men, women, and teens got booted from their families all the time when their orientation came to light, although usually not as brutally as Kyle had been.

*They knew. They knew. They all knew.* Dan couldn't shake the thought from his head. *They knew.* He was dimly aware of people speaking, talking to him, but none of their words registered in his head. Instead, he remembered the face of the first boy who had kissed him, the one who had wanted him to go out for a cheap dinner and a date at the campus movie theater. Dan had made up an excuse—the first in a long series of excuses used over the years—and the boy had never asked him out again. Then he thought back to a night in a sleazy dive he never wanted to remember, a place he would prefer to forget, a place he never would have gone to if he had been open, out... *not their fault. But they knew.* A string of meaningless encounters. Good men, interesting men, men he liked, all turned away. Long nights with only the cats for company. And later, Rebel. But still alone. *Can't believe they knew.*

Rafael looked alarmed, his parents both spoke, Tara's earlier grin had vanished, and Adrianna reached out a hand towards him.

Dan stood up, knocking over his chair, and stumbled back.

"And none of you said anything? *Why? Why didn't you say you knew?*" His voice cracked and rose unsteadily.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Dad countered with the first words Dan had understood in... how long? A few seconds? Several minutes? An eternity.

Dan felt cold, lost, untethered. *Why didn't I tell you? Because I didn't think you wanted to know. Because I was an even bigger idiot than Sergio or Rafael?* The butterflies had finally died. Or else he was too numb to feel them. All the long, lonely years. Unnecessary. Time lost, chances gone forever. *Should have come out years ago. They knew. They all knew.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but no sounds emerged. No words came to mind. Perhaps he should be feeling relieved that his family knew and didn't seem to care, but he just felt... shocked. Betrayed. Stunned. He must be the biggest idiot and worst actor on the planet. *They knew.*

He closed his mouth, and turned away. He didn't want to say anything he might regret later and wasn't certain if he could speak, anyhow. Time to leave.

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Past time. For now at least. He needed to think and couldn't do it when everyone was staring at him like he had suddenly sprouted wings or started speaking gibberish. Or maybe he had.

He tracked down Rebel in the kitchen and managed, "Rebel, come!" in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. He led Rebel outside before fumbling with the travel harness and leash. Only when Rebel whined and licked his face did Dan realize he had started crying.

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## Chapter Ten

### *Collapsed Tunnel*

Dan wasn't sure how he managed to drive to Kyle's. But he found himself parked in the driveway, staring at the garage. Not his own carport, not his parents' garage. Kyle's. Behind him, Rebel whimpered.

"Kay, boy, we're getting out." Dan forced himself to move. He hurt all over and he hadn't even been aware of doing anything. Maybe he ached just from holding everything in. Or the hours of tension. Had he overreacted? Possibly.

He walked gingerly up the path. The house seemed dark, no lights visible from the street side of the house, except for the low walkway lights and the light above the door. Odd. Maybe Kyle had gone out? He would check his phone for messages once he was inside. He unlocked the door, but heard no beep from the alarm. A quick glance at the box showed the system was off.

Silence greeted them. The living room appeared empty, so Dan checked the study and the master bedroom and the kitchen. All empty. Maybe Kyle was outside. Outside would be good. He could sit out on the patio and look up at the sky. With the sliver of the waning moon not due to rise for hours, he could gaze at the stars and strive for inner peace. Rebel stopped walking beside him, moving towards the east windows instead of the patio door. Dan followed, rounded the end of the daybed, and stopped short as he nearly tripped over the slipcover.

The dim light of one of the decorative lanterns on the deck wall shone through the window, illuminating Kyle sleeping on his back on the daybed, a rose-and-ivy sheet pulled up to mid-chest. Even in his distressed state, a tiny portion of Dan's brain thought perhaps he should remember to tease Kyle about the pattern. His right arm was curled around Kiko, who rested her head and right paw over the phoenix tattoo. Even in sleep, Kyle's right hand loosely clutched his smart phone. *Still waiting for me to call*, Dan realized. Kyle hadn't shaved recently, and the rough shadow along his chin reminded Dan of the bad-boy impression he had first had of Kyle, all those weeks ago.

And then Dan noticed the new tattoos. Just temps, but the sight of them caused the whole world to shift again. Kyle's left hand, resting atop the sheet

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against his side, sported a Celtic trinity heart knot tattoo beautifully colored along a changing rainbow spectrum. A small rose climbed up his thumb, and on his four fingers were two stars, a heart, a paw print, and a butterfly. The two stars—for the two of them? Heart for emotion, love, maybe courage and strength. A paw print for their animals. And a butterfly, a powerful symbol of transformation, or metamorphosis.

With the application of those tattoos, Kyle had demonstrated more faith in Dan than he had felt in himself. Up until the time he had blurted the words out, he had doubted his ability to say them to his family, no matter how much he had wanted to. Kyle had believed in him. And now it was done. Dan had done it for himself, but Kyle had helped him find the courage. Or maybe his love for Kyle had helped him find the courage. He stared at the butterfly, transfixed. Was that what dinner had been about, his transformation? Breaking free of his cocoon?

Thinking back over the past weeks and months, he realized that first Jacob and later Kyle, with help from their other friends, had helped him over a series of hurdles and obstacles, with the same patience and encouragement the men showed their dogs on the agility course. Jacob had probably been trying longer, albeit more subtly, to help Dan, but it was not until Kyle came into his life that Dan had felt the motivation to stand up for himself, instead of feeling increasingly resentful and frustrated. Friendship had started him on the path, but love had changed everything. And he did love Kyle, or at least he thought he did. Was it too soon to know for sure?

Dan sank to his knees on the tile by the daybed even as Rebel whined inquiringly. Kiko opened her eyes and stirred under Kyle's arm, dislodging the phone. Kyle sat up, startled, blinking awake, and fumbling for the phone until he noticed Dan. Concern and alarm flashed across his face, and he sat up, shifting Kiko with him.

"Dan, are you okay? Did they hurt you?" he asked, even as he reached out.

"Not the way you mean. Not physically." Dan felt the tears return as the tumultuous emotions came flooding back. "Kyle, they *knew*. All of them, Dad, Mom, Rafael, Tara... hell, even *Adrianna* knew." He rested his face against Kyle's sheet-covered knees, trying to stem his tears.

"They already knew you were gay?"

Dan nodded.

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“Come up here.” Kyle reached down and pulled Dan up to sit next to him on the daybed, wrapping both arms around him.

Dan leaned into Kyle's bare shoulder, mumbling “All those years, thinking I was hiding the truth, that I needed to hide the truth, practically lying. And hating myself for it, for the hiding and being such a coward. I don't think I realized until tonight how much I hated the hiding, when I realized it hadn't even been necessary.”

For a long while, Kyle simply held him, saying nothing. Kiko jumped off the daybed and went over to Rebel. The dogs trotted into the kitchen. Kyle ran a soothing hand up and down Dan's back. Dan's hand crept up to rest on the phoenix.

“I know it was hard on you, keeping silent. You are not a deceitful person. And that's a compliment.”

“Maybe that's why they all guessed.”

After more quiet reassurances, which registered more to Dan as sound and feeling than actual words, Kyle finally offered tentatively, “At least you know now they won't kick you out of the family for being gay. One less thing to worry about.”

“I know. And I should be relieved and happy. I know I should. Maybe I am. But I'm also angry and frustrated and resentful. Confused.” Then the whole story spilled from Dan, somewhat disjointedly and out of order.

“So, let me summarize: this morning you told your mom you wanted to talk to her and your Dad; when you arrived you found out she intentionally invited your sister, your brother, and his wife; when your parents started demanding you clean the garage and your mom wanted to let your brother off the hook, you lost your temper, and are still mad at them for expecting you do it and mad at yourself for putting yourself in a position where your compliance is expected; and finally, when you came out after weeks or months or even years agonizing over the decision, you find out they all knew and hadn't acknowledged it to you, as a result of which, you didn't lead the life you wished you had.”

The matter-of-fact recital both astonished Dan and served to help calm the chaotic swirl of his emotions. “How did you do that?”

“Years of listening to academic presentations.” Kyle tugged the sheet free, and draped it so it covered both of them. “And, of course, hearing and knowing you, the real you.”

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*As I know you. And want to know you better.* Only as warmth seeped into him did Dan realize he had been shivering. “I don’t want to feel this way about them, so fucked-up. Kyle, I have *never* felt this way before. I don’t *want* to feel this way, but I do. I’m such a mess.”

“No, you’re not. You just had your emotions locked down for a long time, and now you’ve let them escape the cage. We all do that from time to time. Lucas did it, I did it. You needed that shield to protect yourself, but today you let it go.”

*Can I have it back?* Even as he asked himself the question, Dan knew he didn’t want it again. At least not yet. He closed his eyes, concentrating on matching his breathing to Kyle’s. Deep and steady.

“Do you know how long they have known?”

*I asked. Did they say?* “I’m not sure. I didn’t hear what they said. I’ll ask again. But if they knew when I was in college, then... Kyle, so many years wasted.”

Kyle cradled Dan’s head with his other hand, rubbing gently before moving down to massage his neck.

“You can’t do anything about those first years of college, regrettably. But think just to the years since the car accident. What would have changed?”

*A lot? Everything?*

“You told me you spent the first year just juggling your schoolwork, your parents’ medical needs, the lawyers, and your sister’s school transportation, right?”

“Yes.”

“A college relationship probably wouldn’t have survived all that.”

Dan thought back to the rotating partners and fickle attitudes and constant breakups prevalent in the college scene. Even those who remained constant throughout college often did not stick together afterwards. “Probably not,” he conceded.

“And then you started work, but were still driving your sister to school, often picking her up at a friend’s after work, and running all the errands for your parents? Plus you adopted the cats, moved into your own place, and spent time fixing it up?”



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“Yes.” *And drove Dad to his medical appointments and Mom to her rehab. I should tell Kyle about Mom. Not tonight, though.*

“So for at least the first two years, you wouldn’t have had much time to devote to dating or a relationship, right?”

“Right,” Dan admitted. Kyle had a point.

“So, at most, you have missed out on two years or so of post-college dating.”

“I don’t know if I want you bringing logic into this. And I am not only upset about the lack of boyfriends or sex. I am mostly angry because I felt so burdened down by guilt all this time. Not guilt for being gay, at least I don’t think so. I hope not. Guilt for keeping this giant secret, for feeling as if I was deceiving them. Even though I apparently wasn’t, nothing will ever change the way I felt. Almost all the time. That’s what hurts the most. They could have stopped it by speaking to me about it. *I could have stopped it by speaking to them about it. But they didn’t. And I didn’t.*” *Guess I still have some of my Catholic boy conscience, after all.*

“We all live with regrets.” Kyle’s touch and tone encouraged Dan to sit up and look him in the face. “Whatever we did wrong or failed to do. We learn from our mistakes if we can, and then move on. You and your family both made mistakes, but you still love them?”

“Yeah. Although right now I kind of hate them, too.”

“Understandable. But when the time is right, not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, you will all patch things up and move on.”

“Someday.” *I guess I don’t truly want to be estranged from them for long.* “It’s funny, I was so afraid of them kicking me out, and instead, I kicked myself out. Well, I stormed off. Not the behavior they expect from me.”

“Then maybe it was overdue.” Kyle stood up then, pulling Dan with him, holding him tight, and said softly, “Just consider. If you had been out, you probably would already have had a boyfriend that night we met at Jacob and Leo’s.”

*No!* Dan clutched Kyle tighter at the thought of never having met him, or not having been free to get to know him, because at that moment, he couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. “So maybe it was like Rebel and me, or you and Scorch, or you and Kiko. Finding each other at just the right time?”

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Coincidence? Or fate? His thoughts and emotions finally stopped their chaotic freefall, and settled.

And suddenly he became aware of the bare skin of Kyle's back beneath his hands, realized the other man was wearing only loose cotton shorts. He could feel Kyle's nipple rings pressing against his own chest. Dan pulled back a few inches, and Kyle loosened his hold a little.

Dan reached a hand out to touch Kyle's beard-rough jaw. "You took time to put on more than half a dozen tattoos, but you forgot to shave?"

"I was planning on it. I only meant to nap for a short while, and I thought I would have time after you called." Kyle gave Dan a final light hug and released him. "Why don't we both go get washed up?"

Dan retreated to the hall bathroom, washing his face, getting rid of all the evidence of tears. Then he brushed his teeth with the toothbrush Kyle had given him several weeks ago.

Back in the living room, he retrieved Kyle's phone from the daybed and placed it on a table, then straightened the sheets and placed the slipcover back on. He passed into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, and let the anxious dogs outside.

Kyle joined him on the patio, and they settled together onto the rocking bench. Kyle had shaved, but hadn't bothered to put on anything else, other than a pair of sandals. Dan tried to pick out some of the constellations, but Kyle's presence distracted him. He closed his eyes and leaned back. Together they rocked gently, peacefully, as the dogs finished their rounds of the backyard, then came up, seeking reassurance and love and good scratching.

Back in the house, Kyle settled the dogs as Dan rinsed out his glass and placed it in the strainer.

Then their eyes met, electricity zinging between them.

Dan took a step towards Kyle, hesitant, although he had been snuggled up against the man just minutes before. "So, I am definitely out now."

Kyle smiled slowly. "You are."

"Have I completed the obstacle course?"

Kyle pretended to contemplate as he looked Dan over. "Definitely. Maybe you stumbled a couple of times, but you got through it."

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“Have I earned my reward then?” Dan closed the distance between them. “I promise to do my best to touch all the correct spots in the next event.”

Kyle laughed. And kissed him. With purpose. Finally. And Dan felt himself shake loose of his internal holds. At last. He felt no guilt, nothing secret, nothing furtive. Only joy in the moment. Like a dog free of its leash or a butterfly free of its cocoon. Free to jump and run or free to spread his new wings and fly.

They stumbled down the hall, still kissing, as Kyle pulled Dan's shirt free. Skin to skin. Much better. Then they entered the bedroom and closed the door, leaving the dogs on the other side.

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Dan woke with a smile on his face. In the light of morning, he felt a bit of regret for the way the scene with his family had ended, but after that... *best night ever*. He snuggled down, reluctant to admit he was awake, trying to recapture sleep. But morning light and the sound of birds through the open window recalled him to a sense of duty. He opened his eyes, blinking at the clock. *Almost eight?* Maybe Nisaba and Maat were even now dreaming up Internet entries about his cruelty in being so late with breakfast. And the dogs probably needed to go out, although he thought he vaguely recalled Kyle letting them out earlier.

Kyle still slept beside him, and Dan took the opportunity to admire the tattoos and piercings again. Especially the piercings. Dan had loved playing with the nipple rings. Kyle had pulled off his eternity earrings before they fell asleep, but he still wore the little sapphire stud in his nose, instead of the almost invisible clear retainer he wore during the work week.

Rolling out of bed, Dan made his way to the bathroom. By the time he took a quick shower and dressed in yesterday's clothes, Kyle was awake and stretching. Dan slid easily into his arms and they held each other close, as touch rekindled memories of the night before. The good part of the night.

“I have to go feed the cats.”

Kyle processed the information, thinking. “I can go with you, then we can grab some breakfast on the way back. Leave the dogs here. Or we can take the dogs with us and eat breakfast at your place. Just give me a few minutes to get cleaned up.”

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They spent the day together. After feeding the cats, eating their own breakfast, and playing with the cats, Kyle applied a rainbow trinity heart temp tattoo to Dan's left bicep to match the one on his own hand. Then they took the dogs for a long walk on one of the desert trails and ate a late lunch at Kyle's. Kyle graded papers while Dan watched a movie, they fixed dinner together, and decided to stay the night at Dan's to see how the cats and dogs got along. Maat and Nisaba, even though they rarely slept with Dan, objected strongly to being shut out of the bedroom, particularly Maat, who ignored the presence of the dogs in order to wail plaintively outside the door for a long time, occasionally scratching at the wood, to see whether the men would relent. They managed to ignore her.

Sunday morning, back at Kyle's, they set up the full array of agility equipment, and Dan watched as Kyle ran Kiko through different configurations. She seemed happy to be able to show off her moves. Then they lowered the heights of the equipment and Dan led Rebel through shorter combinations of three or four obstacles. Rebel seemed comfortable with both tunnels, the dogwalk, the pause table, and even the lowest setting of the A-frame. After lunch, when everyone had rested, they started training Rebel to jump, with the bar at its lowest setting, inches lower than he would be expected to jump in competition.

Mid-afternoon, two of Kyle's frequent dog sitters stopped by. Benjamin and Lana were siblings, in their sophomore and junior years respectively. Together with a third student, they took turns stopping by Kyle's at set times during the week to play with Kiko. In exchange, Kyle provided them a quiet place to study in one of the guest bedrooms or on the patio or deck, free use of his Internet, and periodic gift certificates to the online retailer or local restaurant of their choosing. Dan introduced Rebel to them, and he explained some of the breed-specific traits of beagles.

Dan spent Sunday night with Kyle and felt a pang in his heart as he left Rebel behind the next morning. He stopped at his own home to tend to his cats, giving them extra attention, and then got ready for work. He arrived early, and the first thing he did was access the online site where he could tap into Kyle's security cameras with the IP addresses and password Kyle had given him. They were off, which meant Kyle was still at home, because he only activated the live feed when he left the property and turned on the alarm system. Dan resisted the urge to call him and ask after Rebel.

He had just started to work on closing out client accounts from recently completed cases when his office phone rang. He answered it absently, without checking the caller ID. If he had seen who was calling, he might have let it go to voice mail.

“Dan! Why haven’t you been answering your cell phone? We’ve been trying to get in touch with you.”

“Hi, Dad. I must’ve forgotten to turn it on.” Dan winced at the apologetic tone in his voice.

“All weekend?”

*Had other things on my mind.* “I guess so.” *And I am glad that I did. Wasn’t ready to talk to you. Still may not be. I know I need to let it go, though. So talk and make up.*

“We thought maybe you were ill. You didn’t bring Rebel by this morning. And you seemed... upset on Friday.”

*Upset? Yeah, just a little.* “I left Rebel with a friend today. Wasn’t sure if you were still willing to take care of him.” *Wasn’t sure if I was ready to see you.*

His father sighed. “Dan, we’ve been taking care of Rebel almost as long as you’ve had him. Just because you’re having a tantrum or sulking is no reason to upset his routine.”

*Sulking?* Evidently he was not over being hurt or mad. “Dad, how long have you and Mom known? And please be honest.”

“Dan, we have never lied to you.”

“But you haven’t always been honest, either.”

“And you have?”

“Dad, please, just answer the question. *How long have you known?* Five years? Ten?”

Only silence came from the other end of the line. Dan was about to hang up when his father finally spoke. “We began to suspect when you were in high school. We didn’t know then, it was just a suspicion. You were quiet and self-sufficient and never seemed troubled. And you never did anything overt, you never said anything. You had both male and female friends, but no one seemed special to you. We were frankly glad when you didn’t show any romantic interest in anyone and seemed content to focus on your schoolwork.”

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“Did you hope I wasn’t gay?”

“Probably at one point, yes. For your sake as much as for ours. But when you never brought any girls home in college, never looked at them the way Sergio and Rafael did, and reacted in certain ways to legislative and political news, or the treatment of gay stars, we knew.”

His fears confirmed. “Do you have any idea what it cost me to keep being gay a secret for ten years? Or even the last seven? Or at least think that I was keeping it a secret? Can you at least use your imagination for a moment and put yourself in my shoes?”

“I can’t believe you thought we didn’t know.”

“I didn’t think you would *want* to know. Either of you. You never, *not once*, gave any indication you thought being gay was acceptable. Never spoke out when anti-gay measures were being discussed by the state legislature. If you had asked me, or even let me know without asking me that being gay was okay, I would have told you.”

Another moment of silence, then, “What did you think we were going to do? Disown you?”

*Yes. Maybe.* Dan finally answered, “That happens far more often than you seem to realize.” *But no, probably not. It would have been hard for me to take care of everyone if I had been kicked out of the family, wouldn’t it? Okay, that’s unfair.* “I did what I felt I needed to do at the time, but you have no idea how hard it was, how much guilt I felt keeping silent. If I had known that you knew, my life would have been a lot different. Because of that secret, I sacrificed potential friendships and made choices to do things I might not have otherwise done. And you know what? I would have liked to have had another adult to lean on these last few years for support. Not just my cats, much as I love them.” *At least I had some friends here at work willing to help me when I needed it the most, even when I didn’t know it.*

His dad mumbled something too low for Dan to hear.

“Look, I can’t talk about this right now. I’ll bring Rebel by tomorrow as long as it’s not a problem. Maybe we can talk about this over the weekend. I’m sorry if you think I am ungrateful or blowing this out of proportion. I know part of this... lack of communication... is my fault. But not all of it. I was just a kid when this pattern of silence was established, a kid tired from years of family drama and conflict. You relied on me to be the good kid. So I don’t want all the blame for keeping quiet.”

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He hung up the office phone. After staring unseeingly at the computer screen for several minutes, he fished out his cell phone and turned it on, noting several voicemail messages from his parents, one from Adrianna, and a text message from Tara. He ignored them all and tossed the phone onto his desk. *Brain in gear. Settle the accounts of satisfied clients. Focus on the job.*

His internal pep talk helped. For a while. As he ate lunch, he connected to Kyle's security feed and briefly looked at the dogs lounging together on the daybed. Seeing Rebel and Kiko so peaceful helped settle him enough to get him through the rest of the afternoon. At one point, he relented enough to send Tara a reassuring e-mail, and got a message full of animated hug emoticons in return. Who was reassuring whom?

After work he went directly to Kyle's. A tantalizing scent teased him as soon as he entered the house, luring him back into the kitchen. Kyle stirred a spoon in a large pot, while both dogs watched him with hopeful expressions. Rebel bounded over to Dan, as Kyle put his spoon down. Rebel got hugs and a good scratch. Kyle got a hug and a slow kiss.

"Curry again?" Dan asked, tasting the spice on Kyle.

"Vegetable and lentil curry stew. I walked the dogs, but Rebel should still be up for some training. Reinforce the newest stuff, the jumps."

As Kyle finished cooking, Dan took Rebel out back, where many of the obstacles were still set up from the day before. After they were done, he helped Kyle disassemble and store the equipment. Dinner ended far too quickly, and with a few lingering kisses and much regret, Dan took Rebel and left. Even knowing he would see Kyle in only two days did nothing to ease the sudden pang he felt at their separation. Only the knowledge that Maat and Nisaba were waiting for him kept him from turning around. As his car idled at a red light, Dan touched his arm where the temp tattoo still stood as a symbol of their feelings, of the chances or whims of fate weaving their lives together.

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## Chapter Eleven

### *Weave Poles*

On Tuesday morning, Dan dropped Rebel off in his parents' backyard and snuck away without seeing anyone. He didn't have time for, or feel in the mood for, another confrontation. Or even a civilized discussion. Not yet.

He and Jacob went to the gym after work, and Jacob gave an appreciative whistle at the sight of Dan's temp tattoo.

"Feeling brave today, are you?"

"Only about some things, unfortunately. Thanks for giving me the kick I needed to reboot my life." Dan paused, searching for the right analogy. "I guess my processes were stuck in a loop or something. My new program is definitely helping."

Jacob laughed at the word play effort. After Dan shared an abbreviated and edited version of the recent events, Jacob gave Dan the nonjudgmental encouragement and support he had come to expect from the other man. "That night at our party I just wanted you to relax and have some fun. Never thought of you and Kyle together until then, but I should have. You two are good for each other. If we don't count the whole telling-the-family mess, you are the happiest I have ever seen you. And I think Kyle is, too. He needed an animal person in his life."

Dan made plans to come out to his friends at work and let the word slowly spread. Although, now that he thought about it, he wouldn't be surprised if several of them had not already guessed, or at least suspected. If his family knew, then perhaps his friends did as well. He would start with Heather and Joe. Heather would know if anyone had speculated about his orientation behind his back. And she might even be honest if he asked her about it.

Wednesday dragged at work, but when Dan and Rebel arrived home, his spirits instantly lifted when he found Kyle's vehicle parked to one side of his driveway. Inside he found Kiko playing with a new chewtoy, while Kyle sat on his couch, with his feet on the second-hand coffee table, reading—or attempting to read—a thick document with the dubious help of the cats. Maat sprawled in his lap, taking up far too much space, while Nisaba sat nearby, occasionally batting a paw at Kyle's red pen.



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“I see you’ve been adopted.”

“Yes, I make a fine cat bed.” Kyle stuck the pen in the document as a bookmark, and shoved it in his bag, then gently dislodged Maat, who gave him a sleepy glare before curling up in the spot where he had been sitting. Then Dan and Kyle were in each other’s arms as if they had been separated for two months rather than two days, drawing apart only when the need to breathe became imperative.

After walking the dogs, they prepared a quick meal of salad and shrimp scampi over angel hair pasta. They finished with mint gelato and coffee. Then they snuggled on the couch, only paying half-hearted attention to the television. Maat pretended to ignore Kiko, walking by her with a new I-don’t-see-you-and-you-don’t-matter air, while still keeping watchful eyes on the bull terrier. When Nisaba walked by, dragging a gym sock, Kiko grabbed one end of it, and a brief game of tug-of-war ensued. Both of the animals enjoyed it. Although it did not end well for the poor sock.

Heartened by the animal congeniality, Dan put Rebel’s bed in the hall near the bedroom door. Kyle, who had brought over one of Kiko’s oversized pet pillows and a favorite blanket, placed them nearby. Then they snuck into the bedroom, hoping the presence of the dogs might dissuade the cats from yowling outside the closed door. The ploy succeeded, at least for one night.

Thursday, Dan stopped at the grocery store on the way home and succumbed to the lure of fresh basil plants and containers of basil clippings. He washed and spun several cups of basil leaves, setting them aside as he peeled garlic cloves. He did not expect the knock on his door. Not Kyle, not tonight. Unfortunately. Too late for deliveries, and besides, he wasn’t expecting a package. Maybe a salesperson or a neighbor? He went to open the door, gently nudging the cats aside.

“Rafael?” Dan stared at his younger brother, frozen, before remembering his manners. “Let me grab the cats. Come on in.”

He got a firm grip on his sneaky cats as Rafael opened the screen and slipped into the house.

“Is something wrong?”

“Can’t I just be here for a friendly visit?”

Dan could count on one hand the number of times Rafael had been to his house, so he contented himself with walking the short distance back to the

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kitchen and gesturing his brother to a seat at the dining table. "Something to drink? Beer? Water? Juice?"

"Beer's good."

Dan passed Rafael a bottle of lager and started toasting his garlic, needing to keep his hands busy.

"Did I interrupt your dinner?"

"Not yet. Making pesto. Might eat a little tonight, but I am going to freeze most of it."

Rafael toyed with his bottle. "I am going to try to just come out and say this. I don't have a problem with you being gay. You're still my brother. And there are lots of gay guys in my classes. I didn't understand at first why you ran out on Friday. Dude, you were so angry about the garage, then so pale after you, uh, came out. I was scared for you. I thought you would be glad we all knew. Adrianna explained it to me. She knows so many people, you know, from working at the salon and talking to other mothers at toddler playgroups and library time and stuff. And I also talked to some of the guys at school. So I heard stories about kids getting kicked out of their homes and stuff, even here in Tucson."

"Yeah, it happens." He thought of Kyle, of other boys and men he had known.

"The thing is, I feel bad for never seeing that you needed us to talk to you about it. You have always been, well, quiet and responsible and self-contained. Private. You never talked much about your life apart from school or work or the animals, but I always just thought you wanted to keep your, uh, friends away from Mom and Dad, not because you didn't have a life.

"I remember you taking care of me when I was a kid, teaching me to ride a bike, looking out for me when we were in the same school. You were always there to talk to me about, you know, *stuff*. Especially when I was too embarrassed to talk to Dad or Mom. Although I guess I didn't pay enough attention, or maybe Adrianna wouldn't have gotten pregnant. Not that I wish we didn't have Tomas or anything like that."

Dan thought of his nephew and smiled. "He is a blessing to you both."

"And you should be grateful for that at least. Since Adrianna and I have kids, Mom won't be nagging you for children and trying to hook you up with a woman, despite everything. And Dad gets little Zanettis."

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Dan gave a reluctant laugh. “True enough. Hadn’t thought of that. The thought of Mom trying to match me with a different woman at every meal is...” He shuddered. In hindsight, maybe the fact that she had never brought an eligible woman over should have been a red flag. Adrianna had tried to pair him with some of her female friends and cousins, but not, he realized, for at least two years. “Okay. Thanks for carrying on the family bloodlines.”

“You’re welcome.” Rafael smiled, relaxing a bit. “And if you want to know how I knew, I saw how you looked at Travis when he played keyboard for us a couple of years ago. And he said he had, uh, seen you somewhere, but he wouldn’t say where. Asked me if I thought you would go out with him.”

“He asked. I said no. I always said no. Until recently.” Dan tossed pine nuts into the skillet with the garlic. Better not to mention to Rafael that he actually had considered hooking up once or twice with Travis at their mutual hangout, but had held back because of the musician’s association with his brother. He might have changed his mind, in time, but Travis had followed his dreams to California.

“Anyhow, I just never knew you were hurting. Or that you needed us to be there *for you*. You were so busy taking care of Dad and Mom and Tara after the accident, and I know I wasn’t a whole lot of help. I should have been there to help you, to give you a break, to let you get out of the house. But since you were still living there, it just seemed easier to let you deal with it all.”

Dan finally admitted to his brother what he had not told anyone else. “I was planning to move out.”

“Move out?”

“That summer. Before the accident. I was going to go on a road trip with some friends, then come back and move out. I had saved up enough money to cover rent for most of the school year. I was on the top of the waiting list for a tiny apartment in a triplex, just for some privacy, with fallback places all lined up.”

“Jeez, Dan, I’m so sorry. I never knew. Man, that must’ve sucked. I mean on top of everything else.”

Dan looked back in time. “Don’t get me wrong, I love Mom and Dad, but I wanted out of that house so fucking bad. Just out from under their roof. I know they needed to save money for you and Tara, which was why I was going to pay for the rent myself. Living there those first three years was like being a

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high-school student with a curfew, even though I was over eighteen. *'Why won't you be home for dinner? Let us know when you get in. Have you done your homework?'* I don't want that for Tara."

"Tara doesn't want that for Tara."

"No kidding. Want to stay for dinner? I'll tell you the story about Tara's ploy to break Mom's resistance." Dan laughed, as he realized it had been pretty hilarious, now that he was no longer in the middle. "Call Adrianna from out back, I need to run the food processor for a while."

By the time Rafael returned from phoning Adrianna and washing his hands, Dan had finished the pesto and was heating up leftover angel hair and dicing roasted red peppers and peeling the leftover shrimp.

"I should learn to cook more. You make that look so easy. Why do you have two dog beds in your hallway?"

Dan blushed. "Um... one belongs to Kiko, my boyfriend's dog. We thought if we left it there, the cats would get used to her scent faster."

Rafael smiled the mischievous, carefree smile of old, the one he had worn when he first rode a bike by himself, or narrowly missed careening into a pole while on his roller blades, or planned to surprise his music teacher with a new song he had learned on his own. "Boyfriend, huh? I am not sure if I should ask you to tell me everything or if I should ask you not to tell me anything." His brother contemplated, undecided. "Well, you can pick what you think I want to know. And if he hurts you, I will totally help you beat him up. Even if I can't play for a week because my hands are too bruised."

Dan almost spilled the wine he was pouring for himself all over the counter at that. "Thanks! A truly magnanimous offer. Seriously, I'm touched, but I hope that's not necessary."

"Hope not. I know you are the smart one, well you and Tara, but sometimes you are totally clueless about certain things."

Dan took both the compliment and the insult in stride. "Yeah, I have begun to realize that. So be a good brother and clue me in. I will tell you one detail about Kyle though—he is way hotter than Travis was."

Over dinner, he told Rafael about the trick Tara and her friends had played, and they reminisced about their childhood, family vacations, visiting their grandparents in California, happier memories of their parents, activities they

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had done together despite their age gap. Then they turned to more serious topics, talking together as adults about their parents, particularly Mom's recovery and Dad's therapy.

Rafael apologized again to Dan for leaving him to bear the entire burden the past few years. "I thought—I wanted to think—that you had everything under control. You never complained or asked for help. If you had, I would have helped. Maybe not as well as you did it, but I would have tried. And maybe Adrianna or some of her family would have also."

"Some of that was my fault for not asking, then," Dan admitted. "And I knew you were young and busy, but I am asking now. I can't do this alone anymore. Especially with Tara leaving. She helped more than she should have had to also, especially running errands after school."

At that, Rafael looked guilty, but Dan shook his head. "Let's look forward. What we need to do is split the tasks and get both our parents more involved in doing things for themselves. Yes, Dad is in a wheelchair, but Mom isn't. Now that she's clean, she can drive again if she feels motivated to. And we need to get both of them out of the house more. They shouldn't be cooped up in there day after day. It's not healthy, even if Dad's working. And Mom needs a hobby or a volunteer job."

They discussed possible ways to get both their parents out of the house and more active in the world beyond. Rafael suggested Adrianna could take Mom to some of the more female-oriented gatherings of her family, some of which sounded like activities Mom might actually like, and suggested Mom or Dad could watch his kids while he did his share of the yard work and errands, which would be easier without the children in tow.

Dan sent his brother home with a grateful hug and a container of pesto, sharing a better understanding of each other than they had enjoyed in years.

When he dropped off and picked up Rebel on Friday, he even managed a brief, only slightly awkward, chat with his parents, mainly about Rebel and the weather and a white-winged dove which had been bullying the rest of the smaller birds at the feeder. He had thought his world was finally about to settle into a new pattern. Then Sergio sent him a text, asking him to Skype. And the whole pattern shifted.

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Dan stood next to Kyle inside the converted barn at PAO, looking at the layout of the ring and comparing them to three versions of the course map.

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Even he could tell that changing the obstacle order around would alter the difficulty and require more attention from both dog and handler.

They had brought both Rebel and Kiko this morning, both to socialize Rebel into the class environment, and to give Kiko practice on a new arrangement. The following week would bring Rebel's first chance at attempting as much of the course as he could, at a lower height setting. Rebel had behaved remarkably well today, especially given Dan's own distracted state.

Sighing, Dan put down the papers. "Do you ever feel as if you started one course, and all of a sudden, someone changed the order, and maybe even the obstacles, and didn't bother to tell you?"

"I certainly have in the past. Is this about your parents? Your brother? Or us?"

"Family. But especially Sergio." Dan reached down to pet Rebel. "Seriously, he was the last person I expected to hear from. I mean, apart from superficial conversations when he passes through, we haven't talked in years."

"So why did he call now?"

"Dad told him. About me, about the incident at dinner. Maybe other stuff, for all I know."

"And?"

"I didn't even know he and Dad were talking. Sergio says they Skype regularly. He and Dad. They fought all the time when he was growing up, but now, he talks to Dad more than anyone else in the family. Even Mom. He says he prefers to e-mail Mom because sometimes she gets too emotional if they talk, and he doesn't need the distraction when he's deployed. And he didn't say that to be mean, he was just being matter-of-fact about what was best for him and his men. Funny, I still sometimes see him as an overly emotional, high-strung, messed-up teen, younger than I am now, but he's been a soldier for ten years. He's all grown up and mature and responsible."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's weird, too. I guess I kind of wrote him off. Hell, he may have written himself off for a while. Not anymore. He told me that since he was the master of fighting with one's family, I should learn from his mistakes and not drag out patching things up too long. He admitted to me that if our parents

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had died in the car accident, when he was on a previous deployment, his biggest regret would have been not being on speaking terms with them.”

Dan paused, thinking back to the conversation, remembering the sight of a somber Sergio in his uniform. His older brother, at least, had claimed to have been surprised by Dan's revelation, although he, too, expressed no problems with having a gay brother.

“It was actually kind of surreal. He said he knew how I felt about the family not telling me things, because he didn't learn about the accident until weeks later. And then no one bothered to tell him about Mom's problems until after the fact, so he was furious with both Dad and me about that. And he was right, I should have told him, should have tried to contact him, or mentioned it when he was in town. Something. Not assumed he wouldn't care.”

He wiggled his foot on the floor until his sole squeaked. “He congratulated me on having the guts to finally stand up for myself, though. Said he was glad to know I could do it. When I said I wasn't certain if I even knew all the reasons why I got emotional and angry, he said, *‘Welcome to my teenage years’*.”

Kyle choked as he held down a laugh. “I think I might like this missing brother of yours.”

“I don't know when Sergio became smart, but he nailed all of us. *‘I like to confront my problems head-on and can handle a good fight. Rafael is like Mom, and will ignore a problem, hoping it goes away, or will leave to avoid confrontation. Dad and Tara are manipulators. And you, Dan, you are a peacemaker and will do whatever seems best at any moment to smooth things over, and you are so determined to be good and helpful and take care of people, you don't realize when they are walking all over you.’* And I think he's probably right.”

Kyle looked at the pair in the ring, as he took Dan's hand and squeezed it lightly. “So what are you going to do about it?”

Dan turned and looked at Kyle, smiling but serious. “I think I need to learn how to fight with you sometimes.” His smile grew at Kyle's startled look. “Not that I think you will try to walk over me, just so that I know I can stand up for myself. We need to kick good, passive Dan to the curb.”

“You are going to work to bring forth the rebellious Dan?”

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“Yeah. Except maybe at work. Besides, if we do fight, then we can make up, right?”

“I certainly would hope so.” Kyle kissed him lightly. “I look forward to it. And consider me warned. Do you want to fight now, or do you want to watch Kiko and me in the ring?”

Dan pretended to consider.

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“I know you and your brother are cleaning your parents’ garage next weekend,” Kyle commented after lunch. “Want to get some practice in and help me finish straightening mine?”

“Sure. Why? Are you getting another car?” Dan teased. Kyle already had two vehicles: his everyday crossover SUV and the classic sports car bequeathed to him by his uncle. The latter vehicle was safely protected under a car cover even inside the garage. Kyle told Dan he only used it on special occasions, as a date car, but they could take it for a drive or use it when they went to eat at a good restaurant. Somewhere he felt safe parking it.

After rearranging the motley piles of miscellaneous items in the unused bay on a newly assembled shelving unit along the far wall and setting some stuff aside to get donated or tossed, plenty of room was available to park a third vehicle. One pile of wood they unearthed proved to be the remnants of the old cat towers and walkways that had once been in the cat room. Kyle looked it over. “Not sure why I didn’t toss it when we pulled it out. Fate? I am not sure how much of it is reusable, but you can use it to get measurements if you want to replicate it, or design something similar.”

As Dan’s heart raced at the implication that he and the cats would one day be part of Kyle’s household, even without the invitation being formally issued, Kyle pressed a keychain garage door remote into his hand.

Dan thanked him, hugging him tight, before adding, “Of course I’m not sure my piece of junk is worthy of being in a garage.”

“Well, you won’t be driving it forever. Since I don’t think it will last that long.”

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## Chapter Twelve

### *Finish*

Monday after work, Dan sat down with his parents—in the living room, not at the dining room table where their last dramatic encounter had taken place. It occurred to Dan that he had not eaten there since that night, nor spent more than five minutes at a time under his parents' roof. And for the first time in years, he had gone more than a week without running any errands for them. *Sorry, Tara. Hope I didn't make it too hard on you.*

Dan felt surprisingly ready to face whatever they said. Three nights and two days with Kyle left him happy and relaxed. Honestly, he wouldn't have been surprised to see himself glowing. Saturday, he and Kyle and the dogs had gone downtown, wandering between the different music venues of the Tucson Folk Festival. Sunday, Tex and Tony hosted an early family-friendly Cinco de Mayo potluck brunch, complete with a creative set of backyard games and table crafts for the kids. Dan still had small sparkle-glitter handprints on the legs of his shorts, from when he had ventured too close, in an ill-advised attempt to see what the children were doing, and ended up in the middle of a spontaneous glitter hug-fest. Most of it had probably rinsed out of his hair. He hoped.

Dan settled into the couch. Each of his siblings had shocked him in one way or another recently, so Dan waited to see if his parents would do the same. He was going to let them speak first.

“We owe you an apology,” his father began. “We talked over what happened at dinner and what you said last Friday, and thought back over the years, and you were right. We did not want you to be gay. When you were in college, we may have told ourselves that we were okay with it and that we would support you if you told us, but you were correct when you accused us of never doing anything to encourage you to tell us.” Dad reached over and put his hand over Mom's. “As long as you didn't tell us, we could pretend that maybe it wasn't true, even though we knew it was. We could imagine that you had a secret girlfriend somewhere you just didn't want to talk about. And we purposely kept any discussion of gay politics away from you when you were younger, when we thought maybe you were just confused, and it just got to be a habit over the years.”

“I knew I was gay when I was fifteen. Maybe younger.”

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His mother winced.

“Is that why you wouldn’t let me move out when I was in college? So you could keep an eye on me?” That question had nagged at Dan since the previous week.

His parents looked at each other, then Mom spoke softly, “Mostly it was to save up money, we did still have Rafi and Tara to worry about. But yes, we hoped you would give us some indication, talk about your friends, and you would have more opportunity to talk if you lived at home. I don’t think we consciously thought if you lived at home you would be less likely to... have a relationship, but I can’t deny it could have played a role in our thinking.”

“Well you might not have thought it, but it worked. I didn’t dare have a boyfriend for fear you would hear about it. And it was a damned lonely way to live. I wanted what almost every kid that age wanted—a chance to be happy, to find a partner, if only for a few years.” Dan contemplated telling them that, if not for the accident, he would have moved out but wasn’t sure what purpose that admission would serve.

His father continued his apology with, “When you fought with Rafael about cleaning the garage on Friday and mentioned how much you have done the last four years, I knew you spoke the truth. And I recalled a few weeks ago when you said something about not being this family’s slave, a statement I brushed off at the time. But you truly felt that way.”

Dan looked at his work shoes, noting he needed to take care of some scuffs in the leather. “At times. I felt like I got stuck with the burden of caring for the whole family, but I felt shut out of it, too. Weeks went by where no one bothered to thank me for anything, or even say please. Just, Dan I need this, and Dan do that. And that wasn’t fair to me.”

“No, it wasn’t,” his mother agreed. “It wasn’t until Rafael and Adrianna came by and asked what they could do this week to give you a break that we realized how much you do—how much you did—for us. And apart from a few meals, we never showed our gratitude.”

“You took care of Rebel for me. I appreciated that.” Dan looked each of his parents in the eyes. “What I need to know *now* is whether or not you accept me as I am? Accept me as gay? I am finally remembering what it is to be happy. And I don’t want to lose that.”

Dad spoke first. “We refused to see—we didn’t want to see—that you were not happy before. You have changed the last couple of months, smiling when

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you think no one is looking, humming. And I don't want you to lose being happy, either. So, yes, I accept you as you are. And I apologize sincerely and regret deeply that I let you believe otherwise for so long."

Mom wiped back her tears. "And I want you to be happy, too. I am sorry. Not only for ignoring your needs about being gay, but especially for those first years after the accident. If it weren't for my... weakness and addiction, then you would not have been burdened so heavily. I need to thank you for everything you did for me, for your father, for Tara. Without you, this family would have fallen apart. We depended on you, and you came through for us, but we failed you." She blew her nose. "Yes, Danilo. I accept you as you are, as my gay son. And I am proud of who you have become."

At that Dan felt tears come, too. Good tears. Healing tears. The years of hiding, of unacknowledged resentment, of bearing a heavy burden alone, were finally over. He didn't know if his parents would mean it forever, but they meant it now, at this moment. And he remembered, distantly, the night he met Kyle, Leo had told him to take a leap of faith. And he had taken several since then, some larger than others. He swiped a quick hand across his face and managed a tentative smile. And leapt over the edge of the cliff.

"Does this mean you two would be willing to meet my boyfriend?"

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Kyle accompanied Dan when he went to help clean his family's garage, both to meet his family, and because the men didn't want to waste any of their limited time together. Kyle wore a thin, faded, paint-stained long-sleeve work shirt over another tee—one loose enough that the nipple rings probably wouldn't show. He didn't wear any nose jewelry today, but did sport a pair of topaz ear studs in a shade of blue almost matching his eyes. He had confessed to Dan that during college he had worn blue streaks in his hair more than once, even shown him a couple of old photos.

The garage cleaning project became a family affair. Tara moved the family car outside. Dad stationed his wheelchair near a card table set up in the vacated space. Mom brought a patio chair in, and alternated between sorting and directing the proceedings. When Rafael found an old photo of Sergio, Dan set it up on the table so that the absent member of the family could be remembered, even if not present.

They sorted through boxes of clothes, books, toys, games, school papers, and computer discs and video games for obsolete systems. Laughter and

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nostalgic reminiscing accompanied the finds. They found a box of memorabilia from Mom's family that she had thought lost in the house somewhere, and she gratefully looked through it, promising to tell her offspring about the items at a later date. As a group, they discussed which toys and games could be cleaned or salvaged and which should be tossed. Some were set aside for Tomas and Cori and others for donation. Many books, either gifts or a particular favorite of one person or another, could suddenly not be parted with by their owners, even though they had sat boxed and forgotten for who knows how many years.

Kyle volunteered to take charge of the donations, splitting the toys and games between Tex's pediatric ward and a thrift store that raised money for children in shelter care. The clothes were also to be divvied up between several charities. Old videotapes of TV shows were tossed, purchased videotapes slated for the public library fundraiser.

When Dan found his old high school yearbooks, Kyle immediately took possession of them.

"Hey, no fair!" Dan protested, making a grab for them. "I don't get to see yours."

Kyle held the books away from Dan, grinning. "I have my last two somewhere. I'll share if you will."

Dan pretended to sulk, but inside he felt warmed as Kyle flipped through the yearbooks.

Rafael became enthralled with music sheets from childhood lessons and wondered how soon his son could start learning the keyboard. Tara reminded him that Adrianna had already confiscated the boy's xylophone and claimed, teasingly, that Tomas showed no signs of his father's musical talent. Much bickering ensued.

Within a few hours, everything was sorted, with separate piles for the donated items, those to stay at the house, and those to be taken by Dan or Rafael. Sergio's boxes remained neatly labeled and sealed in one corner, pending his next visit. They retired into the house to wash up, with Dan and Kyle letting the dogs outside for a romp.

Fortunately, his parents had learned about Kyle's career before he removed his work shirt, because they both seemed stunned by the tattoos, much to Dan's amusement. Mom even shot Dan a look of disbelief. He just winked and shrugged.

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Over lunch—featuring homemade green chile and chicken tamales—his family interrogated Kyle.

When Mom asked about his family, Kyle responded, “My grandparents died just under ten years ago and my uncle four years ago.”

“And your parents?”

Kyle shrugged, expression hardening. “As far as I know, they’re still alive. Haven’t heard otherwise.”

“You don’t know?” She appeared stunned.

“Ma’am, you and Dr. Zanetti have accepted Dan.” Fortunately for the peace of the conversation, Kyle did not comment on how long that acceptance took. “My birth parents never accepted me after learning I was gay. The day they decided to send me away to get ‘fixed’ was the day I stopped considering them to be family.”

Kyle paused, looking around the table and meeting each person’s eyes. “Being accepted—as I was, in my entirety—by my grandparents and my uncle was the biggest blessing of my life. They were my family. I was lucky after they took me in, because I never had to hide after that.”

Dan’s parents both shot him guilty looks.

Dan reached out and took Kyle’s hand. “Now you have me.”

Kyle looked at him, smiled. “Now I have you. And Kiko and Rebel and Nisaba and Maat.”

And in front of his family, Dan leaned over and kissed Kyle.

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As May crept onwards, the palo verde trees finally lost all their yellow flowers and pink blossoms appeared on the ironwood trees. Dan and Kyle settled into their relationship as spring gave way to summer. They trained the dogs, more in the mornings than the increasingly warm evenings, and went on excursions with their friends. Kyle attended Tara’s high school graduation with Dan. Dan accompanied Kyle to an end-of-semester dinner at the Foothills home of one of Kyle’s fellow faculty members; they took the sports car, convertible top down, and left the dogs at home. They went to hear Rafael play twice, once at a community college music department event, once when his band—with a new drummer—played in one of the local bars.

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Maintaining two households had become an irritation, and they rejoiced the morning they emerged from Dan's bedroom to find all four animals snuggled together on Kiko's pillow. Rebel and Kiko lay side by side with their heads together. Nisaba curled up against Rebel's side, and Maat formed a gray ball on top of the two dogs, her white paws invisible against Kiko's fur.

"Do you think the cats are ready to move to my house now? *Our* house? Our *much bigger* house? I can work from home much of next week to keep an eye on the cats, and they will have the special cat room to retreat to."

Dan looked at the pet pile, as Rebel twitched a paw. Maat opened sleepy eyes and then closed them, falling back asleep with feline ease. "I don't know about the animals, but I definitely am." He leaned back into Kyle, then turned around for a heated kiss before pulling away a few inches. "Want to help me start packing?"

"Soon. Maybe in an hour or two." And Kyle tugged him back into the bedroom.

Later, sated and showered, they started packing the more easily movable items such as clothes—although many of those had already migrated to Kyle's—and books. Maat and Nisaba helped by investigating every box, while the dogs sniffed anything that reached the floor.

Looking at a travel book of Egypt, with a camel and a pyramid—what else—on the cover, Dan began to hum "You Belong to Me" and stopped abruptly.

"I never realized what a sad song that was until now," Dan said, as Kyle looked at him. "I mean, think about it. One person is off traveling, while the other is home alone. That's just wrong. I've always wanted to see the pyramids and the tropical isle sunsets and exotic markets, but never alone. Maybe that's why, even though I saved up money, I never went. I never wanted to travel by myself. Where's the fun if you can't share it with friends, or better yet, someone you love?"

Kyle reached out and took the book away, tossing it in the nearest box, and hugged Dan hard. "We will travel together. You and me. And sometimes the dogs. See all sorts of places, and not just because of agility events. Starting this summer, Memorial Day or the Fourth of July weekend, or any other time you want. But together, no matter what."

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“Because we belong to each other. Because we love each other.” The formerly closeted, newly rebellious, overachieving, Catholic accountant and the tattooed and pierced professor, who had run from home as a rejected teen and later lost those who loved him best. Who would have thought?

“Always.”

And as they kissed, the dogs and cats crowded around them.

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## Epilogue

### *Reward*

“C’mon, Kyle, we don’t want to be late!” *And we have to leave before the cats give me their pitiful looks.* Both were underfoot, meowing, sensing something was happening. They did not like the sight of the luggage.

“Take a deep breath and start loading the car. We have plenty of time.” Kyle unplugged his iPad and shoved tablet and charger into his carry-on next to his laptop.

Dan opened his own carryon to check on his new digital camera—an early Christmas present from Kyle—and the extra batteries, memory cards, charger, and adapter. And his Kindle and its charger. And his stiff new passport.

After loading the car, saying a quick goodbye to the animals, and promising them that their favorite pet-sitter would be by soon for an extended stay, they activated the security system and headed to the airport. Dan felt so bouncy and hyper, he hoped he would be able to sit still for the flight. Maybe the second cup of coffee had been a mistake. Less than ten hours from now, including layover and airport wait times, and they would be landing in Belize! Ten days spent between Belize City and Caye Caulker. True, they would miss Christmas with his family, but they saw them all the time. The semester break had been the best time for Kyle to plan a winter getaway.

There was so much they planned on experiencing. A mountain biking trip from San Ignacio through the forests. The Mayan ruins at Xunantunich and Caracol and Altun Ha. The Belize Zoo and several wildlife sanctuaries. Snorkling at the reef by Caye Caulkner and other locations. The Blue Hole by Lighthouse Reef. They hadn’t even left Tucson yet, and Dan was already more excited than he could ever remember being in his life, except for maybe when he and Kyle... anyhow, best not to let his thoughts wander in that direction right before a long plane ride. Instead, he thought about how much he loved his current life.

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The last seven months had been a revelation, as everyone’s lives had changed for the better.



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He and the cats and Rebel had settled easily into life at the new house. Rebel adapted to visits by the pet sitters and being home with Kiko and the cats during the day. Nisaba and Maat loved the cat room, but soon staked their claim over certain other parts of the house, as well. They stayed away from the daybed as dog territory, but each had favorite spots elsewhere in the living room, particularly in the morning as the sun shone in there. Kyle lost ownership of his navy sweatshirt. Nisaba had found it folded in a corner of his office desk and adopted it as one of her special beds. She would curl up there frequently when Kyle was at his computer. Once, when Kyle tried to wash it, she sat on the spot where it had been, meowing pitifully until he returned it. Tex and Tony had brought over some of their woodworking equipment one weekend and helped Dan and Kyle design and construct two cat towers, one for the cat room and one for a corner of the living room. So now, Dan and Kyle probably had the second most-spoiled cats in the city.

The workout equipment had been moved into one of the guest rooms, and a second desk added into the office for Dan. His office needs took up much less space, at least until he started his online MBA sometime within the next year or two. Their biggest fight had been about money. Dan had offered to pay Kyle rent to help with the mortgage, but Kyle shrugged it off. Most of the money for the house had come from Kyle's inheritance from his uncle. Kyle told him he would rather Dan save his money for the MBA, for travel, and for a decent car. He would rather Dan be driving safely than anything else. So Dan contented himself with sharing the food and living expenses, at least until he got through his MBA and paid off his new car. Then maybe he would re-open the discussion.

Over the summer they had traveled—mostly short trips over long weekends. They had gone on camping and hiking trips with their friends, mostly in Arizona, but also venturing into New Mexico. They had taken Kiko to a couple of agility events, while Rebel just spectated. His turn would come. And they had spent one night in Phoenix after Kyle decided they had to go hear one of their favorite bands and not worry about making the long drive home afterwards.

Dan became bolder with his haircut and his choice of clothes, particularly during leisure hours. More comfortable with the temporary tattoos. He even toyed with the idea of eventually getting a permanent one, but he was not ready yet. Kyle bought him a small assortment of ear cuffs to wear on those occasions when he felt particularly brave. Dan even wore a plain cuff to work once or twice.

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His father had received the jumpstart he needed to no longer feel sorry for himself. Dan wasn't certain if learning about what Kyle's uncle Lucas had accomplished while deaf had been a spur, or just one factor among many. But his parents' garage now hosted a vehicle Dad could drive from his wheelchair. He was teaching part-time at the med school as an adjunct faculty member and seemed to be enjoying it. He and Kyle even shared stories and jokes about teaching and students.

Roz had performed her animal-matching miracles and somehow paired Dad with a service dog—a German shepherd / chocolate Lab mix trained to assist people in wheelchairs. Baxter accompanied Dad everywhere, even to classes. Now that Dad was following his physical therapy with renewed dedication, his upper body strength had improved. He even talked sometimes about finding investors interested in possibly setting up a wheelchair accessible golf course somewhere between Tucson and the retirement community of Green Valley.

Mom spent a few days a week with Tomas and Corinna. She also worked part-time for little pay at one of the charity stores. Both activities got her out of the house on a regular basis, and she was now driving herself around, at least during daylight hours, and running household errands again. And she helped both Roz and Tex whenever either needed volunteers for an animal rescue or pediatric fundraising event. Mom was the one who first learned of a new effort to raise money to provide a safe haven for homeless and runaway teens in Tucson and brought it to the attention of Kyle and Dan. After a quick background check of the outfit, Kyle had donated some money. The entire family was helping with the campaign, and Dan also recruited some pro bono legal work from his law firm.

Tara was happily ensconced with Aunt Nicci and attending ASU. She had bonded with Tex, of all people, and talked about going into premed in college and later becoming a pediatrician. Or maybe becoming a plant geneticist and achieving world domination through bioengineered plants. Dan wouldn't put either past her. Kyle merely asked her to make sure that her plants could defend them against an impending zombie apocalypse at the same time they eradicated world hunger and combatted climate change.

Over Labor Day weekend, Dan and Kyle hosted a potluck dinner party, their first big social event as a couple. Mom contributed several of her favorite dishes. Many of their mutual friends came, along with people from both the law firm and Kyle's department. Rafael and two of his friends brought instruments

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and played background music for a while before dinner, just for fun. To Dan's surprise, Thomas Emrich showed up, his family in tow, and spent quite a while chatting with Dad. And everyone seemed to genuinely admire the string of temporary tattoos that ran up his left arm from wrist to elbow, showing the life cycle of a butterfly from egg to caterpillar, to chrysalis, to final metamorphosis as an adult. The first set of temps Dan had designed and printed by himself.

In October, both Kiko and Rebel had participated in a local agility event, open to dogs of all levels of experience. His parents, Rafael, Adrianna, and their kids had all been there to cheer on Rebel and Kiko. Rebel performed valiantly, although he hesitated over one of his jump cues and almost ran the wrong way through the tunnel. He waited until after he had run the course to start sniffing. Dan was extremely proud of him. Kiko came in third in her height group, running a clean course, but slower than some of the other competitors. And Dan finally got to turn the tables on Kyle, presenting him with a reward for a job well done: a pair of tickets for excellent seats to a concert he knew Kyle would love.

Sergio had come home for Thanksgiving. He and Kyle had immediately hit it off. Sergio, Dan, Rafael and Kyle had gone out a couple of nights, once to a microbrewery and once to engage in slightly inebriated bowling during adults-only hours. Kyle, volunteering to be the designated driver, and thus the only sober one, raked in the best scores. Sergio talked about his girlfriend, saying he hoped to ask her to marry him, soon, and would be spending Christmas with her family. All together, the three brothers had the best time together they had ever experienced.

Tara and Aunt Nicci had come down for the Thanksgiving weekend as well. Kyle had bribed Nicci with a few flavors of homemade mochi, an Asian dessert new to Dan's entire family, and homemade baklava.

"Are you taking care of Dan?" Nicci had asked.

"We take care of each other."

And Kyle got her seal of approval with those six words. "About time."

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With the luggage checked and security checkpoints cleared, Dan finally relaxed enough to take a few deep breaths.

"Sorry if I've been a total basket case today," he apologized, after he purchased a bottle of water and they found seats.

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Kyle just laughed. “I’d probably be disappointed if you treated this as a commonplace occurrence. I know this is your dream, that you have wanted this for a long, long time. And I am excited, too. I’ve just had more experience being stuck in airports and on planes than you. But we have our e-books and audiobooks and even games to entertain us. We’ll be fine.”

Dan reached over and took Kyle’s hand, looking him in the eyes.

“Kyle, you need to know, the trip is wonderful, but the travel is just one thing, a little piece of the big picture. You have made *all* my dreams come true.”

And they held hands until it was time to board the plane.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*JC Shelby moved to Arizona over twenty years ago. Although she has written stories for family, friends, and classes since she was a child, this is her first published fictional work. She enjoys reading, writing, cooking, gardening, and hiking. Her household is currently run by two cats that may bear more than a passing resemblance to the two in this story.*

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# ALL I EVER WANTED

By Lauren Lewis

## Photo Description

Two men, both dressed in tuxedos, are standing alone around the back of a church. They are kissing and holding each other close. The taller man has his arms wrapped around the smaller man's waist, while the smaller man is leaning into the kiss and reaching out for his partner.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*There is a man that I've longed for, for a really long time. Growing up I saw him constantly, and even throughout college he has been part of my life. Why have I not approached him? Well, he's my older brother's best friend. And I think he's been in love with my brother for as long as I've been in love with him. Now, on the day of my brother's wedding to a woman, my love interest will have to stand by my brother and watch him start a life with someone else. How can my brother not see what he's going to be losing? What can I do to help my crush?*

*Please HEA and include the scene depicted in this photo somewhere in the story (whoever the characters are). Lot of fluff is preferred (and sex scenes if you want).*

Sincerely,

Kat

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, sweet/no sex, fluff, weddings, set in England, HEA, brother's best friend

**Word Count:** 16,294

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## ALL I EVER WANTED

By Lauren Lewis

I heaved myself and my luggage off the train and down onto the busy platform. I was only going home for four days, but with the amount I'd packed, it looked like I'd made plans to move back home for the next few months. I was moving slowly and other travellers were pushing past me in their hurry. I stumbled and swore under my breath after a particularly violent shove. I was *so* ready to get back to Mum's house, where I knew a cup of tea and a hug would be waiting for me.

My backpack weighed me down as I struggled to walk in a straight line, desperately trying to pull my suitcase along behind me. One of the wheels kept getting stuck and was looking rather worse for wear, and I was pretty sure it was only minutes away from falling off completely. It was as if the suitcase wanted to go anywhere but forward and was deliberately trying to pull me in every other direction.

"Come on, you useless bloody thing, hang in there for five more minutes," I muttered, the wheel getting stuck once again and causing the suitcase to fling itself to the side. I stopped and scowled back at it, giving the handle a sharp tug before turning back to face the throng of people ahead of me. No one seemed to have noticed the crazy guy talking to his suitcase, which was a relief.

I scanned the crowd at the front of the station, searching for that familiar smile. My brother, Warren, had called me last night to tell me that it would be his best friend—and best man—Joel who would be picking me up. Warren had also apologised, again, for not asking me to be the best man at his wedding. He insisted that it had been a really tough decision and that, in the end, it had all come down to the toss of a coin. In all honesty, I was kind of thankful that he hadn't picked me. I'd tried to reassure Warren, to let him know that I really hadn't taken it personally, but I wasn't sure he believed me. I loved my brother and all, but I already had so much going on with my studies and my part-time job at a bar back in London, and best man duties would have just added too much to my already pretty hectic life.

Joel was much better suited to the role. He and Warren had been best friends since their school years, and by some miracle they had stayed friends

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for the two decades that followed. Joel knew much more about Warren than I ever would. The seven year age gap between Warren and I hadn't helped matters. We had become much closer as we'd grown up and moved into adulthood, but I was still the kid brother.

It was pretty clear to everyone that Joel was also a better candidate in terms of, well, brains. No one thought I was stupid or anything, but it was a well-known fact that I had always been pretty useless when it came to organisation and planning. I wasn't entirely sure how I had made it to my final year at University, especially without failing at least one of my modules. I mostly put that down to the dedication of a handful of good friends who seemed to have made it their life's mission to keep me on the right track. Someone had once said that I couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery, and that wasn't too far from the truth.

It was the Mohawk that caught my eye first. As soon as I saw it, my heart jolted in my chest and then started to pound frantically. Joel was tall and his Mohawk was usually the first thing you saw when you searched for the man in a crowd. I found him leaning against a wall near the entrance to the station and he smiled when his eyes found mine. His beautiful, sky-blue eyes. *Fuck, I've missed this man.* When I'd been living back home with Mum, I'd seen Joel on an almost daily basis. He'd been a good friend over the years, especially when I'd needed someone to talk to or ask for advice when I didn't want to speak to my brother. Warren hadn't always seemed like the most approachable person in my life, but I'd always known that Joel would be there for me. I'd always trusted that he would listen, that he'd offer advice without judgement and that he wouldn't share anything I said with Warren unless I wanted him to. He'd always had my back.

"Hey, Titch!" Joel called out as he spotted me. I rolled my eyes, and his smile grew wider. I hated that nickname and he bloody well *knew it*. It made me sound like a child, which was something I definitely didn't want Joel seeing me as. Besides, I wasn't even that much shorter than he was anymore. I'd caught up as I'd gotten older and I was actually a lot closer to Joel's height now. The nickname had started when I was about eight or nine, though, and it seemed to have stuck.

I took deep breaths and tried to calm myself as I made my way over to where he was standing, looking over at me with that infamous smile. It was only Joel. I'd known him almost my entire life and I'd seen him a million times



before, but every single time he smiled at me like that, my insides turned to jelly. He didn't even need to smile at me. Just being around him made my insides melt. It was like torture. Sweet, beautiful torture.

*Pull yourself together and stop being such a sentimental prat*, I chided myself. I lifted a hand to wave, calling out a greeting. Joel pushed himself away from the wall as I got closer, walking towards me and pulling me close for a hug. I closed my eyes and savoured it, feeling the loss of his warmth when he let go.

"It's great to see you, mate." He automatically took the handle of my suitcase and started pulling it along behind him. He seemed to be having less trouble with it than I had. Joel glanced over his shoulder to check that I was following, before laughing and shaking his head.

"Christ, Harry. How much stuff did you bring with you?" He eyed my backpack, plus the two overflowing carrier bags hanging from my arms.

"I'm going to my brother's wedding! I needed to come prepared!" I said in mock annoyance. I looked down at the bags hanging from my arms and sighed. "Plus, I brought some books with me. Jon reckons I need to make time to study, and he wouldn't shut up about it until I'd packed a few. It's crap really. It's not like I'll even look at them while I'm here."

Joel nodded but remained silent as we approached his car in the car park. He opened the boot and threw my suitcase inside, then moved over to let me shed myself of all the bags that had been weighing me down.

"So is Jon your... boyfriend?" Joel asked, somewhat reluctantly. His reluctance confused me.

"Um." I stumbled over my response. Joel's question had taken me by surprise. Jon definitely *wasn't* my boyfriend, but he had been my closest friend since we'd met during our first week at Uni. I chuckled to myself as I thought about what it would be like to actually date Jon. I loved the guy, but he drove me crazy most of the time. I sometimes wondered how Aaron, his boyfriend of two years, managed to put up with him. But, despite Jon's constant mothering and nagging, he really was a great guy with such a big heart.

I shook my head as I climbed into the passenger seat and put on my seatbelt. "Nah, he's just a friend. He's one of the guys I share the house with. I think you met him once when you came to visit with Warren. Tall? Blonde? Anyway, he's kind of made it his aim in life to see me pass my degree."

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“Oh.” Joel didn’t say anything else on the matter. He started the engine and headed out of the car park. There was a CD playing but the volume was low, and Joel reached out to turn it off. Once he was on the road, he started talking again.

“So, how is Uni going? You getting on alright?”

“Yeah,” I smiled. “I’m surviving. I’ve only got a few months left now, which kind of makes me feel a lot better. The end is in sight, you know?”

Joel frowned and glanced over at me briefly. “Is it really that bad?”

“No! I don’t mean it like that. I love Uni, I love my friends and most of my classes. It’s just been a lot of hard work. I’m not the most academic person on the planet, and I’ve had times where I felt like I was getting nowhere, you know? But now I’ve got the dates for my finals and graduation is getting closer. I finally feel like I’m actually *getting* somewhere.”

Joel nodded. “I guess it’s a busy time for you, then?”

“Really busy,” I replied with a nod. I thought I could sense where this conversation might be leading and I really hoped I was wrong. I already felt guilty enough for bailing on my brother’s stag do last weekend and I didn’t need Joel to make me feel even worse.

“Still, it’s a shame you missed Warren’s stag do,” Joel commented. I grimaced, and he shot me a look that made me feel about two inches tall. “I know you’re busy and all, but he would have really liked you there, Harry. *I’d* have liked you there. It wasn’t the same without you.”

My cheeks flushed under Joel’s scrutiny. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I just had a really important exam the following Monday and I had to cover a shift at work. I couldn’t get out of it.”

That was a blatant lie. I *had* wanted to go to Warren’s stag do, but I hadn’t felt like I’d fit in. I had always found that I had very little to talk about with most of Warren’s friends. They’d never really bothered to talk to me, and I’d completely fallen out of the loop since I’d moved away to study. Joel had always been the only person in Warren’s friendship group who’d ever given me the time of day. I knew I’d just end up standing around like a spare part, waiting for Joel or Warren to come and talk to me. Having said all that, the biggest reason for not attending had been Joel himself.

The truth was that I had been harbouring a pretty big crush on Joel for, well, a heck of a long time. I had never made a move before because he’d been

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Warren's best friend for nearly twenty years. But there was more to it than that. I knew Joel's secret, and it killed me a little inside every single time I thought about it. It made me feel helpless and hopeless and completely fucking *heartbroken*.

Joel was in love with my brother. He'd never actually told me, and he'd never exactly confirmed it. But I'd caught the way Joel looked at Warren too many times not to realise how he felt. All the signs were there, and it baffled me that Warren couldn't see it. Given my own feelings for Joel, I just hadn't been able to go to that stag do. I knew I wouldn't be able to spend the evening in close proximity to them both, watching as Joel stood by my brother and wished him well, knowing that inside his heart was shattering into a thousand pieces. It would be difficult enough to see that happen on Warren's wedding day.

The car was silent. I wasn't sure what else to say, and I was pretty sure that Joel knew I was lying. I prayed that he didn't call me out on it, because I didn't want to have to keep lying to him. Joel said nothing more about the stag do or the wedding, for which I was eternally grateful. After a while, he started filling me in on some of the stuff that had been happening at the sports centre. It was a deliberate attempt to change the subject, but I liked listening to him talking about his work.

Joel worked as a fitness instructor at the local sports centre. He loved his job and he took great pride in it. His enthusiasm was clear in every word he spoke, in the sparkle of his eyes when he talked about the people he worked with, and the clients that he helped. He chatted away and I felt like I could relax again. I stared out the window, taking in the familiar scenery of my home town as he spoke, smiling to myself as I absorbed his words and the comforting sound of his voice. It felt good to be home, and even better to be in Joel's company once again.

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Mum was waiting for me at the doorway as Joel pulled into the drive. He parked next to Warren's car, so I knew I'd find my brother inside.

"Here we are," Joel said with a smile. "I'll bring your bags in later. Go say hi to your mum before she spontaneously combusts with excitement."

To say that Mum was happy to see me would have been an understatement. She pulled me close and I swear I heard my spine crack. For someone so small,

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she certainly had a lot of strength. She pulled away after a few moments, a frown on her face. *Crap, what have I done wrong this time?*

“It would be nice if you bothered to make it home for more than just Christmas and your brother’s wedding. I miss you! I don’t see you enough these days, and you’re my baby boy!”

I groaned and put on my best whining voice. “Mum! I’m not a baby! I’m sorry. I just have so much going on with studying and working. My manager keeps asking me to work overtime, and it’s not like I can afford to turn the extra shifts down.”

Mum lightly patted my cheek. “I know, sweetheart. You work so hard. I’m so proud of you. I know your father would have been, too.”

We didn’t talk about Dad all that much these days, despite how we all missed him. Warren and I always worried that it would upset Mum to hear it, and for the first year or so after he had passed, even the slightest reference to him would have brought her to tears. It had been six years now since he’d died, and Mum was finally in a better place. She spoke about him a lot more, and she never forgot to remind Warren and me of how much he had loved us and of how proud he would have been to see where we both were today.

I walked into the front hall and headed towards the kitchen at the back of the house, where I could hear two familiar voices. Warren and his fiancée, Ashley, were sitting at the kitchen table, flicking through a magazine and drinking coffee. Warren looked up as I walked into the room, a huge grin on his face. He put his mug down and jumped up from his seat.

“It’s my baby brother!” he exclaimed. Before I had a chance to tell him, quite deservedly, to *fuck the hell off*, he pulled me into a tight hug. He patted me on the back hard enough to make me wince. I heard Joel’s chuckle from somewhere behind me.

Physically, Warren and I were completely different. I had brown hair, dark brown eyes, and stood at around five foot ten, all of which I had inherited from my mother. Warren was taller, at close to six foot four, and he had much fairer hair—not quite light enough to be classed as blonde, but pretty close—with pale grey eyes. He had inherited his looks from our dad’s side of the family. Warren was much more built than I was, too. He had muscles without even having to work out. He seemed to forget his own strength at times, and he had enough energy to rival a child or a puppy. I envied him sometimes. I’d never be

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muscled or strong. I wasn't exactly scrawny, but I wouldn't be on the cover of Men's Fitness any time soon either.

Warren pulled away and grinned down at me. "Christ, I think you got taller. Would you look at that! He's almost as tall as you, Joel." He ruffled my hair before pushing me away.

Warren always did that. He treated me like a child. Even though I knew he meant no harm by acting that way, I still hated it. I hated it even more when he treated me that way in front of Joel. I didn't want Joel to be faced with the constant reminder that I was Warren's kid brother. I wanted him to see me as the man I had become, rather than the kid I used to be. I glanced over at Joel, who was standing just inside the doorway, watching the two of us. There was a smile on his face, and I noticed the hint of something in his eyes. Something I couldn't quite place. When he caught me staring, he winked. I quickly turned my face away to hide my blush.

Ashley stood next and, with much more grace, pulled me into a hug. "It's lovely to see you, Harry," she spoke softly.

There were no two ways about it, Ashley was a stunner. She had wavy, shoulder-length brown hair and a gorgeous hourglass figure. She was the kind of woman that made heads turn. If I hadn't been one hundred percent gay, I'd have totally fallen for her too. To top it all off, she was a really nice person and super smart. She'd studied Law at University, and now she worked for some big law company in the city. Warren and Ashley made a very beautiful couple, and it was easy to see how much they loved each other. They had met at a mutual friend's birthday party a little over five years ago, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Ashley walked back over to the table and picked up her handbag, slinging it over her shoulder. "I've got to head out, but I just wanted to be here to see you." She turned her gaze to her fiancée and laughed. "And to wish you luck with this guy."

"Ashley gets the house for all the bridal things, and she's basically kicked me out until after the wedding, which means you and Mum are stuck with me until then," Warren said with a wink.

"Well let's be thankful that the wedding is the day after tomorrow," our mother commented, walking further into the kitchen and putting the kettle on. I snickered and Warren held his hand to his heart, a mock expression of pain on his face.

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“Mother! You wound me!”

“You’ll be fine,” she replied dryly.

“I can stay with Joel if you don’t want me here,” Warren said casually, a slight twinkle in his eye as he shot me a look.

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Warren! You’re staying with your mother, and I won’t hear another word about it.”

Joel and I both chuckled as Warren laughed and stood to pull our mother close for a hug. “I was kidding, Mum.”

