

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**LONG TIME
WAITING**

Ann Anderson

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LONG TIME WAITING

By Ann Anderson

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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Long Time Waiting
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Photo Description

Two young men, one with dark brown hair (on the left) the other with sandy brown hair (on the right), are kissing, both with looks of surprise. The man on the right has a hand across the other's cheek, blocking the kiss from anyone looking.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been best friends since the day we met in kindergarten. I've been in love with him forever, but he's straight—as evidenced by the scads of girls he's dated. I finally worked up the nerve to not only come out to him our senior year of high school but also tell him how I felt for him. As I expected, he told me that he'd be my best friend no matter what but that he was straight and didn't feel the same way. I was heartbroken but knew that I had to suck it up if I wanted us to remain friends. I stayed single for the rest of high school while he dated every girl around. Now we are rooming together in college and I'm doing my best to get over him and move on. Unfortunately, every time I meet someone or date someone new, he thwarts my plans. I don't even want to talk about the time he walked in on me and my new guy about to get down and dirty—let's just say he was NOT happy. I don't understand! If I didn't know better, I'd say he was jealous. But he's straight... isn't he?

Please no threesomes, cheating, paranormal, or bdsm. Also Author, please give me some sweet lovemaking and an HEA ending!

Sincerely,

Mick2012

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, friends to lovers, gay for you, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: attempted rape, suspected child abuse of secondary character

Word Count: 27,414

LONG TIME WAITING

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Freedom, thy name is college. Chris grinned to himself as he set the final box from his car on the grass, more than grateful his parents had been willing to spend the extra money on getting him one of the coveted freshman parking spots. He tried to contain his glee, really, he did, but there was no way he could hide the grin currently stretching his face as another freshman walked past his car and scowled at the sight of the tag hanging from his rearview mirror. He'd pay his parents back, of course, but no one needed to know that. All through high school he'd been a bit of a dork, but now, having a car just might boost his popularity.

"Hey, Chip!" A warm, hard body slammed into his back as an arm wrapped around his shoulders. "Guess what?"

Chris smiled, unable to stop the involuntary reaction if he tried, and glanced over his shoulder at Dale. "Chicken butt."

"Ha, ha." Dale shoved him a little and let go, stepping back with a flourish as he bowed, one of his hands held out toward Chris.

It took Chris a moment, but his heart sank when he saw the piece of paper between Dale's fingers. He kept the smile in place through sheer force of will and long practice from high school. "Oh?" He cocked an eyebrow, locking his car before hoisting his last box and heading toward their dorm.

Home, sweet home. The thought was more bitter than Chris liked, and he shook his head to clear the slimy thought, trudging up the three flights of stairs to his floor.

"Wait up," Dale called from behind him, his footsteps loud in the small stairwell.

Chris paused, peeking over the rail to see Dale with three of his bags, one over each shoulder and the last dragging at the corner over the stairs. He waited a beat for Dale to reach the landing, then headed through the door onto their floor, dodging other freshman until he managed to squeeze into his room. *Their* room. Dale huffed out a breath as he threw his things at one of the beds.

“What if I want that one?” Chris teased. Better to make light of the situation than have Dale realize there was anything wrong. *It’s always going to be wrong. But, it’s college. Time to find my way.* Even if he would be rooming with Dale, that didn’t mean Chris had to stick to his friend. Maybe Cathy was right and he was a minor-level idiot for putting himself through the torture of rooming with his childhood friend. Who happened to be his biggest crush. His crush who didn’t feel the same and was straight.

What was it Cathy had said to him? *I’m your sister, which means I’ll hold you close when you come crying while secretly laughing behind your back.* Or something like that.

“Dude, they’re the same.”

Chris blinked, his brain catching up. “Do we want to bunk them?” He watched Dale as he surveyed the room.

“Nah.” Dale turned to him, a wide, bright smile dimpling his cheeks. “I think we can set the desks side by side along the wall”—he motioned to where he meant, some of Chris’s books stacked haphazardly across the top—“and one of the beds can be under the windows with the other catty-corner along the other wall. Gives us plenty of space in the middle to move around since the closet will be by the desks.”

Chris tried to imagine it, but failed. That was the best thing about Dale; he could see the possibilities where Chris tended to view the world in one dimension. A knock on the door had them turning. A pretty blonde stood in the doorway, her shirt a bit too tight, but judging by the way Dale was eyeing her, he thought it was just right.

Nausea churned Chris’s gut. What had he been expecting though? That they’d go off to college and Dale would suddenly realize he loved Chris? That was a fantasy grown from reading too many of his sister’s romance novels and then being her beta reader as she tried her hand at the craft.

“Hi, I’m Janice. I’m one of the RAs of the dorm and will be on duty until eight tonight. If you need any help or have any questions, let me know.” She smiled at Dale, her gaze never even straying to Chris.

Chris looked between the two and knew this was the girl who’d given her number to Dale. “Thanks.” He pasted on a smile—when had the previous one slipped?—more than ready to leave the room. “We’re good.”

“For the moment,” Dale added, winking at Janice.

Bile rose, and the only way Chris could think to combat it was to flee the room. He smiled at Janice as he moved from the room, shouting over his shoulder, "I'm gonna grab my laptop. Why don't you set up the room?"

Dale gave some kind of affirmative answer, and Janice moved into the room, her laughter chasing Chris as he entered the stairwell.

He was an idiot. There were no two ways about it. Rolling his shoulders, Chris headed down the stairs and out into the early morning temperatures. Soon enough the day would be hot with the noon sun and, if the brochure was to be believed, there was a local gym with a pool he could go to. A few laps and a little weight lifting would go a long way in calming him down. Maybe he'd call Cathy.

"Ooph." Chris tripped as he knocked into someone, doing a little hop-step to regain his balance. He turned, horrified that he'd slammed right into someone and they'd fallen. "I'm so sorry." He crouched down, collecting the books and clothes scattered over the ground.

The guy he'd slammed into glared at him through lopsided glasses, his eyes dark behind the specs. "What were you doing?"

Chris flinched at the waspish tone. "Sorry." He held out the books and clothes, not meeting the guy's eyes.

There was a sigh then the weight in his hands was removed. "It's all right. I should have been watching what I was doing."

Chris flicked his gaze up; a small smile tugging at his lips as the guy before him huffed, trying to shove everything into the two boxes on the ground. "Let me help." He reached forward, shuffling some of the books around until there was more space. Then he took one of the shirts, rolling it into a tight ball and shoving it between a large and small book. He continued, not minding the silence or the repetition. It was soothing, like a good swim. "There." He glanced up, his smile freezing at the curious look on the guy's face.

"Kiyoshi." The guy, Kiyoshi, held out his hand. "Thanks."

Chris took the offered hand, tentative, but the grip he received was firm, and there was no hit aimed for his face so he figured he was good. "Welcome."

"Which floor are you on?" Kiyoshi asked, stacking the boxes and lifting them. They stood taller than he was.

Chris rose, a small thrill of amusement and excitement bubbling inside, and took the topmost box. "Fourth." Kiyoshi eyed the box in Chris's arms and

shrugged his shoulders as he strode to the building, Chris stretching his legs a bit to catch up until he could fall into step beside his dormmate.

“Me too.” Kiyoshi grimaced as they walked through the door. “I do not look forward to taking four flights of stairs every day.”

“Oh, come on,” Chris teased, trailing behind his new friend. “It’s not that bad.”

The look Kiyoshi gave him could have fried him on the spot. “You’re one of those people who likes to exercise, aren’t you?”

Chris laughed, his spirit lighter than it had been since Dale had showed him that stupid piece of paper. “Mainly swimming. You don’t do anything?” He didn’t believe that. Even if Kiyoshi was small, maybe five four, and slim, there were muscles in those thin arms; there was no way he could have carried both boxes if there was no strength there.

Kiyoshi grumbled something, shifting the box he held to one arm as he opened the door some idiot had closed to their floor.

“What?” Chris grinned at the scowl that question earned him.

“I do martial arts. MMA to be specific.” He held the door open with his foot and stepped out of the way, motioning Chris through first.

“Oh yeah?”

Kiyoshi snorted, slipping past Chris and down toward the men’s half of the floor. Apparently their floor was one of the coed ones, the only coed one. “It’s so cliché. All my mother’s fault.”

Chris laughed, dodging a running child, an angry older sibling close on their heels. “How so?”

“Wanted me to appreciate my culture better.” He gave Chris a look that said he didn’t believe the words but accepted them. “I play video games, read manga, and watch anime. I think I’m in touch with my parents’ culture as much as I can be without growing up there.”

“Where?” Chris stared around the room Kiyoshi walked into, amused by the heavy metal posters already lining the walls, the guy Kiyoshi would be sharing his room with lounging on one of the beds, headphones on and music blaring. That had to hurt his ears. Chris shook his head at the sight while Kiyoshi made no qualms about dumping what was obviously his roommate’s things on the guy’s stomach.

“Japan.” Kiyoshi set his box down and flipped off his roommate, the guy sneering but not retaliating.

“Know each other?” Chris set his box atop the other one, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the pair.

“You could say that.” Kiyoshi rummaged around, withdrawing a piece of paper and a pen. “I know you said we’re on the same floor, but here’s my cell number.”

Chris blinked, a little surprised. “Really?” And that just made him sound all kinds of needy, didn’t it.

“Yeah.” Kiyoshi grinned at him. “Maybe we can go swimming sometime.”

“All right.” He stared a moment longer at the piece of paper and the neat scrawl of numbers then glanced at his new friend. “Sure.”

Kiyoshi smiled, his nose crinkling a little, and reached forward to clap his hand on Chris’s shoulder. “You’re an all right guy. I think we’ll be friends.”

“He gonna play with us?” the roommate shouted.

“Shut up, Nate,” Kiyoshi snapped.

“Play?” That sounded all kinds of ominous.

“Role-play.” The roommate, Nate, hopped off the bed, his headphones around his neck and the music still going full blast. “Kiyoshi promised to play with me when we realized we were going to the same college. We need two, three more. Four would be nice, but it isn’t necessary.”

Chris looked between the pair, amused by the flush rising in Kiyoshi’s cheeks while Nate held up a book, some strange symbol on the front. Chris shrugged his shoulders and grinned. “Why not?” If these two could make him smile so much every time he was around them it would be a small price to pay. “I’ll call you after I’ve gotten the last of my stuff.”

“Cool,” Nate said, flipping open the book and pulling out papers, mumbling to himself as he sat at his desk, shoving stuff onto the floor.

Kiyoshi shook his head and gave Chris a helpless look. “Don’t mind him. I’ll talk with you later.”

Chris nodded and headed out, his steps lighter than before. Maybe college would be all right. He’d already made friends. And tomorrow they would have

the various clubs set up around the campus. He could find the Gay/Straight Alliance and see what they did, maybe meet other new people.

He was still grinning as he left the dorm and headed to his car. His steps faltered when he spotted Dale leaning against the trunk, his arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

“Where have you been?”

Dale’s tone had Chris bristling, which was absurd. It was just a question. “Making new friends.” He held up his own piece of paper, a small flash of triumph streaking through him. Dale wasn’t the only one who could make friends.

“Oh?” Dale leaned forward, his tone casual, but they hadn’t been friends for close to fourteen years and not learned each other’s quirks.

“What?” Chris drew the paper away, clutching it in his fist then shoving it in his pocket and moving past Dale.

“Nothing.” He shrugged his shoulders, the move too casual.

Maybe Chris was thinking too much into it. They had been on the road early, Chris wanting to be one of the first to arrive, though the pit stops at several gas stations had sidetracked his plans. It had been worth it though to share a few laughs with Dale.

He unlocked the car and popped the trunk, his laptop bag hidden beneath a blanket, Dale’s beside it. “Think that’s it.”

“Food run,” Dale cheered as he grabbed his bag and ran to the dorm.

Shaking his head, Chris shut and locked his car, taking a minute to pull out his phone and send a quick text to Kiyoshi asking if he wanted to head into town for some food. He’d barely taken two steps when there was a response. Looked like he could introduce his old friend to his new ones. Humming, Chris made his way through the milling groups of friends and family, jogging up the stairs and through the shared space toward the men’s corridor. Dale was half in their room, his face turned toward the room, a smile on his face and a laugh in his voice. Dread filled Chris.

Sure enough, as he approached the room he heard that same laugh from earlier. Perched on Dale’s bed was Janice, her hand tucking a stray bit of hair behind her ear as she gazed at Dale. Chris wanted to hate her like all the girls

Dale had dated in high school, especially their senior year, but he couldn't find it in himself. At least she had good taste.

"Hey!" Dale beamed at him, Janice flushing under Chris's stare as he set his laptop bag under his bed. "Mind if Janice comes with us?"

"Hey, Chris."

"Uh." Chris turned away from the confused look Dale was giving him and grinned at Kiyoshi as he stepped into the hall, a little anxious that Nate wasn't with him. "Where's Nate?"

Kiyoshi rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "Since you agreed to the game he's all excited and wants to make a character for you."

Chris had never role-played, but he thought he was supposed to make his own character. Kiyoshi just shook his head as if he knew what Chris was thinking and didn't have an answer. Instead of asking, he turned back to Dale. "Looks like we have room." He smiled at Janice and relaxed a little when she gave him a tentative smile in return.

"All right. Let's go." Dale waited until Janice left the room before shutting and locking the door, throwing an arm around her shoulders and starting up a conversation as he led the way.

Kiyoshi fell into step beside Chris, casting him several sideways looks, though he didn't say anything. Chris was glad for that small mercy, cringing inwardly at the way Janice curled her arm around Dale's back, her hand settling into one of his back pockets as if it were natural. And maybe it was for her. Chris didn't like that thought. He wanted to give her a chance. Who knew, maybe she'd be the one to get Dale to settle down rather than hop from girl to girl.

The drive to the local grocery store was short, for which Chris was grateful. The pair had sat a little too close in the back seat. Dale's signature move of pushing a girl's hair behind her ear and his hand trailing along her cheek and jaw was a little sad. But it worked. Every. Damn. Time. Janice was melting into his arms, giggling incessantly. At least they hauled out of his car as soon as they'd stopped, holding hands and striding toward the doors without a backward glance.

A hand on his leg jerked Chris from his melancholy thoughts and the I-told-you-so lecture Cathy was sure to give him when he called her later that night.

"You all right?" Kiyoshi asked.

“Yeah.” Chris couldn’t look at him. Heck, he could barely look at himself. Almost a year after confessing his crush and then witnessing Dale go through the majority of the student female population at their high school should have woken him up to the fact Dale would never be his in any capacity beyond friendship.

“I get it,” Kiyoshi said, climbing from the car.

“What?” Chris followed, locking the car and trailing a little behind. Dale hadn’t even noticed Chris wasn’t right behind him.

Kiyoshi gave him a look. “Did you tell him?”

A flush stole into his cheeks and he pushed his hands into his pockets, uncomfortable. He’d told his family he was gay at the start of high school. Cathy had been a junior and more than supportive. His parents, not so much. “Yeah.”

Even with Cathy at his side, Chris had been less than enthusiastic to wave his rainbow flag after the yelling and crying his parents had done. Then it had become too much when they’d gotten ready to start their senior year and he’d spilled everything to Dale. How he was gay, how he liked Dale as more than a friend. He knew Cathy had been in her car across from the parking lot of the movie theater, ready to sweep in and rescue him if anything went wrong. Only, it hadn’t. But it had. Dale had clapped him on the back, said he knew, and shattered all of Chris’s budding hope with a “Sorry, dude, but I’m straight. You’re like a brother to me.” Chris had laughed at the time, but it had hurt. Cathy had held him while he cried himself to sleep that night.

“I told Max, a big, mean kid, that I liked him in second grade. He tried to beat me up, but Nate saved me. Ever since then we’ve been inseparable, though our relationship is more antagonistic than anything else.”

“Yeah?”

“Yup.” Kiyoshi grabbed a cart, steering it toward the cereal aisle. “It was around that time my mom signed me up for karate. She hoped it would toughen me up, because she somehow thought me confessing to a guy at such a young age was some kind of failing on her part. My dad accepted it. Said he didn’t understand, but as long as I was happy...”

There was a wealth of sadness in that. Chris wasn’t sure what would be worse. Having your parents reject you out right or having them give a vague answer. He settled his hand on Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “Sorry.”

