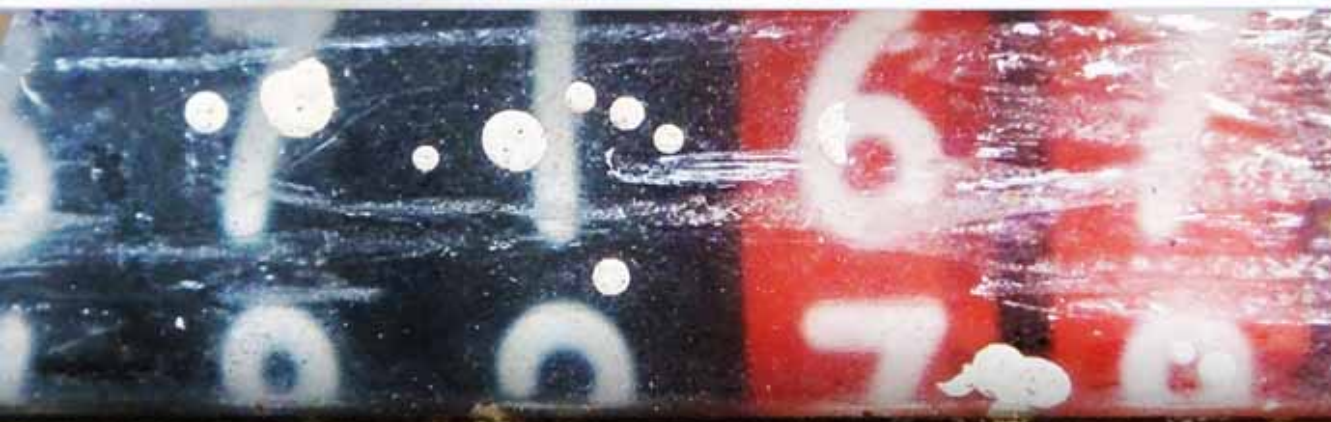


Deep in the Count



MADISON PARKER

DEEP IN THE COUNT

Brandon plays baseball for Virginia Tech. Although his coach is confident he has a successful career ahead of him, Brandon's not so sure. What if he doesn't make it? What will he have to fall back on? He wishes he were smarter. He looks at his friend's roommate and thinks he'd give anything for that confidence and those brains. Because brains and confidence? That's sexy! If only he could get Corey to notice him, come up with a plan that would appeal to Corey's inner geek...

Corey's program of study and academic standing are sure to land him a good job in his chosen career field: cryptology. Those popular kids? They think that because he's a "geek" he's missing out on life, but they're wrong. He's got his eye on the prize and doesn't need the distractions of a social life. So why is he having such a hard time ignoring his roommate's flirty friend?

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

DEEP IN THE COUNT

By Madison Parker

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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DEEP IN THE COUNT

By Madison Parker

Photo Descriptions

1. A young man stands looking off to the side. His simple grey wifebeater shows his muscles, and despite his all-American appearance, his stance seems almost shy, lacking confidence, with his hands in the pockets of his jeans and his body held in a stiff manner.
2. The young boy is lying flat on his stomach, with an almost-smile adorning his lips. He's the opposite of the man pictured above, lacking visible muscles and pale where the other was tan. He's wearing thick-rimmed black glasses, and his dark brown hair appears wind-blown, or perhaps just "artfully messy."

Story Letter

See Photo 1

I may be popular, and the star "jock," but that doesn't mean I'm confident in myself. I try so hard to just make it by. I look at him, and I think I'd give anything for that confidence, those brains, 'cause brains and confidence? That's sexy.

See Photo 2

People think because I'm a "geek" that I'm missing out on life. Sure I'm not popular, but I am self-confident, I know that I will have a great life because I've got the brains to be what I want. College will be over and I'll be a success, where will all the popular people be?

Dear Author,

I would love a different take on some of the other jock/geek stories I've read. My geek is not bullied or shy, he is confident in himself, he just doesn't care about the other stuff. My jock has no problem going after our geek, he

doesn't care what others will think, he wants him so bad. The popularity is not something he wants or has worked for, it just is. My geek is resistant because he doesn't need this in his life, his course is set, he doesn't need distractions.