I watched as Mum reached up to pat Warren’s cheek affectionately. I’d missed this while I was in London. It hit me like a tonne of bricks just how much I missed my family. My mum, my brother, and Joel. Ashley, too. She’d been a part of Warren’s life for so long now, and she already felt like an important part of our family.

Ashley kissed Warren goodbye and then hugged me, Mum, and Joel on her way out. Mum made us all cups of tea, and Warren and I sat around chatting while she prepared the dinner and Joel brought my bags in from the car. I was starting to feel a little tired, so I made my excuses and headed up to my room. I smiled as I noticed the ‘Harry’s Den’ plaque on the door that my dad had made for me when I was five or six years old. I’d never had the heart to take it down.

It had been three months since I’d last been home. My room was exactly as I had left it. It hadn’t changed much at all in the three years since I’d moved away. The pale blue walls were still covered in band and film posters, and there was a notice board on the far wall that was decorated with photographs and tickets from various gigs I’d attended. The only thing that had been changed were the sheets on the bed, which Mum had obviously provided in preparation for my arrival. I threw my bags on the floor by my desk, then hauled my suitcase onto the bed and started unpacking. I was only going to be back for a few days but I hated living out of a suitcase.

This had been my room for most of my life, yet it always felt strange for a while when I came back here, as if I was in somebody else’s space. I knew it was silly, but it took me a while to adjust. I threw my clothes into drawers and then walked over to the window, looking out at the back garden. It was getting dark and I couldn’t see all that much, but I could make out the old greenhouse at the bottom of the garden where dad had grown his vegetables. It was mostly just used as storage now. I turned back to my room and looked over at the

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notice board with all my photos and little pieces of memorabilia from the various places I'd visited.

One particular photo caught my eye. It was one of my favourites. It had been taken on my fourteenth birthday and was of me, Warren, and Joel. My dad had taken it, all of us standing together in the front garden. I'm standing in the middle and I look like a midget in between those two giants. Joel has an arm around my shoulders and Warren and I are laughing, although I have no idea what was so funny. My head is turned away from the camera and I'm looking up at Joel, who's staring at the camera with one eye closed because the sun was shining in his eyes. Even back then, I was hopelessly in love with my brother's best friend. I think my dad knew. He was the first person I came out to, and also the only person I came out to until after his passing.

"Harry! Dinner's on the table!" Mum's shout snapped me out of my thoughts. I glanced towards my bedroom door, then back towards the notice board. My heart ached with longing, a longing for so many things. For Dad to be alive again. To be back in that moment right there in that picture, with all of us together and so *happy*. I longed for Joel. I longed for him to love me, to look at me in the same way that I saw him look at Warren sometimes. I shook myself, trying to clear my head and stop myself from being so hopelessly sentimental, and then turned and headed down for dinner.

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Everyone was already seated at the table when I got downstairs. Joel was sitting next to Warren, chatting about one of their friends who had just got back from a holiday abroad. Joel glanced over at me as I took my seat next to Mum, then thoughtfully filled me in on their conversation. Joel was like that, always making sure I felt included. Warren changed the topic of conversation to the wedding, and I mostly tuned him out as I started eating.

I hadn't realised how hungry I was until that very moment, and I had definitely missed Mum's cooking. She had made cottage pie, which was one of my absolute favourite meals. It smelt delicious. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a proper home-cooked dinner. My life at University consisted of microwave food, pizza, or the occasional pasta dish or curry whenever Jon agreed to cook.

"Seriously, I can't believe how crazy the wedding planning has been, but Ashley has loved every second of it. I know it makes me sound like a total chick, but it's just so good to see her happy." Warren paused to eat, and then

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started talking again. “But you never know, Joel. It could be you next! You’ll find some guy and you’ll fall head over heels like I did, and then you’ll be the next to settle down.”

Joel was silent for a moment. I looked up at him, watching for his reaction. He nodded his head slightly. “Yeah, maybe,” was his only response.

“Mate, it’s gonna happen. You just wait,” Warren laughed. “You can’t be alone all your life, one day you’ll realise that.”

Our mum shot Warren a look, but he carried on talking regardless. “I’m serious. You must realise what you’re missing, right?” Warren shot me a quick glance, and then looked over at Joel again with a smug grin. “Some guy is going to come and sweep you off your feet and you won’t know what hit you.”

Warren didn’t mean any harm with what he was saying, but it was just like my brother to speak before he actually thought about the damage his words might cause. He was hurting Joel, that much was obvious. I could see the pain in Joel’s eyes at Warren’s words, and I was almost certain that Mum could see it too. But while we might have been able to see the hurt that was so painfully obvious, Warren was apparently oblivious to it. He kept on talking, unaware of how much he was hurting his best friend. He eventually stopped ribbing Joel about his love life and moved back to wedding planning, but that wounded look never left Joel’s eyes. I couldn’t get over it. I couldn’t let Warren’s words or the hurt he was causing go. I looked down at my plate, my appetite suddenly gone.

“This is complete bullshit.”

I hadn’t meant to say the words out loud. I’d taken myself by surprise just as much as everyone else. I supposed it was the look on Joel’s face that had finally made me snap. That look of sadness was breaking my heart. Joel was pining over my older brother, and I knew he would never feel that way about me, no matter how much I wished otherwise. I wanted to punch Warren square in the jaw. I wanted to scream at him for letting Joel fall for him, for not seeing how hopelessly in love Joel was and for being such a smug prick about *everything*. I wanted to hurt him the way he was hurting Joel. I wanted to tear him a new asshole for breaking the heart of the man I’d been hopelessly in love with for years. Most of all, I wanted Joel to see how much I loved him. I would *never* hurt him like that, and I just wished that he could see it. I wished I had the courage to tell him, to shout “Love me instead!” and make him realise that, yes, I might be a few years younger than him and I might be Warren’s



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brother, but I was here and I was an adult now and I fucking *loved* him with every single molecule of my being.

I took a deep breath. The silence that followed my outburst was almost painful. I wanted to take back the words. This wasn't Warren's fault, not really. I looked around at the three sets of eyes that were staring at me, wary and confused. Warren looked offended. Mum was frowning and shaking her head.

"Watch your mouth, young man. You don't swear at my dinner table, and you certainly don't say such things about your brother's wedding."

"I didn't... it wasn't about—" I wasn't exactly sure what to say. How could I even begin to explain what my problem was? My hands began to shake, and I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment and shame. I stood and pushed away from the table. Without another word, I turned and left the room. I headed out the patio door and into the back garden. The outside light clicked on as it sensed my presence, and I started to pace.

I heard the patio door slide open several moments later, and I turned my head slightly to see Joel walking towards me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to talk to him right now, but perhaps it was time to be honest. Perhaps it was time to say whatever it was that I needed to say, and let the chips fall where they may. Joel stopped a few steps away, his hands in his pockets. He didn't say anything. He just looked down at his shoes.

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have snapped like that," I mumbled.

"Warren's pretty upset. He thinks you're mad because he didn't ask you to be his best man."

I sighed and ran a shaky hand through my hair. "That's not what this is about, Joel."

There was an awkward silence. I was getting pretty sick of awkward silences, so I let myself ask what I needed to ask. I just needed to hear Joel say it. I needed to hear the truth so that I could get past this.

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Joel's eyes snapped to mine, but he wasn't quick enough to hide the pain that reflected in them. "No," he replied.

"Don't lie to me, Joel. We're supposed to be friends. Can't you at least give me the truth?"

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Joel sighed and shrugged his shoulders, looking back down at the ground. "I'm not lying, Harry. I don't know what else you want me to say."

I turned to face him. I was confused. I knew that I hadn't misread all the signs. "But you looked so sad back in there. You look sad every time Warren talks about Ashley, every time Warren talks about how much he loves her. I've seen the way you look at him." *The way I wish you'd look at me*, I thought. "You don't date anyone for longer than a few months, and you've never been in a serious relationship. I know it's because of Warren, so please don't stand there and lie to my face."

Joel shook his head. "It's not what you think, Harry."

"Then what is it?" I asked. I needed him to explain what was going on. I just needed to understand.

"I'm not in love with him, alright?" Joel looked back at the patio door, checking that we were still alone, before continuing. "I thought I was, once. He was my first crush, he was the one who was always there for me, the one who helped me come to terms with who I am. He was my shoulder to cry on when shit got bad, the one who helped me pick up the pieces after my dad rejected me. I love him for that. I'll always love him for that."

Joel paused and rubbed at his eyes with his palm. "But you're right, I *am* sad. I'm sad because I want what he's found with Ashley. I want to find a love as strong as that. In an ideal world, I'd have liked to have found it with Warren. But he's straight and his heart belongs to someone else. I accepted that a long time ago, and I'm fine with it."

Joel took a deep breath after he'd finished speaking. I noticed that he wouldn't look at me and that his face was flushed. I felt like a complete asshole for making him spill all his feelings, for pushing him to tell me. I'd been so hung up on how much I needed to hear the truth that I hadn't put enough thought into how difficult this might have been for Joel. I'd made this all about *me*, about how *I* felt, and I'd had no right to do that.

Joel closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. His shoulders sagged. He opened his eyes and looked up at the night sky. "Don't tell Warren about any of this, okay? I'm over it, I really am. It's just... it's hard to let go sometimes. I know that one day I'll find someone, someone who'll love me back." He blushed a bit more at that, although I wasn't entirely sure why. He still wasn't looking at me. "It's just that Warren was my first crush, and he's been my best

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friend for so long. He's had a place in my heart since I was a kid and that's not something that just goes away."

I nodded and reached out to rest my hand on Joel's arm. I wanted to pull him in for a hug but something stopped me. We'd never been afraid to hug before but suddenly something felt different. I felt like I'd crossed a line with Joel, and I didn't want to step too far over it in case he pushed me away.

"Is that why you snapped at Warren back there? Was it because you thought he was hurting me?" Joel raised an eyebrow and looked down at me curiously. I felt my cheeks flush slightly.

"I snapped because you're my friend, Joel. I care about you, and I couldn't just sit there and watch him break your heart without saying *something*."

Joel sighed and lifted his arm to rest it across my shoulders. The warmth of his body at my side was comforting. "My heart isn't broken, Harry. Bruised, maybe. But not broken. Most of the guys I've dated all proved themselves to be complete pricks after a month or two, which is why I've never been in a serious relationship. I don't know, maybe I *was* comparing them to Warren. Either way, it never ended well."

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my eyes. I buried myself closer into his side, treasuring the warmth and comfort of his body. I looked up at him. "Joel, any guy would be lucky to have you." *I'd be so lucky to have you.* "You're the nicest, funniest, most genuine person I've ever met. If a guy doesn't see that, then he's an idiot." *I see that. Every single day, I see how perfect and wonderful you are.*

Joel flushed and laughed. "You really think so?"

"I do. You're amazing, Joel."

Joel bit his bottom lip right then, and it took all my strength not to groan. He didn't seem to realise just how perfect he was, just how much I *wanted* him. Joel looked into my eyes and I heard his breath catch. In that moment, I was so sure he was going to kiss me. He reached for me with the arm that wasn't already around my shoulders, resting his hand gently on my neck and smiling down at me. My heart was pounding so hard and so fast in my chest that I was sure he'd be able to hear it.

"Thank you," he spoke softly.

He lowered his hand, but I wasn't ready for him to pull away. I'd seen something in his eyes, I was sure of it. I reached out to grab his hand and trap it

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in my own, then leaned forward and pulled him against me so that our chests were touching. I looked up into his eyes. His perfect, beautiful blue eyes that were staring down into my own darker ones.

That's when I kissed him. I wanted him to know he was not alone. I wanted him to feel the warmth and comfort of another person. At first he didn't respond, but after a few seconds he began to kiss me back. His lips pressed gently against mine, and the moment was so perfect that I could cry. I opened my mouth to let him in and lifted my hands to cup his face.

After a few more seconds, Joel pushed me away. It was a gentle push but it was enough for me to get the message. Joel didn't want me. I panicked and looked away.

“Oh shit, I'm sorry.”

Joel cupped my chin and turned my head so that I was facing him. “Harry, it's fine.”

“It's not fine. I've wanted to do that for so long but you're sad, you're confused, and you don't think of me that way. Fuck, you pushed me away. *Oh shit*. I shouldn't...”

Joel cut me off with a gentle hug. Thankfully my mouth and my brain caught up with each other and I stopped speaking. The hug took me by surprise and stopped me from making such a fool of myself. My thoughts all muddled together as I tried to understand what this hug might mean. Was it my consolation prize? Was it Joel's way of getting me to shut the hell up?

“Really, Harry. Don't be sorry. It was nice. It's just that I'm not sure this is the best timing in the world, and you're Warren's kid brother. I don't think he'd like this. I don't know whether I should—”

I pulled away from Joel and stumbled backwards, nearly tripping. Joel shot me a look, and his eyes flashed with what appeared to be remorse. Fuck, he regretted kissing me. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't bear to see the regret in his eyes. I took a few steps back. My heart felt heavy and my body felt like lead. “What, so that's all I am to you? *Warren's kid brother*? I thought I was supposed to be your friend, too! And in case it escaped your notice, I'm hardly a kid. I'm twenty-one years old!”

“Harry, you know that's not what I meant, I—” Joel reached for me, but I took a few more steps back. I was close to tears and I just wanted to go back

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inside and hide for a while. Joel looked like he was going to say something more, but I didn't want to hear it.

"We should go inside," I mumbled. "They'll be looking for us, and I think I'd better apologise for being such a prick." I made my way to the patio door without another word.

"Harry, please, let's talk about this," Joel said, desperation clear in his voice. I carried on walking and didn't look back.

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I lay in bed that night and thought back over the last fifteen or so years of my life, trying to pinpoint the exact moment when I fell in love with my brother's best friend. I'd been in love with Joel Clarke for almost as long as I could remember. There seemed to be no defining moment or epiphany where I suddenly realised "Hey, I totally love this guy!" It had been a gradual thing, a slow burn that had grown and grown until it had completely taken over my heart and I couldn't possibly imagine ever loving another person in the same way.

I first met Joel when I was four years old. I can't actually remember the day I met him, but Mum once told me about it. She said that Warren had come home from school shouting about the new kid in his class, and the next day Warren had invited him over for dinner. All I can really remember is that, from the moment the other boy had walked through our front door and into my life, I had been fascinated by him. Warren was a popular kid throughout his school years, and he'd always had lots of friends over to hang out. The difference with Joel was that he hadn't ignored me like all of Warren's other friends.

Warren and I had always gotten along just fine, for the most part. We argued and fought like most brothers do, but there were never any doubts as to whether we loved each other, and Warren had always looked out for me. I'd been a pretty small child, but with Warren and Joel watching my back, I barely ever got picked on. The age gap had been the biggest issue. Seven years might not seem like a huge difference in the grand scheme of things but, as children, Warren didn't always want his little brother hanging around. Like on his sixteenth birthday when he had yelled at me for interrupting him when he'd had a group of friends over. I had been really upset that day and had ended up running off in tears. Joel had been there, and he'd left Warren's room to watch TV with me until I'd cheered up. He'd always been nice like that, and it was just one of the many reasons why I loved him.

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Joel had been an amazing friend to Warren and me after our dad passed away. He had been instrumental in helping us to cope and move past it as best as we could. I was fifteen when Dad had a heart attack, and he died almost instantly. None of us had seen it coming, and it very nearly tore our family apart. Mum was a wreck for a while, but she'd tried her best to stay strong for her boys. Joel was a shoulder to cry on for both of us. But he had also been much more than that. He was the one who held our hands at the funeral, who came over to the house to help Mum and Warren with tidying and clearing out Dad's belongings, who had listened and given advice when all any of us wanted to do was scream and shout or punch our fists through a wall. While my heart still breaks for the dad that I lost and the years I have spent, and will spend, without him in my life, Joel helped ease that pain. His friendship and his kind words helped me to move past my grief.

I came out to Joel not long after my dad had passed away, the day before I told Mum and Warren. I told him about a boy from my class that I'd shared my first kiss with, and he'd high-fived me, hugged me and promised me that everything would be okay. He had even offered to come with me when I told Mum and Warren. They both already knew that Joel was gay and had been completely fine with it, so I wasn't really too worried about their reaction. I just didn't want my mum or my brother to feel like I'd let them down. Joel had been really supportive, which had only served to deepen my feelings for him.

I was about sixteen or seventeen when I started to notice the way that Joel looked at Warren, as well as the looks of jealousy that he sometimes shot in Ashley's direction once she became a part of Warren's life. In hindsight, I think Joel had been looking at my brother that way for some time, even before then. I imagined it was probably the same way that I looked at Joel, and from that moment forward I tried really hard to control the way I looked at him when there were other people around. I was scared I'd give myself away and he'd find out how much I wanted him. I thought that he'd stop being my friend if he found out how I really felt. I was worried that Warren would realise that I was crushing on his best friend and call me out on it.

I managed to control my feelings, for the most part. I mean, up until today when I'd kissed him. *Fucking hell.* I'd left for University at eighteen, and I'd had this crazy thought in my head of how I'd find some amazing guy who'd be my boyfriend and I'd finally get over all these feelings I had for Joel. Clearly, that hadn't happened. If anything, the distance had only made my feelings stronger. I still spoke to Joel on Facebook and through texts, and he'd even

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come down to London to see me a few times. He had always visited with Warren, though.

I cringed at the thought of what might happen when I next saw Joel. He'd want to talk about what had happened, probably to tell me that it could never happen again. Probably to remind me that I was *just Warren's little brother and nothing more*, and that nothing would ever happen between us. But for tonight, I let myself imagine that he wouldn't say those things. I let myself imagine that he would pull me close and kiss me, that he'd tell me he loved me. It was with those thoughts in my head that I finally fell to sleep. I dreamed of Joel, of his body pressed against mine, of his hard cock as it slid inside me, of his perfect blue eyes as they gazed down into my own when we made love. I woke just as my orgasm hit me. My body shuddered and my back arched. It felt amazing, right up until I realised that I was alone.

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I got out of bed early the next day. I could hear sounds from the TV downstairs, so I made my way to the living room wearing only the thin t-shirt that I'd gone to bed in and a fresh pair of boxer shorts. I found Warren sitting on the sofa, dressed in a suit, with an Xbox controller in his hand. I glanced over at the TV for a moment before raising an eyebrow and snorting out a laugh.

"You brought your Xbox with you?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course I did. I wasn't gonna stay here for two days without it, was I?" Warren didn't look away from his game.

"Are you being serious right now?" I flopped down on the sofa next to him and pulled my legs up so they were under me. I was cold, but I couldn't be bothered to head back upstairs to get dressed. I shivered a little then kicked my legs back out so that my cold toes were resting against Warren's warm thighs.

"Eurgh! Get your disgusting feet away from me," he laughed, pushing them away with one hand while he tried using his controller with the other.

"My feet are perfect, you asshole!" I laughed and kicked him lightly, then pulled my feet back. I sighed and rested my head against the back of the sofa. I was still feeling a little tired since I hadn't had a particularly good night's sleep.

Warren paused his game and turned to face me. "Are you alright?" he asked.

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I grunted. “Yeah, I’m fine. What’s with the suit?” I tried changing the subject. I didn’t really feel like talking about my problems right now and I didn’t want Warren to start worrying about me.

Warren looked down at himself. “This is what grown-ups wear when they go to work,” he replied.

“Says the guy who’s playing Xbox at his mum’s house at seven o’clock in the morning,” I responded.

“Touché,” Warren laughed. He threw his controller onto the coffee table and then looked over at me intently. “You sure you’re okay, Harry? It’s just that you’ve been acting weird since you got here. Is it because I didn’t ask you to be my best man? ’Cause I thought we discussed that. I thought you were okay with it.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s nothing, I’m sorry.” I didn’t want to ruin the next few days for Warren. I felt like a total prick for being miserable and for making him think that I was mad at him.

“Is it...” Warren looked down for a moment. “Is it Joel? Has something happened between you two?”

“No!” I exclaimed, probably too quickly. Warren raised an eyebrow. “No, not really,” I mumbled lamely.

“You know what?” Warren asked. “I’ve been thinking it for a while now, and I reckon you and Joel would be pretty great together. Even when we were kids, you two got on so well. It pissed me off most of the time. I wanted you to go away, but Joel was always happy to let you hang around. It drove me *insane*.”

“Well, nothing will ever happen,” I snapped.

Warren gave me a knowing look. “But you want it to, right?”

I nodded. I couldn’t believe I was actually admitting this to Warren, but I realised that I needed to share what I was feeling with someone. I really wanted my big brother to support me, and it seemed like Warren wasn’t completely against the idea.

“If he can’t see how awesome you are, he doesn’t deserve you.”

“That’s probably the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” I said with a smile.



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“Yeah probably,” Warren grinned for a moment before he turned serious again. “Joel is my best friend, but you’re my brother. I can kick his arse for you, if you want.”

I smiled. “Nah, it’s cool. But thanks.”

“Alright then. Is there anything else that’s bothering you?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t about to tell Warren what Joel and I had discussed last night. *Oh yeah, there is one more thing. Your best friend used to have this super mad crush on you and it’s tearing me apart.* “No, that pretty much covers it.”

“Okay.” Warren didn’t sound convinced but he let it go. I really appreciated it. “Well, I have to go into work today. No rest for the wicked. Joel is gonna pick you up and take you into town so that you can both get your tuxedos sorted, plus Ashley has asked him to pick up the flowers and drop them off at the house this afternoon. You okay with that?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do I really have a choice?”

“Nope.” Warren grinned and jumped up from his seat, picking up the Xbox controller and throwing it in my lap. “He’s working an early shift so he’ll be here at about twelve. I’d better head out. I’m showing two houses this morning, and I’ve got a fucking mountain of work on my desk. Bring on the honeymoon!”

I smiled over at my brother as he grabbed his jacket and his keys and headed for the door. I loved seeing him so happy, and it was hard to hate him for what he’d been putting Joel through. It’s not like Warren had led Joel on all these years, was it? Warren checked his hair in the mirror by the door, then turned and waved.

“Catch you later, Titch.”

Nope, scrap that. It was pretty darn easy to hate him.

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Joel turned up at 12:21, not that I’d been counting down the minutes and seconds or anything. He’d texted me about an hour beforehand to say that he might be a little late, since he was planning to grab a quick shower at the end of his shift. I heard Joel’s car approach from my spot on the sofa, where I was watching a day-time television show that I found strangely addictive. I jumped up from my seat and glanced out the window, confirming that it was Joel. Once

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he'd parked and climbed out of his car, Joel walked straight through the front door without even knocking. I forgot that he did that, that he treated this place like his home. It brought a smile to my face.

“Hey, Claire,” he called out to Mum, who was busy tidying the kitchen and singing along to the radio. Mum poked her head out into the living room and smiled. She was always so pleased to see Joel and treated him like one of her own.

“Hello sweetheart, how are you? Would you like a cup of tea before you head out?”

Joel shook his head and told her he was fine, and she went back to whatever she'd been doing in the kitchen. Joel finally turned to face me. He looked unsure of himself, which wasn't something I was used to seeing. He was a fairly confident man, someone who seemed to know how to deal with almost any situation. Except, perhaps, when your best friend's younger brother had kissed you the night before. Yeah, I could see how that might make things more difficult for him. I felt bad, though, because I really didn't want Joel to feel uncomfortable around me. Things had never been awkward between us before, and I was starting to hate myself for ruining that.

Perhaps the best course of action would be to act like nothing had ever happened. He could choose to go along with it, or he could choose to say something. I wasn't sure which of those options I'd prefer, but at least this way the decision would be his. I grabbed my jacket from the back of the sofa and pulled it on, then nodded my head in the direction of the door. “I guess we'd better get a move on, yeah?”

Joel took a deep breath, as if to steady himself. There was a look of determination in his eyes as he took a few steps towards me. “Just wait a second, Harry.”

“Yeah?” I asked. My hands began to shake a little, so I folded my arms across my chest to try and hide it. I tilted my head to the side and really *looked* at Joel. He seemed tired. No, scrap that. He looked absolutely *knackered*. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well last night.” He paused and I could see that he was looking for the right words. “I wanted to say sorry for what I said yesterday, after we kissed. You're not a kid. Trust me, I know that. And you *are* my friend. I'm sorry if I made you think otherwise.”

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“Oh.” I’d expected him to scold me for kissing him, or say that Warren was never to find out about what had happened, or maybe even ignore me altogether. I hadn’t really expected an apology. I didn’t really *want* an apology. I certainly wasn’t sorry for kissing him. I shook my head in exasperation. “You don’t need to apologise to me, Joel. I probably shouldn’t have snapped or come on to you like that, I guess.”

“It’s fine, Harry.” Joel glanced over at the kitchen before he continued, making sure that Mum wasn’t listening in on our conversation. “That’s what I was trying to say to you last night, but you wouldn’t let me finish. All that stuff you said, it was really sweet of you. And the kiss... the kiss was nice, too.” The last part was spoken so softly that I could barely hear it.

“*Nice? Seriously?!*” I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t even funny, not really. “You pushed me away!”

Joel raised an eyebrow at my outburst and took a few steps in my direction. “You just took me by surprise, that’s all. I needed a moment to process, but then you bailed on me. Harry, we need to talk about what happened.”

“No, we don’t.”

My hands were still shaking and I suddenly felt terrified. Not of Joel, but of this whole situation. I didn’t want to talk anymore. What the hell was there to talk about, anyway? At the end of the day, he’d been the one to break the kiss. He’d been the one to push me away and tell me that it was a bad idea. He’d said the kiss was nice, but so what? That didn’t mean anything. We had been talking about his feelings—or at least his past feelings—for my brother mere seconds before the kiss, so please forgive me if ‘*nice*’ didn’t exactly fill me with hope.

Joel sighed and reached out to rest his hands on my shoulders, then gently pulled me toward him. We were standing so close together, almost embracing. He leaned in to brush a quick kiss on my temple, then another on my cheek. I hadn’t seen that coming. My heart was pounding and I didn’t move, afraid of what might happen if I did. Afraid that Joel might let me go and I’d never feel his hands on me like this again.

“We really need to get moving, but we’re going to talk about this later,” Joel spoke the words into my ear. “And you’re going to let me speak this time.”

I nodded and took a step back, then took a deep breath as I tried to calm myself. “Alright, fine. But not now, not here.”

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I extricated myself from Joel's arms, despite how much I'd wanted to stay wrapped up in them. I could still hear Mum moving around in the kitchen, so I called out to her, letting her know that we were heading into town. Once we were away from the house and on the road, Joel started up on his questions about my classes and my friends. It was like nothing had changed at all. He asked me what music I was listening to these days, what new films I'd seen, and what TV shows I was watching. Despite everything that had happened since I'd been back and just minutes ago back at the house, it was surprisingly easy to chat with Joel.

We were busy for the rest of the day, right up until late afternoon. Picking up the tuxedos hadn't been much of a problem, but the flowers had turned out to be something of a nightmare. There had been a lot more than either of us had expected, and it had been tricky getting them all into Joel's car. We didn't want them getting damaged, so we were wary to put them on the back seats in case they fell down. I ended up riding with some of the flowers on my lap. The smell drove me mad, and I started to think that I might be allergic. The desire to sneeze was like nothing I had ever felt before. My nose kept twitching and my eyes were watering, and Joel thought it was the most hilarious thing ever. I was less than amused. I was extremely grateful when we finally dropped them all off with Ashley, and when she hadn't murdered us for destroying them.

"Do you fancy dinner at my place tonight?" Joel asked as he reversed out of Ashley and Warren's driveway.

"Really?" The question took me by surprise. It was only five, but we'd both skipped a proper lunch in favour of a packet of crisps and a Kit Kat. The idea of having dinner with Joel gave me butterflies. *Fucking butterflies*. I felt like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush. "Just us?"

Joel smiled. "Just us."

I blushed at my question. I hadn't actually intended to say it out loud. I tried to think of something witty to say to cover for the needy and somewhat pathetic question that had left my mouth before my brain had decided to kick in. "Um, are you going to cook? 'Cause I'm not sure that's such a great idea."

"Fuck off," Joel said, without any real force behind the words. Then he shook his head and grinned. "Nah, I can order take-away if you want. Probably safer that way, right?"

We decided on Chinese from the only decent take-away restaurant in town, and then headed back to Joel's place. Joel lived in a small two-bedroom house

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on the outskirts of town. I'd only been there a couple of times before, but very little had changed. The small front garden was tidy and colourful—most probably the result of my own mother's handiwork—and as Joel pulled into the driveway, I couldn't help but notice how much this place stood out from the rest of the houses on the street. Perhaps it was all in my head, given my feelings about the person who lived there, but the place looked so much more homey and comforting. The place suited Joel, especially with the trendy, modern appliances and warm colours that I knew were inside.

Joel unlocked the front door and stood aside to let me through first, the bags containing our dinner in his hand. "Age before beauty," I joked, signalling for him to head inside.

He snorted a laugh as he rolled his eyes and stepped into his home. I followed him into the front hallway, glancing up at the framed photographs that hung along the entire length of one wall. They hadn't been there the last time I had visited. There were several of them—a couple of his parents, a few from nights out and parties, but it was the one at the far end that caught my eye. It was a bigger copy of the same photo I had pinned to the notice board in my bedroom back home, the one that had been taken on my fourteenth birthday. Joel had framed this?

I couldn't hide my smile when Joel turned to face me, and shot me a wink that made my heart melt and my smile widen. He glanced over to the picture and laughed, walking up to my side and looking at it too.

"I love this picture," he commented, glancing down at me with a smile of his own. "I've got loads of pictures of us all together, but this is my favourite. It was such a perfect moment, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it was. I just can't believe you framed this."

Joel wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me gently to his side. "Of course I framed it. This picture means a lot to me. *You* mean a lot to me."

I nodded my head but said nothing. It wasn't often that I was lost for words, which Joel knew all too well. He grinned as he let me go, turning to head into the kitchen. He grabbed plates and cutlery before we sat at the dining table and ate in companionable silence.

Once he'd finished, I watched as Joel walked over to the sink. I couldn't take my eyes off of him while his back was turned, admiring the view and feeling my cheeks burn with lust. I managed to tear my eyes away from his arse

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just as Joel turned to lean against the counter. “So,” he began. “I can give you a ride home after this, or you could stay and watch a film. We could have that chat.”

“Yeah, I’d like to stay.” I couldn’t hide the fact that I was nervous. My voice sounded weak and shaky. I wanted to stay here with Joel, and I knew that we needed to have that talk, regardless of whether I’d like the outcome. I was afraid that Joel would break my heart, but I was also afraid of what would happen if he didn’t. What if we *did* decide to take this further? What then? Could it really work, or would I always be compared to Warren? And what if it didn’t work out? What if I ended up losing Joel as a friend? My thoughts turned to what Warren would think of all this. He’d practically given me his blessing this morning, but there was much more to this than Warren would ever know.

“You’re thinking too much.” Joel’s words snapped me back to reality. He was watching me, smiling, with the hint of something else in his eyes. It looked like affection, and he’d looked at me that way for years, but there was something else there now. Something I couldn’t quite place. Maybe he was nervous too?

I laughed as I stood up from the table, taking my own plate to the sink. “Well I’ve never been accused of that before.”

I caught Joel rolling his eyes at me once again before I turned and headed into his front room. Joel had a huge DVD collection, and I looked through it for something decent to watch. Yes, I was also looking for an excuse to put off our conversation just a tiny bit longer, enough for me to actually catch my breath. Joel and I had always had a very similar taste in TV and films, mostly because he’d been the one who’d gotten me into science fiction and fantasy when I was a kid. Warren and Joel would watch *Star Wars*, *Buffy*, and even *Star Trek* reruns, and they’d let me sit and watch with them if I promised not to talk through it. They had both been pretty diehard TV junkies, and talking through anything was a definite way to get my arse kicked. It had all been good fun, though, and I knew that Warren had loved introducing me to all his favourite films and shows. I chuckled to myself at the fond memories.

“What are you laughing about?” Joel asked. He was right behind me, the words spoken softly into my ear. I spun around, his copy of the original *Total Recall* in my hands. He was so close that I could feel his breath on my face. *Fuck, he’s gorgeous.* My dick was in agreement, and I was mortified by my reaction. I didn’t want to embarrass myself again like I had the night before.

But there was definitely something in the way he was looking at me... it was different, new, and it filled my heart with fear and hope in equal measure. I hadn't seen that look on his face before. At least not while he'd been looking at me, anyway.

"Um, I was just remembering when you and Warren used to let me watch TV with you. Um, let's watch this." I held the DVD up in front of us like a shield. "Or we could watch *The Hobbit*. I haven't seen that one yet."

Joel nodded but didn't move away. He took the DVD from my hands and put it down on the shelf behind me. "Either is fine. But could I... could I kiss you first?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that would be a good idea." *Liar*. I thought it would be a *brilliant* idea. "Maybe we shouldn't."

Despite my words, I leaned forward and my eyes fluttered closed. Joel's lips met mine in a kiss that started out gentle but quickly developed into something much more passionate and needy. I couldn't believe it, this was really happening. I was kissing Joel, and he wasn't pushing me away this time. *He* had kissed me. Joel wrapped me in his arms and pulled my body against his own. My erection rubbed against his denim-clad thigh and brought me back to my senses, if only for a moment.

"That's not... we shouldn't..." I felt lightheaded. I couldn't find the words I needed, mostly because I didn't really want to say them. Why was I trying to ruin this moment? *Shut up, Harry, for fuck's sake*. I felt like I should push him away this time, but I didn't *want* to. Joel didn't let me go, but he pulled back a little to look down into my eyes.

"Why not?" Joel wasn't trying to push me, but he sounded genuinely curious. "Harry, tell me what you're thinking. Please."

"You don't want this, not really. You pushed me away last night, Joel." My mind was whirling and screaming at me to stop talking. *Just take what you can get, Harry. Don't ruin this*.

Joel brought a hand up to gently cup my cheek. "I know, and I'm so sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed you until we'd talked about whatever this is, I just... I couldn't help myself. Can we talk about this? Please?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Joel."

"I want you to tell me what you're thinking. Something happened between us last night, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since. There's

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something here between us, isn't there? I'd really like to explore it, but I need you to talk to me, Harry."

Joel was still cradling my face in his hand, and I liked that. His thumb moved softly against my cheekbone in a tender caress. I let out a low whimper. I should have been embarrassed by it, but I was too busy trying to process exactly what Joel was saying, replaying his words to make sure I'd heard him correctly. "Really? You want to explore this? Us? You want to... what? See where this goes?"

He nodded and rested his forehead gently against my own. I closed my eyes and sighed. "I care about you Joel, but I don't want to be a stand-in for my brother."

Joel backed away from me then, although he didn't let go of me entirely. His hands moved to rest at my waist. "Are you being serious? You're not a stand-in, Harry. How could you even think that?"

"I'm just going by what you said last night. You loved him for so long, how can I be anything else? How could you feel anything real for me?" I suddenly sounded like a whining child and I hated it, but I couldn't stop myself. "You do love him. You don't need to lie to me, Joel. Just don't pretend that you love me for me."

Joel reached out and brushed a strand of hair from my forehead. "What I feel for Warren doesn't matter! I care about you, I always have. And this, right here. It feels really good. It feels right, you know? That's all I've been able to think about since last night. How *right* it felt when we kissed."

It felt right for me, too. It felt like forever, it felt like happiness, it felt like fate and love and every other mushy romantic cliché in the world. Of course, I wasn't about to admit to any of those things out loud. Joel pulled me towards the sofa and gestured for me to sit down. He sat down at my side, our thighs touching, and grabbed hold of my hand.

"Do you remember when Warren and I drove down to London to surprise you for your twentieth birthday?" I nodded. "And do you remember that you had that guy over when we turned up?"

"Uh, yeah." I blushed. It's not like I could forget that. It had been mortifying to find your brother and the guy you'd been crushing on for years at your bedroom door while you had a guy, a one-night bloody stand from the night before, sleeping in your bed.



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“I swear, I’d never felt jealousy like it. Not even when Warren and Ashley started seeing each other. It was... fucking *hell*. It was so intense. I wanted to drag him out of your room by his hair.” Joel shook his head. “I didn’t want to think about it too much at the time. I guess I was scared of what it might mean.”

“That was a year ago,” I said. Probably not the most relevant thing in that moment, but it was the first thing that had popped into my head. He’d thought about me that way a year ago?

“I know,” Joel smiled. He must have seen where my thoughts were taking me, because he squeezed my hand gently before lifting it to his lips so that he could place a soft, tender kiss against my knuckles.

“But... you were in love with my brother. Can’t you see how that might make me feel like I’m not enough for you? I’ll never be Warren, and you know what’s really pathetic?” I laughed humourlessly. “Sometimes I wished I was.”

Joel reached for me then. He didn’t say a word, just pulled me close and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I buried my head against his chest and took a deep breath, inhaling his scent and finding comfort in the feel of his body wrapped around my own. He kissed the top of my head and whispered softly to me.

“Let it go, Harry.”

I turned my face up towards his then, our lips so close together. *Let it go*. Joel had said it himself the night before; it was hard to let some things go. But I was getting my chance to show Joel how I felt about him and how great we could be together. I was getting my chance to be with Joel in all the ways I’d been dreaming of for what felt like my entire life. This was all I had ever wanted, at least since I was old enough to realise that I was attracted to guys this way. I needed to leave Warren out of this. If I couldn’t do that, then I would lose my chance to be with Joel. *Let it go, Harry*. I looked up into Joel’s eyes and smiled. I could do that. For him, I could definitely do that.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay?”

“I’m letting it go. I want you, Joel. I’ve always wanted you. If you say that you’re over my brother, then I believe you. Let’s forget about that and move on, yeah? I want to see what’s between *us*. I want that so much.”

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Joel didn't respond in words, he just closed the gap between us and kissed me soundly on the lips. I lifted an arm to wrap a hand around Joel's neck, pulling him close and losing myself in the feel of his soft lips pressed firmly against my own. Joel tilted his head to deepen the kiss, and I sighed as his tongue met mine, elation and pure joy bursting from my chest and making me dizzy. Joel pulled away for a moment, a moan on his lips.

"Thank you," he whispered.

I wasn't exactly sure what he was thanking me for and I didn't ask. I felt like I should be the one thanking *him*, considering all the times he'd been there for me in the past, and for giving us a chance to be together now. I pulled him up against my body and let out a breathless chuckle as he pushed me down so that I was lying across the sofa. I spread my legs to make room for him while he lowered his body on top of my own and began grinding against me ever so slowly. He kissed along my jaw and my neck, his hands gently sliding under my T-shirt and across my chest. I was sensitive there, and I couldn't stop the embarrassingly feminine giggle that escaped my lips as his fingertips brushed against my sides. Joel pulled back and beamed down at me.

"As much as it kills me to say this, I think we'd better get you home. We have a pretty important wedding to attend tomorrow." Joel placed a wet kiss on the side of my neck and then moved up to nibble on the spot just below my ear. I nodded my agreement, glad at least one of us was thinking clearly. "We can pick up where we left off tomorrow night," he whispered into my ear.

It was getting late by the time I got back home. We'd made out for a little longer, but Joel had been right. It was important that I get home, since we both had to be up early tomorrow to start getting ready for the wedding. Joel gave me a lift back to the house, as well as a kiss goodnight in the car. The place was in complete darkness so I knew that Warren and Mum must have already gone up to bed. I made my way upstairs as quietly as possible, trying desperately not to wake either of them, particularly Warren. I knew he'd have questions if he saw me sneaking into my bedroom at this time of night. Once I was in my room and I'd undressed, I fell back onto my bed with a smile on my face and was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

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Warren woke me up early that morning with a surprisingly gentle tap on my door. I wasn't really asleep anyway, just dozing. I looked over at the clock on the bedside table. 5:09 a.m. I groaned.

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“You awake?” Warren whispered as he opened the door.

I snorted. “I am now.” I sat up and ran a hand through my hair. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t sleep.” He bounded into my room and threw himself across the end of my bed. “It’s crazy, right? I’m twenty-eight years old and I’m acting like a fucking five-year old on Christmas morning. I’m getting married to the most amazing woman in the entire world today! Holy fucking *shit!*”

“You’re such a chick,” I laughed and playfully punched my brother on the arm. “But I’m happy for you. Seriously, you and Ashley are going to be really happy together. I can tell.”

Warren nodded and smiled. “I think so, too. I mean, we’ve already been together so long, but after today she’ll finally be my *wife*. She’s it for me, you know?” He tilted his head and grinned. “So how come you were out so late?”

“I was with Joel. We had dinner. It was... good.” *Good? Really?* That was the best thing I could come up with? I think it was the stutter at the end that gave me away, and Warren started cackling with laughter. I felt my cheeks heat and lifted my pillow to smack Warren around the head with it.

“Shut up, nothing happened!” I wasn’t sure why I had chosen to keep the truth to myself, especially since I knew that Warren wouldn’t be upset. I could tell that my brother wasn’t fooled.

“Sure thing,” he laughed, jumping from the bed and taking my pillow with him. “This is mine now, Titch. If you want it back, you’re gonna have to fight me for it.”

I snorted at his childish words, but as soon as his back was turned and he was heading towards the door, I jumped up and grabbed him around the neck. I reached to pull the pillow away from him, both of us shouting and laughing. I eventually managed to pull free, the pillow in my arms, and fell back onto my bed, my sides aching from laughter. Warren stood and leaned against the doorframe, a knowing smile on his face.

“Alright, you don’t have to tell me anything. I’ll leave you be. Everything’s okay with you though, yeah?”

I nodded and grinned at Warren’s protective older brother thing. It reminded me of my school years and brought back just how much I missed Warren while I was away. All our joking and arguing aside, we were brothers and we loved each other.

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“Hey, Warren?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, you know.”

He nodded and laughed lightly, moving into the room to slap me on the shoulder. “Love you too, little brother.”

Warren turned and left, and I listened as he made his way downstairs. I didn't bother getting up, I just flopped back and lay there on top of my covers with a smile on my face, thinking about Joel and Warren and just how blessed I was to have them both in my life. I fell back to sleep listening to the faint sounds of Warren killing zombies in the living room.

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The wedding itself was only a small affair. Ashley and Warren had both wanted a traditional ceremony, with only their close family and friends in attendance. The service was held at the village church, a charming and beautiful old building with a gorgeous view of the countryside surrounding it. It was also the same church where our parents had gotten married thirty years ago. It was fair to say that our mother was feeling rather emotional. I sat with her for the ceremony and held her hand while she shed a few tears. Ashley looked amazing in a simple, but elegant, white dress. Warren had tears in his eyes as he watched his bride walking down the aisle towards him. Seeing them stand there together and hearing them say their vows made my heart ache, but in the best way.

We all headed outside after the ceremony, where pictures were being taken by a professional photographer. He made us pose in various groups—Warren and Ashley together, Ashley with her parents, Warren and myself with our mother, another with just Warren and Joel, and so on. The photographer was a good friend of Ashley's, and I couldn't help but notice that he kept sending flirtatious glances in Joel's direction. I didn't like it. Joel seemed rather reserved, and I wasn't sure if it was just because he was on his best behaviour for the wedding, or whether it was something more. When I knew that he was no longer needed for photos, I grabbed Joel's arm and pulled him aside. I took him to a quiet spot around the back of the small building.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my words meant to comfort him. It was the first chance I'd had all day to be alone with him, and I needed to make sure that he was alright.

“Honestly? I'm... I'm fine. There was a time when I didn't think I would be, but I really am.”

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“That’s good.” I reached for his hand and laced our fingers together. “I’m really glad, Joel. I was worried about you. I know what you said last night, but I still didn’t think this would be easy for you.”

Joel smiled down at me. His eyes gazed into mine and I stopped talking. That look in his eyes was so beautiful. He was looking at me the way I’d always wanted him to, as if I was everything he could have ever wished for. The elation and love I felt in that moment was like nothing I had ever felt before.

“It’s because of you, Harry. You’ve given me something to hope for, something to hold on to. You’ve made me so happy, not just today, but for years. I don’t know why I didn’t realise it before, but now that I’ve got you, how could I ever want anything else?”

“You really mean that?”

Joel kissed me. His arms wrapped around my waist as I reached out to rest my hand on his hip. I felt Joel’s lips curl as he smiled, and I growled a little in the back of my throat, which only made him smile more. My hand strayed to rest on his arse, and I leaned further into him to deepen the kiss, my heart soaring as my dick stood to attention.

“Harry! Joel!” It was Warren’s voice. It was getting closer, but Joel didn’t push me away. He didn’t let go of me, even when I pulled away from the kiss to rest my head against his shoulder. His arms stayed firmly wrapped around my waist.

“Harry! Where the hell—” There was a pause. I turned my head to see Warren standing a few feet away. His mouth was opening and closing, but no sound escaped. He cleared his throat and looked around.

“Oh. Um. Hi. I’ll just... I’ll leave you guys to it.” He was flustered, which only served to make me chuckle against Joel’s shoulder. Warren might have known that something was going on between Joel and me, but he clearly hadn’t expected to find us making out at his wedding. He recovered quickly, taking a few steps back before breaking out into a huge smile and glancing my way. “Nothing happened, huh?”

I grimaced. “Yeah, that might have been a lie. Sorry.”

Warren chuckled. “Just make it quick, yeah? We want to head to the reception. I can’t tell the guests that we need to wait while my brother and the best man are getting down and dirty round the back of the church.”

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We could still hear Warren's laughter after he'd rounded the corner and disappeared from our sight.

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The reception was a much bigger affair than the wedding itself. Warren and Ashley had hired out the function room at a hotel in town, and the whole place was full of family and friends. After I had stuffed myself with buffet food, I made my way over to a deserted table away from the crowds of people to play a game on my phone. Crowds got to be too much for me after a while, and I was starting to feel a bit fidgety and agitated. A slow song started to play, and I realised that everyone was pairing off onto the dance floor. I snorted a laugh at a few people's awkward attempts at dancing and then looked back down at my phone, grateful to go unnoticed. I glanced up hesitantly when I saw someone approaching and gave a sigh of relief when I realised it was Joel.

"Dance with me?" Joel asked, holding out his hand. I raised an eyebrow and looked over to Warren, who was dancing close by with Ashley. They were both looking our way with smiles on their faces.

"Really? You want to dance with me?"

"No, I want to play tennis with you." Joel rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry. I want to dance with you. Are you going to say yes, or are you going to let me stand here like a lemon while everyone is watching us?"

"I think I'll go for option B," I said with a laugh. Inside, my heart was beating so fast that I thought it might just beat out of my chest.

Joel grabbed my hand and hauled me out of my seat. "Hey!" I mock protested, even as I wrapped my arms around his waist. "I can't believe you're daring to manhandle me in front of my entire family. The cheek of it!" I needed to shut up some time soon. I was babbling.

"I'm sure you'll get over it," Joel laughed. He kissed me then, right there in front of everyone. I felt the heat in my cheeks, but I kissed him back. I stumbled a little, but he was holding me up and he didn't let me go. It was perfect.

"I'm going to risk ruining the moment by saying something," I started. Joel rolled his eyes, as per usual, but I forged on. "You were my first crush, Joel. I've loved you since before I even knew what that really meant. I don't expect you to say it in return, but I want you to know what you mean to me. I want you to know that you're all I ever wanted."

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Joel leaned down to kiss my forehead. “Harry, you’re such an amazing person. I’ve always known that. These feelings I have for you now might be new, but they’re strong and they feel so right. You’re all I want, and I’m going to do my best to prove that to you every single day from now on.”

“I’m going back to Uni tomorrow,” I commented. I didn’t want to leave. Now that I finally had Joel the way I wanted him, I never wanted to let him go. I knew that Joel could hear the worry in my voice.

“I know. I’ll still be here when you get back. I’ll come and see you, I promise.”

I nodded. “It’s not that long until I graduate. I’ve only got a couple of months left, and then I’ll be back.”

Joel smiled. “I’m not going anywhere, Harry.”

I could feel my cheeks heating as I blushed. “Good, that’s good.”

Joel took me to the train station the next day. *My boyfriend, Joel*. It was official, and we had sealed the deal the previous night after Warren and Ashley’s wedding reception. He held my hand as we walked into the station together, and then kissed me goodbye after promising to visit in two weeks. He knew that I didn’t want to leave, but he had promised that he wouldn’t be going anywhere and, best of all, he had told me that he loved me too. That was all I had ever wanted to hear, and it was what gave me the strength to let him go and to get on that train, knowing that when I finished my studies and moved back home in a few months, he’d be right here waiting.

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## Epilogue

### *One Year Later*

“You’re going to be the death of me, Harry.”

I let out a breathless laugh as I crawled back up Joel’s body to kiss him on the lips. His moan was like music to my ears. I pulled away to lie down at his side, tucking myself in under his arm and resting my head on his shoulder. “Yeah, but you love it.”

“I really do,” he said with a smile. He turned to kiss my temple. “I love you, so much.”

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My phone rang then, and I sat up and leaned over Joel to reach it. Warren. I answered the call before dropping back down onto the bed, half resting across Joel's chest, where he started running his fingers gently through my hair.

“Harry, you up yet?”

I couldn't help myself. I laughed, shooting a wink at Joel, who pushed me away to climb out of bed. I watched his perfectly sculpted arse as he walked across our bedroom and towards the bathroom. “Are you sure you really want me to answer that?”

“Eurgh! I didn't mean it like that, you perv. Way too much information, thanks.”

I could hear the sounds of a baby crying in the background, and I chuckled softly. “Oscar sounds happy this morning,” I commented.

My nephew was only two months old, and he already had one hell of a set of lungs on him. I was pretty sure he was going to grow up to be one of those screamo-type rock stars. Warren sighed. “Yeah, he's having a bit of a tantrum this morning. Ashley is trying to calm him down, and I'm keeping my distance.”

“Real nice, brother.”

“So, you'll be at Mum's for midday, yeah?”

Mum was cooking a special first anniversary meal for Warren and Ashley. We would also be meeting Mum's new boyfriend, which would be an interesting experience. Joel was the only one of us who had already met the guy. It had been a complete accident, but he'd run into Mum and Stuart in town last week. I figured it made sense that Mum would want to keep him from meeting her two protective sons as long as possible. I almost pitied Stuart, just thinking about the grilling he'd be getting from Warren.

Joel walked back into the room as I sat up and leaned against the headboard. I watched as he pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and then sat cross-legged at the end of the bed.

“Of course, we'll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Good, and don't be late. Stuart is going to be there, and I want you two to keep Mum busy while I talk to him,” Warren said.

“Seriously, Warren? Leave the guy alone! Joel said he seemed nice enough, and I trust Mum's judgement.”



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Warren huffed but said nothing more on the subject. I could still hear Oscar in the background, his cries getting louder. “Hey little man, what’s up?” Warren was obviously talking to his son. “Look, I’ve really got to go. I’ll see you later, baby bro.”

I hung up with a laugh, placing my phone on the bedside table, then kicking my legs out to rest my feet in Joel’s lap.

“That godson of yours is a nightmare. I swear, when we have kids, you’re gonna be the one who deals with the poop and the screaming.”

“Wait, what? You want children? With me?”

“Yeah, of course I do. I thought you knew that.” Joel looked shell-shocked. “Oh, fuck. I just completely put my foot in it, didn’t I? Are you freaking out? Oh shit, you’re totally freaking out...”

“No! No. I’m not freaking out. I just... I want kids too. With you.” Joel smiled then and shifted himself on the bed so that he was sitting beside me.

Joel didn’t say anything for a moment. He just sat there, watching me. “What? What is it?”

“So, I have a question that I wanted to ask you.” He leant to the side and reached into the top drawer of his bedside table. He rummaged for a moment before pulling something out and turning back to face me. *Holy crap, is that what it looks like?* I glanced up from the box in Joel’s hands. He was smiling at me, but he looked nervous.

“Harry, I’ve known you for so long and this past year has been the best year of my life. I never thought I could be this happy, and it’s all down to you. You’re the most important person in my life and I love you with everything that I am.” He held the box out and opened it, revealing the platinum band inside. “Harry Jacobs, will you marry me?”

I didn’t need to think about it, I already knew my answer. “Yes! Of course, yes!”

Joel let out a noise that sounded like he was being deflated, and then he laughed and kissed the side of my head. “I love you, babe,” he whispered. My heart pounded as Joel removed the ring from its box and lifted my left hand to gently place the engagement ring on my finger. I couldn’t look away from it. Joel and I were going to get married. Joel was my fiancé. He was going to be my *husband*.

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“Holy shit, I can’t wait to tell Mum. Warren and Ashley are gonna *die*,” I squealed. Actually squealed. I’d have been embarrassed if I wasn’t so ecstatic. Joel laughed again and pulled me close for a kiss.

I couldn’t help but laugh back. This moment was perfect. The love of my life was holding me in his arms, and he wanted me there for the rest of his life. Joel was mine. *My fiancé*. I liked the sound of that. It seemed fitting, too. This whole thing had started off with a wedding, and now we’d be getting one of our own. I couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life by Joel’s side. He was my other half, and he was all I ever wanted.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Lauren is a new author from the East Midlands, England. She mostly writes M/M themed stories and, as a hopeless romantic, absolutely adores a happy ending. Lauren loves reading, writing, comic books, fangirling over all her favourite films and TV shows, and generally just having fun. She is a geek and proud! Her favourite colour is green, she has a MASSIVE tattoo fetish, loves sparkly nail polish and bearded men (although not necessarily together), and enjoys nothing more than curling up on the sofa with a cup of tea and a good book. You can contact her via Email, Goodreads, or Twitter.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#)

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# ALL OR NOTHING

By C. J. Anthony

## Photo Description

The photo is a typical candid shot of two men posing for a camera, in a darkened room, perhaps at a party or a bar. They are shirtless, showing off well-maintained “bear”-style physiques—ripped muscles and hairy chests, and faces with stubble. One man is younger, with short dark-brown hair, and the other man is older, with slightly graying hair and stubble. They are both leaning into each other, heads touching. The younger man has his arm around the older man’s waist, and the older man has his arm around shoulders of the younger man.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Look at us. You’d never believe what it took to get us to this moment. I’m older than he is and it just was a HUGE stumbling block. Add in that I’m successful and established and this cub is just getting started, and well, I didn’t give him a chance. I didn’t believe he was ready to commit, thought it was a temporary thing for him. He’s a persistent thing though, and was looking for love. Tell the story of how we got here, together, happy and secure.*

*Please no rape, cheating or ménage. We need that HEA!*

Sincerely,

Kevin

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** age gap, bears, businessman, college, friends to lovers, massage therapist, over age 40, slow romance

**Word Count:** 24,401

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## ALL OR NOTHING

By C. J. Anthony

John put the Jeep in park and cut the engine. In the quiet, music and laughter floated through the air. He glanced into his rearview mirror at the scene behind him. The neon sign “Mac’s Shack” glowed softly above the surf shack-themed bar built of wood weathered by the salty ocean air and roofed with fake straw thatching to complete the look. Small lanterns were strung up along the outside, lighting up the space as the sun slowly sank into the coast behind the bar. Men spilled out of the shack and onto the large outdoor patio—some paired off, some in groups of three or four or more—all chatting and laughing and drinking. Most of the pairs were obviously intimate—whispering in each other’s ears, touching an arm or a leg—and the few who had already moved beyond the flirty-touchy stage were swallowing tongues, with humping and grinding soon to follow.

The chalkboard sign by the front door read: “Welcome, Bears of Irvine!” complete with a cutesy bear face drawn next to the word. John groaned as his fingers jiggled his keys, itching to just put them in the ignition, turn the Jeep around and go back home.

The only thing stopping him was his friend Mac—yes, Mac of Mac’s Shack. Mac had called or texted him every day this week, reminding him of the party tonight and of John’s promise to come. A result of the lunch they’d had at the beginning of the week when, unfortunately, one of the topics of conversation had been John’s nonexistent love life.

“Goddammit, John, you’ve got to get off your ass and get laid! The only way to get that asshole Ian out of your system is to fuck him outta there—repeatedly.” This was Mac’s sage advice. John winced.

Mac shook his head. “Christ, I can’t believe you’re gay. Okay fine, you don’t have to fuck on the first date. But you’re never even going to have a first date if you don’t get out there and meet someone!

“This Saturday. The Shack. It’s our first bear get-together of the year, and I promise it’s going to be real chill, like a happy hour. All the guys are really low-key, down to earth. It’s a fun group and a lot of ’em are our age or

roundabouts.” Mac winked at him. “I better see your ass there, or I’m going to hunt you down and drag you there myself.”

John groaned. Mac was the unofficial “social director” of a local online bear group. Mac was a naturally boisterous guy and always looking for a good time, so he was a natural fit. It also didn’t hurt that he just happened to own a bar to hold said “social events.”

“Don’t groan and grouse, I’m serious. I’ll come pounding on your door if you don’t—”

John had finally agreed, just to shut him up. He knew Mac was right, he needed to get out there and meet someone new... he just didn’t know how to go about it. At forty-five, he felt too old for the “thump-a-thump-a” dance clubs that, frankly, he’d never really enjoyed that much in his youth. And normally, he didn’t really go for these types of “social gatherings” either, because no matter how “chill” it might be, it was all still a meat market, everyone sizing each other up for one reason only.

John’s phone buzzed and the screen lit up.

*Where the fuck are you?—Mac.*

John rolled his eyes and opened the door to climb out of his Jeep. It was nine o’clock. He could go in, make an appearance, have a couple of beers and still be home before the eleven o’clock news.

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He’d barely walked in the front door before he heard Mac’s loud whoop. “Johnnie! Son of a bitch, you made it!”

Several men standing nearby turned to check out the object of Mac’s excitement. John caught quite a few pointed stares, raised eyebrows and leering smiles as they gave him a once-over and apparently liked what they saw. John ignored them all and focused on Mac, who was barreling toward him.

Mac was a husky guy whose years had expanded his middle and grayed his hair, but he was still the bawdy, garrulous, “always up (in more ways than one) for a good time” guy he had been in his younger years. His long, gray hair hung to his shoulders, and his skin was a dark bronze. His uniform Hawaiian shirt—blue with white and pink flowers tonight—was unbuttoned, showing off his small belly and the gray pelt of fur covering his chest. Khaki shorts and flip-flops completed his look.

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He drew John into a quick hug, ending with a hearty slap on his back that had John choking down a cough. "Can't believe you really came!"

John frowned at him. "I didn't think I had a choice, did I?"

Mac scoffed. "You are always in charge of your own destiny, Johnnie."

"Bullshit."

Mac threw his head back in a bark of a laugh. "Yeah well, you're here, and about damn time!"

John just shook his head with a grudging smirk as he handed the guy at the door a few bucks for the cover. Mac kept his hand on John's shoulder and drew him further into the bar. "We got a good crowd tonight. Everyone's real friendly. Lots of guys our age, too." He winked at John. "Oh, but ya gotta lose the shirt. Give it to me and I'll stash it behind the bar for you."

"What? I am not taking my shirt off!"

"It's a beach party, John. Let loose a little. Be at one among your fellow bears. Do you see anyone else with their shirt on?"

John glanced around quickly and realized every other guy in the place was bare-chested, shirts tucked into their waistbands, if they had a shirt at all.

"You're still wearing your shirt."

"But I am still proudly displaying my chest. And it's my place, I can do whatever I damn well please. Now, off with the shirt. I've seen what you got under there, Johnnie boy. It's a shame to be hiding all that. Come on." Mac was motioning impatiently at John's shirt with his fingers.

John was mortified. Muttering under his breath, he closed his eyes and quickly tore his shirt off, flinging it at his friend. Mac gave a loud wolf-whistle and laughed at him. Mac took his shirt and leaned into his ear. "Now go mingle, you hot, sexy, old man." He gave John a swat on the butt and then headed off to go welcome another large group of men streaming in the door.

John glanced down at himself uncomfortably, feeling his nipples tighten at the light breeze flowing through the bar. He stifled the urge to cross his arms over his chest to cover himself. Without looking at anyone, he headed straight for the bar, ordered a beer and then swallowed nearly all of it down in one gulp. His head immediately felt fuzzy, and he told himself he'd better slow down. He had drunk two beers down pretty quickly before he left the house, to put some

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liquid courage in him, and now this made number three. He was a typical social drinker—a glass of wine or a beer now and again—but he hadn't thrown back beers of this quantity and speed since he was in college.

Casually leaning against the bar, John finally allowed himself to survey the crowd. One quick glance showed... no one he was immediately interested in. There were bears of all shapes and sizes there, a few that could have potential, but none that really wanted to make him leave the bar area yet. A small group of younger bear cubs congregated in the corner, which surprised John, as Mac kept stressing this gathering, was mostly "older guys like him." Not that forty-five was "old," per se, but these young cubs looked like they were barely legal. He was disgusted to see some of the older men blatantly salivating over the baby cubs, with some of the young studs just eating up the attention. At his age, John had never understood being with a guy so much younger, well aside from the obvious. Sex only took a relationship so far—like to the next morning. Then what? Although he had known a few May/December couples that made it work.

Shaking his head at the ridiculousness, he turned back to the bartender to order another beer.

"Mr. Mattheson?"

Startled to hear his name, John turned to the voice. *Who the fuck knew me here?* One of the younger cubs from across the room was standing next to him, so close their arms were almost brushing. The boy was tan and dark haired—everywhere, from the short cropped hair on his head, to the dark, sexy eyebrows, the heavy scruff on his jaw and chin, and the oh-my-God smattering of dark fur covering his perfect pecs and well-chiseled abs. A sculptor could not have done better. And he was smiling right at John—not in that leering, I-want-to-eat-you way, but in a sincere, happy-to-see-you kind of smile. A damn gorgeous smile, John had to admit. His mouth dried up and he had to swallow a couple of times before he could speak.

"Yes?"

Gorgeous boy's smile got even wider. "I knew that was you! You probably don't remember me, but my family used to live down the street from you. I'm Mark Kincaid?"

Mark Kincaid... *holy fuck!* Little Marky Kincaid? The kid who used to ride his bike down their block and wave when John was out working in the yard? Who used to deliver their paper? Jesus Christ... and he had grown into *this*?



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John was truly mortified now to realize this man he was ogling no more than a minute ago was the little pip-squeak kid who'd once lived down the block from him.

John was speechless while his mind tried to put all this together. Mark's smile turned shy.

"It was a long time ago. My parents moved us out of the neighborhood when I was sixteen."

"Ah... yes. I remember now." John finally croaked out. "The Gardners moved in to your house." He frowned as he processed numbers. The Gardners had a baby right after they moved in, and the kid was eight or nine now? So if Mark was sixteen when he moved and it'd been nine years, that would make him... twenty-five? Oh Lord, he was still a baby. A very, very hot, very hairy, very *manly* baby.

Luckily, the bartender walked up before John's head exploded. He turned and asked for another beer. Mark handed over the empty bottle he was holding and ordered another as well, and also handed over a twenty. He looked back at John.

"This one's on me. If that's okay?"

Oh God, now he was buying him a drink! He was never going to get rid of him now. And what did that mean? It had been so long since he'd been in a bar with the intent of meeting someone. In his day, accepting a drink from someone was the equivalent of agreeing to a blowjob in the back room.

"Uh, thanks... Mark, but that's really not necessary."

"No please, I'd really like to."

The bartender arrived back with their beers, and it was too late anyway; the guy had already taken Mark's money. John grabbed his beer and threw back about half of it all at once. Vaguely he remembered his previous plan of not drinking any more, but he was losing track of how many beers he'd had. He thought this was maybe four? Or was it five? Regardless, he resolved this would definitely be his last one.

Whew, it was getting very warm in here. He was glad Mac had made him take his shirt off. Mark was still standing there, sipping his beer and smiling—again. Did the kid ever do anything else but smile?

"So, um... where did you move to, Mark?"

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“Long Beach.”

John nodded politely. “Nice neighborhood?”

“Yeah, but the scenery wasn’t as nice.”

“Really? I’ve been there a few times. It’s beautiful, as I recall.”

Mark blushed and leaned in closer to John so he could speak quietly. “None of our neighbors were as hot as you. I had such a huge crush on you growing up. That’s why I used to ride my bike past your house so much, especially when you were outside mowing the lawn. With your shirt off.”

*Oh God.* John grabbed his beer bottle like it was a life preserver and swallowed the rest down in one gulp.

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John shifted his head, eliciting a groan that made him cringe. It took his brain a second to catch up to the fact that the deafening noise came from him. Why was someone pounding a hammer on his head? Oh, wait... the pounding was inside his head. He groaned again and opened an eye. He recognized his sheets, and his nightstand and the framed photo of Paris on his wall that he’d bought at that gallery last year. Okay, so he was home, in his own bed. He swallowed and licked his lips. His throat was so dry it was like sandpaper. He sighed at the glass of water he spied on the nightstand and forced his head up slowly. When he realized that wasn’t going to be enough, he shifted his upper torso up to a sitting position, fighting against the protesting of his head. He saw the bottle of aspirin next to the glass of water and wondered if he’d need the whole bottle. He hadn’t felt this bad since college. How much had he drunk last night? That was the last time he let Mac twist his arm into going anywhere.

As he swallowed a couple aspirin and gulped down the water like a drowning man, he heard faint whistling from the... kitchen? He froze. Someone was in his house? Oh God, what had happened last night? Did he bring someone home? Frantically he tried to sort through the hazy pictures in his brain. He remembered talking to Mac when he came in, he remembered standing at the bar, he remembered... Mark. And then... nothing was coming up after that. Mark was the last person he remembered talking to. Mark who had lived down the street... oh God, Mark who was *twenty-five*. He tore through the comforter and the sheets that covered him. Okay, he still had his boxer shorts on, not that that necessarily meant anything. His clothes were neatly folded on the chair across the room. He leaned his head over the side of

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the bed, ignoring his stomach's sloshing around, threatening to heave its contents up. There were no condom wrappers. *Shit, oh God, please don't tell me we didn't use anything.* Every muscle in his body groaned and ached as he flung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, but that could be from simply passing out in such an awkward sleeping position. He definitely didn't feel like he'd been fucked, though that didn't mean he didn't... *oh God...* fuck Mark. Although if he was having trouble remembering what happened last night, he doubted he had been in any shape to be fucking anyone.

Slowly he got up and shuffled around the room, grabbing a T-shirt and some sweats and putting them on before he did the walk of shame to the kitchen.

The scent of eggs and bacon assaulted him as he made his way down the hall, and the turnover of his stomach almost caused a pit stop in the bathroom. He braced his hand against the wall and waited his stomach out until it settled before he continued on.

Mark was in the kitchen whistling and moving around the stove. At the bar were two plates and two glasses of orange juice. John stood for a moment, surveying the scene, before pulling himself together and striding confidently over to the bar. He made it, but his whole body protested inwardly.

Mark looked over and smiled. "Hey you're up! How are you feeling?"

"Um..."

Mark laughed. "Food's almost done. Get some protein and grease in you and you'll be feeling good as new. Did you take the aspirin?" John nodded. Mark waved a spatula toward the stove. "I hope this is all right. I just knew you'd probably need something in your stomach, and I know the last thing you feel like doing with a hangover is cooking."

John nodded again. The pops and cracks of the bacon cooking in the skillet filled the awkward silence as Mark stirred the eggs in the other pan.

John drowned in the embarrassment he felt about... well, whatever he'd done last night. But he knew he couldn't bury his head and ignore it. "Listen, Mark, I... well... I want you to know, I don't generally make a habit of drinking like that. I haven't done that in ah... well it's been too many years to count. Let's just say I was much younger."

Mark smiled gently. "Hey, no problem, I get it. I know it was your first night out after Mr. C. leaving, and you were nervous."

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John blanched. “How do you know about Ian?”

“You told me.”

John covered his eyes and groaned loudly. “Oh, please tell me I was not blubbing my sad story on your shoulder.”

Mark laughed. “No, nothing like that. Actually I was the one that asked about Mr. C. I remember him living with you. He was pretty hot too, but I was always a little disappointed when he was out doing the mowing and not you.”

Ian Carpenter—“Mr. C.” to the young Mark—and John had been together eleven years. They’d met at some charity event, for cancer, maybe? Or something for children? It was so long ago, the details were already faded in John’s memory. John had been there representing his firm, and Ian had been a doctor at UC Irvine Medical Center. Despite the hundreds of people there, they’d seemed to keep running into each other every time they’d turned around. When Ian had suggested a nightcap, John had agreed. They’d spent the next two hours at a quiet cocktail bar, talking. Two days later, Ian had called and asked him out to a gallery opening of a friend of his, and that’d been it. Three months later, they’d realized they’d been spending so much time together, the natural next step was for Ian to move in with John.

They’d been a perfectly matched couple—two very good-looking, uber-successful, professional thirty-something men, with similar likes and dislikes. And after eleven years together, John had assumed that was how the rest of their lives would be. They’d been “comfortable.” So comfortable they’d been able to finish each other’s sentences and thoughts, and exist on conversations such as “pass the salt” and “can you pick up the dry-cleaning today?” Sunday mornings had become passing sections of the paper back and forth between each other without a word spoken between them.

Then one day, out of the blue, Ian had come home and said he had a job offer at Mass General in Boston—and that he had already accepted. At the time, John had been blind-sided and started to argue that he couldn’t just quit his job at the firm and move to Boston. As the empty silence had seeped in, he’d suddenly realized Ian didn’t want him to come with him. And when his next feeling had been relief that he didn’t have to move to Boston, he’d realized they had reached their end. After some time and space and grieving for what he’d thought he’d had with Ian, he’d realized that maybe he hadn’t fought harder for Ian because he’d known things hadn’t really been working for them. They hadn’t for a long time, in fact.

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Mark brought a plate over and then squinted at John as he carefully placed it in front of him. “You don’t remember us talking about Mr. C.?”

John shook his head sheepishly. “I’m afraid I don’t remember much from last night. I...” He swallowed hard to get the courage up for the next part. “I don’t remember even coming back here. I’m sorry, but I have to ask. Did we—?”

Mark saved him from uttering the words. “I slept on your couch last night.” John breathed out a huge gust of relief.

“Not that I am not interested, believe me.” Mark set the plate down in front of John before pausing to look him straight in the eye. His eyes were steady but glittering with a mischief and desire that stirred something in John. “But I would never take advantage of someone who was drunk or unaware.” Mark turned back to the counter and filled another plate of food for himself. He came over and sat down at the bar next to John and finished his story. “Mac couldn’t leave the bar, so I offered to bring you home since I knew where you lived.” He winked at John. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I stayed on your couch. I just wanted to make sure you were okay this morning.” He held his hands up. “I promise, I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I eat and clean up.”

John smiled in grateful relief. “You don’t have to clean up the dishes; I can handle that, especially after all you’ve done. You went above and beyond, giving me a ride home and then staying here to make sure I was okay. And making me breakfast.”

“No problem, really, I was glad to do it. Oh, and Mac said he would swing by later and pick you up so you could get your Jeep. It’s still at the Shack. Unless you need your car sooner? I’d be happy to take you over there—”

John shook his still-pounding head. “I don’t think I’m in any shape to drive just yet. I need more coffee and a long, hot shower. And more aspirin.”

There was silence as they ate. John snuck a glance at Mark as he took a drink of his orange juice. He remembered the kid who’d ridden his bike down their street and found it hard to reconcile that skinny, lanky kid with the man sitting next to him.

“So... how are your parents? Are you still in Long Beach?”

“Mom and Dad are still there. I moved back to Irvine. I’m going to UC Irvine part-time, trying to get my business degree. The rest of the time I work at the Redwood Therapy Clinic as a massage therapist.”

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“So, which do you want to do? Business or massage?”

“Both, I guess. The plan is to open my own massage/spa salon someday. I figure the business degree will help with that.”

John had to admit he was impressed. The boy had a plan and was building toward it. “Sounds like a solid plan. Good for you.”

The pleased smile that broke across Mark's face flashed John back to the night before, at the bar, when Mark had first approached him. At least he remembered that part of the evening. That smile was pretty unforgettable. John let his gaze linger on Mark longer than he knew he should before he snapped his attention back to his plate, hopefully before Mark noticed. No doubt Mark was incredibly sexy, but he was also way too young for John. They were in completely different places in their lives.

When they'd finished eating, Mark again offered to clean up the dishes, but John waved him off. An awkward moment passed.

“Okay, then I should probably get going—” Mark started.

“Sure, sure, of course.” John ushered Mark toward the door. “Thanks again for last night. I really am quite embarrassed—”

“No problem, Mr. M., we've all been there before. Don't sweat it.”

John cringed at the moniker that fell from Mark's lips. As if it wasn't already obvious how much older John was than Mark, Mark's nickname from childhood opened the wound a little wider.

“Mark, considering you dragged my drunk ass home last night, and God knows what else you might have witnessed, I think you can call me John.”

Mark grinned. “All right, John.”

John opened the door, and Mark was just ready to step over the threshold when he paused. He seemed to be mulling something over, and he was biting his lip as if he wanted to say something.

“Would you like to grab some coffee sometime? Or dinner?”

John's eyebrows rose. Coffee could maybe be construed as a “friend” invite, but dinner straddled the line into “date-territory.” Did Mark mean a date? Or just as friends?

“I hope it's not too forward or whatever, but I'd really like to see you again, John.”

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John's stomach churned up his breakfast. Okay, well that settled the debate pretty quickly. "I'd like to see you again," generally meant one thing. His mind reeled as he tried to figure out exactly how to let the kid down gently.

"Uh, actually, it's a little soon after Ian... and well, I'm so busy at work right now..." John took a breath. "I honestly only showed up last night to appease Mac. He was going to come drag me out there if I didn't show up."

Mark's expression sobered as he nodded and looked away for a moment. John expected him to turn and leave, but instead, he looked John straight in the eye one more time. "Well, I think you're pretty terrific, John. If your schedule ever frees up, give me a call." He handed John a business card. Then he trotted down the steps and got into the old blue Honda Civic that was parked in John's driveway and drove off.