Kiyoshi shrugged. “Yeah, well, I’ll live. And you”—he pointed a finger at Chris—“need a boyfriend.”

A laugh slipped out, but he found he didn’t want to stop it. A few shoppers looked at them funny, but Chris didn’t care.

“Better?”

“Yeah.” He wiped a hand across his eyes, amazed by the wetness there. It felt good to let it go. Sure, he had Cathy, his strange, loving sister, but it was lonely sharing the same thing with the same person for so many years. “Did you ever confess to this Max again?”

He received a snort as an answer followed by a terse, “No.”

“Oh?”

“Dude was an asshole. Besides, I kind of developed a crush on Nate.” He smacked Chris when he chuckled. “Fell out of that pretty quick. Guy needs a mother more than a newborn baby.”

Chris continued to chuckle and they fell into an easy conversation, each of them talking about their current major, classes, family, their coming out stories. It was nice, calming.

“Chip!”

“Chip?” Kiyoshi looked at him over his glasses.

“My sister’s idea.”

“There you are,” Dale said, Janice at his side looking a little put out.

“Yup.” Chris grinned at the scowl that earned him.

“Dude, why did you wander off?”

He shrugged his shoulders before he could think better of it. “We’re about done. How about you?”

“We already checked out,” Janice said, stepping close to Dale and slinging an arm around his waist, her fingers teasing along his hip.

“Then we’ll do the same,” Kiyoshi said and pushed their cart toward the checkout. Chris followed, a small part of him hoping Dale would reach out, catch his arm, but they weren’t in some romance novel or Hollywood movie, and Dale continued to hold Janice close to his side.

They paid and left, Kiyoshi distracting him with plans for dinner and a swim. They invited Dale and Janice, but Dale waved them off, saying he had plans for Janice. She giggled some more, and Chris really wished she wouldn't. It sounded too high school. This was college. Wasn't it supposed to be different? But he didn't say anything, just stowed their bags and got in the driver's seat, more than ready to be away from Dale and Janice.

It seemed Janice wanted the same since she recruited Dale to help carry her two bags up to her room. Chris shook his head, but he was more than used to Dale assisting a damsel in distress. Kiyoshi dropped his things off in his room, then helped Chris lug the furniture around the room since Dale hadn't done it or said when he might be back. Which, based on how he and Janice were acting, wouldn't be until sometime tomorrow.

Nate poked his head in as they were finishing up and asked, "Wanna grab lunch then wander the campus?"

Chris glanced at Kiyoshi, who shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Sure."

They headed to the cafeteria, the roommates arguing over what they would have for lunch until it devolved into embarrassing stories from their childhood. Chris let the conversation wash over him, laughing and chuckling throughout, but he didn't share anything else. Nate might have been cool with Kiyoshi, but Chris didn't know him, and there was no need to share his life story with the guy after spending a handful of minutes with him. Even if he had spilled to Kiyoshi. Maybe it was like sensing a kindred spirit or something since Kiyoshi had reciprocated.

Lunch was more of the same, each of them trying to be the one with the last word, and Chris had to admit he thought Kiyoshi was winning.

"Then there was the time he had to kiss a girl for spin the bottle. He threw up all over her."

Chris choked on the bite of hamburger he'd taken, wheezing a little as he tried to dislodge the piece of food. He grabbed his water, guzzling half of it, and turning wide, watery eyes on the pair. "What?"

"I was nervous," Kiyoshi groused, stabbing a piece of the salad he'd put together and shoving it into his mouth.

"Uh-huh." Nate nudged him in the side and, for a moment, Chris could see why Kiyoshi might like the guy. Then he belched.

“Dude.” Kiyoshi waved his hand in front of his face, and Chris found himself plugging his nose. “Uncalled for.”

At least Nate had the sense to look embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Chris said.

“No, it isn’t,” Kiyoshi snapped, spearing another bite of his salad. “Don’t encourage him.”

Nate laughed, ruffling Kiyoshi’s short hair.

“Don’t.” Kiyoshi batted his hand away, retaliating by stealing a piece of fruit from Nate’s tray.

“Hey.” Nate hunched over his tray, glaring balefully at Kiyoshi. “Not fair.”

“Uh-huh.” Kiyoshi popped the fruit into his mouth and swallowed. “Wanna see the gym then we can wander the campus?”

Nate rolled his eyes, huffed, but looked resigned. “As long as you don’t expect me to actually go there during the year, aside from classes, I don’t mind.”

“Then it’s settled.” Kiyoshi waved his fork in the air, then brought it down, stealing another piece of fruit when Nate let his guard down.

“Hey!”

For a first day, this was proving to be far more eventful than Chris had anticipated. When Kiyoshi glanced his way and winked, Chris knew it could only get better. He’d get over Dale, find himself his first boyfriend, hopefully lose his virginity, though that was still up for debate, and get good grades. He grinned, digging into the rest of his lunch. Yeah, college would be its own kind of freedom.

Music blared from too many speakers. People laughed and talked too loud. Chris hated it. The sole reason he still remained at the frat party was because Dale was there. Flirting. *Of course*. He rolled his eyes and took another sip of the watered-down juice he’d managed to snag. Someone bumped into him, a girl, who giggled and batted her lashes at him before stumbling away. Was he the sole person not drinking alcohol? He probably should. Maybe it would loosen him up?

“What are you doing here, standing in the dark?”

Chris turned, staring into startlingly blue eyes. He blinked, but that color didn't fade. He did notice the handsome face that surrounded them. A little curious why someone so handsome would approach him, Chris quirked an eyebrow and took another sip. "Debating if I want to stay or if there's a better party," he answered. *Preferably one that's not so loud.*

The guy smiled at him. It was slow, predatory, and showed a lot of teeth. "If you want, we can go back to my place?"

Shocked, Chris took another sip of his juice. No way the guy was propositioning him. Was he? "Seems a bit sudden."

"Oh?" The guy leaned in close, crisp deodorant wafting to Chris's nose.

"Yeah." Chris blatantly eyed the guy while finishing off his drink. "I don't even know your name."

The guy laughed. It was a good laugh, but it didn't do anything for Chris. He heard another laugh, and his focus drifted away from the guy in front of him and landed on Dale. He was smiling wide at the girls around him, his light brown hair a shade darker thanks to the low lighting of the house. Chris couldn't help but watch as a fourth girl holding drinks joined the other three spread around Dale.

If Chris were honest, Dale wasn't the drop-dead gorgeous that made models or movie stars. He was an average guy, a little more buff because he was on the basketball team, yet, what caused Chris to stare? He wished he knew, but whatever it was that had him cling like a leech to his crush, it probably dragged the girls into Dale's orbit.

Chris's side was nudged, his attention back on the guy beside him. He looked more amused than offended. "See something you like?"

Chris shrugged his shoulders, raised his cup, and remembered he'd finished it off. "Maybe."

"Ah." The guy held out his hand. "Bobby."

"Chris." Chris took the hand in his. It was smooth and, when he glanced down, the nails were well tended.

"So." Bobby nudged his body alongside Chris's. "Did you want something more to drink?"

Chris glanced at the red plastic cup he held and waged an internal debate. He turned his gaze back to Bobby. "Sure."

Bobby's grin was too wide and bright, but Chris shrugged it off. He was still hooked on Dale, so no one would be perfect unless Chris at least tried to get to know them. A body slammed into his side, nearly sending him sprawling, though Bobby caught his arm and helped him regain his balance, then winked before slipping away. Chris turned with a scowl, a pair of girls giggling and slurring through apologies. A new song blared from the speakers and they started dancing, shrieking in delight as they stumbled over each other. He should have taken Kiyoshi up on his offer and spent the night in. Or gone against his own morals and taken one of the cups with alcohol.

One of the girls began grinding against him and he stepped away. She pouted for a moment, then shrugged and turned away, her squeal reaching a deafening pitch when another girl strode over to them. Chris turned away, moving to a new patch of wall and settling back, his gaze inadvertently traveling back to Dale. One of the girls at his side was leaning into him, and Dale had ducked his head to hear whatever she had to say.

"Here's your drink."

Chris forced his attention away from Dale and focused on Bobby. "Thanks." He took the drink and downed a fourth of the cup, gasping at the sharp burn of alcohol barely masked by some horrible fruity flavor. "Ugh, that's awful." Why did people drink this? He scraped his tongue against his teeth to try and take away some of the flavor. It didn't work.

Bobby laughed, leaning into Chris's side. It was kind of... nice. "Don't drink much, do you?"

Shaking his head, Chris took a cautious sip. Nope, still tasted foul.

"You get used to it," Bobby said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Did you want to come over to my place?"

What he really wanted was to go back to his dorm and forget this whole night, but he was starting to feel a little fuzzy. Whatever the alcohol was, it was strong. He probably shouldn't drink anymore. He took another sip.

"Here." Bobby handed him a sandwich, and Chris realized he hadn't eaten in a while. Hadn't he read something somewhere that said if you didn't have food in your system, alcohol hit you harder?

He took the sandwich, biting into the thick layers of meat and cheese, scarfing it down as if his life depended on it. It was a simple sandwich, but in that moment it was the best food he'd eaten. Yeah, he should have eaten earlier.

“Easy.” Bobby laughed, his slim body pressed against Chris’s side. “Freshman?”

Blushing, because there was something teasing and knowing in the way Bobby looked at him, Chris nodded, shoving the last of the sandwich into his mouth.

“I remember what that was like,” Bobby said, his arm snaking around Chris’s waist.

He let it sit there, unused to the weight. Whenever Dale threw an arm around him it was always across the shoulders. “What year are you?” he asked, taking another sip of the drink and shuddering at the taste.

Bobby laughed and held out the second cup he held. “Here, try this.”

Chris took the cup and sipped, sighing in relief at the same watered-down juice he’d had the first time. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’m a junior, education major.”

“Yeah?” Chris had another sip, let the juice sit on his tongue a moment to help get rid of the lingering aftertaste of alcohol, and swallowed.

“Yup. Math. Most seem to think I’m nuts, especially since the upper-level classes are all taught by Mrs. Davenport and she’s known as a hard-ass, but I like it. You?”

“As you already guessed, freshman. At the moment I’m getting a dual major, accounting and business management.”

“Oh, fancy.” Bobby leaned in, and Chris got a whiff of his cologne. It was subtle with a little bit of spice. Chris liked it. “You thinking about starting your own business?”

Chris shrugged, careful not to dislodge Bobby from his lean. “Don’t really know yet. My sister’s been designing clothes and jewelry as a hobby, though lately she’s been thinking of doing it full time.” He didn’t mention that she also wrote as another hobby. Cathy needed to be *doing*, ever since they’d been little. At least she had something to be passionate about.

“Oh yeah?”

Chris hummed, taking a big swallow of juice, his gaze riveted to Bobby. Bobby smirked and leaned in. Chris let him, watching as that face got closer. When those lips touched his own, Chris gasped. The contact was far more

unfamiliar than an arm around his waist and his body constricted, more from the fact it felt as if he were doing something wrong than any disgust with being kissed.

Bobby pulled back, his breath warm against Chris's face. "Come on." Bobby hooked his arm through Chris's and began walking deeper into the frat house.

Curious, Chris let himself be led. When Bobby rounded a corner, tugging him along, Chris chanced a glance back, a small jolt rushing through him at the sight of Dale's attention on him. Who was he kidding? There was probably some pretty girl he was watching. Turning back to Bobby, Chris kept a step back, a small part of himself ready to bolt if needed. Maybe Bobby was being a nice guy, but Chris would rather be safe than sorry.

Warning bells chimed as Bobby opened a door and stepped into a room. Chris didn't know who it belonged to, but being so far away from everyone else made him nervous. *I shouldn't have watched that horror movie with Kiyoshi as celebration for passing our English test.* There was no way Bobby was going to turn into some kind of monster or pull a chainsaw out from under the bed.

When Bobby released his arm, Chris watched in mounting terror as Bobby moved to the bed and ducked down to grab something from underneath. He took a shuffling step back, ready to bolt through the still-open door, and then Bobby stood. There was no chainsaw, just a tube of lube.

"Uhm..." What could he say? *Maybe what the fuck?*

"Come here," Bobby said with that too-bright smile as he reached for Chris and took his wrist, tugging him forward.

Chris stepped forward, his heart slamming in his chest. Suddenly, Bobby jerked his arm back, causing Chris to stumble and fall on the bed. Bobby settled across his back, pinning him. Chris couldn't move. His body locked in fear even as his mind tried to figure out what was going on.

"You freshmen are so easy," Bobby whispered into his ear.

Oh no he wasn't. Chris jerked, nearly startling Bobby, but he just rode the motion, pressing an arm across the back of Chris's neck. "Knock it off," Chris snarled, bucking. This couldn't be happening. Their first week of college they'd been forced to attend a little seminar for all freshman telling them what to do if something like this happened, but Chris couldn't remember any of it.

“Aw, scared.” Bobby chuckled low and mean, his tongue tracing Chris’s ear. “No one will hear you.”

“I disagree.”

Chris stilled at the new voice, relief making him limp. Bobby snarled but rolled off. Chris scrambled away, watching as Bobby smiled at Dale and held his hands out.

“We were just playing,” Bobby said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Was there something you needed?”

“Yeah. Chip?”

Chris rose to his feet, his body trembling, and he almost fell. He hurried to Dale’s side, more than ready to leave.

“Whatever. He wasn’t any fun anyways.” Bobby walked toward them and shoved his way from the room.

Chris tucked himself into Dale’s side, clinging to his friend’s shirt as his mind caught up with what had happened. A choked sob left him.

“Shh,” Dale soothed, wrapping his arm around Chris’s shoulder.

Another sob left him and he curled into Dale’s warm body, wishing he’d known. But how could he have? Bobby hadn’t appeared to be some kind of sick pervert. Shit, this was the worst. Barely a month into college and things had gone horribly wrong.

“Hey, come on.” Dale coaxed him to take a step back, grabbed his hand, and headed toward the back of the house.

Chris trailed behind, his eyes on the hand he held in his own. It was familiar, nothing like Bobby’s. He clung to that thought with the desperation of a drowning man. When the night air hit him, he glanced up, glad there was no one around, because his vision was blurry from the tears he wanted to shed. He followed Dale toward the main building, terror squeezing his throat as he saw the light on in the campus security office. He didn’t want to tell anyone what had happened. *What if he does that to someone else?*

That thought pushed him through the door and into a seat in front of a kind middle-aged woman who offered him a can of pop and some peppermint candy. The peppermint soothed him, and he was ashamed to listen to the recording Dale had managed to capture before interrupting what would have been a nightmare.

“It’ll be all right,” the officer told him, her hand a little rough as she patted his.

A few hours later, after recounting everything to the local police, Dale took him back to their dorm. They lay down to sleep, except, when Chris closed his eyes, he saw Bobby and the horror that had occurred. There was no Dale to save him.

“You okay?” Dale whispered.

“No.” There was no point in lying. He curled tighter into a ball, a part of him hoping if he was small enough the nightmares would leave him alone.

There was a minor shuffling, a dip at the side of his bed. Chris glanced over, blinking at the outline of Dale.

“Scoot over,” Dale said.

Once Chris had moved, Dale lay atop the blanket and wrapped his arms around Chris, holding him close. Chris shivered, burrowed his face into the blanket, and sobbed. Dale shushed him and rocked him until Chris didn’t know when.

But he blinked and was awake staring at his room. He was on his side, warm and comfortable, and someone was holding him. His memories of the previous night were a bit of a blur. He turned his head, trying to remember what he’d done, and saw a familiar face over his shoulder, brown eyes staring at him in worry.

“Hi,” Chris croaked out. His throat hurt. Dale stared at him. Chris wrinkled his brow and squirmed, turning over to look at Dale without straining his neck.

“How do you feel?” Dale asked, his voice low, like they were sharing a secret.

“A little fuzzy.” He shrugged his shoulders, blinking. Dale was starting to scare him. His roommate kept staring.

“Do you remember what happened?”

Chris shook his head, then froze. Bobby. He shivered.

“Here.” Dale shifted up, reached over Chris, and settled back down with a bottle of water. “That was a lot more crying than I’ve ever seen you do before. Drink up. Let me know if your head hurts.”