**Would love a tutor/student type of initial relationship, have been dying for a hot scene where the geek knows the jock wants him, maybe he offers to strip or a kiss (for starters) for correct study questions. Must have HEA, prefer little to no BDSM, love some angst.*

Sincerely,

Carey

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athlete, college, cryptology, geeks/nerds, opposites attract

Word count: 17,735

Dedication

This one's for all of you who like to get (or turn) your geek on.

DEEP IN THE COUNT

By Madison Parker

CHAPTER ONE

Brandon followed Jack down the hall.

“Sorry,” Jack said, “I thought I had it with me.”

“Don’t worry about it. You probably left it on your desk.”

“Yeah.” Jack jammed his key in the lock. “Let’s just grab it and go.”

Jack didn’t hide his irritation well. Brandon followed him into the dorm room, shrugged off his backpack, and dropped it by the door. He glanced back and forth from one side of the room to the other. “Guess I don’t have to ask which side is yours?”

Jack snorted. “You think?” he said, walking toward his desk.

The line of demarcation couldn’t have been more obvious. Jack’s side of the room was littered with dirty clothing. His baseball cleats lay on the floor next to his glove and crumpled uniform. Empty soda cans, stacked two and three cans high, covered his bedside table. It was Jack’s space all right—the poster of Carl Yastrzemski on display above the bed left no room for doubt. Jack was a die-hard Red Sox fan. Brandon liked the team too, but he was more of a Jacoby Ellsbury fan. Of course, that probably had more to do with Jacoby’s killer smile and good looks than his season stats. Jack, on the other hand, was definitely into the ladies. He had an assortment of pin-up girls in various stages of undress splattered across his wall.

In contrast, Mr. Tidy lived on the right, with all of his belongings in their proper places. The collection of posters hanging on Mr. Tidy’s wall, aligned neatly and spaced evenly apart, caught Brandon’s attention. “Yeah, you don’t strike me as the type to have a poster of”—he waved his finger toward the object in question—“*Battlestar Galactica* over your bed.”

“Frak no.”

Brandon quirked an eyebrow. “Frak?”

“It’s a joke. They say ‘frak’ instead of ‘fuck’ on the show.”

“What show?”

Jack shook his head. “Hello? *Battlestar Galactica*.”

“Oh. Right. You watch that?”

“No, man. But you hang around Corey long enough, you pick up shit. Besides, that chick in the red dress? Totally hot.”

Brandon glanced at the woman in the poster. Platinum blonde hair, big breasts, skimpy red dress. He supposed he could see the appeal. He’d never been a big fan of sci-fi though, and this looked pretty hard core: aliens, space ships, military fighters. Brandon scrutinized Corey’s things as he moved closer to the neatly made bed. “I wonder what his sheets look like.”

Jack stopped rustling through the papers on his desk and turned to look at Brandon. “Perv.”

“What? No! I’m just sayin’. He probably has Star Wars sheets or something.” The corners of the navy blue comforter were tucked in tightly, as if they were hiding some sort of secret.

“Whatever, man. Shit, I can’t find the damn flash drive.” Jack scratched his head and heaved a sigh.

Brandon figured he ought to help Jack, so he made a cursory scan of Jack’s side of the room. The bed was a mess. His sheets and blankets were twisted in a pile on top of the mattress and a pair of boxers jutted from under a lumpy pillow at the foot of the bed. “Check your bed. Maybe it fell out of your pocket.”

“What is it with you and beds?”

Brandon didn’t respond. He was never quite sure how to take Jack’s teasing. Jack was cool with the whole gay thing, as were most of the members on the team, but even so, Brandon stiffened slightly when hearing the little jabs. “Just trying to help.”

Jack let out a frustrated growl in response as he turned his attention to his desk drawers.

Brandon approached Corey's desk, eyeing the small action figures on display. He lifted one and studied it closely. It was some sort of goblin or troll or something. "Maybe your roommate borrowed it," he said.

"Nah, he knows better than to touch my stuff."

"Right." Brandon returned the creature to its place on the desk, but clumsily managed to knock over several neighboring figures.