John glanced down at the business card. "Mark Kincaid, Licensed Massage Therapist, Redwood Therapy Clinic." Scrawled above the clinic's phone and address info were Mark's personal cell phone digits. He closed the front door and detoured through the kitchen on his way to his bedroom, intending to pitch the card. His hand hovered over the trashcan, but something wouldn't let him throw it away. So he turned and tossed it in the small dish on the stand by the front door where he kept his keys and other miscellaneous notes and reminders.

Three hours later, he found himself looking at it again as he stood, jangling his keys and waiting for Mac to pick him up. He shook his head and reached for it, intending to again throw it away, when a loud car horn sounded twice outside. John set the card down again and headed out the door before Mac annoyed all of his neighbors with what would become incessant honking if John didn't show up immediately.

After John got in and buckled up, he looked over to see Mac still sitting there, grinning and chuckling at him like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"What?" John asked, annoyed.

"How you feeling this morning, big guy? Did you wear that boy out? Break him in real good?"

John's face flamed. "Mac!"

Mac cackled as he put the car in gear and took off.

"I did not touch that... kid. At least, I don't think I did. He said he slept on the couch."

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Mac's face fell, and he gave John an exasperated look. "You mean to tell me you had that young, juicy, grade-A piece of prime beef served up to you on a platter, and you didn't fuck the shit out of him? Where have I failed you? Are you switching teams on me?"

John frowned at Mac. "You are a crude old man, you know that? First off, I am not looking to just 'hook up.' And that is all those young guys want, especially from some old guy like me. I remember that age—"

"I am not a crude old man, you asshole. And neither of us is old, well, at least not in years. Just because we're a little grayer doesn't mean the plumbing is dead. Or, at least mine still works. After last night, you better get checked out. You might be ready for the old folks' home." Mac shook his head in disbelief.

"My plumbing's not *dead*, I just want more than sex or a quick fling. There's nothing wrong with that."

"No, but you just got out of a long relationship. Take a break. Live a little. Have some fun before you jump right back into ho-hum-picket-fence-boring."

John sighed. He loved Mac, and they'd been friends forever, but this would never be a topic they would see eye-to-eye on. In the twenty years he'd known Mac, the longest relationship Mac had ever been in was... actually John couldn't ever remember Mac being in a relationship with anyone. He'd talked to him about it many times, but Mac was perfectly happy with his life as it was, and he'd finally convinced John that they just needed to agree to disagree on the topic. They had different opinions on what they wanted in life when it came to love and sex, which was why it was ludicrous Mac was now trying to convince John to change his view.

"The whole discussion is irrelevant, anyway, Mac. I was in no condition to do anything last night. Hell, I don't even remember getting home!"

Mac laughed again. "Hell yeah, you were three sheets to the wind. What happened, man? I don't think I've ever seen you that wasted."

John hid his face in his hands. "I don't even know. I had a couple beers at home, then a couple more at the bar..."

"And three Jaeger shots."

"*Three?*" John exclaimed.

"That I know of."



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John groaned. "How badly did I embarrass myself?"

"You stripped naked, climbed on top of the bar and did a round of the hokey pokey."

Mac exploded in laughter at the look of pure horror on John's face. They had reached the Shack, and Mac pulled next to John's Jeep and cut the engine of his car, still shaking so hard from laughter he could barely breathe. He pounded John on the back as he tried to catch a breath.

"Oh God, the look on your face!" He had to restrain another round of giggles. "I'm *kidding*, John!"

"You son of a bitch."

"It's too bad you didn't do that. You need to let loose sometime, Johnnie-boy. But no, I tried to keep tabs on you, and I never saw anything inappropriate. You just got a little more social, played some pool, chatted with some of the guys. With your little boy cub right next to you the whole night. He never left your side. It was so cute."

"Why did you let him take me home?"

"He said he was your neighbor. Which, by the way, why have you been holding out that you have such hot, studly neighbors? All I ever see when I come to visit you is that cranky old bag that lives across the street from you. Oh! Did she finally kick the bucket and he moved in?"

"No!" John growled. "Mrs. Bradsaw is still there. Mark used to live in my neighborhood about ten years ago. With his parents. When he was fifteen and delivered my newspaper. He used to have a crush on me."

"Oh. Oh my. God!" Mac wheezed with laughter as he tried to form words. "Oh, that is so precious!"

John sat there, silently seething at his friend. Mac finally got himself calmed down and started digging for his phone.

"Well, I think the guy still has that crush on you, Johnnie-boy." Mac fiddled with his phone, pushing buttons until John felt his own phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out to see Mac had sent him a picture from the night before. He and Mark, both shirtless, still at the bar and posing with an arm around each other.

"I look plastered."

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Mac chuckled, “Yeah, you’re pretty trashed. But he looks pretty happy. And you both look pretty damn hot together.” With all humor gone, Mac paused. “Give him a shot, Johnny. If it makes you feel better, take him out for a meal first before you fuck him. Have a little fun with the young cub while you’re still young enough to enjoy it.”

John just shook his head.

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John spent the rest of the weekend as usual—grocery shopping, catching up on laundry and other cleaning around the house. He couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering to Mark though. Every time he grabbed his keys, he saw the business card with Mark’s number. Every time he picked up his phone, he was reminded of the picture Mac sent him. He’d even pulled the picture up twice, his finger hovering over the delete button each time. The picture was still there; he couldn’t seem to erase it just yet.

When he went into his garage to get the lawnmower out, he balked, remembering Mark as a young teen riding his bike past his house, a seemingly innocent childhood thing to do at the time. Now knowing why Mark rode past his house so often made his stomach twist uncomfortably. *Good God, man, get a grip on yourself. He’s twenty years younger than you!* John kicked himself internally and put a mental block in his brain, locking the boy down in the “insane and impossible” folder of things to never think about again.

Happily, that seemed to help. Monday, he went back to work and let himself get drawn into his work and the day-to-day grind—he was the CFO at a small, but national financial firm based in L.A. John’s life had a routine, and he liked it. It was comfortable: get up, get breakfast, coffee, shower, go to work, come home from work, exercise, eat dinner, watch some ESPN or the news and go to bed.

For working out, he’d turned one of the spare rooms into a small gym with a treadmill and a weight bench. A few nights a week though, when the weather was good, he would come home from work, change and head out for a run at one of the many Irvine city parks. There was one not far from his house that had a great running trail and was fairly quiet and peaceful in the evening. It was the perfect way to shake off the stress of the day and the commute and unwind, to stretch out his muscles and get some fresh air with his exercise. Thursday was one of those nights, and as he was standing by the trail doing some last

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minute stretches before starting off, he was surprised to hear a familiar voice along with the pounding footsteps behind him.

“John!” He turned to see Mark quickly approaching, shirtless again, but this time with a fine sheen of sweat covering him that made John’s mouth water.

Mark smiled wide as he slowed his run down to a stop in front of John. “I thought that was you!” Every word was punctuated with a heavy breath from the exertion he’d already expended.

John swallowed hard and forced himself to respond. “Hello, Mark. How are you?” It was a lame response, but he was surprised at seeing Mark again so unexpectedly.

“I’m good. Long day of classes and work. Thought I’d get in a run before dark. Looks like you had the same idea?”

John nodded.

“I remembered this park from when I was younger. My parents and I used to come here a lot when we lived in Irvine.”

“Yep, it’s a beautiful park, one of the best in Irvine. Great running trail too. Do you run here a lot? I’m surprised I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I try to get here as much as I can. My schedule fluctuates because of class and work. Like, last semester, I had a lot of evening classes, so I usually ran in the early morning. This semester, I have morning classes, so I’m running in the evening.”

John sighed inwardly. *Great.*

“I just got started. You want to run the trail together?” Mark’s smile was so hopeful and sweet, John couldn’t bring himself to say no. Besides, there was only one running trail, so they were bound to catch up to each other eventually.

“Sure, if you promise not to leave the old guy in the dust.”

Mark’s eyes drifted down John’s torso with a look that made John feel naked even though he was wearing a loose tank top. “I’ve seen that six-pack you’re packing under there. I don’t think you’ll have any problem keeping up at all.” He winked at John and took off jogging. John’s whole body heated up at his comment, but he took off to catch up.

John ran at his typical speed, and Mark kept up. If he was keeping his speed down for John, it didn’t show. Mark seemed just as winded as he did when they

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stopped about an hour later. John ran through his cool-down stretches, feeling the pleasant burn and ache he always felt after a good solid run.

“That was great, thanks, John. It’s nice running with a partner.”

John found himself grinning at Mark. “I’ve never run with someone before. It was nice.” And he really meant that. He was surprised at how comfortable it had been running with Mark.

“There’s a great café across the street. They have coffee, but they also have healthy smoothies and energy drinks. I usually stop on my way home. If you’re not in a hurry to get somewhere, would you like to go with me?”

John stopped his hamstring stretch and stood to look at Mark, tongue-tied.

Mark held up his hands in a surrender motion. “Just as friends, I swear, nothing more.”

John knew he would feel like a heel refusing after that statement, so he agreed.

A few minutes later, they each had a smoothie and were sitting down at one of the small patio tables outside the café. It was quiet this time of night, not a lot of people strolling by on the sidewalk.

John took a sip of his drink and hummed as the cool flavors coated his tongue. “Mmmm, okay, you were right. The Mango-Pineapple-Orange is delicious.”

Mark smiled cheekily. “I’m always right.”

John raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Well, this time, I’ll say yes. ‘Always,’ however, remains to be seen.”

Oh crap, did he just flirt with the boy? Mark sipped his smoothie and looked out at the park across the street, as if he were contemplating something. John chastised himself and vowed to be more careful of what he said and how he said it.

“So, what was up with calling yourself an old man back there?”

Mark was looking at him earnestly, waiting for a response. John found himself caught off guard, not expecting that question.

John snorted. “Because I am. I’m hardly twenty-five anymore.”

“You’re not old. You’re only what? Late thirties?”

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“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, young pup.”

Mark scowled at the nickname.

“Forty-five,” John finally admitted.

“That’s still young. Especially with how you stay in shape and take care of yourself.”

Silence passed as John prayed the subject would die.

“That’s the real reason why you said no when I asked you out the other day, isn’t it?”

John took a breath and looked Mark in the eye. Did he feed the boy a lie or tell the truth? He truly liked Mark—he seemed to be a great kid, decent and honest—and with those big brown eyes staring back at him so earnestly, he opened his mouth but changed his mind a split-second before the words came out.

“No, really... I’m just not looking for anyone right now. I swear.”

Mark nodded. “Okay. I won’t push.”

John smiled gratefully. “Thanks.” Mark’s face clearly showed his disappointment, however, and John felt guilty. “I enjoyed the run though.” He tipped his smoothie cup toward Mark. “And the smoothie. I’m always looking for more friends.”

It took a few seconds before a smile started to tug at Mark’s delectable lips. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I can do that.”

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The next week, when John went back to the park for his usual run, he caught himself looking for Mark. He was about halfway through before he saw Mark running a short distance ahead of him. Running behind him, John’s eyes couldn’t help but appreciate Mark’s strong, broad back and shoulder muscles as they worked in perfect, sweaty precision, and how they led down to his sculpted, round ass muscles that pumped in unison with firm, toned thighs and calves.

John felt his cock start to respond and fill, and he groaned inwardly. *No, no no! He’s twenty-five, he’s twenty-five, he’s twenty-five*, John kept repeating to himself, trying to make his body behave.

“John?”

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John's eyes flicked up to see Mark running in place and looking back at him. "Hey, Mark." He smiled weakly.

"I heard a voice behind me but didn't realize it was you."

*Oh shit.* John didn't realize he'd been talking out loud. "Just mumbling to myself, I guess."

Mark seemed to accept that, luckily, and they continued on, running the rest of the trail together. As before, they stopped for a smoothie afterward.

Mark talked about his week and classes, and he mentioned his friend Greg had invited him out with a bunch of their friends to one of the local gay bars the coming weekend.

"Well that sounds fun," John encouraged.

Mark made a face. "Nah, I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"This week really did me in. I worked extra hours at the clinic and had big tests in Econ and History to study for. I'm fried. I just want a quiet night on the couch with some TV. I'm really not that much of a party guy. Greg and the others rag on me a lot for it, but I'm a few years older than most of them, you know? And I work a full-time, physical job. Most of them work part-time campus jobs. They've got more time to study and still party. I like to go out once in a while and let off some steam, don't get me wrong. But I guess I'm more of a homebody at heart."

John nodded, impressed yet again with the young man. Everything he said or did constantly surprised John.

This time, before they parted, they exchanged numbers in their phones and set up a regular appointment, two days a week, to run together.

As the next few weeks passed, their scheduled evening runs became John's favorite parts of the week. He enjoyed Mark's company, and it was nice to interact with someone who wasn't a coworker. He realized how insular his world had become since Ian had left, with his days spent at work and his evenings and weekends—sans the occasional lunch or dinner date with Mac—spent mostly alone. What he had with Ian may not have been perfect, but it had been nice always knowing there was another warm body "there," to converse with or go somewhere with. His time spent with Mark was beginning to make him realize how much he missed friends and companionship.

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They were sitting at the café after one of their runs when John's phone beeped out the chime of a text message. He checked it quickly and shook his head with an exasperated smile.

"Everything okay?" Mark asked, concerned.

John smiled. "Yeah, just another text from Mac, reminding me again of the birthday party he's throwing for himself this weekend. In case I missed the other four texts he sent me this week."

Mark chuckled. "Hey, I'm going too. I guess I'll see you there."

John raised his eyebrows. "Does he send you daily texts?"

"No," Mark said with another laugh. "He posted a general invite to everyone on the Bear group."

John groaned. "I don't know why that surprises me. He talked like this was going to be a small barbecue in his backyard for a few friends. I should have known better when he said he was holding it on the beach behind the bar. That man is the P. Diddy of Irvine."

Mark nearly choked on his smoothie.

At least this time, John thought, he would be more careful with his alcohol intake and not need Mark—or anyone else—to bring him home.

Or so he thought.

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The front door banged against the wall as John hop-shuffled into his house, one arm around Mark's shoulder, while Mark had one arm around his waist, helping to support him.

When John had arrived at Mac's party in the late afternoon, it was already in full swing. Men congregated in groups all over the beach. The grill and food tables were set up closer to the Shack itself, where of course, the drinks were being served. A volleyball net had been set up further down the beach. Mac was in his glory, ruling over the whole event from a large throne parked by a small bonfire. He wore a pale blue Hawaiian print shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a coconut-bra stretched across his wide chest. Below that, he wore a grass skirt and flip-flops. Topping the whole ensemble off was a fake silver costume crown.

Shaking his head, John headed over to wish his friend happy birthday.

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“Please tell me I don’t have to kneel before you and kiss those big stinky feet, Your Royal Highness.”

Mac let out a loud hoot of laughter and jumped up to embrace his friend. “Johnnie-boy! Welcome, my friend! And no, only the young virginal pups have to kneel before me.”

“You’re a crazy motherfucker, you know that?” John grinned good-naturedly at him.

Mac, one arm still around John, led him away from the crowd surrounding his makeshift throne. “Your young cub is here.” His lips stretched into a Cheshire Cat grin. “So, how’s it going with you two?”

John wrenched himself away from Mac’s arm. “He’s not ‘my’ young cub. I keep telling you that. We’re friends. Running companions, that’s all.”

Mac just rolled his eyes heavenward.

“Mac...” John warned.

“I’m not saying anything more. Except that you need to *get laid!*” He gave John a good slap on the ass. “Now get out there and mingle and have some fun.”

John headed to the food tables and dished up a plate of food, grabbed a beer and headed to some blankets spread out on the beach. He had just sat down and bitten into his hamburger when Mark came and sat down next to him with a plate of food.

“Mind if I join you?”

His mouth full, John waved at the space next to him. “Sure, have a seat,” he said after swallowing.

“You were right, Mac sure knows how to throw a party.”

John rolled his eyes and nodded. “God forbid Mac let any good excuse for a party go by.”

They ate in companionable silence, chatting between bites. Eventually some of the other partygoers joined them, including several of Mark’s younger friends.

“So, you’re the hot neighbor Mark was telling us about!”

John flushed. “We used to be neighbors, yes.”



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The guy flicked his eyes down John's body and back up, smiling approvingly at what he saw. He turned to Mark. "He is a walking wet-dream, Marky. You must have had a round-the-clock boner growing up!"

Mark's expression darkened, and he shoved at the guy with his foot. "Shut up, Kevin!"

Kevin just laughed as he rolled over on to his side and pretended to be hurt. Mark's other friends roared and also ribbed Mark. Mark didn't say anymore, but his face was nearly purple in embarrassment. When the conversation moved on to another topic, Mark leaned closer to John. "I'm sorry about that," he said quietly. "Kevin's a douche."

John just smiled. "It's okay. We all had crushes when we were young."

Mark looked like he was going to say something else when his friends started to get up, and they pulled on his arm.

"Come on, let's play some volleyball."

"I call dibs on Mark."

"Hot neighbor guy, you can come too."

And that's how John found himself in front of the volleyball net, shirt off, sweat rolling down his back and face, bumping and serving and spiking and—happily—holding his own against the mostly younger guys. Until he landed on his left leg awkwardly and crumpled to the ground in agony. He knew it was a leg cramp, but unlike any he'd had before, it wasn't going away. It seized up and was not letting go. He had to have Mark and another guy help him up and over to the sidelines.

Mark pressed and poked John's calf, assessing his injury. "You've got a really tight knot there. You'll be fine once it loosens—"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'd better head home." John was mortified at having to bow out with a muscle cramp while all of the young guys had already turned back to the game. He just wanted to get out of there. Except when he tried to stand, the pain was excruciating. As he tried to hobble to an upright position, grimacing, Mark pulled an arm around his waist to steady him.

"You're not going to be able to drive. Let me take you home."

John groaned in frustration but wasn't in any shape to argue.

After Mark helped him inside and kicked the door shut behind them, John motioned toward the living room. "If you can just help me to the couch, I'll be fine—"

"The couch won't work, you need to stretch out. Your bed will be more comfortable for you."

"No, really it's okay—"

Mark turned his head to look John in the eye. He raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. Instead, Mark carefully guided John down the hall and into the bedroom.

"Okay, sit down slowly and roll over onto your front and stretch out."

John felt clumsy and awkward but finally managed to lie down on his stomach.

"I'm going to straighten your leg out now." Mark's voice was low and soothing.

"Unghf!" John grunted in pain into the comforter until, finally, the leg was straight. His leg felt hot as the muscles grabbed and pulled until he wanted to bend the leg up again to try and make it stop.

"Sorry, but that's great. You're perfect. Now just stay there like that."

He heard footsteps and then noise coming from his bathroom.

"What are you doing?" He lifted his head up to see Mark coming out of the bathroom with a bottle of something in his hand and a large fluffy towel.

"I'm going to massage that knot out of your leg and get the muscles to calm down, so you can move your leg and be rid of the pain."

"Oh you don't have to do that—"

Mark had been fitting the towel under his leg, to cover the comforter, and he stopped to look down at John. "Licensed massage therapist here, remember? Be quiet and let me help you." Mark grabbed the bottle he had set down on the nightstand. "You are stubborn, aren't you?"

"Sorry," John mumbled. He felt shame for forgetting about Mark knowing massage and thinking Mark just wanted to get John in his bedroom. Not that his leg would allow much in the way of sexual maneuvers anyway, right now.

"We're just lucky you had this bottle of massage oil in your medicine cabinet."

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John closed his eyes. That bottle was probably about five years old, if he remembered right. He had bought it to try one Valentine's day with Ian, but Ian hadn't really gotten into it, and all that had happened was they'd both ended up oily and messy. Did massage oil have an expiration date?

"Just lie there and relax," Mark murmured. "The sooner you can get your muscles to relax, the better you'll feel."

First, John felt Mark's cool, dry, fingertips pressing and squeezing right where the pain was. It felt so good; Mark's fingers on his skin felt phenomenal. He could even feel the pain easing slowly. In contrast to Mark's cool touch, John also felt his warm breath on his skin as he leaned close to John's leg. Tiny sparks of sensation rippled up through his leg and his ass to his spine and his groin.

All at once, his touch was gone. John bit his lip to keep from protesting, but he soon felt the dip of the mattress as Mark kneeled on the bed with one knee. He heard the cap of the oil open and shut, and soon his whole calf was bathed in warm, silky wetness. Mark added his touch to the oil, working slowly and methodically up John's leg. Starting above the ankle, he rubbed deep into John's leg, working the warm, soothing oil into the muscles.

John couldn't restrain the moan that escaped his lips this time. The leg cramp was gone, replaced by other, much more pleasant sensations. Mark continued massaging John's leg, up past the sore calf muscle and into the thigh, gently but firmly working those muscles with a lighter touch than he had used on John's calf.

His whole leg sizzled from the touch of Mark's fingers, and he groaned again when Mark stopped.

"Don't stop," he felt himself murmur as he lay there contentedly, his eyes closed.

There was silence from Mark for a few seconds before he felt the heat of Mark's body leaning over him.

"Do you want more?" Mark's voice whispered over John's ear, and he nearly shivered from the sensation.

"Yes, please," John breathed out.

Mark's body shifted behind him again, and he felt the oil on his other leg. Slowly and carefully, Mark showered that leg with the same attention he'd

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given John's other leg. His movements went higher and higher, teasing what was hidden under the fabric of John's shorts but stopping short of touching John's ass.

John's cock was definitely responding, enlarging and throbbing painfully as it remained pinned under his body.

Mark left John's shorts on but poured another palmful of oil and continued on to John's back. Starting at his lower back, he rubbed and kneaded the muscles up his spine and out to his upper back and shoulders.

Mark straddled John's body, a hot, weighty thigh on either side of him.

John sighed in bliss. His body felt supine and electric all at the same time. It had been so long since another man had touched him, and even longer since he had been touched so sensually like this. He and Ian, by the end, were barely kissing each other goodbye on the cheek anymore, much less anything like this. In fact, Ian's touch had never felt like this to his body.

"...*you need to get laid.*" Mac's words rumbled through his brain, and as if to agree, his cock twitched underneath him. He shifted his hips upward in response, causing his ass to brush the front of Mark's shorts. Mark was undeniably hard, and John had to clamp down on the desire to rub his ass up against him harder. *Fuck.*

John's brain tried to be rational through the lusty haze filling up his thoughts, but lying there half-naked with another beautiful half-naked man on top of him, his rational side quickly lost the battle. *Fuck it,* he thought. Maybe Mac was right. Of course, he still wanted a long-term partner. But in the meantime, what was wrong with a little sex once in a while? Especially with a very willing partner right there at his fingertips.

Mark had stopped his motions. Both hands came down to the comforter on either side of John's shoulders, holding his torso up—just barely—from touching John's.

"Did you like that?" Mark's voice was throaty and deep in his ear.

"God, yes. You're amazing. I can't even move. You could do anything to me right now."

Mark leaned up and cocked his head to get a better look at John's face.

"That's a loaded offer."

"I'm serious. Fuck me if you want. Anything."

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“Anything?” Mark’s dark furry brows furrowed over his dark eyes.

“Anything.” John moved his hips against Mark’s to punctuate his invitation.

Mark ground against him, pinning him to the bed.

“I don’t want to fuck you, not right now.”

Now it was John’s turn to be surprised, as he looked into Mark’s eyes.

Mark grinned. “I want to take you out. On a date.” Then he leaned forward and captured John’s lips with his, sealing their deal with a hot, sensual kiss.

Dazed, John just lay there as Mark got up from the bed and went into the bathroom. He heard water running, and then Mark walked out, wiping his hands on a towel.

He walked over to the bed and crouched down so his face was level with John’s. “I didn’t do any of this today to get in your pants. I just wanted to make you feel better.”

He placed another light, gentle kiss on John’s lips and then bounced upright. “Lay there for a while and keep the leg relaxed. Then take a hot shower. I would take it easy tonight, and if it’s still sore later, you can ice it to dull the pain.” Mark was heading out of the bedroom when he paused and twisted his head to look at John over his shoulder. “And Wednesday night, seven o’clock. I’ll swing by to pick you up for dinner.”

John waited until he heard the sound of the front door closing before he let out a frustrated groan.

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“He turned down *sex* with you? For a date instead?”

“Yes.”

Mac threw up his hands. “I’m done. You two are apparently made for each other.”

John had stopped by the Shack to talk to Mac the next day. He swirled his beer bottle around on the wooden table, lost in thought.

“I still think I should call him and cancel.”

“For fuck’s sake, why?”

“He’s so young...”

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Mac sighed. "Do you like him?"

"Well, sure, he's a nice guy, has his head on straight, knows what he wants and is going after it. But he's still in college."

"He sounds like such a bum. These radical young kids today! Working a job! Going to college!"

"Mac..." John growled.

"Listen. It's one date. One dinner. What harm will it be to go, to give it a try? Date him for a while; see if you guys can make it work. You might be surprised."

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John was still conflicted when his doorbell rang Wednesday night.

When he opened the door, he was surprised to see the fully dressed version of Mark standing there in a crisp, clean polo shirt and khakis. John realized most of the times they'd been together had either been running or the beach parties when Mark was usually in shorts and no shirt. He looked even more handsome in clothes, if that was possible.

Mark smiled at him. "Hi," he said.

"Hello, Mark."

"You look great."

John had gone with a casual button-down shirt and cotton trousers.

"Thanks, you too."

As they walked across the driveway to Mark's beat-up car, John wondered if he should offer to drive, then immediately kicked himself for the thought. Mark's car had been good enough to give him a ride when he was drunk and injured, it should be good enough to take on a date. He waited patiently while Mark ran around to the driver's side and then opened the passenger door from the inside, since that was the only way it would open. And he made sure he pulled hard on it when he closed it, as that would be the only way it would shut securely. A sense of *déjà vu* crossed over him as he remembered the old beater he drove in college having a similar issue. His smile lasted only a second when he also remembered how long ago that had been—and then he just felt old.

Mark looked over at him. "John? Are you okay?"

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John shook himself out of his head. “Yes, I’m great.”

“You can still back out if you want. I’ll understand.” Mark looked nervous.

John tried to smile reassuringly. “Of course not.”

Mark’s whole face eased when he smiled.

“Do you like Italian?”

“Love it,” John replied enthusiastically.

The valet gave them and the car a condescending look at the restaurant, but other than that, no one seemed to give them a second look.

The restaurant, La Bella Rose, was fairly new in Irvine, and John had not had a chance to try it yet. It was patterned after the small inexpensive trattorias all over Italy. The décor was simple and clean, nothing overly fancy. The menu had basic traditional Italian dishes at affordable prices.

The waiter arrived and offered to recommend a bottle of wine.

“Yes, please—”

“No, thanks—”

Both John and Mark spoke at the same time. Then they both apologized at the same time. The date was off to a smashing success of awkwardness.

“I’m okay with just water, please,” Mark addressed the waiter before turning to John. “But please, John, order anything you’d like.”

“Well if you’re not drinking, I hardly need a whole bottle. I don’t think either one of us needs to see me inebriated one more time.” Mark smiled knowingly.

John ended up ordering a glass of wine with his dinner and the chicken marsala. Mark ordered spaghetti with the house marinara sauce. At first, John assumed Mark had simple taste buds until he realized the spaghetti was the cheapest thing on the menu. Then he felt bad for the bottle of wine faux pas and for ordering a more expensive dish than Mark.

When the waiter asked about dessert, John immediately declined, and when the bill came he tried to figure out how to offer help. He watched as Mark looked at the bill then seemed to be fumbling in his wallet longer than necessary.

So John quietly tried to reach for the bill, but Mark would not have it.

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“I asked you out, John.”

“I can pay for my half—”

“No,” Mark said firmly, and so John let it drop. Mark finally put some bills in the leather portfolio the waiter had left and looked visibly relieved when the waiter came to pick it up.

On the way home, John relaxed and realized that he'd actually had a great time with Mark. Not that it should have been surprising since they'd been getting along so well up to this point. Dinner was really no different than their after-run smoothies at the café.

But, as they pulled up to his house, John got nervous again. Would Mark expect to be invited in? Did he *want* to invite Mark in? His cock woke up at that idea, so John knew immediately it would be a bad idea.

In the end, Mark solved the problem for him. He walked John up to his door, and they paused as Mark saved John.

“You don't have to be scared, John. I won't ask to come in.”

“Scared?”

“Your knee was bouncing in the car the whole way home.” Mark smiled at him. “Just tell me you had a good time. But be honest.”

John found himself smiling as he contemplated the question. Honest would be easy. “I did have a very good time tonight, Mark.”

Mark's grin broadened, lighting up his whole face. “Good. So did I.” He leaned forward and kissed John, caressing his lips confidently but not forcefully. “Good night,” he said softly when they broke apart.

“Good night,” John whispered as Mark walked back to his car.

They made plans to go out again the next week. John knew he was going to have to work late, so he told Mark to meet him at work.

He was just finishing up when his assistant Marjorie walked into his office with a quizzical look on her face. “There's a very hot young man outside asking for you.”

John smiled. “Tell him I'll be right there.”

“Well no rush, slutty Sally from down the hall already sniffed him out and is barking all over his tree.”



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John's face paled, but he didn't look up at Marjorie.

"But I'm guessing," Marjorie drawled slowly as she watched John carefully, "that he's probably not going to be interested in her, is he?"

Still refusing to look at her, John shuffled papers around on his desk. "I have no idea," he muttered.

"Oh my God, John." Marjorie quickly stepped over to John's desk, sitting down in the chair across from him. "Please, don't tell me you hired a male escort!"

That made John's head snap up. "For fuck's sake, Marjorie!" He threw a file folder full of paperwork down on the desk with a hard slap. "Why the hell would you say that?"

She shrugged. "Well, he's young and cute, obvious arm candy. Don't get me wrong, I think it's great you're finally going out again after Ian, and your personal life is your private life, but... well, do you think it was smart letting him come to the office?"

John closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "He is not a male escort. I did not hire him for anything." John's face flushed as it usually did when he was about to blow up. After ten years of working with him, Marjorie knew the signs.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. So who is he? Are you interviewing him for an intern position I don't know about?"

John sighed heavily. "We're going out to dinner. On a date."

Marjorie's eyes popped and her mouth dropped open before she quickly composed herself. It was too late, however; John saw the shock on her face.

"How did... I mean, where—?"

"It's a long story," John interjected. "I met him at one of Mac's parties."

"Well, then at least he's over twenty-one," Marjorie murmured. She immediately slapped her hand over her mouth and looked at him with wide eyes. "I'm sorry, John."

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. "For the record, he's twenty-five. Oh, but it gets better." He paused and peered at her through his fingers. "He used to be my neighbor down the street when he was fifteen. He had a crush on me at the time."

Marjorie's eyes danced and her cheeks puffed out as she bit her lip to keep the giggle in.

"Go ahead, let it out," John said wearily.

She finally let a small giggle escape. "Oh that's so... adorable."

John uncovered his face and leaned back in his chair. "I look ridiculous, don't I? With someone that young?"

She cocked her head and smiled slowly at him. They had worked together for the entire ten years John had been at the firm, and had been through a lot together. They were more friends than colleagues, and that was the only reason they could have this conversation now.

"Do you like him?"

"He's really working hard to make something of himself. He works full-time and goes to college. He's getting a business degree so he can have his own business someday."

"That's great," she said slowly. "But you didn't answer my question."

He sighed. "I don't know. I think... maybe I could. But Christ... what if everyone who sees us together thinks I hired him for the evening? Or that he's just my mid-life crisis?"

Marjorie reached out and placed her hand on his. "If you like him, if he's worth it, then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks."

John mulled over Marjorie's words as he closed down his computer and locked up his office for the night. She was right. It shouldn't matter what anyone else thought. But he still couldn't get over his initial reaction when she had thought Mark was an escort. Shame and embarrassment—which only embarrassed him even more. He pivoted to see Mark sitting quietly in one of the chairs by Marjorie's area, Sally still fawning over him and talking his ear off. He looked bored and annoyed but was putting on a polite face and pretending to be interested in whatever she was saying. He looked up at that moment, and the beautiful happy smile that stretched his face when he saw John swept all thoughts of his and Marjorie's conversation out of his head. John found himself grinning back instinctively. Mark stood up as John approached.

"Hi, Mark. Sorry I took so long." *And sorry you got stuck with her*, he tried to say with his eyes.

"No problem. I was a little early anyway."

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Just as John was about to usher Mark out of there, the office door next to his opened and he heard a familiar female voice call his name.

“John!”

He froze as he turned to acknowledge his boss Walter Cannon and Walter's wife, Lois.

“Is Walter making you work over too?” She rushed over and gave John a quick hug.

“Oh, you know he's a slave-driver. Lovely to see you, Lois.”

Lois stepped back to stand beside her husband. “I came by to kidnap this one and make sure he didn't work through dinner.”

Walter smirked. “Yes, so concerned about my well-being. It's really just an excuse for us to go to her favorite sushi place.”

Lois hit Walter playfully on the arm as they bantered back and forth. They teased each other, John laughed dutifully, and when all chatter died out, John suddenly remembered Mark was still standing there next to him. There was an awkward pause as John saw Lois's eyes flicking back and forth between him and Mark. She finally extended her hand to Mark. “Hello, I'm Lois Cannon.”

*Oh shit*, John thought. “I'm sorry, uh, this is Mark, my da... dearest nephew. Mark, this is my boss and his wife, Walter and Lois Cannon.”

Mark was perfectly polite, shaking both Walter's and Lois's hands, and there were the required echoes all around of “so nice to meet you.” John caught a disappointed glance from Mark but guiltily ignored it to stay focused on his boss and his wife.

They ended up leaving together with the Cannons, riding the elevator down to the lobby of their building, where they finally split up—the Cannons going on to the parking garage and John and Mark out to the street level. The restaurant they had picked was just a couple of blocks up the street, so they walked. Silently, with a huge force field of tension between them. John felt like a heel at the lie he'd told Lois and Walter. When he opened his mouth and those were the words that came out, he'd surprised himself as much as he had Mark. While they walked, he kept trying to come up with an apology, but everything sounded like the complete shit it was, because there really was no good excuse.

The street noise and traffic saved John from saying anything, but he knew once they got to the restaurant, his time would be up.

Once inside, the hostess seated them and handed them menus. Mark didn't even touch his, so neither did John. "Mark, I'm so sorry—"

"Are you not out at work?"

*No*, John wanted to say, but he couldn't lie. "I am out—my boss and most of the people I work with know."

"Then what was that? Why was I your 'nephew' instead of at least a friend?"

"Because you were dressed nicely and you're good-looking and Lois would have seen right through the 'friend' label, picking up that we are more than that."

"*Am* I more than just a friend?"

John didn't know how to respond.

"I'm going to ask you a question again, and I want the truth this time. The real reason you didn't want to go out with me originally was because of my age, wasn't it?" Mark was calm, but the hurt showed clearly in his eyes.

"Not the only reason... but yes, it was one," John said quietly.

"Why does the age thing have to be such an issue? We get along great."

"We do, but..." John trailed off. "How do I know you're not just looking to fulfill your boyhood crush?"

Mark looked truly affronted and shook his head. "I like you, John. A lot. I like the *you* I've gotten to know these past weeks. You're not just a crush to me anymore. I was just a silly kid then."

"And you're still young, Mark. Even I played around in my twenties; everyone does. I'm not looking to be just some fling for a few weeks or a month. I'm too old for that. Been there, done that and all that nonsense. I want someone steady, someone looking to get serious. We're at different places in our lives. You're still in college and just starting to build your life. Which, I greatly admire your ambition for. You know what you want and you're going after it. You won't want to be stuck with the stodgy old guy. You'll tire of me and move on."

"No I won't. You just said it yourself, I know what I want."

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John sighed wearily. Their waiter walked up at that moment.

“Good evening, I’m Jason, I’ll be your server tonight. Can I get you both started with something to drink?”

“Two Coronas, please.”

“Certainly. I will just need to see your son’s ID first.”

John reacted before he could stop himself, his mouth turning down in a grimace and his face flushing hotly with embarrassment. All witnessed by Mark, whose eyes were trained on him. When he dared glance at him, he saw the pleading intensity on Mark’s face literally die out right before him. His eyes were dull as he suddenly stood from the table.

“No need,” Mark said hollowly. “I’m not staying.” And then he stood up and walked out.

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John stewed all weekend, moping around his house. He kept replaying the whole situation, wishing there was something he could have done or said better to avoid the ugly conversation it had turned into. *You could have just never gone out with him at all* was his brain’s answer. And he couldn’t disagree. He had made the whole mess all by himself.

Sunday, his insistent, buzzing phone woke him from an unintended nap on the couch.

“Hello,” he answered fuzzily without even checking who it was.

“Well, you’re alive at least. Where the hell are you?”

John frowned at Mac’s accusatory tone. “At home.”

“That’s funny, I thought you were supposed to be at Ginny’s.”

Ginny’s? *Oh shit!* He and Mac were supposed to meet up for brunch at their favorite diner at eleven. He whirled around looking for the clock on the wall. It was one o’clock.

“Dammit, I’m sorry, Mac. I completely forgot and fell asleep on the couch.”

“Kinda early for a nap, old man.”

John sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. “Well, I didn’t get much sleep last night. And before you even say anything, it’s not what your dirty mind is thinking!”

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“All right, all right. So what’s going on?”

John told him everything that had happened with Mark. Mac cackled when he was done.

“I can’t believe Marjorie thought you’d hired a male escort!” He set off on a fit of laughing again. When he calmed down he got serious.

“Well you already know my opinion of the whole situation. That’s what happens when you try to have a relationship. Better to just fuck ’em and be done with it.”

“So yeah, maybe it wasn’t the best time or way to let the boy down. But if you can’t get over this age difference thing then isn’t it really for the best? For both of you? Better to just cut the cord now before both of you get tangled up in a bigger mess. Young cubs’ hearts are like stretchy rubber bands—by next week, he’ll be good as new and on to someone else.”

“I know.” Yet, somehow, that thought didn’t make John feel any better.

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Monday, Marjorie was in his office first thing, wanting to know all the dirt on Mark. He got more of a sympathetic response from her than he did from Mac.

“Oi. You really introduced him to Walter and Lois as your nephew? Oh, I’m so sorry, John. I feel responsible.”

“You? You’re not responsible. My big fat mouth is the one responsible.”

“I know, but that whole talk we had beforehand, and me assuming he was an escort.” She cringed. “It made you sensitive about his age.”

“But Marjorie, you were right. The waiter assumed he was my son, for Christ’s sake!”

“For what it’s worth, John, I don’t think Walter or Lois would have thought anything of it. They would have been happy for you. Anybody who knows you would, and anyone else... well, who cares what they think?”

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John didn’t see Mark for two weeks. He still went to the park to run, but Mark was never there anymore, so he figured Mark was trying to avoid him, which disappointed John. Then again, who could blame him? If the situation

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were reversed, John would probably do the same thing. But he really wanted to talk to Mark, so he decided to switch running days and, sure enough, caught Mark walking into the smoothie café just as John was starting his run.

He jogged over to the café and found Mark sitting at a table inside by himself. Taking a deep breath, he approached.

“Hi, Mark.”

Mark glanced up at him, “Hi,” he said curtly.

“Can I sit down for a moment?”

Mark gestured to the other seat at the table but didn't say a word.

“I've been hoping to catch you, but I haven't seen you on the trail. I guess I can understand if I'm the last person you want to see right now.”

Mark remained silent.

“I'm so sorry for the other night. You have no idea how sorry. I should have been more honest with you from the beginning. And I shouldn't have introduced you as my nephew. That was ridiculous. My boss and his wife are great. I don't know why I said that.”

“And you probably shouldn't have gone out with me.”

John's lips turned down. “And I probably shouldn't have gone out with you,” he affirmed. “I have enjoyed the time we've spent together though. And I hope it's not strange if I ask if we can get over this and still stay friends? I've really missed running with you.”

Mark was silent for a long time, and John started to brace himself for the “no” that was inevitably going to come out of Mark's mouth.

“For the record, you're still wrong about me,” Mark finally answered. “Just because I'm young doesn't mean I act and think like everyone else in my generation. That would be like saying all of your generation just wants to settle down and get married. I think Mac destroys that stereotype—weekly.”

John's eyes widened, and he couldn't hold in the laugh. “Very true.”

“But, I can be man enough to accept your feelings.” Mark's lips stretched upward—not one of his full, face-splitting smiles, but it was enough to ease John's nerves.

Mark reached out his hand. “I can do friends.”

John smiled in relief and reached out his hand. They shook on it, John ignoring how firm and warm Mark's hand felt in his.

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John absently swirled the bottle of his beer around in the wet condensation circles it made on the bar. He was at the Shack, waiting to have dinner with Mac, who had been called to the back room for some kind of beer emergency. He glanced across the room to where Mark was sitting at a table with another very good-looking guy about the same age. They had come in while John was sitting here waiting, and both he and Mark had acknowledged each other with a wave and a smile. It had been three weeks since their agreement to stay friends, and so far John was relieved that it was going well. They were back to their normal running routine and smoothie shop visits. They were able to talk about what was going on at work, or how the Dodgers had totally gotten creamed by the Mets last weekend. Normal friend stuff.

They hadn't ventured into talking about their love lives yet, but John was happy to see Mark out with someone. He and the guy he was with seemed very comfortable and friendly with each other. John was glad to see Mark smiling and laughing so much.

"Excuse me." John swiveled in his seat. The man trying to get his attention was a little shorter than John and balding, with soft features. He was neatly dressed in a casual short sleeve button up shirt with the top button undone, khaki shorts and brown leather loafers. He squinted at John with an anxious smile. "You wouldn't happen to be Dennis would you?"

John raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm sorry. Not Dennis."

The man sat down in the empty seat next to him. "Well his picture was different but you do look a little like him so I thought maybe... sometimes people use old pictures on their profiles. Sorry. I'm Ray, by the way."

John nodded at him. "I'm John. Nice to meet you."

"Dennis and I met on queerharmony.com. We've emailed and talked and exchanged pictures; we've just never met in person. So I'm a little nervous."

"Ah," John said. Ray opened his mouth again to say something else but thankfully was interrupted by another man.

"Ray?"

"Dennis!"



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Ray stood up and they gave each other a quick hug. Ray introduced Dennis to John and then the two men slipped off to a table across the room. John didn't think Dennis looked much like him, but maybe if he squinted there could be a slight resemblance. They both had graying hair, although Dennis's was whiter. They were both about the same height and build, though Dennis was not as fit as John.

Mac finally showed up and they sat down at a table and ordered food. "I saw you talking to that guy at the bar. Someone you know?"

"Huh?" John's head snapped around. He had been watching Ray and Dennis and missed Mac's comment.

Mac nodded at the couple.

"Oh, no, just met them tonight." He took a deep drink of his beer. "They met on queerharmony.com. Tonight is their first date, I guess you could call it."

Mac snorted. "Oh God, *'We help you find forever love.'*" He mimicked the website's ad headline in a deep voice. The cheesy tagline was usually accompanied with warm and fuzzy pictures of two good-looking men enjoying a walk hand-in-hand on the beach, smiling and canoodling with each other.

John glanced at the couple again. "Well, they look like they're getting along pretty well."

"They can pretend they're 'looking for love' all they want, but I guarantee in the back of their minds they're really asking themselves 'how big is his cock' and 'how fast until we can go back to his place and fuck'."

John rolled his eyes. "As always, you are ever the true romantic."

Mac paused mid-chew and shrugged his shoulders. "What? I speak the truth."

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John was restless when he got home. It was not unusual for him to be home alone on a Friday night, and normally he enjoyed passing out on the couch and relaxing from the long workweek. Tonight, for some reason, he just couldn't relax.

He tried watching a movie and lost interest. He tried reading and couldn't stay focused. He took a walk through his neighborhood to try and work off some of the excess energy, but that didn't work either. Finally, he pulled out his laptop and decided to check mail and surf around the internet.

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He checked into his Facebook page to find the top entry in his feed was from Ian's wall. Ian had changed his profile to "In a Relationship." There were several photos of him and another respectable-looking, bookish man, similar in age. The man was tagged in the photos as Andrew Quentin and according to his profile he was a professor at Harvard. Most of the pictures of he and Ian together were typical poses for Ian—standing next to each other, a slightly awkward smile on both their faces. But there was one where they both had an arm around the other's waist and big happy grins, and another of the two of them actually kissing. This surprised John, as Ian had never been a big fan of PDA or touching in public. It wasn't even a fear of being gay in public; it just wasn't in his nature, period.

As John scrolled through the many congratulatory responses on Ian's wall, he was surprised at the feelings that flashed through him. There was a bit of sadness, some regret, but overall he mostly felt happy for Ian, glad that he had found someone who obviously made him happier than John did. He also realized that he didn't miss Ian all that much. He thought of all the time spent with Mark and how comfortable he was with him, and how much he enjoyed the companionship of another person. And then there was Ray and Dennis. He'd watched them surreptitiously the whole time he'd been at Mac's. The pair chatted and laughed and smiled—a lot. Occasionally, Dennis reached over and casually touched Ray's arm or hand. Despite what Mac wanted to believe, they looked happy. And they were still there when John left, talking and lingering over beers, long after their meal was over. They certainly looked like a successful match to John.

He eyed the ads on the side of his Facebook page. As usual, there was one for queerharmony.com. His finger moved slowly across his track pad and then with one quiet click, a new window opened in his browser.

The screen went white and the words, "*Welcome to the final step on your journey to love,*" floated in red over a gauzy white background. The couple walking along the beach emerged from the white fog next. The words, "*We help you find forever love,*" faded into view, along with, "*We're all about building meaningful, long-lasting relationships.*"

There were some more sappy platitudes as he scrolled through the site's intro spiel. Then, "*Let's get you started on your journey*" popped up. Below those words was a full explanation of their "tried and true" process.

Well, what the hell, John thought. And he clicked on the big blue “Sign-up now” button.

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Tuesday, John sank gratefully into the plastic chair at the smoothie shop. The heat was high today, even for Southern California, and he and Mark had really had to push to get through their run. Mark was up at the counter getting their smoothies, so John pulled his phone out of his pocket and turned it on. Immediately it chimed seven times.

“Whoa, somebody’s popular,” Mark said as he sat their drinks on the table and sat down.

John blushed but didn’t say anything.

“Everything okay? If you have a business emergency and have to go, that’s okay.”

John looked at Mark sheepishly. “No, it’s not an emergency. I... I signed up with queerharmony.com.”

Mark’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t say anything condescending, so John continued. “I met this couple at Mac’s who met through the site, and it was only their first date, but they looked like they were having a good time, so... I thought, why not? I figured it would take a while, but I’ve been getting pinged with matches like crazy.”

Mark swallowed before giving John a smile. “That’s great. Have you met any of them yet?”

“Mostly I’ve just been messaging and emailing. But I’m meeting one guy for drinks on Friday night and another for coffee Saturday. You don’t think I’m crazy?” John asked hesitantly.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to meet someone,” Mark said quietly.

John smiled gratefully. “I haven’t told Mac yet. He’ll give me so much shit.” He told Mark about Ian dating someone.

“Is that why you’re doing the website thing?” Mark asked.

“Yes and no. Actually, I don’t mind that he’s found someone. I’m glad for him. So, then I was like, well why can’t I meet someone too? It feels like time.”

Mark just nodded but didn’t say anymore on the subject.

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John was encouraged by all of the interest he was getting online but soon discovered the meaning of the old adage, “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your prince.” Turned out not everyone quite matched their profile.

Wendell was completely charming in email form. In reality, he had a gap between his front teeth and a lisp. Not that the Captain America T-shirt he wore on their date and the fact that he still—at 43—lived at home with his mom, helped matters. Although he *was* an entrepreneur—he did own the comic book store he talked about incessantly.

Garrett was sex on legs and had a British accent that John could listen to all day long. He also dealt in authentic “antiques” from the motherland that, well, weren’t necessarily “authentic”—unless China had suddenly become part of the British Commonwealth. He also was prone to long-winded rants against the Queen and the British government that put John to sleep.

Jerome was near bald, muscled, tan, dressed neatly and was the most polite, gentle man. John imagined him helping little old ladies across the street. Until he said he was a card-carrying member of Leather & Tackle—one of the most hard-core BDSM clubs around.

Then there was Bob, who showed up to their date looking nothing like his picture. Well, he would have looked like his picture if his toupee hadn’t come loose in the breeze on the way to the restaurant he and John met at for coffee.

Mark doubled over in laughter as John recounted his date with Bob. “Did you tell him?” Mark finally got out in wheezing breaths.

“I didn’t want to. But after five minutes I couldn’t take it anymore. So I tried to discreetly tell him. He was thankful, but he didn’t even seem embarrassed! Instead, he just launched into a whole discussion of the botched hair plug job he’d had and how hard it was to find a toupee that looks real. I wanted to tell him he’d better keep looking.”

Mark broke out laughing again, and John had to chuckle with him.

“I had no idea it would be this difficult to meet someone normal!” John just shook his head. He had been on QueerHarmony for three months. And had been on tons of first dates, but no one had stuck yet.

“Thinking of calling it quits?”

John sighed. “Nah, not yet. I’m probably just expecting too much, too soon.”

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Mark grinned at him cheekily. “Well, you know what they say—sometimes you have to kiss a lot of frogs...”

John rolled his eyes as Mark chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think they need to change their website motto to that.” He gave Mark a sincere smile. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?” Mark asked.

“For letting me prattle on about my bad dates and for listening without judging me. It’s nice to have someone to talk to.” John had finally told Mac what he was doing and had heard nothing but negativity and ribbing ever since from his oldest friend.

Mark’s smile got smaller on his face. “Well, that’s what friends are for, right?”

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When John got home that night, he showered and changed. Settling back into the couch with a beer and the remote, he grabbed his iPad. Sighing, his finger hovered over the QueerHarmony app. In the end, he clicked it and signed on to check his hits for the day. The longer he’d been on the site, the less and less frequent his matches and requests were becoming. Tonight he had four. Two of them got immediately deleted just from their messages, one actually made it to John checking out his profile before he got deleted. Number four made John pause though.

**Message from: Alastair Humphrey.**

*Hello, John.*

*My name is Alastair. I am new to QueerHarmony and am still feeling my way around here. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but I scrolled past your profile pic several times. Something made me keep coming back to it, though. I was pleasantly surprised by your profile, and that doesn’t happen much around here. I’ve had some really awful, hideous dates. What is the point of that two-hour long questionnaire we had to fill out and the profile we put up if no one ever seems to pay attention to them? Did I say I liked playing naked chess in the rain? Or that I’m into dressing up and going to Renaissance faires? No!*

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*Uh oh, are our messages monitored on here? The powers that be running this site may have me kicked out for not toeing the party line before you even read this.*

*If not, I really appreciated your honest and straightforward profile. If you don't mind a plain and vanilla straight arrow kind of guy, I'd love to hear from you.*

*Alastair Humphrey*

*P.S. After rereading this, I don't want to give the wrong impression. I'm not that "straight" of an arrow, obviously. I promise I'm just as bent as everyone else on here.*

John smiled and laughed. He clicked over to Alastair's profile. He was right; his profile was very quick and to the point. He was in finance, like John, an accountant at a major firm it said. He had salt and pepper hair like John, perfect white teeth and a big smile, and adorable crinkle lines by his eyes when he smiled.

John switched back to his messages and started typing out a response to Alastair.

For two days they emailed back and forth. On the third day they stayed up for hours Skype chatting—text, not video. And on the fourth day they met for dinner.

Alastair had picked the restaurant, a lovely French restaurant that John had not had the chance to try yet. When John arrived, he was relieved to see Alastair looked exactly like his profile picture. And his personality was exactly the same as it was in their emails and chats.

Alastair ordered a bottle of wine and recommended the foie gras as an appetizer. "It's to die for."

John found he was exactly right. It was exquisite, as was everything else about the evening. The food was delicious, the conversation stimulating. They had many laughs as they compared their previous "dates of disaster," as they began to call them. They stayed so long they nearly closed down the restaurant. Afterward, as they both walked to their cars, it was Alastair who spoke first.

"Well John, dare I say it, but I think maybe our streak has ended?"

"Streak?"

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“Of disastrous dates.” They had reached the parking lot, and Alastair reached out to take John’s hand. “As much as it pains me to eat my words, I think that damn site may have finally found a perfect match for me.” His eyes were dancing as he looked at John.

John smiled back at him. “I think it may have,” he whispered.

“Phew,” Alastair made an exaggerated swipe of his brow, as John laughed. “Does this mean you will agree to see me again?”

“Of course,” John said.

Alastair leaned in and gave John a quick dry, peck on the lips. They agreed to talk soon.

After John got home, his phone buzzed with a text from Alastair.

*I just wanted to say again, what a lovely evening I had John.*

John smiled. *Me too*, he texted back.

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The next week, as he told Mark all about his date with Alastair, he couldn’t help the smile creeping over his face.

Mark stayed silent until he was done, nodding and smiling where appropriate. “That’s great, John. I’m glad you’ve finally met someone just like you.”

Something about Mark’s words niggled in his brain, but he ignored it. “Well, we’ve only been out twice, but I think it might be promising.”

As they went their separate ways after finishing their drinks, John watched Mark walk away and suddenly realized that Mark never said much about his personal life. He wondered if Mark was still dating that guy he’d seen him with at Mac’s. Mark only ever talked about his job and his classes. Occasionally, he did something on the weekend with his friends. John would have to chat with him about that next time. He realized his own dating life had begun to monopolize their conversations.

It wasn’t until he was in his car and putting the key in the ignition that Mark’s words came back to him—“*I’m glad you’ve finally met someone just like you.*” John cocked his head. What had Mark meant by that?

Two days later when he and Alastair met for dinner again, he found himself distracted all evening. Watching Alastair, he guessed they did look a lot alike,

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but that was just because they were both in their mid-forties. John was a little more fit than Alastair, but not by much. They both worked in offices, in the business world. They both had similar tastes in food and wine.

“John.”

John pulled himself out of his head. Alastair looked at him bemused with an eyebrow raised.

“Three dates in and I’m boring you already?”

John smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry, no, of course not. Um—”

“Would you like to share the tiramisu for dessert?”

John wasn’t a big fan of tiramisu, but it was Alastair’s favorite dessert, as he’d ordered it both of the other times they’d been out. “Sure, that’d be great.”

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For their next date, John took the lead and invited Alastair to Mac’s for dinner.

“Mac’s Shack?” Alastair wrinkled his nose at the name, as John pulled into the parking lot.

John grinned. “Yep, it’s not fancy, but it’s a great little place, and the food’s good. Mac, the owner is my best friend.” Every date so far, they’d gone out to some of the best, highest-rated restaurants in the Irvine area, and while John enjoyed those places, he also sometimes enjoyed a good burger and a beer once in a while too. Plus, he wanted to introduce Mac and Alastair.

Alastair gave the place the once over when they walked in. John guided them to a table in the corner, and Alastair swiped his finger across the tabletop when he sat down. “Has this place been visited by the Health Department?”

John tried to laugh off his comment as if Alastair was being humorous. “Mac has never had any violations. He runs a good place. It may not be Le Petite Fleur, and there may not be any coq au vin on the menu, but the food is good.”

Alastair pulled one of the plastic menus out of the wire menu holder on the table, handling it with two fingers.

“Everything is good,” John repeated himself as he nodded at the menu. “I recommend the California burger with guacamole. The Hawaiian Luau burger with pineapple and sweet sauce is also delicious.”



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Alastair didn't say anything, just continued to peruse the menu.

"Johnnie boy!" Mac's booming voice carried across the bar. He sidled over with two beers and sat them down on the table in front of John and Alastair.

John stood up and gave his friend a hug and then Mac waved him to sit down. Mac sat down in the chair next to John while Alastair looked distastefully at his beer. Hoping Mac didn't notice, John rushed into introductions. "Mac, this is Alastair Humphrey. Alastair, this is Mac Crenshaw." They both shook hands politely. John saw Mac giving Alastair the once over and knew he would get an earful from Mac later.

"Thank you very much for the beverage, but I don't really drink beer. Do you have any red wines?" Alastair actually pushed the beer toward Mac with his finger. Mac just stared at him, clenching his jaw. "Hey, Cass, need a glass of our finest mer-lot over here," he bellowed out to the bartender. John wanted to cringe at Mac's purposeful mispronunciation of merlot, knowing he was just being obnoxious, but he was thankful Mac was keeping his comments to himself for now.

Mac turned his attention to John. They did the typical quick check-up on their lives since they'd last talked.

"How's Mark?" Mac asked. "Haven't seen him in here in a while."

"Really? He's fine. Busy, I think, but he's good."

The waiter came over and Mac stood to leave. "Well, Alastair, it was good to meet you. Take good care of my boy here." He leveled a serious look at Alastair before continuing. "Enjoy your meal, and let me know if you need anything."

Alastair ended up ordering the fish and chips, and asked the waiter exactly how the fish was prepared. Their young waiter looked at him blankly. "Um, just like it says on the menu: beer-battered and fried."

Alastair wrinkled his nose but didn't say anything else. After the waiter left, he looked suspiciously at John. "Who's Mark?"

John arched his eyebrows in surprise. "Mark is the young man I run with. I told you about him, remember? He used to live on my street when he was younger."

"Oh, yes, that's right." His tone dialed back the accusatory stance a few levels. "The boy."

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“Well, he’s twenty-five, hardly a boy...”

“That’s nice of you to let him run with you. I have a niece and nephew around that age. I never know what to speak to them about. The age gap is so vast. And kids today are so flighty. My niece graduated college and moved back home with her parents and my nephew has decided to become a perpetual student. He’s switched majors so many times, it’s ridiculous.”

“Actually, Mark has a pretty level head on his shoulders. He’s working, going to school, doing it all on his own. He wants to own his own business someday. And he’s actually very easy to get along with.”

“I tried another dating site before QueerHarmony and I got nothing but young men trolling me, wanting to hook up! With me! I was twice their age, for heaven’s sake. How ridiculous would I look gallivanting around town with a child on my arm? Like some sugar daddy.”

“Well, not all young men are looking to hook up...” John’s voice faltered when he realized that this conversation had turned into him defending Mark against all of the same arguments he had used when he’d decided not to date Mark.

Luckily, their food came at that moment, and they both fell silent. Alastair picked through his fish and chips, only eating about half of his plate.

Afterward, when John dropped Alastair off at his house, he apologized. “I’m sorry that you didn’t enjoy yourself tonight. I just thought something a little more casual would be a nice change of pace. And I wanted you and Mac to meet.”

Alastair waved him off. “No, you’re right. It’s good to broaden my horizons, expand my palate once in a while. I was just never much for bars. Really, though, I did have a good time because I was with you.” John didn’t believe him, but when Alastair leaned over to kiss him, he kissed him back.

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For their next date, John invited Alastair over to his house. He cooked a nice meal—and served wine, not beer. After they settled in on the couch. John turned on the baseball game but noticed Alastair nodding off a couple times. So he tried flipping through channels, but they couldn’t really find any movies they could agree on. John finally left it on the history channel when Alastair seemed to come alive at some civil war program. Soon it was John who

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struggled to stay awake. When it was over, John shut off the TV. He scooted closer to Alastair and they kissed. John put his hand up to Alastair's neck, rifling his fingers through his hair then trailing his thumb along Alastair's jaw. He and Alastair were in agreement about taking things slow, but they hadn't done anything more than chaste kisses and holding hands. He thought it was time to try taking things further.

Alastair's lips were warm, but he pretty much let John take the lead, not pushing for anything more. He placed his hand awkwardly on John's bicep. John felt the weight of his hand but... that was all. Not that that was a bad thing; he remembered it wasn't all flash and fireworks with Ian either. They had grown into their attraction eventually.

John leaned in more to Alastair, pushing him against the back of the couch. Alastair pulled away. "Oh... my." He smiled at John and stroked John's cheek. "This is lovely, darling."

"Would you like to stay tonight?" John asked.

"Oh, you know I would... I have an early morning meeting though. I should probably go home tonight."

John thought Alastair seemed a little relieved when John didn't try to entice him to stay anyway, but he let it go. John walked him to the door. They kissed goodnight and made plans to see each other Friday night.

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Friday night, Alastair had to cancel their date to work late, so they rescheduled for Saturday afternoon. With an evening to himself, John went for a run and then came home, showered and ordered Chinese takeout. He watched a movie and then flipped over to watch the eleven o'clock news before heading to bed. He could barely keep his eyes open.

*"Our top story tonight—firefighters have been battling a huge fire in the Irvine area, at the University Town Center apartment complex on Stanford..."*

John's head popped up. Mark's apartment was in that complex. He leaned forward and turned the sound up on the TV.

*"... We're still gathering information, but what we know as of right now are that several of the apartment buildings have been completely destroyed. Firefighters are still battling the blaze,*

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*and there are believed to be two fatalities so far. Of course, no names are being released until the victims' families have been notified..."*

John's heart started hammering in his chest and his body went cold. *Mark... Oh my God, no.*

*Wait, he's probably fine. Maybe his apartment wasn't even one of the damaged ones. It's Friday night. He probably wasn't even home.*

John fumbled for his phone and called Mark's number. It went straight to voicemail. Again, it didn't have to mean he was in trouble...

John jumped off the couch, grabbed his keys and wallet, and slammed the door behind him.

All the way over to Mark's apartment, he chastised himself. *This is ridiculous. He's probably fine. You're not going to be able to get close to the fire anyway. No one there will be able to tell you anything.*

John parked his Jeep on the street as close as he could get to the barricades that were set up. As he looked up in awe at the sheer size of the flames still burning and the amount of damage there was, a lump formed in his throat. *Dear God, please let him be okay.*

He got out of the Jeep and ran toward the fire. There were people and firefighters everywhere, all of them yelling directions and orders. One important fireman yelled at him to stay back and that he couldn't come through, but as soon as he turned his back, John slipped past him and the barricades.

He frantically searched through the crowds of people. A lot of residents and spectators were milling about. Some had blankets around them. Some were sitting on the grass with oxygen masks over their faces. Some had an emergency person assisting them. No sign of Mark anywhere, though.

As he pushed on, he saw the guy Mark had been sitting with that night at Mac's. He was standing with a blanket around him and a breathing mask that he kept taking off. Another young man had his arms around him and kept kissing him on the temple. John paused at the sight. He had thought Mark and the man were dating.

He approached the men. "Is Mark—?"

The boy with the breathing mask took it off again and gestured.

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John followed his motion and saw Mark, sitting on the back of an emergency vehicle, also with a breathing mask on. John let out a huge exhale and rushed over.

“Mark! Mark, are you okay?”

Mark looked up at him with surprise. “John—” He paused to let out a hoarse cough.

John put a hand on his knee and tilted Mark’s head up with the other. There were smudges of soot all over Mark’s face, and he used his thumb to wipe some of the black ash away from Mark’s cheekbone. “I saw the fire on the news. They said there were fatalities, and I... I just had to know if you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” Mark turned his head and another rattling cough came out of his throat. John sat down next to Mark and put his arm around him. “The fire started in the apartment next-door to ours. Clark, Kevin and I were able to get out in time, but our place and all of our stuff is completely gone.”

“Clark and Kevin?”

Mark pointed to the two men John had just talked to. “Clark, my roommate, and Kevin, his boyfriend.”

“Oh, Clark’s your roommate.”

Mark looked at him blankly. “Yeah.”

John smiled sheepishly. “I saw you at Mac’s with him once, having dinner. I just assumed you two were together.”

Mark laughed, which actually came out as a croaking noise. A female EMT heard him and whirled around. “Sir, you shouldn’t be talking. You need to keep the mask on, get some clean oxygen into your lungs.” Mark put the mask back on, and John spoke to the EMT. “Is he okay? Does he need to go to the hospital?”

“Not if he keeps that mask on. He just has a little smoke inhalation. Once his breathing is better, we’ll release him.” She patted Mark’s leg and then turned to go find someone else to help.

It was three hours before Mark was released. John stayed with him the whole time. Once Mark was cleared medically, there was paperwork and questioning by some officer from the fire department. At one point, a woman from the Red Cross also stopped by with bottles of water and asked if they needed anything.

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“Do you have someplace to stay tonight, or would you like us to set you up somewhere?”

Mark's face went blank. “Ummm... I don't know—”

John jumped in before he could finish. “He's staying with me tonight.” The woman nodded, handed them a contact card and a pamphlet, and moved on.

Mark looked at John, exhaustion starting to settle in his eyes. “Thanks, John, you don't have to—”

“It's no problem, Mark. I'm just so glad you're okay.” He smiled gratefully and placed his hand on the back of Mark's neck, rubbing gently. John didn't know where it was coming from, but he had this need, this urge to touch Mark. He supposed it was just the adrenaline of the potential life-and-death moment that had just happened. Mark sighed and closed his eyes momentarily. “My spare room is yours for as long as you need it,” John murmured.

When they were finally given the all clear to leave the premises, John put his arm around Mark to guide him toward his Jeep. Mark was dead on his feet. “Come on,” John said softly. “Let's get you home. A nice hot shower and a warm, soft bed, and you'll be good as new.”

They'd only taken a few steps when Mark pulled away and started fumbling in the pocket of his shorts. “Got to get my car. I'll follow you.”

John frowned. “Mark, I don't think you're in any shape to drive. We can come back and get your car tomorrow.”

Mark was insistent though, and John couldn't change his mind. He looked at John bleakly. “My car's the only thing I have left.” John's heart twisted for the kid, and he relented. John followed behind him the whole way to make sure Mark didn't get in an accident. Luckily, John didn't live far, and the streets of Irvine at two in the morning were fairly quiet.

Once at his house, John got Mark settled in the guest bathroom with towels. Then he made sure the guest bedroom was set up and headed off to his own bedroom to find some clothes for Mark to borrow.

He was just walking in to the guest bedroom with a pile of clothes when Mark walked out of the bathroom, naked except for a white towel wrapped low and loose on his hips. John couldn't help but take in Mark's broad, still damp, hairy chest with a beautifully inviting dark treasure trail leading to what was hidden under the towel. John's cock started to pulse inside his jeans and he tried to keep himself in check.

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As soon as Mark saw John, he pulled the towel up a little higher. They both stared at each other in surprise for a moment, before John held out the pile of clothes in his hand. "Here, I got you some clean clothes to wear. You're close enough in size to me that they should fit well enough for now."

Mark smiled. "Thanks, John. I truly appreciate this so much."

John set the clothes down on the bed. "Like I said, no problem. I'm happy to do it. Now, get some sleep. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask, although I think you know where everything is." He winked at Mark and then left the room.

John went into his room and got ready for bed himself, but despite the late hour, he couldn't fall asleep. He was too wired, his brain having trouble shutting down, and after tossing and turning for an hour, he finally got up. Walking quietly past the guest bedroom so as not to wake Mark, he went to the kitchen. Settling on a mug of warm milk, he wandered through his house, ending up by the sliding door that led out to his back deck.

He stared out at the inky darkness, the moon and a few stars the only illumination. It looked so quiet and serene; he slid the door open and went outside, stretching out on a lounge chair. It was still warm enough to be comfortable in not more than his sleep pants.

As he lay there, he tried to analyze the thoughts drifting in his head. How worried he'd been when he heard about the fire. How scared he'd been for Mark. How he'd rushed over there to find him, without even a second thought. And the overwhelming relief when he'd seen Mark. *But that's normal. He's a friend; I would have done the same thing if it were Mac.*

Then what of the need to constantly be touching him, to feel his warm, electric skin under his? When he first saw Mark sitting in the emergency vehicle, he'd wanted to crush him in his arms and hold him tight, but he'd restrained himself for fear that Mark would be uncomfortable. That kind of hug was a "more than friend" gesture. But the touching—he wanted to be in constant physical contact with him. *No, that was all just overreaction to the fact he'd almost lost Mark. That has to be all it was, right?*

Then what of his body's reaction to seeing Mark in the towel? *Natural reaction.* But no, John knew it was more than that. He'd never gotten that excited so quickly with Alastair.

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Admitting that last sentence was like the tumbler of a lock clicking into place, resulting in a whole Pandora's Box of feelings and emotions opening suddenly within him. No matter how much he had been trying with Alastair, deep in his heart he knew Alastair was never the one. None of the guys John had seen or dated from that stupid site lived up to what John was looking for. None of them sparked his heart even one tenth of the way Mark did. Every quality Mark possessed was exactly what John wanted: He was smart. He was kind. He was funny. He liked many of the same things John did. And yet he was still different enough to challenge and excite John. Why had it taken John so long to see and accept it? Why had he been such a stubborn old fool?

*But he's so young.*

*I don't care, John's heart answered back.*

*What happens when he grows tired of you and leaves?*

John's heart was silent at that one. But really, was love ever a sure thing? Wasn't that what it was all about? Taking a leap? It was all a risk. He and Ian had been together for so long, and it hadn't stopped Ian from leaving.

As John headed back to his room, he hesitated in front of the guest bedroom, placing his hand lightly on the door. So many emotions swirling inside him were starting to fall into place. With all that had happened tonight, this wasn't the time, but soon—once John had his heart completely sorted out—he would have another talk with Mark.

John stepped back to continue down the hall when he noticed the faint crack of light under the door. Frowning, he took a chance and opened the door slowly. The light was the moon shining in from the window. And silhouetted against the window was the figure of Mark. He had drawn the curtains and blinds aside, and was leaning against the window, one arm up above his head, forehead pressed against the glass.

"Mark," John spoke softly. "Are you okay?"

Mark stood away from the glass as he glanced back at John. "Yeah. Just..."

"Couldn't sleep either?"

Mark sighed. "I crashed for a while. Then woke up, thinking... Now, I'm too anxious to sleep, I guess."

His heart, bursting with the freedom he was now finally giving it, propelled him into the room to stand next to Mark. He reached out and gently rubbed Mark's shoulder.



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“I’ve never been through something like that. I was so lucky I got out in time. What if—”

“Shhh... Don’t talk like that,” John whispered, as he stepped closer and put his whole arm around Mark’s shoulders, pulling Mark closer to his body. “Just concentrate on the fact that you’re okay. You’re alive and well.”

Mark leaned his head toward him, and John ran his fingers through Mark’s hair, gently stroking and scratching. He leaned down and placed a kiss on the top of Mark’s head. It felt natural and right, and he didn’t want to stop. He could feel Mark visibly relaxing from his soothing caresses, and before he knew it, Mark had shifted further into his embrace, placing both hands loosely around John’s waist.

John instinctively pulled him closer, craving the feel of his warm body against his. He drew his fingertips up and down Mark’s back. Up and down... up and down... light as a feather. His intent was to keep Mark relaxed, but he was surprised to feel shivers run down Mark’s spine.

Moving his hand up to Mark’s neck, he stroked there, and carded his fingers through Mark’s hair. It was meant to be a massaging motion, but Mark let out a groan, and his eyes fluttered shut as his head lolled backward. “John,” he whispered.

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” John answered hoarsely.

Mark’s eyes opened, and John found himself looking right into his eyes, drowning in their beautiful, deep, dark depths. With one hand still on the back of Mark’s neck, he used the other to rub his thumb against Mark’s bristly stubble. John felt the heat bloom through his body as he imagined that wonderful bristle rubbing all over his body.

John’s thumb moved on to rub slowly over Mark’s lips. Mark’s breathing picked up as he simply stared up at John. A feeble voice somewhere in his mind warned him, *You shouldn’t do this. Mark is upset; he’s been through a traumatic experience.*

The hammering of his heart in his chest drowned out the voice until that was all John could hear. As if in slow motion, John leaned down, tipping his head. When their lips touched, John literally felt something snap in himself, blood rushing everywhere, bringing him out of the slow-motion haze into a present of need and want and desire. The hand on Mark’s neck gripped his

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head, and John kissed Mark, long and slow and deep. A guttural sound came from Mark's throat, but John continued kissing his lips, twisting his tongue with Mark's and tasting him, and oh, he tasted so sweet.

John let out a muffled moan himself and finally broke away from Mark so he could breathe. Mark had clutched John even closer to him during the kiss, and now their chests and hips were pressed together. John's cock was rock hard and trying to search out Mark's, through his pajama pants. He could feel the barest whisper of Mark's hard length in his pants, and a shiver went through John.

He didn't know who did what next, just that they were kissing and clutching bare skin and sighing and moaning. John did remember he was the one who sunk his fingers into Mark's biceps and physically turned and walked him back to the bed. Mark fumbled backward on to the bed, with John following him down, nearly crushing Mark for not wanting to stop touching him. They both groaned, Mark uttering a hoarse "fuck."

John loved the feel of their chests pressed together. Ian's chest had always been smooth, save for a few stray hairs, and he had forgotten how amazing it felt to have another hard and hairy chest under his. But he heard Mark's exclamation, so he leaned up quickly on both arms.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," he whispered.

John stared down at Mark, and his eyes seemed black as they shone with raw want and desire and something else they'd have to talk about later. Right now, John couldn't wait anymore. He wanted to go slow and cherish Mark's beautiful body, but his own body had other plans. He stroked his hands all over Mark's chest, especially at his nipples, twisting the small buds to attention. Mark arched and writhed, egging John on.

He bent his head and captured one of Mark's nipples in his mouth, licking and biting until it was red and hard. "Jesus, John," Mark breathed out just before John switched to give the same attention to Mark's other nipple, eliciting a raspy growl that went straight to John's cock.