“Dale?” Chris’s heart slammed against his ribs, terror squeezing his throat.

“Hmm?” Dale reached forward, his hand carding through Chris’s hair.

“What happened?” He opened the water bottle, taking little sips to make sure his stomach could handle it. It had to be a nightmare, right?

Dale released a gust of air, his gaze skittering away before returning, a hard edge in the brown depths. “That asshole... Adam—my teammate—called after he heard what happened. He was coming late to the party and saw the commotion. He told me that, apparently, that guy goes around, picks a new freshman at a frat party, rapes them or tries to, then blackmails them if they threaten him.”

Bile rose at the back of Chris’s throat. It was hot and he wasn’t sure he could keep it down. As if he knew what Chris was battling, Dale reached toward his feet and shoved a bowl in Chris’s face. Unable to contain it, Chris retched. It was horrible and he hated how raw his throat felt.

“How long has he been doing that for?” he whispered, unable to look at Dale. He wasn’t the first, and that made him so angry but he knew, if that guy had... gone all the way, Chris would be too scared and ashamed to tell anyone.

“A while. A few others have come forward after hearing what happened last night; at least one junior, two sophomores, and one other freshman. I’m sorry.”

“Oh God.” Chris curled around the bowl. There was nothing left to leave his body, but he still felt sick. Why would someone do that?

“I got you,” Dale said as he rubbed a hand along Chris’s neck then traced the bumps of his spine as far as he could reach then reversing his hand’s path. Dale bowed his head, the top nudging the base of Chris’s neck.

When it seemed nothing else would come up, Dale took the bowl away and pulled Chris close, holding him tight enough he could almost believe they were one. What a fool he was.

“I’ll always be there for you,” Dale murmured. “You’re my Chip.”

That didn’t give Chris as much comfort as it used to. Then Dale leaned in and kissed his forehead.

“Sleep a little more. When you wake up, we’ll see how you’re feeling and get some food in you.”

Chris nodded, his throat tight. He was more than a fool. He was every kind of idiot. He clung to Dale, his best friend, his roommate, the man he had fallen even more in love with because he was too kind. And he could never have him.

Chris wanted to scream. They'd been at college for one semester, half their freshman year, and every time Chris thought he might have met a great guy, Dale was there. It didn't make sense. Okay, sure, that first guy, Ricky or whatever—God, he just wanted to forget all about that guy, but if he couldn't even think of his name how could he possibly heal?—had been a horrible choice. But how was Chris to know the guy would turn out to be... He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. Even after so many months and a few visits with a therapist, the thought of that asshole still locked his body in fear. His therapist had encouraged him to meet other people if he was comfortable with it, but none of the guys he'd tried dating had understood. Maybe that's why Dale kept interfering. What other reason could he have?

He ran a hand through his hair, hunched at his desk with one of a dozen assignments due next week. It was Tuesday. He had plenty of time, but something in what he'd been reading had just... sparked his anger. That first guy had been a total failure on Chris's part. As had the second guy. Who had a girlfriend at the local community college. A pregnant girlfriend. But the third guy? They'd hit it off, had so much fun, until Dale began popping up. How he figured out where they'd be for their dates was mind-boggling, yet he'd appear, either with a girl or one of his basketball friends, and interrupt what would have been a nice date. That guy had given up after two months of constant interruptions.

And there hadn't been anyone since because Dale was always in his space.

Even Kiyoshi wasn't having such a horrible streak. Then again, Kiyoshi's luck was about as good as Chris's own. Yet, Dale kept having a new girl hanging off his arm. It didn't help that even at the college level Dale could play basketball as easily as he could breathe, beating several seniors for a starting spot. His new friend Adam didn't make Dale's popularity any better. That man was also a freshman, but... Shit. Chris buried his head in his hands. It was one thing to want his best friend, but to find his best friend's new friend hot? Wasn't like Chris was dead or anything, but he had horrible taste in men. Adam was everything a playboy could be.

A loud, repetitive knock sounded on his door. Glad to have his thoughts distracted, even if it was Nate wanting him to revise his character sheet because he couldn't be an elf thief, Chris went to the door. Relief filled him at the sight of Kiyoshi, his gym bag slung over a shoulder and customary scowl on his face.

"We're going swimming."

Chris nodded. The exercise would do him good, get him out of his own head. “Give me a sec.” He grabbed his stuff, checking he’d put his suit and sweats back in after the last load of laundry he’d done, locked up, then jogged after Kiyoshi. The guy was impatient about the strangest things.

They walked in silence, occasionally waving to someone they recognized. That was the one thing Chris loved about college; everyone was relatively friendly. Sure, there were some jerks, but that was nothing new.

“We’re role-playing tonight,” Kiyoshi said, jogging down the slight hill that lead to the gym.

“Yeah?” Chris followed, his brow furrowed as he tried to figure out what had Kiyoshi so pissed off. Was he struggling with his homework?

A snort was his answer, the silence somewhat strained between them as they entered the gym, flashing their school IDs. The high school kid manning the desk barely glanced their way as they walked past him. When they reached the locker room, Chris couldn’t contain his curiosity.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Kiyoshi shrugged, turning the motion into a roll of his head on his neck. “Nate’s got himself a girl.”

“Ah.” Chris understood. Even if Kiyoshi claimed his crush was no longer there, it was still hard, especially since the guy was his friend and... maybe Kiyoshi was a bit like Chris, still holding out hope that his straight guy friend would see him rather than some pretty girl.

“Exactly.” Kiyoshi stomped over to a set of lockers, half of them with Out of Order signs on them, and wrenched one of the good ones open.

Few people came back this way since so many of the lockers didn’t work. It was an ideal spot for a little grumbling.

“And how’s Shaun treating you?”

That earned him a snort and a sharp glare. “You’re not funny.”

“What?” Last Chris had known, Kiyoshi thought the guy was all right. In need of a stylist, but the guy seemed decent.

Kiyoshi grumbled something that Chris couldn’t catch.

“What?”

“I said,” Kiyoshi’s glare was a lot sharper than the previous one, “the dude’s an asshole.”

“Okay.” He waited a second, stripping off his clothes and putting on his swim trunks, then turned and raised an eyebrow.

A faint flush spread in Kiyoshi’s cheeks as he mimicked Chris in undressing and took off his glasses. He squinted when he turned back to Chris. Then he snapped. “Dude thought since I was small that meant he could push me around.” He grimaced. “Treated me like a girl and tried to grope me when we went to lunch.”

“Ouch.” Chris winced, sympathetic. He’d learned, through experience, that surprising Kiyoshi with a touch, no matter how friendly, was a no go. The guy had a mean, pointy elbow that could destroy the very air in one’s lungs.

“Yeah.” Kiyoshi stormed over to the towel area, nabbing two and chucking one at Chris. “Asshole complained I was abusing him. His buddies took exception.”

Chris tried to stifle the chuckle, but it was futile. “How’d that go for them?”

“What do you think?” Kiyoshi asked, his tone dark as he stomped out of the locker room and down the short hall to the pool area. “Nearly broke one of their wrists.”

“Poor Kiyoshi.” Chris made sure Kiyoshi could see him and nudged him, receiving a light elbow in retaliation. “Come on. A few laps and you’ll forget all about him.” He opened the door to the pool area and walked in.

Even though he couldn’t see his face, Chris knew Kiyoshi was rolling his eyes. At least some of the tension appeared to drain from that slight body, with the way his shoulders drooped and his stomping became... less.

“I’m gonna use the diving board first.”

Chris followed without comment. He used the small board, going feet first rather than try anything fancy, unlike Kiyoshi who bounced off, twisted a few times in the air, and came down in a dive that created a small splash. A little kid in the shallow end clapped, cheering as Kiyoshi came up for air. If Chris hadn’t been close he would have missed the proud look on his friend’s face as he waved to the kid. Together they swam away from the boards, over to the lanes, and started off with a few laps.

“Race you?” Kiyoshi called out after they’d gone a few turns.

Chris gave a thumbs-up and they settled against the wall, Kiyoshi counting down to one. Chris launched himself away from the wall, stretching his muscles

as far as they would go in a bid to out-swim Kiyoshi. His friend might be small, but he could swim. Apparently it had been one of the few exercises Kiyoshi didn't mind doing while training in all the different schools of martial arts.

He turned, slamming his feet into the wall to propel him forward. As he came up for air he tried to assess where Kiyoshi was. The small glimpse he had showed they were about even, but Kiyoshi could pull out ahead if Chris didn't pick up the pace. He saw the wall closing in and strained his arms, needing that little bit more.

His hand slammed into the wall and he came up, turning his head to stare at Kiyoshi, who was sitting on the lip of the pool, grinning like a fool.

"Wow," the kid in the shallow end said, swimming toward them. "You're fast."

Kiyoshi beamed, reaching over to ruffle Chris's wet hair. Chris scowled, trying to flatten it out. Though, based on the kid's amused expression, Chris was failing miserably.

"Takes practice," Kiyoshi said, hopping back into the water with a little splash. "Do you practice by yourself?"

"Uh-huh." The kid stared at Kiyoshi with stars in his eyes.

Chris would tease him about that later. Maybe while they were role-playing and Kiyoshi was "winning". Though how he could win since they were on the same team made little sense to him.

"Do you like swimming?" Kiyoshi ducked under the bobbers separating their lanes and broke the surface on the other side, running a hand through his dark brown hair, combing it over. Chris swam over and lay his arms atop the bobbers, watching the pair.

"Uh-huh." The kid swam closer, eyes as big as saucers.

"Then keep at it." Kiyoshi gave the kid a big smile. "If you work hard you could be world-class someday."

"Really?"

That might be a little much, until Chris saw what was probably the mother. She had a baby on her hip and a cell phone in her hands, her fingers flying over the keyboard. "Tommy?" She didn't even look up. A small stream of lava-hot anger slid through his bloodstream as he watched the mother. His gaze flicked to the kid, Tommy, and he saw the light leave his eyes.

“I gotta go,” Tommy said, turning away and starting a slow swim toward the pool stairs.

“Hey, Tommy,” Kiyoshi called, getting Tommy to stop and look back. “We’ll be here about the same time tomorrow. Maybe we’ll come early and I can teach you how to train. Sound good?”

It was like Kiyoshi had given him the sun, moon, and stars.

“Yeah.” It was barely a whisper, but Chris heard it, and based on the beaming smile on Kiyoshi’s face, he’d heard it too. They watched as Tommy left the pool, a spring in his step as he walked up to his mother’s side. It took her a moment to realize her son was at her side, and once she did, she turned without a word, marching out of the pool room, Tommy trailing along behind.

“Look at you two.”

Chris laughed at the pinched look on Kiyoshi’s face as arms wrapped around Chris from behind. That voice could only belong to Adam. He peeked over his shoulder and, sure enough, there was the star of the basketball team in all his chocolate glory.

“Dale with you?” Chris asked, taking a sweeping glance of as much of the room as he could, but there was no sign of his roommate.

“Naw,” Adam drawled, his chin resting on Chris’s shoulder as he pulled him close. “Think he’s got a new girl he’s gonna spend the night with.”

Chris tried not to stiffen at the words, but it was hard.

“Aw, Chip...”

Chris pushed away, unable to take the wealth of sympathy in what was Dale’s and his sister’s nickname for him, and turned a smile Adam’s way, though if it looked anything like Chris felt, it was broken at the edges. “How was practice?”

Adam shrugged, thankfully dropping the subject as he ran a hand over his shaved head. “All right. Nothing exciting.”

“It never is for you,” Kiyoshi sneered, diving under the water and swimming off.

“Aw, he’s mad.” Based on the grin that spread across Adam’s face, he didn’t mind.

Chris shook his head at Adam's antics. "If you wouldn't call him that ridiculous Yoshi nickname you gave him after your first meeting he wouldn't be so surly toward you."

"Sure he would," Adam said, stepping back in close to sling an arm across Chris's shoulders. "He's just pissed he can't have this." Adam indicated his muscular body with a sweeping gesture, that grin spreading wider as an indignant yelp sounded off the stone walls.

Chris laughed, ducking away from Adam's arm and swimming off to join Kiyoshi. He chuckled at the scowl on Kiyoshi's face as he flipped Adam off, the man's laughter bouncing from wall to wall. Lucky for them there was no one else there at the moment, otherwise they might be kicked out.

"Come on," Chris teased, "lighten up."

Kiyoshi turned the full force of his glower on him. "Maybe when playboy knocks it off I will."

"Aw," Adam called out, leisurely making his way toward them, "I'm not that bad."

Kiyoshi snorted and held up his hands, ticking off fingers as he said, "Last week you had two 'girlfriends' on Monday, a 'study date' in a guy's room where you came out with a hickey on your neck on Tuesday, then there were the twins on Wednesday who got into a fight in the middle of the cafeteria because each of them believed you were seeing them exclusively, followed by the TA you were caught kissing on Thursday, and Friday ended with you found in bed with, how many girls was it? Five?"

"Six," Adam interjected, the shit-eating grin never leaving his face as he drew closer.

Kiyoshi rolled his eyes. "Of course, how could I forget? And the weekend saw you hopping who knows how many beds."

"Well, shoot." Adam gave a powerful kick, ending up right in Kiyoshi's personal space, their bodies bumping. Chris had to resist the temptation to laugh at the outraged expression on Kiyoshi's face. "I didn't realize you cared so much."

A growl came from Kiyoshi, his shoulders hunched. Chris began counting down from five to see how long it would take for Kiyoshi to lash out and realized he should have started at three when his friend shoved against Adam's

chest, giving himself enough space to dodge to the side where there was more room for a getaway.

“You’re disgusting.” So saying, he swam to the edge and leveraged himself out of the pool, his footsteps slapping in a fast tempo as he left the room.

“Dude.” Chris shook his head, amazed that Adam’s gaze could still hold such fondness as he stared at the doors Kiyoshi had disappeared through.

“What?” Adam turned to him, winking as he moved to his back and kicked his feet in a slow rhythm.

There were no words. Chris shook his head a final time and swam to the edge. He might as well make sure Kiyoshi wasn’t snarling at anyone in the locker room. The last time that had happened Kiyoshi had ended up punching someone. He found Kiyoshi sitting on one of the benches near their lockers, his head in his hands as he dripped all over the place.

“You all right?” Chris asked, settling himself next to his friend, nudging their legs together.

Kiyoshi gave a bitter laugh. “He’s an ass.”

“Yup.” There was no denying it. Adam even admitted to it whenever anyone called him such. “But you like him.” It was half question, half statement.

“I’m an idiot,” Kiyoshi snapped, standing suddenly and stripping off his trunks, wrapping a towel around his waist without a glance in Chris’s direction.

Chris watched him stomp toward the little steam room, big enough for three guys, four if they didn’t mind sitting close. Chris stripped, wrapped his own towel around his waist, and followed after, letting Kiyoshi have a couple of minutes to compose himself. Even if Adam was bi, Chris had to admit the antagonistic relationship the pair had was not what either would probably want before starting any sort of romantic relationship. And for someone like Kiyoshi, who had confessed he wanted his first time to be special, being with someone who was known to have an “I can leave you when I want” attitude was less than promising.

When he opened the door to the steam room, his nostrils tightened from the dry heat, his mouth seeming to lose all moisture. He’d be in there ten minutes tops, then duck back out. How Kiyoshi could stand to stay in longer than that was a mystery. Chris settled on the opposite bench from Kiyoshi, leaning his

back against the heated wall. Barely a minute passed and he was leaning forward, all the water sucked from his back. All right, it was too hot. He needed out.

Kiyoshi chuckled at him as he rose and opened the door, the temperature difference dragging a shiver through his body. But it was sweet, sweet relief.

“I’ll join you in a bit.”

Chris nodded, waving his hand in acknowledgment as he let the door shut behind him. He went to the sinks and splashed some water on his face, working the cool liquid up his arms. His skin felt all dried out, ready to crack any moment. At least the water fixed some of that feeling, which was starting to create an itch beneath his skin. He went to his locker and pulled out his workout clothes; a pair of old, navy blue sweats and a faded T-shirt his sister had given him of some band he’d never listened to. He got dressed and headed to the weight room, starting out with some easy reps using a dumbbell while he waited for Kiyoshi.