"Aw hell," Jack said. "Now he's gonna think I was messing with his shit."

"No he won't," Brandon said quickly, straightening the figures. "He'll never even notice."

Jack crossed his arms and gave Brandon a stern look. "He'll notice."

"Jesus, what's the big deal? And why does he have so many of these things anyway? They all look the same."

"It's some kinda army," Jack said. "Look, I don't know. Just help me look for this damn thing before I completely lose my shit."

"Okay, okay. You want me to look in his desk? Maybe he picked it up by mistake, thinking it was his."

Jack grabbed the corner of his sheet and flapped it violently. A piece of pizza crust flipped into the air and toppled the soda can mountain. "No, he doesn't use 'em. Says they're obsolete. Tells me I should be in the clouds or some shit."

Brandon laughed. "Cloud storage?"

"Whatever." Jack got down on his hands and knees and searched under the bed.

Brandon glanced away to avoid staring at his friend's ass, which was sticking up in the air. "So, uh... it must be weird living with a—"

"Queer?" Jack said in a muffled voice. "It ain't so bad."

“What?” Brandon whipped his head around. “Shit. What? I was gonna say ‘nerd’.”

Jack shimmied out from under the bed empty-handed. “Yeah, that too.”

Brandon stared at him, dumbfounded. “Is your roommate gay?”

“Yeah. It’s cool though. It’s not like I have to worry about him bringing guys over. He’s a total geek.” Jack narrowed his eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. It never came up.” Jack snatched his backpack and proceeded to dump the contents onto his bed.

Brandon glanced at Corey’s side of the room again, hoping to see a picture of him somewhere. “Is he cute?”

“Really? You’re asking me if he’s cute? This conversation is getting way too gay.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “Oh come on. I can tell if a girl is hot—I’m sure you can tell if a guy is cute.”

“Well he ain’t Zac Efron. He wears glasses. And he’s always playing with one of those Rubik’s cubes. He’s like, off-the-charts not cool.”

“I bet he’s really smart, though.”

“He’s a freaking brainiac, and I’m sure he thinks we’re a couple of dumbass jocks. Guys like him don’t hang out with guys like us.” Jack suddenly jumped up with the flash drive in his hand. “Holy, shit. It was in my backpack the whole time.”

Brandon sighed. “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

CHAPTER TWO

Corey sat hunched over his desk, pumping a stress ball while he stared at the code before him. He'd ruled out the possibility that it had been encrypted using monoalphabetic substitution—the Index of Coincidence was too low. At this stage in the competition, an affine cipher was too much to hope for. Surely the code involved one of the more complex enciphering schemes. He was fairly certain it was polyalphabetic. Vigenère perhaps? If so, the Kasiski Test suggested the keyword length was a multiple of seven.

Well, it was a start.

His laptop chimed, startling him. “Not now, Samantha,” he grumbled. Of course, she couldn't hear him because he hadn't answered the call. He enjoyed their Skype sessions, but she had a knack for calling at the worst possible times. He really needed to make some headway with this cryptology challenge. He'd managed to crack each of the other codes with relative ease, placing him further ahead in the competition. And he'd hoped to decipher this message tonight, so he could move on to the next round before any of the other competitors.

Corey opened his web browser and navigated to his favorite Vigenère cracking tool. If he were lucky, he might be able to find the keyword in under an hour. Of course, there was also the possibility that the keyword was fourteen or even twenty-one characters long, or that he wasn't dealing with a Vigenère cipher at all, in which case, he'd have to start from scratch.

His cellphone buzzed with a text message:

Answer my call, cocoa puff. I know you're there.

He chuckled at the pet name, but silenced his phone and set it face down on his desk. Now, back to the task at hand. He adjusted the frequency histogram of the letters that appeared in the message until they roughly resembled the known frequencies of the English alphabet. His best guess for the first letter in the keyword was T. There were a lot of seven-letter words

beginning with T. It could also be a foreign word, or not a real word at all, but he was hoping for something recognizable.

His computer chimed again. Damn, Samantha was persistent. If he didn't answer the call, he'd end up having to make up some grand excuse about where he was and what he was doing. There was no use putting it off. Samantha refused to be ignored.