He felt the wet spot on his pajama pants and knew he had to have Mark soon, or he was going to explode. He continued a trail of frenzied wet kisses down Mark's stomach. When he got to the waistband of Mark's pants, barely

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containing a very large bulge, he didn't waste time. He pulled them down and off Mark's legs so Mark was completely naked in front of him, and holy hell, was he a sight to behold. John almost forgot what he was doing as he took in the view. As his eyes settled on Mark's cock, his memory came back, and he kneeled back down. Mark's cock was not quite as long as John's, but it was definitely thick and heavy and strong. John imagined what it would feel like to have it inside him, and he had to pause and grip his own cock and balls firmly for a moment to keep from coming.

He licked all the way up Mark's cock and circled the head before taking what he could in his mouth, causing Mark to cry out and fist John's hair hard. John breathed in Mark's scent deeply as he licked and sucked and tasted Mark's cock. God, he tasted amazing. He would have continued until Mark came down his throat, but he needed to feel Mark's body around his own cock more.

John's mouth let Mark go, and he shifted over Mark and the bed to the nightstand, when he remembered this wasn't his bedroom. Crap, he didn't want to stop and go back to his. He rummaged in the drawer and finally came up with a nearly empty bottle of lube and one lonely condom. According to the date, it was still okay. *Thank fuck*, John breathed.

He poured the lube on his fingers and made quick work of opening Mark up. Mark was shifting his hips upward and babbling something nonsensical. When John couldn't wait anymore, he put the condom on, lubed himself up and kneeled over Mark. Mark pulled his legs up, and John slowly pushed himself in.

John nearly blacked out with the feeling of Mark's body gripping him and taking him in. It had been so long since John had felt this—no, scratch that, it had never felt like this with anyone else. The heat and the warmth enveloped every inch of him, and he cried out, nearly falling over Mark but catching himself with his hands.

Finding himself face to face with Mark, he paused in concern. Mark's eyes were closed, and he was biting his lips. His neck muscles strained with effort, and his breathing was labored.

"Mark," John whispered. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

Mark opened his eyes, and John had never seen him more vulnerable or more beautiful.

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“God, no, I just... oh fuck... never felt like this... John.” Mark reached up and gripped the back of John’s head tightly, and brought him down for a searing, explosive yet incredibly tender kiss. When they broke away, chests heaving, John touched his forehead to Mark’s.

Then he started moving slowly, stroking in and out and reveling in the feel of their two bodies together. Although John wanted to savor and enjoy this moment, their need ramped up quickly, and soon their slick, wet bodies were moving against each other harder and faster. The room filled with curses and grunts and the sound of the bed shaking under them. Unexpectedly, Mark cried out and arched his back, crushing his cock between his and John’s body as it pulsed and exploded without any other touch.

John felt the warm wetness between their bodies and lost it as well, burying himself so deep in Mark, he didn’t think he could ever get out. Nor did he want to.

John collapsed on Mark in pure exhaustion, his whole body still trembling. Mark, under him, stroked his trembling fingers gently through John’s hair.

Eventually John had to move. He pulled out and sat on the bed in a daze, still shaky, as he disposed of the condom in the wastebasket next to the bed. He grabbed his discarded pajama pants and wiped himself and Mark off. Then he climbed in bed next to Mark, who was still lying on his back. He traced his fingers through Mark’s chest hair and up to his jaw. Mark swiveled his neck and they looked into each other’s eyes, neither wanting to spoil the moment with words.

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John woke up from a deep sleep the next morning and stretched, smiling happily at sore muscles that hadn’t been sore in a long time. Without even opening his eyes, he reached out for Mark and found nothing but cold, empty sheets. Opening his eyes, he looked around, but the room was empty. The bathroom door was open and the light wasn’t on, so Mark wasn’t in there. John forced himself to get up and pad into the kitchen, thinking maybe Mark was starting breakfast, although from the time on the hallway clock it was noon, which would actually make it lunchtime. After the late night and little sleep they’d had last night, he was surprised Mark was already up.

But the kitchen was quiet. No smells of coffee or food lingered.

Then he saw the yellow piece of notebook paper on the counter.

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*John,*

*Thanks again for letting me stay last night, but I think it's probably best if I find somewhere else to stay. My friend Eric has a foldout couch; he'll let me crash until I get things sorted out.*

*Mark*

John collapsed on a stool as he processed Mark's words. Why would he leave? And without saying anything? Last night had been amazing, and he knew Mark felt it too. John bolted into his bedroom for his phone.

He called Mark, but it went to voicemail. He texted him but got no response.

He took turns pacing the living room and calling and texting. He left message after message: *Mark, we need to talk. Please call me back.*

After an hour, the niggling doubts started creeping in—you knew he'd do this, one night and he's moving on. No, John wouldn't believe that. Mark always said he wasn't like that. He was the one who wanted John in the beginning, and John had been the one pushing him away. Mark's note made no sense. There had to be something else going on.

John let another half-hour pass before he had to do something. He had almost lost Mark in the fire last night and now... now that he had finally figured out what he wanted, he was not going to lose him again.

He read the note again. He was going to stay with his friend Eric, but he didn't say where that was. John tried to think. Finally he remembered Mark mentioning Eric. He lived in the Harvard Manor Apartments, just off of California Avenue. Mark had told this entire convoluted story about helping his friend Eric move in while it was raining.

Half an hour later, John was driving down California Avenue. John knew it was probably ridiculous, driving around the apartment complex parking lot looking for Mark. But sure enough, at the last building, he was rewarded. Sitting in a space outside was Mark's beat-up blue Civic.

John parked and walked up to the building. He got lucky, and a resident happened to be coming out so he could get in without buzzing the intercom. Inside the front door, he found the tenant listing on the mailboxes. There was an E. Johnson in Apt. 8. He didn't know Eric's last name, so he took a chance and headed up to number eight.

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At the door to Apt. 8, he took a deep breath before knocking. He didn't even have to ask if Eric or Mark lived here, because Mark himself answered the door. He looked shocked to see John on the other side.

"How did you find me?" he asked incredulously.

"I remembered you had a friend named Eric that lived in these apartments. And then I saw your car out front."

Mark looked down and frowned.

"Now that I've admitted to being a crazy stalker, can we please talk?"

Mark cocked an eyebrow. "You realize how weird that sounds?" Then he sighed and stood back from the door to let John in.

"Let me explain about last night—" John started.

"No, John, I don't want to hear it. I can't. I can't listen to you say it was a mistake. And I can't stay with you if you think we're going to be some kind of friends with benefits thing, because I can't do that. Not with you. It hurts too much." His last four words were quiet, and John was stunned into silence.

"I should have stopped you last night, I knew that. But it felt so good, kissing you and touching you. I figured it might be my one chance. I didn't realize how painful it would be this morning waking up in your bed, knowing you didn't really want me, that it was going to be all awkward now. I got up and went into the kitchen and Alastair called. I didn't answer, but I heard the voicemail he left you. Calling you 'darling' and saying he'd see you later. My heart was ripped out of my chest."

John swallowed thickly. He hadn't even looked at his voicemail this morning.

"I've been patient. I told myself I could be your friend, that I could wait it out. When you started going out with all those ridiculous guys, I sat there and listened to your stories and stayed on the sidelines until you could look up one day and see me, 'til you would get over your bullshit issues about our age difference and about me being young. I thought that day would come, and it would all be worth it. But now you have Alastair. And I don't know what last night was to you, but I won't be just a casual fuck. It's either all or nothing. And I can't hear you say 'nothing' to me right now."

Mark turned his back to him, and John felt his eyes getting wet.

The room was silent as John tried to find his words. In the end, he chose one.

“All,” John said calmly.

Mark spun around. “What?”

“What if I said I wanted it all? With you. What if I said I’d been a stupid fool, and I’m sorry? I saw the news report about the fire, and this fear came over me I’d never known before. I prayed the whole drive there, ‘Please, God, let him be okay.’ And the reason I couldn’t sleep last night? Before I came to your room? It was because all I could think about was you. That was when I realized how I truly felt about you. I was going to tell you this morning, but then we got a little distracted last night, and you were gone when I woke up.”

Mark’s eyes were wet now, and he looked shell-shocked. His arm twitched like he wanted to move, but he stayed in his spot across the room. “What about Alastair?”

John blushed. “Well... I didn’t even know he called this morning until you told me. I never even thought to check my machine.” John looked at his watch. “And he’s probably at Café North right now waiting on me, and I couldn’t care less.”

“I will not be introduced as your son or your nephew.”

“Would it be okay if I introduced you as my boyfriend?” John held his breath and watched Mark. He wasn’t responding, and his face was passive.

And then, Mark’s lips edged up, slowly stretching across his entire face in the most beautiful smile John had ever seen.

“Yeah, I think that would be okay.”

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## Epilogue

John looked down at the framed photos sitting on the table and frowned when he came to one. He picked it up. “Why is this picture included?”

Mark wrapped an arm around John, the metal rings on their left hands clinking as his arm covered John’s. “Because that’s the night we met.”

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“But I was wasted! Look at me—I could barely form a smile. Besides, the first time we met was when you and your parents came to Ian’s and my Fourth of July party. We even found a picture of it, remember? When we were going through those boxes in my attic—”

“Seriously? You want to put up a picture of you and me when I was nine?”

John looked at him for a second. “Yeah, we probably don’t want to do that.” John sat the picture down. “Can I at least burn this in the bonfire tonight?”

“You can, but it won’t matter. I have a digital version on a flash drive hidden away where you will never find it.”

“Damn modern technology,” John grumbled.

“Besides,” Mark said. “That was the best night of my life.”

“Schlepping an old drunk guy home?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “No. Finding you there that night. And then getting to talk to you. I was so excited you remembered me.”

“And I couldn’t believe this smoking hot, ripped, sexy man in front of me was the same little boy who used to deliver my newspaper.”

Mark groaned. “Yeah, ‘I used to have a crush on you when I was fifteen’ is probably the worst pickup line I could have ever chosen.”

John laughed but then sobered again as he looked at the picture. “Thank you,” he whispered solemnly.

Mark, still with his arm around John, cocked his head so he could look at his face. “For what, sweetie?”

John’s throat got so choked up, he had to take a minute before he could form words. “For not giving up on me. For waiting me out. For loving me.”

Mark buried his head against John’s shoulder blades. “Oh, baby. Thank you for giving us a real chance,” he murmured against John’s neck.

John had been such an idiot in the beginning, and it had taken him ridiculously long to admit his feelings for Mark. But ever since he had... the last three years had been the best of his life. Finally, he knew what real love and partnership was. Mark made it so easy, because he was always just... there. Whenever John had a bad day at work, or traffic made him cranky, or something in the world let him down, Mark was there to catch him and love him. And John did the same for him, or at least he hoped he did. He certainly tried.



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Things hadn't been easy the last three years. It had taken some adjustment on John's part to begin living with someone with an erratic college schedule, but he'd never been prouder than the day he watched Mark graduate. Mark was now focusing on the next part of his plan—to own his own massage clinic. That was going to take some old-fashioned sweat and determination, but John was going to be right there beside him, helping in any way he could.

There had also been issues with family and friends. Well, actually, their friends were all really supportive of them being together. Mark's family, on the other hand, took a little bit longer to come around. He and Mark had only been together "officially" for a couple of weeks when he took John along with him on a visit to his parents for dinner. They were puzzled at first but cordial when they recognized John from the old neighborhood; glad to see him again while in their minds trying to figure out how and why Mark had brought him to their house.

"Mark, I thought you said you were bringing your boyfriend with you?" Mark's mom had inquired, confused.

Mark smiled wide and reached for John's hand, entwining their fingers together. "I did. John and I are together now." The shock on his parents' faces that morphed into stony disapproval was probably not helped by the fact that Mark also kissed him on the cheek.

He and Mark ended up not staying for dinner, and there was not much communication on either side for several months. They were shocked and appalled that Mark was dating someone their own age, and that John, twenty years older than their beloved son, really loved and wanted to be with their son. The knowledge that Mark had already moved in with John only made the situation worse, never mind the fact that the two men had been friends for months before that. It took some time and many awkward dinners before Mark's parents finally started to come around. Now, everything was great, and John was so glad.

The situation had been the cause of some pain and discord between the two of them as John felt horrible for breaking Mark apart from his family. He threatened to break up several times, but Mark was strong and determined. He was not going to let anything come between the two of them.

Mark's unwavering devotion to him and to their relationship left John constantly in awe, and made him strive every day to be worthy of that devotion. He didn't know what made Mark believe in them so strongly, but damned if he was going to question it any more.

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Not surprisingly, Mark had been the one to pop the question six months ago. John would have been happy forever with the way things were, but it was so important to Mark. John teased him frequently about being the first of his friends to “settle down and get married,” and Mark’s answer was always the same—“Damn straight. I am not letting you get away.”

Mark trailed a line of kisses down the back of John’s neck and he laid his head back on Mark’s shoulder, sighing contentedly. Mark drew John’s whole body into his tighter, and John groaned as their hips met. Mark’s decadent mouth headed up John’s jaw to his ear, kissing and nipping, and causing John’s body to flush with heat all over.

“Where the hell—oh for fuck’s sake, you two!” Mac’s abrasive voice cut through their moment, and John sighed in frustration. Mark just laughed, burying his head in John’s back again and wrapping his other arm around John.

“You’ve got a hotel room later for that. Right now you’ve got a hundred guests waiting to see you cut the damn cake.”

John threw his head back and laughed. “All that time you were telling me to get laid and *now*, you’re telling me I can’t!”

“Well, you darn fools went and got married. That’s what happens—no more sex. Why the hell do you think I’m still single? Now, come on, I let you have this stupid reception here, the least you could do is go enjoy it.”

Mark and John pulled apart and John walked over to his oldest friend. “I do thank you, Mac, for all of this.” They did the bro hug and a slap on the back, and though he would deny it to his grave, John saw tears shining in Mac’s eyes.

“Just be happy,” Mac said.

John reached out and took Mark’s hand in his, and they smiled at each other.

“We are,” he said.

“Are you ready?” Mark asked him. “All or nothing?”

“All or nothing,” John replied, grinning.

And they walked out the door of the Shack, hand in hand, to the beach and their waiting friends and cake and champagne, and the rest of their lives.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*C. J. Anthony started reading and writing at an early age. She attributes her love of reading and romance to her mother, who not only taught her to read but also made countless trips to the library lugging piles of books home for her to read. She loved getting lost in the people and places and adventures she found in books, and it wasn't a far jump to start writing her own stories, early childhood tales about flower families and travelling to the moon with her best friend.*

*She recently was inspired to try writing again, this time with tales of beautiful men in love speaking to her and wanting their stories to be told. C. J. has always believed in true love and HEAs, even if there is angst and pain along the way—life is never perfect, after all, but everyone deserves a happy ending and someone there to catch them when they fall.*

*When she's not writing, she spends most of her time juggling a day job and freelance design work on the side, enjoying music, movies, spending time with friends and, of course, reading.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE ANCHOR TATTOO AND THE PISTACHIO DREAM

By Paula Coots

## Photo Description

A man with sandy hair, shaved close to the scalp. His facial hair is similarly close-cropped. He's leaning his head back, with eyes closed. There is a tattoo, a skull with wings, centered on his well-developed chest, and his upper arms are vibrantly tattooed, as well. His abs are pronounced, but not in that body builder way. He looks strong, but his face shows a hint of hidden pain, or perhaps the after effects of overexertion.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I go to the gym three or four times a week. Not because I'm about getting fit and buff, but because I have a bit of an ice-cream addiction. Spending some time on the elliptical means I can eat as much as I want, almost guilt-free. He started coming into the gym about six months ago. I'd never seen him before, and I'd been going there for about two years. He looked like he could bench press a small car, and I would have been happy to have him bench press me. The best part? The tattoos. A couple of times, I'd found myself getting ever closer and had to scramble to avoid an awkward, weird, stalker kind of situation.*

*The thing was, my mom taught me growing up that guys with tattoos were scary. We'd actually run out of gas one time after she refused to get gas when she saw the attendant had tattoos. She'd never tell me why, but she'd cross the road to avoid them and was always telling me to stay away. But like most kids, the more your parents tell you to avoid something, the more it fascinates you. I hadn't yet worked up the nerve, I wasn't sure I ever would, to get one of my own, but men with tats? Oh, God, I wanted to lay down and purr and rub myself all over them. I'd had the pleasure of doing so a few times in my short twenty-four years, but this guy, damn, he was all my fantasies come to life.*

*I'd love to take the first step, but if he's straight, and offended, I'm toast. But he's so yummy. Like triple chocolate with caramel swirls and sprinkles on top. What to do, what to do?*

*Sincerely,*

*Tattoo obsessed guy*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** tattoo, ice cream, gym, self-acceptance, friends to lovers

**Word Count:** 20,547

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# THE ANCHOR TATTOO AND THE PISTACHIO DREAM

By Paula Coots

The green of emeralds. Sinew. Muscles sliding and bulging under the tattoos. I step a bit closer, I can't help it, I've got to see the details... aquamarine, black, orange, red, and yellow bleeding into flame. That winged skull centered on his chest, and those pecs...

*Shit.* I spin around and head right back to the elliptical. Admittedly, the wussiest piece of equipment in the gym, but still. I pick up speed.

Did he see me, staring at his chest like that? My mouth is drier than the West Texas sandstorm kicking up outside the gym's *hey, look at us working out in here* picture window.

The sweat shivers me. Not mine, necessarily, but the memory of the sweat that shines on top of the skull expertly rendered on his damn fine chest. I fan my hand at my face, then quit because it's so girly it even embarrasses me, especially here. Besides, I'm already *not* working out like most of the guys. There's so much grunting, and whips of laughter or shouts of "Hold it. I'll spot you!" going on that I can close my eyes and pretend I'm at a Roman orgy or something.

And, ah, all these man smells. I breathe in deep.

I open my eyes. I can see him a bit in the mirrors, my usual view. And he's often dropping his head back and pausing a moment, closing his eyes, lost in some rapturous music in the obligatory white ear buds. Or recovering from some major overexertion, maybe? He just doesn't seem... here, somehow. It's like I can almost feel him lift off through the ceiling. And then, bam, his eyes roam over to his next conquest.

Except, damn, why can't he head toward me? He's moving away from the machines toward the free weights, and I'm too far in the cardio section. I bolt off that sissy machine like the pedals have caught fire. As he hurries away, so light and quick on his feet, I watch him give a loud hand slap to two other guys.

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All I know is, I've got to pick a new torture device so I can keep a bead on him. I don't know, maybe I've got a problem, because the past week, it's gotten more intense, more desperate. I move over to the what-cha-ma-call-it machine for building killer triceps on one side, shapely biceps on the other. Out of the side of my eye, I watch him toss a medicine ball with some grinning black guy, who is also shirtless and also mostly shaved except for a fine dusting of hair over his scalp, along his jaw, and over his mouth. It's a pretty common look lately—one I refuse to adopt. I like my mop of spiky, dyed-black hair, and I don't care if it's so nineties or not. I just hope my eyeliner remnants are not too obvious.

The object of my affection is named David. I know. Ridiculously appropriate, almost too stupid to believe, but I've heard it. Not Davy, or Dave, but David. I watch him. He's hairless, his chest, armpits, back, and arms anyway, and it makes me wonder. I've never once seen him do more than glance into a mirror, apparently checking out his form, not himself, like a lot of body builders. He's got a serious kind of *I'll body slam you head first into the cement if you look at me wrong* kind of vibe going on there, anyway.

He keeps drawing my attention, and it's not just the high-definition ink. He's mysterious. I can't figure him out. Even now, he's not really even smiling back at his medicine ball partner, and waves off after about twenty tosses.

He's here for one thing: pumping iron. I can think of a few more things he should pump...

Damn, he's walking my way, with a swagger that's so pronounced, I've never been sure if it's a limp or not. He jams the buds tighter into his ears, his eyes downcast, his full lips moving.

I wonder what he's listening to.

I wonder why I can't ask? He walks on by, without even glancing at me.

Is it because I look gay as hell? He's out of my league and I know it. I've had other inky guys, gay ones, to rub on, and it's as delicious as mint chocolate chip ice cream. Or Cherry Garcia. Or...

Yes, I should think about that. Quit wasting my time.

My mouth waters just thinking about my guaranteed after-workout reward. I love ice cream. I have no intentions of bulking up, and I won't at this rate even if I try, but I do enough cardio so that I can eat my thirty thousand creamy

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calories a day practically guilt free. Now, we'll see if my arteries agree with that logic in six months when I get my next checkup. But shit, I'm twenty-four, I don't do drugs, I barely drink—I eat ice cream. What can be so bad?

Well, maybe this stupid gym addiction could be construed as a bad habit. I'm like some kind of animal—a dachshund on the scent of a badger, maybe—trailing after him, wiping my neck with my towel. I watch his head bob as he high fives some other non-inked dude who has given me the eye once or twice. Now, that dude is packing a couple of pieces of equipment I require, and good-sized ones, too, if all that flopping around in the red shorts is any indication. But he's missing the artistry, you know? And David's ink is perfect in every way, the best I've ever seen. Well-placed, vibrant, and not too much. The work on his arms stops just above his elbows, and there's one spotlighted killer piece on his chest, and then the masterpiece on his back.

Okay, so I stop myself as David heads for the dressing room. I have never followed him in there, I know I couldn't handle it. I pretend to sip from the water fountain and glance at his back and the phoenix that spreads its wings across his shoulder blades. Huge, glorious wings, tinged with all shades of red, yellow, and deep-down burning indigo. Eagle-like beak open wide, more flame pouring out along the curled tongue. Fierce, piercing eyes that seem to follow your every move. Gaping talons that look so real, I would never want to succumb to their razor grip in real life.

I've never been shy; I was popular in school. People even like me at work because I am a certified smart-ass motormouth, and a cloud of laughter usually surrounds me. So WTF? I have rehearsed talking to him in my head a hundred times, wondering how not to come off as a complete doofus. I could say, "Who does your ink? They're really great, with photo realism." I can think of a million things, but I can't utter a syllable.

Maybe if I had some kind of clue how he would react, maybe if I knew he wouldn't trash my fantasy by acting like a complete douche bag.

I catch a glimpse of his small bubble butt as he disappears. He always wears black Nike pants that hang low on his hips, with a white stripe down the outside of the legs. Same pair? Surely not. He couldn't possibly do laundry every day. But then... oh, lordy, my dick stirs as I think about what they would smell like if he *didn't*. And why pants every damn time he works out? Why? Why can't I see his legs? I bet they're covered with more than fabric, too, and I so want to see. I want more art. And the bulge is nice, but held firmly in place. My guess



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is the guy probably sports a good jockstrap since he seriously works out, probably even more than I know.

What I'm sure of is this: he's here forty-five minutes, every day, doing mostly free weights, and then thirty on the cardio. He probably comes in the mornings and at lunchtime, too. It's a twenty-four hour gym. Could he possibly be here, more alone, after midnight?

Iffy, and I'm too lazy to check out that theory. It's a nice fantasy in the shower, anyway.

I can barely stomach this evening routine as it is, but the eye candy beats the worn-out gay bars in this hick town, and there's only so much TV I can stand before I start losing IQ points.

Believe me when I tell you it is very hard for me to stay busy this long in a gym. Since I have his schedule down now, I miss his cardio ninety percent of the time.

I head over to the thigh machine, but my heart is really not in it when I can't at least hear him grunting or see his reflection. I manage five wimpy-ass lifts and head back to the bench press machine. At least I can lie down on that one, in spite of the stinky vinyl.

"Hey," this guy says, and I lay there looking up at him and struggle for a moment until I remember him. Sort of. He flicks my gut with his gym towel, so I sit up.

Oh, now I know who it is. The tattoo. It's the traditional Japanese tiger climbing up the inside of his right forearm, complete with crimson, bleeding claw marks. I can't camouflage the disappointment. "What's up, Reg?"

"Nothing. Haven't seen you around much. Change your hours or what?" A nervous-looking smile. "I hope you're not just avoiding me, because—"

Oh, hell to the no. I hold up my hand, but I can't help stealing a glance at the body I used to find so beautiful. I try hard not to say, *Yes, I changed my hours, you arrogant prick, but not to avoid you. I switched so I can stalk... I mean, catch a glimpse of David. And like you should care.* I try to be normal. I'm not sure I've ever achieved that state. "Yeah, I get tired of the same old grind, you know?" Like him. What a boring lay, sorry to say. He had some pretty art, but he was so selfish and he rarely ever called except late at night. I had been too young or vain to actually believe that I could only be a booty call.

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I'd thought I'd found a keeper, was well on my way to a boyfriend, even, though it'd started as an immediate hookup. And when has that ever worked out for me? Still, I floated until I saw him at Baskin Robbins with some dark-haired woman, spoon-feeding her my favorite chocolate mint chip, and grinning like he used to grin at me.

Okay, so he's slipping her some ice cream; that's perfectly natural to do that with your friends, right? But not slipping her some tongue right after. Right at the table in front of God and everybody. Little kids! Families! The trauma.

Somebody drops a weight bar. Expletives and laughing draw me right back to this jerkoff.

My lips grow tight, like I am trying to keep his tongue out of my mouth. We'd had plenty to yell about back then. I wish he didn't think he could just pop me with a towel and give me that gorgeous grin like nothing had ever happened between us. I swallow and eventually say, "Well, how's Lisa?"

"Theresa."

I roll my eyes, a maneuver I save for spectacularly stupid moments from spectacularly stupid people. "Whatever."

"Man, I told you... at the time I was—"

I hold up my hand again. "Uh huh. Look, I'm trying to work out. I'm not here for social hour."

"Trying is the word, all right." A ridge forms over his nose, a frown like a caged animal. I used to find that attractive? God, what is up with me and these MMA-looking brutes? "I was just trying to be friendly, man. You used to crack me up, you're funny. We had fun. And don't give me that, you were cruising, you always were, even though I admit you hid it very well." He sniffed, shifted his weight. "I thought... maybe we could go grab some ice cream or something."

"Ah, such a low blow. I wish you'd stooped to that level more often back then." I stand up, feeling too sticky from the bench. "FroYo is more your style, honey. Please. Don't talk to me, okay? It's been, what... two years? And the passage of time hasn't made you any less of an asshole."

Reg flips me off and stalks away, his usual mature method of handling conflict. "Fucking queen."

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“You should know. Does Lisa?” Uh oh. Was that a little too loud? I stare at his receding back, at the setting sun and all the tribal swatches under it that framed the storm clouds so perfectly you could almost smell the rain. Damn, his skin is pretty.

Some of the other guys are looking at me, but Sai's Gym is known for three things. Number one, all male. Number two, everybody minds their own business. And number three, no funny stuff allowed, or the owner, Roid Roy, will toss your ass. And not gently, right out into the alley, and what transpires there nobody knows.

If Roy Sai sported some ink... he might have been worth more than a surreptitious glance or two. Well, and if he wasn't crazy, that would help.

Maybe what had just happened was almost funny stuff. I feel a few jungle stares, and there is a definite pause in the clanking metal. But then... okay. Maybe the confusion factor saves my ass this time. I don't think it will the next.

So, why Sai's for me when there's a perfectly fine Gold's Gym in Gay Town? Well, like I said, there's usually not a lot of drama going on here, and contrary to belief, as flaming as I could be when I let my inner bitch out, I didn't much care for all those size or muscle queens. So objectifying. And the way they mostly looked down their aquiline noses at me, this skinny ass with wild hair, who fits in there even less than the straight workplace in the fascinating world of data entry.

Sometimes it's okay to have a cube of your own.

I'm sure there are some great guys at that gym, really, if I looked hard enough and waited long enough. But I'm just not into that scene of meaningless, expected blow jobs in showers. You tend to get tender knees. And maybe I like it here because it's safer to dream than actually risk too much.

It's not like I'm lonely, that I don't have plenty of friends, or that I've even had too many of them for lovers. I mean, I even have my share of “best straight girls” to gossip with until the sun comes up.

I climb on the stair stepper and think about how I'd gotten into this whole scene in the first place.

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One day, after work, bored and exhausted, I'd decided to just drive around, and caught a glimpse of this new gym. It was painted a forbidding black, smack

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dab in the middle of two seedy tattoo shops. I had wandered through them before, flirting with the idea of actually getting a goldfish or something until the whirring of the tattoo needles turned my stomach into a rolling ocean and out I'd gone.

Was I that squeamish or that brainwashed from Mama?

I stood and cupped my hands around my eyes so I could scope out the new place. Hey, could this feast of beef actually be the lost gay Mecca of gyms? All the dudes looked a bit rough, but that certainly didn't rule it out. The equipment looked kind of old, but appeared to be well maintained. I noticed the red, hand-painted name: Sai's Gym. And I laughed out loud when I got closer and read the sign on the window that proclaimed, "Where you come to work out. No bullshit."

Well. It's a red neon sign now.

I remember thinking back then that driving out of my way on the route to work was a passing curiosity. Lord knows tons of flighty ideas course through my hyperactive brain frequently, and always have. Once, when the tattoo "parlors" were closed, I stopped and stood in front of the door again. I vowed that one day I would go in and just see if you had to sign your life away. I knew I'd get tired of it pretty quick, and didn't expect to find out there was no membership plan. It was a *pay by the month as you go* kind of deal.

And the solution to my ice cream craving struck me in a blinding flash. I could work out for real! I could burn enough calories to eat my favorite, tiny-bowled treat more than once a week... and in bigger bowls.

I've been coming here now for two years. And maybe, since this place is right on the same block as the thriving tattoo shops, I'll grow a pair and actually go through with it. And at any rate, browsing their new flash occasionally after a stimulating workout was more entertaining than watching CNN on the stationary bike.

I nod in time to the AC/DC thumping through the speakers. I like that it isn't too loud so you can listen to your own stuff in your buds if you want. That first day I sauntered into the dressing room, I half expected to slip into some easy action, because I knew from experience that I am of the build that a certain percentage of macho guys like.

I had carefully flirted with my eyes and got ignored mostly. I got scowled at once.

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My eyes had worked plenty of magic before, and I knew it was a tool in my arsenal that I could break out in the right circumstances. I'd known it right off with the aforementioned Reg. And about a year ago, I'd had another one of those *I've found my artistic masterpiece* moments with a small but built Asian-American man, truly tatted up like a Yakuza. The only problem was... I think he really was a Yakuza. Or the American equivalent. That didn't stop him from having a sweet laugh and giving great head, but it did stop my heart after I saw the collection of guns one evening in his closet.

I could remember it, *just like it was yesterday*. How I listened to him in the shower, singing something about spinning around like a record...

We'd been seeing each other every weekend for over a month, and he always dressed so swank, in his silk suits, or leather jacket and perfectly ripped jeans that showed a death's head right above his left knee.

In the closet, I'd yanked on the chain, wanting a perfectly legitimate gander at his fine threads and saw no reason not to nose around. I mean, his cock had been up my ass maybe twenty times and mine up his about half that, so I thought I had earned the right to browse. Hmm, hmm, hmm. Immaculate clothes. Boots. I breathed in the smell of fresh laundry, dry cleaning, and his spicy scent. But at the back of the closet...

How would you explain a rack with two machine-gun-looking thingies and four hand guns? Pegs holding up a couple of holsters, one that looked like it should be strapped on your leg.

Either that, or a freakishly huge cock ring.

Gangster guns? No redneck hunting rifles or antique six shooters.

I shut the door, breathing way too hard, while he sang some other song from the eighties and I dragged one sweat-drying leg into my Diesel's, and then the other. Thank God I was in my no socks wearing phase. I slid my beige loafers on faster than an ill-fated television pilot gets yanked off the air.

He opened the door, steam billowing around him like a staged cloud, all one-hundred-and-twenty pounds of muscle and art, and my heart beat even faster. God, was he pretty. He said, "What's up with the pants? And you've got your shoes on? Uh uh. It's not Monday yet."

"There's a Ben and Jerry's sale at Thom Thumb, I just remembered."

He hung his head, his long wet hair inviting me to suck on it because I could tell he was getting horny again. I buttoned my shirt with shaky fingers.

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He said, "Why didn't you get in the shower with me? I was trying to lure you in with my fabulous singing."

I grinned. It was a joke of ours. He couldn't carry a tune in a teacup. "It almost worked, like a siren wailing from a jagged seashore." I slipped on my jacket, way too chill and cool, he should've known I was acting. "I'm sorry, Jim, I've really got to get home."

There was no sweet-eyed grin, nothing but the hard look my mama had always run away from and warned me to stay away from like the plague, too. I could still hear her say, "Tattooed men like that... all they think about is themselves. It's the ultimate in vanity. Think about it, Tam. Why would they go to all that trouble, to display themselves like that? It's nothing but white trash, criminals, or psychos."

Yakuza Jim said, "There isn't an ice cream sale at Thom Thumb. What the hell is going on?"

My tongue tried to stick to the roof of my mouth. "I thought I told you. I need to go in early tomorrow to make up for getting off early this weekend to spend with you. And we both know if I stay here, there ain't going to be any sleeping going on."

That did it. The eyes softened and he laughed, and I remembered running my tongue up the inside of his thigh, tracing that raging bull up until I hit the Manga-eyed beauty that seemed to be worshipping his erection. I'd done enough of that.

He let me go, not knowing anything was any different, I don't think.

And I spent the night terrified he'd hunt me down and kill me... but... no. A few nail biting weeks. Just normal phone calls, and then calls not returned, and then... he left me alone.

Fortunately, he didn't work out at Sai's anymore. He'd never been that regular, anyway. He probably stayed so fit chasing down losers who refused to pay off loan sharks for their drugs. Or popping some caps in some asses for fun to spare me too much thought.

Crap in one way. Hallelujah in another.

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Obviously, my ink record sucks. So Reg is a self-centered jerk. And with Yakuza Jim, Mom had been a tad too close to correct. Damn it, I hate it when she's right.

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Lifting the biceps bar, wishing that I had worn my own earphones this time because some death metal ground through the gym speakers, I start thinking about Mama. I wonder if she'd been raped or something, by some tattooed thug. We'd even run out of gas one night, outside of Midland, because she didn't have a card that would work, and when she saw the tattooed love boy through the window, she wouldn't go in and pay, and she damn sure wouldn't let me do it.

Then, I think about how when I was around thirteen, I'd fantasized once in awhile that maybe my real father was dark and evil, like a tatted-up Darth Vader, instead of a computer nerd who apparently fell back into his passionate obsession with electronics once I became a component in their high school, night moves mistake.

I get up in disgust and wipe my face.

And then somebody taps me on the shoulder. I turn around and holy fuck, it's David. He's wearing a black, short-sleeved Polo shirt, with his coloring book arms showing. And slacks? What the... where are the usual jeans that accentuated that wondrous bulge?

His face gives away nothing. He's talking to me? And his voice isn't all manly deep, either, but more quiet. Like a psycho, maybe. "Why do you watch me so much?"

My knees feel like jelly and not the good kind. A fresh wave of sweat stings my eyes. I wipe at them with the limp towel. "Excuse me?"

"When I'm here, you're usually here. And you don't think I see you watching me in the mirrors? What's up with that?"

I look around at the floor, find my Gatorade. It's lukewarm, but I finish it, looking at his face, really trying to get a read on his eyes. But they are so brown, I can barely tell where the iris ends and the pupil begins. "I do not."

Muscles jump in David's jaw, under the fine auburn stubble, and I find myself trying to hide my crotch behind my towel. I have to say something. "I just like tattoos, man. That's all."

He runs his eyes fast over my body. I feel my dick stirring even more, though for security reasons it should be trying to shrink, probably. "Naw. You're not sporting any ink."

"Well... that's because... because I'm scared of needles. I pass out, I'm not kidding, or proud of it, but uh... well... I want tattoos, I really do." I needed

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more Gatorade. Or a gin and tonic. “I mean, yours are great.” I prop my chin and cock a hip. Just one more time, I have to try to sound halfway sane. “Does the same person do them?”

A slight softening around his cheeks. “Yeah. All except one.” He sniffs, and stands up straighter, crossing his arms. “Kat Von Dien.”

My face feels blank. Obviously, I should know that name if I am such a tattoo aficionado. The silence hangs a second too long, maybe, but I’ve never been called dim. “Oh, wow. That must have cost a lot.”

He beams. “Fuck yeah. It took me a year on the waiting list, but shit, she is just as hot in person as she is on TV. Hotter, maybe.” He adjusts his junk, and my heart falls. I mean, it feels like somebody actually reaches in there and squeezes until juice spurts out.

Another straight one.

Why do I torture myself?

I think I say, “It’s cool. It’s the phoenix, isn’t it?”

He grins. “Yeah, you can’t miss her work anywhere, huh?” He tries to look over his fully clothed shoulder. “I just wish I could see what I paid three thousand dollars for. I’ve heard it’s nice.”

And then he laughs, and so do I. “Oh, it’s fantastic. Why do you think I look?”

He nods. “I thought so. I just... couldn’t figure out why you didn’t have any ink or piercings or nothing.” Again with the grin. “Do you want to see the rest of them? There’s this great guy, his name is Charlie Watts, I shit you not, just like the drummer for the Rolling Stones. He’s at Exotic Ink, and I don’t let anybody else do me but him. Except Kat, of course. Man, I can hook you up. For real. I can get you a deal.”

“Uh. Well. I don’t know...”

He makes a face, like *what a dumbass*. But in a teasing way. He grabs my arm. “Come on back here, let me show you my art.”

As I let this... fantasy man, this walking painting, pull me toward the dressing room, I feel like I am tiptoeing over hot coals, rising on heat waves. Up my thighs, over my face. I say, “Do you like ice cream?”

He looks over his shoulder at me. “What?”



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I don't know how I manage to make any words at all. "I like to reward myself with some triple chocolate with caramel swirls and sprinkles on top after I work out. It's a tradition."

And his laugh... all I've seen him do is half-smile maybe four times in the last six months. Or grimace under three hundred pounds of iron. "Doesn't that defeat the purpose?"

"Exactly. I need a reason to keep coming back. I mean, your tats are nice and all, but that's hardly enough motivation."

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So... I get dressed first. I do it fast.

Okay. I can stand here and watch him skin off his shirt, and show me the wild red, blue and green fish around his right arm. The snakes and skulls on his left. Smaller Latin writing on his wrists. He tells me what they mean, but I forget. His back. Something snaking down into the top of his pants back there, but he doesn't offer any more peek show.

He starts putting on his shirt again.

I say, "What about your legs?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going to show me your legs?"

The faintest hint of rose tinges his fair cheeks. "Well. My right leg is good. And my left thigh... I don't know, man, I—"

I sit on the hard bench. "Like I'd know the difference."

"Believe me, you would. My left leg is like... practice."

I frown.

He starts with the belt, then the zipper, and I wet my lips, wondering where the hell this is going. He drops trou halfway, stopping at his knees. Well, what do you know. No jockstrap, just very tighty whiteys.

For some reason my hearing starts acting crazy again, like he is speaking Russian or something. On his right thigh, a beautiful tree of life, dotted with bright red apples. A few had dropped to the base of the tree. More damn snakes. Fountains. It gives me a reason to squat, and get closer to him. It gives me a reason to memorize even more of his body. All I have to say is, "Yeah?" And,

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“Ah. Cool.” And he keeps right on talking. I wish I could hear what he was saying.

I glance at the shapes beneath those bright drawers, then follow his finger back toward the owl on the top of his left leg. He says, “The only good part.”

“What does that Latin writing down the inside of your thigh say? And why Latin? I mean, the Gothic script is super cool.”

He shifts his leg so I can see better but says nothing.

Hairless and muscled, like I suspected. What kind of a freak am I? Maybe there doesn't have to be a reason I like the ink, other than it visually turns me on. Like ice cream turns on my tongue.

Like his dick would, if it shows any interest at all. Which it doesn't. I try not to look at it too much, but it is damn near as pretty in his undies as his ink and just a little bit too close.

I say, “These are all great. What are you talking about, practice?”

“My calves.”

“Well, let me see.”

He clears his throat, starts pulling up his pants.

My voice sounds so confident. “Let me see. Really.”

He ducks his head again, letting the pants puddle around his ankles for a second, and then just steps out of them, tossing them on the bench. “I've had most of the bad ones covered, but this... hell, this is embarrassing.” On the back of his left calf is a clunky anchor, of all things. Faded to that unattractive blue gray of old tattoos.

I say, “Yeah, well... I guess everybody needs an anchor?”

I glance up and he looks at me like I am so strange, but then he sort of smiles. “It was my first one. I don't know. I can't quite work up the nerve to get an elephant or something to cover it. It'd have to be that big and dark.” He pulls at the muscle. “Damn. The definition sucks. I should cover it, but...”

I watch him, bent over, still pulling at his calf. He studies it longer than the others.

“It means something to you.”

He looks up, and I can see even less of his irises. “Yeah, like I said, it was my first one. My friend did it in high school.”

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Maybe because I have my clothes on and he doesn't, I feel bigger than him. Older. Though I'm not. "But it's more than that."

Like Reg, he frowns ferociously. Apparently, I like that in a guy. "Why do you say that?"

I shrug, watching him. And since he doesn't look away, I don't either. After a moment, he straightens up and glances around the locker room. We are alone except for one person back in the shower area. It smells of soap and stinky gym clothes and sweaty men, and I don't mind if we stay here forever.

He turns and grabs his slacks, starting to get dressed.

Well, hell. I say, "Where do you work, that you wear slacks? Don't tell me you're a waiter. Though you must make a killing in tips, if you are."

He rolls his eyes. "I work at Roxanne's."

A high-brow piano bar. My eyebrows pull up, and I squash the instinct and stick my effeminate hands under my armpits. "Doing what?"

"What do you think?"

"They need... bouncers? There?"

He tosses his head back with a loud, sharp laugh. "I'm a bartender, asshole, and yeah, 'I kill it in tips'. Sooner or later, I want to open my own tattoo shop. I hope it's sooner. I've been apprenticing with Charlie."

"What?"

"No, Watts. Charlie Watts. Anyway, that's how you learn. I mean, you think you go to college to become a tattoo artist? I didn't want to show you my lower legs, because that's where I practice. From potatoes then to your own skin. But after awhile... you've got to have somebody trust you enough to let you do your first tattoo."

I sniff. "The anchor. I get it."

"That bad, huh? Well, I told you." He whips his head up to meet my eyes. "I always think maybe it isn't as bad as it really is."

I wish I could read him better, his body language. After studying him for half a year you'd think...

But he says, "I've got a little time before my shift starts. You want to go get some tutti-frutti or whatever the fuck you said earlier?"

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In the parking lot, holding our gym bags.

He says, "Yeah, I'll meet you there. I got to get some gas first."

Oh, sure. Yeah. Right. He's really going to meet me. "You know where it is?"

He lets his head fall back. "Where are we? Dallas? Of course I know where it is. You want to follow me to the EZ Mart or something?"

I wave him off and hurry two rows over to my ancient Honda. "Nah, show up or not, what do I care? I'm about to have some killer ice cream, what do I need you for?"

He shrugs and climbs into his super-shiny, black Dodge Ram, and I act like I really only want my chocolate fix. I watch him drive off in the opposite direction as I turn right and feel about as empty as the super-size container is going to be.

And now, fifteen minutes later, would you look at this? I'm here and so is he.

Chocolate melts on my tongue, and I close my eyes on the almost stinging touch of mint chips riding on top. "Mmmm." I realize I've just made a sound and steal a glance at him.

*OMG! OMG!*

I'm sitting across a pink table that never looked tiny before, in a pastel parlor. It's like... we need a man-sized table, not a twink-sized. I'd always felt right at home until now. I feel like a blazing flame, and I'm really not. A few flourishes here and there, true, but now I feel like a flouncing sissy. I make sure to keep my butch on.

Actually, I can't believe I'm watching the peculiar way he eats pistachio ice cream. He takes the spoon and turns it upside down then sticks it way back in his mouth. Then he pulls it out totally clean, and then rolls the ice cream around for a couple of seconds. It's just about the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

I say, "It's the Pistachio Dream."

"Really? Is that what it's called? I didn't see that on the menu."

It isn't on the menu. "Yeah, you just didn't see it."

"Oh." Swirl, stick, lick.

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Maybe he savors it like that because he hasn't had it in five years. Could he be that sensual in other sordid ways?

He takes another bite, kind of floats off into his own world for a bit, like he does in the gym. He doesn't look at me much, and how great is that? I can study his cheekbones, his long, pale eyelashes. They look almost like brushes. The ridge of his brow. I wonder what the bristle feels like on the top of his head. Prickly and fun? I wonder what that thicker-than-normal neck might taste like. Or...

I could just go on.

When he glances up at me, I actually jump and get a major brain freeze on top of it. I have to lean over, pinching the bridge of my nose. He laughs low, a purring sound.

"It's not funny. Jesus."

But I laugh, too, and wonder what the hell. The brain freeze wiggles into my esophagus, and I rub my chest. I notice him watching my hand, smiling around his swirly bite.

It just busts out of my mouth. "You do know I'm gay, don't you?"

His eyebrows raise ever so slightly, and he takes that spoon out of his pretty mouth quicker than usual. "I forgot how good ice cream is, you know? I stick to a tight regimen. Soy protein isolate—"

The freeze is burned away by flustered jitters and the heat in my ears. It feels like they're about to melt. "Did you just hear me?"

He nods, not looking up, not smiling, for what feels like five minutes, though it's only a couple of beats. "Yeah, I heard you. So?"

I run my hands through my hair. I try to roll out the full arsenal of my charm, no matter how lame I feel. "I'm glad you're so well adjusted and secure in your manity."

"My 'manity'? What the fuck is that?"

I dare only half a spoon. Brain freeze hurts and I'm not totally recovered. "I like to make up words."

"Hmm."

"You don't like words much."

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He shrugs, and mixes up the remaining ice cream in his bowl, making it creamier. “You can’t lie if you don’t talk, right?”

I sip some water from a purple cup. “Ooh, revealing. So uh, you lie a lot? Or have a lot of people lied to you?”

He adjusts himself in his seat, glancing around at the noisy-ass kids and the bored parents playing with their iPhones. “Maybe.”

“Sorry, but I just have to get this little detail out of the way. Are you a serial killer?”

“You say the weirdest shit.” It really looks like he’s trying to stay tough and not smile. I feel like I’m winning something. He says, “Yes.”

I roll my eyes. And then remember Yakuza Jim.

And David says, “So, is that the truth, do you think?”

“Well, you look like you could strangle a crocodile, so could be. Should I be afraid, very afraid?”

“I think *I’m* the one who should be afraid, as long as you’ve stared at me and followed me around.”

“What? You’re scared of little old me?” But inside, I beam like Rainbow Brite. He had noticed me. “I mean, I don’t know you. I kind of feel like I do, because of the gym and all, I guess.” I slip in my last bite then swallow it. “Are you going to strangle me now?”

He takes another slow spoon of ice cream, and tries to look mean but fails this time. “I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction.”

“It jokes, too. Oh good lord, I need some more ice cream.” I jump up, totally on autopilot since I don’t have much sense left.

“No, really, you don’t. This is not good for you, man. This crap *will* kill you.”

“Well, neither is sitting across from a serial killer, but what are you going to do?” I let myself swish a bit, a zip of excitement shooting through my gut, too much glee singing in my voice as I order some more. I never indulge this much, but I never get to sit in front of such a slice of heaven, either. And I need some time to collect myself, between worrying whether he’s going to bolt, or God forbid, dismember me.

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I can't keep my eyes off him as I return, and he stirs his ice cream around. I shake my head and sit down hard. "I don't believe you."

He shrugs again, but there's a shine in his eyes. "Really. Good. I'm just a weirdo. Speaking of fucking weird, I hear your name is Tam. What kind of name is that?"

I copy him, swirling my ice cream. It does seem to taste better like that. I wonder why. "Well. I'm twenty percent Scottish, eighty percent mutt. My name is Thomas MacEwen. So you know, what a boring name. Tom. So why not Tam? Like a Tam O' Shanter?"

Blank stare.

"You know, like the hat?"

"What?"

My voice fades. "It's a Scottish hat..."

His eyes start to glaze.

I cut in with, "Well, uh, I don't know who that tattoo person, Kat 'Carpe Diem' is, either. So we're even."

His lips turn up higher than ever. "That's a good one."

Be still my thudding heart. "Thanks."

"I thought it was maybe short for Tammy, like you used to be a girl or something."

"Yeah, you're so funny."

He doesn't laugh much, but he does have a great smile now that he's apparently cracked himself up. Probably the stoic, one grunt kind of guy in bed. Ahem. I say, "Seriously, what are you doing here with me, anyway?"

"Making sure you're not dangerous. I've never had a stalker before, and I'm kind of freaked out."

I take a bite. The pauses between our sentences certainly could have allowed enough time for a translator at the United Nations. "Ah. And your verdict?"

He makes a face. "I don't think you're Hannibal Lector."

"Why, thank you, sir."

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“But you’re still kind of freaky, man.”

“And you’re not?” I stop myself before I say *and you knew I was watching you*. Time to change the subject. “So you sat for, what, hours and hours getting your back done? I mean, you’ve probably heard this a billion times, but... did it hurt?”

“Well, it did take about twenty-two hours, broken up over two days.” Twirl of spoon, lick of contents. He is almost done. “It should have been broken up more, but... I couldn’t afford to stay in L.A. that long. And yeah, it does sting a bit after about, I don’t know, six hours. It’s hard to stay that still.”

“Did you cry?”

He rams his spoon into the bowl. “Little bit.”

I actually shudder. “Damn. That takes some willpower.”

“Guess so.”

“Guess that’s why you can work out so much. Do you do three times a day?”

He sits back in his chair. “Yeah, but how did you know that? Do I need a restraining order, for real?”

“No,” I say, sipping some tepid water from the tiny-tot cup. “But I’m not an idiot. You don’t get a body like that working out what, an hour and a half, once a day?”

That rose-colored flush over his cheeks just about slays me. How could he be so stone-faced, and yet still blush? I think of how he drops his head back and closes his eyes after a rep, collecting himself between sets. I finally realize that maybe he is shy. Except for flaunting his ink, of course. I want to ask him everything. I want to know everything. Not over a period of weeks, though I sure as hell wouldn’t complain, but I want to know it all. Right now.

I think it feels like that because we’d been having a conversation without words for perhaps four months.

He says, “Yeah. Usually three, sometimes only two, depending on my schedule.”

“Seven days a week?”

Swirl. Lick. He needs to stop eating it that way. “Yep.”



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I scoot back in my chair. I smell his body, his clean sweat. “So discipline is definitely one of your strong suits.”

He flashes his teeth at me. “No, my Batman suit is stronger.”

We laugh. His is higher than I expected when he’s not being evil, but adorable. He sounds about seventeen. “Ah, great! Another joke!”

“No, I really have one.”

“If that’s the only joke you’ve got, you better work harder, mister.”

“No, not my only joke, my suit. My Batman suit.” He fakes serious very well. He almost has me going, gets me imagining maybe a little latex or handcuffs...

I’m not particularly into that, but I’m crushing on him so hard I might consider giving it a go. Hell, I haven’t “crushed on” anybody like this since I was what, twelve? I am starting to embarrass myself. I try to shut my mouth to keep from further self-incrimination, but oh no. There she goes. “Now that sounds interesting.”

Leaning his chair on two legs, it creaks, so he puts it right again fast. He reaches his arms high over his head, stretching, and then pulls each arm over his chest, holding for a second. Then rolls his neck.

There really isn’t even any need for me to try to keep my mouth closed at that moment. I am too enraptured by the simple masculinity. The male beauty.

I mean, his face isn’t the most gorgeous I’ve ever seen, but there’s just something about him. Strong, solid, measured, quiet, compared to my flighty, chatty, ADD tendencies. How long would he be able to stand me? I won’t change for anybody, I’ve fought too hard my whole life to discover and accept who I am. But would we be like oil and water or would this be a kind of yin yang situation?

Would it even be a situation? *Stop getting ahead of yourself, Tam.*

I take a bite, and for the first time, don’t really taste it. “So if you knew I was watching you, why didn’t you stop me?” I drop my spoon on the napkin. “Oh, crap, I get it. You’re like a circus freak exhibitionist or something.”

That sneaky smile. “I like to show off my tats. You know that. Like all those other shirtless assholes.”

“Well, your body is nice.”

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A nod. "Yeah. Should be. I work at it."

"Why?"

Now he finishes up with the last of his baby scoop, and lays his spoon down, almost daintily. "Because I like tattoos, but not on flab, you know what I mean? And it keeps me out of trouble."

"You don't do it for the 'ladeez'?"

He rests his elbows on the table, squeezes his big hands together and leans on them. "For me, I guess. Or whoever wants to see. I feel better when I'm in shape, when my endurance is up."

Now why does he have to go and say something like that?

I hold my chest again. "I feel stupid, but I'm just going to say it. Are you like... bi?"

"You wish." He sits back, with that look, like he's getting ready to go.

"Wait, did that offend you? I'm just curious."

"Why are you so curious?"

Now my face feels like it's about to melt off. My heart bangs too fast. "I don't know. Maybe I like you. Does that offend you, too?"

"Why would that offend me? You act like I'm some kind of shitkicker. Do I look like a hick to you? I was born in Austin, and you know what they say, the 'Keep Austin Weird' shit. I'm proud of that. I'd still be there if my mom hadn't gotten sick so fast... and just died on us."

"Oh, David. I'm so sorry."

"It was about eight months ago."

"God. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Fuck no." He clears his throat and pushes his tiny bowl away. "I was talking about Austin earlier. I want to open my own shop there someday and I will."

I follow his lead. "I know you will. I have faith. So why are you staying here, then?"

He plays with his spoon. "I have a younger brother. He's two years younger, and kind of... gotten in with the wrong people. Meth, dealing, who

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knows. I'm hoping to stay on a little longer, because... I think he needs me and he's heading for jail if he doesn't straighten up."

Ah. Sweeter than puppies and kittens wrestling in my heart. "I hope you can help him, but you know how drugs are. He won't stop until he wants to, until he hits his own bottom."

Does every thought have to morph into a dirty, ridiculous *Three's Company* double entendre? *Stop it, Tam. Just stop. This is serious.*

"I know. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Parents still living, or... together?"

"No brothers or sisters. Both parents, though they're divorced. I never see my dad, but not a big loss there. I'm really close to my mom, she's great. So..."

The natural conversational lull.

He purses those perfect lips. "Ah, nice and stable. Lucky you."

"Yeah, I'm feeling pretty lucky right now."

With a quick flick of his eyes, I don't feel so lucky. If I could only read his face better. I say, "Not everything I say is meant to be all gay and shit."

"Sounds like it."

"Well, I can't help the way I talk. You just have to trust a bitch sometimes."

Now, that makes him laugh and throw up his hands. "Proves my point, right there."

"Hey, I gave you that one, sucker."

So then after our laughter dies, I say, "I want more ice cream."

He gets serious. "No, you don't need it. What are you trying to do to your body, anyway? That processed sugar will kill you, I'm not playing."

I shrug and get up to buy another giant cup. And hell, I'm glad I'm wearing a big T-shirt, because my woody just keeps getting out of control. I feel that urge clawing up inside my guts, sort of pulling at my back. I need to come pretty quick, maybe within a half hour. I don't think that would be too much of a problem, at least with my ingenious self. I know already there's no way I'm getting that close to him this evening. But I am starting to feel that maybe, just maybe... I might have a shot at it. Someday. I hope sooner, rather than later.

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When I make it back, he sort of curls his lip. "Are you kidding with that? You can eat that much ice cream?"

I sit and take the spoon and make moaning noises. Funny, though, I am stuffed and don't even want it. "I can eat a lot."

He looks away and rubs the back of his neck.

"You want to taste it?"

"No, I do not. The more sugar you eat, the more you want. It's a drug."

Jack Tripper in my mind. Honey, you got that right.

He sniffs, all manly now, and levels his gaze on mine. "Look, I've got to get going pretty quick. So I'll just tell you. You're kind of different. Interesting. And even though you're a health disaster, I don't have any guy friends. I mean, there's some guys at work, but most of them just want to go out and get drunk and get laid, and... I'm not into that."

"Getting laid or getting drunk?"

"Oh, I'm definitely into getting laid, just not drunk. I'm into living a clean, focused life, if you didn't notice. I don't drink. I mean, kind of like I don't eat ice cream. Usually. I mean, I can do it if I want."

He's a doll when he's flustered. "You are a big boy."

"Yeah, I'm a big boy. I can do what I want."

I think I'm too excited to fully understand what I'm saying. I pretend I don't know about rejection or its slicing edge. "So what do you want to do?"

He narrows his eyes at me again and crosses those muscled arms across his chest. "I know you're flirting, and that's okay. I get flirted with a lot. Mostly chicks, but hey. Like I said, you don't freak me out, believe me, or I could have had you kicked out of the club a long time ago."

I toss my spoon on my napkin. I'm way too full, anyway, starting to crash from my sugar rush and beginning to feel a bit sick. "Yeah, I don't get this little conversation at all. Especially if you figured out I was watching you."

"Me, either. But I get... I don't know how to say it. You seem real. And kind of sweet."

"I told you, ice cream is good for you. Makes you sweet in a lot of ways."

"God, you're so corny."

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“True. So why... well, let me start over. I’m just going to lay it out there. So what do you want from me? Do you want to hang out again? Join me in my ritual ice cream? Or is this just a one-time kind of...”

He drums his fingers on the table for a moment. “I think I just want to try a new thing, okay? I’m just going to try to talk for once, too. Death has a way of making you realize life is short, you know?” A flicker of emotion crosses his face, his recent loss cutting him as deep as it should. “The best I can come up with is maybe I’m looking for a friend who isn’t a redneck sonofabitch. Maybe. That’s mostly all I’ve met, besides a couple of really nice chicks, but... maybe it’s losing my mom, I don’t know. I don’t feel like getting too close, you know? But at the same time, I feel like... I’m too quiet inside.”

Finally, I say, “Are you depressed?”

“I guess so. I want to have some fun, but it’s like I don’t know how anymore.”

I realize he’s *lonely*. “Have you had fun now? With me?”

He clasps his big hands. “Maybe. At least you’ve held my attention, and that might not sound like much, but for me, right now, that’s a big deal.”

I clear my throat. I hadn’t expected anything like this. But then, I hadn’t expected anything at all. I start feeling more real, and my dick loses a bit of its chokehold on my brain. “So it’s just you and your brother? Where’s your dad?”

He scoots his chair back further, finally preparing for departure like a big old jet airliner. “No idea. He split a long time ago. Mom had a bunch of deadbeats and pricks. For a lawyer, she sure knew how to pick them. Eh, whatever. I need to get going—”

But I’m not done yet! “David, can we do this again sometime?”

He studies my face then, for the first time, for maybe more than thirty seconds. It’s hard to stay still under his gaze. He says, “It’s weird to me, too, kind of. I guess I do feel like I know you a little bit, from the gym and everything.”

“So maybe we can be friends. Can you be friends with a gay guy?”

He narrows his eyes. “I’ve been friends with ‘gay guys’ before. Believe it or not, a lot of them hang out at all the gyms I’ve been in.” But he got serious. “With you, though, I’m not quite sure. I never knew why you kept looking at me. You’re not *that* into tats, are you?”

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“Oh, no, I really am. Yours are so beautiful. I think they’re the best I’ve ever seen.”

That one nod. “I could tell you were looking at them. And I didn’t feel like you were... you know, acting all creepy over me. It was like you were looking at a piece of art. Which you are. My tats are killer, I know that. I wouldn’t just junk up my body with bad designs.”

“Except for your lower legs.”

A grin. Ah, he has nice teeth. A bit crooked but that only makes him seem more real, for some reason. “Practice, I told you, you dipshit. That doesn’t count. And anyway, it’s better than polluting my body with this ice cream crap.”

And that gets him laughing again. I think he really needs that, his shoulders seem to ease down. I think he needs a lot more laughing in his life. “So, what do I do to be friends with a gay guy? Do we have to go shopping? I hate shopping.”

“Well, you’ve never been shopping with *me*. I could deck you out good. Or we could go to the movies. Or rent them and hang out. We could go out to clubs. I can pass for straight, you know that.”

He nods.

I say, “Do you like to dance? Gay bars are better for that.”

“No, I don’t like to dance in any bars, so scratch that off your list first thing.”

I clap and femme it up just for him. “So does that mean we can make a list? You might want to hang out more than this once?”

He scratches at his chin bristles. “Sure. Why not?” Another cocky smile. “I can take care of myself just fine, don’t you worry.”

Well, thoughts dance through my mind. I want to say, yeah, we can be friends. But I like your muscles, too, and your face and your crotch and the way you make those sounds when the weight is just that much too heavy. Can I really be just a friend underneath all that yummy?

I want to throw that out there, but I can’t. There’s something about him, for sure. He is the kind of guy who can hide behind his own face. I start blabbing. “That phoenix on your back. What does it mean to you? I guess I want to know

what all your ink means. If I could get one half as good as yours... I might do it someday."

A different smile. A bit tighter. "Really? What would you get?" Now he sucks his lower lip, trying not to be such an obvious smart ass, maybe. "Now, I'm warning you. If you say 'a rose' or a 'hummingbird', I don't give a shit what they mean to you, I'm out of here."

I slap my hands on the table and notice my ice cream looks like chocolate milk. "Well, hell. It's been nice knowing you." I hold out my hand, and he looks at it all dumbstruck. When he decides to take it, my breath catches a bit. His palm is rough, maybe from not wearing gloves when he lifts. Warm. Big and enveloping, but not too tight. A perfect shake, and when he lets me go, it's like I can still feel a buzz on my skin.

"Yeah. Cool." He stands. "Really, I'm going to be late." He rubs his stomach and makes a sour face. "I knew I shouldn't have eaten that crap."

"But it was good, wasn't it?"

He sighs. "Unfortunately." He almost snorts, trying to stop his laugh. He baffles me, too, in a way, maybe that's why I find him even more irresistible than ever. "Thanks for the, uh, interesting... uh, meeting? Like I said, most guys around here... we don't talk about anything that matters. I get tired of it. Most girls, too, they just want my body."

"And who can blame them? You torture it, you decorate it, show it off. Of course people are going to admire it." I swallow. "Want it."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Are you stupid? Don't you enjoy your body at all?"

"Well, shit yeah. I did for a long time. Like you said, maybe I'm just still... down right now. But I like it when somebody notices."

"You don't mind that I notice?"

He hangs his head. "Would I be here if I did?"

The top of my head nearly blows off. "Well, fuck, am I supposed to pretend I don't notice? I thought I was behaving quite well."

He slugs my arm, and it is just like junior high. Like the time Randy the varsity quarterback hit me after they'd won a game and I congratulated him, still holding my clarinet and in my dorky band uniform. I'd walked on a cloud

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for a week. "Relax. Your problem is too much sugar." He taps his temple. "And too much of this."

The knot in my throat feels as tight as my pants over my returned full-fledged hard on. I lean forward, trying to move my junk over to the left a bit without being so damn obvious. I sip from my bowl with my pinkie held out, and he just busts out laughing. He says, "See what I mean? You're an addict."

He squeezes my shoulder. I put the bowl down before I drop it. I sound all bitchy. "You are totally blowing my mind, David." Seriously, I want to blow *him*. Right now. "You know I'm gay. And you know I'm attracted to you. So... you might want to lay off touching me a little, at least until we start to bore each other."

"Oh, come on." Then a flash of that frowny scowl again, and then he chews on a corner of his lower lip. That flush of rose. "Maybe this won't work."

Desperation. "No, no, it can. We just need some guidelines, how's that? You're good with discipline, right?"

"Yeah, but you're obviously not." But he shifts his weight and thinks awhile. I watch him looking around at the tacky décor, then at the mom with her daughter, who looks about five. Her sandy brown hair is pulled up into pony tails nearly at the top of her head. It's cute.

I jump when he says, "Okay, how about this. Since you're at the gym so goddamn much, what if I train you? Let's say for three months."

"Oh, hell. You just want money. I should have known."

A laugh. "No, asshole. You didn't listen. You have to listen or what's the point?"

"Well, get to the point then."

"Okay, how about this. What if you really let me train you? And if you're a good boy, we can have ice cream afterward sometimes, but only if you work hard enough. And then, after three months, we'll know if we can be friends by then, right?" And he's winding me up, for sure. "And then all you have to do is pay me."

My voice sounds reedy. "How much and with what currency, if you don't want sexual favors?"

The grin lit those almost dull eyes, delineating the pupil from the iris, making them shine. "You let me do my first tattoo on you."



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“What?”

“Yeah. You be my guinea pig.”

Memories of experiments in backseats with guys who didn't even wave the next day. Yeah, I know guinea pigs. “I'm not into being used.”

He crosses his arms, looking like a younger, much cuter Mr. Clean. All he needs is some pirate earrings, but now he's clearly enjoying his power over me. “I'm not saying that. If we make it that far, at that point we can talk. See if you really want one. I am actually a pretty good artist already, I can show you my book—my drawings, if you don't know what that is. I do some kick ass designs.”

“Well, your calves don't look so great...”

“Very funny. And hey, either one of us can change our minds, right? I might get bored with you if you don't work hard enough, or you might find somebody else to stare at. I'm just saying, you need more than cardio, man.”

“You *are* crazy.”

“Never said I wasn't.”

“Do you see these arms?”

“Where do you think I came up with this screwy idea?”

A great laugh between us. And I know it, I should run. I pick at a dried spot of what looks like cherry vanilla that my damp napkin must have missed earlier. “We could try it, I guess.”

“Cool,” he says.

I look up at him. “So we can talk and stuff when we work out?”

“Yeah, dude. Why not?”

“I've never seen you do that before.”

“Do you think any of them wanted to talk to me? Or had anything interesting to say?”

“You think I'm that different?”

“Possibly. Probably. I kind of like this idea.” He looks pretty pleased with himself. “There's a limit, see, so no pressure.”

“No Nazi pressure, either. You push me too hard—”

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“Hey, I won’t. I got to push you a little, though. Get you ready for a nice man.”

I drop my head dramatically. “Who are you kidding? You just want a sucker who’ll let you do your first ‘real’ tattoo.”

“Hey, look at me.”

So I do. He says, “You think some chick wouldn’t let me try out my works on her? Some other guys? I want it to be special.”

“Oh, good God. You want your virgin time to be special.”

“Yeah, why the fuck not?”

Walls begging to be built, begging to crumble.

God, he’s so sure of himself. I wish I was. He glances at his wrist, like he’s supposed to be wearing a watch. I’d been like that until I got used to my phone last year. “Look, sleep on it. It’s not a big thing. I got to get. If I’m late, Joan will have my ass. See you.”

And just like that he’s gone.

She’d have his ass.

Damn. I want to have his ass.

What’s his deal, anyway? Holy hell. What other kinks lurk behind those secretive eyes, under those brilliant colors and hairless muscles?

I watch him slide into his truck like a cowboy, throw his arm over the back of the seat, back out and drive off.

Everything about him confuses me. So he’s impulsive? Thoughtful? He can actually talk. And most importantly, he is not an illusion.

I guess it always has to be like that. A spin of the wheel.

Sometimes you win a prize.

Seems like most of the time you land on the bankrupt space.

I wish I hadn’t wasted my six-dollar bowl of ice cream and try to ride the queasy. My balls kind of ache. My mood turns as blue as they possibly are.

I don’t brood, I won’t start now. But I feel like I’ve mixed the wrong flavors in a disaster of a sundae, like pineapple and bubble gum.

But then maybe I’m afraid of really having a friend, too, somebody to know. Not just somebody to obsess over, or occasionally fuck.

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I try to find some trace of bullshit in what he'd said, and I can't feel any.  
Well. Like Mama always said, "You don't get married on the first date."

It isn't like I have to stick with it, he'd said so himself. I decide then and there to set some boundaries for myself. I am not about to give him all the power.

No phone numbers, no addresses. Just the gym, where there are lots of people and it's safe enough.

And if he gets to me too much, in any way... if I do fall too hard... well, it isn't like I haven't fallen before and gotten back up.

And what's the worst that could happen? A broken heart.

And maybe a terrible tattoo.

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"I can't!"

"You can! Do it. I got you. One more. Okay, good, good, one more!"

"Are you trying to rip my shoulders out of their sockets?"

But I did one more bench press, and thank God he is there to catch it or my windpipe would have been history. I lay there on my back, my teal tank top sweated through, even my shorts. I am too exhausted to care about his sweat dropping on me, about his smell, his nearness, his goddamn anything.

"I hate you," I say, almost under my breath.

"I heard that, fag," he says. And claps his hands fast, like a coach. "Up. Time for lunges."

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Those first few sessions... I don't even want ice cream.

Can you believe it? If I didn't want to puke, I just wanted a shower and to go home and get ready for my stupid job in the morning.

He calls from behind as I strip to get into the shower with my noodle arms and legs. "Hey. Ready to drop out yet?"

"I can make it more than two weeks. Bastard."

And he just laughs.

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Asshole.

I won't come back anymore. I am over my tired, freaky obsession. Long over it.

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I am back the next day, working legs because he has me on a regimen, working different body parts, like a pro. Only four days a week. I would have killed him if he insisted on anything more from me. At least, you know, this kind of physicality. And I find out we can cut up, and he laughs, and he's a nice guy when he isn't a gym sadist.

I think we even start getting the side eye once in awhile.

This time, I'm on my back again. For some reason, this has become my favorite part of the workout. Maybe it's because I *am* on my back, looking up at him. "Look. I'm getting abs."

"You've always had abs, silly. You just couldn't see them. Put your shirt down."

I shake out my arms, blow out a huge breath, buzzing my lips. "Okay, then. I've always wanted biceps."

He doesn't bother to even go there. I really try. I did enjoy getting stronger, much to my own surprise. I feel better, more energy. I kind of like being sore the next day, the good kind of sore. Kind of like the good sore you get after a particularly hard fuck. I wear it like a badge, whistling at work just like I am getting some. My mood is that much better.

I don't know how it came up, but I start blabbing about boyfriends, and he interrupts with a quiet, "How many have you had?"

"What?"

"How many people have you slept with?"

I bobble the bar, and he helps settle it in the weight holder thingy. He says, "Rest a second. Then we'll do your second set. I think that's enough for one day."

I link my fingers together over my chest and look at him. "Personal question. Wow, um. Okay. You tell me first."

He shakes his head like he can't believe what he's said, either, and glances off across the sea of muscles and machines. "Three."

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My body jerks. I don't know why. Thank God I hadn't been in the middle of the lift. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I wouldn't go around saying something like that. Guys might think you're a pussy or something."

"So how many have you had?"

I narrow my eyes, not even pretending to think. I could estimate... maybe twenty-five? More than that, if you count just the occasional fooling around. I grab the bar too soon, and settle my shoulders. "Talk about feeling like a ho. No, I'm not telling you. You don't have any need-to-know clearance."

"You're ready to go again?"

I want to say *oh, you have no idea*. But I am a good boy, and start another lift. "One," I say, all deep voiced and butch. "Two."

He leans over. "Go slower. Push it up slower. That's it. Really concentrate on the movement. Concentrate on good form."

"It's a little hard to do that, with your endless, mindless chitchat."

He says, "So what do you do when you're not working?"

"Really. I told you. I'm trying to concentrate. Six!" My arms are starting to shake. I stop short of the twelve reps. "Whew. I don't know. Give me a minute, I need to get some oxygen to my brain."

He stands up and crosses his arms over his chest. "I didn't tell you to stop yet. That was barely half a set."

"So what do you do when you're not working or here?"

He does an impromptu set of squats. He does stuff like that sometimes, so he won't get totally cooled down. "I don't know. I like to read. Listen to music. I'm boring, I like to be alone, I guess."

I sit up, careful not to bang my head. I push at my sweaty hair, at least getting it unstuck from my forehead. "What do you like to read?"

"Mostly architect stuff, or American history."

"God, what are you? Fifty?"

He stops squatting. "No, I'm twenty-four. And I watch TV."

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“Like what?”

“*True Blood* when it was on.” And then that rose flush comes over his cheeks again. “I like news shows. Shit, maybe I am fifty.”

“You need to get out more.”

“You need to get to the dumbbells station.”

“I thought we were done for the day.” I get up, and towel my face. “So, uh, I know I need a break from this routine. Sounds like you do too. What do you want to do other than this shit?”

He doesn't answer, just motions for me to follow him to the free weights.

There we stand, looking at each other in the mirror, both with dumbbells in our hands. I mean, his are three times heavier, but still. I feel tougher just standing next to this tattooed bad ass. I feel kind of cool.

He says, “I already told you. Don't be asking me out on dates.”

“That was a friendly invitation. Maybe you can't tell the difference?”

He grimaces, pulls two very slow, alternating curls. “You know, one of those people I slept with was my best friend. We were tight, you know, from eleven to about... sixteen. And then his family moved away.”

Now, I drop a weight, very bad form and just barely hopping out of the way to save my foot, and then somebody even yells, “Hey! Watch it over there!”

“Did you say...”

“Yeah, I did. Russell. I thought we were just, you know, being guys, messing around.” He does two more curls, then replaces the weights. “I missed him so bad when he was gone. I realized... it was different.”

“Holy shit,” I say. I put my weights up, too. “And don't talk so loud.”

“I thought you were out and proud and loud.”

“Well, I am, but you're not.” I cock my head, my heart pumping faster. “And the other two?”

“Girls.”

Deflation. “Oh. So... you are bi. Or just 'gay for him'.”

He crosses one ankle over the other one, takes the towel out of his back pocket and dries his face. A shrug. “I'm not really sure. I didn't really... get

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into girls as much as I thought I should. I mean, I liked it better with him. But I thought it must have been because we were so young, and it was the first time, or some shit like that. I don't like to think too much." He taps his temple. "Makes me crazy. So I work out, no time for thinking."

I suddenly don't want him to be *bi-curious*, especially not with me. I don't even want it to be a possibility. I say, "Maybe you haven't found the right girl. I mean, don't you get off on them hitting on you all the time?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, I do, but I don't like feeling like a piece of meat, either. And I try, but I'm not really interested, and even I think that's weird. Don't you?"