It wasn’t a long wait, and soon enough the pair fell into a rhythm, switching with the bigger machines then ending their workout with a short jog along the small track. They didn’t talk much, just changed and left, their bags slung over their shoulders. Chris let Kiyoshi lead, a little amused when they took the longer, winding path that would keep them clear of anyone else.

“Nate will probably want his girlfriend to join us tonight.”

“Okay.” Chris didn’t mind. It might save him the trouble of having Nate correct everything he did.

Kiyoshi snorted, a muttered “You’re so easy” reaching Chris, but he didn’t comment. Role-playing wasn’t so bad as long as he was allowed to make up his own rules.

A few more potential guys had come and gone as soon as Dale appeared, and Chris was getting tired of it all. He wanted to date someone, to have sex that didn’t involve one participant. His classes were going well, except for math with the teacher who spit; Chris had to arrive almost half an hour early to get a seat far enough away from the man. His friends were great, but his dating life...

Chris gave up trying to figure out the answer to his Intro to Psychology worksheet and pulled up his favorite porn site. Best way to get over a bit of melancholy was to masturbate.

He dug around, wanting something new, but eventually settled on an old favorite of two buff men wearing jockstraps having a ridiculous wrestling contest where one gets hard. He muted it while he waited out the buffer, scrolling the time to the start of the sex, plugged his headphones in, spread his legs, and undid his jeans. He hadn't tugged himself out when a knock came from his door.

To answer or not to answer, that is the question. He shouldn't have decided to take that Shakespeare class. "One sec," he hollered, putting his computer to sleep and buttoning himself up before heading to the door. He opened it and blinked, surprised to see Kiyoshi standing there, his arms folded and the worst scowl on his face Chris had seen yet. "Uh... How was—"

"Don't ask," Kiyoshi growled, shoving past Chris and stomping toward his bed, flopping down face-first.

"Uh, okay." Chris shut the door and settled back in his chair, watching his friend and waiting. When the silence began to get to him, he started whistling. It was some random song he'd heard someone listening to the other day, but it had a catchy beat.

"Please don't tell me you like that song," Kiyoshi whined, flailing one hand out to snag Chris's pillow and shove it atop his head.

Chris laughed. He didn't think it was that bad. "Come on," he said as he stood and leaned over, snagging the pillow from his friend. "Tell me what happened."

The glower on Kiyoshi's face could have set fire to some dry kindling. Chris was used to the look by now.

"Well?" He folded his arms, and when an answer wasn't forthcoming, began to whistle again.

Kiyoshi growled at him and made a grab for him, hopping off the bed when he couldn't quite reach Chris. They wrestled a bit where they stood until Kiyoshi flung him to the bed and climbed on top of him, grabbing the pillow Chris had managed to keep a hold on and swung it at him. "That song is not funny."

Chris couldn't help it. He chuckled. "It is when it gets you this riled." He reached up, tickling Kiyoshi's sides and grinning like a loon as he yelped, dropping the pillow and grabbing onto Chris's wrists. He used his strength to

drive Chris's arms to the bed above his head, holding them there as he panted into Chris's face. If only Chris could fall for Kiyoshi, life would be easier for both of them.

As if reading his thoughts, Kiyoshi sighed and pulled back, flopping down beside him. "He wanted me to give him a blowjob, said I look like I do it all the time."

Chris rolled onto his side, facing Kiyoshi, and raised a brow. He took in Kiyoshi's somewhat round face, the narrow nose, thin lips; there was nothing there he could see that might label his friend as someone who went down on guys all the time.

"I don't get it either," Kiyoshi mumbled, turning his face into the bedding. "Then I told him I'd never done anything with a guy and he got all grabby." Kiyoshi snarled and raised himself up, slamming a fist against Chris's bed. "Ended up throwing the guy when he wouldn't take no for an answer. One of the student part-time security guys came rushing over. Lucky for me Janice was nearby and had seen the whole thing."

"Really?" Chris remembered when she and Dale had broken up. She'd seemed bitter, but Chris would have felt the same if he'd been told a relationship he was in simply revolved around sex and there was no connection. He knew she'd felt used, had seen it as the tears slid down her face and her cheeks became blotchy. She'd appeared to hate all of them after that.

"Yeah." Kiyoshi turned to look at him, his expression that same quiet thoughtful look from the first time Chris had bumped into him. Chris still debated whether that look was a good sign or one that should have him running. "How have things been going for you?"

There wasn't anything he could read into that question, but the way Kiyoshi asked... Chris shook his head and decided to take it at face value. "Not good. Dale keeps popping up and scaring all the guys I bring around away. I think I'm getting some kind of reputation."

Kiyoshi snorted and rolled himself on top of Chris, their noses nudging at the tip a moment then Kiyoshi was pulling back, his gaze intense. "Maybe we can help each other out."

That didn't sound like a question. It also didn't sound innocent, and Chris's heart kicked up its rhythm. "Oh?"

“Mm-hmm.” Kiyoshi leaned in close, his breath fanning across Chris’s face. “We both want to lose our virginity”—Chris tried not to wince at the word, but it was hard, especially when his own sister had been horrified that he’d been trying and hadn’t managed—“and who better than a friend?”

“Uhm, maybe a boyfriend?” What had happened to Kiyoshi waiting? Wanting it to be special? He bit his tongue against the urge to ask.

Kiyoshi snorted, leaning in closer so their noses touched again. “Which neither of us seems to be getting anytime soon. Look, we don’t have to go all the way, just see if there’s any chemistry. Come on, you know you’ve thought about it.”

Well, yeah, but Chris had never wanted to admit it. Bad enough he still wanted Dale, but doing anything with Kiyoshi... it felt like some kind of betrayal and left a tightness in his chest when he thought about it. Yet, Kiyoshi had a point. They both wanted to lose their virginity. Better with someone they could trust rather than a one-night stand who might not care that it was their first time or some jerk who wanted the chance to brag.

“Just kissing,” Chris acquiesced—because how bad could kissing be?—and squirmed a little beneath Kiyoshi’s weight on top of him.

“Sure.” Kiyoshi shrugged, leaning down to lick the tip of Chris’s nose. “Just kissing.”

Chris wrinkled his nose, but still tilted his face up. When Kiyoshi leaned down, Chris thought he needed to meet him, and their teeth clashed. It hurt, and they both pulled away with a grimace on their face, Kiyoshi topping it off with his signature stink-eye.

“One of us needs to lead.”

Chris flushed and nodded his head. Kiyoshi waited, his focus embarrassing Chris as he tried not to shift around in a futile attempt to relieve the unpleasantness in his gut. This time when Kiyoshi leaned in, Chris remained where he was. The kiss was soft, almost tentative.

He didn’t feel anything.

Kiyoshi pulled back and eyed his face. “Well?”

It was Chris’s turn to shrug. “Nothing.” He smiled sheepishly. Maybe it was something with him?

“Me too,” Kiyoshi said with a sigh. “Let’s try a little more.”

Chris tilted his face again. This kiss was a little firmer, but there was still nothing. Maybe he'd read one too many of Cathy's romance novels, but he'd expected a kiss, even one from a friend, would be... more. Then Kiyoshi moved his face, added more pressure, and gave a quick swipe of his tongue against Chris's lips.

He jerked back, unprepared for that addition. They stared at each other a moment, then Kiyoshi leaned back in, and Chris closed his eyes, just feeling his friend's lips against his own, opening his mouth a little when Kiyoshi's tongue swiped against his lips. Kiyoshi lapped at his lower lip a moment, then slipped inside. Chris was unsure what to do, so let Kiyoshi tease and coax his tongue into responding, leading him into Kiyoshi's mouth until they had to pull away for some air. It was nice, but not earth-shattering.

“Still nothing?”

Chris shook his head. “Not really.”

Kiyoshi hummed, then trailed one hand down Chris's side, slipping it under the hem of his shirt and tugging the fabric upward. He rose off of Chris and helped him remove his shirt then took off his own. “A little skin-to-skin can't hurt.”

Chris agreed, but based on how Kiyoshi's groin appeared to have no reaction against his own, Chris doubted there was ever going to be anything between them. Still, he let Kiyoshi kiss him again, their tongues touching, sliding against each other, their chests pushing together then parting. Nothing. It was a little sad to admit, even if only to himself, but he was more relieved than disappointed that neither of them seemed to be enjoying the moment.

“What are you doing?”

Chris jerked, nearly biting Kiyoshi's tongue, as he turned, his eyes going wide at the sight of Dale framed in the doorway, his face twisted in anger. Chris had seen that look before when that scumbag had tried... But there were no words Chris could say to salvage what was turning into a bad experience.

Kiyoshi sighed and sat up, collecting his shirt and putting it on, his hair sticking every which way until he flattened it, his focus solely on Dale. “Well, that was a failure.”

An involuntary snicker left Chris and he clapped a hand over his mouth to stop any more from coming out, but it was in vain. He doubled over, arms

wrapped around his middle, as he guffawed. Kiyoshi threw his hands up beside him.

“I thought I did a good job kissing. If you didn’t lie there like a fish you might have enjoyed it.”

“Hey,” Chris gasped out, sending a mock glare his friend’s way. He pushed against Kiyoshi halfheartedly. “I wasn’t that bad.”

Kiyoshi rolled his eyes before turning his gaze toward Dale, who still stood in the doorway, though he looked less angry and more confused. “This little experiment,” he indicated the small space between them as Chris put his shirt back on, “was a failure. Neither of us was into it.”

He sounded as if he was pouting, but Chris knew better. There was that look on Kiyoshi’s face, the one that said he was plotting.

“And what, exactly, were you doing?” Dale asked, his tone clipped and sharp.

Kiyoshi turned his face to the ceiling as if to ask for patience. “Seeing if there was anything beyond friendship between us.” Kiyoshi faced Dale then, his lips turned down in a grimace. “There was nothing.”

Dale appeared even more confused. “Okay.”

“So now I’m going to return to my room and wallow in misery that no one is right for me.” Kiyoshi threw his hands up in an overly dramatic fashion and stood. “Have fun,” he called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Chris sighed and fell back against his bed, suddenly drained and wishing he didn’t care so much about anything at the moment. Maybe he needed to get out of his dorm. The walls had been closing in on him lately.

“So why did you really do it?” Dale asked, his weight settling on the bed by Chris’s feet.

Chris glanced toward his roommate. What could he say? That he wanted Dale? Craved the man like some lovelorn puppy even after being rejected over a year ago? “We wanted to see if our friendship could be more.” It was what they had said, but they’d both known all the underlying words that hadn’t been spoken when they’d started kissing. They were two peas in a pod, he and Kiyoshi.

Dale sighed, leaning back on his hands, his wrists pressing into Chris’s leg. He was tempted to shift away, because it hurt, dammit. To have the person he’d

been crushing on since they'd shared a cookie in the first grade so close but still so far away. It hurt and it sucked and he should have listened to Cathy. His sister was right; they should have separated at least for their freshman year. A fresh start. Maybe then Chris would feel more normal and less at odds with himself.

“Chip?”

But he could never say those words to Dale, not when Dale looked at him with concern, one of his hands shifting to lie on his leg.

“Hmm?”

“Felt like I lost you there for a sec.”

“Sorry, thinking.”

“About what?” Dale began moving his hand in a small circle atop Chris's jeans.

Chris shrugged. “Nothing.” *Don't touch me.*

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” *Not at all.*

“All right. Hey,” Dale grinned at him, all excited like, “why don't we see a movie? Make a night of it. We can get something to eat at that pizza place you like then catch a late showing.”

“I have class at eight tomorrow.”

“Chip, Chip, Chip.” Dale shook his head, that grin never leaving his face. In fact, it seemed to spread wider. “What's college for if not missing a class or two to sleep in?”

Chris thought about it a moment. *What the hell.* “Sure, why not?”

“Sweet.” Dale jumped up, dashing to the closet to dig out Chris's shoes. “Come on, let's go.”

Chris laughed. His chest was still tight from the old emotions that wouldn't fade, but a night out was probably what he needed. He slipped his shoes on and raced out the door, laughing as Dale stood there a moment.

“Loser buys?” Dale called after him.

“Yup,” Chris threw over his shoulder, disappearing into the stairwell and rushing down the stairs.

At least he had a head start. Probably not enough, but Chris would take his chances. He reached the bottom floor and bolted through the doors, his feet slamming against the pavement as he tried to keep his breathing even and his stride long. The grass nearly tripped him up when he stepped on a rock, but he kept going. The first stoplight had him glancing back, his eyes widening as he saw Dale gaining on him faster than he'd thought possible. He checked the street, glad it wasn't busy for a weeknight, and settled into a rhythm as he dodged pedestrians and took a shortcut through an alley. He nearly collided with Dale on the other side. How the guy managed to get around the corners so quick was a mystery, but Chris was almost to the pizza shop, and he had no plans on paying.

They made it to the door at the same time, Chris panting harder than Dale, but Dale held the door for him and winked. "All right, you win."

A weak laugh left him, but he had no energy for anything else. "Thanks." He'd probably pay for the movie tickets then. He walked into the shop, taking a deep breath of the grease-laden air as he strode to the counter, grinning at the teenager behind the cash register.

"What would you like?" the girl asked, her gaze skittering toward Dale then shifting back to Chris.

He gave her a wide smile. "The veggie special, no onions, extra green peppers." He glanced at Dale. "Wanna share?"

"No way." Dale shook his head. "I want meat."

"Your loss." He turned back to the girl. "A small."

"Dude," Dale said behind him. "At least go with a medium."

Chris rolled his eyes and lightly punched Dale's shoulder. "If we're going to the movies you'll want popcorn and candy, and if we eat mediums there's no way we'll have room for the junk food. I'm not gonna waste my money on stuff that isn't going to be eaten."

"Fine, fine." Dale gave a long-suffering sigh as he slung an arm across Chris's shoulders. "A small meat lovers." He said it in the most morose tone Chris had ever heard.

"All right." The girl's attention was focused on the arm across Chris's shoulders. "That'll be thirteen seventy-three."

They fell into an easy conversation, but every so often Chris found his focus straying back to that lone figure on the bench. The pizza was good, but it sat heavy in his stomach.

“Look,” Dale suddenly said, his expression amused and exasperated, “why don’t we wrap up the rest of our food and check on the kid?”

“You sure?” Chris hated feeling like a jerk for being so distracted, but it was getting late, and that kid just sat there.

“Yeah.” Dale scooted off his seat and went to ask the cashier for some boxes. When he returned to the table they put their pizza away and left, checking for cars before they jogged across the street.

How much of an idiot would he look like if the kid wasn’t Tommy? But the closer they got, the more Chris thought it probably was his swim buddy.

“Tommy?” he called out tentatively, a bit wary of scaring some random kid and having the cops called on him.

The kid looked up and, sure enough, it was Tommy. His eyes were red and puffy and there was a bruise darkening his cheek.

“Oh, Tommy,” Chris whispered, sitting on the bench beside the small form. As soon as he was settled Tommy launched himself into his lap, sobbing and mumbling.

Chris looked at Dale, feeling helpless and scared. What was he supposed to do? Dale didn’t look too happy and strode away, his phone to his ear. Chris turned back to the child in his lap and did his best to soothe him. When he mentioned food, Tommy’s stomach let out the loudest growl possible, and the kid flushed cherry red. Chris grinned and combed a hand through Tommy’s hair as he held out his box. Tommy ate like he hadn’t touched food in a while, and based on how light he felt perched on Chris’s lap, he thought that might be the case. A warm presence sat beside him and he glanced to the side, giving a weak smile to Dale as his roommate stared at the pair of them.

“I called the cops,” Dale whispered. “And Kiyoshi.”

His muscles relaxed at both pieces of information. As much as he wanted to bundle Tommy up and protect him from the world, it would be considered kidnapping. The kid needed help, and if it was one of his parents who’d hurt him, then his home life needed to be checked out, because if Chris remembered right, there was a baby at home too. And Kiyoshi would know what to say to Tommy if the kid began crying again.

They sat there in silence, Chris carding his hand through Tommy's hair as the kid devoured his pizza then stared at the second box. Dale made a big production out of giving his box to Tommy, but he ended it all with a wide grin and a wink. Tommy ate two pieces before handing it back and curling up in Chris's lap, his little hands fisting in Chris's shirt. Not long after Kiyoshi came across the street his expression a mix between worry, relief, and rage.