He answered the call to her usual greeting of, "What's up, buttercup?"

"Hey, Sam." He was a little taken aback at the sight of her. She didn't usually wear makeup, but tonight she was all done up, with her long, almond-brown hair loose around her shoulders instead of pulled back into her typical ponytail. He wasn't used to seeing her look so... girly.

"What are you doing?" she said. "And don't say homework."

"I'm not doing homework."

"Good. What *are* you doing?"

"Cryptology."

She groaned. "Same diff. It's Saturday night. You should be out having fun."

"I *am* having fun."

"Riiiiiiight." She shook her head. "You're sitting in your room, alone, crunching numbers. Sounds like a blast."

"Samantha..."

"I know, I know. It's your life. But you're such a cutie. I can't believe you don't have a boyfriend yet. I mean, it's *college*. You're supposed to be sowing your wild oats or whatever. There's plenty of time for all that serious stuff later."

"I've told you a hundred times. I don't want a boyfriend. What I want is to win this competition and graduate first in my class. A boyfriend would just eat up my time."

"That's not the *only* thing he'd eat."

“You’re far more interested in my sex life than I am.”

“That is seriously messed up, Corey. What is your *problem*?”

Corey dug around in his backpack, then lifted a paper to the webcam. “This. This is my problem.”

“Okay... you got an A on your math test. What exactly is the problem?”

Corey slapped the paper onto his desk. “It’s a ninety-three! That’s completely unacceptable. I usually get over a hundred. Avani scored ten points higher and she’s been gloating for two days.” Corey ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair. “I can’t afford to slip up now, Sam.”

“Oh my God. You are *such* a nerd. Seriously? I wish I had your problems.”

“Fine. Make fun of me,” Corey huffed. “You know what? I gotta go.”

“Oh come on, don’t be mad.” She pouted momentarily. “Look, I can see you’re stressed. You need to take a break—find a way to relax, even if it’s just for a little while.”

“I’m fine, Sam.”

“Grab your cube.”

Corey shook his head in protest. Why couldn’t she just let him be?

“C’mon. Grab your cube. Just like old times. Or have you lost your touch?”

Corey gave her his best “bitch, please” look, then pulled his Rubik’s cube from the front pocket of his bag. He turned it in random directions to mix up the colors. “What song are you gonna use?”

“Gimme a sec. I’m looking for a good one.”

He knew she’d find one that would make him laugh. They’d been playing this little game for years. She’d make faces and sing an obnoxious song, and he had until the music stopped to solve the cube. If he finished before the music stopped, she had to grant him a wish. If not, he had to grant her a wish. It’d been a long time since they’d done this, but he practiced his cube daily and was confident he could beat her.

“Okay hang on, I’m cuing up the music. Lemme see your cube.”

Corey rotated the cube in front of the camera.

“All right,” she said. “Ready? Go.”

As soon as he heard the intro, he knew which song she’d picked. It was a horrendous nursery rhyme that would stick in his head for days.

“John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt!” she sang. “His name is my name too.” She bobbed her head from side to side as she belted out the lyrics. He was trying to keep his eyes on the cube and tune her out, but it wasn’t easy. “Whenever we go out, the people always shout, ‘There goes JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT.’ Da da da da da da da!”

He bit down on his cheek, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a smile. He needed to remain focused. She got through one more round before Corey’s door swung open and Jack walked in. Corey’s concentration was momentarily broken as he glanced at his bewildered roommate.

“JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT. Da da da da da da da!”

Jack raised his hands and covered his ears. “The fuck?”

Corey furiously spun the cube. His time had to be nearly up.

“Whenever we go out, the people always shout, there goes ‘JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT.’ Da da da da da da da!”

Corey cursed under his breath when the music stopped.

“Lemme see!” Samantha said, out of breath and laughing. He turned the cube around in front of the camera. She easily spotted the two squares that hadn’t been moved back into position.

“I win! I win!” she screeched. “Hey, Jack!” she added, waving furiously.

Corey winced. “Okay, geez. You got me. But please, be reasonable. I really am stressed out enough as it is right now.”