I try to come up with something funny. I can't. "Okay. So. Did I tell you I like to cook? Why don't you invite me to your place, and I'll bring some food and cook and we can talk. No funny stuff. Just talk without... all this noise."

He works at his lower lip for a second.

I say, "Without the distraction of Pistachio Dream."

He laughs. "You're so funny." And then he says, "How about we skip the workout Thursday, because it's my day off."

"Swell," I say, in my goofy Hollywood voice. "What do you like to eat?"

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He sits at the table as I cook gluten-free spaghetti with tofu meatballs and make a salad. Nothing too fancy because I am too damn tired.

We talk about everything. Favorite foods, politics, music. Sports. I actually like watching basketball. He doesn't like to watch, he likes to play. He loves classic rock and plays some "on the original vinyl", but I can't tell any difference between that and listening to a CD or mp3. We kick back with beers, and I've never felt so comfortable just sitting on a couch with a guy, listening to Queen. I doze off, even.

When I jolt awake, my neck hurts, and it is a good thing my bottle was almost empty, or it would've spilled all over me and his still new-smelling couch. I take the warm bottle to the trash can, and then go around the corner, feeling sneaky, but also content. He is already in bed, and I watch him awhile. His mouth hangs slightly open and he is snoring. He looks so young and kind of innocent. I don't know why that makes me smile.

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It is past midnight.

I let myself out.

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So after one and a half months, I can finally *really* talk to him while we work out without forcing humor or keeping a wall up. He might as well have been wearing his ear buds before now, the change in his body language and face is that drastic. He grins at me. A lot. I start thinking about him at work. At home. In the shower.

He takes mercy on me, and we toss a fifteen-pound, truly sweat-stinky medicine ball back and forth. About twenty feet between us. I have never done this before he came into my life, and true, it is easier now. But still, don't fool yourself. It's a heck of a lot harder to do than you'd think.

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Ice cream time again.

He brought his "book" and my jaw drops. Not because I am playing it up, either. "Oh my God! You did all these? You're amazing."

He scratches at the side of his eye and gives me an almost smug little smirk. "Thanks."

"The detail. Shit, now that is one scary skull, like a gargoyle or something."

I can see how proud he is, and he has every right to be. I swallow, because I want to say it, even though I know it will sound so lame. But since I have always wanted to hear it from my dad, I take the risk that damn near chokes me up. "You should be proud, David. I am so proud of you."

Now the cheek flush spills all the way down into his neck. "You think I have a chance to make it in my own shop?"

I close the book. "What do you think? These are so good."

"You don't know anything about tats."

"No, but you're a fucking great artist."

He stands up quick and takes my nearly finished bowl of pistachio and his empty tea away. "Stop talking, you're embarrassing yourself."

But there is no missing his pleased grin as he ducks his head and goes toward the trash cans.



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Ah, wow. He might just achieve his dream. With enough money behind it, some advertising, some luck.

He motions for me to get up and I do, satisfied for the first time because I feel like now... he is letting me see. He is truly letting me in. And under that easy-to-irritate side, like when you don't do a chin up right, he is like an excited kid, full of plans and hope.

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How do you get to know somebody? How long does it take? Do you ever really know someone?

You can get to know a body in one evening, if you are extremely thorough.

He knows I watch him get out of the shower more than ever, his pale skin all pink and clean. He dries his head like he actually has hair and then commits eye contact, complete with a smile. So I check out his junk, and there's no disappointment on my end of the deal. But if he is interested... why doesn't it show when I actually stand and look at his dick? I like how he is shaved down there. Makes it all look bigger, maybe. Cleaner. Kind of surprisingly more like a boy and I am not sure how I feel about that part of it. I've been damn careful this whole time, not to get in his space, to keep my flirting to an acceptable level, to keep my eyes to myself.

Most of the time.

I kind of feel sick that he doesn't seem to notice, but kind of relieved, too. I have done the "gay-for-you shit", and I don't like that. It never works. But the man part of me... it sure as hell takes too much notice of his closeness. Maybe if I show him, would that change everything? I've been having so much fun, I'm really not completely sure I want it to change.

I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose him.

In this steamy, teeming dressing room, we sit side by side on the bench, with our clothes on. He is struggling into some black Nikes with neon green swooshes and soles. I slide into my almost dorky oxblood Doc Marten shoes. No, not cool boots, but shoes. Since he is off on this Wednesday night, he wears faded jeans and a Metallica "*And Justice For All*" black tee almost faded to gray. I touch his shoulder. "The fabric just looked soft. How old is this thing?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I got it, um, when the album came out."

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“Did not.”

“Did.”

So I sigh like a martyr and stand up. I start cracking. “Look, I know you like broccoli and surprisingly, Julia Roberts movies. I know the name of your first girlfriend, where you went to school, who you want to win the Super Bowl. But I don’t know what’s going on here—”

He stands up so fast, I have to step back. He grabs my face, and I let out a little squeak. He lightly kisses my lips. Like most events regarding him, I chalk it up to a dream, until he doesn’t let go and keeps looking at me. Nobody has a sweeter blush.

Somebody, Eric, I think, walks by and says, “What the fuck?”

And I try to dart my eyes at least, since my head is in a vice, and try to explain my dirty little self, but like Vin Diesel, David says, “Eric, this is none of your business. Get out.”

I grip David’s forearms, feel the smooth skin. I glance down, wishing I could somehow feel the tattoos, but of course they are perfectly smooth, like his skin. “Do you use Nair or something? To get rid of your body hair?”

He cocks his head. “I just kissed you and you’re asking me about my grooming techniques?”

I try to step back or at least free my face because somebody else walks by, but he won’t let me go. And whoever the next guy is doesn’t say a word. I try to talk but only manage some kind of noise. I start over, “I wouldn’t go around kissing me, man. You don’t know what you’re going to wake up.”

He glances down at my crotch. “I see something waking up.”

I frown. “Who the hell are you, anyway? I thought... you were straight. Mostly. I mean, besides your crush on Russell.”

A pulling down of his lips, a pain in his eyes I wish I can take back. “It was more than a crush, Tam. He did more than tattoo a bad anchor on my calf.” He lets me go, looks down. “He broke my heart.” He picks up his bag. “Do you want to go to my place? Or wait, let’s go to yours. You’re shaking like a sonofabitch. I didn’t mean to scare you. Maybe you’d feel better at your place? Come on, I’ll follow you.”

“You’ve never been to my place.”

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He glances over his shoulder at me. "First time for everything, I guess."

So I float out of there, somehow drive home, watching his bright headlights in my rearview. I just keep thinking, *WTF, WTF, WTF.*

I guess I don't know this guy as well as I thought.

I know how he laughs, how he'd turned out to be nice. Not pushing me too hard. Barely eating his ice cream, but letting me talk a million miles an hour and eat mine. How he shakes hands. How he thuds me on the back and says, "Great job." How that makes me feel prouder than when my uncle did it after a rare home run.

I breathe like I am in a yoga class. Again, my thighs tremble slightly. I am so hard I ache. I am so scared when he walks up behind me; I drop the keys to my duplex.

He says, "I'll get them." And he unlocks my door.

Then hands me the keys.

I don't live high on the hog, as they say around here. In fact, my duplex is pretty dumpy. My three-seater, thrift store couch is way too small to sleep on. It's barely big enough to lie down with your feet dangling off the end and watch TV. My stereo is over ten years old, with big speakers. My flat screen isn't mounted all sleekly on a wall. It balances on a brown TV tray, the kind you eat off. I have a kitchen from the seventies and a bathroom that looks just the same. And my bedroom? A fucking mattress on the floor. Sort of made up. At least the covers are tossed over the sheets.

He looks around, purses his lips.

I laugh a little. "Not what you expected, huh? Not all gay? I didn't get that decorator gene, apparently."

"Apparently."

I watch him examine a couple of framed pics my mom gave to me. French style posters from Target or something. One from a vet, one for some kind of wine. I toss the keys in the black bowl on the junk table by the door. "Do you want a beer or something?"

He rushes over, slams me against the door, a very clever way to shut it. My breath whooshes out with the force of it, then he kisses me again. It isn't like the first time, because this time I can feel his soft lips. The sting of his bristles.

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The exploring tongue. I throw my arms around his neck. He picks me up like I am nothing. Hell, I probably am nothing to him. He half lays me on the couch, and my frantic hands feel him like the house is on fire, and maybe I have five minutes in my life to memorize a body I'll never touch again.

We have to breathe sometime. I say, "Goddamn."

He pushes my too long hair off my forehead and smiles. "You don't like it?"

I grin and rub my hand over his scalp, finally, touching it, and it tickles just like I thought it would. His head is hot, though. It makes me laugh. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

"What? Kiss me?"

"No, touch your spiky little head."

He pushes me back on the couch. "Why didn't you just do it?"

"Uh, yeah. Like, right."

"Why didn't you just kiss me, if you wanted to?"

I push his shoulders back, long enough to keep him off my lips. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"You're a man, right? What, aren't these balls?" He runs his hand from deep under my ass, shivering me all over, cupping me between my legs and squeezing almost too hard. I wince, and probably moan and all that shit, as he starts working on me through my pants.

I say, "That part right there. That's my dick. Are you sure you're big enough to play with it?"

He leans and takes my lower lip between his teeth, making us laugh, making me grind into him. I say, "Oh, yeah. I can feel that you are old enough. Big enough, I mean. Shit. David... you don't have to do any of this."

He pulls his head up and touches my lips. I wish he'd reach down and undo my pants, and from the way his pupils look, as big as the irises for real, almost, I have a feeling he is about to. "I don't do things I don't want to do."

"I'm just surprised, that's all. I..."

"Do you have to fucking talk so much?" He skins off his shirt, then continues with his pants, slowly. And on purpose. I watch those muscles sliding

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under those beautiful tats, and now I do know how his skin feels under my fingers. Soft, living velvet. He glances at me. "I want you to suck me off, okay?"

I wet my lips. Oh, I plan on it. But. "Why? So you can get off, then just leave? Make the little fag boy get on his knees, make you feel like a tough guy?"

He stops with his pants, glances down and toes off his shoes. And there he is, naked, standing in front of me. "Check out my ink," he says, flexing a bit, letting my eyes touch him. Then he stands closer, his hard, veined dick about a foot away. His hands a little shaky. "I like the way you look at me."

I take his hands, then, and kiss each one. Then he strokes my hair.

The heat in my cock, yes, I've felt a million times. But this spreading heat in my chest? This expanding light from just under my ribs? I can barely breathe. "What are you doing to me?"

He brushes my hair back some more. "I want you to love me. And then I want to fuck you. Does that sound all right to you?"

I swallow again. There is nothing else I can do.

He kneels in front of me and presses his lips to mine again. Our teeth collide. Then his tongue strokes inside my mouth, not invasive, not scary, and I lose myself in him.

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So waking up in a tidal wave of fear is my usual state of mind, after I know I've been fucked over (and literally fucked) by some built, tattooed maniac who's already out the door. But this warmth was like the flowing ocean, like lying on the beach in the evening sun. And this arm...

The snakes. The riot of color. His hard, warm body against my back, his oddly metallic morning breath riding over my shoulder.

I start laughing. "Whew," I say, not caring if I wake him up, kind of glad when I do.

He sort of laughs, too. "Ah. Man. I need to piss." So he hops up and I watch him in my tiny bathroom, his back, the way he shakes his dick. He even washes his hands, his face, splashing water, and it is sexy as hell, the way it drips down his chest. He looks around, uses my mouthwash. I know that he knows that I

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am watching him, and exhibitionist that he is, he makes sure to turn his back so I can admire the expensive and expressive phoenix across his shoulders.

And the sunburst with stylized, curling tendrils at the small of his back. Curving tendrils reach inward over the top of his ass, too.

He saunters over, his penis swinging, and well... it was rather larger than I remember. And he is getting a good case of morning wood.

“Okay, my turn,” I say. But I don’t evacuate or wash with such *élan*. I do, however, brush my teeth.

He is laying there with one hand behind his head, watching me. I can’t be cool like him, though. I run back to the mattress and crawl under the covers and lay my head on his chest. “You fucking lied to me. All this time.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“How do you explain this?” I wrap my hand around his cock, and he draws in air between his teeth. I move the soft skin over the hardness.

He takes in a deep breath, and manages to do what comes so easily to me. Talk. “What is there to explain? I’ve been watching you, too. I’m just better at it... oh, fuck, that feels good.”

We don’t talk for a minute.

He says, “Remember my twenty-two hours on the ink table?” He pulls me close in a near choking one-arm hug and thankfully lets me go so I can work on what I’d started. “I ain’t nothing, if not patient.”

I listen to his heart. I can feel the health and strength radiating off him. “You just wanted me to have abs.”

He gives that short bark of a laugh. “You have always had abs under all that ice cream fat, goofy, how many times are you going to say that?”

“Until you stop laughing at it.” I take my hand away. I’m good at that, too. Teasing.

“Hey.”

I tickle around his belly, making him jerk. I trace my fingers along the top of his thigh. He is starting to sweat against my cheek.

Until I just barely touch and bam, his body tightens, he nearly shakes the bed. He comes, just like that, and I grin. And no, he isn’t the one-grunt kind of guy.

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We still have the towel from last night, so I reach for it and toss it at him.

He laughs a little. "Crusty."

"Oh, all right." I drag my horny ass up and get a fresh one, and then clean him up myself, while he nudges me with his head, and then we kiss until I can't concentrate on anything else.

After he repays the favor and I am floating around in some blackness behind my eyes, riding the streaking colors once in awhile, a huge happiness slithers inside. I finally settle back into my body. I am grinning. I could cry.

I pull away so I can see him, and our sweat sort of tries to keep us stuck together. He runs his rough hand over my chest, then touches my cheek. And it is weird, how soft his hairless skin feels against me. His voice sounds gravelly. "I feel good about the work we did."

Mine sounds about the same, like I've been yelling. Maybe I have. "Work? Are you telling me I have to *pay* you?"

Now I am not sure for a second if he was kidding, so glad when he cracks up. "I was talking about the gym. Don't you feel good about your body? You should."

"Why? I'm not all muscular like you."

"No. But you're in great shape. Probably hardly any body fat, and you've got me to thank for that. Fucking sissy ice cream parlor."

I punch his ribs. He curls up on me, and we kiss and are about to start something all over again. I memorize his face with my hands. The tickle of his whiskers pleases me more than I could have ever imagined. "You ain't nothing but a whore, is that it? Three people, my ass."

He reaches for my hand, and makes me wrap it around his dick again. "You haven't finished paying me yet."

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I wasn't finished paying him the next day. Or the next.

In my bed again.

He shoots his wad on my bare thigh, over my dick, and I love the way he rubs on me, how we rub together. How he gets me off the same way and mixes those fluids that have always sort of surprised me. Like... how can pleasure be

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measured by these sticky teaspoons of jism that we are both so proud of and play with like finger paints?

We wipe off some, and rest.

He takes a while, then nips at my shoulder. I curl tight, turned away. He says softly, "I want to tell you this. God, it's embarrassing, though." And he surrounds me like a python, his leg squeezing as it slides over my hips.

"You. Have. Got. To. Not crush me."

He eases up fast. "Sorry." But he nuzzles up into my neck, and plays nicer with me this time. "You know, I never thought I'd admit this, but... after the first couple of months, after I'd noticed you watching me, I used to jack off thinking about it."

"What? You did not."

"Did. Don't make me crush you again."

"Okay, okay." I squeeze him instead until he complains, and a wrestling match threatens.

He almost crushes me again. "God, that's so lame. Don't you think that's stupid?"

I run my hands over the hills and valleys of the muscles beneath the circus ink. "Obviously. I have no respect for you at all." I quit acting silly and lay on my back. "Fuck, that's hot. I would've... I mean..."

He raises his head, and he is embarrassed, fair skin redder than I've ever seen. I can feel the heat from his cheeks. "I can't believe I told you that."

I pull his face around, and he fights me, but eventually our eyes meet. "I don't even know what to say. Except, uh... thanks for telling me. Wow. I would have never guessed that in a million years."

We lay there. I feel as much of him as my skin can soak in. I listen to his breathing, feel it tickle my shoulder. Listen to the traffic outside.

A surge of adrenaline shoots through me, and I flip over and push him on his back. "Well, you took your goddamn sweet time and you could've let me know you were fucking interested or something. You cruel and unusual bastard."

I love making him laugh. In the gym. In Ginny's Gourmet Ice Cream Parlor. And I am learning now how I especially love it here, in my crappy-ass, lumpy



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bed. “Never been called that before, but I guess it’s true. This is hard to say, it’s not real easy for me to talk about heavy stuff, but after Russell, I didn’t want to feel anything like this again.” He grabs my chin almost too tight. “I wasn’t just playing you. Or checking you off a list, waiting for a mistake. I just... wanted to make sure that look in your eyes meant what I thought it did.”

I lean over for a sweet kiss, and it doesn’t stay sweet for long. Oh, the glorious moments, the first times, the new times. And I try to fight the fear of how those new times turn to familiar ones, even rather boring ones. How desire melts away, slowly, day by day, like mounting utility bills.

He touches my lips. “What? Come back. Why do you look so sad? It’s not always that way.”

I find the smile that I’d lost. “What way?”

“The way you were thinking.” He taps my temple. “Too much of that.”

“You don’t know.”

“No. Nobody does. But you do it anyway. And you know what?”

He wiggles under me. I say, “Damn, boy, Little David is feisty this morning.”

“Complaining?”

“Nooo, but...” He grabs my hips, and even if I want to get off him, I can’t break his hold. I drop my head, open my mouth, let him rub against me until I match him and we come again. Not all at the same time, like in some romance. Him first. Me, maybe three or four minutes later.

All I know is I have to fall over, empty and full all at once. My ass kind of stings, too. I’ve never let anybody do that to me so hard. Never. But he knows what he is doing, he didn’t hurt me. Much. I like how he can throw me around, and just... take whatever he wants. And oh, no, just remembering it... I can’t possibly be ready for it again, can I? I mean, isn’t it physically impossible?

“I’m usually ready for a guy to leave about now,” I say, taking deep breaths, blowing them out. “I mean, I’ve got to get more than two hours of sleep sometime. And I’ve got to go to work.”

He turns on his side, and I am glad he doesn’t touch me. There was enough of that after orgasm rational fatigue that makes his voice as hoarse and slow as mine. “Yeah. I know the feeling. But I also know this feeling. I want to cut our deal short.”

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That shot a lightning bolt through my chest. Am I seriously having a heart attack? I turn, trying to talk...

He is lying on his arm and shakes his head, almost not moving it. "Not like that. I want to tattoo you. Now."

"What?"

He grins, slow and spreading. "I've got my works in the car. I want to put an anchor on the back of your leg."

This cracks me up. And I roll around until I see that he is still smiling, but dead serious, too. I swallow a wad of anxiety as thick as the ancient memory of swallowing a mouthful of come. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. But it'll be a pretty one, I promise, with a rose twined around it. I've already got it drawn up and stenciled."

A sliver of ice shoots from the base of my spine all the way up into the bottom of my skull. It hurts. "Nah. Not yet. Okay?"

"What? Are you skeered?"

He tries to tickle me, but I grab his meaty hand and he lets me kiss it. "You know I love your work. And I will let you." I let go, and blow out a big rush of air again, pushing my bangs back. "Wow. I can't believe I just said that. And I mean it. I think. Just not now. Can't we just do this for a little bit?"

That caveman "bad form chin up" look. Then this new one, that tender one. "You don't ever have to do it, you know? It was just an idea. You don't have to be what I want, or do what I want, do you know what I mean? I know I can look all scary." And he makes a face that would make any quarterback staring at him over the offensive line piss his cute little padded pants. "I like you because you're you. If you don't want a tattoo, fine. I just think you do."

I scoot closer and we start that playful kissing. Moving in, mouths open, teasing. Pulling back. Sucking on a bottom lip. Tongue flicking.

"Fuck, I have got to go to work. I can't be late again. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I hear him groan as he lets me untangle and start scrounging around for clothes. I don't shower.

I want his smell all over me as I take phone calls and enter crap into computers, probably half of it wrong. I am barely even on the planet, anyway.

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Well, meeting him in the gym... our eyes just lock. I can't help it, and apparently he can't, either. It is obvious as hell, and not just in the way we laugh while we work out and actually have fun. That just doesn't happen all that much, and certainly not the way we do it, without even touching.

Ah, man, just enjoying him in our old environment feels surreal. My dick gets so hard it aches, and we just stand there by the trapezius apparatus, bags in hand. We look around at some of the guys who actually stop working out and stare at us with tight lips and square jaws.

"Shit," I say. And then I start laughing, louder and louder until I double over.

He pats my back like I am choking and eventually clears his throat. "It's been getting chilly in here the last couple of weeks, don't you think?"

Ducking my head, I say, "Yeah. I think Roid Roy is starting to take notice. I think maybe we need to find a new gym."

He slings his arm around my neck and takes my heavy gym bag into his left hand so he can carry both of them. "Plenty of places to work out. I could use some new machinery. I think I've reached a plateau here, anyway. What do you think, trainer?"

"Yep. You've just about maxed out everything this dump has to offer."

We strut out to the silence of the patrons and "Back in Black" growling in the background.

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And then we proceed to our own gym, on his floor and then his table.

Over the weeks, even hand jobs in public bathroom stalls when we go out to eat, or to buy groceries. Those end up being quite a vigorous workout of my forearms.

We make our own gym wherever we want. In our skin.

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His house is better than mine, and not just because it used to be his mother's. There's no overly feminine touch, all the family photos put away. A lot of her furniture replaced. I can still smell the traces of the relatively fresh ivory paint.

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I've cooked in here plenty, we've watched TV, and I've listened to more rock from the seventies than I ever knew existed.

We've showered together and done just about everything you can do wet without busting your ass. Not to say feet didn't slip a time or two.

So far, we've been lucky, and his strong arms caught us every time.

Back in his new memory foam bed that conforms to us perfectly the nights I sleep over, I watch him strip. How he loves to do that. Showing off his ink for me.

And well, let's just say I never grow tired of that dramatic little display.

But then, he gives me a quick kiss and gets serious.

I rub his back. "What is it, baby?"

"I want to do it."

"What?"

"I want to tattoo you. Anywhere you want. But if we put it on your calf, and I mess it up... it's not very easy to see, you know?"

"Aren't you too tired?" I'd waited for him until his shift was over after midnight. I bite at his waist and that turns out to be much harder than you'd think. No fat to grab onto.

"No," he says. "I'm strangely wide awake."

My stomach rolls. "Okay," I say.

The grin and the kiss are worth it. "Okay, it's better if you lie down on your stomach. Like you're on a bench."

"Can't you, uh... take care of this first?" I flip my dick at him.

Now that grin is wicked. "It'll just make it better, so no, I won't. Quit touching yourself, kick off those blankets and let me get my kit."

I do what I am told and watch him turn on every light in the bedroom area, even the vanity lights in the bathroom. He sets up his works. Fascinated, I watch him move the lamp, plug in the gun. Set out his disinfectant and inks. Some time or other, he really had printed off a stencil. He holds it up. "Do you want to see the design I made for you?"

I slap my hands over my eyes. "No. Surprise me." I laugh a little. "You're good at that. Among other things."

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“Turn over.”

I do, the mattress inviting me to hump, but I torture myself, fighting the fear of the “needles”.

He takes a deep breath, then rests a gloved hand on my ass.

I say, “Oooh, that feels kind of kinky.”

A smack that stings and I move against the mattress. “Stop that,” he says, in his deepest, sergeant voice and I stop. But I laugh, more nervous than I want to be.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

I swallow and get serious. I just nod.

“So, uh. Be very still or you’ll fuck it up for sure.”

“I’ll fuck it up?”

The bed sinks as he sits down, and I feel the coolness of him sliding the stencil in place. “Do you want to check the position? Make sure you like it? Because you need to be happy with this.”

I shake my head. “You said it feels like little knives, scraping?”

“Yeah, but like I said, I am good at it, and it’s not just the potatoes that say so.”

“Potatoes know, from what I hear on the streets.”

He massages my ass, and I consider all this. He says, “It’s just a tool. Bundles of tiny needles, in and out, fast as all get out, scarring you with ink. That’s the reality. But if you’re good, you don’t have to go too deep, and you’ve got a lot of muscle in that area. That really helps, it doesn’t even have to hurt all that much. And real artists don’t have to... you know, attack the skin. I’ve had great teachers, Tam. I’m good like that. I won’t make you bleed.”

I chew my lower lip, wondering... if I give him what he wants, my surrender, my skin, would this “honeymoon” start to die? Would it be over, just like all the rest of my, dare I say it, boyfriends had decided it was over and faded away or just downright left?

I listen to his breathing, heavy and yet controlled. Sometimes I still can’t believe he even wants my body. He helped shape it, for sure. Maybe I helped him shape himself.

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I've never wanted to give anybody everything like this before.

I say, "And you'll take me out for some caramel chocolate chip afterward?"

"Well, when they open. It's three in the morning, silly."

He eases closer, until his breath tickles the back of my neck, and he kisses me once on the spine. He hovers over me, holding himself up. With my head turned to the side, I could see the corded muscle above his wrist. We stay that way, about three inches apart, longer than there was any reason to. He says, "Baby, this isn't some game, like your little stalker routine."

He falls on me then, crushing the wind out of me, and I buck him off and scramble on top, pinning his arms. Well, he let me, and I'm no wimp anymore. I stare down at him. "Don't play with me."

The big smile goes away. He knows what I mean. "I'm not."

So I touch our lips together and it is as good as all that chocolate.

And pistachio.

I hop up and resume my position. My voice sounds muffled. "So, am I, what, like the fortieth dude you've marked with an anchor?"

"I can't believe your self-esteem sucks so bad. I mean, you've got abs and biceps and everything now." He gives a little laugh but I can't. I squinch my eyes shut as the machine whirs to life, and I hear clinks and smell alcohol. He says, "You don't know that it's an anchor, anyway, now do you? And try not to be an ass for once. I've never done this before."

"Well, somehow that doesn't make me feel one iota better."

"Ah, just man up." Barked, just like in the gym.

The peeling away of the paper. "Ouch!"

He actually gets tickled. "Oh, come on, that was just the stencil. Are you sure you don't want to double-check the position in the mirror?"

"No, just fucking get on with it before I change my mind."

"Remember, there's usually a sign in the shops. Remember what it says?"

"Yeah. 'Think before you ink'. Because it don't come off, I know. And I've thought about getting one more than once, so come on already."

He turns my leg from side to side for a second. "I think I got it. Yes. I think it's perfect."

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“Good enough for me.”

So he moves the whole table an inch closer, without dislodging a single implement. I hear him rip off a couple of paper towels, which does nothing for my nerves. But I've seen this done on other people. I have a pretty good idea of what was about to start.

“Ready?”

My hands shake as I turn my head to the other side. I am sweating like a sonofabitch. “Shit, talk about drama. Why do you have to make everything so fucking... ow!”

“Hey, you have to be still, it'll make a bad line, and I know that didn't hurt. Talk about drama. Just be still or let's forget it.”

“No, it didn't hurt. I mean, it stung, but...”

“Do you need a shot of Jack Daniels or something? I'm getting second thoughts here...”

“No, I want it! I swear I do. I always have. I've just been afraid.”

His voice gets soft. “Well, don't be. If you truly don't want this, I'll stop now. You've just got a dot at the moment.”

“A dot?”

“Yeah.”

“So I've already got a tattoo?”

He laughs. “Well, yeah. A perfect little dot.”

I crack up big time. “It's too late! Mama will kill me!” After I get myself together, I sigh. “Ah, David, I'm so happy. Do it. Do it to me good, please.”

And so he does.

I listen to the buzz of the machine, feel the wipe of the cloth, the way he moves my leg, kind of pushing it over here and there. A dab of Vaseline. I think about him fucking me and think... shit, this little pain he gives me is like a shot of another pain that night he scissor-fucked me. I started to breathe fast and he notices. “Hmm. I think this is going to be the best tattoo I'll ever do.”

“It better be.”

“Yeah. Well. You're giving me good motivation.”

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I start groaning.

“Stop moving. I mean, it’s sexy as hell, but this little detail... won’t be. Yeah. That’s it, baby. I’m almost done.”

Wipe. Sting. Move. Sting. Wipe.

Maybe it takes five more minutes.

“All done,” he says. And then he smacks my ass hard with the latex hand. “You can relax now. You want to go see?”

I shake my head, and he falls on top of me, but keeps his leg off my sore one. “I marked you,” he says, and he growls all silly and bites down hard on my shoulder. “Now you’re mine.”

I grab his fine head, and nearly grind his face into the back of my neck. “I let you. Don’t ever forget that.”

He breaks my hold and hops off, sounding all hyped up like a kid getting a long-wished-for bicycle. “Get up. I want you to see.”

Rolling over, I look at him. I know the art won’t rub off on his sheets, but still. I don’t want anything to touch it, either.

He motions me toward his closet mirror. “I wanted it to mean something.” Then, he ducks his head. “Now I sound all girly. But come here. Please let me know what you think? For real?”

“Honey, I’m always for real.”

I glance at the clock. It took about forty-five minutes. And he’d gone through that for twenty-two hours?

I get up, and my knees shake deep inside just a tiny bit, and I hope that it doesn’t show. But I lick my lips as the anticipation buzzes in the pit of my stomach and mixes in with just a dollop of dread like soured whip cream. I go to the mirror and turn, then look over my shoulder. He holds out his hand and I take it. He squeezes.

I squeeze back and relish the burn, but not as much as the warm expansion in my heart as I see the shine in his eyes. “I feel like it’s time for some chocolate chip, asshole.”

“Quit torturing me and just look at it!”

“Paybacks are hell,” I say, but I let myself inspect my brand-spanking-new ink.



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It is red all around the edges, like a wasp has stung my leg. But there are no bloody looking lines, no spots threatening scabs. It is just a solid, crisp anchor, raised up on the newly cut skin. Much smaller than his ancient tat, but hey, it was much better looking, too. My lip trembles.

He looks worried and like he is trying not to. He says, "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful." My head feels a bit light, and a tiny knot twists in my throat. "Why does the rose have to have thorns?"

"You don't like it."

"It's not that. The lines are so delicate. And the roses. Wow, so red."

"The color will get a bit darker as it heals."

I say, all business, "Nice shading, too and the way they twine." I laugh a little. "God, you really get me, don't you?"

We kiss for a second, but a couple of tears slip, and his thumbs wipe them off my cheeks. "What?"

Not all business now. "I was just... I don't know. Why do roses have to have thorns?"

He takes a deep breath. "They just do."

I nod and touch his mouth.

He taps my temple. "Hey. Come on. Too much of this." But his confidence crumbles. He says, really fast, "I can try to cover them with flowers, or birds or something. Man." He sort of stomps his foot and looks ashamed. "I wanted you to love it."

"Oh, I do love it." I grab his head and make him look at me. "I love it. And I love you."

He drops his head back, shuts his eyes for a moment, like I've seen so many times before at the gym, in a kind of private ecstasy. Only this time, I can stroke and worship his wonderful face. And then when he looks at me, into me, there isn't a closed off look in those eyes anymore. He isn't alone on some distant planet. Not alone in the bliss of his little agonies. He whispers, "I love you, too."

His lips turn up, and then... the smile as he rests his forehead against mine, his hot hands around the back of my neck...

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That is worth all the tattoos and ice cream in the world.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*It all started when I was eleven and saw David Bowie on The Midnight Special. From that moment on, I knew (with the confidence of a child) that I was born to make music. I learned how to play lead guitar and eventually I got to make that beautiful sound all around Texas. I've played with bands that took me to Chicago, Finland, Iceland, Germany, Croatia and South Korea.*

*And all along the way, I never stopped writing. When I was twelve, I had bravely started my first book, called, shockingly enough, The Rock Star. Well. I had some learning and growing up to do. And finally, through a series of coincidences, I found my way back to the central themes of that long ago "novel" about three years ago.*

*My book Another Rock Star draws from those early musical obsessions and filters this story through my own dreams, fantasies and experiences. Through fiction, I'm able to delve deeper into even broader issues and turn it all the way up to eleven.*

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# THE ARCHERS OF KYNTHOS

By KM Harty

## Photo Description

A statue, that looks as if it is floating in water, of a man with an octopus surrounding the lower half of his body. The man appears to be fighting it off and in pain.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He has been down here for a couple of days already; he could tell by the streams of lights through the small openings high up surrounding the edges of the high wall. At first he thought it would be stuffy and hot, curiously it was rather cold. It must be the damp packed-earth wall around him. The wall was at least several metres high. Even so, that was not the only deterrence stopping him from leaving this prison he had been unceremoniously dumped into. He knew that he would be a permanent fixture here unless someone saw fit to release him from the sturdy chain attached to the iron collar resting on his neck.*

*They would come in two or three persons, at fixed intervals each day, to provide him with sustenance and attend to his personal grooming. He had no idea why they were fastidious about his cleanliness and health. He couldn't shake off the ominous feeling that he was being fattened up like a lamb before a sacrifice.*

What I wish for in this story:

*I want this to be a **Tentacles MPREG story (Tent-sex + Mpreg)**. A non-con struggle-forced breeding with impregnation of a handsome MC, and his struggles to adapt to his pregnancy. If you are brave enough, an on-the-page birth scene would be a big plus.*

*I am not one to demand for HEA/HFN as I detest those unnatural/forced HEAs the most. To me, as long as the ending fits well with the story, a tragedy is a big welcome too.*

*I love angst in my stories and I hope the MC isn't too whiny or TSTL.*

*A huge thank you in advance for picking up this story.*

*Sincerely,*

*Kynthos-the-Archer*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** cult, m-preg, gods, abduction, captivity, betrayal

**Content Warnings:** dub/non-con, rape, no HEA

**Word Count:** 24,931

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# THE ARCHERS OF KYNTHOS

By KM Harty

*I don't know how I ended up here. I don't know what wrongs I have done to get to this point. I thought that I was a good person. I don't believe that I have ever hurt anyone, not intentionally. I kept to myself, didn't make waves, and yet nothing in my life had prepared me to end up in this place.*

*The things that have happened to me nobody would believe, but they did happen. I have endured everything that has been done to me. I have survived it, but I am not the same man that I was before. The physical pain that I have been through is nothing compared to the pain of the betrayals that I have faced.*

The time was coming. They would be coming. Slowly rolling on his back, he was careful and aware of the chains that bound him, being sure not to pull or jerk himself as he had done so many times in the past. Gently laying on his back to stare at the cracks in the wall where it met the ceiling, where sunlight would whisper in, the only sign that he had that the world was still turning. There were people up there, walking and living, going on with their lives, even as his had come to an abrupt end.

Closing his eyes to prevent the tears that always seemed to want to come at thoughts of the situation he had found himself in, he took a deep breath trying to calm himself down. There was no point in dwelling on the anger, fear and despair that now seemed to live within him. The smell of dirt, the cold and the cement that was now his home, filled him, causing his eyes to water again. This was his life. This was his hell.

The sound of the lock disengaging brought him out of his daydreams and back to the present. Slowly sitting up, he warily eyed the two men who walked in. The same two men every day. Maybe weeks? Maybe months? Time had lost all meaning here. He had lost all meaning here.

When he first woke up, there was a big man who would come in every day to take him down the hall and beat him. With his hands, a whip, whatever he seemed to have handy. He never spoke to him, never said a word. Just dragged him down the hall and brought him into a little room and did whatever he thought would cause enough pain for one day. Then repeat.

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Then one day two men showed up with food. He had tried to get away, well as far away from them as he could, but they never did anything, never said anything. They cleaned and tended to any wounds that he had, and once he was able to stand on his own, his new routine was set.

They walked in three times a day with a tray of food. He ate while they watched, then they took the tray away and locked the door.

Once a day they opened the wall into a small attached room that housed a shower. They came in, unchained him from the bed, walked him into the bathroom, and disrobed him. Into the shower he went where he was chained back up, washed inside and out, dried off, and dressed in clean clothes. Then repeat, every single day.

The humiliation of having these two men string him up in the shower and wash him, like he was a child. The way that they would take the soap and wash him all over, lift up his penis and balls, like they were another arm or leg, not something considered private.

He was clean. He was fed. He felt like he was a Thanksgiving turkey, being given the best to fatten him up to better feed on. That was the thought that scared him the most.

It was a couple of days after that routine started that he got sick. The pains in his stomach had him throwing up on himself, curled into a ball of pain. There was nothing he could compare it with. Not even being beaten and tortured every day compared to this. He knew that there were people around him, someone washed him up. At one point he was sure that there had been an IV in his arm, but his awareness of time had been lost. He didn't know how long he was sick. How long it was before they started coming back morning, noon and night.

He hadn't wanted to touch the food. He knew that he had been poisoned. Why? He didn't know. Why poison him when he was already trapped? Was this a new kind of torture? He took tentative bites of his food, slows sips of the water. The pain never come back, but the fear had kept him wary.

The tray table being slowly rolled in brought him back to his present. As always, he watched the tray being rolled in and placed in front of the bed. He had already been showered so at least he didn't have to go through that again today. The cover was taken off the food, and the aroma hit him like a physical blow. There had always been good, plain, healthy food for every meal. But

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today there was steak, a big-ass steak, with all the sides. This scared him more than anything. This was his last meal. He knew that deep inside.

“Please, don’t do this. Please, let me go,” he begged them both. Instead of answering, one walked out the door.

He was confused. That never happened. There were always two of them in the room at the same time. He stared at the door, his fear racing inside worse than ever. Something wasn’t right; they always stayed in the room with him.

Then he walked in. The big one, who used to bring him down the hall every day and beat him. He was dressed in a dark suit, which always seemed ridiculous to him. Who kidnaps people, locks them in a hole in the ground, and comes to torture or kill him in a suit? Well, at least with the dark fabrics he wouldn’t have to worry about stains.

“Eat.” The voice was the gravelly sound that he remembered. The stern look in his black eyes telling him that the choice was not really his; he needed to eat what was put in front of him. The thought of eating, though, made his stomach rumble. There was no way that he would sit here and eat his last meal without a fight.

“No. Fuck you, and fuck all of this!” Kicking out with his leg, he managed to hit the tray and send it flying. He didn’t watch where it went, just kept kicking his legs out as the man prowled toward him. If he was dying, then he was going out with as much fight as he could put out.

The man walking towards him reached in his pocket, and he was sure that a gun was going to be pulled out. When the man pulled a syringe out instead, the fear intensified.

“No, please, don’t do this. Please, just let me go. I don’t know anything. I am nobody. Please stop.” The other man who had stayed in the room with them sat down on his legs immobilizing him. Unable to lash out, he kept moving his body as much as possible trying to get them away from him. It was no use. The man leaned over him and injected him in the arm. He watched, horrified, as whatever the white liquid was in the syringe was slowly released in his body.

“NO, NO, No, no...”

“You are wrong, Marcus Myles. You are everything to us.”

With that, he slowly rolled his head to meet the eyes of the man leaning above him, and stared into those black eyes as his world went dark.



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He awoke in Hell.

Not like the hell of being held prisoner, chained in some room, but in what he would literally picture as hell. The room was all reds and blacks, and there were flames above him. He moved his head to look to the side and the pain that throbbed through his temples was enough that he saw black at the sides of his vision. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he slowly turned his head to the side to look out into the room.

All he was able to make out in his fuzzy vision were the colors and the flames. It looked like there was fire climbing the walls, coming out of the floor. It lit the room enough to see black shapes spread out around him. He closed his eyes and took another deep breath and opened his eyes back up. The dark shapes were people, or at least he assumed so. It was hard to tell with them being cocooned in something black. There were a lot of them in the room though. Looking back up, he was able to make out the fixtures above him that had flames coming out of them as well. Leaning to the other side it was the same. More black shapes, but on this side there were a couple in red.

They started toward him, and he could begin to make out some kind of music in the background. It was a low hum that was getting louder the closer they came to him. He tried to move his arms and legs, but it was useless. He was completely tied down, unable to move even his fingers. He tried to squirm and could feel the tight bands that were holding down his stomach. The music was getting louder, and he was now able to tell that it was not music that he was hearing. It was chanting of some kind. Not in English though. He was unable to make out any words that were being said.

He was going to die. Every breath that he was taking was going to be his last. He was being sacrificed for something that he didn't know, understand, or even believe in. A bunch of people in robes were going to kill him before he reached his twenty-fifth birthday. Everything that he had not done in his life was starting to flash before his eyes. Regrets of things not done. A silent prayer was sent above to save him.

The chanting stopped. Looking to the sides, he could see he was surrounded by the men in robes. They were still a couple of feet from him, and the circle was at least a couple people deep. He tried to open his mouth to beg for his life again when the smell of something awful caught his attention. It smelled like sulfur, or something rotten burning. It was terrible, and he tried to look to see if the flames were getting closer.

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One of the red-robed people stepped forward and started talking in that language again. He seemed to be talking to something at the edge of the table that he was lying on. Lifting his head up to see what it was brought the pain back full force. He thumped his head back down, and the pounding got worse in his head. His eyes were watering, not sure if it was from the pain in his head or from the smell that was getting stronger.

Lifting his head back up to try to get a look at what was happening, he let out a silent scream. He was not sure what the hell was there, but it was huge. It was some kind of dark shape taking form from black smoke that hadn't been there before. He tried to struggle against the bonds that held him, but was completely unable to move anything but his head.

“Oh, god, no, please. Please, don't do this,” he begged of the man closest to him.

The man ignored him and kept talking to whatever the hell was coming up in the smoke. Looking back up, he could see a more distinct form, but it didn't look to be human.

“What the fuck is that??? Please, someone get me the hell out of here!”

His pleas were ignored. Everyone around him was completely focused on what was happening in front of him.

Continuing to swear and plead, he tried to move in the slightest. Knowing that it was useless didn't mean that he wouldn't keep trying. The dark smoke slowly started lowering and he could see what was happening. There was a figure there. Not quite a man, and not quite—not. It was a monster. The kind that you fear is under your bed when you are a child; the kind that you see in movies or read about in books.

Whatever it was, it was large. It looked to have a man's face, but there was no neck. The head just blended down into what looked to be the body of an octopus. There were arms/legs everywhere. It was a dark gray color, which seemed to shine in the light, almost as if it was slimy. The eyes were the easiest thing to see. They were glowing red. The red seemed to light up the room as the creature looked down at him.

He was screaming himself hoarse now, begging to get away from this nightmare that he seemed to have fallen in. He tried to keep telling himself that this wasn't really happening. He had been knocked out and this was some nightmare that he was trapped in; maybe some new form of torture, a drug of some kind.

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He didn't want to look at the monster but was terrified to look away. The thing started to move around him, circling the table that he was strapped to. On the second pass, the thing trailed one of its tentacles along his body in its wake. The feeling of the slime that it was covered with raised goose bumps on his skin in a room that had been so hot before that he was sweating. It was cold and heavy and gross, and he would give anything to have the thing back away from him.

The fear was unlike anything that he had ever felt. He had no clue as to what was going to happen or what could possibly happen. This was so far from his realm of belief that it was even scarier than the thought of dying here.

The thing was walking around him again, speaking now to whoever had last been chanting. A hood was pushed back, and he could see a man standing there. An older man, gray hair closely cut—so normal looking yet talking to a monster. The man seemed very pleased with whatever was being said. The monster then looked back at him and the eyes glowed brighter. It said something to the man with the hood down, and a cheer went up through the crowd. Whatever they had been hoping was going to happen, was apparently going to happen.

Two more of the red-robed men stepped forward and began to do something at his ankles. The monster moved its body so it was standing at his feet waiting for whatever they were going to do to him. He heard the sound of a lock and realized that they had unlocked his legs. As soon as the cold metal casings came off, he tried to kick out with all he had in him, but his legs felt like noodles, and he could barely get his legs to move. Whatever the big man had shot into him was making his body very sluggish and not respond as well as he needed it to. When his legs were pulled back toward him, he had a very bad sinking feeling as to where this was going. Screaming again, commanding his legs to do something for him, but unable to do anything, he kept screaming and trying to lift his body.

The creature moved in between his raised legs, and he felt sick. The creature leaned down and took a whiff from him and smiled even broader. It then turned to one of the red robes and spoke quickly.

The tentacles were now sliding up and down his legs. It felt like there were fish crawling all over him, and he was trying to do anything to get away. One tentacle wrapped itself around his balls and squeezed hard making him yell out louder than he had already been. Another one started stroking his dick, but it

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didn't arouse at all, it was too wet, cold and slimy to do anything other than make his dick try to crawl up inside his body. He was covered in goose bumps and his body started to shake.

Feeling one of the tentacles rub itself along his crack made his stomach turn. Turning his head to the side, he brought up what little he had in his stomach. Looking around the room, there was only the one face he could see. Everyone else was covering their faces with their robes.

“You cowards, show your faces!”

They all ignored him, but the monster in front of him smiled wider.

“You are going to be the perfect carrier. Feisty. I like them that way.” The voice was gravelly and flat. Turning toward the gathered men, it said, “Thank you for your sacrifice.”

With that, he felt a burning pain in his anus. It felt like he was being ripped apart. Screaming and begging, the tears were flowing even as the creature pushed forward. He looked down and saw that the creature was pushing one of its tentacles in his ass and wasn't stopping. He could feel the widening of his hole as the tentacle grew thicker. Trying to dislodge it only caused it to be pushed in deeper. The men around him started chanting again, and the thing inside him slid forward till it hurt so much he thought he was going to pass out.

It stopped, and he was hoping that this was when they would kill him. That he wouldn't have to have this torture go on anymore. The thought of what they might possibly do to his dead body was a passing thought, but the relief from not feeling the pain anymore was higher on his list of things to happen.

The creature started chanting along with the people in the room. Pausing as the tentacle was shoved all the way inside him. Marcus could feel it throbbing inside. The dry entry was now slick with blood and whatever slime was covering this thing. Slowly it started to pull out of him, only to thrust all the way back in; the chanting got louder and louder, faster and faster to match the thing's thrusts inside him. The flames on the walls got bigger and brighter as the thing was thrusting as hard and as fast as it could.

His voice had gone hoarse with his screaming and begging. His face felt like it was on fire from the tears that he had cried. The pain was unbearable. He felt like he had been torn wide open and this attack was never going to stop. Finally, the thing pushed further in and paused.

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Marcus screamed again. The creature had pushed all the way into his insides. Red-hot pain, greater than any pain he had felt before, burst into him. He lifted his head and looked down. He could actually see the end of the tentacle pushing up his lower abdomen. The chanting around him reached a high point, and the room was engulfed in flames. He could feel the heat burning his skin. Then it was quiet.

He felt the thing pull out of him, and it felt like he was wide open. He could feel something trickling out of his anus and was not sure if it was seed, slime, blood, or a combination of all three. He was ready to pass out. The flames had died down to only cast a glow around the dark room, and the hooded people around him all stood still, not even the rustling of robes could be heard.

The man in red spoke again in whatever language they had been speaking and chanting in before. The creature took a step back away from him and his legs were lowered. The pain he felt, as feeling started coming back into them, was immense. He wasn't sure how long he was held with his legs in the air like that. It had felt like a lifetime in his mind, but he figured that the reality had been a lot shorter. Maybe at some point he had blacked out.

The men who held his legs walked back and joined the circle around him. Two more walked forward and grabbed his legs again and raised them up. He tried to fight, but his legs were still slowly getting the feeling back to them, and his body felt weak from the pain. The chanting was going strong again when the creature stepped forward and shoved another tentacle inside of him. He tried to scream again, but blessed blackness overtook him.

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Marcus was sitting at the kitchen table with his mother staring at the sunshine outside. They were talking about nothing as they tended to do. They were best friends and always had been. She had raised him by herself and had done an awesome job of it. Well in his opinion anyway. Sitting there, he knew that something was wrong. There was something niggling at the back of his mind, but he couldn't place it. He felt like he had been here before and it was really bothering him. He tried shaking his head and that didn't clear up the foggy feeling he had.

She was wearing a blue dress. Why was she wearing a dress? She never did. Susan Myles had worked in a factory his whole life, and she never wore dresses. Marcus had always thought that his mother was the most beautiful

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woman in the world. Be it in the coveralls that she was required to wear every day for work, or the sweat pants that she favored when she was home. Her dressing up usually was a pair of dress pants and blouse, buttoned all the way to the top, and even then that was only for weddings or funerals.

So why was she wearing that dress? He knew the answer to this, but he couldn't pull it out of his mind. There was something there and he just couldn't grab it. He was just sitting there staring at her. She had tears in her eyes now. That wasn't right. He couldn't ever remember her crying. Even when he had told her he was gay when he was sixteen, she hadn't cried. She just gave him a hug and told him it was his day to do laundry.

Then he noticed how pale she was. Her shine was gone, the sparkle that made her who she was was gone. In its place was a sad woman. This was the day. This was the day that she told him that she had cancer and that there was nothing they could do.

She had hoped that what the first three doctors had told her was false. She was wrong. The doctors had given her the same prognosis as every other one she had seen. Three months, with treatment maybe six. There was nothing at this point that they could do. It was too late. That was the dress that he had buried her in.

She was still talking to him, but he couldn't hear her. This wasn't real. She hadn't told him yet so how did he know? Standing up and going to the window, he looked out into the backyard of the house that he had lived in his whole life. But it was wrong. It was dark outside. He turned around and the room was light. What the hell was going on?

Turning back to the yard made him leap away. The yard was on fire; grass, trees, shed. Everything was engulfed in flames. He turned and yelled for his mom to get up and run, but the voice was lost in his throat. She was in her coffin, in that dress that he had buried her in. He tried to yell for help, but his voice wouldn't work for him. This was wrong. This was all wrong.

He turned and ran for the front door. Opening it up, he was faced with another door. He opened that one as well, but it was just another door. Repeating this over and over again, all he got were doors. He turned to go run out the back door, but the flames had caught up to him. He was surrounded by flames. His mother's house, his house, was going down, and he had no way out. Trying the door again, all he got was another door behind that. It felt like he had opened up a hundred doors, and yet he was still trapped in the house.

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The heat was getting to him. He felt like he was starting to melt. His whole body started to hurt. He fell to the floor and clutched his lower half as pain speared through him.

“No, no, no,” he whispered out.

Closing his eyes, he banged his head against the wall. “This isn’t real. This isn’t real.”

Opening his eyes brought him back to the reality that he was in. Closing his eyes fast did not bring back his mother’s face. He was now facedown on the slab that they had him on. His hands tied down above him. He couldn’t move. His body was aching, and his heart hurt in a way he hadn’t felt since his mother died. He wasn’t sure how long he had been in this room; how long this creature had spent raping him over and over again. He knew he had passed out a couple of times. The first time being when he felt the second tentacle start to rub along him and then shove in with the first one. Thankfully he was able to descend into the darkness again.

The chanting had died down somewhere along the way. With his head turned to the side, he could see that there were about half the people left that had been there when this nightmare had started. He closed his eyes again, hoping that this time he would never open them.

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He was floating. He was warm, not like the flames that had warmed his body, but the warmth that came from being in the sunshine. He didn’t want to open his eyes and be back in the nightmare that he had been in before, so he kept them closed. He dreamed that he was in heaven and his mother was there. She was wiping his brow and the rest of his body off, telling him that it was okay and that it was over. He tried to talk to her, but his voice was gone. His throat hurt, but the pain was ebbing away.

Marcus wasn’t sure how long he had laid there, somewhere in-between sleeping and waking, before he heard a door open. He didn’t want to see where he was or who he was with. He tried to take himself back to the place where his mother was with him.

“I know you’re awake. Time to open your eyes and get something to eat. I know that you must be hungry.”

He knew that voice. It broke his heart to hear that voice. The man that he thought could be the one. The man that he thought he would spend the rest of

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his life with. The man who had drugged him and brought him here. He tried not to flinch or move, but he could smell the food and his stomach started growling. He had no idea how long it had been since he had been in that hole in the ground and kicked that tray.

He could hear him set down the tray somewhere beside him, and then felt the bed dip where he sat down. Marcus didn't mean to flinch, wanted to pretend that maybe he was in heaven and this wasn't happening, but he couldn't stop it. Giving up the pretense, he opened his eyes and tried to move away from him. The man actually smiled at him as he put his hand on his leg to stop him.

That caused Marcus's whole body to shake with fear. He tried to still it, but he couldn't. Where he had been warm before, he was now ice cold. He stared into those blue eyes, and he felt his stomach rebel. Not that he had anything to throw up at this point, but it was turning.

"Marcus, honey. You have to eat something. Come on, it has been a couple of days since your last meal. Come on, don't look at me like that. I did this for us."

Marcus turned away from him and tried to move himself off to the other side of the bed. He was looking around the room trying to find a weapon of some kind. When he got to the other side of the bed, he swung his legs to the floor and pushed himself off. However, his legs weren't able to hold him. It felt like they weren't even there. He caught himself going down on his arms, but they, apparently, were unable to hold him either and he found himself face planted on the floor.

He wanted to cry out in anger, but remembered all the crying that he had already done and steeled himself against starting again. He was done crying and done begging. They would not hurt him again.

He felt arms wrap around him, lift him off the floor, and gently place him on the bed. He wanted to fight him off, but he was so weak he could barely move. The pain that shot up his backside was a blaring reminder of what had happened to him. He tried to curl himself up into a ball as the memories came at him full force. The pain from his arms and legs being tied up for so long, being unused for so long, came back and he was so weak he was unable to do it.

That's when he realized that he wasn't tied up anymore. There were no chains around his neck, or on any part of his body. Looking around the room,



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he found the door that was letting the sunlight in, and it was unbarred. Staring at the door, he saw his freedom. Not that right now he would even be able to walk over there and climb out, but eventually he could. All of a sudden he was filled with hope. For the first time since the night he had gone to Brian's house for dinner and felt the effects of the drugs in his drink, he had hope. Strength though he didn't have. He looked over at the plate of food sitting there waiting for him and tried to reach for it.

Brian picked him up again, and he cringed in on himself at being held. He didn't want anyone to touch him, especially Brian. Ignoring his flinches, Brian got him up on the bed and tucked him in as if he was a child. When he had him all propped up and tucked in, he brought the tray over and placed it on his lap.

As soon as the lid for the tray was removed, the smells just about brought him to tears. There was not much on the tray. Looked like chicken broth, Jell-O, and some kind of pudding. There was a glass of milk, and some hot beverage that must have been tea as it was too light a color to be coffee.

Marcus reached for the milk with a shaky hand, and had to stop to look at the bandages on his wrists. Another sign that what happened was not a nightmare. He grabbed the glass and brought it up and gulped down the cold goodness. His throat hurt so bad he had trouble swallowing and he was able to feel the cold as it traveled down. It was the best feeling he had had in a long time. Finishing it off, he started into the broth and ate that as fast as his shaky arms could spoon it into his mouth. He totally ignored Brian, who sat there watching him eat. Brian was smiling at him like he was so happy that he was eating. Marcus just wanted to reach over and choke him.

"If you can get your strength up we can go for a walk in the next day or two. Wouldn't that be nice? It will be like that day you and I packed a basket and took it to the lake. Remember that?"

"You have had me kidnapped, locked in some room, chained in there like some animal. I was beaten, and raped over and over, and you want to talk about a date that we went on. Get the hell away from me!" His throat hurt. Even the cold and hot fluids he had didn't seem enough to calm the pain in his throat from screaming himself hoarse.

"I did this for us, Marcus. You are angry now, and I get that, but you will see that this is a blessing. We have worked so hard to get to this point, and you are perfect. Now finish eating, get some rest, and I will be back later with your supper," Brian said as he patted his leg.

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“You didn’t do this for us. I sure as hell didn’t see you up there having that thing shove whatever the hell those tentacles were up your ass. Get the hell away from me now.”

Brian slowly stood up with a little smile on his face.

“I get that you are mad, but you don’t understand how important you are to not only me but our people. When you have had some rest, I will take you outside and show you the grounds.”

“I don’t want to see the fucking grounds! I want to go home now!” He was shaking and a little sick to his stomach.

“I’m sorry but that can’t happen. You have a new life here, a better life, with me.”

Picking up the empty cup, Marcus threw it at his head. With no strength in his arms, it was not much of a throw, and Brian was able to dodge it easily.

“You need to eat and rest. Get your strength back, and then you will see that this is for the best.”

Marcus watched him walk out of the room and wondered how he had never seen the man for what he was.

The two men came back and helped him to the bathroom, this time giving him privacy and letting him take care of himself. They ran a bath for him and must have put something in the water as he could feel his overly stiff muscles slowly relax. They brought in more of the same soft foods for him, and once again stayed to make sure that it was all eaten. They kept their distance from him though, still not talking, but giving him his space.

There were books and magazines left for him. All of which were, of course, his favorites, courtesy of Brian no doubt. It helped pass the time at least. A chair was set on the balcony for him to enjoy. Enjoy his ass. Brian was always there when he was on the deck. He talked quietly almost to himself, trying to be soothing. Marcus ignored him at all times. There were maids who came in and out all day cleaning the room, and changing the bedding. He knew that it would be pointless to try and talk to any of them.

So he ate and sat on his deck ignoring everyone. Once he was on the deck that first time, he understood why he was no longer tied up. They were in the mountains. Not just surrounded by the mountains but literally on top of one. From his vantage point, there was nothing for miles and miles. This was not

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where he had started out being held, of that he was sure. The air was thinner here; he could feel it when he breathed.

There was nowhere for him to go. He had no idea where he actually was and heading out on foot was not a smart idea. There had to be roads and cars here. He would just wait it out and find his way home.

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It was a week before Brian showed up in his room with a heavy sweater. This was obviously the sign that he was going for a walk as he normally just curled up with the thick blanket that they had provided. It was spring, and that shocked him, as the last thing he did in his real life was go to his boyfriend's house for Valentine's Day dinner. It had been the first time that he had had a boyfriend on that special day and he had been so excited. He had brought Brian chocolates and some flowers while Brian had gifted him with an infinity bracelet with a diamond at the center. Then he had a glass of wine after dinner and woke up in that basement.

Shaking the thoughts away, he pulled the sweater on. It fitted him perfectly, like all the clothes that he had been brought. The super-soft jeans and Henley that he was currently wearing fit him like a glove. Everything fit him and was way nicer than anything he could afford. Although he would give anything right now to be wearing his Wal-Mart jeans in his cheap apartment. Not that he was hopeful that he still had an apartment waiting for him. He had been living in a month-to-month rental for the past year. After his mother had passed away, he had been forced to sell the house to cover her medical bills. The apartment was nothing special, one bedroom and run down, but it was his. He was sure that as soon as he hadn't shown up with rent, all of his stuff had been sold off, and someone else was living there now.

Brian opened the door and gestured with his arm for Marcus to go first. Slowly inching out of the room, he followed the long hallway down. There was nobody else up there with them. Stopping when he got to the top of the stairs, he had to take a deep breath. He was in a mansion, or castle or something, because he had never seen anything like this before in his life. The grand staircase ended with the biggest entryway, with huge chandeliers and gleaming tiles. It was like a fancy hotel, or a movie set or something. Brian ushered him down the stairs and to the huge front doors. There were two men standing there in suits who didn't even bother to look at him, just stared straight ahead. Brian opened up the door and there was another set of guards on the outside, and still

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more walking past with big guard dogs. Marcus felt a shiver run through him, and it wasn't from the cold. His hopes of getting out of here were slowly sliding away as he caught sight of a massive iron gate that covered the front of the driveway. There was no way that he was going to be able to make it out of here on his own. He knew that much. He looked at Brian, and the man smiled widely at him.

When they had first met, it was that smile that had done him in. He knew that he wasn't anything too special to look at. He was able to get laid when he wanted to, but he was never the guy who was flocked to in the bars. He had the twink-look going, with longer brown hair and his small frame. His eyes were brown, just plain brown, kind of like the rest of him, kinda plain. The day that Brian had looked at him and given him that smile, he had melted. Brian was his all-American wet dream come to life. Blond hair, blue eyes, and muscles that went on for days. The fact that he was looking at him was shocking. There were better looking guys, but Brian only had eyes for him, and Marcus always thought he was crazy for picking him when he could do so much better.

He was also a perfect gentleman. Even though they had met at a club, he had taken him out to dinners and dancing. Always attentive, always putting Marcus first. It was so good. He would pick him up in his fancy sports car, take him out, and treat him like gold. They would have a picnic in the park wrapped up in blankets and sit there until they couldn't take the cold anymore. They spent hours and hours talking. It seemed like they could talk about anything at all.

The only strange thing was that Brian hadn't wanted to rush the sex. They had made out lots of times and it was good, so good, but Brian said he wanted to wait and make it special. Yeah, good one, wanted to save his ass for that monster. He was right. Brian may be good looking but was bat-shit crazy.

They walked around the grounds in silence for a while. It was beautiful there with the gardens slowly starting to bloom and the mountains in the background covered in snow. If one was able to overlook the fact that he was a prisoner.

Marcus tired quickly. This was the most that he had moved in months and his body was not up to the strain. Brian seemed to realize this and stopped at a bench in the middle of the garden by a massive, ugly-ass fountain. Taking a closer look, Marcus was able to see it was a statue of the monster that had raped him. In its grasp was a man who appeared to be in the throes of pleasure/pain?

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Turning quickly away, before he started beating on the damn thing, he took a seat on the bench with a good distance between himself and Brian.

“Love, it’s time for us to talk. I need you to understand why you were chosen.”

“Don’t call me that. What the fuck you talking about? Chosen? I wasn’t chosen. I was beaten, locked in a cell, raped. I am locked away in a castle in the mountains like some stupid princess movie. How dare you even say that?”

“Marcus, just relax and let me explain some things. This house belongs to a group that I am a member of, the Archers of Kynthos. Everyone here is a member. Our fathers were members, and their fathers, and so on. The Archers have been around for hundreds of years.” He paused as if that was supposed to mean anything or impress in some way. When all he received was the cold stare that he had become accustomed to, he took a breath to continue.

“Kynthos is an Island in Greece where Zeus watched the birth of his son Apollo. We have been studying the history and the reasoning of why that place had been used. We were able to determine it wasn’t the island itself, but certain artifacts we have been able to acquire that were needed. The world has changed so much from when our ancestors were in charge, that most are unable to recognize it. The goal of the Archers is to unite the world under one rule. End the war, hunger, and hate that is plaguing the world. That’s where you come in.”

Lost, totally lost. This made no sense at all to Marcus as he sat there listening. These guys were trying to be card-carrying members of some Illuminati group. He watched as Brian took a breath and a big smile broke out on his face.

“We finally figured out how we can accomplish this, but we have been looking for years for someone like you. You have such strength in you. It is what initially attracted me to you. I saw you and thought, ‘Here is the man for me’. The fact that you are the Chosen One... You have no idea how blessed I was the day I found out you were the Chosen One. Now I know that we are going to be able to spend the rest of our lives together. You have no idea how happy that makes me. I love you. I do, Marcus. You have become my whole reason for being.”

“Did you love me while I was being raped? Were you one of the ones who got to hold me down while he kept...?” Marcus had to take a breath when Brian looked away.

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Oh god. The man he thought he had been in love with had been one of the ones holding him down while he was being raped.

“What were you thinking of while you held me down? Were you thinking, ‘Here is the man I love being ripped apart’? That not even in his worst nightmare did he imagine what he was going through? What were you thinking? Tell me!”

Marcus jumped at him, trying to get a punch in if he could. The best that he managed was a bitch slap on the face. Brian didn't lose his temper, nor did he lose his smile or that look in his eyes. Like Marcus was being indulged. He grabbed both his arms and pulled him around till he ended up sitting on his lap. Marcus tried to fight him off, but was unable to get any movement. Brian let go of his wrists and slowly rubbed up and down his arms as if to calm him.

“That is not a topic for today. There are things that you need to hear today, so please calm down and relax. Nobody here will hurt you, especially me.”

Realizing there was really nothing he could do, he let himself go limp and sit there. How messed in the head was he that he was enjoying the touch. That it made him feel warm on the inside for the first time in what seemed like forever. It was always that way when he was Brian. Why couldn't his brain tell the rest of him that this was a sick asshole and he was stuck on the man's lap?

“We needed someone very special to bring this about. Someone who would bring in the era of change that we have been working so hard toward. We were close once before, but never like this. When I met you, I knew you were it. The blood tests proved it.”

Oh god, the blood tests. Brian had been adamant that when they did finally have sex he wanted nothing between them. Thinking it was romantic at the time, Marcus had gone down to the doctor Brian had recommended. Bile filled his mouth.

“You were it. You had the genetic marker that we had been looking for. We just want the world to be one that we control to make it a better place for everyone. Not what it's turned into. You will be the father of this new day. The doctor came and told me the good news this morning. It worked. We hoped and prayed that it would, but there is always room for error. But I knew, if anyone could do it, it would be you.”

“The father of the new day? I'm gay, asshole. I don't sleep with chicks.”

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“You don’t understand me, honey. You are the chosen vessel for our king. Everything that we have done was to make sure that you were strong enough, brave enough to do this. You were what we were waiting for.” Taking a deep breath, he said, “We found out this morning that it worked. You are carrying our king.”

Marcus felt the world tilt sideways and go black.

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He awoke back in his room. It was the same room that he had been in, the same furniture, the same sunlight streaming across the floor. Yet it was all wrong somehow. Closing his eyes, he tried to go back to his dream, but no matter how hard he tried, he was stuck where he was. Slowly opening his eyes, he spotted Brian and another man standing by the window. They seemed to be deep in conversation and didn’t seem to notice that he was awake. He wanted to keep it that way.

He didn’t want to wake and have them spouting off all of these crazy things that they had going on in their heads. He didn’t believe what they said, couldn’t believe what they were saying. It was too crazy for words. Although up to this point nothing that they had done seemed sane by any means. Shifting slightly, he felt a slight pain in his hip, and was unable to stop the small sound that escaped him.

Both men turned and looked at him, both smiling. Wishing he was strong enough to get out of the bed and wipe the smiles off their faces but feeling even weaker than ever, Marcus couldn’t do much more than try to slide to the other side of the bed away from them.

“Hey, none of that. Just relax, honey; nobody here is going to hurt you,” Brian said as he slowly made his way to the bed.

Marcus laughed. They didn’t want to hurt him. What the hell had the last couple months of his life been?

“Your hip will be a little sore. The doctor was worried about your B12 levels, so he just gave you a little shot. How are you feeling otherwise?”

He couldn’t stop laughing. These people had treated him worse than a rabid animal up till this point and now they were worried about his B12 levels. These people were all monsters, and so screwed in the head that there was nothing else to do, but laugh in their faces.

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“What is wrong with him?” The other man in the room had come forward and was now staring down at him as well. It was hard to make out what had been said with the man’s heavy accent. Something European, he was sure but had no idea where from.

The newcomer was an older gentleman, somewhere in his fifties at least. He looked like money, lots and lots of money. From the diamond ring and watch to the very expensive-looking suit that he was wearing. He had almost an indulgent look in his eye, like Marcus was some child that he was spoiling.

“I am sure that he has had enough shocks to his system for a while,” Brian answered, turning back to Marcus. “You’re okay. I know that was a big shock to hear today, but we don’t have a lot of time to let you adjust. If there were any other way that we could have done this, we would have. We just had to be sure of you.”

Brian nodded his head toward the other man. “Let me introduce you to the Viceroy of Kynthos for our European division, Laurent Gochnauer. He wanted to get a chance to meet you.”

Marcus turned away from the two men and tuned them out. He let his mind wander to what he should be doing right now. It was now late afternoon, so he would have already finished his shift at the coffee shop where he worked. It would be time to grab a quick bite at home, change and get ready for his second job as a bartender at a club that was just a couple blocks from his house. Well, that depended on the day. Not knowing the day, he was going with that plan. It was the weekend, and he was looking forward to the tips that he would be making.

He was not sure how long he was mentally going through his day before Brian sat down in his line of sight. He looked tired and stressed out. Marcus almost felt bad for the guy, almost.

“Marcus, I know that this has been a lot. If there had been any other way of doing this, I would have found it. We had to prove to them that you were the Chosen One. Now they don’t believe you are strong enough to survive this, but I know that you can.”

Brian took a deep breath and scrubbed his hands across his face.

“Right now there are two options, and I need you to look at me so I know that you understand me. Are you listening to me?”



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When there was no reply, Brian reached down and grabbed his shoulder, giving it a hard shake. Marcus glared at him, but didn't reply.

“Answer me. Do I have your full attention?”

The pressure on his shoulder didn't lighten up, so Marcus gave in and gave him a slight nod.

“Good, this is important. Probably the most important decision you will ever make. Option one. You will marry me before the child is born. We will have a ceremony in front of my people. After our son is born, you will help raise him in this house. You will never want for anything in your life. Not for you, and not for our son. I will make you happy here, and you *will* be. Option two: you will get on a plane tomorrow with Viceroy Gochnauer. They will keep you in one of their holdings until the child is born. After that, they have no use for you at all. The child will be raised by our members who have been hand selected for this task.”

“No matter what you say, I don't believe you. I am not pregnant, Brian. I am a guy; guys don't get pregnant. I don't understand why you keep saying that.”

Brian's face turned cold and hard so fast it was scary. All of a sudden, it was like there was a person he didn't know standing there.

“So you are choosing option two then. I will let them know that you will be leaving in the morning. I would wish you the best, but that seems like a moot point now. Good-bye.”

It felt like his life flashed before his eyes. No matter what Marcus believed his reality to be, it was not what others believed. The choice seemed simple when he broke it down. Stay and live, leave and die. What really worried him was what would happen when they all found out that he wasn't pregnant.

Brian was heading to the door already when Marcus yelled at him, “Brian, option one! I pick option one.”

The man was angry, and when he turned to look at him, Marcus was scared of him for the first time. It was not the fear of what had been done, or what others had done. It was of what this man could do to him. Never once had he ever seen him this dark, this angry.

“Be very sure about this. There is no going back. You will be my husband. You will stand beside me and what this group stands for. You will help us raise

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our son to be the great king that he is destined to be. If you cause problems, you will be dealt with.”

He had to look away. He could not even look into the face of the man in front of him. This was not the man who he fell in love with, or at least thought that he had.

There was no choice for him though. Here at least he had a shot of making it out of this situation. The longer that he stayed alive, the more chance he had of making it free of this place.

“I agree, just please don’t send me away. Please.” Marcus had begged in the beginning and he had sworn to himself that he would never, ever do it again. Life or death choices were not where he ever thought he would be trapped.

“Everyone must know that you accept this marriage. You will be sharing my life and my bed.”

“What? After what happened you want—” Brian held up a hand to silence him.

“You will be my husband in every way; that is nonnegotiable. You loved me before. I know that it’s still in there, and one day soon you will love me again.”

He changed. Just like that, the dark, angry man was gone, and the carefree man that Marcus had first met was back. It was scary how fast he changed.

He took a deep breath, trying to think of how to word this without setting him off. Working the words slowly through his head, he had to take another deep breath, but was unable to hold back the shudder that went through his body.

“Brian. I need you to help me. Explain to me how you think that it is possible that I am pregnant.”

“Do you remember being sick? Right after you were brought to the halfway house?” Marcus nodded.

“We had a biochemist make up a serum that would help guarantee that you would be able to conceive our king. You were what we needed, but we had to add something a little extra to make sure it worked. Cottus himself should have been able to make you conceive during the ritual, but we needed the extra guarantee that nothing could go wrong. You don’t know how long we have worked for this. There was nothing at all left to chance.”

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Marcus looked in his eyes and felt the man's words roll over him. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he realized that, in this hell he found himself in, he could really be pregnant. Feeling his stomach rebel at the thought forced him to run to the bathroom to lose what little breakfast he still had inside of him.

Brian stood there rubbing his back and as soon as he was done being sick handed him a cool cloth to put on his face. Marcus sat back on the floor of the bathroom facing the toilet with his knees drawn up in front of him. Taking deep breaths to calm himself down, he tried to wrap his mind around what was happening.

"The doctor wasn't sure how soon morning sickness would take to kick in. We are still unsure of what your gestation period will be, so we are playing it by ear here. Every day the doctor will be by to check up on you. My job is to make sure that you are taking care of yourself and our baby."

Looking at him smiling so smugly made Marcus lean forward and throw up again.

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Life became a whirlwind after that. There was the wedding to plan, the doctor visits, and all the well-wishers already stopping by, not just to wish them well for the marriage but to see how he was progressing. Brian stayed by his side as much as possible. There were meetings to attend at what seemed like all hours of the day and night. Marcus was aware of the night ones because he had been moved from what he considered his room to Brian's. He spent every night lying beside the man who had destroyed his life.

That thought needed constant reinforcement as well. The man was attentive, loving and controlling. There was not anything that happened in Marcus's day that Brian didn't plan out for him. His clothes were laid out for him every morning, all his meals planned in advance. Brian was there every morning as he threw up for what felt like hours, wiping his brow when he was done. He stayed during every doctor appointment and asked more questions than Marcus did.

Marcus was trying. He really was. It was just so damn hard to be here. Each person he met he had to wonder what part did this person take in his torture. Were they standing there while he was raped and begging to be released? Shaking their hands made his skin crawl and his stomach roll. The first one he had met did make his stomach roll. It was the big man who had beaten him for

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god knows how long. Turns out his name was Carl. That was one that had never crossed his mind when he was naming the man. It was always something like asshole, or fucktard. It was never something as plain as Carl. Turned out the man was the head of security, and the second in command under Brian. Not only was the man in the nightmares he had every night, but he was also the one who watched him all day.