"How is he?" he asked as soon as he reached them.

Tommy peeked at Kiyoshi, then held out his arms, making grabby motions with his hands. Kiyoshi quickly scooped up Tommy and sat on Chris's other side, cradling Tommy close.

"All right," Chris said in a soft tone. "We gave him our leftover pizza and he nearly ate all of it."

"Good." Kiyoshi scowled at the cruiser that pulled up, two officers stepping out.

"You the ones who called?" the female of the pair asked.

"That was me," Dale said as he stood up, holding out his hand.

The officer gave him a quick shake before she peered at Kiyoshi and Tommy. "Hey, kiddo."

Tommy glanced at her, the bruise on his cheek clear even in the fading light. The officer looked sympathetic, her partner appeared pissed but trying to cover it up behind her.

"Do you want to tell me how you got the bruise?" the female asked.

Chris managed to tilt his head and read her tag. It read M. Callaghan. He couldn't make out the male officer's name tag.

Tommy shook his head, his hair flopping every which way, and buried his face in Kiyoshi's chest.

"Tommy?" Kiyoshi said in the softest tone Chris had ever heard from him.

After a moment Tommy looked up, his eyes wide and wet. "Mommy says I'm not allowed to say."

"Do you know why your mommy says you can't tell who hurt you?" Kiyoshi's hand rubbed along Tommy's spine and he leaned in close, almost as if they were sharing a secret.

Tommy bit his bottom lip, sucking the flesh between his teeth. He shook his head.

“Was it your mommy who hurt you?”

Chris’s heart constricted as the tears spilled from Tommy’s eyes. No child should be hurt by their parent.

“It wasn’t her fault,” Tommy whispered, the words nearly choked off as he hiccupped. “I was a bad boy.”

“No,” Kiyoshi whispered fiercely. He gripped Tommy’s chin and tilted his face up. “You are not a bad boy. You’re not, Tommy.”

Chris reached over, settling his hand atop Tommy’s head. When those big, bright eyes turned his way, he nearly forgot what he wanted to say. “You’re a good boy, Tommy. You go to practice every day and you listen to what we say, right?”

Tommy nodded his head, fresh tears spilling over.

“Sirs?” Callaghan said, her expression torn.

“I’ll go with,” Kiyoshi said, rising.

“You sure? I can come with,” Chris offered. He wanted to be there, yet, at the same time, he wanted to be as far away from the situation as possible.

“Yeah.” Kiyoshi gave him a weak smile and walked to the cruiser, nodding to the male officer as he held the door open for him.

Chris watched as Kiyoshi got Tommy settled in the seat beside him, his arm going over Tommy’s shoulders once they were both buckled.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Callaghan asked.

Chris blinked and turned his focus to the officer, recounting how he’d seen Tommy, thought it was his swim buddy, and decided to investigate when it looked like no one was coming for the kid. Dale gave his own statement and they both took the officer’s card.

“I’ll be in touch,” she said, climbing into the car.

“That was ominous,” Dale said as they watched the cruiser pull away.

It was meant to be a joke, but Chris couldn’t laugh. All he wanted was to return to their dorm, curl up in bed, and call his sister, because even though he knew he’d done the right thing, he felt like he’d done the worst thing in the world.

“Come on.” Dale clapped a hand on Chris’s shoulder and turned him toward campus. “Let’s get back to our room.”

“The movie...” Chris really didn’t want to go.

Dale snorted and gave him a look. “You won’t watch it. Besides, you have an early class.”

Chris nodded, letting Dale lead him back to their dorm and soaking in his roommate’s voice as he told story after story about his classes. By the time they arrived at their room the shock of the situation had faded a bit and Chris had started to shake. Before he could say or do anything, Dale had pushed him onto Chris’s bed, crawled in beside him, thrown a blanket over top of them, and snuggled close.

“Let it out,” Dale whispered against his ear, his arms holding him close.

And Chris did. The tears started, followed shortly by sobs. A part of him, deep in the corner of his mind that felt abandoned by his parents ever since he’d come out to them, had known that Tommy could have been him. He could have been some kid on a bench, hurt and alone, with people walking past as if he didn’t matter.

Dale continued to whisper in his ear, but Chris didn’t hear the words, just focused on the cadence, the soft, even breaths, the chest moving with each inhale and exhale. Soon enough, he drifted off to sleep.

The next day was hell on Chris’s concentration as he kept peeking at his phone, worried he might miss a text or phone call, either from Kiyoshi or the police or even Department of Children and Family Services. When his school day was finished, he ran back to his room to deposit his things, then headed right back out. He almost toppled Dale as his roommate rounded the corner, pulling Chris close and staring at him with wide, bewildered eyes.

“What’s up, Chip?”

Chris flushed, embarrassed by the need to visit Kiyoshi and grill his friend for details on how Tommy was doing, even as his pounding heartbeat slowed and his nerves calmed at the close proximity of Dale. It just wasn’t fair. Having a crisis on his hands should distract him from his still-hopeless crush, instead he was acting like a swooning heroine in one of his sister’s romances. Which he never read. His face flamed hotter.

“Ah.” Dale stepped back, but didn’t release him, that bewildered expression replaced by one of understanding. “I get it. Come on.” He tugged Chris along, back to their room, and pushed Chris into one of the chairs.

Confused—because how could Dale know anything about what Chris was thinking?—Chris watched his best friend as he rummaged around their room, coming up with an unopened twelve-pack of pop and a bag of chips.

Oh. Chris winced at his forgetfulness. Part of the deal they’d made for role-playing was to bring treats, since the first few times they’d nearly eaten all of Kiyoshi and Nate’s food while playing. And tonight was a role-play night.

“Here.” Dale pulled a can of pop from their open twelve-pack and handed it over.

Chris opened it and chugged until he thought he might choke. How was anyone expected to deal with this? *How could anyone walk past a child sitting on a bench by himself? Especially since evening had been looming?* He shook the thought off, turning his attention to Dale as he moved around the chair. When Dale’s hands settled on his shoulders and started to knead, Chris let out a low groan, tension melting from him under those strong, sure hands.

Dale’s touch never faltered, even when he hit a sore spot and Chris yelped at the sharp burst of pain. It quickly subsided into a dull throb that faded beneath Dale’s relentless touch. With no other choice, Chris relaxed, his head falling forward as he became loose limbed. When the massage turned soft, almost gentle, Chris moaned low and deep at the lack of hard pressure, and the small zing of arousal that stirred his cock. That’s when Dale’s hands stilled.

Groggy, Chris blinked and glanced over his shoulder. Dale’s face was blank a moment, then he smiled, his hands giving a final pat before he pulled away and moved to collect the pop and chips for their night of fun.

Why? Chris silently lamented the loss of those hands on his shoulders. He was a fool a hundred times over, but in that moment when he’d been so relaxed, he hadn’t cared. Shame washed through him. It had been months since school had started. He should be over his best friend. Yet, some part of him still clung to the hope that Dale would look at him and see someone he could be with as more than a friend.

But I don’t want to be one of his bed warmers. And that, more than anything, was probably what hurt the most. If Dale had found himself a nice girlfriend to settle with, for at least a few months, maybe then Chris could get

over his years-long crush. Instead, Dale bed-hopped. Not as frequently as the rumors said Adam did, but it seemed a close race between the pair.

Rolling his head on his neck to relieve some of the new tension that suffused his muscles, Chris rose and took the chips from Dale, grinning wide as he left their room, Dale close behind. They walked in silence down the hall, Chris pausing for a moment when he heard a rich, deep laugh coming from Kiyoshi and Nate's room. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, wondering how Adam had managed to get into the room. The last time he'd tried, Kiyoshi had slammed the door in his face.

When they entered the room, Adam was perched on one of the computer chairs, his arms folded across the backrest and his chin resting on his crossed wrists, his face bright with a wide grin. Kiyoshi sat cross-legged on his bed, his arms folded and a scowl on his face as he glared at Nate. Nate sat on the floor, face beaming, as he handed papers over to Adam.

Chris knocked on the open door, amused at the sight in the room. Nate turned toward them, his face lighting up even brighter as he ushered them in. Once they were inside Dale shut the door, grin cheeky as he held up the pack of pop.

"Hope everyone's thirsty," he sang out as he strode to take the other desk chair, Chris settling beside the still-sulking Kiyoshi.

He leaned toward his friend, doing his best to keep amusement from his voice as he said, "I didn't know Adam liked role-playing."

Kiyoshi turned his scowl on him a moment then returned it to Adam, who was busy chatting with Dale about the character Nate had helped him create. "I didn't either. Apparently someone told him our plans for the night, and he decided to invite himself over."

"And Nate couldn't resist." Chris shook his head, his cheeks hurting as he continued to smile. The smile melted away as the fear that had been plaguing him all day poked at his brain. "How's Tommy?"

Kiyoshi shrugged his shoulders, the motion knocking them together a little. "I don't know. I told my mom about it though, and she's all full of righteous indignation."

Chris leaned back on his hands, gaze unseeing as he stared at the other three. He couldn't help but wonder what it would be like for Tommy now. Would he be allowed to see them? Would he be put in foster care? Or left with

his mother? So many questions, but what connection did he have to the kid? Nothing aside from the occasional meeting at the pool.

“He’ll be all right,” Kiyoshi whispered, his voice fierce and, when Chris turned to look at him, his face a mask of determination.

Chris wasn’t sure who his friend was trying to convince. Even though Kiyoshi scowled at the world and appeared generally unhappy, he was a good guy, there when anyone needed him, and Chris knew it killed him when he was forced to stand back and watch. They were two peas in a pod, though Chris still floundered with who he was.

A wide, terrifying grin broke across Kiyoshi’s face, the full force of which was turned Chris’s way. “Don’t look now, but someone isn’t happy we’re so close.”

“What?” Chris’s brow wrinkled and he glanced to the side, a jolt of... something going through him at the intense stare Dale was giving them. Chris swallowed, licking his lips, and glanced back at Kiyoshi, who was leaning in close, ready to fall on top of Chris. His mind flashed back to yesterday, before they’d found Tommy, when Kiyoshi had been on top of him and Dale had walked in, his face twisted in fury.

Laughing, as if it were some great joke, Chris pushed him away. That didn’t stop his heart from slamming against his ribcage.

“Ready to play?” Nate asked, handing their papers over.

“And what does Yoshi play as, an elf?” Adam teased, his smirk wide.

Kiyoshi snatched them both, his scowl deepening as he shot a glare Adam’s way. “Are you?”

Adam waved his papers, a cheeky grin on his face as he winked at Kiyoshi. “Whenever you are, Yoshi.”

Kiyoshi bristled, and Chris had to grab his papers or risk losing them to Kiyoshi’s clenching hands.

“All right then,” Nate cheered opening his book to their newest quest. “Adam’s at a lower level than us, so if we get into any battles we should keep him closer to the back until he earns enough experience.”

Adam squawked in indignation, which drew a smirk across Kiyoshi’s features. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chris laughed, snagging the six-sided dice when Nate held them out to him. “Come on, where are we?”

“Wait,” Adam said, his brows wrinkled. “I thought role-playing dice had more sides?”

“Normally,” Kiyoshi interjected before anyone else could. “But someone lost the regular dice, so we’ve improvised.”

“All right.” Nate scooted around on the floor, practically bouncing in place, looking a smidge guilty. “You’ve traversed the Wilted Plains and find yourself in the Witches Wood, where terrible monsters lurk and mad men rule. You need to find leaves from a Dragon’s Fire bush, but it will not be easy. There’s a town nearby where you can go to collect information and supplies. Do you roll to go to the town?”

“What do we need?” Kiyoshi asked, rising from his spot and moving to where Dale sat, reaching around him to open the pop and snag two cans. He returned and handed one to Chris.

Chris nodded, but didn’t open his. It was a bit early and he could still feel the other one in his system.

Nate hummed a moment, then nodded his head. “A ten or higher.”

Chris quirked a brow, jiggled the dice in his hand, then tossed it on the floor in front of Nate. They bounced a little, rolling to a stop a little ways in front of Nate. It was a nine. Chris glanced at Nate, who wore the most stricken look on his face.

“What?” Dale asked, leaning forward, trying to peer at the book.

Nate held it close, glaring at Dale. “A troll appears.”

Chris winced while Kiyoshi and Dale groaned.

“What? What’s so bad about a troll?” Adam asked, his expression confused.

“I say we feed our new,” Kiyoshi got up and peered at Adam’s papers quickly before sitting back down, “paladin to the troll and make a run for it.”

“But I just created that character,” Nate practically wailed.

“How much would it cost to escape?” Dale asked, reaching down and scooping up the dice.

Nate glanced at his book and moved his lips in silent calculation. Chris was tempted to buy a new set of dice so Nate wouldn’t have to work out the math. “A... nine.”

Dale sighed, but rolled anyway. They all stared, a collective exhale escaping them at the sight of a ten.

“Next time we need a high roll I vote Dale gets the honor,” Kiyoshi muttered, holding out his hand for the dice.

“All right, you’re in the woods. Spread before you are four paths. Two meander off to the left, one of which is overgrown with weeds, the other well traveled. One cuts straight, also well-traveled, and the final veers sharply to the right and appears to have been traveled, but not recently. Which will you travel?”

“The road not traveled?” Adam stated, glancing around at them.

Dale shrugged his shoulders. “Why not.”

Kiyoshi was glaring at Adam again, and Chris knew he was weighing the pros and cons of arguing a different route.

“What about the one less traveled, but still traveled?” When they all stared at him, Chris clarified, “The one to the right.”

“I agree,” Kiyoshi said, a faint grin curving his mouth that he quickly smoothed over.

“Do we roll when we’re undecided?” Adam asked.

“I still have a say.” Nate mock glared at them all.

“But don’t you know the story?” Adam countered.

“No.” Nate shrugged his shoulders. “This is a new book I hadn’t had a chance to play. Besides, most Dungeon Masters also play along.”

Kiyoshi mimicked his roommate when Adam’s eyes glanced his way. “It’s true. This one was a gift from his uncle for getting into college.”

“Okay.” Adam didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t say anything else.

Nate sat there a moment, his face scrunched up in contemplation as he studied the page. “I think I’ll side with Kiyoshi and Chris. If a road’s never been traveled, chances are if someone went down it they never returned.”

“So less traveled?” Dale asked, glancing to Adam.

“Sure.”

“All right.” Nate nodded, continuing with the game.

Turned out the path they'd picked was the right one, only to discover that the leaves they needed were guarded by a Wyrn—a young, immature dragon that had a nasty temper. They prepared for battle, and at the end Adam managed to land the killing blow. They all cheered, laughing and joking as they continued on, Dale and Adam in charge of the more directional rolls since both Kiyoshi and Chris were having low rolls throughout the game.

The hours rolled by, Adam getting more into it as they went, Kiyoshi even laughing at their newest player's enthusiasm. It was getting close to two in the morning when Chris yawned, his jaw popping and his eyes watering.

"Uh-oh," Dale teased, rising from his seat. "Someone needs to go to bed."

Chris sulked, but let Dale tug him to his feet, leaning against his roommate as the others agreed, Kiyoshi eloquently snapping, "Get out of my room," and proceeding to strip down to his boxers before burrowing beneath his blankets.

Dale just laughed, lugging Chris from the room. Chris didn't mind as he enjoyed the warmth of Dale's body pressed against his own. If he could he'd crawl into bed with his roommate, but that would be a bad idea.

When they reached their room, Chris pushed away, stripping much the same as Kiyoshi had and slipping beneath his covers. He stared blearily at Dale as he moved about the room, locking their door and turning off the light. There was the soft shuffle of footsteps, clothes hitting the floor, the gentle creak of Dale's bed.

"Night," Dale whispered.

Chris murmured some half-formed words, snuggling into his pillow, and let sleep roll over him.

There had been no sign of Tommy at the pool for several weeks now. It weighed on Chris, but even Kiyoshi didn't know what had happened to their young friend. It was disappointing, yet, as Cathy said, that was life. She felt bad for them, but she'd been firm in telling them they should forget about the kid unless they saw him again. Still, swimming had become a bit more lethargic for both of them.

"Let's race," Kiyoshi said, splashing him with a small wave.

"Okay." Chris swam to the wall, peering around the room as if Tommy would randomly appear if he kept looking, then focused on the lane, nodding to Kiyoshi when he braced himself against the wall.