“You have to do whatever I say,” she gloated.

“Within reason,” he reminded her.

“You have to flirt with a boy. In person. And Jack doesn’t count.”

Jack snorted in the background. “That goes without saying.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no. C’mon, Sam. How about I do your math homework for you instead?”

She shook her head. “I’m not taking math this semester. You’re not getting out of this, Corey. I won fair and square, and it’s a reasonable request. I’m not asking you to walk up to some guy and shove your tongue down his throat. Just a little harmless flirting. You know, make him *think* you wanna shove your tongue down his throat.”

Corey sighed in defeat. “Why are we even friends? You’re a thousand miles away. And you’re a pain in the butt, you know that?”

“I love you too. And I expect a full report by the end of the week.”

A fine mess he’d gotten himself into this time. Maybe he could make up a story about a fake encounter to appease her. Nah, she’d never buy it. Surely he’d falter when trying to answer her questions. He’d never been good at lying.

“How am I supposed to meet someone? I’m busy.”

“How about the tutoring center? New people come in there all the time, right?”

“No way. I *work* there.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” she said with a mischievous grin. “Da da da da da da da!”

CHAPTER THREE

Brandon looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching before he pulled open the door to the tutoring center. A quick scan inside revealed no familiar faces. He breathed a sigh of relief, then filled out his information on the sign-in sheet. Name: Brandon Hart, Subject: Statistics, Time In: 6:05. Should he have used a fake name? Would they report to his teacher that he'd been there? That would be embarrassing. Would someone he knew see his name and make fun of him? How had he let things get so bad? When had he become a *dumb* jock?

The center was smaller than he'd imagined. There were a few rectangular tables where students could sit and work, and at the far end of the room, there were two stations where the tutors sat. Both of them were busy with other students, so Brandon took a seat at an empty table. He flipped to a blank page in his notebook and opened his textbook to the section on confidence intervals. The text may as well have been written in a foreign language for all that he understood. He would have to ask for help before he'd be able to get anything done. He wasn't sure how this worked, so he sat back and simply observed.

There were only a few other students there: two working with the tutors and two sitting at the table beside his. They looked like they were doing their homework. He'd be more than happy to sit there and work on his homework, but he didn't even know where to begin. He'd been doing okay until they got to the section on probability. All those symbols and formulas swirled in his head like alphabet soup, and it had all gone downhill from there.

The female tutor swiveled side to side in her chair and tapped her pencil on the desk. She was a pretty girl of Indian descent. She glanced at him and smiled. *Shit*. It was one of *those* smiles—the *you're-really-cute-wanna-go-out-sometime?* smiles. He frowned at his notebook. He hated the look of disappointment that usually followed those smiles. And some girls tried even harder to hook up with him when they found out he was gay. What was up with that?

He turned his attention to the other tutor. The guy looked a bit younger than Brandon, and he was cute in a nerdy sort of way. The dark frames of his Clark Kent glasses matched his thick, dark hair, which curled a little at the ends. What really caught his eye, though, were the guy's lips. Even from a distance, Brandon could see that they were deep red with a beautifully pronounced cupid's bow. The guy had a smooth, even complexion and he was thin, all of which may have accounted for the fact that he looked a couple years younger than Brandon. Brandon hoped the guy would glance over at him so he could get a clearer view of his face, but he seemed to be engrossed in what he was doing.

Suddenly Brandon felt the urge to bolt. He didn't want to deal with the pretty Indian girl hitting on him, and he didn't want to make a fool of himself in front of the cute guy. He eyed the door, but reminded himself why he was there. If he didn't pass his math class, he'd be at risk of being placed on academic probation, which could cost him his scholarship. Without baseball, what the hell was he going to do with himself? He wasn't good at anything else.

Cute Guy leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms overhead as the student he'd been working with packed up his things and left. Cute Guy arched his back, and Brandon's mind went to dirty places, imagining the feel of that creamy, smooth skin against his fingertips. Then Cute Guy stood and looked around.

"Anyone need help?" he asked.

Brandon blinked, then averted his eyes. He hated everything about this situation. He wasn't usually this shy; he just didn't want Cute Guy to know how stupid he was.