After meeting him, he had been dragged into Brian's office and reminded again of his two options. Option two was still available if he had any problems. This thought passed through his mind every time he thought of running screaming, and that was most of the time. The pregnancy was progressing much faster than they had guessed. A week after it had been confirmed, and he was already, as far as the doctor guessed, finished with his first trimester. The good news was that the constant sickness should fade. The bad news was his wedding day was now fast approaching.

Nobody was kind enough to give him a timeline on this. Just smiled at him like he was some child every time he brought it up. Brian kept telling him to not stress about it. He was taking care of everything. It was to just be a small ceremony, with just the heads of the Archers there. Another thought that made him sick. Brian was the Viceroy for the Archers for North America. He was the head and only answered to The One above him. They would all show up to pay their respects for his marriage, especially since he was to be blessed with being married to the Chosen One.

Marcus was lying down for one of his doctor-ordered naps. He had to take one every day, not that he was complaining. He was so tired all the time he found himself falling asleep while sitting with Brian in some meet and greet that he seemed tied to all day. He would sleep for a little bit at a time before the nightmares would wake him up. Even as tired as he was, he was unable to sleep more than forty-five minutes at a stretch before waking up screaming. Brian was always there and would always hold him after. He hated the fact that it felt good to be held. Not that he was taking away the nightmares, only acting as a constant reminder of what he was now in. Yet it was still nice not to wake up alone and scared.

Today the sleep just wouldn't come. No matter how long he lay there, he was unable to actually fall asleep. His mind kept running in directions that he couldn't stop it from going. Back to the room, back to the hell night. Toward his upcoming wedding night. To giving birth to this thing that was inside him.

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Yes, that something inside him was making its presence known as a small bump that had appeared in the last day. He had heard the heartbeat, and that had pushed him further into believing. This little bump was further proof of his hell. The pull to rub his hands over it was strong. Everything in him wanted to stroke his hands over it and feel something. Anything. Love or hate. There had to be some feeling for this thing inside him. But where he was at was saving all his strength to survive, and he couldn't add another burden to what he already had.

The door made a soft noise as it was slowly opened, and he could hear someone come in before softly closing it behind him. Brian. Had to be. The maids and other staff wouldn't bother to come in while he was resting. There was no way they would even dare; Brian's wrath was legendary apparently. He felt the bed dip behind him as the other man climbed in behind him and brought him close.

"I know you're not sleeping. What's wrong? You seemed pretty out of it earlier." Brian was breathing on his ear and the feeling was going straight to his cock. Stupid body didn't know what was good for it.

"Brian, I don't know if I can do this. All these people here did this to me, and I am supposed to just forget about it? Sit across the table from them and make small talk? You don't know what you are asking of me."

Brian took a deep breath, and started running his hands through Marcus's hair. It was something that he used to love having done. Brian was well aware of this fact. His other arm came around him and started rubbing over his bump. The feeling sent chills up and down his body and not really in a bad way.

The hot and cold his body was running was driving him nuts as well. How could he feel anything for this monster?

"You are going to do it because you have no choice. I wish that there could have been another way. I wish I could have worked our way towards it, but we had a deadline. The ceremony had to be performed on a blood-red moon to work. I do know that no matter what timeline we had, you still would have felt betrayed by me. You have to understand. I need you to understand. There can be no doubt in the people around us that you love me, they already know that I love you. If there is any doubt in their minds, they will take you away. I know you feel like I am a cold-hearted bastard, but I am doing this for us. They will kill you and not feel bad about it at all. That is why I am pushing you so hard. I need you to understand this."

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“Why? Why can't I go back to my life? I swear I will never say anything to anybody ever. I swear.” Marcus cursed the tears that ran down his face. He hated feeling like this. He had sworn he was never going to cry again, but he couldn't seem to get any of his emotions under control.

“It is too much of a liability. I am truly sorry, but isn't this better? Isn't this house better than the little apartment you used to live in? Here you have everything you could ever want.”

“Except my freedom. Can I go to a movie? Can I go shopping? Tell me how this is so much better when I can't even leave the house.”

“You can leave the house. I told you, you are free to roam the grounds whenever you feel like it.”

“The grounds?! Are you kidding me? You totally ignored what I said. I said freedom, not be let outside like some dog!” he screamed at him.

Brian flinched and his face turned dark and twisted with anger. The hand in his hair tightened and pulled hard. Marcus let out a small sound at the pain, and immediately was let go. The hand slowly working its way back to soothing. The face had changed back to the loving Brian again. Marcus had thought his moods were bad right now, but they were nothing compared to Brian's.

“You are not a dog. Nor are you a prisoner. You are my beloved. In time, when we know that it is safe, we will take you into the city. We are not the only ones who tried to perform the ceremony, but we are the only ones who succeeded. There are others out there who would do anything to get you and the baby. You are not willing to look at the big picture in this. This is not about you and me. It's about what's best for the Archers.”

Marcus laid there trying to absorb everything. Not sure what was a pile of BS and what wasn't. Now he wasn't safe because there was another group after him? That seemed like a pile of crap as far as he was concerned. Something else in his life for him to be afraid of. Then again it could be the truth, what did he really even know anymore?

“Have you thought about a name yet? I know that I would like him named after my father, Anthony, but the one thing that I have fought for was being able to name him. It should be something strong though. It will be our king's name one day after all.”

“I don't understand. How can he be our king? Of like North America?”

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“No, love. He will rule the world. We will rule all, under him. I know that you don't understand that yet, but one day you will see just how powerful he will be.”

“Is he some kind of monster? Is he going to look like that thing?”

“No, he will not be a monster at all. How could you even think that your child would be a monster? He will have power over the people. He will be a great leader, kind and generous to those who deserve it, except when he needs not to be. You have the power to shape him into a good person, but never forget that he will one day lead.”

Marcus closed his eyes and tried to let this all soak in. “Who will decide who the good and bad people are? You?”

“Yes me in a way, but not just me. The Archers have been planning this for years. Our ancestors were planning for this. There have been other tries, but they have never succeeded fully. We have learned from past mistakes and are more ready for the challenges that are ahead. We are ready for anything at this point, but you don't need to think about that. For now, you need to be healthy and ready to be a father to this child we are having. You need to rest and get ready to be the most handsome groom in the world. These things you are worried about are not to be worried about now. We have our lifetime ahead to worry. For now, let us be. Can you do that for me?”

Marcus wasn't sure what to answer. It seemed really simple, live there and somehow survive, or leave and face certain death. He needed to worry about today, getting through this day, this moment before he could worry about the rest.

“I will try. That's the best answer that I can give you right now.”

“I will accept that. The other thing is, you need to forget about what happened before you woke up here. It's in the past now and it needs to stay there. I know that you feel that we hurt you. I know that you feel violated. I would in your shoes. You will understand about the greater good one day, and it will all make sense. But for now, I need your promise. You need to relax around the house and the people in it. What's done is done, and there is nothing that can change that.” Brian tugged him a little closer and his voice had gone a little deeper at this.

“I will try.”

“NO, not try. You will do it.”

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“Yes, Brian. I will do it.”

One way or another he was getting out of here one day, and he was going to kill everyone here if he had to.

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Their wedding was beautiful. It was full of people that Marcus didn't care to know, but he smiled and nodded at all the right times. He gracefully accepted the congratulations on both the wedding and the baby. He drank his sparkling cider, ate his seven course meal, and smiled through the whole thing.

He remarked on the assortment of flowers, all white, that covered the ballroom in the house. The staircase he had walked down to meet his groom was draped in them. He joked that the number of candles in the house was enough to burn down the mountain. He smiled when people patted and rubbed his stomach and asked how he was feeling. He was able to joke about swollen cancles and his shrinking bladder. He hung onto Brian like a lifeline the whole day, and perfected the art of appearing as the perfect blushing husband.

He tried to count the number of guards that were there that day, but there were too many to count. He had learned how to pick out the ones who were security and the ones who were just uptight. The place was crawling with both. No one seemed to be bothered when they were talking with him and he would look around the room for his “groom”, meanwhile counting the number of windows in each room and hallway. He went to the kitchen to thank the chef for the meal, which was the best he had ever had, and finally found what he hoped was the door to the garage. Running to the bathroom to pee, he *accidentally* went into the security room.

Yet nobody noticed anything but a happy, pregnant groom. Brian spent the day beaming at him. The love that shone in his eyes as he said his vows earlier in the day hurt like a knife. The man believed himself to be in love with him. Having to pull forth the emotion to say his made him sick.

He had always dreamed of getting married, and the day he was having was like a dream come true. Except for the people involved, and the man he married. After he said his vows, he looked up to heaven and sent his mother an apology for lying to a man of the cloth, but he was sure that his mother would forgive him this time.

His groom had even thought of his mother and had somehow gotten a picture of her and had it set up beside the altar. When Marcus had asked why,



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Brian had said he knew how much it meant to him to have his mother there when he got married.

So Marcus cried through his vows as well.

In the two weeks since they had their little chat, Marcus had been trying to be the man that Brian wanted him to be. He had been attentive and caring and there were times when the lines were blurring as to what was a lie and what was the truth. All he had ever wanted after his mom died was someone to love him and care for him. This man was all that in his dream body. It was hard to do the act and not feel something for him.

Yet tonight would be the real test. Even though they had been sleeping together for almost a month, they had yet to actually have sex. Brian said he was giving him time and he still wanted their first time to be special, when they were actually married. Marcus kept hoping that his pregnancy would keep going at the speed it started and the doctor wouldn't let them have sex until the baby came. He had no plans on sticking around long after this thing was out of him.

Life, it seemed, always had other plans. His pregnancy had slowed down; where before their timeline was at a month, the doctors were now thinking two. His stomach was stretching out quite a bit, but the doctors kept assuring him that there was a lot more growing to go. He had sat there smiling when Brian had asked about sex, and had to fight to keep that smile on his face when the doctor assured him there was no danger with them having sex.

So here he was waving goodbye to the guests as they made their way up to their room, his hand firmly in the grasp of his new husband. At the top of the stairs, Brian grabbed him and hugged him close, then leaned in for a kiss. Marcus wrapped his arms around the man and pulled him even tighter as the kiss got deeper. The cheering from below got loud fast. The whistling and cheers had them both smiling and breaking away from the kiss.

As they made their way into their room, Marcus reminded himself to let go. Who he was before, and what he had gone through, was put into a tightly sealed box in his mind. Who he was tonight was the only thing that he could think about. This Marcus had his husband leading him into their room that had been lit up with a hundred candles. There didn't seem to be a flat surface that didn't have white candles on it glowing. The bedspread was a Tiffany Blue with white rose petals covering it. It was the perfect setting for someone's wedding night.

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Brian stopped in the middle of the room and pulled him in close. Placing his hands on the sides of Marcus's face, he slowly lowered his head for a kiss. It was gentle and sweet and almost brought Marcus to his knees. Brian finally broke the kiss and took a slow step back. The heat in his eyes was enough to melt Marcus into the floor. The jacket that Marcus was wearing was slipped off his shoulders and fell to the floor. Next, Brian slowly unbuttoned his loose tuxedo shirt, letting his fingers trail over the skin that was found underneath.

Once all the buttons were undone, Brian slowly brought his hands back up Marcus's chest to his shoulders and let the shirt fall on top of the jacket. As soon as his shoulders were clear of the material, Brian bent down and trailed hot kisses along the skin that had been exposed. He didn't move his hands from where they had come to rest on Marcus's waist, just splayed his fingers over the heated skin.

Brian worked his kisses up to Marcus's neck and nibbled on the skin there, up one side and down the other. His hands had worked their way to Marcus's back, and he let his fingertips ghost across the skin there.

Marcus felt like he was one big goose bump. His skin felt like it was on fire and cold at the same time. The sensations were so gentle and so arousing he didn't even know what to do, except feel. Brian was playing his body perfectly, and he hadn't even taken his pants off.

Brian lifted his head, and Marcus opened his eyes to look at him, not even aware that he had closed them. Brian gave him a small smile before leaning in and capturing his lips again. The kiss was hot and deep, and Marcus could feel himself whimper into it.

The hands at his back slowly worked their way from his neck down to the top of his tuxedo pants. He tried not to stiffen at the contact, but he was unable to stop it from happening.

"Shhh, I have you, love. Just let me love you." Brian went back to putting small kisses along his neck and slowly nibbling on his ear while his hands were undoing his pants.

Marcus let his head drop back as he enjoyed the sensations. No other man in his life had ever taken care of him like this. He was more of a wham-bam-see-you-later kind of guy. This, this was something else entirely, and it was wrecking what he had going for him up to this point. It was hard to distance yourself from someone who was loving on you so hard, and the main attraction hadn't even started yet.

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He felt his pants drop to the floor. He was now standing in a pile of wedding wear, naked in front of this fully-clothed, beautiful man. It made him feel self-conscious of the belly that was sticking out in front of him. He lowered his hands to hide it while still trying to avoid all contact. He had managed so far to ignore it, but standing there naked, it was really hard to. Thankfully, Brian grabbed his hands and pulled them away.

“I think that you are the most beautiful man I have ever seen. Don’t hide away from me. That is our child growing inside of you, and it only makes you sexier to me.”

Marcus had to push the thoughts back into the box and lock them up tight or he would have reminded the man that he was not the father of this child. Those thoughts had nothing to do with where they were now. If they managed to break through, then he would break. He couldn’t let that happen yet. So he stepped away from the man, away from his pants and the sandals he wore for the wedding to accommodate his swollen feet. He could see the instant concern that crossed Brian’s face. It quickly turned to surprise as Marcus made his way to the bed to lie down. Once he was comfortable enough, he held out his hand.

Watching Brian almost rip off his clothes was one of the funniest, and sexiest, things he had ever seen. The man got his tie caught in his shirt, and buttons went flying. He didn’t have the luxury of wearing flip flops for swollen feet and his pants got caught around his ankles. Marcus couldn’t hold back. Here was this man who had totally seduced him while getting him undressed making a mess of getting himself undone. He let out a loud laugh that he couldn’t stop.

Brian had been bent over trying to get his shoes and socks off when he heard the sound that he thought he would never hear again. That laugh was what drew him the first night they met. Then the fire that burned inside of him, and his sweet looks. The laugh had been gone and the fire had all but disappeared with only slight hints of it coming through. But that laugh. That was something that he wanted to be able to hear every day of his life.

Listening to Marcus laugh and looking down at himself, he broke down laughing as well.

“Not so smooth, am I?”

“Right now? That would be a no.”

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“I have waited for this moment for so long, and this is not quite how I pictured it going.” Brian had finally worked his way free and now stood straight in front of him.

Marcus had to take a breath, laughter all but forgotten. The man was perfection. He was sculpted in all the right places and his cock was standing very tall at attention. There was only a slight dusting of hair on his chest and around his balls, otherwise he was smooth. He stalked his way to the bed, and Marcus felt like he was prey of some kind. He tried to move up the bed more, but a hand grabbed his ankle. He stilled and stared into those blue eyes, then relaxed back down.

Brian took his time. He seemed to touch every part of Marcus, leaving nothing untouched. His legs were caressed and every inch kissed. Those hands stroked over every inch of skin they could find and slowly caressed. It was gentle and so loving. Marcus was straining for him to touch the one part of that was begging for it, but Brian seemed determined to leave his cock alone. His nipples were kissed and slow sensual bites placed on them. They were hard peaks by the time that Brian left them alone and worked his way up to kiss him.

There were slow kisses at first, light bites of the lips, that slowly turned demanding and sought all dominance over him. Marcus had wrapped his arms around him, trying to hold on to something and trying to lift his hips up so his dick could get contact with anything. His stomach was holding him back though. When he pushed up, his stomach would make contact with Brian's and he couldn't get the friction he so desperately wanted.

“I'm getting there, love. Just relax and let me love you.”

Brian started working his way down again. Loving on both nipples again and leaving Marcus panting. When he got to the round stomach, Brian caressed it while he stared down smiling at it. He placed a gentle kiss right above the belly button and started working his way down again. When he got to what Marcus thought would be the good parts, he again just gently ran his hands up and down his thighs while letting his hot breath drift over his dick. It was too much and not enough at the same time.

Marcus tried to relax, but he couldn't help lifting his hips off the bed again. Strong hands pushed them back and he could feel a small laugh escape the man. He felt a wet hot tongue licking his balls before one was sucked into Brian's mouth. Marcus couldn't stop the gasp that escaped this time, and he couldn't

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seem to control his breathing. His ball was sucked and left to sit on the man's tongue before the tongue moved and licked its way up and down and around. When he had decided that one was good, he let it go with a pop and gently sucked the other one in for the same treatment.

The hands that had been working his thighs moved up, and one was placed on his pelvis to hold him down while the other worked its way to his taint to work that. When Brian was done licking his balls, he looked up at Marcus and waited for eye contact before he grabbed his cock and licked a path up it. He did that a couple more times before he took the tip into his mouth.

It was hot and wet and the eye contact and hand were driving him nuts. He felt like he was going to come at any minute and was trying to hold back. When the mouth went all the way down on him, and he could feel the tip of his cock at the back of Brian's throat, he started panting. The hand that was working his taint made its way down further and slowly circled his hole. It was crazy and intense, then the other hand came up and pinched a nipple and he was done.

Letting out a cry, he came hard. It had been months since he had come, and it felt like he was going to last forever. The mouth didn't back down and swallowed every shot that he had. When he was done, he was licked clean from top to bottom.

Brian crawled up him and kissed him hard. He normally didn't like the taste of his own semen, but this seemed even hotter for some reason. The man kept kissing him and kissing him. They kept changing directions, and they went from hard to soft, right back to hard again before Marcus had to rip his head away to get air into his lungs.

Those hands came up and grabbed his shoulders and turned him over. Brian reached up, grabbed a couple of pillows, and got him situated with his heavier front on all fours. Marcus felt a moment of panic before the kisses started up again. They started at the nape of his neck and worked themselves all the way down to his ass crack. They stopped and skipped that part before working their way down his legs. His swollen feet were gently massaged and the arches kissed before they started back up again.

When the man finally made it back to his ass, Marcus felt like a melted pile of Jello. He knew he needed to keep the weight off his stomach and was trying to protect it, but his legs were shaking with the effort to keep upright. Big hands were wrapped around the top of his thighs to bring him forward and open him

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up even more. The hot tongue on his hole drove him wild. Marcus had no idea how long the other man worked his hole, but he was back to being a shaking mess begging to come by the time Brian had worked his tongue inside his hole.

Kisses were placed on his ass cheeks as Brian slowly pulled away. He could hear him rustling around for something and then heard the pop top of a bottle being opened. He could feel himself tensing up when that mouth was back on his hole kissing it, working the tip of his tongue inside. The lube had all been forgotten by the time he felt the mouth moving away and being replaced by a finger that made its way inside.

Marcus had been sure that he would be freaking out by this point. Not sure if the box in his mind was holding or if he was just so turned on that his brain and body weren't working together, but there was no way that he could stop his body from rocking back and forth on that finger. When the second was added, it took a deep breath for him to relax around it, but when those fingers moved around and found his spot inside he went wild. He was fucking himself on the man's fingers and couldn't stop. Every back thrust dragged the tips of Brian's fingers across his prostate and he needed it so badly. Even though he had just come, he was ready to let go again.

The third finger was a little more than he was ready for. As wild as it was, the slow burn was enough to calm him down for a second, but not much more than that. Not that Brian gave him that much time to adjust. Once he worked the three fingers in and out a couple of times, he was lifted and the pillows pulled out from under him. He was situated on his back with his legs being lifted up onto Brian's shoulders. Brian was working lube on his dick as he stared into Marcus's eyes. He got himself ready and then pushed forward once he was lined up. When the pressure gave way and the tip popped in, Brian closed his eyes and let out a groan. It took him a couple seconds before he was able to open his eyes and stare back at him.

Staring into each other's eyes as the other man sank himself into him was too much for Marcus. He turned away from the feelings of his body and the love that the other man was staring into him. His face was grabbed and pulled back.

“Look at me. Watch me. Don't you dare hide from this moment.”

It was too much. The man was very well endowed, and it seemed to take a lifetime before he was fully seated inside. Once he was ready, he pulled himself

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out a bit and then sank back inside. Marcus couldn't stop his hands from reaching out and grabbing the arms holding his legs back. Brian worked himself in and out for a while driving both of them nuts. He released the legs on his shoulders, leaned forward, and fused their mouths together as he started pounding harder and harder.

Marcus couldn't do anything but hold on for the ride and beg him to go harder when he was able to get his mouth free of the other man. He was close to coming again, and he wasn't able to stop himself from begging for it.

Brian didn't make him wait as he lifted himself back up, grabbed his legs again, and started plowing into him harder and harder. Marcus was going wild and grabbed his own dick to finish himself off when his hand was slapped away.

"Mine!" He was grabbed and jerked off in a hard grasp. It didn't take long before he was coming again all over Brian's hand and their chests.

As soon as he started to come Brian slammed into him two more times before grinding his hips into him and letting go of his own deep groans.

Not once did they lose eye contact. Marcus felt the tears coming again, and was ready to ruin the moment by screaming at the man about his hormones, when the other man leaned forward and kissed the tears away. In between each kiss, there was a softly whispered, "I love you."

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In typical newlywed fashion, they went at it like bunnies for two days. They stopped for meals and for the doctor's checkups, but other than that, they spent the rest of the time naked and talking. Brian bathed him, massaged him, and cared for him in a way that had him breaking down more than he wanted to admit.

He was so out of touch with himself. He couldn't control when he was sad, angry, happy, or horny. It was like he had no control over his mind or body when it came to this man. He brought it up to the doctor during his second visit when the doctor weighed him and he came in twenty-five pounds more than he had been before this all started, and he started crying again.

The doctor asked Brian to leave the room, but the other man didn't want to leave. He finally did when the doctor told him that nothing was going to happen or be said as long as he was in the room. Marcus was a little shocked at this as

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nobody in the house ever did anything without Brian's permission or seemed to dare speak against him. That was saved for the other Viceroys. When they came for meetings, you could hear them arguing in the vicinity of the man's office.

When Brian had finally cleared the room, the doctor turned back to him and gave him a gentle smile.

"Marcus, you can't keep going on like this. You are at some point going to have to give into whatever is in your head and just let it go. It's not healthy at all to hold in everything that you are. I'm not saying that I could even imagine what you have gone through, but I know that you have managed to lock it away somehow."

When Marcus gave him a sharp look, he patted his knees.

"I have been a doctor for a long time son, and I haven't always worked in this place. I used to work in an ER. I would see people come in all the time after being beaten and abused. Some of them would lock it away like it never happened and go on with their lives. But let me tell you something about those people. At some point, they all cracked. Sometimes slowly and sometimes in horrible ways. I am not saying that I agree or disagree with what happened. I am an Archer and I have my beliefs, but I am also a medical doctor who has seen people crash hard from something like this and never get back up. You have something to get back up for, son. You have that man there who loves you like crazy and you have a child that you are going to be bringing into the world in a very short time. I understand your anger, and I understand your resentment, but all of this is making you a little crazy. Yes, your hormones are a little off right now, but not as bad as your highs and lows are right now. If you weren't pregnant, I would definitely be prescribing you heavy medications to help you out, but I can't. I can let you talk to me, and I need for you to know that no matter what you say, I will not take it back to the Viceroy."

"Yeah, sure. I will talk to you, with Carl listening in and reporting everything to Brian. That would just be fantastic. I will get right on that," he replied, pushing the man's hand off his knee.

"Marcus, please look at me. This room is secure. There are no monitoring devices in this room. The Viceroy would not allow it. You don't have to decide today, but you will need to decide soon. Please, don't let this grow inside you. If something was to happen during delivery and you still have it inside of you,



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you will not fight to live. I am not ready for you die, and I am sure neither are you.”

With that, the older man patted his knee and walked out of the room. He could hear him talking quietly with Brian out in the hall and could hear Brian raising his voice. Brian came into the room, looked at him, and slammed the door.

“If there is something wrong, you can talk to me. You don’t talk to anybody else about it,” he said, as he made his way to the large walk-in closet.

“Why shouldn’t I be allowed to talk to the doctor? Do you not trust him?”

Brian came out pulling a sweater on and handed him one as well.

“It’s not that I don’t trust him. I just thought we had gotten to the point where we were good and you didn’t need him. You can talk to me.”

“Brian, there are things going on with me that I can’t talk to anybody else about. I swear I won’t tell him anything other than what I am feeling, but you have to let me talk to somebody else in this house.”

He didn’t look happy, but he finally nodded and took a deep breath.

“Come, let’s go for a walk. It’s going to rain, and I know how much you love the smell of rain.”

He took the outstretched hand, plastered on a smile, the past locked away again, and followed him out into the cloudy day.

Marcus didn’t bare his soul to the doctor, but he did start talking about his nightmares. The other man didn’t say much, just walked him through breathing exercises, and was a sounding board for him. When they were alone in the bedroom, the locked-away place in his mind slowly started to crack, little by little. He wasn’t feeling healed, but he was feeling better. Then there was a major concern a week later when he mentioned that he hadn’t felt the baby move.

He had been having regular ultrasounds during his pregnancy and was worried when the doctor called down and had the machine rushed up. Brian refused to stand out in the hallway, as he always did when he had a chance to see his baby up close. He tried to talk to the doctor, but the older man ignored him in favor of his patient.

When he had it all set up with the freezing cold jelly coating Marcus’s stomach, he got the wand working its way across his stomach. There was no

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noise in the room until the heartbeat came through the machine loud and strong. The doctor let out a heavy sigh of relief before going through the motions of measuring the baby to make sure that everything was fine.

“Okay, Viceroy. I am going to have to ask you to leave so I can talk to my patient alone.”

Brian was going to put up a fight again, but one look from the doctor let him know that nothing he did was going to make him agree to let him stay. Once the man was out of the room, the doctor finished cleaning the gel off his stomach and helped him sit up on the bed.

“How often are you talking to him?”

“Who Brian? We talk all the time. I mean when he’s not working.” The doctor reached over and cuffed him on the side of the head. “Hey, that hurt!”

“I was talking about you talking to the baby, not the Viceroy.” Marcus looked away from him at that.

Up till this point, other than the very unfortunate signs of pregnancy that he was going through, he had managed to completely distance himself from what was growing inside of him.

“Brian talks to it all the time,” he defended, and that earned him another cuff to the head.

“Marcus, I am serious. This is your son, not an ‘it’. I know you are not happy right now, but you need to be able to connect to your child. There have been studies done about children and how their learning ability is affected in the womb. To say nothing about feeling the connection to their mother, or father in your case.”

The doctor took his hands and placed them on his stomach. Right away, he felt something happen. It was a really uncomfortable feeling, and not, at the same time.

“This is not an ordinary child that you carry. This is the half son of a God. You don’t think that he isn’t more aware than any human baby born? You have managed to cut yourself off not only from yourself, but also the child that you carry. Talk to him. Hold him from the outside. Let him know that you are there.”

“I’m scared that it’s a monster like that thing that raped me! Don’t you know how scared I am that that thing is going to come for a second round?!”

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What happens if I have this baby and he turns out like that? Tell me then, what I am supposed to do!"

He was yelling, but he could hear Brian come in through the door, and he turned to him. "Get out!" he screamed.

Brian looked lost, but the doctor gave him a shooing motion with his hand and the other man left.

"Okay, listen to me, son. You are not going to be giving birth to a monster. Your son will come out very human. He will have some powers that we are not even sure about yet, but they shouldn't show up till at least puberty. Think of the good that you will be able to infuse in him before then."

"Aren't you supposed to be preaching to me about him being some all-powerful king?"

"Have no doubt he will be a king, but what kind of king will he be? That is up to you to decide. You may not realize this, but you are the one with all the power here. You can take this child, and give him good. Teach him; don't let him go with these men who all want something from him. If you don't stand up for him, he will be taken from Viceroy to Viceroy and he will never be a child. He will be a learning tool. You have a chance here that no other person on Earth has. Please don't waste it."

Marcus looked at the doctor as he finally snapped, "I hate you. I hate all of you!" He kept screaming it over and over again.

Brian came in and couldn't get him to calm down. He kept screaming until he made himself sick and then the doctor was given no choice but to sedate him. He was out very soon after that and missed the doctor being dragged out of the room.

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He awoke to darkness. The room was dark and all the curtains were closed. He turned his head to the side and saw Brian sitting in a chair beside the bed with this head in his hands.

"Brian, what happened?" The man's head popped up and he stared at him. It was weird, but Marcus felt the need to touch the man suddenly and reached his hand over to him. Brian stared at it like he had never seen one before. It took him a minute to slowly reach out and grasp it in both of his.

"Don't you remember what happened?"

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Marcus had to think about it for a couple of seconds before the hate and anger he had unleashed came back to him. It wasn't as full though, like it normally was. It felt like it had been dialed down a notch.

"Am I drugged?" There were still some fuzzy edges around him that he couldn't seem to shake free.

"We had to sedate you. Would you please tell me what happened? The doctor won't tell us what happened."

"Nothing. We just talked and I guess I kind of lost it."

Brian scoffed at him and dropped his hand.

"Kind of lost it? You think having to sedate my heavily pregnant husband is something that I wanted to have to do? You think that bringing down the house with your screaming is 'kind of losing it'? Are you shitting me here, Marcus? This was beyond 'kind of losing it'. You had some kind of breakdown. You've been out of it for a whole day. I was going to bring someone in to put a feeding tube into you, damn it."

"I'm sorry. I mean that I am very sorry to put you through that. The doctor and I were just talking, and he made me see some things that I wasn't ready to see."

"Yeah, well you won't have to worry about him anymore. He will never be coming near you again," Brian said as he stood up and started pacing.

"What? No, Brian. What did you do? Bring him here now."

"After what he did to you? I don't fucking think so. You were fine before talking to him; you will be fine with another doctor."

"No, I won't. I want him here with me. Please, Brian. He is the only other person in this house who talks to me, besides you. Please don't do this to me."

"To you? You don't want me to do something to you? You are a liar, you said you were fine. You told me you were fine over and over again and then you pull this!"

Brian was yelling at him, and he was back to being the scary man that he hadn't seen in so long. He longed to see the soft, blue eyes that he loved having on him. He was losing the man fast if he hadn't lost him already. That fact should not have bothered him in the least, but he was starting to love him again. Never mind the lesser of two evils in his life.

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Marcus took a deep breath and adjusted himself till he was sitting up.

“I wasn’t fine. I was far from fine when we got married.” Brian just stared at him. “I thought if I could just lock away what happened and not think about the past, ever, then I would be fine. But I wasn’t. I care about you. I do. Probably closer to love than care, but that’s not the point. It wasn’t me, not all of me. It was like a piece of me. It was killing me, and I think that it was hurting the baby.”

Marcus reached down and covered his stomach with his hands and was rewarded with some kicks from inside. He was shocked by the instant connection he felt to the little person inside. It was like suddenly he could not only feel the movement, but he could actually feel him deep inside his heart.

“I have never felt him kick. Did you know that? I have never rubbed my hands over my stomach or just put my hands there to feel him. Did you know that? I had managed to distance myself from him. I never even thought of him as my child. How could there be anything of me in him? How could he even be mine with how he was made?”

Brian sat back down in the chair in front of the bed, and placed his hand on top of Marcus’s on his stomach.

“I didn’t hate him because I didn’t feel anything at all towards him. I never thought of holding him, or about him growing up. All I could see was a monster. I know you told me that I didn’t have to worry about it, but I didn’t know if I could believe you. There was so much going on in my head that I didn’t know, and still don’t know, what to believe. When I told the doctor about not feeling him move ever, he did an ultrasound, and he made me feel him. When I felt him kick, it was like I could feel him inside my head and my heart. It hurt so much, and everything that I thought I had kept safe from the world came crashing in. I am sorry that I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“Why? Why do you doubt my love for you? Why do you doubt me?” Brian looked stressed, but his level of anger had gone down by a lot.

“You didn’t give me a chance to have any doubts and fears. You told me how I was supposed to feel and that was the end of it. You only gave me two options and neither of those had anything to do with how I was feeling. You have no idea how it feels inside me. I am fat, can barely move, I pee every five minutes, and if I don’t get my chocolate or ham when I want it, I break down in tears. I go from happy, to sad, to angry so fast that I give myself whiplash, and you don’t want anything other than the happy. What was I supposed to do?”

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“Ah, love. Why didn't you say anything sooner? I swear that I would have listened,” he said as he climbed on the bed and grabbed his husband tight. “I would have tried to figure out a way. I wish that I would have noticed. You always seemed so happy, that I just let it go.”

“Well, I'm not. I promise to work on it from now on, okay? Just please give me my doctor back.”

“Okay, I will see what I can do.” He leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Quit squirming around.”

“I can't; I have to pee.” Brian let out a light sigh and stood up to help his man out of bed, and watched him waddle off to the bathroom. He seemed to have flourished in his day spent in bed, and was even bigger than before.

There was a soft knock on the door. He got up to answer it and found Carl standing in the doorway.

“Viceroy Gochnauer is on the phone again, and he won't talk to anyone else. You need to take this call.”

Brian turned and watched his man waddle his way back into the room and stop when he saw who was standing there. He took a deep breath then made his way back to the bed. Brian rushed over and helped him into it and tucked him in.

“I have to go take this call, but I will have a plate of food brought up right away, okay? Unless you feel like heading down to the dining room?” Marcus shook his head no at this, “I will also see about the doctor.” Placing a kiss on his forehead, he walked out of the room.

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Brian was angry. Never in his life had he been this angry. Nothing that had happened up to this point had managed to get him this upset. He still held the phone in his hand, so he grabbed it and the base it was attached to and threw it through one of the windows of his office. This could not be happening.

“Carl, in here now!” he screamed out. He knew who to blame for this. There was only one person in this house who would betray him like this.

“You called the Viceroy?” The man walked in with a smirk on his face. He was well aware of what he had done.

“Who do you report to?” Brian asked

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“You, Viceroy,” the man replied

“Then why did you feel the need to contact the European office with concerns about my husband instead of coming to me first?” Brian sat back down at his desk, trying to calm his temper.

“I don’t feel that you can be impartial to the problem in this situation. You have become too attached to the subject.” The man stood there at military rest, stiff as a board and proud. Proud of what he had done.

“By ‘subject’ you mean my husband, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I do. I don’t believe that you are able to see that your husband raising the king is a very bad idea. He isn’t stable enough, and doesn’t seem to be embracing the ways of the Archers.”

“And you felt like you couldn’t bring that to me? You had to contact the others?”

“Yes, sir. As I said, you are too close and don’t see the problem.” The smirk was at full force now. The man was well aware that the call he had received demanded his child be handed over as soon as he was born, and his husband would be picked up to be dealt with.

“I think at this time I need to end your employment with me and our branch.”

With that, Brian pulled out the gun he had under his desk and shot the man between the eyes. He put the gun back in his desk, walked around the body on the floor and called for Carl’s second. When the man reached him, Brian opened the door to the office, letting the other man in.

Looking him directly in the eyes, he took a step back letting what happened to his commander sink into the other man. Then he stepped forward and got into the man’s personal space.

“Who is your loyalty to?” Brian asked.

“You, sir, first, and then the Archers.”

“Good. Congratulations, Jonah. You’ve been promoted. Now take out the trash.” With that, Brian walked out of the room and left him to deal with the dead body on his office floor. He had more important things to worry about.

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Marcus wasn't stupid by any stretch of the imagination. Something had happened and nobody in the house was talking about it. He had asked Brian repeatedly and was told not to worry about it. There was just a slight communication problem they were having, but it would be worked out. He called bullshit on that one. There was something big going on, and he hadn't seen Carl in days. Not that he minded, but the man was the second in command. It wasn't like he would just disappear. When he asked, Brian just told him the man was reassigned. His new second and head of security was a lot less threatening to Marcus, as they didn't share the history that he had with Carl. But it just didn't seem like it was as simple as that. The staff all seemed to be rushing around all the time and there seemed to be a panic in the air.

Brian spent most of his days locked up in his office. He thought maybe the man was hiding from him. When the doctor finally came back to see him, his face was covered in bruises. He wanted to confront his husband about this, but the doctor told him to forget about it. There was no way he was going to let it go until he saw the desperate look on the other man's face. The doctor just looked him in the eye and asked him again, so he decided to drop it, for now.

His pregnancy seemed to be moving faster than ever, and he seemed to be growing at a scary rate. The doctor was guessing the delivery to be not in days, but in hours instead. This freaked the hell out of him. How had he managed to get to this point in his pregnancy and not once thought about how he was going to get his son out?

Of course now that it was brought up, that was all he could think about. Everything else seemed to drop off to the side as he thought about what was ahead of him. He was driving Brian nuts, when he was able to see the man, making sure that he would be there the whole time. Brian assured him that he would never miss it for anything in the world.

Then he found the passports and birth certificates. It had always been in the back of his mind that something could happen and he could be shipped off somewhere to be killed and his baby taken away. Before, what scared him was knowing that he would die. That had been a guarantee. Now the thought of someone taking his baby from him scared him to the core.

Brian blew him off when he brought it up. Assured him, again, that there was no way that his son was being raised anywhere than with his dads. The paperwork was a just in case they ever needed to take the baby to the hospital. He wanted everything documented so there would be no question as to who the baby belonged to.



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He even showed him the adoption papers that had been drawn up to look like they had used a surrogate. The names on the paperwork were not theirs. They were the names that were on the passports he found. Again, Brian said they just needed everything straight and away from the lives they were living before.

So Marcus lived under the mushroom cloud that had been created for him. There seemed to be answers for everything, but it just didn't feel right. Brian would hold him so tight at night that he had to ask the man to let him go. The other man hadn't made love to him since his last little breakdown. This was fine by him as he felt about as sexy as a whale, which is what he looked like. Brian would just hold him at night and tell him he loved him over and over again.

His time was spent mostly in his room sitting on his chair talking to Michael Anthony, the name they finally settled on. He found himself telling him about his grandmother most of all. He wished his mother would have been able to meet him. Not that he would ever want her to hear how he came to be the father of a baby, but he would like to see her hold her grandson. That's where he was sitting, with the doctor sitting in the only other chair in the room, when he felt the first blinding pain.

He gasped out loud at the pain as it ripped through him. It felt like his stomach was being ripped apart. The doctor was at his side immediately, looking at his watch and telling him to breathe as they practiced.

"Can't breathe," he wheezed out. The doctor was rubbing his shoulders and talking calmly. When the pain finally passed, he shoved the doctor's hands off of him. "Breathe, that's your answer?!? I can't breathe through that. If that's what it feels like, then you better knock me out now."

The man gave him a smile and helped him out of the chair. They had set up a delivery room just down the hallway from the bedroom and he was being ushered there while the doctor was yelling at one of the guards who had shown up a week ago in the hallway. There was always at least one of them there at all times.

Marcus looked at him, and couldn't for the life of him think of the man's name right now. All he could do was to shuffle his feet forward, trying to get to the delivery room.

"Drugs, gimme drugs," he managed to get out before another pain hit him. He leaned up against the wall and the doctor was there helping to hold him up.

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Again rubbing his back, trying to smooth out the pain that he was going through. No amount of rubbing his back was going to help him.

Once the contraction had passed, they finished making their way into the room. He had been situated on the bed, and his pants taken off when Brian came rushing in. He looked like he had the hounds of hell chasing him. His hair was all disheveled like he had been running his hands through it over and over again. His clothes were all wrinkled, and Marcus tried to remember if he had even made it to bed the night before.

He rushed over to him, took Marcus's hand and pushed the hair that was already falling into his face away.

"I love you so much, Marcus. You are my life." Just then another contraction hit and Marcus was unable to respond to him at all. He just squeezed the man's hand as hard as he could, trying to transfer some of the pain onto the man who had gotten him into this situation.

Once it was over, he was once again begging for meds. The doctor went over to the cabinet where anything that might be needed was ready to go. Brian let go of his hand and went over to the doctor and whispered something in his ear. The doctor flinched at whatever he was being told and then let his head drop.

"What's wrong? Brian, what's going on? What's wrong?!?" he yelled, but the other two men in the room ignored him. He started freaking out, when another contraction hit.

Brian rushed back over to his side and the doctor came back with a needle, but instead of giving him the shot, he laid it on the table beside him. Marcus started freaking out even more now.

"Nothing's wrong, Marcus. I just need to see how far along in labor you are before I give you anything for the pain. It could not only hurt you, but also the baby. The Viceroy was just reminding me of this."

"Bullshit. He's not the one that's going through this. He doesn't all of a sudden get to decide what meds I can and can't have." He was panting hard now. The pain in his backside was actually taking over the pain of the contractions. He felt like he was being ripped apart in both places, and he wanted the damn meds.

"Oh god, Doc. It hurts so much." The man had laid a blanket over his legs and now went under the blanket to look at his ass. He should have been

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humiliated beyond belief at this point—who wanted someone staring at his hole?—but he could have cared less. When he felt a slicked-up, gloved finger slowly enter him he freaked out.

“What the fuck?!?” Brian tried to calm him down a little bit, but it was no use. Marcus was losing it.

The doctor ignored him and put a hand on his stomach, pushing down on it. The doctor quickly added a second finger and felt for what, Marcus didn't know.

“If you're looking for my tonsils, I had those taken out. Brian, do something, please.”

“Baby, you are in labor; just relax and let the doctor do his thing.”

“Don't you 'baby' me. Let the doctor reach up your ass for your tonsils, and see how you relax.”

The fingers were pulled out of his ass none too gently, and the doctor stood up. As soon as he did, there was a big gush of water coming out of him.

“Okay, you were just about fully dilated so I just broke your water to move things along a little more quickly. I'm sorry Marcus, but there is no way I can give you any pain medication this far into labor. You need to get ready to push soon.”

Marcus could feel the tears running down his face, and for once, he didn't really care that he was crying. He was in pain and covered in fluid, and now he was going to have to push the baby out of his ass without the promised meds. He was so scared of this, and was in no way prepared for what was coming.

When the door flew open and Jonah came rushing in, Marcus growled at him. Brian's hand tensed in his and he could see the fear that crossed his face.

“They are on their way. We have two hours.”

With that, Jonah turned and fled the room, but Marcus didn't have time to think about it. Another contraction hit and he just tried to survive it. When it was over, he looked at Brian who looked to be in worse shape than him.

“Who's on their way? What the hell is going on?”

“Don't worry—” Brian started, but it was the doctor who cut him off this time.

“If you don't tell him, I will.”

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“Tell me what!” Marcus screamed as he started to bear down. The doctor rushed and grabbed his seat and moved it between his legs.

“The Archers are coming.”

“To what, meet Michael?” Marcus managed to pant out as he pushed hard through his next contraction. The doctor didn't interrupt them, just gently gave out orders on when to push. “I thought that these things could take hours!” he yelled down at the man.

“I guess your son is eager to meet you,” the doctor said, looking at Brian.

“No, they aren't here to meet Michael. They are here to take you both away.”

Marcus looked at him and wrenched his hand away. He focused all his attention on his next push, ignoring the pain those words caused. He felt like not only was his body being ripped apart, but also his soul. He knew they didn't mean together, they were here to take his baby and Brian was letting them.

“Get out,” he said, as he bore down again. When Brian went to wipe his brow again, Marcus let go of the handles on the bed and shoved his hand away. “Get out now.”

“No, please don't do this. Please, let me be here.”

Marcus was unable to reply. His passage was stretched so wide he could feel the head of the baby on his back. He worked on pushing as hard as he could. He wanted the pain over; he wanted this whole thing to be over.

The contractions never stopped, and Brian never left. He stayed by his side and offered small words of encouragement but didn't try to touch him in any way. It felt like an eternity to Marcus. The pain was indescribable, but then he felt something push through his outer ring and the doctor asked him to stop pushing. A tool was grabbed and the doctor did something.

“Okay, Marcus, head's out, and I cleared his airway. I just need a couple of good pushes and then you can meet this beautiful boy. Come on you can do this. I know you can.”

Marcus pushed with everything he had, but he was sure he was going to black out at some point. He knew that they said his body would adjust to not only carry but to give birth, but whose body could adjust this much? He was not actually made to be doing this.

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With one final push and what seemed like the last of his energy, he felt a great release and could hear the cries of his son. He felt such joy as the doctor handed him his son and gently placed him on his stomach. He was perfect in every way. Ten fingers and ten toes, and a good set of lungs on him.

“Oh, he’s perfect,” Brian said in awe. He looked over and placed a kiss on both of their foreheads. “Don’t say anything, please. I will find a way to make this all right. I swear.”

Not taking his eyes off his son, he said, “How do you plan on doing that, when they are coming here to kill me? Please don’t ruin my only time with my son.”

The cord had been cut, and the doctor took him away quickly to clean him up and get him dressed before handing him back to his father. The doctor ignored Brian completely and focused on Marcus and the baby.

He walked him through the after birth, but Marcus didn’t even notice. He was trying to memorize everything about his son.

“Hey there, baby. I know that we haven’t formally met, but I’m your daddy. Did you know that? Do you recognize my voice? Do you think that you will remember me? I know that I will remember this for the rest of my life. You know I didn’t want you, but now that I am holding you, I know something that they don’t. You are special. So very special to your daddy. I love you so much and I just met you.”

He couldn’t talk anymore as he was crying too hard. How could something he never knew he wanted be in his arms and be the only thing he wanted in his life now? The feelings were too much on top of everything else going on around him.

“Marcus. I am not letting them take you. I have a car all ready to go and the doctor is going to get you out of here right now. That’s why you couldn’t have meds. I need you to be able to get into his car and get out of here. I will see what I can work out with the other factions. Once it’s safe, I will bring you back here and I will get Michael back and we can all be together. I swear it’s not forever. It’s just for a little while.”

Looking at him, Marcus could tell he was trying to believe with his whole heart. That, somehow, he would find a way for them to be together. Yet how alive would he be knowing his baby was halfway around the world from him?

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“Brian, let’s just take the baby and go. Please. We can be together. Please don’t take him away from me. I love you, please don’t do this.”

“They would hunt us both down and kill us without a second thought. Then I would not be able to have any say at all in who is raising him, and where he lives, and how he grows up. At least this way, we will be together until I can figure this out.”

The doctor had come up behind him while he was talking, and he never even saw the needle that was jabbed into his neck until it was too late. Marcus watched as Brian slowly slid out of his chair to the floor. Shocked at what was happening, he held Michael closer to his chest.

“I guess we’ll find out now what you will do,” the doctor said to Brian. He turned to Marcus and held out his hand to help him out of bed. “I know you don’t think you can do this, but I need you to come with me now.”

“Why? Where are we going?” Marcus struggled to stand with the baby in his arms and he was just able to do it. He was shaky on his feet, but when the doctor held out his hands to take the baby from him, he just hugged him closer. There was no way he was handing his baby over to anybody.

“When he asked me to take you out of here, I never told him where we were going. The less anyone knows the better. I have your bags here all ready to go. I packed them myself so there was no chance of being tracked. We are going to have to put Michael in one of the bags and zip it up part of the way so it looks like we are leaving the baby here.”

Marcus got dressed as fast as he could, given how tired he was and how much pain he was in. But he finally managed it. The doctor had pulled all the bags out and had one ready to go to put Michael in.

“Hey, baby. I need you to do something for Daddy. I need you to be really quiet for a couple of minutes. Think you can do that for me?” He laid him in as gently as possible and made sure none of the blankets were covering his face. He grabbed one of the soothers from the stash of baby stuff and put it in his mouth.

He grabbed the bag with him in it and started for the door. When he turned around, he looked at Brian lying on the floor and knew that the man had been doing what he thought was right. He wanted to tell him he understood in a really fucked up way, but the man was out cold on the floor, so he followed the doctor out.

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There were now two guards waiting at the end of the hall, and the doctor stopped in front of them.

“Brian’s with the baby now. Give the man some time while I get the Chosen One to safety.”

They both nodded their heads. “Safe travels and we hope to see you soon, Marcus,” the tallest one said, his name still escaping Marcus, but he didn’t even care about that now.

His heart was pounding so loudly he was sure that everyone could tell he was hiding something, but they just tipped their heads at him as he passed. They knew that he would be leaving his baby, so why wouldn’t he be acting strange? The fact that they all knew and not one person here warned him made him want to burn the place to the ground.

When he passed by Brian’s office, he stopped. There was a pull there that he couldn’t seem to stop. It was so strong that he didn’t even know he had opened the door and walked in till he was standing inside. The doctor had stopped and came to stand in the doorway.

“What are you doing? We need to get out of here now.”

“Just give me a minute. I have to leave him a note. Please, just give me a minute.” When the man made no move to leave, Marcus just stood there and stared until the man turned around and left the room.

Marcus looked at the desk with all its neat piles of paper and the two big computer screens. There didn’t seem to be a notepad on the top, so he opened up drawers till he stopped cold. There in one of the drawers was a gun with a silencer on the end. He had no idea what kind. Marcus had been to the shooting range a couple of times in his life so he could shoot and knew gun safety, but he’d never really paid attention to all the different kinds. Looking back into the doorway, he checked to see if anybody was watching before he tested the safety and slid the gun into the back of his pants, covering it with his shirt and sweater.

Finding a notepad in the same drawer he quickly wrote out a note:

*I could not let you take my son from me. I do love you and will let you know when we are somehow safe. Please, don’t look for us.*

*Marcus*

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Leaving the note on the desk, he ran for the garage, carrying his bag as carefully as possible.

The guard at the gate was expecting them. He made sure the doctor was aware that he couldn't take the main road; he would have to take the side road down. The doctor nodded and then they were gone.

Marcus couldn't help but turn around and stare at the house that he had been calling home for the last couple of months. How screwed up in the head was he that he was sad to see it go? Maybe once they found a safe place he would start going to therapy. Lots and lots of therapy.

Michael made it for another couple of minutes before he started fussing. The doctor pointed out a bag that he had packed with formula and bottles. They had talked about caring for the baby before the baby came, and he had watched videos and read books. But actually sitting here feeding his son was a feeling like no other. He was scared outta his mind, but nutso in love with the little man in his arms, so that it didn't even matter. Once he fed and burped him, he laid the seat back so that they were lying back and held his son on his chest and went to sleep.

He was not sure what woke him. He all of a sudden had the feeling that he needed to be awake and it had to be now. He was alert but didn't open his eyes, wanting to check out around him before he gave it away. The car had stopped moving, and he was alone in the car, except for the baby that he was holding to his chest. He could hear someone talking outside and recognized the doctor's voice. Whoever he was talking to must be on the phone as there was no other side to the conversation.

"Yeah, him and the boy... No, I knocked that fucker out. Should have killed him but it was what I had handy... No, we should be there in a couple days... Yeah, switching cars here shortly... No, I made sure that there was no way anyone could track us... Yeah, yeah, it's all ready. You just have my goddamn money ready when we get there." The voice faded away and he wasn't able to catch anything else.

Marcus slowly lifted Michael off his chest and put him back into the small bag on the floor. Once he was situated, he called out for the doctor.

"Hey are we there yet? I could really use a bed to sleep on." He opened his door and climbed out. They were in the parking lot of what looked to be an old forest ranger's station. The other man was opening up the shop door and inside was a large black SUV.



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“Wow, way to blend in there, Doc,” Marcus said, as he slowly made his way over.

The older man chuckled, reached underneath, and patted the underside, until he found what he was looking for. Marcus tensed now, scared of what the other man was going to do till he yelled out “Yes!” and pulled the key chain out.

“How you feeling? I know that sounds like a stupid question, but I figured once the adrenaline wore off you would be hurting. Sorry, I can’t give you anything till we get somewhere for the night. Just in case we need to run.”

“No problem. May I ask what you are doing now?”

“Well, I had this parked here. I just want to make sure that no one found it and tagged it or something. Don’t want to have anyone tracking us or anything.”

“Yeah, I guess. Sorry, I am so out of my element here. I don’t know about any of this, but I need to thank you for getting us out of there.”

The doctor walked back to the car and grabbed their bags out of the trunk. He pushed a button on the key fob and the back gate lifted on the SUV.

“I am just really sorry that it had to end this way. Never did I think that Brian would be such a cold-hearted bastard as to try to separate you from your child.” The doctor made his way over to the back of the SUV, and Marcus followed him. What was in there confused him even more.

The SUV was full of baby stuff. There seemed to be a playpen, blankets and clothes and even a car seat in the second row.

Reaching into the back of his pants he pulled out the gun he had taken from Brian’s desk and pointed it straight at the man.

“What’s with all the baby stuff? I thought the plan was just to get me out and bringing Michael was a last minute change of plans?”

“Well, well, the little kitten has some claws does he? What do you plan on doing with that? Huh?”

Marcus refused to move. His son was in the other car and was counting on him to get him to safety. “What’s going on? Tell me now or I will shoot you!”

“God, you are so naive. You think that I would willingly incur the wrath of the Archers for some little twink and his baby? Get real, kid. This thing is bigger than you. The price for the two of you, alive and kicking, is fifty million

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dollars. Who the hell is going to pass that up? Now put the gun down and let's go."

Marcus had that feeling again; somehow he knew what was going to happen. He needed to do something right now. He was out of options and his son needed him.

So he pulled the trigger.

Watching the other man fall, he thought that he would feel something. Horror, pain, sadness, anything over the fact that he had just taken a person's life. Yet all he could feel was relief. After he had lowered the gun, he checked the back of the SUV to see what all they had.

It had been fully stocked with food, medicine, clothes and pretty much anything he could possibly need for Michael. How close he had come to losing his son to someone else had him throwing up what was left in his stomach. When he was feeling a little steadier, he went to the car, grabbing Michael and the rest of his bags. Getting him strapped into the car seat was a lot harder than he thought it would be, and he was getting frantic knowing that at this point every second counted.

When he climbed in the big SUV and pulled out of the shop, he couldn't stop the shaking of his hands. He knew he had to get away from this place. He needed rest and time to heal. There was only one place in the world he knew he could go to. Now he just needed to figure out where the hell he was and make his way to safety.

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### *Epilogue*

Brian sat at his desk and stared at the drink in his hand. In the last three months, he had more than his fair share of drinks. He was lost in a war, right now, that he didn't know if he would win. With no sign of Marcus and Michael at all, he wasn't even sure he wanted to win.

His whole life had been working to that point. His father had never made it to Viceroy and he was so proud of him when he did. His life was the Archers. From when he was born, he always knew that he would be in charge one day. He lived it, breathed it, and hadn't cared what they asked for in sacrifice.

He still believed in it. He still believed that, one day, his son would rule the world; that he would be the most powerful being on this planet and others

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would bow down to him. That was what he wanted. The fact that it was his son, and the carrier was his husband, was enough to get him on the path that he wanted to go down. He knew there was only one thing for him to do. He needed to find The One and take him out, getting himself appointed to the head of all the Archers.

His plan was actually pretty simple, in theory, but in reality it was a lot harder. He was at war with every faction over his failure to control his husband and losing their future king. Every single other Viceroy was calling for his death. He would be doing the same thing if the situation were reversed.

However, it wasn't reversed, and he was stuck in his office trying to figure out what to do. If he didn't decide fast, he knew he would be dead within the week. It was a guarantee. All he needed was some hint that they were still alive, and maybe he could go on. There was nothing so far. However, when he became The One there would be nothing stopping him at all, and he would hunt down his husband and child and bring them home where they belonged.

At this point, he needed to find out if they had been sold by the doctor to another group, or if Marcus had killed the doctor himself and got away. Finding the doctor's phone had been lucky and a fountain of information. Right now, holding that information was the only thing keeping him alive.

Rising to pour out the contents of his glass the phone rang. He stared at it for two more rings before he lifted the receiver.

*"Yes"*

*"In one week at 11:30 am local time The One will be at 60594 Frankfurt am Main, Germany."*

The phone went dead. Brian stared at the drink in his hand and back to the phone. He felt a smile come over his face. He knew that they would in no way be expecting him to attack. With everything going on, he would be expected to be at home searching for his son. Now that he knew he would be able to take out The One, he had other plans to make.

Soon the hunt would be on.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*KM loves her man-love stories. Unable to afford her habit she has picked up her laptop and started writing her own. She lives in Canada with her teenage twin boys and a cat that hates her.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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# THE ARROYO

By M. Caspian

## Photo Description

A dark-haired, young man crouches naked in the corner of a bathtub, beneath a spray of water. White tiles and chrome fittings surround him. A heavy chain with a sturdy padlock is draped over his right shoulder, above a large tribal tattoo on his bicep. The man protects his head and chest with his arms, cowering, as he apprehensively meets the gaze of the viewer staring down at him.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I always knew it was a possibility. Have known since childhood that they could take me someday. The slave traders have been sweeping the area for weeks now but I didn't think they'd want me. They usually take girls and if they take boys they're younger, blonder... prettier. There's not usually a demand for someone who looks like me and has reached the ripe, old age of twenty-four. But I was wrong. Someone did want me. I'm so fucked.*

*One last sweep of this dirt water town and I can get back to my life. My books, my music, my art and my life that doesn't revolve around grabbing kids to sell to the highest bidder. I hate this shit. One last run. My debt will be paid and I'll be free from that son of a bitch who grabbed ME as a kid. Maybe then I can finally stop thinking and dreaming. Turn off those dark desires that swirl in my head and wake me up at night in a cold sweat. I'm not HIM. I will never be HIM. My last fucking run and it all goes to shit when some guy, trying to be the hero, gets in my face. He's too old, too dark, too inked... but God help me I want him.*

*I don't know what I was thinking when I stood up to him. I just wanted the kid to have half a chance at getting away. He's so angry. I screwed up his quota and now I'm going to pay for that. He told me to get clean. EVERYWHERE. Then he gave me a thick chain with a padlock on it and told me to chain myself to the table when I was done. Something about "inspecting the merchandise". I'm so fucked.*

I'd like a story that caters to my medical kink. Examinations, medical instruments, non-con that turns consensual, never penetrated straight virgin,

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training, etc... Prefer some angst with a lot of internal struggle for both characters. Straight guy should struggle against getting aroused by his captor. No Stockholm syndrome and a HEA.

*Thanks!*

*Sincerely,*

*Moderatrix Lori*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** dystopia, speculative fiction

**Tags:** dark, slavefic, medical personnel, medical kink, body modification, abuse, humiliation, first time, age gap, interracial

**Content Warnings:** graphic violence, sexual violence (rape, sexual assault), medical procedures

**Word Count:** 34,385

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## THE ARROYO

By M. Caspian

“That’s the fucking spot.”

The truck shuddered as it descended the arroyo. Trace kept working Pete’s fat prick with his mouth, sucking firmly and tonguing the slit just the way Pete liked it. Pete’s free hand carded through his hair, massaging his scalp. The touch calmed him, made him feel less alone.

“Shit, you’re so good at that, Trace.”

A snap reverberated through the bench seat, followed by a terrible grinding crunch. The truck tilted sharply and jerked to a halt, leaning over at an unsteady angle in the sand. Pete’s weight crushed him against the door of the truck. Twenty years of training stopped Trace closing his jaw, but his teeth still grated against Pete’s sensitive head, and he stopped petting Pete’s warm balls.

Trace pulled off, a long string of saliva connecting them like some thread woven by Fate’s daughters.

“Fuck! Can’t they even keep the fucking roads maintained in this hellhole?”

Trace let the roar of Pete’s voice roll over him. It was never personal. Pete was only hot and bored, and the man liked bitching to pass the time. Instead, Trace tipped his head side to side, cracking his neck, rolling his shoulders where they had stiffened. Damn small cab.

Just for a second, Trace closed his eyes. He was grateful to Pete, not least for letting him ride up front of the catering unit. He never expected payment for favors; just one reason why Trace liked making him feel good. They were all bone-tired. He hated this part of the trip. Hated thinking about the cargo riding in the buses ahead. And the Colonel was always tense in this part of the Valley.

He wished he could have stayed in his tiny, sterile domain at the back of the convoy. But the regular road washouts throughout the Protectorate—and the occasional crack from earthquake damage—made the big medlab sway until he felt sick. Seeing the view helped a lot.

Pete radioed ahead to let the Colonel know they were going nowhere, fast. Dark, narrowed eyes watched them from the scattered handful of buildings at



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the sides of the road on each side of the wash. Trace looked past them to the endless horizon, a lone elephant tree standing silent sentry.

Vehicles passed them on either side, as the command unit ahead paused with the deep hiss of hydraulics. The Colonel jumped down, the morning shine on his boots quickly enveloped with chalk-colored dust. Trace swung open the heavy passenger door, struggling against the lean of the catering unit. He clambered out, landing awkwardly in the base of the arroyo that had carved its way through the Fed-laid asphalt, and ran forward.

“What’s the take gonna be here?” the Colonel asked.

Trace wiped the dust off the tablet screen with the lower edge of his gray T-shirt. “We’ve got seven fifteen-year-olds, five of them girls.”

He shook his head. “That’s not gonna be enough, is it? What are our numbers so far?”

“Four hundred and twenty-nine. We’ve still got a lot of the Valley to go, Brawley, Calexico, then Digby—”

“Yeah, yeah, give me totals, not the names of these piece-of-shit towns. Fuck, I can’t wait to be back to civilization.”

“Another forty, more or less. Probably less.”

“Fuck. We need five hundred to meet the orders from Purity Houses alone. That doesn’t include private commissions. And I’ve got another one from Senator Fields that’ll pay big bucks. A boy.”

Trace stiffened.

The Colonel grinned. “See, you’ve been lucky with me. Fields likes to take them apart piece by piece. The world never knows the inverters and the sadists from the outside. Only you and me, boy. We know, don’t we.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Colonel nodded. “Piece by fucking piece.”

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Isaac was changing a keg when his brother’s lanky body came bursting through the swinging inner door, carrying Lila in his arms. A sliver of harsh daylight and a billowing cloud of dust testified that the kid hadn’t waited for the outer door to close.

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“Shit, Miles. You know better than that. There’s a pressure door there for a reason, goddammit.” The kid’s face fell, and Isaac cursed himself.

“The Feds are here.”

Fuck. He’d hoped for an hour of sleep before the bar opened at five. Through the thick double-glazing, and over the hum of the aircon, came the engine roar of the convoy. He pulled his work shirt over his head and threw it onto the bar with his canvas apron. Lila handed him up an old T-shirt, ingrained with dirt and sweat so that it never looked clean.

“Thanks, princess.”

Isaac glanced through the wide glass window by the front door, keeping out of sight. The forward carriers of the convoy had passed already, winding off toward town. He stuffed his feet into unlaced steel-capped safety boots, traded for with one of the refinery workers. Good quality. Citizen-made.

“You gonna put a closed sign up or something?” asked Miles.

Isaac shook his head. “Nah. No one will expect us to be open tonight, not with this lot outside.”

He guided them out the back door, heading around the side of the building and crouching down behind the dumpster in the alley. They crowded together to peer at the large buses now passing, detouring around the steep side of the arroyo. Last year’s solitary rainstorm had worn through the asphalt surface fifty yards up the road from the bar. For two days, purple desert blooms washed across the sea of shiny, black asphalt and white dust.

Tiny faces pressed against the bus windows, looking resolutely outward. Lila tugged at his shirt. “Isaac, what’s a princess?”

“I don’t know, Lila. It’s just something you say, I guess.”

At the back of his mind he’d known they were due, but it was still a surprise: like finding out a toothache was an abscess deep in the root.

An armored platoon vehicle roared past, its track making easy work of the sides of the dry wash. The star-and-rays flag painted on the driver’s door made Isaac’s gut clench. Lila ran out from the shadow of the dumpster, toward the line of vehicles, “Traders!” she cried, clapping her palms together at the duo of fluttering flags attached to the roof of a supply truck.

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Isaac swooped her up and ducked back into the shadows. He caught her hands, silencing her. “No,” he said. “No, not traders. Feds. Federation of American States.”

The mistake was hardly surprising. Traders visited two, sometimes three times a year, bringing luxuries like Coca-Cola and chocolate. Not that they had much to trade for them. But the Feds hadn't been through since their last scheduled vaccination pass, last winter. The flag flew down at the refinery and over at the solar plant, of course, but they kept the kids away from there.

Miles reached over to take Lila from Isaac, hefting her onto his knee. Isaac gripped his shoulder with what he hoped was a reassuring clasp. Miles was only fourteen. No matter what the next day brought, at least his brother would be okay. Lila started to whimper. Would she remember this day in twelve years' time?

They were up to the tail end of the convoy—the catering trucks and big medical units—when there came a teeth-aching grind. Isaac peered over the garbage bags. The truck maneuvering its way down the shallow sides of the arroyo came to a halt, tipping half over on its side. The convoy slowed, then stopped.

Isaac tensed. It was the command unit that had halted at the entrance to the alley. A white-haired colonel jumped out, bellowing, “Trace!” Isaac's breath caught in his lungs. He tried to still his pounding heart, too scared to crouch out of sight and draw attention through his movement.

A big guy in the gray drill pants and T-shirt of a slave hopped out of the truck sitting askew in the bottom of the arroyo. He easily topped out over six foot, muscled and fit. He glanced into the alley as he ran to the command unit, meeting Isaac's surreptitious gaze. Sun-wrinkled, copper skin surrounded his cool gray-blue eyes.

The second the two men turned away Isaac ducked his head behind the dumpster and flattened his solid frame against the rough boards of the bar. His heart was in his throat. He told himself it was okay. *He* couldn't know. There was no danger, but fading into the background was a hard habit to break.

The klaxon rang out. So, old Barney hadn't been asleep atop his tower for once. Isaac swallowed and forced himself to speak. “Hear that?” Isaac said. “Census. Tomorrow, I guess. You best get home to your mom. Stay off the roads. Tell her I'll come by first thing in the morning.” He smiled down at Lila, trying to hide the tension in his body.

Lila started to cry anyway. Isaac didn't bother to shush her. Better she got it out of her system now. She definitely didn't want to cry during Census. No one needed that kind of attention drawn to themselves, no matter their age.

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The cool air in the command unit was a relief after twenty minutes in the outside world. When a knock came at the outside door, Trace stayed kneeling next to the Colonel, seated at his desk.

“Enter.”

It was Pete, wiping his oily hands on a rag. “It’s completely fubar, sir. But there’s the refinery we passed back up the road aways. They can lend us the equipment we need to fix it. I’ve ordered a new axle from Yuma. It’ll only take three days, maybe four.”

Pete’s eyes flickered down to Trace, taking in his position on the floor.

“Where are my manners, Barnes,” said the Colonel. “You wanna use him? Be my guest.” A conspiratorial smile danced across his face, and he reached down, caressing Trace’s face gently. “He likes it when you hurt him, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Please.” Trace turned his head into the Colonel’s hand, kissing it softly.

Pete coughed. “No, sir, thank you for the offer though. Maybe later.”

“Oh, I don’t think I have your restraint.” He laughed, leaning back in his chair. “It’s been a long day. Not over yet, either. Suck me, boy.”

Trace raised himself up on his knees. The long muscle in his left thigh gave a deep twinge. He’d been worried about it for a while, ever since that session on the Morgan’s Mule last year in San Luis. He could have cursed out the Colonel’s brother for having the bright idea to run a copper rod across the top and electrify it. Getting up again from this position wasn’t going to be easy for much longer. The Colonel brushed his hand across Trace’s short hair, pulling at the salt and pepper strands at his temples.

“You’re getting old, boy. How long have you been with me?”

“Nineteen years, sir.”

“Shit. When are you up?”

“May fifteenth.”

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“Only two months left, huh? Let’s make them memorable, shall we?”

Trace worked the stiff leather from the elaborate belt buckle the Colonel wore, the twelve bright stars of the Federation standing proud of the surface. He unfastened the khaki trousers, and drew out the Colonel’s flaccid cock, surrounded by wiry gray hairs. It pulsed as Trace sucked it into his mouth, lapping and slurping at the loose foreskin. Revulsion coiled in his belly.

“Wait a minute. Off, boy. Eyes open.”

Trace pulled off the Colonel’s cock, kneeling straight, hands tucked behind his back. The Colonel turned the ring on his right hand around, bringing the ruby Citizen’s Cross palm-side. He caught Trace’s bristled chin in his left hand, striking out with the right. The raised cross caught Trace on the cheekbone, knocking his head to the side. Pete’s face was blurry and distorted through the moisture the blow brought to his eyes. He swallowed a hiss of pain as he turned his head to face the Colonel again.

He drew his hand back a second time, then struck again, landing unerringly in the same place.

Warmth trickled down his cheek, and Trace held himself still as the Colonel leaned in. His whispered words landed in hot breaths against the side of Trace’s face. “Only two months. We will have to make the most of those.” His gnarled hand snaked down Trace’s body to grasp his balls firmly through his soft pants, tugging them downward. The sensation of his cock trying to fill punched into him. Even all these years later, Trace fought back the bitter revulsion of wanting to get hard. That had been a tough lesson, and he was a slow learner. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Colonel’s pink, wet tongue snake out, quivering.

Wet saliva daubed his face, and the Colonel’s caresses turned to crushing pain in his sack. Tears left hot trails down his face.

“Good. Back on, now. And get me good and wet, boy.”

Trace slurped on the Colonel’s prick, burrowing his tongue under the hood, as the length stiffened and engorged.

The Colonel shrugged. “Well, Barnes, that’s damned annoying. So, you two had better stay here. Trace can process the local cohort in the small medunit while you do the repairs. Use the comms truck with the bunks in it. And if you keep that small transport you could send the girls on as soon as they’re ready,

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save a bus staying behind. There's only five. No—wait. Pick a boy up here, too. Saves me looking for one. He can come back with you. I'll push on and finish up the Valley, meet y'all in Yuma."

Abruptly he stood, placing his booted foot in the center of Trace's chest, pushing him to the floor and leaving an imprint on Trace's shirt. The Colonel worked his cock, rubbing it slickly between his fingers, before throwing his head back, groaning as white fluid jetted from the tip. The wetness was cold against Trace's face in the chilled air. The come soaked through his T-shirt, sticking the fabric to his body.

He smiled at Pete. "Sure you don't want to join me?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Well, you'll have him for the rest of the week. Don't hesitate to make use of him. Make sure he keeps himself ready for you. Unless you like it dry and tight, of course. That's fun, too."

The Colonel kept jerking himself, as a few last drops fell. Trace knew better than to move. He refastened his button fly, the shiny buckle catching the bright ceiling lights. "Who else d'ya want on your team, Barnes?"

"Rodriguez, if that's okay, and Clarke to drive."

"Sure, no problem. Is that enough? Just the two of you for the mechanical work?" He nudged Trace with his boot. "All right, kneel up, boy. So, that's the plan. We'll push on today. You wait here till it's all fixed. Call me when you're done and heading to Yuma. Anything else, Barnes?"

"Not for me, sir, but young Miller would appreciate a word."

The Colonel looked taken aback for a second. "Sure, send him in."

Miller entered bashfully, twisting his forage cap in his hands. The gesture was curiously incongruous in a guy as big as Miller was: six three and muscles all over. His first trip out of the Fed, and he looked perpetually overwhelmed. The red cotton Cross hand-stitched to his pale sand-colored fatigues hadn't even had a chance to get sun-faded yet.

"Sir, I'm... ah... I'm sorry to bother you. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, son, come on in. Have a seat. What's up?"

"I have a... concern. About my soul."

"That's a mighty big concern, Miller. You'd better tell me about it."

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“I know we do God’s work. But God said we weren’t to lie with other men. It’s a sin, sir.”

“It is indeed, son. But you’re not lying with men, are you?”

“No... but... your slave. When I see him, I have... unnatural urges.”

A grin slit the Colonel’s face, and he leaned forward, patting Miller’s knee. “I see where the confusion lies, son. You’re thinking this slave here is a man.”

“Well... yes, sir.”

“Rest easy, son.” His eyes flicked toward Trace. “You’re not a man, are you boy?”

“No, sir.” Trace used every ounce of control to keep his voice level.

“That’s exactly right. Good boy.” He half-frowned, then turned his attention back to Miller. “It’s fine, son. You know your twenty commandments, right? God’s law is clear. A Citizen must never lie with another Citizen as he would with a woman. Slaves come from the Protectorate of Southern California. They don’t count. You have a... what’s that word, boy?”

“A dispensation, sir.”

“Right on the button. You have a dispensation, son. You could use him to your heart’s content, and God would be fine with that. I’m not actually sure if he has a soul. What do you think, boy?”

Trace gritted his teeth, swallowing the bile that rose in his throat. “Evidence suggests not, sir.”

“Show him your hole.”

The greedy craving in Miller’s eyes made Trace’s throat catch in apprehension. He turned, then unfastened his gray cotton pants, letting them drop to his feet in a puddle of fabric. He bent over, resting his elbows on his knees.

“You lack enthusiasm, boy. Spread your cheeks a little wider, there.”

He closed his eyes, gripping his ass with his hands and pulling his cheeks apart. He was glad neither of them could see his face.

“Now just you take a look, Miller. That hole there does not belong to a man. You can do anything you want to it. You wanna fuck it, that’s fine. But you wanna work your shock stick in there and just enjoy the squeals he makes, well,

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that's fine, too. God has a purpose for each of us, son. He made us born in the upstanding, God-fearingly glorious Federation of American States because he wanted us to be Citizens. Now, His ineffable will placed this boy here in the Protectorate of Southern California. Ours is not to second-guess His reasons, son. We are His tools. There's a natural order to things. We obey our God. Our wives and daughters obey us. Our slaves obey everyone.

"I'm glad you came to me with your concerns. I'm proud of you, son, for thinking about what God wants, and how we can honor Him. If you work hard in God's cause, you can own your own slave one day. Now, was there anything else?"

"No. That's all. Thank you, sir."

"Fine, fine. Any more questions, you come see me. I'll tell you what; you stay here with Barnes. Give him a hand instead of Rodriguez. Spend a bit more time with the new harvest, up close. Get to see for yourself they're not like the rest of us. I'm glad we had this little talk."