“Go!” Kiyoshi shouted, diving with ease beneath the surface of the water.

Chris followed. He pumped his arms, focusing on the rapid, even beat of his limbs slamming the water and pushing through, propelling him forward. He reached the other side and did a quick turn, racing to catch up with Kiyoshi’s form. He knew he was unlikely to catch up, but he would still try.

That’s when someone swam in front of him and he had to duck down so he wouldn’t slam into them. He managed to miss them, nearly taking a layer of skin off his chest as he skimmed the rough bottom of the pool. With a snarl he broke the surface, ready to chew out whoever the idiot was. He turned, and saw Dale. His roommate sported a cocky grin as he swam lazily in the lane Chris had been using.

“What were you thinking?” Kiyoshi barked, swimming toward them with choppy strokes.

“Aw,” Adam called out, paddling to Dale and nudging him. “He didn’t mean anything by it.”

Kiyoshi sneered at the pair, and Chris could only shake his head at the spectacle.

“Come on, Chip,” Dale sang out as he stood, the water sluicing down the hard planes of his six-pack, “let’s race.”

Quick as a fish, Adam ducked beneath the water and swam to Chris’s side, bursting from the water and wrapping his strong arms around Chris. “No way. He’s gonna hang with me.”

Chris blinked, a little confused. Dale didn’t appear confused. He looked pissed off, and if Chris knew him—which he liked to think he did after so many years as friends—Dale was ready to issue a threat. It was all very old Western and Chris wanted no part of it.

“I’ll race you instead.”

Chris craned his neck, staring wide-eyed at Kiyoshi, whose expression had gone bland. That was worse than that contemplative look Kiyoshi got.

“Or are you afraid?”

Chris could see the steam rising from Dale. He usually wasn’t that easy to provoke.

“You’re on.”

If Dale's words had been daggers, Kiyoshi and Adam would be dead where they stood.

"But—"

"Shh," Adam whispered into his ear, hugging him close. Which should have been impossible, but apparently there had been a little more space between them, and Chris might have wondered what Adam was packing, but to feel it against his rear... well, that was a whole different story.

"What are you doing?" Chris hissed. He tried to wriggle forward, but Adam pulled him back, resting his chin on Chris's shoulder.

"Look at him."

Chris didn't have to ask which him Adam was referring to, his gaze automatically traveled to Dale; who was glancing their way as Kiyoshi counted down. Once their race started, Adam released his hold just enough that Chris wasn't flush against him.

"What do you think about playing a game?"

"What kind?" Chris asked, craning his neck to stare at Adam. His peripheral vision focused on the long, lean arms of Dale as they broke the surface then crashed back through.

The smirk that greeted him was less than promising and gained all his focus. "Ever notice how Dale gets jealous of any new guy you bring around?"

Chris held his tongue and did his best to stomp out the little bit of hope peeking around his heart.

"I sometimes think he wants to lock you up and never let another near you. It's probably tearing him up inside."

Chris sighed. "What does this have to do with a game?"

"Well..." Adam drawled. "I can be your boyfriend. What can Dale say against me?"

Chris laughed. He couldn't help it. "And Kiyoshi?"

"I never said you would be the only one getting something out of this game," Adam said with a shrug, his gaze locked on the racing pair.

"You know it's going to backfire." Because these things always did.

"Probably."

Chris sighed, turning at the sound of Kiyoshi's cheer. He looked too smug to have lost, but Dale didn't appear to care. His eyes were hard as he glared at them, or more likely Adam. Chris wanted to believe that Dale was jealous, that Dale acted like he was because he wanted Chris and didn't know how to say it. It was foolish and Chris knew he'd be hurt, yet he still hoped. Maybe this would be the final straw that showed him he and Dale would never be anything more than friends.

"Deal." He was going to regret this. So, so much.

"What are you grinning about?" Kiyoshi asked, splashing them as he came over.

"Do you really want to know, Yoshi?" Adam smirked.

Chris shook his head, squirming from Adam's hold and grabbing Kiyoshi's arm, dragging him away. "Come on. Let's go lift weights, then head back to the dorm."

"Don't forget our date tonight," Adam called after them.

When Chris glanced back, Dale had a thundercloud hovering over his head while Adam had the biggest grin stretching his face.

"That guy's an asshole. I don't know how you or Dale put up with him," Kiyoshi groused as he climbed from the pool, grabbing one of the towels they'd brought with them.

"He's not all that bad." Chris grabbed his own towel, trailing behind his friend, half listening as he complained about Adam.

"...thinks?"

"Hmm?" Chris winced at the anger on Kiyoshi's face. He'd tuned out too much. "Sorry. I was thinking about the movie tonight."

"Is that what Adam meant when he said date?"

"Uh... maybe?" Chris refused to look at Kiyoshi.

"So he's finally made his move."

Chris snapped his head to the side, staring at Kiyoshi. "What?"

Kiyoshi rolled his eyes and gave him the look that said he thought Chris was being slow on purpose. "We have that history class together and he mentioned wanting to ruffle some feathers. I told him he already ruffled mine

on a regular basis so who did he want to be his next victim. He said Dale. He thinks you're not the only one with an unfulfilled crush and he wants to see if sticking his neck out there will make Dale finally say he likes you."

Chris's heart slammed like a wild beast against his chest. "What?" It couldn't be true.

Kiyoshi hummed in response, stripping and getting dressed in his workout clothes. Chris followed him, barely registering what he was doing as they worked out. He'd thought Adam was joking with him more than anything, but if Kiyoshi let Adam go through with this plan of his, that meant Kiyoshi agreed. He swallowed his nerves, waiting until they'd finished their workout and were heading back to the dorm before gathering his courage.

"Do you think Dale likes me as more than a good friend?" He sounded like such a girl. All emotional. Sure, guys could be emotional too, Chris had seen his grandfather fall to pieces when they had to bury his second wife, but this... this was somehow worse because it seemed so pointless.

They walked in silence for a bit. "Yeah. I do."

Chris swallowed. What was he going to do now?

"That's a good thing, right?" Kiyoshi asked, gazing at him from the corner of his eye.

Was it? Chris shrugged, swallowed. He was going to say something stupid. "What if... What if it changes us?" He would rather forget his crush than have Dale hate him.

Kiyoshi snorted, looking at him over the top of his glasses. "Usually dating someone changes you, but I get what you mean." His gaze drifted back to the path they were walking. "I don't know. You've been together a really long time." He shrugged his shoulders, glancing back at Chris. "If you still like him after everything so far, I think you'll be all right."

A little afraid, and a little hopeful, Chris followed Kiyoshi into their dorm and toward their rooms where they dropped off their stuff, changed into jeans and shirts, then headed to dinner before making their way to the movie theater.

"It kind of sucks that we didn't fit," Kiyoshi said with a sigh.

"Why?" Chris asked, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Just think," Kiyoshi flung his arms wide, "we get each other, we like a lot of the same stuff, we drive each other crazy, but we're always there for each other."

“Too bad our hearts don’t agree,” Chris teased, wrapping an arm around Kiyoshi’s shoulders and dragging him close, nearly making them both trip.

“Watch it.” With a shove Kiyoshi broke free and dashed toward the entrance of the theater.

Laughing, Chris gave chase, but no matter how even he and Dale were, Kiyoshi could beat them all. It was amazing that he wasn’t involved in any college-level sports, or even professional with the way he knew how to handle his body and learn a game.

Together they entered the sole movie theater in the town, the next closest was almost half an hour away, and collected their tickets and treats. They were early—at Kiyoshi’s insistence since he preferred the back row—and settled in to wait for Dale and Adam to arrive. Nate might show up with his girlfriend, but that was always a maybe. When the lights started to dim, Dale and Adam entered, and Adam laughed, bolting up the stairs while Dale stood there, his mouth hanging slightly open.

Adam took the seat beside Chris, threw an arm over his shoulders, and leaned in close. “Hey, Chip.” He gave Chris a quick peck, the smirk he wore full of mischief.

Over his shoulder, Chris could see Dale, and he was less than happy. Deciding to play along, because what could it hurt, Chris snuggled into Adam’s side, glad the theater was dark as he blushed at the feel of an unfamiliar body beneath his cheek, fingers teasing the curve where his neck met his shoulder.

He knew Dale was silently fuming, his attention hardly on the screen as an action scene unfolded with explosions, people screaming, and the hero walking in a slow-motion frame toward the destruction. It was all very exciting, and Chris didn’t remember anything, too focused on Adam at his side and Dale just out of reach. He wanted to reassure Dale, but of what, he wasn’t sure, and instead cast the occasional glance Kiyoshi’s way, a little perturbed to see the knowing smile on his face.

Once the credits rolled and they’d all shuffled out, talking about nothing in particular, Dale made sure to place himself at Chris’s side, occasionally nudging him with his shoulder as they walked and talked or giving a light punch to his arm. It was too confusing and Chris wanted to stop, grab Dale, shake him until his teeth rattled, and demand an explanation. But he kept walking, laughing and joking, while on the inside he cried like a baby at the tornado of emotions ravaging his heart and mind.

Adam's hand in his was rough, calluses rubbing against Chris's smooth palm as they walked back to the dorm. It had been an odd two months. At first Dale had huffed and puffed a lot, but then he'd seemed to settle, even congratulating them on dating. That had hurt, but the sting was less than Chris had thought it might be. Maybe he was finally getting over Dale. He could only hope.

"So," Adam said, his thumb massaging along Chris's knuckle.

Chris waited, curious. "So, what?" he finally asked when the silence stretched into awkward territory.

Adam coughed a little, glancing at him, a streetlight illuminated him from behind for a brief moment. It was strangely enchanting. "Can I come back to your room?"

Fire and ice churned in Chris's gut. His heart kicked up its pace. *Yes.* It wasn't that he liked Adam, he was a nice guy and they had fun, but he did find him attractive. As far as Chris knew, everyone found Adam attractive, even if they didn't want to have sex with him. But Chris wouldn't mind having sex with him.

A small piece of guilt slammed into his stomach. He wanted to say yes, wanted to drag Adam back to his room and find out what was so great about having sex with another person, yet, he hesitated.

"If you need time or don't want to, I understand." Adam gave him a sheepish grin, his eyes hidden by the darkening atmosphere as night slipped across the land, while his teeth flashed in the light of the fading sun.

Chris shook his head, squeezing Adam's hand as he thought about what he wanted to say. "It's not that I don't want to, because I do. I want to know what it's like to be with someone else. It's just..." He sighed, unwilling to look at Adam, afraid his friend would see the internal struggle and... what? Laugh?

"Hey." Adam's free hand cupped his chin, dragging his face up so Chris had no choice but to look at Adam or risk straining his eyes. "I get it."

There was a look of defeat in those dark eyes, and Chris understood. Just as Chris still desperately, foolishly clung to a minor hope that Dale would step forward and admit he liked him as more than a friend, Adam carried a similar torch for Kiyoshi. They were both floundering in their unrequited feelings and neither of them seemed to know how to let go.

Chris swallowed. He gripped Adam's hand when his friend would have let it slip away. It was time to move on. He tugged Adam along behind him, a shy sort of smile creeping across his face and he had to duck his head. Maybe he would laugh or giggle or make some other awkward noise, but he didn't want that. It would ruin the fragile moment that they'd somehow woven in the span of seconds.

The dorm was mostly empty, a few people loitering around looking bored out of their minds. It was a Friday night and there were parties to be at. Chances were Chris's floor would be deserted. He didn't know where Dale had gotten to, but that was something he couldn't think about. Every time he thought of his best friend, another shard of guilt dug deeper into his heart.

They arrived on Chris's floor, no sounds echoed in the narrow hallway. It was almost eerie, but the warm hand clasped in his own reassured him he wasn't alone. Striding with confidence, Chris unlocked his door and walked in, turning to watch as Adam filled the frame, his presence seeming to push into every corner of the room. Chris's heart skipped a little at the sight of Adam's shy grin as he nudged the door shut with his foot.

Chris stepped forward, nervous and bold, and slipped his arms around Adam, locking the door with a quiet *snick* that sounded through the room.

"Come here."

The words were hushed and Chris slipped that little bit more closer to Adam so their chests brushed when they inhaled in tandem. Adam lifted a hand, slow as if he feared he might startle Chris, and cupped Chris's cheek. His hand was warm. It was different. A sensation Chris had never felt before. No one had ever gotten so close, had looked at him the way Adam was. Sure, he and Kiyoshi had tried to fool around, but that was a candle compared to the raging fire licking through Chris's body.

He was tensing up and liquefying in the same moment. All from a simple touch.

Adam leaned in, and Chris thought he might be ready to say something. He had no clue what. Instead, Adam kissed him. It was a bare brush of lips, but enough that Chris could experience the rough scrape of Adam's chapped lips, feel the touch of Adam's breath across his lips. It was intoxicating. How was it that Chris had been missing out on this?

The hand on his jaw tilted his face a little and the kiss deepened. Still a soft exploration, but Adam's touch was firmer. Chris became lightheaded, and

curious to know what else he could feel if Adam went further. A little unsure, Chris raised his hands, one settling on Adam's arm, the hard press of muscle beneath smooth skin, while the other curled around Adam's neck, gently tugging him closer so he could take more from the man offering him so much.

Adam's free hand came up to cup his hip, his fingers tight as they dug into the curve of his body and dragged him close. Their bodies aligned, Adam's pelvis nudging into Chris's belly. There was a hard length trapped beneath rough denim and whatever underwear Adam might wear. Excitement danced low in Chris's gut, his cock rising to answer.

Then Adam's tongue traced the seam of Chris's lips and Chris groaned, opening his mouth. It was a strange sensation, having another's tongue in his mouth, but it was hotter than he'd ever expected it to be with the way Adam moved his slick muscle, teasing Chris into a game of dominance. It lasted until Chris had to pull away, his breaths panting from between his lips, which felt hot and swollen.

This close, he could see Adam's dark gaze, his heavy-lidded eyes, and the small curve of his lips that spoke of satisfaction. Chris smiled in response, the tension he'd felt dissipating a little, and he leaned in for another kiss, this one chaste compared to what they'd recently shared.

A chuckle pressed against his lips. When Chris glanced at Adam, there was a gentle, fond sort of smile on his lips.

"What?" Chris whispered, a little afraid that if he spoke at a normal volume whatever was between them might shatter.

"Nothing." Adam shook his head and leaned down for another quick kiss. "Come on." He dropped the hand that had been cradling Chris's jaw to his hip and lead him backward. When Chris's legs hit the bed, Adam turned them, plopping himself down and drawing Chris onto his lap.

Confused, Chris asked, "What are we doing?"

"Shh." Adam tugged him forward and tilted his head up. Answering the unasked demand, Chris leaned in to continue their kisses. Soon enough, they were back where they'd started, Chris hot and bothered and wincing at the constriction his jeans caused. "Just like this," Adam whispered against his lips, nibbling at the swollen flesh.

Chris groaned, shifting to try and find some way to relieve the ache in his groin. Adam chuckled at him, one of his hands slipping around to flick the

button of Chris's jeans. Chris gasped, pulling back, his focus riveted on the sight of Adam's big, long fingers catching the zipper and tugging it down, his hand slipping between denim and the soft cotton of Chris's briefs.

Whimpering, Chris ducked his head, resting his forehead against Adam's collarbone. Adam didn't relent, his fingers teasing Chris's throbbing erection as if he'd done it many times before. And he had. Chris knew that. This was a way to relieve an itch for both of them. Hopefully Chris wouldn't do anything stupid.

Just when he thought he had himself under control, Adam's other hand slid into the back of Chris's briefs and teased the tip of his crack. Chris gasped, the touch unfamiliar and daunting.

"Shh," Adam whispered, his lips tracing a pattern along Chris's jawline. "I've got you."

Chris nodded, bucking into the hand that pushed his cock against his belly and massaged it. It felt so good. Why hadn't he ever thought to try it?

Adam's hands stilled on him and Chris couldn't figure out why. "Ah" was breathed into his ear, and then the door slammed into the wall.

Chris jerked, Adam's arm behind his back the only thing that saved him from falling to the floor. He craned his neck to stare wide-eyed at the intruder. Who happened to be Dale. A pissed-off Dale.

Dale walked into the room, grabbed the door, and slammed it shut behind him. His hand lashed out and he flicked the light switch. Chris had to blink to see. Adam's arm tightened around his back.

Oh. *Oh shit.* He was in bed with Adam. Well, on his own bed with Adam, but he didn't think the distinction mattered. What was he supposed to say? Uhm, sorry, I thought you'd be out? If he had known... Wait. It didn't matter. Adam was his, kind of, boyfriend, and boyfriends had sex.

"What are you doing?"

Shit. What was he supposed to say? Scrambling, Chris opened his mouth to say something, hoping that whatever came out would be good enough, and gasped as Adam's finger slipped down his ass crack.

"Getting hot and heavy." Adam said it with such a tone of 'duh' that Chris nearly laughed.

Except, Adam's finger was tapping against his hole and, oh, that was new. He'd touched himself, of course he had, but, aside from a doctor's visit, no one else had touched him back there. Adam was taking a lot of his firsts.

"Get out," Dale snapped.

Chris groaned. How was he supposed to handle this? *First, get off Adam's lap.* Yeah, that was a good idea. Only, when he went to shuffle off Adam's muscular thighs, his friend pushed his finger the barest bit inside his hole. It didn't burn, but Chris knew it would if Adam tried to push it in any further.

What's he doing?

Adam then hooked his chin against Chris's shoulder, tilted his face toward Chris's throat, and licked a wide line across his neck. Chris shivered.

"No," Adam said, his tone flat and neutral.

Are they having some kind of peeing contest? Beyond confused, Chris squirmed a little until it became more than apparent he wasn't going anywhere. So he gave up and settled, his focus riveted to the dark red flush overcoming Dale's face.

"Why should I?" Adam asked, nuzzling his nose against Chris's racing pulse. "You're his friend and roommate. I'm his boyfriend."

Chris could see icy rage covering Dale's features. "Uh..." He didn't know what to say. He yelped when Adam nipped the juncture of throat and collar, glaring at him for the interruption.

Hands suddenly grabbed him, yanking him out of Adam's arms. Chris stumbled, wincing as he tripped over his own feet, and gasped as his body was slammed into a firm surface, a hand grasping his chin and yanking his head up. "Like hell you are," Dale snarled, his lips claiming Chris's in a searing kiss that put to shame everything Adam had done to him up to that point. With that one touch of Dale's lips against his own, Chris was lost.

He shuddered, tears pricking his eyes, and dove into the kiss with a hunger born of long-standing desperation. The angle was all wrong, but what was a little bit of physical discomfort when he had the balm that healed his emotional wounds?

Dale crushed him closer, using a hand on his hip to turn him so they were chest to chest, pressed so close Chris almost couldn't tell where one of them began and the other ended. It was all so cliché, yet he grasped it with both

hands and refused to let go. He managed to wriggle his arms up from their limp position at his sides and cupped his hands along Dale's stubbled jaw, the tips of his fingers tracing the sharp upward line on the bone as it reached toward Dale's ears.

They pulled apart, Chris gasping as he knocked his forehead against Dale's shoulder, Dale's ragged gasps of air loud in Chris's ears.

"Well." Adam drew out the word.

When Chris managed to gain enough mobility to peek from the corner of his eye, he saw a wide, self-satisfied smirk on Adam's face. *Jerk.*

Adam rose from his spot on Chris's bed, all liquid grace, even as his erection strained against the confines of his jeans. "Looks like I'll head home. Maybe Yoshi will comfort my broken heart." He winked, that damn smile still on his face, and sauntered past them as if nothing had happened.

Chris's body was tight as he watched Adam move, waiting for Dale to lash out. Except, Dale remained where he was, arms wrapped around Chris. That dark gaze tracked Adam's movements as he left the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

They stood, frozen, for so many heartbeats Chris began to sweat in fear, his blood cooling until it seemed to chill him. He stepped back. Dale's arms slid from around him, his gaze still focused on the door Adam had shut.

Chris's heartbeat lurched in his chest. He was a fool. For some strange reason Dale was possessive of him. Maybe Chris was some kind of toy? Though, how could he know, when Dale never said anything? Merely stomped and snarled and... This was ridiculous.

Chris turned away, more than ready for bed. First he'd have to take a shower. His erection had disappeared almost completely, but Chris felt dirty. He wanted Dale's touch gone from his skin. He'd better bring extra soap. He strode to his bed, ducked down, and pulled his shower supplies out. All he really needed was his soap, but if he was going to shower, he might as well do it right. When he rose and turned, Dale was watching him, his expression unreadable. Chris thought he knew Dale. *Apparently not.*

"Where are you going?" Dale folded his arms across his chest. Chris could imagine him made from stone for all the warmth he emitted.

Holding the soap and shampoo up, Chris took a step forward. "I'm going to take a shower. Not that it's any of your business." He made no qualms about

letting the bitterness seep into his tone. He was tired, emotionally wrung out, and he wanted a shower, damn it.

He strode past Dale, reaching into his closet for the towel he hung on a hanger; a habit his sister had instilled in him. When he moved to the door, a hand slammed into the wood, keeping it closed when Chris would have stormed out. He didn't turn, his heart in his throat as he waited.

"I don't want you to leave." It was said softly, with a touch of bitterness and a wealth of sadness.

Chris swallowed.

"I'm an idiot," Dale whispered, the breath that carried his words dragging across Chris's throat, and then his lips followed. They were a little smoother than Adam's and sent tendrils of heat flexing throughout Chris's body. Where Adam had stoked a fire in Chris's blood, Dale ignited a bomb that devastated every scrap of reason Chris ever had.

He tried to turn so he could see Dale, and was thwarted when his best friend's athletic build pushed into his back, pinning him against the door. It was light; Chris could have broken from the hold with ease, yet he stayed still.

Dale kissed his throat. "Please, stay?"

Chris nodded. His throat was tight. He opened his mouth... no sound escaped.

"I'm sorry." The words were so quiet Chris feared he might have imagined them. "I just..." Deep exhale, sharp inhale. Chris waited. "I thought I was straight."

Words clamored to be given life. Chris held them back behind locked teeth.

"I was amazed when you came out to me. I have a cousin, lives down south, who came out. When she did, I found myself in front of a computer doing research. I wanted to be there for her if she needed me. We were family. I read about how it's personal, how it's terrifying, and I thought about how I never had to come out as straight to my parents. It was a given. When you told me you were gay... It was a gift. I cherished it. Then you told me you had a crush on me and... I don't know." Dale's hand slid down the door, his arm brushing along Chris's, then his arms were wrapping around Chris's middle, holding him close. "I was scared."

Chris shuddered at the admission. His head fell back, his hair brushing along Dale's cheek until the back of his head rested against Dale's shoulder, his eyes staring, unseeing, at the ceiling. He waited for the rest.

"I never thought about being attracted to guys. But as soon as you said you liked me as more than a friend, I had to think about it. I said whatever came to mind, then fled. I went ahead and asked out a girl soon after to prove to myself that I didn't have to think about it. Didn't have to think about what I'd always dismissed as friendly curiosity after I'd realized you were gay. I mean, every guy thinks about it, right? When a friend they know is gay, they think about what they must find attractive about guys, right? But I looked at you and I thought I understood, and I panicked. I was scared that I might like guys, and then what would that say about me?"

A shiver whisked through Chris, leaving him cold and defeated. If Dale had been so scared, what had changed?

"What would my parents think? My friends? I knew you wouldn't care, but, then, I thought, 'What if it turns out that I like Chip? Not any other guy, just Chip? What if we try to be more than friends, it doesn't work out, and I lose him?' That terrified me. Everything else paled in comparison to maybe losing you. I knew I could handle losing everyone else, but not you." Dale squeezed him tight. Chris's ribs protested, but he didn't make a sound. "I couldn't lose you. So I dove into dating women. I hoped maybe I'd forget. A part of me was relieved when you didn't bring around any boyfriends. Then we came here."

There was a desperate edge to Dale's words. Chris wanted to soothe him. Wanted to hold Dale as close as he was holding Chris. He wanted to slug Dale too for all the mixed signals and for the way Chris felt as if he were a bunch of jagged pieces that couldn't fit back together.

"I just... I thought maybe you'd find someone else and I wouldn't have to look too closely at what I felt about you. Then I saw you flirting with that asshole and I was pissed. When I heard what he did to unsuspecting freshman... All I could think about was protecting you. Stupid, right?"

Tears trickled from Chris's eyes. It was too much. He shook his head.

"Hey..." Dale hooked his chin against Chris's shoulder. "Say something."

Chris shook his head. If he tried to speak, it would come out as a broken sob.

Dale lifted his face away, his hands gently coaxing Chris to turn until they were face-to-face. The world was a little hazy for Chris, his eyes clouded with tears, but he could still see the shock and fear on Dale's face. *Shit. He's gonna change his mind.*

"I'm sorry," Dale whispered, knocking their foreheads together. "I'm an idiot."

Chris shook his head again. He hated himself at that moment, unable to utter a word. What was wrong with him?

"Shh," Dale soothed, tilting his face just so and planting a kiss on Chris's lips.

He couldn't contain it. He sobbed, his hands reaching up and fisting in the material of Dale's shirt. He used his hold to drag Dale closer, slanting his lips against Dale's for a hard kiss. He wanted this to be real. Wanted it so much he ached in the roots of his teeth and down into the marrow of his bones. Chris swiped his tongue across Dale's lips, delving into his mouth when he opened for Chris's questing tongue. Their breaths mingled, tongues clashing, and Chris wanted nothing more than to remain there forever. Fear gripped him, coaxing him to take as much of Dale as he could get in this moment before his childhood friend woke up and realized what he was doing.

A groan spilled into Chris's mouth and he had to pull away to drag air into his lungs. Dale stared at him, eyes a little glassy, a gentle curve at the corner of his lips. Chris leaned in for another deep kiss, but Dale kept it light, ushering Chris back to the beds, knocking Chris onto his back on Dale's bed. He watched as Dale moved away, flicking the light switch and covering the room in darkness until the faint glow of the moon penetrated the night that had fallen about their room. Chris watched the shadow that was Dale move back to his side, coaxing him fully onto the bed. Dale stood beside the bed for a moment and stripped down to his boxers. Chris's heart kicked into high gear. He wasn't sure he was ready for anything beyond kissing with Dale. His roommate climbed on top of the bed, his hands working on Chris's shirt. Deciding not to fight it, Chris stripped, apprehension gnawing beneath his skin. Dale settled beside him, coaxed Chris onto his side so he was facing away from Dale, and then Dale's arms were wrapped around him again, pulling him close so they were spooning.

"I want to hold you," Dale said in a near whisper, as if he feared the words would shatter in the night. "Simply hold you."

“Okay.” Chris snuggled into the warm, hard body holding him, shut his eyes, and fell into sleep.

Morning light woke him slowly, and when Chris opened his eyes he was greeted with the sight of Dale, his hair disheveled, an arm flung over his face, and a light snore falling from his lips. This couldn’t be real. Chris flopped back against the bed, just watching Dale. It was probably creepy, but he was weak and unable to resist. Besides, when would he have another opportunity like this?

The bed shifted as Dale stirred, smacking his lips. Chris tried not to laugh at the sight as Dale flung out an arm, blindly groping, grabbing onto Chris and tugging him close.

“Whad’ya wanna do today?” Dale yawned his eyes opening to squint against the light filling their room, then turned his head and regarded Chris.

Chris’s mouth went dry as he tensed, ready for Dale to kick him out of his bed. Instead, Dale rolled over, pinning Chris beneath him before ducking down for a kiss.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” Dale said as he pulled back, splaying himself across Chris’s body so it was impossible to miss the hammering of either of their heartbeats.

Chris wet his lips, the taste of Dale lingering on the tip of his tongue. “What does this mean?” He needed to know, because there was no way they could go back to being just friends if whatever was between them didn’t run its course.

“What do you want it to mean?” Dale leveraged himself up on his forearms, his eyes dark and his face blank, but Chris could see the worry simmering in those brown orbs.

Just breathe. “Boyfriends?” He shrugged his shoulders. Somehow that word sounded childish. He wanted to take it back, to come up with something better fitting. He had no clue what that might be though.

“I think I’d like that.” Dale leaned down, his lips brushing against Chris’s in a light touch. “We’ll see where this goes.”

“Yeah.” Chris reached up, wrapped his arms around Dale’s shoulders, and dragged him down for a fuller kiss.

A loud noise from the hallway startled them apart, and Chris smiled at Dale. They had all the time in the world to go further if they wanted to.

Chris grinned as the doorbell rang. A month into summer vacation and Dale would finally be staying over for two nights. Two nights without any parental supervision. Chris's dad had given him a look before Chris's mother had ushered him out the door earlier that morning, smiling at Chris and reminding him of the cash she'd put in an envelope on the counter in case he and Dale wanted to order pizza. They were off to visit Cathy in her new apartment. Cathy had called almost two hours ago to let him know their parents had made it safe and sound, and reminded him he owed her since their parents still didn't know that he and Dale were a couple.

He'd blushed then, just as he was blushing now, opening the door and holding it so Dale could come in, his backpack slung over one shoulder and a grin on his face. Chris shut the door and turned, swallowing when he saw Dale bent over, unlacing his shoes then rising to kick them off.

"Tonight's gonna be epic," Dale said, finally turning. There was no flush to his cheeks, no twinkle in his eyes.

Chris's heart sank a little. He wouldn't be deterred though. They'd been together for a few months, and Chris had plans for tonight. Heat rose in his cheeks, but Dale didn't notice, chatting about the movies they would watch and the games they would play. It was a bit frustrating... Okay, if he was being honest with himself it was a lot frustrating, but he could be patient.

"Wanna put your stuff in my room and get a game going?" Chris stepped forward, nudging Dale with his shoulder and twining their fingers together. Chris's pulse pounded, a spike of anxiety curdling his stomach.

Dale soothed him with a squeeze of his hand and that bright smile he got when they were alone. "Sounds great." He leaned forward suddenly, knocking their foreheads and nudging the tip of his nose under Chris's until Chris tilted his head back and to the side, giving Dale perfect access to his lips.

They kissed, just their lips touching and gliding against one another. Oddly enough, it calmed Chris, his heartbeat returning to a normal rhythm and the heat leaving his cheeks.

Dale was the first to pull back. "Better?" he whispered.

Chris nodded, the heat rising in his cheeks again, but he smiled. Happy. He was so happy.

"Come on." Dale tugged on his hand, dragging him upstairs. "I think we should start with something else today."

Chris's heart lurched in his chest, his feet faltering a moment, and he squeezed Dale's hand hard. "Sorry." He tried to jerk his hand away, but Dale kept a firm hold of it.

"Nuh-uh." Dale shook his head and smiled. "Not tonight." He tugged Chris the rest of the way upstairs and pulled him close once they were on the landing. Moving them away from the stairs, Dale nudged Chris against a wall and moved in, their bodies flush together. "Chip," he whispered, then ducked in.

This kiss was deeper, richer, and Chris opened to Dale's tongue. They tangled their tongues together, sometimes in Chris's mouth, other times in Dale's.

"Yes, just like that," Dale said as he pulled back, a goofy grin on his puffy, wet lips.

Chris wanted to lick those lips, but settled for running his tongue along his own bottom lip. His eyes widened as Dale moaned. Then they were kissing again, and Dale's greater experience was painfully obvious even after all the times they'd kissed throughout the remainder of their freshman year.

Dale wrenched himself away, both of them gasping for breath. "Chip... God, the things you make me imagine."

Chris chuckled breathlessly. "Like what?" Maybe they were on the same train of thought?

"I want to strip you." Dale pushed in close and placed his lips against Chris's ear. "I want to spread you out and map every inch of your body. I want to take it slow until we're both crazy and you're begging me to do something."

"Oh," Chris said on a sigh, untangling his hand from where Dale still held it and reaching up so he could grasp Dale's shirt near his shoulder blades and try to urge him closer. They were already so close, but Chris wanted him closer still.

"Would you like that?" Dale asked and rubbed his nose down along Chris's jaw. Then he pulled back, his gaze intense.

Chris swallowed, and his heart slammed against his ribcage as a war between fear and desire churned his gut. He nodded, but that didn't seem enough for Dale, who continued to stare, his gaze less intense, more fond. "Yes." Chris cleared his throat. "Yes."