Trace imagined the look on Miller's face as his heavy footfalls left the command unit. He heard the creak as the Colonel swung around in his swivel chair, and took the nudge to the back of his knee as permission to straighten. He pulled his pants up as he turned around. The Colonel's voice radiated satisfaction, even if he was never sated for long. "Keep one of the girls back for me to play with, okay? A nice used one. Existing scars would be good. Don't want to lose value. And wipe my jizz off your face before you see them. No need to spook the livestock. Not until I can enjoy it, anyway." He pursed his lips. "I never had a slave who served their time out before. You planning to go back home?"

"No, sir."

"Good boy. You always did know how to properly show your gratitude."

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Trace watched the convoy move off, the white dust swirling behind the last trucks, until he tasted dirt on his tongue. He pulled his filthy T-shirt off and wiped the come from his face and neck, balling the fabric in his hands and hurling it away. He took a breath, trying to calm himself. He had three, maybe four days. Alone. He definitely had tonight. A whole night by himself in the medunit, and the Colonel would be clicks away. He sat on the aluminum steps, and with shaking hands drew a bootleg pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He



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heard the scuff of boots on sand, and tensed. Pete walked around the corner of the medunit, producing a lighter from his chest pocket and throwing it at him. Trace caught it neatly, then pulled two cigarettes out of the packet and lit them both, cupping his hand against the wind. Pete lowered himself to the ground beside him.

He passed a cigarette over. "Smoke, sir?"

"Cut that 'sir' crap out." Pete took his cigarette, their fingers touching. Pete's skin was hot. "It's all set up for tomorrow. Met the headman and everything. It's a head *woman*. Can you believe that?"

Trace shrugged. There'd been a woman in charge in El Centro, too, from what he could remember. Hadn't seemed to make any difference.

Pete took a deep draw and blew out a smoke ring. "What's the updated population for the county?" he asked.

"Thousand and six. Up from last trip."

"I'm surprised the land supports that many," Pete said.

"It's the solar plant." Trace jerked his head south. "And the refinery. Brings Fed money in."

Pete nodded. They sat close together, breathing the thin smoke into their lungs and expelling it into the short, dry dusk, each breath a quiet addendum to the day.

"Pete, you ever met an ex-slave?"

Pete shook his head. "I don't think there's any such thing."

"They tell us twenty years."

"You sure you remember the talk right?"

"I *give* it."

Pete snorted. "Sure, then. Hell, I bet there's a farm in Great Carolina where the ex-slaves all go. Green fields. Trees and shit."

A tiny butterfly landed next to their shoes, deep mustard-yellow against the bone-white earth. Trace put his hand down in front of the butterfly and waited for it to crawl over his finger so he could lift it up. Wingspots of gray made it seem flecked with ashes. He raised it high and let out a soft breath under its wings, watching as it fluttered toward a stand of tall green torch trees.

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“You got nowhere else to go, you’re welcome to come home with me.” Pete didn’t look at him, but his arm tensed at Trace’s side.

“Yeah.” He forced a smile out. “You know I appreciate it.”

“It’s not charity, man. You’re a medic, my family would love to have you on the spread.”

He didn’t reply. It was a nice fantasy.

He tracked the butterfly’s path, until its wings were lost in the livid yellow starting to streak the sky.

Pete stood, throwing the last inch of his cigarette down to the dry sand and grinding it out with his boot. He nodded out at the huge horizon, the ground paved in cracked salt tiles. “What’s that called?”

Trace swallowed, trying to moisten his dry throat. “The Salton Sea.”

“Sea? There’s no fucking water.”

“There was once, I guess. There used to be a canal that irrigated the whole Valley. Till Secession. Now Colorado sends its water to the rest of the Federation.”

“How the fuck do you know that? No, wait, don’t answer that. It’s those damn dead trees you collect, isn’t it? You’re the font of all bloody knowledge.” He chuckled. “Grub’s up soon. You coming over to eat?”

At a table across from Miller’s God-fearing eyes? He’d rather be tucked up in his bunk with music on and a nineteenth-century French novel in his hand. Or the emergency MREs he had stashed in the medunit. He shook his head. “Naw, I’m fine. Not hungry. I’m gonna turn in early. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Pete’s back tensed, but he only nodded.

Trace watched until Pete was out of sight, then leaned back against the steps, thinking about the delicious rasp of yellowed paper under his fingers, the story yet to be unraveled, and smiled.

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Trace scuffed his feet on the steps to remove the worst of the dust, before climbing into the medunit. He locked the outer door and slipped his shoes off, stowing them in a locker by the door. He padded across to the living quarters at the rear, the metal floor cool on his bare feet. He closed the door and leaned

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back against it, breathing deeply and relaxing at the scent of chlorhexidine hanging in the cool air. Just him. Only him.

The bunk was narrow, the shelf above it stacked with books. He ran his fingers along them, the dust jackets crisp and new. He took out the one carrying the title *The Life of St Thomas Aquinas*, and pulled the camouflaging cover off to save it from wear. The pages inside were the color of turned cream, the paper soft and pliable under his fingers. The type pressed deep into the paper. He could *feel* the town of Yonville-l'Abbaye as he ran his fingertips over the pages. He left the novel on his bunk so he could look at it as he showered. The water washed away the day while his mind went out to the agricultural show, and Rodolphe clasping Emma's hand.

He dressed in a clean T-shirt and sweats, reveling in the luxury of being able to sleep in clothes. He pulled up his favorite playlist on his tablet, letting the soft strains of Bach cello suite whisper to him.

He'd barely read a paragraph when a demanding rap came outside the main unit door. He froze. It wasn't Pete, he'd never come to him at night. Would Clarke need something?

The knock came again, but he couldn't make himself answer. Physically couldn't. He was asleep. He never heard. He'd shucked off all his defenses; he couldn't make himself put his slave face on again. There would be a penalty tomorrow, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He plugged his earbuds into the tablet jack and tucked them into his ears. The cello sang, just to him, as he rode through the ferns with Emma and Rodolphe.

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They started early, the sun a dull orange segment on the horizon.

Pete stood beside Trace, projecting his voice out to the crowd, while his lapel mic sent his words to the portable speakers set around the outside of the square. "You all know how this works, so let's get this over and done with before the sun gets too much higher in the sky. Then you can all go home with your families."

Well, not *all* your families. Trace hated this part. He shoved his sour emotions beneath his medical training. Miller caught his eye with a smirk, standing on the edge of the crowd, hand fondling the hilt of his shock stick. He'd shown his enjoyment of the last few weeks all too much.

"I want all the babies born in the last two years, front and center," Pete called.

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A small trickle of women holding babies and toddlers came up to the table, laid out with Trace's equipment. The process wasn't demanding. A quick DNA sample, a jab for the MMRHIV vaccine, sending high-pitched squalls slicing into the air, and a scanned copy of the flimsy plastic birth certificate.

One mother handed him a blanket-wrapped bundle, the apprehension clear on her face. Trace pulled the blanket back from the tiny face. A split smile greeted him, her philtrum cleft down the center, like a hare. She was born in an odd year, anyway, so she wouldn't be harvested, but he noted in the file that she should be sterilized when she reached puberty. Regulations were to pull the weed out at the root rather than let it spread. He smiled at the mother when he passed the infant back, but she didn't meet his eyes.

The toddler in the next woman's arms had a livid, puckered burn scar across her face. He flipped the blanket back and followed where it dripped down her body. An even. His eyes went straight to the mother, her gleam of triumph shining through her mask of fear and hesitation. He tapped Pete on the shoulder, drawing his gaze from the crowd. Pete always expected trouble, although there hadn't been any for years.

Pete took the bundle gently from him, eyes roaming the tiny, naked body, sadness and compassion warring for supremacy. He steeled his face, and walked away, holding the child up, arms stretched over his head, swiveling for the whole crowd to see. His voice was steadier than Trace's own would have been. "This is a crime against the Federation. I want everyone here to know that this child will be taken when it's her harvest. She's an even, and she belongs to Citizens. Hurting your own children won't change that. You want to make things better for them? Teach them to be obedient, loyal, docile. Teach them that they don't belong to you, they belong to the Federation."

Pete thrust the toddler into Trace's arms and walked away. The tension in his shoulders told Trace he was hurting, too.

Trace filled in the details on his tablet and handed her back to her mother, forcing down his disgust. Trace was glad he wouldn't be here when this kid's harvest came. She was too damaged to appeal to wealthy Citizens. By scarring her, the mother was inviting clients to add to the collection. He shook his head. People never thought their actions through.

There were only nine under-twos: five odds, four evens, and only two of those girls. Not good. The population wasn't replenishing itself. Not only here: all over the Protectorate. The Colonel wouldn't be happy. Especially here. When he wasn't happy, no one was happy.

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The atmosphere grew cold, taut. People murmured as Pete tried to speak. He raised his voice over the crowd. Uneasiness settled on Trace's skin with the ever-present dust.

“Come on, let's get this finished. All the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds up to the front. Odds on the right, evens on the left.”

Trace looked them over, Pete beside him. The five girls were passable, and Clarke herded them over to the transport, as choked sobs filled the air. The single boy was a disappointment. Wiry enough, from good strong stock, but ugly as Satan, and decidedly lacking in supple, ivory skin that might tempt a man to sodomy, even one with a distinct taste for it already.

“Where's the other boy?” he asked.

Two parents stepped forward, tremulously holding out a folded rectangle of thin plastic to Pete. Pete grabbed it with irritation, passing it over. Trace unfolded a death certificate, dated three months earlier. Snake bite. He nodded and passed it back to the parents. Fortunate kid. Fifteen minutes of excruciating agony, and then peace.

Weariness filled his bones, soaked his marrow. There was bound to be another snake out there, wasn't there? He could take a nice long walk. Write his own final chapter.

The fourteen-year-olds were a better batch. One of the boys was tall, willowy. Olive skin, with a golden sun-kissed glow that Trace was willing to bet went all the way under his clothes. Blond curls with a hint of chestnut, falling adorably over his fine-boned face. God, they'd be fighting over his contract. He shook his head. He needed this to be over. It was getting too fucking hot. He looked at Pete and pointed his thumb at the tall kid. “He'll do.”

The kid stumbled a step backwards, his mouth opening and closing like he was drowning. Trace had seen that enough times to recognize it. Felt it, too.

He wished they wouldn't run. It only made the process more painful. It happened sometimes, with the odds. They weren't prepared, the way the evens were. They thought it was a sure thing: they were off the hook. They should have learned earlier that life just wasn't fair.

Trace turned his back on the kid. He couldn't watch another takedown. Clarke was already jogging back, pulling cable ties out of his pocket, while Miller smiled and advanced, shock stick drawn.

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Isaac's heart pounded as Miles sought him, his frightened gaze scanning over hundreds of heads to try and find where Isaac had hid himself in the crowd. Feds marched toward the boy. Isaac saw terror and horror in his gaze, felt its echo in his own chest.

Not Miles. No. *He* wouldn't have Miles. Isaac didn't look back to Rachel and Lila behind him somewhere in the crowd. He threaded his way to the front of the throng, lunging forward to trip the young Fed as he passed. He snagged the thin, reedy man by the shoulder, grabbing hold of his greige uniform with both hands and using his greater weight to force him off his feet.

"Miles, run!"

The boy fled, his long legs carrying him swiftly, reflexes honed from twelve years of digging out kangaroo rats to supplement a meager meal. Isaac felt a sense of satisfaction at the dust cloud that dissipated into the desert air, as his brother ran to safety.

The older Fed, the one who'd stood back and watched everything, turned an exasperated expression on him. He was on top of Isaac before he could land a second blow. The ground rushed up to meet him and the stench of urine filled his nostrils. Dust plugged his nose and he tasted chalk and creosote, gritty against his teeth and tongue as he tried to suck air into his lungs. His ear scraped the ground, catching against a sharp rock. He tried to lift his head, but the message wasn't getting through to his muscles.

"You want me to go after the kid, Sarge?" The Fed he'd tripped pinned him to the dirt, rocking from side to side, the knee in Isaac's back grinding across his spine.

"Nah. It's too fucking hot, Miller."

"Where do you want the new meat?"

The medic loomed over him, blocking the sun like a monument. A sheaf of emotions warred on his face: compassion, annoyance, and something else, dark and hungry. The man's voice sounded far away. "Stick an ankle cuff on him and dump him in the shower in the medunit."

The words stole any trickle of hope Isaac had left. Something hard and metallic shoved his head forward and down. He didn't even have time to groan before the world darkened to nothingness.

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Tiles pressed against Isaac's skin, slippery and cold. He squinted his eyes against the brightness of the room. White surrounded him, reflections bouncing off slick ceramic and chrome. Cold water beat down on him from a showerhead a million miles above.

Isaac shivered and retched, his stomach trying to empty itself. Guys at the bar got shocked sometimes, when they overstayed their work leave and talked back to the MPs. Isaac's head pounded. Did this feel better or worse if you were also drunk?

A shadow fell on him, blocking the blue-white light. Isaac blinked the stream of water out of his eyelashes.

“Welcome back, kid. That was incredibly stupid, you know.”

He was forty, maybe, gray hairs adding texture to his short buzz cut. An angry scab marred his sharp cheekbone. His upper body was thick with muscles, the skin lined and weather-beaten. Isaac shivered as his eyes cut right through him: the gray of nighttime clouds in the rainy season. Thick forearms and wrists ended in huge gnarled hands. This was the medic. The slave. *His* slave.

“You're the property of the Federation, now. Bet that wasn't what you were expecting when you pulled that stunt, huh? I've gotta go process this new batch of girls. Get clean. Everywhere. Here.”

He held his hand out, and Isaac instinctively reached up to take the offering. The weight was unexpected, the large gauge chain thick and clumsy in his hands. The padlock clunked against the side of the tub.

“When you're done, lock yourself to the table. I'll be back to inspect the merchandise.”

Despite the shower, Isaac's mouth was suddenly dry. He narrowed his eyes in puzzlement. He was too old: he was twenty-four, for God's sake. This was a mistake. He couldn't be here.

The man—Trace, they'd called him—nodded as if reading his mind. “The Federation only takes the kids born in even years to make sure there's enough girls left for breeding. To renew your population. Make sure there's always another harvest. There's nothing in the Law says they can't take whoever they want. As you have just discovered. Accept it. Now get yourself ready. There's soap, shampoo, de-lice solution, and an anal bulb in that basket at the other end of the tub. Use them all.”

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“Please. Did Miles get away? My brother?”

Trace turned back, gazing blankly at Isaac for a moment before he gave a curt nod. The metal door closed hollowly behind him, and after a few minutes fragments of words filtered through the wall, as the man raised his voice in the well-measured cadences of a rehearsed presentation.

Isaac checked the metal walls of the room. There was no back door, no window, no vents overhead. Fuck. He couldn't stay here. He crouched in the bottom of the shower, trying to think through the terror and anxiety that were all he could register.

Patience: that was the only card he had to play. He needed to be compliant. Wait. Watch. His eyes rested on the basket of cleansing products at the other end of the tub. They were at least familiar. Maybe shampoo would be the best start. The thought of the anal bulb filled him with apprehension and confusion and... something else, something that stroked the edges of his consciousness with featherlight touches that made him shiver. He picked up the bottle and poured a soapy handful.

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His fingers twitched against his gray pants, betraying his desire to reach out and touch skin as he surveyed the new cohort. But not this skin. Fuck, the kid in the room next door would do that to anyone. Had he looked like that himself, once? Pale skin like smooth vellum, eyes full of fear. And that innocence... now that was delicious. Trace wanted to lick it off his skin. Not pretty, no, not like that kid who got away. Nose a fraction too long, and the wrong shape, eyebrows too bold, face too independent. And that tattoo. That would have to go. *He's too old, too dark, too inked... but God help me, I want him. I want to be inside him.* He laughed at himself. *Well, that's one thing that will never happen. Is this what the Colonel feels when he looks at me?*

The girls were cowering around the edges of the main exam room. It took all his strength to find his voice, to stop it from shaking the way his hands were, to try to inject the reassurance he had honed over the years.

“Don't be scared. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. I'm a medic. I'm going to check out each one of you. You can see this is exactly like the medunit that comes by every year to give you your vaccinations, just bigger, that's all. There are no surprises in here. Nothing I do to you will hurt more than a needle prick.



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“After I check you out, assuming you’re good to go, you’ll be transported over the border to the Federation. You’ll attend training school. You’ll be taught to read. You’ll learn some basic skills.”

One girl, with pretty red hair, raised her hand, and he acknowledged her with a nod. “Can we learn to be a medic, like you, sir?”

“Don’t sir me. I’m not a Citizen, no more than you. But, no, you won’t,” he said. “You’re too valuable for stuff like this.” That was one way to put it.

“What happens after we finish training?”

“You’ll be taken to a Purity House. How long you serve there depends. It’s different for everyone.”

“Depends on what?”

“It’s hard to say. It varies from person to person.” *And depends on how fast your youthful looks fade.* He didn’t say that, though. He wasn’t a fucking idiot. No need for them to be difficult to handle on the journey. There was plenty of time for them to work out the lifespan for soft skin and guileless eyes when you were being fucked by upstanding men of the community eighteen hours a day. The Purity Code mandated ten years hard labor for Citizens who debauched another Citizen’s daughter with sexual congress outside of marriage. But those uncontrollable male urges needed satiating. It was lucky women didn’t feel sexual desire at all, or he supposed they’d be taking all the boys from each community as well.

“When you’ve done your time in the House you’ll be assigned other duties. Housekeeping, cleaning, child care. Food service, sometimes.” And sometimes not. Best to hope you’re not too pretty, that you don’t end up catching the eye of someone who wants to pay the premium so you end up in a private stable. Anything could happen behind domestic walls. And often did.

“Once you serve your term, twenty years, you’re free to go.”

“We can come home, then?”

He smiled at her. “Sure, kid.” How many ex-slaves had she seen come home? “If you’ve got more questions, remember them for the training center in Flagstaff. Today, when we’re done, there’s a cold Coca-Cola waiting in the fridge for each of you. Now, who wants to go first, get the formalities over and done with?”

A blond girl, big-boned and sturdy, spoke up. “Here? In front of everyone?”

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“There’s no need for you to be shy. You’re all in this together.” And this would be the least of the things that would happen in front of whoever cared to watch. He patted the exam chair, the disposable paper cover crackling under his hand. “How about you then? Hop on up.”

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No cigarette had ever felt so good as the one he smoked on the medunit steps when he’d finished. Astounding. This had to be a record: five virgins. The Colonel wouldn’t be happy, though. Virgins fetched such a high price; he wouldn’t pass up profit to slake his own thirst. These girls wouldn’t be headed for a House, but straight into private collections. The Colonel had connections. He always knew where the top bidders were to be found. Even for that plain one. Maybe not for long, with her, though.

The girls clambered into the air-conditioned transport with Clarke, clasping their precious carbonated prizes to their chests. A few tremulously waved to him, but he didn’t wave back. This time he had a treat waiting for him as well. And for once it wasn’t a book. He sucked the sweet smoke into his lungs, hoping to still his tremors. He wanted a steady hand when he touched the kid.

Iridescent blue wasps scampered in and out of pinhole burrows in the chalky dirt, dazzling where they caught the light. Sandaled feet stepped into his sight line. He brought his gaze up slowly. Baggy shorts bared lean, golden legs. A white singlet exposed flawless skin and a hint of a nipple where it slipped to one side. Long, sun-bleached strands fell to the boy’s shoulders and strayed over a perfect oval face.

“I’m sorry.”

“Say what now, kid?”

“I’m sorry I ran. I didn’t mean to. I was just... I’m sorry.”

Trace shrugged, taking another draw of tobacco smoke. The kid moved his feet restlessly on the sand. The merest hint of soft hairs on his legs caught the sun.

“Please, can you take me instead?”

He cocked his head to one side. “You’re offering yourself up?”

“Yes. Please? My brother... he supports us all. They need him. No one needs me. Please. Just let me take his place. The way you wanted.”

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He closed his eyes and let another mouthful of smoke fill his lungs. “But I want *him*.”

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Walking back inside the medunit was like entering a cave. Cool light reflected off the shiny white tiles, letting Trace's eyes widen in relief after the blinding sun outside. Cold air kissed his skin, making him shiver. Just the cold. Sure. He circuited the room, wiping dust from shiny chrome surfaces. Damn stuff snuck in everywhere.

He spread a clean cloth on the instrument trolley and laid out the tools of his trade in meticulous rows. One drawer was ajar, and he nudged it closed, rubbing his fingerprints away. He'd already cleaned the examination chair, but he took a moment to grab a paper towel, squirt disinfectant, and wipe the white vinyl surface down again, before spreading a new disposable cover over it. He'd have the kid on it in a minute, laid out, helpless...

Jittery with anticipation, he moved to the door. The handle was cold to the touch. Strange that he'd put the kid in there. He could have left him with Clarke and Pete. So why had he done it? He closed his eyes as the answer came to him: he wanted the kid untouched, left just for him. His to touch, his to explore, his to keep. Which was hilarious, seeing as he had nothing. Not even himself. Only a bootleg collection of tattered words.

He entered the room. Good. The kid had obeyed orders. The chain clanked against the leg of the dining table that was bolted to the floor. Trace squatted down beside him. The kid was cold and shivering, the moisture of the shower still damp on his skin. Trace was appalled.

“Hey, I left a towel for you, you know.” He gestured with a tip of his head to the white folds of cotton on the floor beside the tub.

The kid's eyes only flicked toward it for a second, then sought his face again. Reaching out, Trace snagged the towel. “Stand up.”

The kid dragged himself to his feet. Trace shook the towel, the worn terrycloth scratchy against his hands. He reached out and touched the kid, pulling him close and holding his breath as he felt the firm body through the thin layer of fabric.

“What's your name?”

The kid was trying to grit his teeth, but he couldn't stop them from chattering. Trace rubbed him down, trying to warm him with friction. *Shit*.

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He'd left him in here alone way too long, while he lost himself in pointless reverie. He was a fucking idiot. And now the kid was scared, and with his body this cold Trace would have a hell of a time finding a vein for the draw.

He knelt, unlocking the padlock with fingers suddenly clumsy. He forced himself to keep the light, professional tone in his voice. It was hard-won. It had taken years to be able to show up and do his job with his own wounds slathered in burn cream, bandages, antiseptics. And other wounds that nothing could touch. "Come on, kid."

"It's not kid." His voice was low, but strong.

"What's that?"

"My name's not kid. It's Isaac."

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Tentatively, Isaac followed the medic out into the main room of the medunit. The smell of the place drew echoes from his childhood: the bitter tang of disinfectant mixed with fear. Light glinted on metal surfaces.

Isaac turned his head, checking out the room. Again, no windows, and a single door, with a snib lock on the inside. Trace shook his head. "They're right outside kid. You'll end up back in here, and in worse shape than you are now. Don't do it, for both our sakes, okay?"

"I wasn't... I won't."

Trace pointed toward the corner where a scale unit stood against one wall. "You know the drill. Hop up."

It was easier facing the wall than exposing himself to the medic. He let out a long breath and straightened up on the scale.

"You're only five nine, kid, but a good solid build for all that. I'd have said you were supposed to be a little taller, but you look like you eat okay. You had some nutrition issues when you were younger?"

Trace's voice was soft, and there was a moment where Isaac thought about opening his big mouth, then he thought better of it. How could he explain?

"All right, we're done here. Jump up on the chair."

Trace nodded to the large exam chair in the center of the room. The white paper cover looked sterile and cold.

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Isaac sidled over to the chair, holding his hands cupped in front of his cock and balls, which hung limp and shriveled by the cold. Trace gestured to his groin. "Don't even bother. I'm going to see a lot more than that by the time we're through."

*More than that?* Isaac swallowed and slid himself sideways onto the chair. The paper cover was Tyvek, like the building paper they used to line shacks, when they could get it. Softer than Isaac expected.

"That's it," said Trace. "Just there, for now."

Isaac glanced at the instrument trolley. He remembered the big six-pronged vaccination gun from his childhood. Glass tubes and a white plastic syringe rattled in a kidney-shaped dish.

Trace draped a shiny white plastic apron over his gray scrubs, then slipped a smooth blood pressure cuff around Isaac's right arm. The slave's face was so close, he could see the puckering in the skin around the scab, and older scars, faint under his tan. Isaac realized the slave was watching him in return, and the scrutiny brought a flush to Isaac's cheeks. He turned his head, concentrated on the soft rubbery sounds the apron made as Trace shifted position, and when that wasn't enough, on the quiet beep of a tablet powering up and the soft taps of a stylus on glass.

The quiet hum as the cuff filled vibrated through his body. Trace's hands warmed Isaac's cold skin where they glanced across him. An ice-cold stethoscope bell landed on his chest. He inhaled sharply, then let out a harsh cough.

"It's all right. Just breathe in and out." Trace's voice was graveled, deep, and reassuring.

"Lean forward."

Isaac rested his weight against Trace's solid body. Trace placed the stethoscope against his back.

"That's it, good boy. In and out. That's all you have to do."

Exhaustion closed Isaac's eyes. It was more than the shock stick and being harvested, after all his efforts to avoid the census over the years. He was hollowed out from Miles's close call. He'd have given almost anything to save his brother, but he wished the price hadn't been quite this high. He rested his forehead against Trace's chest, and matched the man's breathing, calm and unhurried. He drew in a deeper breath and coughed again.

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“That’s good,” said Trace. His hand stroked Isaac’s shoulder blade. The touch was strange. Gentle. Caressing. No one had touched him like that before. He’d always hoped a girl would, one day, but there were so few, and he had nothing to offer but a share of his burdens. Isaac forced himself to remember this was the man who’d had him brought in here. He wore the gray of a slave, but they’d followed his orders.

Trace put a hand to his shoulder and lightly pushed him upright. He read the cuff monitor then detached it.

“What’s your name?”

“I told you. Isaac.”

“Full name.”

“Poole. Isaac Daniel Poole.”

“Okay, Isaac, let’s have a look at your records, shall we? What did you catch as a youngster, huh?” The man’s voice was gentle, too, an incongruous match to his big build.

Trace worked at the tablet for long minutes, and Isaac felt his muscles stiffen up in the cool air.

“How old are you, Isaac?”

“Twenty-four.” He didn’t see any point in lying.

“You look younger. It’s that pale skin that does it. You sure that boy was your brother? You’re not much alike.” His words made Isaac shiver.

Trace put the tablet down and dragged a stool over, sitting in front of Isaac and staring into his eyes. “So, kid, you wanna explain to me why there’s no Isaac Poole in our records, but Miles Poole is?”

Isaac didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

“You move here from outside the Protectorate?”

Isaac shook his head. He tried to speak, but his throat was dry, and only a croak emerged. He snapped his mouth closed, ashamed. “It’s okay, kid. I’ll get you a drink.” Trace walked over to the big double sink, pulled a plastic cup from a dispenser fastened to the wall and filled it. He looked solid and dependable, all muscle under his soft scrubs. He was different from the Feds. Different, too, from the men in town who worked at the refinery or the plant

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until they shrank and faded. Or the women who incessantly toiled and cooked and swept the ever-present dust. Isaac had never imagined how his life might fit around getting older, about not being a boy any more. He never dared assume there would be a time when Rachel and Lila and Miles and anyone else might not need him.

He studied Trace, the contours of his face and thickness of his arms. Maybe it would be all right to become a grown man in the Fed, if it was this kind of man. Wouldn't it?

Trace held out the plastic cup. Isaac took it with a shaking hand, the water in it shivering in tiny ripples.

"You'll still be feeling the after effects of the shock sticks. I can give you an analgesic, if you want?"

Isaac shook his head. The cold water bit his gums and left a sour aftertaste on the back of his tongue. Trace threw the empty cup into the wastebasket with unerring aim.

A wet sensation brushed over his upper arm, and Isaac hissed. Trace wiped his bicep with a white wet square of cloth. His face was so close again, and this time, Isaac didn't look away. When Trace looked up, their eyes met, and Isaac's breath hitched. A zigzag line cut the warm brown of Trace's iris where it met the hazel-green ring around the outside. He knew those eyes.

"Just a disinfectant wipe," said Trace. "Your tracker goes in here." He held a tiny plastic syringe in his gloved hand, and Isaac turned his head away. He didn't see the large gauge needle slide into his skin, but he grimaced as Trace's fingers depressed the plunger, sending the chip into his body. The empty syringe landed on the trolley with a dull clunk.

Trace tightened a green webbing tourniquet on his upper arm. His fingers were tender and nimble as he stroked the inside of Isaac's elbow, touching the site of the deep blue vein. Isaac started shivering.

"Hey, don't tense up, okay?" Trace's hand was on his face, stroking his skin. "When you're tense your veins are hard to find. Shit, you're way too cold." Trace pulled off the tourniquet. His footsteps echoed. A squeak filled the space, then the closing of a cupboard, and a peculiar and unfamiliar crackling. A warm, soft weight descended on Isaac. Heat radiated out from a blanket covering him.

"Just swivel yourself around, get comfortable." Trace stroked Isaac's back with one hand as he helped him turn. He grasped Isaac's shoulder, pressing and

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urging him back, until he was lying in the chair. The large flat lights in the ceiling shone blue-white, the glow diffused by textured plastic panels.

“You weren’t supposed to get this cold. That’s why the water was warm. It was hours you let yourself get cold in there. That *I* let you get cold in there. I’m sorry. Instant heat blanket. Pretty good, huh?”

He was sorry? He’d never heard that from a Fed before. Isaac couldn’t respond. He closed his eyes and listened to Trace moving around the room, making small noises of tidiness and organization. His muscles started to loosen...

Trace’s big hand settled on top of his head, stroking his hair softly. His voice sounded distant. “You get warm. I’ll be back soon.”

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His tablet chimed softly. Trace knew it would be the Colonel: there was no one else to call him.

“How’s it going, boy?”

“Fine, sir. The five girls are all on their way to the center now. They’re all good, healthy. They’ll do well. Sorry, but I couldn’t hold one back for you.”

“You’ve got a boy, though, yeah?”

“Yes, sir. It’s strange, though. He’s not in the database. I’ve got his DNA running now.”

“That’s fine. Doesn’t matter who he is. Don’t loosen him up too much for me, you hear?”

“Of course not, sir.” His gut clenched at the thought of what Isaac was going to go through. Those early years hadn’t been easy. Yeah, like *now* was easy.

“And Barnes says the repairs are going well, so you should be out of there in forty-eight hours. I’m looking forward to it, boy. Be good now.”

Trace nodded, then realized the Colonel couldn’t see him. “Yes, sir.” The sense of hopelessness overwhelmed him.

The Colonel disconnected without a good-bye. Isaac lay sleeping on the chair. He looked impossibly young. Brave, though. Ready to take a risk for someone else. How long would that last?

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A screech of metal on metal made Isaac's eyes flick open. Disoriented, he looked around. Had he dozed off?

"Feeling better now, kid? We have to continue." Trace pulled off his latex gloves and threw them into the rubbish bin.

"I told you; it's Isaac. Not kid. I haven't been a kid for years."

"To an old man like me, you're a kid." Trace pulled the blanket off Isaac, folding it and putting it on the bottom shelf of the instrument trolley. Trace's hands were dusty from the gloves, and where he skimmed Isaac's body he left behind a delicate trail of white powder.

Isaac cringed as his body was bared again. His balls had dropped a little, not pulled up to his body with cold and stress. Well, there was still the stress. Trace pulled a new pair of gloves from the box, and put them on, then refastened the tourniquet. "Let's have a look at those veins again, yeah?"

Trace's fingers were delicate against his skin as he stroked the inside of Isaac's elbow, skittering across the deep blue vein. The cold swipe of a sterilizing pad followed.

Isaac stared at the bite of the needle as it slid into his vein. He watched the thick red liquid fill up the vial in great slow goutts.

"Oh, you're going to watch this time?"

There was something peaceful about everything now. Simple. Yesterday he'd worked eighteen hours and worried how he was going to get shoes for Lila. Tomorrow he'd look for his chance to run, and if there wasn't one, then the next day and the next and the next. He'd done it once before, after all. But right now, all he had to do was lie here and do what the medic told him. There wasn't any other option. Trace tugged his arm as he unsnapped one vial and deftly inserted a second. He laid the blood-filled tube on the green cloth covering the trolley. Why did they always take blood? What did they do with it?

He closed his eyes again while Trace walked around the lab, footsteps followed by stickers peeling off backing paper and the beep of a bar code reader. A piece of gauze pressed against his tiny wound, held there with a piece of tape.

Trace took Isaac's arm, holding it out straight. He ran his hands down the limb from armpit to hand, manipulating each finger, and kneading the palm

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between his thumbs. His touch was caressing, possessive. It wasn't the impartial and peremptory touch of the medics of his childhood. He skimmed his fingers along Isaac's clavicle. "You got an old break here, kid. And there's a mole on your forearm I think we'd better excise and send for testing. It might be nothing, but if it's not, it's a nasty melanoma. You ever notice how raised it is?" Trace made another note on his tablet.

"How the hell do I have a melanoma? I'm never outside!"

Trace palpated his armpits. "It's the kind least associated with sun exposure. Don't worry about it. It might be nothing, but either way, I'll take care of it." Trace's hand carded through Isaac's hair, feeling the skull structure underneath. His fingertips worked their way down the bone, marking eye sockets, cheekbones, pressing behind his ears. He dug into the hinge of Isaac's jaw, and delicately into the soft flesh of his neck. Isaac's skin pebbled at his touch.

Trace's fingers lingered before sliding downward, caressing his pecs, stroking down to his belly. "You've still got your appendix."

Isaac's stomach muscles clenched involuntarily under Trace's touch. The medic's fingers skimmed his abs, digging into the tender crease where thigh met groin. Unaccountably, Isaac's cock stirred, flexed, and halfheartedly tried to fill. Shame and horror flooded his veins, and Isaac willed himself to stillness, breathing out as Trace hummed and released him, then made a notation on his tablet.

Trace grabbed an instrument off the small table. Isaac dredged up the name from his memory; an otoscope. He saw the glimpse of light in his peripheral vision, then shivered as the beaked appliance delved deep into his ear. Trace was muttering to himself, dropping his hand to Isaac's shoulder and stroking a patch of skin. The back of Isaac's elbow brushed against Trace's crotch. Isaac jerked his arm away in reflex. His face burned.

Trace pulled the otoscope out and reached to the trolley again. The sound of the vaccination gun raised a familiar dread; that dry click as each vial snapped into place.

Trace placed the gun against Isaac's upper arm and pulled the trigger. Yep, it still stung like a bastard.

"Well, you've had your major vaccinations, anyway," said Trace. "So you were under some kind of medical care before."

Isaac glanced at the new mark next to the old welt. His Genoese pox vac site had become inflamed and tender. He'd complained, so his father had taken

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him to an internment camp, back before they spent money on medical care in the Protectorate. He'd forced Isaac to watch through sturdy plate glass as unvaccinated slaves oozed and died on canvas cots. Isaac still had the scar tissue. Trace stuck an adhesive bandage over the top, so Isaac at least didn't have to keep looking at the circular mark.

"One more," said Trace, picking up a disposable syringe.

"What's that one for?"

"Antidepressant implant with a vitamin supplement. It'll last your first six months. You might need something stronger before then, but at least this will help you deal with transition." The injection was swift and painless. "And I probably shouldn't have told you that," said Trace. "At least you don't need a contraceptive implant."

"Contraceptives? I thought they were against God's will."

"Sure they are, kid."

"Isaac," he whispered.

"Swing your leg over." Trace helped him lift his left leg over the metal stirrups, protruding from the extension at one end of the chair.

"There's more?"

Isaac squirmed in the chair like he had a stomach full of green berries, shivering as his shackle clanked against a stirrup. Trace's hand rested softly on his shoulder, then stroked up his neck and caressed his cheek. The repetitive motion settled him. "It's okay. You don't need to worry yet. We're going to start easy. Just relax."

Isaac wrapped his arms around himself. A slight vibration shot through him as Trace raised the height of the chair with a hydraulic base.

"You going to be good for me?"

Isaac didn't trust his voice. He nodded and kept his eyes closed.

"Anything bothering you at the moment, physically? Any aches and pains?"

Isaac's cough took that exact moment to burst forth. He sat up and bent over, cradling his chest to try to ease that tight feeling in his lungs.

"Well, that answers that question." Trace sounded almost satisfied. "We'd better have a look at that. But let's get a DNA sample first."

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A burst of adrenaline renewed Isaac. “No. Please. Honest, I’m fine. I’m not sick. It’s just a cough.”

Trace stroked Isaac’s forehead.

“Hey, boy, it’s okay. Where did you ever get the idea illness is a personal failing, huh? You’ve done nothing wrong. Let’s just take a look at you.”

Trace’s hand lingered on Isaac’s hair. The unfamiliar touch pressed reality back into the room. What the hell was he doing lying here? None of this was possible. He couldn’t go back to the Fed, he had responsibilities here. He struggled to rise again.

“Look, I’ve got money saved, some. I can get you more. Please, just let me out. It’s a mistake.”

Trace swiveled on his stool and looked Isaac square in the face. “It’s not up to me, you know that, right? You belong to the Federation, just as much as I do. There’s not going to be anyone letting anyone else go. There’s no way out. You’ve got a tracker in you now. If you tried to run they’d do everything they could to get you back. They can’t afford to let people think that running is an option. They’ll kill you first.”

He wanted to stop struggling, he did, but fear threaded through him. Trace grasped his left forearm in his huge hands and brought it down to the side of the chair as Isaac fought. He knew it was pointless. There were Feds outside the door, and even if he got free, where would he go? They’d come for him, and his family would pay. But a DNA test would ruin everything.

Trace fastened his left hand to the chair with the worn leather cuffs dangling limply from the armrests. Planting his big palm in the center of Isaac’s chest, Trace held him down as he lowered the chair again. He leaned over Isaac’s body and single-handedly fastened Isaac’s right hand into the other strap. He placed both hands on Isaac’s shoulders, looking into his eyes. “I don’t want this to be difficult for you. Do you need more?”

Isaac couldn’t ask, couldn’t say it. Trace seemed to understand anyway, and he stooped to pull up a long leather strap that held Isaac around the waist, pinning him to the chair. He grasped one of Isaac’s legs around the ankle. Isaac thrashed and shouted, but it was too late. Trace lifted the leg, nudging the strut of the stirrup into place with his hip, then lowered Isaac’s foot into the cradling metal. He strapped it in with a soft leather piece that caressed his ankle and instep. Isaac flailed like a toad after the rains, tipped onto its back by delighted

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kids. The waist strap stopped him getting leverage, and Trace implacably positioned his second leg in the other stirrup.

Cool air stirred on his thighs, his ass, his hole. Salt stung his eyes at the humiliation. He'd always struggled to be strong, dependable. And now to be vulnerable like this, ass and cock exposed, unable to move... He wasn't Isaac any more. A sob burst from him, abrading his throat and pulling the anguish out of his heart. Tears followed.

Trace ignored his weakness, stroking the skin of his calves, running his big hands from knee to foot in long, careful movements. He murmured inarticulate sounds, as if gentling a stray. Isaac dropped his head back on the headrest. Trace's hands were on his thigh now, his fingers kneading Isaac's solid muscle, hard from years of lifting and stacking. When the big hands reached his cock, Isaac closed his eyes, hot tears leaking out from under his closed lids. Trace's hands caressed his balls, then stroked up the length of his shaft, pulling at his soft foreskin. He worked the hood back and forth, drawing it back from the head. Isaac felt tender touches on his slit, a soft caress back down his length, then Trace released him and slid his hands up Isaac's torso.

Isaac tensed at the loss of Trace's fingers, even as he emptied his lungs in relief. Trace's touch confused him. He knew it was all kinds of wrong to touch another guy's junk, even if Isaac had heard whispers otherwise. *Seen otherwise. Not that. Please, not that.*

Trace picked the translucent plastic tube off the table and unscrewed it, pulling out a swab. "Open up. It won't hurt. And it'll tell us if there's anything you're carrying, any reason you shouldn't be bred from. If you're likely to develop anything genetic in the next couple of decades. Heart disease, MS. It's no big deal. Just open up."

Isaac flexed against his bonds, knowing it wouldn't do any good. The leather was supple, well oiled. And it was the real thing too, not synth or vinyl. He just had to lie here and take it. He was so stupid. He should have known this was coming: he'd seen it often enough.

Isaac closed his eyes and opened his mouth. Trace scraped the inside of his cheek, as his breath brushed his face. He smelt like tobacco; like the guys at the bar who sat outside and smoked cigars, trading tall stories in sparse words. The worn leather of their boots spoke of confidence and certainty. He'd always doubted that future would be in his stars.

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Trace walked over to a shiny processor on a bench, and snipped the tip off the swab, dropping it into a vial he inserted into the machine.

“How long will it take?” asked Isaac.

“What?”

“The DNA profile.”

“Forty-eight hours. Why? Is there anything you should tell me?”

Isaac shook his head. Two days. He had two days to work out how to get out of here. “Are we done?” Isaac asked. “Please?”

“Not even close.”

Isaac turned his head away, then gasped as Trace's hands caressed the skin between his legs, pulling his balls gently, coaxing them away from his body. It felt good, but men with men... it was wrong. He tensed, waiting for the touch to be removed.

“Gotta check you for testicular cancer. You're young, but it's never too early.” Trace's gloved hands caressed Isaac's eggs inside their soft skin pouch. The latex was familiar, impersonal, but Trace's touch, and the way his eyes lingered on Isaac's face and neck... that didn't feel impersonal at all.

Trace at last brought his hand out from between Isaac's legs, and Isaac relaxed, exhausted already.

Trace took a tube off his instrument trolley and squeezed a thick stripe of gel out onto the tip of his long latex-covered middle finger. His hand darted back under Isaac's balls, and a cold wet touch met Isaac's hole. Trace's fingers massaged his testicles, and his hand started working Isaac's cock, lifting it until it stood straight out from Isaac's body, gently tugging and caressing, as the other hand worked his ball sack, delicately kneading and softly pulling. Fingers stroked his perineum, brushing across his anus, and drew circles on the soft skin around his hole, sliding and tickling slickly. Trace pressed a little harder, and Isaac moaned despite himself. The slippery caresses turned his cock into the center of earth and sky.

“Take a deep breath.”

Isaac's mind tried to swim toward awareness, lost in Trace's liquid touch. “Wait, what?”

Trace's hand kept stroking and pulling his cock. Isaac could feel his pulse thrumming in his ears.

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“Now bear down. Like you would going to the bathroom.”

Anything, anything Trace wanted, as long as he didn't stop those circling, rotating movements on his cock. And then Trace's fingers were pushing against his anus, pushing inside. “No. Fuck, no. Stop it.” He lunged against the straps holding him fast.

Trace's eyes were sympathetic, but his finger sank farther into Isaac's hole. The movement was constant, one hand pressing and twisting deep inside Isaac, as his other hand caressed and pumped his now flaccid cock. Isaac was broken into pieces, could feel the blood rushing to his face. He snapped at Trace with his teeth, half-growling, half-crying in his rage.

“Shhh. This is going to happen. It hurts more when you fight it. You'll thank me for it soon. Trust me.”

Trace's finger was insistent, gentle, but inexorable. The flat pad of his finger swiped across something inside Isaac's body, and he gasped. Trace released Isaac's cock and placed one hand flat against him, not pressing down, just holding him in place while his finger stroked and pressed, circling around the spot then rubbing it lightly. Trace's finger connected directly to Isaac's dick, and Isaac grunted, trying to jerk his hips forward. His knees tried to fold in against his body, his feet straining against the leather that held them tight. Isaac didn't know if he wanted to protect himself or give Trace better access.

“That's your prostate. Good, huh?”

“No,” whispered Isaac. And he almost believed his words. Then Trace's fingers drew the warmth of pleasure from deep beneath the root of his cock, spreading through his groin and ass and leaking like sunlight into his body.

Isaac turned his head to the side, resting his cheek against the chair, his breath coming in short rasps. Trace's finger left his hole. Isaac's heart stuttered. God, was that it? Did he listen? Why had he ever wished for Trace to stop? Then Trace picked up the tube again and spread another line of gel on his finger, then added a generous dollop to Isaac's cock. The cold touch made his semi-soft cock jerk. Trace's finger stroked along his crack and circled his hole, until it inexorably found its target, delving deep into his anus. Trace pulled out again, and ran his finger around Isaac's crack and balls, scooping along the skin then pushing back inside Isaac's ass, this time feeling wider, bigger. His fingers went unerringly to *that spot*, lightly stroking, circling, rubbing across it.

Trace's hand started a rhythmic stroking and Isaac unaccountably felt moisture bloom in his eyes. No one else's hand had ever touched him there, for

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all the nights he had woken in his own sticky emissions after dreaming about the girl from the bakery down the road. He didn't want it to be like this. All at once, the day's events caught up with him. If he didn't get out of here there never would be a bakery girl. This would be his life now: touched by whoever wanted to touch him, however they pleased. The tears flowed freely as Trace jacked his prick, his fingers plunging deeper and deeper into Isaac's hole. There was pain, then discomfort, and all the while the slow easy friction of Trace's hand on his dick. He felt his cock swell and grow against his will. Isaac made himself fall still, passive. He had nothing now, no control, but they couldn't make him respond to this, they couldn't make him like it.

"That's it." Trace's words were breathless. Isaac watched with blurry eyes at the pleasure in Trace's eyes, as Isaac grew to full erection. He felt rigid, as if the blood vessels were trying to burst out from under his skin.

Isaac threw his head back in the chair, tugging his arms against the straps. He wanted to move his legs, stretch them out, then bring them back, change the angle of his pelvis, but he was held fast, like a butterfly on a collection board.

"Good boy."

Isaac felt a spurt of pleasure at Trace's words. He looked down and saw one drop of milky white fluid, then another, fall from the tip of his dick, landing on his smooth belly. He glanced at Trace and his heart caught at the expression on the medic's face: possessive, hungry, utterly in control. Isaac's cock was flexing, jerking up and down with each push and prod of Trace's fingertips as they swirled over that spot inside Isaac's ass.

"I've got a finger on each side of your gland," said Trace. "It feels healthy. If I kept going I could milk you of your prostatic fluid, Isaac. You wouldn't have an orgasm, but you'd give me your fluid."

He sounded so matter-of-fact. The words forced a groan from Isaac as he closed his eyes. Trace's fingers crept downward again, squeezing his balls and rolling them within their sack, while Isaac's cock kept its regular jerking in time with the tender rhythm of Trace's right hand inside him.

Isaac could feel more drops of his liquid on his skin, then Trace's hand was back on his cock, working him quicker now, twisting his grip then flicking the palm of his hand over the glistening red head. Too much sensation. Too much to feel. His muscles contracted in spasm as Trace ripped his orgasm from him. White lights flashed in the red behind his closed eyelids, and his balls shot their load, his come barreling up his urethra.



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The sensation was the strongest he'd ever experienced. His own hand, in the furtive darkness on his floor pallet in the store's back room, had never been like this. It took long moments for his brain to circle back to earth. The first thing he was aware of was Trace screwing a lid on a small white plastic jar.

“Nicely done. More than enough. They'll take a look at your boys, back in Yuma, see how motile they are. If you do well in training, and your sperm looks healthy, you'll be milked regularly.”

Isaac couldn't even spare the energy to ask why.

Trace dropped the jar into a tiny cryo-unit, then rinsed a soft cloth under the sink tap. He wiped Isaac's stomach, ass, and now-soft prick, the water warm against his skin. He patted him dry with a soft towel, cleaning off his own hand at the same time.

Isaac lay exhausted, panting. He was confused. Used up. And he yearned for Trace to do it again.

“That's all for today, kid. I wanna take a look at that cough tomorrow. It's too late to start anything major now.”

Trace unstrapped Isaac's arms, waist, then legs, caressing his feet as he handled each one.

Isaac's limbs were weird, light, unanchored. On the chair he'd had no choices: everything was up to Trace. Now he had to decide for himself what to do. Deciding where to place his arms, his hands, had never felt so awkward before.

Trace handed him a green bottle from the small fridge. “Here. It's got electrolytes in it. It'll help you feel better.” He led Isaac back into the living quarters and pulled out a rollaway bed from under a bunk. He retrieved Isaac's chain from the table and clamped his shackle to a loop at the foot of the bed, then tucked a soft blanket around him.

“I'll be back with some food. Try to finish your drink.”

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Trace pressed against the bent, twisted trunk of the elephant tree. The bronze bark exposed the wood in patches, a silvery sun-dried heart. He plucked at the cracks in the wood. The tiny leaves were already more brown than green. Would it even make it through the spring?

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He turned his back to the medunit and the smudge of mountains, and sank to the ground. Heat haze shimmered in his vision. A strong leg bumped his shoulder, then a cool metal flask nudged the side of his neck. He raised his hand, twined his fingers around the flask, then took a swallow of water. He leaned against Pete's leg, warm and comforting, as it had always been.

"The axle arrives tomorrow. We should be done the day after, maybe the next."

Trace nodded and passed the flask back up, swapping it for a lit cigarette.

"I've got your back, man," said Pete. "But what the fuck are you doing? You can't train anyone this old. Even if he were slave material."

He knew that already. Isaac was too hard, too strong. He'd fight. The way he struggled against his bonds in there.

God, the look in his face when he came... he wanted to do *everything* to him. He wanted to be in there now, holding him, telling him how brave he was. How full of all the promise of the world, not yet dried up and desiccated.

*I'm losing my mind.*

He nodded at Pete, then got to his feet and walked out into the desert, his cotton T-shirt damp despite the cool in his trailer. He hated that feeling. He'd seen this cotton growing, wide fields of it. The Colonel lent him out sometimes to a plantation owner. The Citizen liked to fuck him outside on the pale, sandy Arkansas soil, kneeling on his back as dry twigs scratched his face. He'd stake him out, after, luring tiny biting bugs to be crushed against his skin as he struggled, come dribbling down his ass. An audience of righteous men watching as swarming things claimed him until he screamed.

Trace brushed his free hand over the patch of cigar burns on his left hipbone, the pockmarked skin a miniature crater field. He needed to process this kid and get the fuck away from him. He had to stop this now. He drew his hand back, and flicked his lit butt into the air, watching the glowing red light arc before falling into the dry desert sand to be extinguished.

He knew it was already too late.

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He followed Pete back to the catering unit, where four covered dishes were lined up on the bench. "You won't believe it," Pete said. "Miller made potatoes

dauphinoise. Even though he's pissed off Clarke 'forgot' to get his duffel bag off the transport. He doesn't even have a toothbrush. Such a terrible oversight."

Trace grinned, and grabbed two trays from the big pile by the sink. This was a break for all of them. Usually Miller would be helping cook for sixty crew plus harvest.

Miller stuck his head into the catering truck. "Hey Sarge, there's a crying mom out here with the head cunt. Want me to tell her to fuck off?"

Pete rolled his eyes. "I'll handle it. And don't speak about residents of the Protectorate that way."

Miller pressed himself to the frame of the doorway to let Pete out. Pete's voice carried in on the night breeze, starting his well-practiced "regrettable but necessary" speech. Miller swung the door shut on the cool air.

"Well now, isn't this cozy? You've been holed up in that medunit all day. A less compassionate man might think you were trying to avoid me."

Trace kept dishing up meals on the trays. *Don't look. Don't react. Don't respond.*

"Listen, I've been thinking a lot about what the Colonel said. And I'm ready to give it a try, okay?" He stepped in behind Trace, pressing him against the big metal prep table. The semi-hard bulge of his cock thrust against Trace's ass. Miller reached up and ran a fingertip down Trace's neck. "You can suck me, all right?"

Trace shivered, and lowered his arms, appetite gone. Miller spoke like he was offering a treat. *Keep calm. Stick to the truth.*

"I'm still on duty, Private Miller."

Miller stepped back, laid a big hand on Trace's shoulder, and forced him to turn around. "That's all right. I can wait. I'll meet you outside in an hour."

Trace and Miller were eye to eye, and Miller tilted his head forward, eyes glowing with excitement as he raised a thick finger and pried Trace's lips apart. Fuck. Trace knew how this went. He was supposed to part his teeth, suck Miller down, make a promise with his mouth that he'd deliver later on Miller's dick. But he couldn't. He fucking hated being caught on the knife's edge like this; part whore, part medic, all slave. Twenty years of making decisions about others while being allowed none for himself. He gritted his teeth until Miller

removed his hand, clenching into a fist as he lowered it, face tight and eyes narrowed.

“I’m sorry, Private. I’ll be tied up all night.”

Miller cocked his head to the side. “*Excuse me?* Are you refusing a Citizen?”

“I’ve got to get dinner back to the ne—”

Miller swept the trays off the table with a clatter, his hand flying up and grabbing Trace around the throat. He turned Trace’s head from side to side, peering at the scab on his cheek, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. Trace shut his eyes, and braced himself, but Miller released him, shoving him backward against the table.

“You are *not* better than me, bitch.”

Trace didn’t move, fighting to keep his arms loose and passive at his side. Miller crowded against him, then bent down to pull up the leg of his fatigues. Trace caught his breath as Miller unsheathed a large hunting knife with an elaborate carved handle. Grabbing the neck of Trace’s T-shirt, Miller sliced through the thin cotton, dragging the blade downwards. The fabric ripped in quick jerks. He traced the point of the knife back up Trace’s chest, leaving a white scratched trail in the skin. His fingers sought out Trace’s nipple, and he dug his short blunt nails into the flesh, pulling and twisting. Trace clenched his teeth. He wouldn’t cry out, he wouldn’t give this asshole kid the satisfaction.

“This isn’t your choice to make, understand?”

Miller thrust his groin forward, and Trace felt Miller swelling within his fatigues, growing hard and fully erect. Miller bent, and bit the firm skin over Trace’s pecs, worrying it with his teeth until the blood roaring in his head deafened Trace and he feared his flesh would rend. Trace thrashed in place, biting his lip against the agony, until a whine leaked out from his unwilling lips. Miller stood and slammed a hand over his mouth. “Shush, bitch,” Miller hissed into Trace’s ear. Spit landed on his cheek. “I sure like your titties.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” shouted Pete. Trace hadn’t even heard the door open over the pulse in his ears. “Have you lost your mind? That is the Colonel’s personal property.”

Trace shivered.

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Pete yanked Miller away from Trace, flinging him across the kitchen. “You’re dismissed, Private.”

They both watched until the door closed behind Miller.

“Fuck, Trace, are you okay?”

“Yeah, the Colonel’s property is fine, thank you, Sergeant.”

“Shit, don’t take it that way.”

Trace turned away and picked up the trays on the floor, placing them in the big dishwasher, and grabbing a cloth to wipe up the spilled food.

“I’ll get you dinner.” Pete dished up two trays and covered them with wrap, while Trace cleaned up and collected two sets of cutlery. When he took the trays from Pete, he could see he wanted to speak, but Trace had no more words in him.

“Thank you, Sergeant. I’ll see you in the morning.” He left without looking back, T-shirt fluttering behind him like a pair of broken wings.

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Isaac heard Trace in the exam room next door for ten minutes before he came through with dinner. When he appeared he was shirtless, with a white bandage taped over his right pectoral muscle. Head down, he’d placed the trays on the table without noticing that Isaac was reading one of the books from the shelf above the bed. Isaac had only just been able to reach it, grateful as hell for a distraction, and to touch a book again after so long.

“Hey, why do you have a book about a boy at magic school under a dust jacket for *Obligations and Duties of the Obedient Slave*?”

Isaac was utterly unprepared for Trace’s roar of anger, or the vicious lunge with which he ripped the book from Isaac’s hand. “Don’t touch my fucking stuff!”

Trace raised the book as if to strike him. Isaac didn’t even lift his hands to defend himself, only gazed in bewilderment at the rage and pain on the medic’s face.

Trace froze, arm high, then sagged, throwing the book onto the bunk, before turning and leaving the room.

Isaac curled up on his cot as best he could, hunger gnawing in his belly. He hadn’t eaten yesterday, but emptiness was an old familiar friend. He didn’t reach for the book again.

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It was half an hour before Trace returned. His face was blotchy and red. He unwrapped a tray and passed it to Isaac. Isaac took it carefully, keeping his gaze lowered and his body angled away from Trace. The food was cold, but delicious. He hadn't eaten like this in... well, a very long time.

Trace didn't bother with his own meal, just climbed into his bunk, avoiding Isaac in his cot on the floor. When Isaac finished his meal he lowered the empty tray to the ground. "Lights off," called Trace. They lay close together in the darkness, a thousand miles apart.

"I'm sorry," whispered Isaac. "I just wanted to know what could happen to me; what to expect."

"It's okay," said Trace. The despair in his voice made Isaac's heart lurch, as if it were Miles lying there. "I shouldn't have made such a big deal out of it. It hardly matters now, anyway."

Isaac rolled over, so he could just make out the shape of Trace's solid shoulders and back under his blanket, like the range of dark mountains to the northeast. He watched for a long time, seeing the rise and fall with each breath, too fast to show a body at sleep.

When they came, Trace's words were nearly inaudible in the quiet room.

"It's just, they're all I have, my books."

Isaac felt an unaccountable desire to reach his hand out and touch Trace's back, to offer foolish comfort.

"Why books?"

Trace took a long time to answer. "Because they're reliable. They don't change from moment to moment. They can't deny what they said the next day. And they can take you anywhere. They can even take me away from this goddamn hellhole."

"But they're not true. Unless they're on the List, they're full of lies, sent to deceive us. I love reading, but books aren't real."

"Maybe. Maybe they're lies. How would we know? I have this book on the history of language, right? It's on the List, it's legal. But at the back there's a list of other books by the same writer, about other countries, and hiking, and his childhood. They're all on the List. But there's one title I've never heard of. It's not on the List. Why? Did he suddenly start lying?"

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“I just wanted something to read, honestly. I won’t say anything.”

“It never crossed my mind you *could* read. That one you saw... it’s pretty obvious it’s not on the Whitelist. Magic definitely *is* a lie. If you say anything, it’s grounds for—well, something bad.”

“What happens to you if they find your stash?” asked Isaac.

“For Citizens, the first offense is public discipline. Second is incarceration. Third is a death sentence. I don’t think they expect a slave would ever own anything, let alone items not on the Whitelist. I’m fairly valuable to the Colonel. There’s a chance he might not kill me. But, probably, it’s just death.”

“Why take the risk that they’ll find them, then?”

“I think I’m hoping they will.”

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Isaac woke to the sound of quiet, ordered movement through the wall. Today had to be the day. When they went outside, he’d wait for his moment, then run. He lay under the crisp sheets, trying to shake his apprehension about whatever Trace had in store for him. Just as Trace had said, there was nothing he could do about that. Getting worked up would only hinder him. He had to be calm, patient, and alert for opportunity.

When Trace eventually came into the living quarters he was dressed, and filled with a familiar sense of purpose. Trace knelt and unlocked his leg chain from the end of the bed.

He walked him to the toilet closet. “Piss and take a crap.”

“What if I don’t need to?”

“It’s better you learn to go when you can. If you need to later, when you’re in the chair, I won’t unlock you for it.”

Isaac obeyed, grateful that Trace at least gave him some privacy for it.

“Now go shower and brush your teeth. Clean out your ass, too. Make sure you use warm water and towel yourself dry. No repeats of yesterday, okay?”

Trace set his unlocked chain on the table.

“You don’t need that. I won’t run.”

“You might if you knew what was coming. Wash up, kid.”

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Trace left a clean white towel and a new toothbrush, and disappeared into the exam room again.

Trace reappeared so quickly after he finished toweling off and brushing his teeth, that Isaac wondered if there was a camera in the living quarters. Isaac wrapped the towel around himself, and Trace held his hand out, gazing at him.

“Trace, please—?”

Only because Isaac was looking directly at Trace did he catch his momentary wince. He held his tongue and handed Trace the towel without argument, then followed him out to the exam room.

Trace nodded at the chair, and Isaac hopped up. Trace strapped his arms and waist down, testing the binding with a sharp tug.

“Doesn't a condemned man get a last breakfast or something?”

“I'll feed you after this. You don't want food to interfere with any anaesthetic we might need. Trust me on this.”

Isaac nodded and leaned back in the chair, letting his head fall onto the headrest. This already felt familiar. Trace picked up each leg and strapped it into the stirrup, fastening each foot cuff tightly.

“Today we're going to take a look at that cough,” said Trace. “I've already got an idea what we might be dealing with, but we have to check.”

He held up a small white spray bottle with a long thin nozzle. “I'm going to anesthetize your larynx.”

“My what?”

“Your vocal chords.”

“What the hell? I won't be able to talk? No way.” Isaac thrashed against the straps, feeling the leather dig into to his wrists, until exhaustion quieted him. Trace stroked the hair back from his forehead. Isaac could feel it stick to his skin where he'd raised a sweat even in the cool air of the unit.

“Shhh. It's only temporary. I can't have you shifting around like this. I'm going to fasten your head in place. It's for your own good.”

Trace's firm hand held Isaac's head still. All he could hear was fumbling above him, at the back of the headrest, and then something flexible cradled his forehead and neck. Isaac heard a faint clank of metal on metal, and Trace's



hands released him. He followed him with his eyes, but he wasn't able to move his head.

“Please. Please don't.”

Trace just stroked his cheek.

Trace had a large wooden tongue depressor, but Isaac kept his mouth firmly closed, teeth gritted. Trace sighed and placed the spray bottle down. It seemed he had been ready for this. There was the rustle of plastic and paper, then a soft scrape. He felt Trace's big fingers poking into the jaw joints on each side of his face. He couldn't seem to keep his teeth clenched, and Trace slipped something between them. The tang of metal was against his tongue, and something bulky touched the left corner of his mouth. Isaac heard the unmistakable *clank* of a ratchet, and his jaw opened wider, then wider, until he was open and exposed to Trace.

“Please, don't,” he tried to say, but all he heard was an inarticulate garble. His throat gave a spasm in fear.

Trace leaned forward, and Isaac felt something hard pushing against the back of his tongue, down his throat, then the sound of liquid spraying. It didn't feel cold or hot, it didn't feel anything but... weird. Where the spray must have touched became... other. Alien. The tip of the spray bottle kept bumping against his airway, touching the inside of his throat, but the touch was becoming muted, dull. Isaac whined and clenched his hands into fists, pressing his jaw down against the appliance. But it refused to move.

Trace stroked Isaac's face, then leaned forward. “It'll be all right,” he whispered. “We have to wait a while for the anaesthetic to fully take effect.”

The chair lowered and Trace straddled him, and ran his hands down Isaac's face, stroking his cheeks, then caressing the inside of his mouth. Isaac tensed in his chair, muscles seizing up. Trace leaned forward, so close Isaac could see the pores of his skin, and fine crows' feet around his eyes. Trace's fingers delved inside his mouth, stroking his tongue.

“You're so open to me,” breathed Trace. “So exposed... Look how beautiful you are.” Trace's fingers caressed the inside of Isaac's mouth. Isaac tried to speak.

“You'll only hurt your throat if you try to talk. Just take it. I'm inside you, and you can't stop me.”

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Isaac closed his eyes, and felt Trace's fingers outline his lips, stroke across the pliable surface of his tongue.

Trace's body was big, but he could feel that Trace was resting much of his weight on his own feet, only pressing lightly onto Isaac. Isaac almost wished he could feel the man's whole weight on top of him, pushing him down. He could feel Trace's balls against his groin, through the thin fabric of his pants. He wondered if Trace was hard; what his cock might look like.

His own cock stirred in interest. No, this was crazy. It was a girl he wanted pressed over him, pushing him down, touching him and giving him no choices...

Trace leaned forward, resting his left arm on the headrest right beside Isaac's ear. Trace held his index and middle fingers up in front of Isaac's face.

"How far down your throat do you think I can get these?"

The pressure against the back of his tongue came immediately.

"Usually you've got a gag reflex here, but the local took care of that."

The fingers were pushing deeper. The sensation of something foreign in his throat made Isaac try to struggle but his body was held fast. It was delicious and terrifying in equal measure.

"Shhh," said Trace. He wrapped his other hand around Isaac's throat, squeezing. "I won't damage you."

Isaac wanted to cough, but could only sit, yielding to the invasion. His cock thickened, swelled, as he gave himself to Trace's touch. Trace started working his fingers in and out of Isaac's throat, fucking him with his hand. He pulled out for a second and adjusted the ratchets, and Isaac felt his jaws forced even wider with the single click. He let out a groan, but all that emerged was a quiet wet gagging sound.

"I know what this feels like, believe me. When you get into the Fed, they'll use this to train your gag reflex away. You'll be so used to it, soon it will hardly bother you. But I'm the first person to put anything in your throat. I wish I could feed you my whole hand. But you'll take my fingers."

Trace pressed his fingers against the inside of Isaac's throat, and Isaac wished he felt like he wanted to throw up. There wasn't supposed to be anything inside him there. It was wrong.

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“Oh, I think we’re at maximum effect now.” Trace slithered his fingers out of Isaac’s throat. Trails of saliva dripped down his chin, and Trace wiped them away with a cool, dry cloth.

“I’m going to cover your eyes, Isaac. You’ll find it easier that way.”

What was Trace going to do? Pinned, and voiceless, and now sightless, too? Terror nudged its way into his body, but Trace had never harmed him; surely he wouldn’t start now? Isaac couldn’t move his head, but he caught glimpses of Trace folding bandages around soft pads, before he lowered them over Isaac’s eyes. Isaac tried to shake his head, but the appliance fastened around his head held him still.

Trace wound medical tape around and around Isaac’s head, pinning the soft bandages down, pressing them over Isaac’s eyeballs. Light leaked in around the edges, but he could see nothing. Isaac felt himself floating, all connection with the environment cut off. Except for those hands. Trace’s hands, skimming along the side of his face and down his neck, then trailing down his pecs and stroking across his nipples, until Isaac was writhing in the chair.

“Okay now, sit still for me. I’m going to use something called a bronchoscope to look into your lungs. I can sedate you if you think you need it. It won’t hurt; it will just feel like... a lot. I’d rather not use the midazolam if I can help it.”

Isaac whimpered as the motor kicked in and the chair reclined, until he was lying flat on his back. Isaac heard Trace adjust and arrange things on the trolley, the sounds of metal and soft rubber unnerving him. Trace’s palms felt hot against his cheeks as he held and settled him.

There was a *clink* against the gag, and then something was inside Isaac’s mouth. His breaths became shallow and rapid.

“It won’t hurt.”

There was something big, thrusting down inside his throat, Trace’s hands brushed against Isaac’s lips, his chin. A metal and rubber mass pressed against the gag. Something *pushed*. Every inch of Isaac fought to get away, yet there was nowhere to go. His jaw pressed against the gag, but it didn’t give. And always this foreign *thing* kept coming, until his chest heaved in panic, and he felt as if something had nested within it.

“Good boy,” Trace murmured.

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Isaac. *His name was Isaac.*

Soft mechanical sounds reverberated inside his skin. When Trace shifted Isaac felt like a puppet on his hand, his weight moving back and forward in the chair in response. The procedure seemed to go on for days. Isaac wished he'd insisted on the sedation, whatever the side effects would have been. There was no pain, only an ever-present sense of wrongness that made him want to retch and yank the bronchoscope out and hurl it across the room.

Isaac's body grew exhausted, his muscles no longer capable of resisting. Sometimes Trace made small noises in the back of his throat, half-formed words murmured, and then, when he was not expecting it, the discomfort grew, and with a great dragging slide, Trace tugged the bronchoscope out of his body. It was as if it drew his lungs out with it. Wetness and metal and rubber touched his face. Isaac wanted to cough but he couldn't: he screamed, but nothing emerged.

And then Trace was there, of course. He pressed on Isaac's shoulder, stilling him, calming him, as the chair rose until he was sitting upright once again. Trace whispered nothings into his ear and his breath caressed his cheek. He held a plastic cup to Isaac's lips and helped him drink, then wiped his mouth and face with a cool, damp cloth.

"That's all. There's no more of that. It had to be done. You were so brave."

While Isaac lay limply after Trace's ministrations, he felt a tourniquet fastened around his upper arm, the light stroke of Trace's fingers from the crook of his left elbow, down to his wrist, the fleabite of a needle pricking his skin. "I thought you took blood already," Isaac tried to say, but only a soft, rasping breath emerged. Trace whisked the tourniquet away and spread a bandage upon his skin like a kiss.

Isaac wished he could hold on to Trace, feel him, but all he could do was lie there and wait for whatever came next. Trace wiped Isaac's skin with a soft cloth, his touch deliberate, careful. Isaac didn't flinch this time when Trace's hand caressed his groin and wiped over his hole. Nor when Trace returned his fingers there, lubing him up with cool, wet gel. There was a rattling sound as Trace picked an object off the instrument trolley. Then he gasped as something slick and narrow and cold slid inside his ass. The intrusion felt vast, and Isaac felt part sick, part excited, that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Trace's hands vanished, and then Isaac couldn't help but jerk as the medic's touch returned, unexpectedly, to his soft cock where it lay quiescent, nestled in

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the join between leg and torso. Trace slipped something rigid and unyielding over the head of his cock, and Isaac felt it settle at rest beneath the helmet, encircling him, holding him, not tightly, not hurting, but disconcerting in its very presence.

“Why?” Isaac mouthed, but no sound came out. He’d been good. Wasn’t he good?

“This isn’t a punishment, Isaac. It’s a pleasure. It’s a gift for you.”

Trace’s strong fingers moved purposefully. Thin wires draped across his skin.

“You ready?”

Isaac tried to shake his head, but the restraints held him fast. He heard a soft click as Trace flicked a switch, and an exquisite hum-tingle-throbbing filled his whole body. Isaac’s cock was being tickled with summer lightning, crawling and creeping and touching inside him, pulling his balls up into his body and tightening each breath within his chest. His hole convulsed, pushing against resistance then pulling something deep inside him. Isaac tried to speak, to make his mouth form words, but only a silent gasp came out, language deserting him. He was all body, all cock, all ass, and he was grateful for the straps holding him down, afraid he would fly away with every pulse that shot through his brain-skin-tongue-sack-dick. He wanted more, more, and he wanted it to stop. He was on a cresting wave that never seemed to break. He clenched and unclenched his hands, and Trace was there, touching him, grounding him, smoothing across the landscape of his body and giving him something to cling on to that wasn’t this growing urge to come and come and shout and flail. His belly fluttered, and his stomach muscles convulsed in time with the incessant there-ness of the current inside him. He wanted to tell Trace, to ask him if he’d ever had this done to him, but when he opened his lips he could only mouth a silent howl, as tears fell from his eyes, soaking into the cotton pads. The sensation went on and on and he couldn’t seem to control his body and it was in him, in his dick and around him and every bit of him and he was losing his mind...

Trace’s voice brought him back, whispering against his ear. “That’s my good boy. You’re all right. My wonderful boy.”

He needed Trace now, needed him to fasten him to the earth. He tried to say, “Please? Please don’t leave me?” But not even a whisper emerged. The humming of the machine in his ass filled the room. Trace unstrapped his left

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arm and grasped Isaac's hand. "I'm here. I've got you. You'll be able to speak soon."

Isaac's orgasm swelled within him, growing exponentially, but he was unprepared for the moment when it rolled over in a breaking crest. It was, again, Trace's hands that held him, rocked him through it, as he writhed and gasped through his pleasure. He dimly felt Trace pulling the long tube from out of his hole, freeing his prick, unfastening the rest of his bonds, turning him in the chair. And then Trace was unwinding the tape holding the bandages over Isaac's eyes, until the bright blue-white dazzled him once more. Trace stood there for a long while, letting Isaac rest against him. Eventually he nudged Isaac to his feet.

"Come on." He led Isaac through to the living quarters, and steered him toward his own bunk. Trace spread a smooth clean sheet over Isaac, then cracked open a heat blanket, shaking it to let the chemicals mix, before draping it over Isaac's body. Isaac curled up, half hurt, half ecstatic, all exhausted.

"I'm going to get you some food. You sleep, if you want."

Isaac caught Trace's sleeve, croaking out his words as if he'd never spoken before. "Why didn't you want to use the midazwhatever—the sedative stuff?"

Trace said nothing for a long time, and Isaac thought that he wasn't going to speak at all.

"Because you would have forgotten. You would have forgotten the whole thing. And I wanted you to remember." Trace leaned down and pressed his lips against Isaac's hair, rocked and held him. "I wanted you to remember me."

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When Trace stepped down from the medlab, Pete was sitting on the ground in the dappled shade of the elephant tree.

Trace walked over and joined him. Pete passed him a protein bar and a lukewarm cup of coffee.

"Sorry it's not hot. I didn't think you would take so long."

He didn't say anything, just took them and swallowed down the tepid liquid in giant gulps, like he was trying to swallow his desire. He tipped the dregs out, and set his mug on the ground. A red-brown hawk circled overhead, playing in the thermals, zeroing in on prey far below.

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“Got a cigarette, Pete? I’m all out.”

Pete passed him his own, lit but not yet burned down. He took a deep draw.

“This kid?”

He nodded.

“You’re taking a long time processing him. What’s the deal?”

He breathed in a lung full of smoke. “*Coccidioides immitis*.”

“What the hell is that?”

“A spore that causes a nasty little fungal infestation. He’s got coccidioidomycosis. Basically the kid’s got mold growing in his lungs. I’ll have to send the sample to the lab to confirm it, but I’m damn certain.”

“Fuck! Can we catch it? Will you catch it?”

Trace shook his head. “No. We’re breathing it in right now.”

Pete pulled his undershirt up over his nose and mouth.

“Don’t worry. We’ve been breathing it for years. Every time we come out here. Back in Yuma, for that matter. It’s everywhere. Invisible. Surrounding us all the time. We don’t even think about it.” He shrugged. “For some reason, in some people, it digs in, takes hold. Takes over.”

“Is it bad?”

“Right now he thinks he just has a cough. The flu, maybe. But the fungus in his lungs is sending spores throughout his bloodstream. They’re probably in all his organs, in his skin, maybe even in the soft tissue lining of his brain. I’ve started him on amphotericin.”

“You what? That sells for, what, two thousand a dose on the black market? Are you out of your mind?”

“And he’ll need monitoring and ongoing treatment for six months, at least, maybe a year. Without treatment he’ll be developing the first bout of chronic pneumonia any day now. Next month he’ll be coughing up blood. Give him a year, a bronchopleural fistula—a hole in the lungs that leads into the chest cavity. With treatment...” Trace shrugged. “He’ll probably be fine.”

“It sounds fucking terrifying. Why are you looking after him like this?”

“He’s not cut out to be a slave. He won’t last three months. We’re going to have to throw him back.”

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Pete nudged him with his elbow. "I miss you," he said. "It's more than the processing, isn't it?"

Trace nodded, dropping the roach end into the sand and grinding it with the heel of his soft shoe. A black ant ran across his instep, investigating.

"He's me, Pete. He's me who didn't get picked. I've spent twenty years wondering what would have happened if I'd stayed free. He's what happened. If he hadn't stuck up for that stupid kid, hadn't been harvested... I dream about the life I could have had, but would I have had all that much?"

"You'd have had something."

Trace's shoulders shook as something tried to well up from his heart, and he wondered if he was going to laugh or cry.

"Here. Before I forget." Pete pulled a slim volume out of his thigh pocket and handed it across. "I was just glad the locals had something I could bargain for. Never saw a town so in need of hard currency."

Trace reached for the book, eagerness twitching in his fingers. His red eyes met Pete's in gratitude.

Pete huffed out a breath and broke their gaze. "Miller cooked a hot lunch. It's not half bad. Come on over and grab a couple of trays to take back. I'll make sure nothing happens."

Pete turned his back on him, strolling over to the catering unit, as Trace flipped through the book. The lower half of the cover was unevenly torn away, leaving no author's surname, only three initials. The remaining cover was battered, but beneath the dust and scratches, a red sun hovered over gray mountains with curious white peaks. Three strange almost-birds flew in the sky. Letter shapes he'd never seen before marched in a border along the top edge, and he flicked open the book in concern, but the text was in American, thank God. He'd have to stash it out of sight until he could get a dust jacket made up. He was grateful no one else cared enough to ever open the books on his shelf. Apart from Isaac, of course. The only other person he'd ever met who liked reading, and it was a fucking Protectorate kid. He tucked the book into his own thigh pocket, and marched resolutely toward the catering truck.

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Isaac woke from his doze as Trace threw a set of slave grays onto the end of his cot.



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“Congratulations. You earned clothes.”

He watched, perplexed, as Trace flipped his bunk mattress over. Trace's fingers burrowed along the seam, before delving into a hidden pocket. He tucked a paperback out of sight.

His throat was tender from the bronchoscopy. Every time he swallowed, he remembered Trace's fingers in his throat, his weight upon his body. He glanced up at Trace, and wondered if he was feeling the same thing, too. “New reading material?”

Trace grinned. “Yep. Definitely not Whitelist.”

“Can I have a look?”

“Not yet. I'll have to make a dust jacket for it, disguise it, once I get back home and get some unsupervised time on the printer. If it looks like a Whitelist book, no one ever checks to see what's under the cover. Only you. How did you learn to read, anyway?”

“Just lucky. Couldn't check deliveries or send in orders without my letters. I'm an even, but I was skipped over at harvest. Too scrawny, I guess.” Isaac was glad Trace wasn't looking at him; he would have seen the lie in his face. “We didn't get a whole lot of regular meals.”

“We?”

“Miles, Rachel, and me. She's three years younger than me, Miles just turned fourteen.”

“Where are your parents?”

Isaac looked down at his knees. “Rachel and I always looked after each other. Anyway, after I found work things got easier. And three years ago Rachel had Lila.”

“Who's Lila's dad?”

“Fucked if I know. Rachel's her own woman. I never ask her where the Fed currency she brings in comes from. And I wouldn't dream of telling her what to do.”

“What a devoted brother.”

Isaac didn't know if Trace was being sarcastic.

“Where do you work?” asked Trace.

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What was the point in lying? Anyone in town could answer the question. “At the store. And the bar, nights.”

“They’re locally owned, aren’t they?”

Isaac nodded.

Trace rearranged his bed, tucking the sheets and blanket back in. “So they pay you in trade goods,” he said. “The real question is, why aren’t you working at the refinery? They’re crying out for strapping young men. They just can’t get the labor out here in the desert. And they pay hard currency. You’d earn ten times what you do in two jobs now.”

How could he possibly answer without it sounding like the hollow excuse it would be? “I get to sleep out the back of the store. And they’re good about looking the other way when the occasional can of food goes missing.” What would make Trace drop the subject? “Where do you get all the books from?”

Trace looked at him while he worked, as if trying to judge how much to say, then shrugged. “Different places. Different people. My first was from the Colonel’s son. That’s why the Colonel hates it here so much, actually. Why he took the rest of the convoy and left us behind.”

“What’s wrong with here?”

“The Colonel lost his son here. Fourteen, maybe fifteen years ago. He should never have brought him on a trip, and he knew it. Wanted to toughen him up, I guess. Didn’t like the way he was turning out. Thought a little trip out would show him why slavery works. Why the Protectorate needs the Fed.”

“You were here then.” It wasn’t a question. “So what happened?”

“Kid saw something that upset him. Wasn’t ready for the realities of the harvest. We had taken a new boy, and—shit, the kid was only ten. Took off into the desert. Left his copy of *Tom Sawyer* on my bunk and headed out, right when a dust storm blew in from the border. You should have seen it. Easily a mile high, like a red fucking tsunami. You couldn’t see six inches in front of you. No point in chasing after him: he could have been at our feet and we wouldn’t have known. The Colonel was so pissed.”

“You looked for him though, right?”

Trace snorted. “Yeah, no. The Colonel was kind of mad. No kid of his would be so squeamish about a little blood, he said, especially when it wasn’t even Citizen blood. We stayed a day. Sent out some guys on ATVs to scout.

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There wasn't really any point, though, no tracks because of the dust cover. And then we moved on. Since then, he tries to get through here as fast as possible."

"And so, what? He... died?"

"There's no way anyone survives out here alone. He was a great kid. I missed him. So, anyway, that was my first book." Trace stood, plumping the pillows and throwing them to the head of the bunk. "I've got another about a man who turns into a giant bug. The owner caught me reading it when we were visiting, said he'd offer me a deal. Forty-eight pages: I'd get one for each strike of the cane I could take. I could say 'stop' any time I wanted. But what I wanted was the story. You should read it. You'd like it, I think."

Isaac swallowed, appalled and sickened. Trace grinned wryly at him. "Not a real rattan cane, of course. I wouldn't be alive to tell the tale."

"Not Whitelist?"

"What do you think?"

"Then how could he have it?"

"I know you're not that naïve. The people who make the rules don't have to follow the rules. That's the one thing that stays the same no matter where you go."

All the lessons of twenty years were in Trace's words.

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"Here."

Isaac looked up. Trace was holding a book out to him. "What's this?"

*"Obligations and Duties of the Obedient Slave. Enjoy."*

Isaac took it in pure reflex, watching dazedly as Trace went through to the lab. He spent the rest of the afternoon curled up on his cot, caught up in classes and spells and friendship, as Trace tidied and cleaned and ran instruments through the autoclave. No girl had ever given Isaac a world like this.

They ate dinner together in the living quarters, the Sergeant passing two trays in through the main door. Afterwards, Trace didn't shower, just climbed straight into his bunk. Isaac lay in his cot for a while, looking from each page up to the broad back so close to him. When, oh, too soon, he finished the book, he shut it with a snap. He'd never felt so alone, or felt such a kinship with a

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character. He was grateful when Trace called for the lights to shut off. The dark hid Isaac's tears.

Trace was a man, but he was a good man. Strong, yet gentle. Thoughtful. He was with the Feds, but he wasn't a Fed. And it would be one night. Isaac didn't ask, merely climbed up to the bunk and lay beside Trace, wrapping one arm around him and pressing against his warm body. "Thank you." He found Trace's hand up by his pillow and grasped it in his. "I wish it was all real."

"You know what I wish?" said Trace. "I wish I could have seen the ocean. Savannah looks out over the sea. I've always wanted to go there."

"Is that the only ocean?"

"I don't know."

They huddled close together on the single bunk, their chests rising and falling in unison. Trace released his hand and rolled over so they were face to face, pressing his body against Isaac's. Isaac grasped for Trace with his lips and tongue. He nuzzled against Trace's cheeks, his chin, the curve of his neck. They lay entwined in each other's arms, keeping the dark at bay.

"Know what else I wish?" said Isaac.

"Mmm?" Trace was half asleep, dozing, and Isaac knew there was no better time to ask.

"I wish I knew why you haven't tried to fuck me."

Trace didn't reply for a long time. "Is that something you want?"

"No. But I know you want to."

Trace rested his head against Isaac's chest, and Isaac tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart.

"I do want you," said Trace. "But I won't fuck you. You can fuck me. If *you* want to." Isaac's skin muffled Trace's words.

"Are you sure? Doesn't it hurt?"

Trace shook his head. "I want it. But it has to be my way."

"Whatever you want. Anything. Everything."

Trace eased himself out of bed, and Isaac bit back a protest at the loss, as his silhouette padded across the clean metal floor to the exam room door. He returned carrying supplies. He knelt above Isaac on the bed, leaning over him.

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“Reach up and grab the bed frame.”

Isaac obeyed, stretching his body out against the cool sheets. Trace snapped a restraint on him, securing one of Isaac's hands over his head, then the second. His chest was so close to Isaac's face he could see bruises on Trace's chest in the shape of teeth marks. Isaac strained his head up and lapped gently, delicately, at Trace's coppery nipple, pressing the lightest of kisses against his skin. He needed to take all the pain away: Trace deserved none of it.

When he had bound Isaac Trace held up a roll of medical tape and cotton bandages. “I'm going to blindfold you.”

Isaac could hear it wasn't a request.

Trace folded the cotton into a pad, then leaned forward and placed a delicate kiss on each of Isaac's eyelids. Isaac closed his eyes, and then the red light filtering through his eyelids darkened as Trace placed the cloth over his eyes. One hand cradled the back of Isaac's head as he wrapped the soft bandage over and around, covering his ears as well as his eyes.

Trace untied Isaac's loose pants, and cold air swamped his cock and balls as Trace pulled the fabric down over his hips. Isaac pulled his feet in toward his body so he could lift his hips up higher, and Trace worked the pants down to Isaac's knees, then lifted each foot in turn to pull the clothing off, left foot last. He stroked Isaac's arch with his strong, thick fingers, until Isaac jerked and quivered.

Isaac turned his head, trying to catch a sliver of sound. Was that the snick of a cap opening? He felt Trace straddle him, his balls brushing against the inside of Isaac's leg. Isaac shivered and tried to pull his legs together, to feel more than that ghostly trace of the man. And then, abruptly, Trace's hands were upon him, cold and wet, and Isaac arched his back at the unexpected bite of Trace's gel-covered fingers. Unseen hands grasped his shaft, working him together, each palm grasping the bottom of his cock and slithering upwards to the soft loose skin at the tip. Isaac snapped his teeth closed to hold back the moan that welled up from his belly.

The bandages muffled Trace's voice. “No, let it out. I want to hear you. I want to hear you want this.”

One of Trace's hands dropped to Isaac's sack, working his balls inside the soft pouch, pulling, stroking, tugging his balls gently away from his body. Trace's other hand ran up his shaft, twisting his palm against Isaac's stiffness,

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then rubbing his thumb over the sensitive head. With a last caress Trace removed his hands, and Isaac felt him lean forward, covering his body, resting his broad chest against Isaac's. Trace was shifting, wriggling, and Isaac could hear a soft slide of flesh on flesh that made his cock weep precome. Then Trace was moving his weight backwards over Isaac's groin, rising up with one hand grasping Isaac's shaft. His cockhead pressed against an expanse of warm skin, and there was pressure, and Isaac's groan reverberated in his throat as a soft channel encompassed him, squeezing and caressing him.

Trace's rhythm was slow and steady as he rocked himself on Isaac's cock. With each descent Isaac was worked a little farther inside Trace. He didn't want to take control, didn't want to be in the driver's seat, but he couldn't stop his hips from bucking up underneath Trace, trying to thrust up into the big man. Trace's hands were on his chest, pressing him backwards into the thin mattress until he felt the firm solid surface of the bunk base press into his shoulder blades. Trace raised his weight farther off Isaac, and he felt his cock withdraw, until Trace's hole held only the tip. Isaac whimpered, rattling the leather restraints against the metal railing of the cot. Fuck, he wanted to hold Trace, wanted to grasp his hips in his hands and drive into him, to see him throw his head back in pleasure. And yet the security of his bonds was reassuring. He couldn't screw this up. Couldn't hurt Trace and not realize. Couldn't time it wrong. Couldn't go too fast and too deep. A week ago he'd never dreamed he could have this, any of this, with a man, and now he could only lie there, and take what Trace gave him, trust Trace to make this good for both of them. The sense of freedom swept over him, and he laughed, as Trace sank down upon him once again, and Isaac felt his whole being in his inches of rigid flesh, in the stroking and clenching of Trace's ass.

The muscles in Trace's legs shook in strain and his breathing grew labored. Trace paused, pulled off, and Isaac whimpered at the loss. Trace was kneeling over him unfastening his hands, then coaxing him to turn to the side. Trace's hands fumbled with the bandage holding Isaac's sight, lifting it away from Isaac's head, until Trace's lips brushed over the shell of his ear as he breathed words into him. "Don't try and touch me, understand? Leave your hands where I put them."

Isaac nodded.

"Keep your right hand on the bed head."

Isaac was lying on his right side now, and Trace captured his left hand, pulling it to wrap around his own body. Isaac's heart swelled at the feeling of

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Trace's skin under his fingers, his warm broad back against Isaac's chest. Trace fumbled in the narrow space between them as he reached for Isaac's cock. Isaac's fingers twitched as he ached to reach down, position his cock and push it deep inside. His fingers brushed softly against Trace's nipple. He spread his hand wide, making sure to leave his palm where Trace had positioned it, his index finger barely stroking against the raised nub. Isaac put all his emotions into that touch as Trace grasped Isaac's cock, edged his hips around, then drove himself onto Isaac once again. Isaac's prick delved right in this time, fluidly, freely, and he pressed his head forward until his forehead nestled in the space between Trace's shoulders, feeling the muscles rippling as Trace grabbed Isaac's hand, entwining their fingers and undulating his body. Oh, this was better; he could move now, mumbling incoherent words against Trace's back as he pumped his hips and wished his skin could speak his feelings.

Trace grasped Isaac's hand, lifted it and carried it down his body, nestled it in the thatch of hair between his legs, Trace's own hand covering his cock.

“Can you—”

“Anything,” said Isaac. He could feel the hesitation in Trace's whole body, tight and controlled.

Isaac moved his fingers, petting and stroking the delicate skin that held Trace's pretty eggs. He wished he could see them, mouth them, lick and suck them inside him. “May I? May I stroke these?” He felt Trace nod and part his legs to give Isaac's hand more room to move, to love.

“Can you tug them a little? Gently.” Isaac was grateful the cloth was working its way off his face now. Trace's voice was so quiet he might have missed it. He cradled Trace's balls carefully, palming them and wrapping his fingers around them softly, then pulled downward tenderly, squeezing just a little more firmly, the way he liked to do to himself when he was lying in bed, exhausted, wanking in an attempt to quiet his mind and let him catch three hours sleep before he got up to do another day over again.

Isaac heard Trace's breath catch. He pressed his lips against Trace's ear. “Like that?”

It took concentration, meeting Trace's movements as he worked himself on Isaac, caressing and tugging his sack at the same time. He leaned in and brushed his lips over the skin of Trace's neck, gently nibbling him with his lips.

“Oh!” Trace's voice was low, abrupt, as if Isaac had forced the syllable out of him, unplanned. Isaac could feel the tremors in Trace's groin, the tight

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pressure of Trace's ass against his cock. He reveled in Trace's rhythmic grunts, the sudden release of all tension in his body as his thrusts against Isaac slowed to a slight rolling motion. Isaac loosened his control, pressing kisses to the nape of Trace's neck as he shot his load deep into Trace's body.

Regret filled Isaac as Trace pulled his hand away from his crotch, lifting it back up to his chest and wrapping it tight against him. Isaac didn't pull out, and Trace didn't pull away from him. They lay, enfolded together, and Isaac turned his head to the side and let his cheek rest against the back of Trace's stubbled head, wishing he could see his beautiful, strong, lined face.

Eventually Trace's body twisted and Isaac heard him pull tissues from a box, then felt him reach down and wipe his groin. Isaac let go of the metal bed frame carefully, gently, not wanting to remind Trace of his commands. It was awkward, and he didn't have anywhere to put his other arm. He wanted to wrap it around Trace's solid, warm body from underneath.

“Can I... hold you?”

Trace stiffened in his arms for a second, then slid out of the cot, letting Isaac's prick slip out from inside him, leaving it lonely and cold, now, against the warm bed linen. Isaac silently cursed himself for a fool.

He heard the soft sounds of fabric, then Trace's weight was on the bed again, nestling in against Isaac, who held his breath as Trace pulled the warm blankets up over the two of them. Trace's big hands were on his face, cupping his cheeks, then sliding upwards and dragging off his makeshift blindfold, and Trace was kissing him, his tongue pushing for entrance. Isaac let him in, reveling in the press of skin against skin, Trace's solid biceps coming down and encompassing Isaac's body. Isaac barely registered that Trace had put his sleep pants on. Isaac slipped his hand underneath Trace's body. He'd regret it, no doubt, in an hour, when his forearm was asleep, but for now, if there wasn't any way to meld them both together, to slip into Trace's skin, then Isaac would take as close as he could get.

The room was as bright as a quarter moon in the desert, the blue light from Trace's recharging tablet filling up the space around them. The expression etched in Trace's skin was almost one of pain, and Isaac leaned forward and kissed the corner of his mouth, flicking his tongue against the turned down lines. He wanted to lick the anguish out of him, to consume it until it was thoroughly vanquished. He wanted to take Trace to the arroyo and show him where the anemones would bloom next rain, each white petal faintly edged with



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palest purple, to borrow the headwoman's glossy bay mares and ride out to the foothills at the full moon, and gift him with the only silver he had. Trace clutched his arms. He grasped Trace tightly back, and closed his eyes against the knowledge that this metal box was sitting in a space between, that this moment was their treasure. It was all they had, and it wouldn't last.

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In the morning, they'd thrown the sheets half off, their two bodies generating heat even against the cold of the air-conditioning. Trace was still tired, woken all night by dreams of Isaac's skin, his touch, dreams that swirled in his head and left him in a cold sweat. Trace winced at the slight burn in his ass. That had been foolish. More foolish than even he usually was. And yet he couldn't hold it against Isaac. Not even against himself. He'd wanted it. Nothing had ever been better, not with Isaac's sweet face, still holding hints of the boy he'd been. He'd blindfolded him as much so he didn't have to look at those eyes as so Isaac couldn't see him unmanned.

He slipped out of the cot before Isaac could stir and look at him with questions. It wasn't that he wasn't well-versed in awkward mornings-after, just that he'd never been the one in charge before.

The shower was warm and comforting against his skin. He'd never had hot showers before he was a slave. Sometimes, when he was trying to contort himself into a position where he could sleep, he would make a list of all the things he was grateful for, and hot showers were right at the top. And those nights never ended with tears. Almost never. Well, sometimes they didn't.

He soaped himself quickly, facing the wall, just in case, wanting to be done before Isaac woke up. Isaac would probably climb in with him, given half the chance. The way he'd clasped against him last night, like he couldn't be close enough. Hell, he'd done the same. No fool like an old fool.

He rinsed off, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around him as he heard Isaac's first stirring over in the bunk.

The kid looked amazing as he walked over, with those eyes that could hold the whole world. Isaac's soft cock and sack nestled against his thighs, his balls loose and relaxed in their skin from body heat, his dick beginning to fill and swell. The kid's dark tattoo stood out against his pale skin, and he realized that arm had pillowed him, all night.

He nodded at Isaac's right shoulder. "We still have to take care of that."

“My tattoo?” Isaac looked down at it, wrapping his hand around his left arm.

“Can’t have you up for auction all mar—”

Trace stopped. *Isaac wasn't going up for auction.*

In his desire for the man, he’d actually forgotten. Isaac would never make his full term of service; the mycosis had damaged his lungs too much. He’d be fine with a quiet life, but the Fed offered anything but a quiet life. He didn’t know another slave who’d lasted out his twenty. Fuck. He had to tell him. And he had to find a replacement. Not Miles, though; not his brother. Aside from anything else, he’d look at him and remember Isaac the whole trip home. Nah, he’d keep an eye out for one, someone he didn’t know, in the towns on the road southeast.

Trace shook his head. “Sorry, no, I meant *that*.” He nodded at Isaac’s forearm. “We have to take care of that growth.” How he wished their last contact wasn’t going to be spilling Isaac’s blood. At least it was for a good reason. “Not this morning, though. I’ve got plans.”

He threw a dry towel at Isaac, brusque now, in his loss. “Get washed and dressed.”

“Wait, Trace. I have to know... they’re going to fuck me, aren’t they? Like I fucked you last night?”

How could he possibly answer that?

“Can you... get me ready? Make it easier?”

Oh, fuck. He was asking? To be stretched and trained and have his flesh made yielding and ready? That was too much for any man to bear, even one who wasn’t a man at all. He had to get Isaac away before that happened.

“No. I’m sorry. I can’t do that.”

He couldn’t dress in front of him. Regret stalked Trace as he carried his change of clothes into the exam room.

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Trace brought back coffee and breakfast. They sat together at the table, and Isaac spooned cold cereal and reconstituted milk into his mouth while Trace swiped the display from his tablet onto the big table. It was a map, and it took Isaac only seconds to recognize the Valley.

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“You know where Slab City is?”

Isaac nodded.

“Point it out for me? I’ve always wanted to see it.”

Oh, this was it. This was his moment. He hadn’t left the unit for two days, and this was his chance. He shook his head.

“What do you mean, no? You said you knew where it was.”

“Yeah, sure, but I’m not used to this... stuff.” He waved his spoon at the map.

Trace looked nonplussed. “Well, can you tell me how to get there?”

“It’s all about which angle the sun needs to be at. How far up that arroyo we need to go. How many hours to walk. It’ll be fine. I’ll get us there.”

“You’re not *coming*.” Trace sounded genuinely shocked.

“Why not?”

“Don’t be stupid. We’re not even allowed to ride an ATV without a Citizen. If anyone asks, Pete will cover for me, but there’s no possible way he can explain why two slaves decided to take a fucking day trip. I’m taking the risk because Miller’s buggered off somewhere, but I won’t risk it for you, too.”

If they stayed here, would it mean more time in the chair? He didn’t know if he wanted the answer to be yes or no. “You could hobble me. Like the slaves who work at the refinery. Then I won’t be able to run, even if I try.”

“Oh fuck no.”

Isaac took another spoonful of cereal. What would it take to get Trace to take Isaac with him? It had to be something important to Trace: something he wanted. “I bet there are books there. Unread. Waiting.” He took another mouthful, chewing slowly to give his words time to sink in. “You could bind my wrists, too,” he said. “I’ll be putty in your hands.”

Trace glared at him, and Isaac looked down into his cereal bowl and smiled.

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Sweat rolled down Isaac’s back, tickling and itching. It was only March, and in a few months only fools would venture out here during the day. His ass was sore from the long ride out on the ATV, sitting sideways because of the hobbles. His hands were tight and aching from grasping onto Trace’s shoulders.

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It seemed Slab City wasn't what Trace had expected, from the desultory way he surveyed the cracked, half-buried tires, crumbling cement slabs, and rusted metal hulks.

Trace strode over to a car body half engulfed by a silver-gray turpentine broom shrub. A single door hung like a broken limb. Trace yanked it open wider with a rusty shriek.

"Hey, watch out for—" Isaac tried to bite the words back. Goddamn Feds always thought they knew better. A dozen things could kill you in the Valley. But then, Trace wasn't a Fed, was he? Still, without him, no one even knew Isaac was out here.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Rattlers, sidewinders, brown spiders, scorpions..." He slammed the door again, and a dusting of rust shivered off the chassis. "I just thought there'd be... something. Anything."

"Like what?"

Trace stalked over to one of the abandoned concrete pads, scuffing it with his shoe. Isaac shuffled after him, the hobbles on his ankles keeping him from taking proper steps. Trace's eyes wandered over the expanse of creosote bushes dotted throughout the ruins, dismay on his face.

"Basements. Houses. It used to be an air force base, back in the mid-twentieth century. Then it was a sort of... nomad camp, I guess. My grandparents talked about it. They called it the Last Free Place. I thought it would be... just... more."

The concrete had been boxed and poured straight on top of the ground, and winter rains had eroded the dirt beneath, leaving the slabs floating adrift on a sand sea. Kangaroo rat burrows disappeared under the edges of slabs, leaving them loose and cracked. Spiny, brown lizards ran between the fractured sections. Drifts of spindly aluminum frames lay in a heap by a pile of rubble.

Trace's foot hit something with a clang. He knelt, and sifted through the drifts of white sand, unearthing the corner of an old square tin, buried in hard-packed dirt.

Trace jogged back to the ATV and unhitched a long bulky cylinder from the pack frame, unfolding it as he walked over.

"One end, a shovel," Trace said, holding it up. "The other, an ice pick, rock axe, or grubber." Trace unfolded the sharp pointed pickax end, chipping away

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the solid earth around the box. Isaac shuffled over to the ATV to retrieve one of the water bottles for Trace. Sweating like this would kill a man. Trace drained the final mouthful then handed it back to him.

“Here, hold this, too.” Trace shoved the pickax at Isaac, and knelt to unearth the last half of the box from its tomb. Trace’s neck bowed before him, fingers scrabbling in the dirt.

“Trace?”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t you ever try running?”

“Where would I go?”

“Where were you from?”

“Pretty close to here. Place called El Centro.”

“I’ve never heard of it. You sure it’s near here?”

Trace glanced up, twisting his mouth into something that almost passed for a smile. “Yeah, it’s gone now. Local county seat. Got shelled out.”

“Shit. Resisters?”

“I assume so. It was eighteen years ago. I didn’t even find out for two years afterward. I was only a dumb kid when I got harvested. I knew nothing.” Trace nearly had the box unearthed now, working it back and forth to worry the last corner out from under a subterranean slab of concrete. “So, no. There won’t be any running for me.”

The pick weighed heavy in Isaac’s hand. The skin on the back of Trace’s neck was paler than his face, and rivulets of sweat rolled out of his hairline. He had an ATV. The pickax would make short work of the hobble. One blow. That’s all it would take. On that spot where Isaac’s lips had touched him in the darkness.

And then the moment was gone as Trace stood, grasping the tin. It was the kind they still sold in the store every Christ’s Day, holding fancy cookies, not that Isaac ever had the cash for luxuries. Any decoration on the outside to hint at what it had originally held was long faded away. The lid had rusted tight against the base.

Trace balanced the box upside down on a flat fragment of concrete block, hammering at the lid with a fist-sized rock until it gave way, spilling its contents across the sands. Trace snorted. “Kids’ treasures.”

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He handed Isaac a green plastic whistle on a brightly colored string, the pea still rattling inside it, then held a pretty glass marble up to the sky, blue and green entwined within. Isaac reached over Trace's shoulder and unfurled a folded piece of nylon from the bottom of the tin. A tiny printed flag hung limply, stapled to a wooden stick, still clinging to flakes of bright red paint.

"Weird," he said. "Look at all the stars."

Trace frowned. "It's not Federation, despite the stripes. Way too many, and they're not in a circle." He shrugged and threw the box to one side. Isaac tucked the flag into the hip pocket of his pants.

"There's nothing here. Let's go back."

"Free my hands? Please? My ass itches, and I know you don't want to do that for me. I've been good, right?"

Trace gestured for Isaac to give him his hands as he pulled the cuff key out of his pocket. "But don't say one word about the hobbles, okay?"

Isaac sketched him a sloppy salute. As they walked back to the ATV, he pulled up short.

"Trace, you hear that?"

Trace halted, head cocked to listen, then shook his head. "Your ears are younger though."

Isaac pointed to where dust the color of skin spiraled into the desert air, riding the updrafts. A few minutes later, the rough rattle of a four-stroke in need of tuning broke the meditative silence of the desert. Trace stiffened at the very moment Isaac recognized the build of the driver.

"Fancy finding you out here," said Miller, dismounting. "I wondered where you might have headed off to, and now I'm glad I bothered to find out." He smirked. "Isn't this just perfect. We have unfinished business, don't we, boy?" He walked toward Trace, hands working to unbuckle his belt. He stopped eight feet away, letting his pants drop. The fabric puddled at his feet, and he bent and freed his knife from the sheath on his calf. "Now crawl over here and suck me."

Myriad expressions swept across Trace's face, before a perfect blankness entered his eyes. Trace turned, and with growing horror, Isaac watched him lower himself to the dusty ground, and slink toward Miller on his hands and knees. When he reached him, he knelt up and placed his palms on Miller's hips, opening his mouth wide.

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“Get your hands off me, boy. I’m a Citizen. Keep them behind your back.” Miller’s cock was purple-red, veiny and rigid. Clear liquid drooled from the tip. He smeared his precome over Trace’s face, slapping his dick against the stubbled cheeks. Miller tapped the hilt of the knife against Trace’s teeth. “I’ll admit, I’m a little worried about these. I wonder how much force it would take to spill them down your throat.” He flipped the knife and trailed the point down Trace’s cheek until the cold blade rested in the hollow of his throat. He held it there as he pushed his dick into the waiting cavern of Trace’s mouth. “Don’t try anything.”

Miller pushed his hips forward in a slow rhythm as he slid his jacket off and threw it to one side, then slowly unfastened his shirt, wiping his sweaty chest before discarding it.

Miller grinned across at Isaac as he thrust into Trace’s mouth. “You broken in yet, boy? You be good and patient, and when I’m done, I’ll look after you too, don’t you worry.” Isaac couldn’t look away. He wasn’t even real to Miller: just a piece of equipment waiting for its turn.

Miller turned his attention back to Trace, kneeling in front of him. “All right, Trace, that’s enough. You got me good and hard now. You know the drill: turn around.”

Trace shuffled on his knees until his back was facing Isaac, hands unfastening the fly on his pants. He exposed his ass, bending over and stretching his hands over his head. His fingers grasped tracks in the white dust. A host of parallel scars bisected Trace’s buttocks, silver-white in the bright sunlight.

Miller took his shock stick out of its holster where it lay on the ground, and hit the inside of Trace’s thighs, until he widened his stance. Trace’s balls dangled between his legs. Miller reached through, hefting the weight of Trace’s sack with his stick, the soft red skin and sparse hair vivid against the black metal.

“These are wasted on you, Trace.” Miller spat, then, the moisture glistening on the pale skin of Trace’s buttocks, running down his crack to his hole. The slimy trail it left behind evaporated off Trace’s skin almost instantly.

“Oops, too bad for you, boy. It’s going to be mighty hard to keep you lubed up for this. But, you know, ever since the Colonel made that suggestion, there’s been something I’ve been dying to try. Just hold still.”

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Miller held the end of his shock stick to Trace's hole, twisting and working his hand as he tried to screw the shaft into Trace's anus.

"Scuttlebutt on the airwaves, bitch, is that you'll be a free agent in eight weeks. Is the Colonel gonna resell you on the Tampa black market? I know I'm not the ideal owner. I'm away a lot for my job, obviously, but I've got an auto feeder in the kennel, and there's a tree for shade. And I can always ask my cousin to come by, check up on you. Give you a workout."

Miller repositioned the stick in his sweaty hand, shoving it in another inch. Trace groaned in anguish.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing!" Isaac yelled.

Miller barely spared him a glance. Isaac shuffled forward. If only his legs weren't bound. "Trace. Trace! You're the same size as him: you can take him. Get up."

Miller turned, exasperation in his eyes. "What part of the situation do you not get, fuckwit? You are both slaves. This is what you're for. To fuck, to ream, it doesn't matter. How many men do you think will have you? Maybe more than even Trace here has serviced. How many is that, hey?" He pushed the shock stick farther into Trace's ass, pulling the dry skin taut. "He's kind of legendary. The Colonel's a very generous man."

Miller placed one hand on Trace's hip, trying to get more leverage. Trace gave another shriek.

"Shut the fuck up!" cried Isaac, stumbling closer. "Stop."

Miller's fingers tightened on the stick grip, his thumb inching toward the trigger-switch. "Fuck, I would have brought lube if I knew you were this tight. You better get it wet, or I'm never going to tickle your colon." Miller pulled the shock stick out, and wrapped his hand in Trace's T-shirt, dragging him to kneel upright.

"Suck it." Miller wrapped one muscled forearm around Trace's neck, pulling him back against his solid body and presenting the end of the shock stick to his mouth. Trace parted his lips...

The metal shaft of the pick slipped against the skin on Isaac's palms as he swung it into Miller's back. The tip sank between his ribs like a shovel through soft sand. Miller rocked to the side, falling to the dust, dropping shock stick and



knife to the bleached hard pack. The pick handle wrenched itself from Isaac's hands.

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Suddenly Trace could breathe again, and a dull thud shivered its way up through the bones in his legs. Why had Miller stopped? He turned his head cautiously. If a blade was coming he'd rather face it. See it.

Miller lay twisting in the dirt, the handle of the pickax protruding from his back. Isaac stood over him, chest heaving and hands clenching. Trace yanked his pants up, and felt hysterical laughter bubble up. They'd just killed a Fed, and yet the one thing Trace wanted was for Isaac not to see him.

He stood, using his T-shirt to wipe his face, snot-smear and wet with tears. Miller clawed at the ground, trying to push himself upright. Isaac put his hand on Trace's shoulder, as if to comfort him. Shouldn't he be the one doing that?

With calm precision Trace pressed his foot against Miller's side, nudging the big man onto his front. Trace placed one shoe on Miller's back for leverage, then worked the pickax back and forth until it pulled, at last, out of Miller's flesh. He stood quietly for a second, then swung the pickax overhand, landing a second blow. The metal sliced into Miller's backbone, six inches above the first wound. Miller screamed. Droplets of blood, bright red against the dry dust, splattered across the sand, and his legs flopped limply to one side. Trace tugged the pick free as Miller's fingers flexed in the dirt, scrabbling to catch the trailing branch of a creosote bush. He twisted his body until he was lying on his back, then reached for Trace's legs.

Trace's second blow pierced Miller's belly. A rivulet of red blood spouted briefly from the hole, trickling down Miller's abdomen. Trace slid the axe back out of the gash, and a length of wrinkled organ burrowed out from the skin in its wake, roiling and unfurling at the surface. The delicate pink was shocking against Miller's light tan belly skin. The section of bowel looped and turned back against itself, lumpy and creased, shiny-wet. Miller's mouth made silent movements, like a fish pulled out of a tank. He wasn't making any noise, now, but where was all the racket coming from? Trace's throat caught, the sound stuttering, and he realized the screaming was his own. He raised the pickax over his head again.

"No, stop," said Isaac. "No more. He's done." He gripped Trace's shoulder, pulling him away from the carnage with his warm grasp. Trace struggled

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against him and then was still, letting the pick drop to the earth. He looked down at Miller's limp form. The desert shimmered and swam around him as his chest heaved, and he retched, losing the contents of his stomach into the dry sand. He gulped oxygen into his raw, scratchy throat.

It took long minutes before he could find the will to speak. "He had his dick in my mouth."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Trace swiveled to meet Isaac's eyes, surprise coloring his tone. "No. I mean my DNA's all over him. Now, unless I go back to camp and bring a gallon of bleach out here I don't think there's anything we can do about that. At least this won't come back to you."

"What are you talking about? I'm the one who hit him first."

"It doesn't matter. My service is nearly up anyway. If I'd just assaulted him they'd shoot me. Killing a Citizen? They'll make sure I suffer, first." Trace dug the keys to Isaac's hobbles out of his pocket with shaking hands, then unlocked him. "They'll need a body before they know he's dead. Don't get any blood on you. I'll handle this."

Trace stumbled over to the ATV. *Please let there be one.* He didn't want to have to run his hands all over Miller's body. He rummaged through the saddlebags, unearthing a tiny tracker, the size of a thumb.

Miller's eyes were open wide. He had one hand pressed to the wound in his belly, candy-pink tissue bulging between his fingers, and blood seeping down his side. His breathing was thin and reedy. He tried to speak, but only a harsh panting came out. Trace knelt beside him, picking the big knife up from its resting place in the dirt. He flipped the tracker on and ran it over Miller's body. It emitted a rapid clicking, rising to a high-pitched whine as it settled over Miller's left bicep.

Isaac squatted on the other side of Miller, close to his face. Spit dribbled from Miller's lips and chin.

Trace rolled Miller toward him, bringing his left arm high. He pulled the wrist forward and knelt on Miller's hand, running his fingers across his bicep, locating the rice-grain-sized chip. He flipped the knife around in his hand, holding the blade tenderly while he made the first incision into the skin. He dug inside the wound with his fingers. Miller groaned, and Trace pulled out a tiny chip. He smashed it between two rocks until only powder remained.

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Trace ran his eyes over the landscape. The car wreck. Just the thing. Trace grabbed Miller's hands and dragged him across the ground toward the car wreck, a sluggish blood trail oozing out behind them. He rolled Miller into the backseat space of the chassis. This felt good. It was the first time in his life he was making *all* the decisions. He rolled up Miller's trouser leg, unstrapping the knife sheath. "You won't be needing this anymore."

He retrieved the pickax and unfolded the shovel end, scooping up the dirt from the blood trail and tossing it over Miller's body. He threw the jacket and shirt over Miller's torso and face, then closed the car door with a protesting metallic screech. By the time he joined Isaac, by the ATVs, Miller's rattling, hollow breaths and rasped curses had faded into the sounds of the desert.

"If they find out he's dead, I forced you, okay?" said Trace. "Promise me you'll tell them it was my fault." He cut a branch from a creosote bush and started sweeping away their footsteps and drag marks. Tiny red ants were swarming over the already-drying pool of his vomit, drawn by the moisture and protein.

"The wind's picking up," said Isaac. "With any luck it will fill in the ATV tracks. But what do we do with this?" He held up the pickax. "Both our fingerprints are all ov—"

"What are you doing?"

Trace froze, his eyes pinned to Isaac's. The voice was young, barely broken, and he'd heard it before.

"Miles!" shouted Isaac. He ran toward the kid, now crawling out from under blue-gray mesquite cover. "Shit, I'm so happy to see you. What are you doing here?"

"We're bugging out, Isaac. You gotta come with us."

"Are Lila and Rachel here?"

"Sure!"

Two hundred yards away an eddy of dust rose from the hard pack. Slowly, a figure emerged from the haze: a tall young woman, dark haired and muscular, carrying a toddler in a packframe on her back.

Isaac whooped and ran toward her.

Trace shifted his weight from foot to foot. Should he go over as well? He was the man who had taken their brother away. It didn't seem likely they would

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welcome him with open arms. He brushed the rest of the drag marks away, searching the dirt until he found Miller's shock stick, and stowing it in the ATV saddlebag next to the second water flask. He rinsed out his mouth and spat, then spilled water on his hands, rubbing them together to rinse off the worst of the sticky red droplets. Footsteps came toward him, and he looked up.

"Trace, this is Rachel."

There was no welcome for him in her face. Of course not. Slave or not, he was a Fed.

"Were you following me, Rach?" asked Isaac.

"No. We're leaving. We never expected to see you out this way. The Feds won't leave Miles alone now, and no one will hire him in the future, knowing he's a target. We won't make it without your income. There's nothing left for any of us now. Leaving was the only choice. I don't even know if there's anywhere to leave for."

"I couldn't just let them *take him*."

Rachel only looked at him with hard eyes.

Trace turned away. "You should go with them, Isaac," he said. "Take the rest of the water." Guilt swamped him for the mouthfuls he had just wasted on his hands. How pointless that had been. "And take Miller's ATV. It won't carry all of you, but it will lighten the load at least."

Isaac gripped his wrist. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

This was the best idea he'd had in his life. "Where are you going to go?"

Rachel eyed him with open distrust and Trace held his hands up. "No, that's okay, don't tell me. But I gotta get that tracker out of you first." There was a bottle of disinfectant in the sparse ATV medkit. Trace didn't bother with a wipe, just squirted chlorhexidine over Miller's knife and Isaac's arm. The blade nicked the skin above the tracker on Isaac's bicep effortlessly. Trace scratched it out with his blunt fingernail, like a thorn. Lucky it was so shallow; he could extract it and leave no more than a graze. He replaced the disinfectant in the kit and passed the box to Rachel. She took it warily.

"Isaac, this is important... you're sick. Seriously sick. You need treatment. Wherever you go, promise me you'll try to get it. If you came back with me to camp I'd give you the drugs, but it's probably better you just seize the moment and go now."

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It was a perfect day. The sky was insanely blue, the haze of the morning completely burnt off now. “You know, in one of my books it says the Inuit have fifty words for snow,” said Trace.

“Who are the Inuit?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. And I doubt very much it’s true anyway. But it makes me think we need more than one word for blue. Look at that sky. I’ve never seen anything like it. There should be a word for just this shade of blue.”

Isaac’s hand crept into his, squeezing good-bye. Rachel and Lila mounted the ATV while Trace gave her a rundown on the controls. Rachel’s eyes overflowed with misgivings. He didn’t blame her. And then they were ready. How did this come to good-bye so fast? Rachel accelerated slowly away, Miles and Isaac loping along beside the vehicle in an easy run. They could probably keep that pace up for clicks. It had been a long time since Trace had had that kind of stamina.

Trace raised his hand in farewell, and Isaac grinned at him, boyish in his happiness. It was the best thing he had ever seen.

Trace sat in the scant shade of a spindly brown ocotillo and watched until the dust trail of the small family faded into the atmosphere. He forced his lungs to work slower, calming his racing heart until everything was still. Whatever would come after, this had been worth it. A perfect blue sky, and Isaac would go on, beneath it.

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They headed toward the foothills, distant ranges endlessly growing in size but never coming nearer. Maybe the desert really did go on forever.

“You should have killed him,” said Rachel.

“What? No!”

“He’s a Fed. He could send them after you.”

Isaac shook his head. “He’s a slave, not a Fed. And you don’t know him.”

“It’s been two days, Isaac! You don’t know him either.”

“He’s the most gentle man I’ve ever met.”

“So, what, he’s going to go back and tell them he *left you* in the desert?”

“Oh, fuck!” Isaac stopped, appalled. What *was* Trace going to say?

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Rachel took her hand off the throttle and brought the ATV to a slow halt, and Miles, jogging up ahead, stopped and looked back at them. “You care about him, don’t you?”

Isaac shook his head. Of course not. Trace was a man. A Fed.

“Holy mother of God, *you do!* Fourteen years, it’s been, since I dug you out of that sand drift in the side of the dry wash, and for at least five of them I’ve wondered why you were happy to pretend that you were my brother. I even—oh, never mind. Just go.”

“Rach, don’t. You know I care about you. You’re my family. All of you.” That last bit was true though. He loved her like a sister. He’d never wanted to make it more than that, and now it finally made sense.

“Go. Go get him. If he’s your man then you’d better make him part of our family. But we’re not going to wait for you. We’re heading to wherever the arroyo flows from. Catch up to us, if you can.”

For a second he was frozen in place, torn between two desires. He couldn’t deny the truth: he wanted Trace to be his family, too. He pressed a kiss to Lila’s sleeping head, lolling to one side under her threadbare gingham sunhat, and then he was walking back along the ATV tracks without a glance back at his heart’s blood.

Rachel’s voice carried to him on the warm tendrils of breeze. “Isaac. You’d better hurry.”

Why would he need to hurry?

*Oh, shit.*

Isaac started to run.

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Firm pressure gripped his arm,

“Okay, *now* who is the incredibly stupid one?”

Trace opened his eyes, blinking sand from his lashes. The medkit from the ATV lay spilled open in front of him. The desert dirt cradled his head. A familiar figure knelt beside him, carefully binding his wrists with soft bandages.

“All you’ve done is mangle your wrists all to hell.” Why was Isaac’s voice shaking? “You’ve lost a little blood, not enough to kill you. But if you lay out

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here in the sun for a couple of days, you wouldn't have needed the knife. And we have no water, and we won't catch up to Rachel and Miles in time. Goddammit!"

Hands heaved Trace to his feet, settling him on the ATV in front of Isaac's warm body.

"You asshole. Don't you ever try this again."

Those whispered words in his ear must have been the wind. No universe would be this kind.

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By the time they reached the outskirts of the township, it was as if Trace was shutting down, curling in on himself. The strength of the big medic had bled into the desert along with his and Miller's fluids.

Isaac parked the ATV next to the medunit and hustled Trace inside in his blood-spattered clothes before the Sergeant could see them. He pressed a bottle of electrolyte drink into Trace's hands and watched to make sure he drank it, leaving a second bottle on the table. He turned the shower on, as cold as he could get it, and pulled Trace's T-shirt over his head. He itched to run his fingers over the solid chest, heaving now, in shallow breaths. He risked pressing a kiss to the shoulder in front of him, and Trace jerked away. Isaac clenched his fists, then reached down to unfasten Trace's pants. Trace slapped his hands away. "No!"

Isaac took a step back, hands raised. "Okay, no problem. You do that, Trace, okay."

"Don't call me Trace." His voice was anguished.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to tell Sergeant Barnes we're back. Maybe find some grub. You shower."

Barnes was cleaning up the catering truck, three covered trays sitting on the shiny metal bench.

"Um, hey," said Isaac.

Barnes glared at him, then pointed towards their lunch trays. "You're back late. Where's Trace?"

"Getting clean. It's dusty out there."

"So you're looking after *him*, now?"

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Isaac shrugged. "Whatever he needs, I guess." He picked up two of the trays.

"Miller's late getting back as well. You didn't see him out there did you?"

Isaac forced a tone of nonchalance into his voice. "He's AWOL? Maybe he defected."

Barnes snorted. "Not him. All full of the glory of serving as a Citizen, clasp his rights to him like armor."

"Did you check his tracker?"

"If I run the search through the system, it'll log it with HQ," said Barnes. "If he's just lingering over a good fuck I don't want to get him in that kind of trouble. But I finished the repairs, no thanks to him. We're pulling out in three hours, Miller or no Miller. Tell Trace."

Isaac knew a dismissal when he heard one.

It was tricky, managing the two trays and opening the medlab doors. Trace was already in dry clothes, throwing his blood-spattered set into a medical waste bag. Isaac unwound his wet bandages, and patted the wounds dry, then redressed them under Trace's instructions. He wished he could wipe the day out of Trace's eyes.

Isaac made Trace sit and spooned food into him, trading bites off both their trays. "The sergeant says we're out of here in three hours. He also mentioned Miller's missing."

Trace was functioning again, although he looked frayed and beaten. "Listen, I've got to take that growth off your arm, and then I'm going to pack you some amphotericin and IVs. Do you think you can find someone to inject you? It's important."

"*You* can inject me."

"You need this every other day. I won't be on the convoy the next time it comes through, and you'll be gone after Rachel and your family."

"Come with me."

Trace shook his head. "No way. You'll have no chance with me slowing you down. Holding you back."

Silence filled the room, and Isaac thought about never seeing those eyes again.



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“I want you to put me in the chair.” Isaac grasped Trace’s hand. “One more time.” Just once more. He *needed* it. He didn’t know if he said it out loud or managed to keep the words tucked deep inside. This was foolish, but he wanted to be helpless and laid out, wanted Trace’s hands on him. The desire had grown in him like yellow primrose after rain.

Trace paused, wiping his hands on his trousers and Isaac knew he’d won.

“Okay. One more session. Then you have to get out of here.”

They walked through to the exam room.

“Jump up,” said Trace, gesturing to the exam chair. “You can leave the T-shirt on.”

Isaac grasped his arm before Trace could move away. That wasn’t what he wanted. He shed his grays, slowly, lingeringly, willing Trace to watch him. He folded the soft fabrics and placed them on a shelf until he stood naked before Trace. Did he feel the same want? Did he like what he saw?

“Into the chair.” Trace’s voice shook, and pleasure stroked Isaac. He’d done that.

Isaac wouldn’t let his eyes leave Trace’s as he lowered himself into the chair’s embrace, then swung around until he was reclining against the back. The cover made crisp sounds as it stuck to his skin. Isaac lifted his ankles into the stirrups.

“You don’t need the straps today,” said Trace.

“But I want them.”

Desire flooded him as Trace fastened the leather around his feet. Trace lavished attention on Isaac’s skin, stroking and caressing, running his hands across Isaac’s chest. Isaac shivered and pushed into his touch.

Trace’s voice was teasing now, playful. “Well now, what shall I do with you? I could catheterize you. Insert a Foley into your urethra, until you won’t even be able to decide if you want to take a piss or not.”

Isaac blanched. Something—anything—going inside his slit... he quivered in the chair. Trace could take all his decisions away. A tight knot formed in his belly.

“No need to be concerned, Isaac. I’ve done it before. Admittedly, only the once. And the feedback I got last time wasn’t entirely encouraging. So I could

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use the practice, right? But what we're actually going to do is take that mole off your arm, okay?"

Isaac glanced down at the mottled bump on his left arm. It itched, sometimes, and hadn't been there long.

"I have midazolam if you want it."

Isaac shook his head. "I want to keep every second of you."

Trace held up a hypodermic. "This is just local anaesthetic. I won't cause you pain."

Isaac looked up at him. "I know."

Trace squirted clear liquid on a cotton pad and rubbed it in a spiral motion on Isaac's arm, working gently outward. The needle was tiny. Isaac watched as Trace punctured the skin just outside the blemish on his forearm. Trace was a big man, but he moved swiftly and surely in his element. Watching him was like listening to music. Isaac thought Trace was going to pull the needle out, but instead, just before he withdrew it completely, he swiveled the needle around, pushing it back into his flesh at right angles. A tiny drop of blood wept to the surface when he pulled the needle out, then reinserted it on the other side of the mole, and then again, making a triangle around it. The skin around the mole was strangely white now, and when Trace pushed at it with a pair of tweezers Isaac felt nothing but a dull pressure.

"I'll give it just another minute. While we wait, let's take care of something else."

Trace swabbed the inside of his right arm, and injected a clear liquid into his vein with a small, narrow syringe.

"What's that for?"

"That's the amphotericin."

Trace stroked Isaac's body, running his fingers down Isaac's abs, and petting Isaac's soft cock where it lay on his thigh. It pulsed and grew under Trace's touch, and Trace caressed the swollen flesh, toying with the foreskin. He let it fall back to Isaac's groin with reluctant hands.

Trace picked up a glinting scalpel. "If your mole was smaller, we could do a punch biopsy, but I wanna get the whole thing. You might not get the chance for follow-up treatment."

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Trace wiped the whole site with a fresh disinfectant pad again, and the tang of alcohol filled Isaac's nostrils. The first cut was fast. The blade didn't hurt as it entered his arm, slicing through the skin as if it were no more substantial than the rind of a soft fruit. Trace repositioned the blade at the top of the cut, moving downward again in an elliptical arc, encompassing the irregular mole and a wide margin of skin around it. Blood welled up, and Trace wiped it away with a folded gauze square. He placed the scalpel back on the trolley, and picked up forceps and a pair of surgical scissors. Trace grasped the stump of loose flesh, demarcated by the scalpel cuts, and pulled it up until it stood above Isaac's arm. He inserted the surgical scissors into the wound, the tip disappearing in a shallow pool of blood lying within the wound. Isaac felt only tugging and pulling, no pain.

Trace clipped the flesh. It took several snips with the scissors to cut through the lump. Trace lifted it with the forceps and placed it in a small translucent plastic jar.

The distinct layers of his flesh made Isaac flinch: skin, then fine, white fat—almost undetectable—and red flesh below. So he was only meat, after all. Blood welled up, and Trace covered the wound with gauze cloth, pressing down.

“You're so strong,” said Trace. “You can do anything. Be anyone.”

Isaac leaned forward in the chair and brushed their lips together. His tongue darted out, touching Trace's lower lip, requesting entry. Trace made a sound deep in his throat, then pressed Isaac back, his mouth hovering breathlessly over Isaac's. Trace's hands found their way to Isaac's shoulders and Isaac tasted Trace's mouth, biting gently at his lips. They kissed for long minutes.

At length, Trace pulled away and cleared his throat. “I've got to stitch that up.”

Isaac didn't watch his wound this time; he watched the medic's face, as he wielded the forceps and curved needle like a conjurer sketching runes in the air. After each stitch, Trace met his eyes.

Finally, Trace laid down his tools and stepped back from the chair. “So I guess this is the end.”

Isaac opened his mouth to reply, and then, almost imperceptibly, the unit shook with the tread of feet mounting the steps outside. Trace's eyes flicked to the medlab door, horror carved into his face.

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The Colonel yanked the door open, and climbed the steps, white dust falling off his boots onto the clean medlab floor. He took in the vignette in front of him, then clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together.

“Excellent. You got the new kid all ready for me.” A grin spread over his face. Trace stood, dumbstruck. The Colonel snapped his fingers. Why was he doing that? The expression on the Colonel’s face shifted to outrage. Trace shook himself from his daze. He was waiting for *him*. For his slave’s welcome. Trace lowered himself slowly to his hands and knees. *Everything was different now; how could this still be the same?* The textured metal flooring dug into his knees as he crawled across to the Colonel. *How did it go again?* He lapped at the heavy boots until shiny leather emerged from the encasing dirt. From the corner of his eye he saw Isaac crane his neck forward as the Colonel swung his jacket off and nudged Trace to one side with his knee. He walked over to Isaac’s chair, catching his chin between his fingers and turning Isaac’s head from side to side. So that’s where Miller had got the gesture from: his idol. He’d wanted to be like the Colonel in every way. Isaac struggled against his cuffs, trying to wrench his face away from the implacable grip.

“He’s a bit big. And old. This isn’t your best work. What were you thinking? You get his DNA results through yet?”

He nodded, then coughed and cleared his throat. “Yes, sir. They finished cycling this morning, but I haven’t looked at them yet.” It hadn’t seemed important any more. Trace could only kneel, swallowing down the bitter bile that filled his throat. *Stupid. Stupid.* He’d known this was coming. He just thought they’d have... more. More time. More of each other. More than this to look forward to. Fuck. If only he hadn’t kissed Isaac, if he’d let him go right away this morning, if Isaac had never turned back—for him... if—

*Fucking if.*

“Let’s just take a look at who you are.” The Colonel walked over to the DNA processing unit, and used his elbow to activate the readout. When he turned, his face was unreadable.

“I guess it’s hello again, Father,” said Isaac.

Trace gazed at Isaac in dismay. *Holy shit.* Well, no wonder he knew how to read. And couldn’t work except under the table. Trace lowered his eyes to the floor before the Colonel noticed he’d been looking. “I’m so sorry, sir. I screwed up. I never would have taken him if I’d known. And sir, he’s got valley fever.”

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“Well, that sucks. He’s got, what, a couple of months of useful life?”

“I’ve already given him two doses of intravenous antifungals, sir.”

“Well, shit, what’s wrong with you, boy? Why’d you waste that much on him? It’s fine. We’ll harvest a second, sell this one to Fields anyway, then fill the reorder on the back swing. That’s not a drawback, kid, that’s planned goddamn obsolescence. It’s a win-win.” He stroked Isaac’s skin, trailing his hand down to Isaac’s groin and flipping Isaac’s cock back and forth, examining it dispassionately.

“Or maybe I can salvage something from him, after all this disappointment. I’ll need a replacement for you. What are we up to now, *siete*? No, *ocho*, yeah? I forgot about that cute blond kid. I expected him to last longer than three weeks, you know? Untreated wounds are a fucking killer in high summer. Well, get *ocho* ready for docking while I wash up.”

He couldn’t. He couldn’t make himself move; could only meet Isaac’s eyes, where he lay in the chair, struggling against the straps. He never even saw the Colonel’s fist coming before it knocked him to the ground. “Three days I’ve been gone, that’s all. And yet somehow you have grown entirely too big for your boots. It’s just as well I won’t have to put up with your weaknesses for much longer.”

Isaac called to him from the chair. “What does he mean, docking? Trace? Trace? Who’s Ocho?”

He was numb as he heaved himself to his feet. “You’re *ocho*.” He was working on automatic as he grabbed a new tray, laid out a sterile cloth and a selection of retractors, clamps, and forceps. And scalpels, of course. He could hear Isaac’s fevered attempts to break free, wriggling in the strong, lined wristbands, his ankle cuff clanking against the metal stirrup in a frantic beat.

He could hear the Colonel at the sink, the thrum of the water against the metal tub, the soft plastic sound of the pump as the Colonel squirted soap into his palms, the squelching as he lathered up his hands and arms—the same sound that made the pit of his own stomach fall away in despair.

“What’s docking? Trace?”

“Don’t call me that,” he whispered.

“That’s adorable. The kid thinks that’s a name?” The Colonel walked up to the chair, drying his hands, before draping the towel over his shoulder. “That’s not a name, you dumb fuck. It’s a number. *Uno, dos, tres*.”

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Isaac's face shone red with exertion and rage.

Trace hated the number. Hated the way the Colonel used it to turn him into a thing. Trace was barely tolerable when Pete said it, but only because he pronounced it longer, sweeter, purposefully turning the number into a name. Making him back into a person.

“It sounds like *ochó* here wants to know what docking is, *tres*. Think we should show him what we're about to do? Or would you rather it was a delightful surprise, just like it was for you?”

Trace tucked his thumbs into the soft waistband of his pants and dragged them downward. The Colonel leaned over and pulled up the gray T-shirt, letting Isaac get a good look at the ragged stump of a cock that jutted out above stretched, low-hanging balls. Livid red and brown scars marred Trace's groin and cock stump, as if someone had held the edge of a hot iron there long enough to start flesh melting.

“It's just a precaution, *ochó*. We can't have you around all the pretty girls with a prick on you, can we now? This means you won't ever have to worry about those nasty urges. We want to keep you fertile though. Why, *tres* here must have twenty, thirty kids back in the Fed. Big beasts, like him, good for farm work. I've got a couple on my own spread. It's like fucking a silent *tres*: my favorite kind. We sever the vocal cords on bred slaves, of course. You're lucky that way; you'll have to keep your voice to give the happy little 'Welcome to the Fed' speech to all the young 'uns.”

The Colonel stepped forward to the instrument trolley and selected a scalpel, raising it to the light. He shook his head as Trace picked up a hypodermic syringe. “I don't think we need to bother with anaesthetic or sedation, *tres*. I want him to remember this forever.”

Trace recoiled. “Sir, you can't—”

“Oh, I can. No son of mine would have been such a pussy about the fate of a few slaves. Or run. That's what happens when you mix Citizen blood with that of a mongrel. His mother was entirely unworthy. Lucky she died so soon after whelping him. Putting her down would have been messy.”

“You fuck,” Isaac screamed at him. “You fucking fuck, I will end you.”

The Colonel grinned. “Well, you've still got a temper. I don't know, maybe we should take those balls, too. After all, I've got plenty of tiny copies of *tres* on ice.” He stepped toward Isaac, helpless in the chair.

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The seconds hung like dust in the air as Trace met Isaac's eyes. How had he missed the resemblance? How had he overlooked this boy, who had given him the most precious gift of all? And now his father would take away *everything*. He let his arm move without second-guessing himself. Trace thrust the needle into the Colonel's neck and depressed the plunger as soon as he felt the syringe break the skin, hitting the vein as much through luck as twenty years of practice. He used all his strength to wrap the Colonel's arms to his side, to stop him from reaching up to pull out the needle.

"My name's not fucking *tres*! It's Alejandro! I'm Alejandro. I have a name, goddamn you, you bastard. You took everything, even my name, and I want it back!" He was screaming, his throat raw, the tang of blood on his lips. "I'm Alejandro."

Tears wet his face, and he couldn't wipe them away with arms heavy with the growing weight of the Colonel's body. Even through the blood roaring in his ears, Alejandro heard the Colonel's shout turn into a gurgle, as the fast-acting sedative hit his system. He held on to him until the struggling stopped, then let the limp body fall to the floor. Alejandro stared at his own hands and dropped the syringe onto the floor.

"Trace—"

"Don't call me that." Was that him speaking? How were words still coming out of his mouth when the world had ended?

"I'm sorry. Alejandro. Please will you let me out?"

Isaac was still strapped in the chair. He unfastened his arms with trembling hands. Isaac leaned forward and freed his legs, then clambered over the stirrups, out of the chair. Isaac pulled Alejandro to him, pressing his hands against his broad muscular back.

He rested against him for a minute then pushed him away. He had to get Isaac away for good.

"Isaac, pull his uniform off. We've got twenty minutes. Maybe. We've got no civilian clothes here. If you're wearing the gray, you'll get stopped by everyone who wonders what an unaccompanied slave is doing out in the Protectorate. You're about the same size." He forced out a laugh. "Of course you are. Anyway, you'll get a lot farther if people think you're a Citizen."

He grabbed a field bag, yanked open the cupboard and threw in all the amphotericin B and packaged hypodermics they had, and all the fluconazole

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tabs. There weren't enough—not even close. He topped the bag off with every broad-spectrum antibiotic he could find. Isaac would be able to trade those anywhere. He dashed into the living quarters and picked a book at random, ripping out the flyleaf and grabbing one out of his precious hoard of pencils. He scribbled down dosage instructions. Thank God Isaac could read.

Isaac was dressing in the Colonel's uniform, strapping his sidearm holster to his body.

“Do you know how to use that?” Alejandro asked.

Isaac nodded, settling the pistol in its harness. “He bought me my first rifle when I was four. Weapon skills were almost the only thing he had the inclination to teach me that I was actually good at.”

He pushed the field bag at Isaac. “There aren't enough hypodermics. You'll have to sterilize these to reuse if you can't find some more. Don't waste them on anyone else. The dosage and instructions are on the note in the outside pocket. When the liquid stuff runs out, start on the pills. Don't stop. It'll take more than a year. Seriously.” He pulled Isaac's face toward him, looked into his eyes. “Use them until they're all gone. Don't sell these on the black market, just the antibiotics. Take them all. You hear me?” If he followed instructions he'd be fine. Live a long and happy life. It might be too late for him, but it wouldn't be too late for Isaac.

He leaned forward and pressed a hungry kiss to Isaac's mouth. It was too urgent to be pretty, all teeth and spit and desperation.

Isaac clutched at his arms, shaking him. “Alejandro. I'm not going without you.”

“I'm his, Isaac, and he's used me up.” He'd forgotten Alejandro was long gone. A slave was all he was. Isaac's youth had enchanted him. As soon as Isaac had gone, he'd take that walk.

“I need you, Alejandro.”

“I can't leave my stuff. My books. Twenty years it's taken me to find them.”

“You'll find more books. You'll find a life.”

“Did you somehow fail to notice I'm not even a fucking man?” He gestured down at himself, choking out a laugh. “*Literally* not a fucking man.”

Isaac crushed Alejandro against him, whispering into his ear. “You're still a man. I want you to be *my* man.”



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“You’re speaking like I’m going to step out of this medunit and all my life will come rushing back, flowing to fill the gaps and cracks of my life.” He could barely choke the words out for the anguish that overflowed him. “I don’t know how *not* to be a slave, Isaac. I’m as barren as this fucking desert. I have *nothing* inside me left for you.”

He sagged against Isaac. Isaac held him, kissing his hair, his ear, his cheek, seeking out Alejandro’s lips, sucking Alejandro’s tongue into his own mouth, kneading his flesh with his demanding hands.

“You’re so full of shit,” said Isaac. “Trace can stay here, but Alejandro’s coming with me. I did it once, and I was alone then.” Isaac nodded at the Colonel’s limp form on the floor of the lab. “Now tell me how to take care of your tracker.”

“The battery only lasts five years, give or take. I’ve never had a new one since the day I was taken. Never gave them a reason to bother. They knew I had nothing to leave for.” No *one*. That Isaac—this kid who had once smiled at him from across the lab as he watched his father at work—that he wanted *him*... it was impossible.

“Then let’s go. Wait... do we kill him?” Isaac nodded at the Colonel’s limp form on the floor.

Alejandro shook his head, stepping away from Isaac. “No. If we do, they’ll hunt us down for sure. They’ll never stop. Maybe if we just go—*maybe*—there’s a chance we can get away.” They needed longer though; twenty minutes wouldn’t give them enough time. He threw bandages and medical tape onto the floor as he rummaged desperately for the cable ties stocked for the times the harvest was restless, then held up a handful with a cry of glee. Isaac kissed the back of his neck as Alejandro looped one around each of the Colonel’s wrists, threading another through to hold his arms behind his back.

“Give me a hand,” said Isaac, and they half lifted, half pulled the Colonel through to the living quarters. His body was hard to move, limp, and Alejandro grunted as he tipped the body into the bathtub, leaving him on his side.

“Part of me wants to hurt him,” said Alejandro.

“Hell, I want to cut off his equipment and shove it in his mouth.”

“That’s not us, though, right? I wish it was.”

Isaac didn’t reply. He wasn’t going to lie.

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Isaac slung the field bag over his shoulder, and caught Alejandro's hand, leading him back out into the lab. Before they could take a step toward the main door, heavy footsteps bounded up the outside steps, and the door swung open.

"We're all set, Colonel. Ready to go when you say the word." Pete's jaw dropped open as he took in Isaac in the Colonel's uniform, Alejandro's hand in his. They faced each other for long seconds.

Pete backed out of the medunit, slamming the door in his wake. Isaac wrenched it open and they tumbled out after him. Pete staggered away from the unit, then turned and walked until he reached the tree.

His shaken voice drifted back to them. "Fuck. I seriously need a cigarette."

Alejandro pushed Isaac toward the ATV. "I'll be right there." He pulled two cigarettes out of the packet in his pocket and walked over to stand beside Pete.

"Got a light?"

Pete pulled his lighter out, and took the cigarettes from Alejandro's hand. He lit them both in his mouth, then passed one to Alejandro, their fingers touching for the last time. They both took a deep inhalation then stood, shoulder to shoulder, watching the sun arc downward.

"Why the hell do you smoke, man?" said Alejandro, finally. "You know this shit'll fuck you up."

Pete breathed out a cloud of white vapor. "Why do you?"

"I smoke because I hoped cigarettes would kill me before now. I knew I'd never find the courage for a more direct solution."

Pete took a last drag. "I smoke because I like the company." He threw the tiny stub to the ground and crushed it under his boot heel. "I'll have to quit the damn things now." Pete turned away from Alejandro and pulled a foil-wrapped bar from his chest pocket.

"I guess I'll just enjoy a little snack on some chocolate I traded with one of these local kids. Black-market Mexicano chocolate. Organic and artisan-made. Illicit goods, so of course I'm making sure to eat it out here away from the Colonel. In about forty more minutes, I'm going to finish up and go check if he wants me to do anything else before we bug outta here. Hell, it might even be forty-five. I sure will enjoy this chocolate, even though it's melted all to hell. I'll have to lick my fingers pretty thoroughly when I'm done. Usually I would

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have saved some for my best friend, but I guess he won't need any this time. No, siree, not this time."

Alejandro rested one hand on Pete's shoulder. He searched for the right words, but Pete took another step out toward the desert, and Alejandro's hand dropped back to his side. What could he possibly say? He would never have made it this far without the man, would have taken that long one-way stroll years before. But there could have been a life down the other fork of the road. He turned and walked toward the ATV, where Isaac was throwing catering-coded supplies into the saddlebags.

"I took care of the comms truck, and a few other things. They'll be out of touch till they can drive to the refinery. Rachel and the others have gone toward the mountains. We can follow, catch up to them. They're only hours ahead of us, and Miles is on foot."

"No."

"They're my family. I have to find them. Help them."

"Not now. Not with only a couple of hours lead before the Feds will be on our tails. The best way you can help them is by going where they are not."

"Shit! How can I leave them? I promised I'd never abandon them." Isaac clutched at him, like Alejandro could somehow stanch the pain flowing out of him. Maybe he could. He'd give his life to try.

Isaac cleared his throat and scrubbed at his face with his hands. "We both need uniforms. Which is a problem, because you'll never fit into the Colonel's. Or Pete's. We could steal the truck?"

"Too slow, and too easy to track."

Isaac cocked his head to one side. "Wait. I know where there's another uniform. Just about your size."

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Isaac's limbs jittered the whole way back out to the Slabs. Tiny finches stalked them, taking advantage of the disturbance they made in the scattered creosote bushes to snap dinner from clouds of midges. It took them too long to locate the right car wreck. Wind-blown sand had filled in the old ATV tracks and they had to navigate by half-buried patches of black asphalt.

Isaac opened the door. Miller's jacket and shirt were lying on top of him where Alejandro had thrown them, and Isaac snagged the shirt, throwing it over to Alejandro.

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He lifted the jacket off Miller's face, then yelped as a hand brushed his ankle. The shape of Miller's head flowed with movement in the shadowed dust, like wet ink on parchment. The light glinted off his right eye, glaring at Isaac from a hollow in his drawn, sunken face that crawled with a multitude of tiny red ants. Miller's left eye was gone, only an ever-moving mass of red-brown carapaces protruding from the socket. More swarmed from the wound that opened his belly to the world, a red infestation staining the crinkled pink folds that now lay in ruin. Trickle of dried blood ran from Miller's mouth down to the sand beneath his head. He strained his neck to raise his head from the dust and insects that enveloped him. His swollen tongue emerged from the gash that was his mouth, touching his cracked lips. He hissed dryly at Isaac in words that would be forever unheard.

"You'd better shake that shirt out really well, Alejandro," said Isaac. "There might be some ants in it."

"Got you."

"But this jacket is a no-go." He glanced down at the bloodstained fabric, damp with fluids.

"Can you pass his pants over, too?" said Alejandro. Of course... Alejandro hadn't seen what remained of Miller; couldn't see his face from that angle. Well, Isaac wasn't going to give him this memory to carry. He shook Miller's grip from his leg and reached down to unlace his boots and yank them off. He unwrapped Miller's fatigues from around his ankles and wrestled them off his limbs, along with his socks. The realization that Isaac and Alejandro would leave him here flowed into Miller's remaining eye like cold honey. He struggled feebly to grasp Isaac's trousers. Isaac passed the clothes to Alejandro. "You're going to have to freeball it, man: I am *not* touching his underwear."

Isaac turned to leave, then swung back and knelt down, his face so close to Miller he could see each individual set of shiny, red mandibles gape in chitinous warning. He leaned in to whisper Miller's afterword. "If you'd raped *me*, I would have given you mercy right about now: a quick knife thrust to the jugular. But you hurt my Alejandro. I hope they keep you alive for days." He turned to make sure Alejandro wasn't watching, then reached into his pocket. "Here. You admired the man so much, you can hold onto his dick for him." Isaac tossed the flaccid length of pale flesh on top of Miller's chest. He drew back and pushed the car door closed for the final time.

Alejandro fastened the last boot, straightened his shirt, and nodded at Isaac. "Let's go."

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They headed across the dry lakebed, driving toward the scarlet sunset. White crystalline encrustations climbed the lower shores, and an abandoned cabin lay on its side on the distant salt-covered sand. Innumerable bones were just under the crisp salted surface, tiny and fragile, crackling under the ATV tires. At the other side, they angled northwest, toward a range of hills. To whatever might be there. They paused just before dawn to eat a single MRE, split between them. Isaac brushed his fingertips over the stitches in his forearm, playing with the spiky sensation against his skin, wondering if Miller in the desert was feeling the same thing.

Alejandro slapped his hand. "Stop picking at them!"

He was attempting to be casual, but his voice was pitched too high and his eyes held pain.

"You okay?" asked Isaac.

"I've got no cigarettes. I've been smoking for twenty years. How am I gonna give up now?"

Isaac drew Alejandro against him, embracing him from behind. There was a glow on the horizon peeking over the tips of distant eastern peaks. His family was out there somewhere. One day—when he'd slipped the Feds, when he had something to offer them—he'd find them. He and Alejandro would find them together.

"I've known you two days, and I know that's not it."

"All my books," said Alejandro. "And now I'll never find out how my story ends."

"There are books where we're going." Isaac drew the flag out of his pocket, unfolding it in front of them. "Pretend that each star stands for a state like they do on the Fed flag. I counted: there's fifty. What if somewhere out there are places where they don't do things the way they do in the Fed? And they all have books."

"It won't be the same. It won't be this book. I was only halfway through."

"Where did you get up to?" asked Isaac.

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“Emma’s lover Rodolphe left her. She was depressed for a long time, living with her husband in a country village. But now she’s visiting a small town, and she’s just met up again with the young man who had a crush on her. Leon just confessed he used to write her love letters and tear them up.”

Isaac wrapped his arms around Alejandro, cradling the strong body. He tucked the flag into Alejandro’s jacket pocket. Isaac bent his head, whispered into his ear, licking and nuzzling the soft skin. “They fall in love. They run away to the city, find a small room where they can make a home together. They promise to never leave each other.”

Alejandro tilted his head back, and Isaac kissed him with a soft brush of their lips, speaking the final words into his mouth.

“And their love lasts forever.”

**Fin**

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## Author Bio

*M. Caspian dreams of quitting full-time work to write, but knows this would quickly devolve into full-time reading. And naps. And Xbox. So, probably better the way things are, huh?*

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