The smile Dale gave him was breathtaking. Without a word, Dale stepped back and grabbed his hand. They walked to Chris's room in silence, Chris's heartbeat loud in his ears. He wanted to drown it out. Maybe if Dale kissed him again his head would be filled with some other noise. But he wasn't brave enough to shove Dale into the wall and kiss him. No matter how much they'd kissed throughout the school year, or the times they'd seen each other since coming home for summer, nervousness always overcame Chris, and he found himself shying away from taking aggressive action.

Once in the room, Dale urged Chris to lie down on his bed.

Chris's heart constricted. Fear started to win the war against desire.

"Shh..." Dale said, dropping his bag on the floor and spreading himself on the bed beside Chris.

They stared at each other, and slowly Chris's heartbeat slowed, his body loosened, and he relaxed with a sigh.

Dale grinned at him and Chris giggled. Soon, Dale joined him and they were laughing, leaning into each other, wide smiles on their faces, their cheeks flushed red. Chris loved Dale when he was like this, so free and open, and he was only like this with Chris.

Happiness sang through him. "I love you," Chris blurted, and that happiness froze, the air he'd inhaled burned his lungs in terror.

Dale's smile widened, and he grabbed Chris. Chris yelped, unprepared to be dragged into Dale's body and smothered with a deep kiss.

"I love you so much," Dale murmured once he pulled back, one of his hands cupping Chris's cheek.

Chris huffed a laugh, all the tension drained from him and he leaned into Dale, clutching at his shoulders. "Thank you."

Dale chuckled and kissed his forehead, then tilted Chris's face and kissed his nose. They kissed each other then, Chris unsure who had moved first, but it didn't matter. They were kissing, slow and languid, and Chris wanted to crawl inside of Dale and make a home for himself in Dale's heart. Wanted to always be with Dale and share these kinds of moments. He was probably a little fucked.

"What are you thinking about?" Dale mumbled against Chris's lips. "Chip?"

Chris pulled back and shrugged. “I don’t know.” He really didn’t. He was all jumbled and confused and... and he just wanted Dale to hold him, to follow through with what he’d said in the hallway about stripping Chris. He swallowed, stared into Dale’s eyes. “Will you...” How did he even ask?

Dale shifted away a little, and suddenly Chris missed the heat of his body, the comfort of having Dale right beside him. Then Dale reached forward, his touch tentative as his fingers skimmed up his arm and proceeded to take a meandering path down Chris’s chest before stilling at the hem of his shirt.

“Are you okay with this?” Dale’s tone was so soft Chris nearly missed it.

“Yes,” Chris croaked out, his focus on those fingers. There was a fine tremble in the long, slim digits, and Chris reached out to take them in one of his hands, guiding them to hook under the hem of his shirt.

Together they pulled his shirt up until Chris had to shift a bit and move his arms so the shirt could be removed. Then he lay there, staring at Dale as his best friend, his boyfriend, the person he loved, stared at his naked chest. They’d seen each other naked before, more times than he could possibly count, but this time was different.

Heat rose to Chris’s cheeks as he tried to imagine what Dale must be thinking. He’d always dated women and now he was with Chris. He didn’t have any boobs or the soft curves of a female’s body. *How can he want me?* The thought was a kind of poison and now that Chris had allowed himself to think it, scenarios of rejection popped into his head. There was no way Dale could want to continue now that he could clearly see the person he was about to sleep with was male.

Dale touched him, his caress gentle. “So beautiful.”

For some reason, that hurt. Chris knew he wasn’t beautiful. Not even handsome. He was just another average guy who anyone could pass on the street.

“What did I do to deserve you?”

Chris shuddered at the question. He was the one who should be asking that. A sudden surge of unexpected pain distracted him and wrenched a gasp from his throat. He glanced down to see Dale’s fingers pinching his nipple.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, Chip, but knock it off.”

Chris stared for a moment, then nodded. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Dale released his nipple then ducked down and sucked the abused flesh into his mouth.

Chris gasped for a completely different reason, his hands rising involuntarily and tangling in Dale’s hair. Dale laved his nipple with his tongue, scraped his teeth against the raised flesh, and blew a soft breath along the wet skin.

“Dale.”

Dale hummed and shifted, leveraging himself atop Chris, the soft brush of his cotton shirt raising goose bumps along Chris’s arms. He then rolled himself to his knees and shucked his own shirt in a quick move and lowered himself back along the length of Chris’s body. Their skin brushed, and Chris shivered, unused to such contact. Dale smiled at him, and kissed him. They kept it slow and languid, exploring, and Chris reached his hands out, his fingertips touching the expanse of Dale’s chest.

He dragged his fingers down, his index fingers hitting Dale’s nipples before moving on, the barely there lines of his abs diverting Chris’s path to the sides and around until he was teasing Dale’s bellybutton. Dale gasped against Chris’s lips, shuddered, and lowered his pelvis into Chris’s.

He’s hard. The realization was a shock to Chris. Even with all they’d done and were currently doing, a part of him feared Dale would pull away at some point. He had dated women before Chris, but maybe he had nothing to worry about. Nervous, Chris bucked his hips, grinding their groins together.

“Shit.” Dale moaned, and reciprocated the action. “Chip.”

Chris gasped and grabbed onto Dale’s hips. He needed, wanted more contact. Already they’d done more than Chris had thought Dale would be comfortable with. Maybe Chris was the one uncomfortable with going further?

He shook his head. What did he have to be uncomfortable about?

“Ah, Chip!” Dale threw his head back, the sight of him a punch to the gut for Chris. “Wait, wait.”

Chris sucked in a breath, his heart constricting. Dale was pulling back, his face flushed and his body a tight bowstring.

“I don’t want to come yet.” He rolled off the bed and cast a smirk over his shoulder. He stood there a moment, then slowly unbuttoned his jeans and grabbed the waistband. With a sharp tug he pulled his jeans and boxers down

his legs and bent to remove them. He rose back up, that smirk still in place, and tossed the last of his clothes across the room before going to his bag and bending to retrieve something.

Chris had to admit, he liked the view. Then Dale turned around and shifted his hands behind his back.

“Strip,” Dale said, motioning at Chris with his chin.

Nervous, Chris reached down and fumbled a little with his pants, unable to take his eyes off Dale’s naked form. He was beautiful, and his hard cock captivated Chris’s attention more than it probably should, but it was the first time he had ever seen Dale hard. Once his pants and briefs had been thrown to the floor, Chris stared as Dale returned to the bed. His hands shifted forward to reveal a bottle of lube and a condom in his hands. Chris hadn’t thought about any of that.

A sheepish grin stole across Dale’s face, and pink colored his cheeks. “I did some research,” he blurted, slipping onto the bed and straddling Chris.

“Okay.” Chris swallowed, his nerves returning. He tried to relax, to prepare himself for the fact that Dale would... fuck him. Heat stole into his face at the thought.

Dale dropped the condom on Chris’s stomach and popped open the lid on the lube. He squirted some into his hand, shut the lid, and set the tube on Chris’s belly beside the condom. Chris sucked in a breath. That bottle was *cold*. Then Dale leaned forward, supporting himself on his clean hand while with the other he reached under himself. Chris frowned and glanced at Dale’s face.

There was a look of concentration, a slight pinched expression around his eyes, and it dawned on Chris what Dale was doing.

“Dale?”

Dale glanced at him, a strained, wobbly smile on his lips. “Chip.”

Unable to resist, Chris looked at the arm along Dale’s stomach. “You don’t—”

“Hush. Oh!” Dale’s eyes widened, a shiver racing through his frame. His legs widened on either side of Chris and his gaze returned to Chris’s face. “I don’t want to be one of those boyfriends who’s always taking.”

Dale kissed him before Chris could say anything. A dazed feeling overtook him when they parted and Dale continued to speak.

“I’ve been doing research. You know me, I have to research things. I guess a lot of guys who have boyfriends that usually date women worry that if they aren’t on the bottom, then the boyfriend will leave them. And I know you, Chip. I know you worry. I want to show you that I’m not just saying I love you to say it.” He grunted, shifting around, then settled and smiled. “Besides, my research extended to how two guys have sex.” He leaned in close, a devilish smirk on his face. “Have you ever fingered yourself?”

Chris gasped, blood rushing to his head as his mind conjured images of him doing just that, alongside a fantasy of Dale watching porn while pushing a finger inside himself.

“Oh God,” Chris moaned, his head falling backward and his eyes closing.

“I did, before coming over. I wanted tonight to be the night, and I wanted to erase as many of your insecurities and my own as I could.”

“What?” Chris jerked upright to stare at Dale, who was reaching for the condom, expertly opening the foil and extracting the rubber.

Dale’s smirk widened. “Like I said, I did research.”

He rolled the condom onto Chris’s cock, the simple touch almost enough to send Chris into orgasm. Except Dale wrapped his thumb and forefinger around the base of Chris’s cock and squeezed. There was just enough pressure and pain to force Chris’s orgasm down.

“I want to know what it feels like,” Dale whispered. He raised onto his knees and scooted forward, his hand still around the base of Chris’s cock. “I want to know what you feel like inside me, Chip.”

Then he was lowering himself, the tight heat of his body something Chris thought he’d only ever experience in fantasies. “Dale,” he gasped. He needed to hold onto Dale, to have some other way of knowing this was real. He grabbed Dale’s hips, his fingers digging into the flesh, the muscles beneath flexing against his hands.

“Fuck, Chip.” Dale paused as he panted, his face tilted down while his body quivered above Chris’s.

“Are you okay?” Worry cut through the pleasure in Chris’s gut with a surprising chill.

Dale nodded, his face flushed a bright red when he tipped his head up to look at Chris. “Yeah. Just need to adjust.” He slid down a little more and paused.

All Chris wanted to do was use the hold he had on Dale's hips to slam him down, but that would be painful for both of them, and Chris never wanted to hurt Dale. "Okay." He clenched his teeth, reciting the alphabet backward to distract himself.

After what felt like forever, Dale was seated, the hot clench of his body a kind of torture Chris never knew he'd wanted and craved. He never wanted to leave, until Dale started to rise. Chris groaned, his hips bucking involuntarily. Dale gasped and moaned above him. Unsure if it had hurt, Chris tried to remain still, the effort colossal. Now he understood some of the porn he'd watched where the men seemed to go at it like animals. And that was a bad thought to think on.

"Chip," Dale whimpered, collapsing forward.

Chris *oomphed*, not expecting the sudden weight on his chest. "Dale? You okay?" He released Dale's hips, one hand curving along the base of Dale's spine while the other he ran through Dale's hair.

Dale chuckled. "It's a lot harder than it looks."

Chris snorted and heaved until they rolled over. Dale gasped and clung to him, his fingernails digging into Chris's back.

"Shit. Warn a guy," Dale panted as he pulled back and glared at Chris.

"Sorry." Chris winced. He'd thought the move natural. Maybe he'd done it wrong?

"Whatever." Dale knocked their foreheads together then kissed Chris. "Just move."

Apprehensive, but still eager, Chris rose up, his arms framing Dale's head, and moved his hips. They both groaned as Chris slid almost all the way out. Trembling against the desire to slam forward, Chris pushed in as slow as he could manage. It was agonizing, but the way Dale relaxed around him made his patience well worth it.

"Fuck, Chip, you can go faster."

"Uh-huh." He did just that. It wasn't the pace he wanted, still slow, but it was nice. Like they were at sea, gently rocking together, the only people in the world.

Dale whimpered and clung to him even tighter. A sudden surge of confidence swelled inside Chris and he lifted himself up a bit more until there

was room for him to reach between them so he could take Dale's half-hard cock into his hand.

"Shit." Dale tightened around him, his body arching into Chris's.

Chris couldn't speak. He could only focus on the clench of Dale's body and his pace. He gasped and groaned and made other noises he wasn't sure he could identify, but words failed him. Then Dale shifted against him and Chris slipped forward faster than he meant to, except Dale made some kind of garbled noise and arched against him, driving Chris deeper. A grunt slipped out of Chris as he tried to adjust, to slow, but he was lost.

He wasn't sure what happened, but Chris was straining, his body moving of its own accord, and then he was choking on air as his orgasm ran through him, leaving behind euphoria. He paused, panting. When he could think, Chris slowly, carefully pulled himself out of Dale's body. Dale was flushed, his body trembling as he watched Chris.

Swallowing to wet his mouth, Chris shifted down Dale's body and took his hard cock into his mouth.

"Shit!" He grabbed Chris's hair in a painful hold, but Chris refused to relent. "Chip!"

Chris hoped he was giving Dale some pleasure as he performed his first blowjob. Not long after he started, Dale was spilling in his mouth, the taste and texture less than pleasant, but Chris swallowed it down.

"Chip," Dale whispered.

The hands in Chris's hair tugged him up so he was lying atop Dale, face-to-face. Dale kissed him, and immediately pulled back with a twisted expression.

"Dude. I think the next time you do that, we need to have breath mints."

"And if you do it?" Chris teased with a kiss to the tip of Dale's nose.

"I'll have breath mints ready," Dale said with a nod and a wide grin.

Chris laughed. "I love you." He kissed Dale's nose again.

"Me too." Dale kissed his lips, even delving his tongue into Chris's mouth before pulling back. "Never let me be scared to admit my feelings for you again."

The smile that stretched Chris's face hurt. "Deal." He went in for another kiss, ignoring Dale's protests as happiness filled him.

Epilogue

The last box thudded against the floor of his sophomore dorm room. Chris stood, stretching his arms above his head. Thick arms wrapped around his middle, tugging back into Dale's muscular chest. He laughed as Dale kissed and nipped at his throat.

"Knock it off." Chris didn't bother to move, he simply basked in having Dale holding him.

"Don't wanna," Dale whined, his grip tight as he buried his face in Chris's throat.

Chris laughed, wriggling until he could turn in Dale's grasp. "Come on." He leaned forward and kissed Dale. He would have pulled back to say more, but Dale chased his lips, locking onto them like a drowning man.

"Will you two knock it off?" Kiyoshi snapped from where he stood framed in the doorway.

Chris glanced his way, grinning at his friend and new roommate. After everything that had happened last year, Chris had sat down with Dale and they'd talked about their relationship. As exciting and new as it was, Chris was leery of them spending all four years of college together. Dale had argued, but he'd eventually agreed to spend their sophomore year apart. They'd see how it went, then make arrangements for their junior year.

"What are we going to do if we manage to get a four-man room next year? Am I going to have to listen to the two of you have sex?" Kiyoshi dropped the box he carried on one of the beds and flung the backpack off his shoulder. "Are you going to help me?"

"All right, keep your shirt on," Chris said, pulling away from Dale.

"Aw, come on," Dale whined. He trailed after them, muttering the whole way about Kiyoshi's timing being a lot like Cathy's. If Chris didn't know better, he might believe that Cathy and Kiyoshi were twin souls, because over the summer Chris's sister had managed to interrupt every quiet moment between Chris and Dale. It was amusing, but frustrating as all get out.

"No. You two have sex, you do it in Dale's room," Kiyoshi snarled as they reached his car. He grabbed a box from his car and shoved it at Chris. "No whining." He took another one and forced it on Dale.

"Man, Chip." Dale shook his head, leading the way back into the dorm. "You know how to pick 'em."

“You’re one to talk.” Kiyoshi’s voice chased after them.

Chris laughed. It was nice to see his friend again. When he reached the room, just before Dale could walk past him to go back to the car, Chris grabbed him and pulled him close, planting a quick kiss.

“Ugh! What did I say?”

Chris chuckled, breaking away from Dale and winking at Kiyoshi. “You just need to get laid.”

“Oh, do I?” Kiyoshi shoved past them and dropped two large duffle bags on his bed.

“I know someone who’s interested,” Dale said, wagging his eyebrows.

Kiyoshi threw his hands in the air and stomped from the room. Chris laughed at his retreating friend. Dale cupped his face and turned Chris for another kiss. Humming, Chris returned the gesture as happiness filled him.

THE BEGINNING

Author Bio

Ann Anderson is an odd little duck who lives in an odd little pond in an odd little place. It's a place filled with words, a pond filled with ideas, and a duck without enough time to listen and write them all down. Ann loves the usual reading and writing, but she also enjoys playing video games when she can spare the time and isn't working or torturing her cats.

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