Cute Guy left his station and walked over to the two students sitting at the other table. It looked like he was checking their work. *Shit*. Brandon flipped through the pages of his notebook. Would the guy ask to see it? God, he'd probably laugh at all the chicken scratches.

"Hi," the guy said as he approached a few moments later.

Brandon's heart thumped wildly as they made eye contact. Blue eyes. Such lovely blue eyes.

"Do you need some help?"

"Um..." Brandon looked down at his paper. "Sort of."

"Why don't you bring your stuff over? My name's Corey."

Brandon took a deep breath, then grabbed his books and followed Corey to his station. He could see now that Corey was tall, maybe an inch or two shy of his own six-foot frame.

"So what are you working on?"

Brandon pointed to his textbook. "Statistics."

"Ah," Corey said with a smile, "the most hated of all math classes."

"Yeah, it's the worst class I've ever taken."

"Don't feel bad. A lot of people have trouble with Stats."

The guy was probably trying to make him feel better, but his insides were knotting up, and he couldn't muster a smile in return.

"So what can I help you with?"

"Um... we're doing confidence intervals right now."

Corey grinned. "Confidence intervals! Ninety-five percent of the time, they work every time."

Brandon looked at him quizzically.

"It was a joke," Corey said, chuckling to himself. "Sorry. Math jokes never seem to fly around here."

He was adorable, and at close range, those lips were mesmerizing.

Corey reached down into his backpack and pulled out a Rubik's cube. He began twisting and turning the edges of the cube while he talked to Brandon. "Why don't you tell me what you know about confidence intervals, and we'll go from there."

“Uh...” Brandon stared at the cube while Corey continued to fiddle with it absentmindedly. Jack had just been talking about one of those things last week. *Jack*. And *Corey*. Realization dawned on him. This was Jack’s roommate—Jack’s *gay* roommate. “Did you say your name was Corey?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know Jack Barrington?”

Corey looked at him warily. “Yeah, he’s my roommate. Why?”

Brandon began bouncing his leg under the table. “He’s a friend of mine. We play ball together.”

“Oh. Did he tell you I work here?”

“No, not exactly. I sort of pieced it together. There aren’t a lot of Coreys with Rubik’s cubes around campus.” Brandon chuckled nervously and pointed to the cube. “I never could figure those things out.”

Corey moved it into his lap, out of sight. Brandon couldn’t read his expression, but he didn’t look as happy as he had a few minutes earlier. Corey motioned to Brandon’s textbook. “Hey, we’ve only got about twenty minutes before closing. You wanna go over some of this stuff?”

Had he said something wrong? “Actually, I’ve gotta go. Sorry.”

Corey nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“Thanks.” He quickly grabbed his things and stood. “I guess I’ll see ya around.”

Brandon climbed onto the bus and slid across to the window seat. It was a long ride back to campus and he was exhausted. As one of the team’s starting pitchers, he was usually relieved after the seventh inning but Coach kept him in the entire game this time.

“You were on fucking fire tonight,” Jack said as he slipped into the seat next to Brandon.

“I don’t know, man. That last inning was rough.”

“What are you talking about? Three up, three down.”

“Yeah, but they were working me. All three were deep in the count before I struck 'em out. I wasn't sure my arm was gonna hold out.”

“You got 'em in the end, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

Jack leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

As tired as Brandon was, he could never really sleep on the bus. Besides, he had too much on his mind. “Hey, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about.”

Jack cracked an eye open, then closed it again. “What's up?”

“You know your roommate?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

Brandon paused. “What would you think if I asked him out?”

Jack stared at him with wide eyes. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“I met him the other day. He seems cool.”

“Cool?” Jack asked in disbelief. “What, were you high or something? Where did you meet him?”

“Uh...” Should he make something up? No, he was a terrible liar. Besides, Corey would probably tell him the truth anyway. “I needed some help with my statistics class, so I went to the math tutoring center. He works there.”

“Yeah, I know. You don't have to ask him out to get him to help you. He helps me with my science stuff sometimes. No funny business.”

“It's not about that. Look, I know I don't need your permission—I just don't want things to get weird between us.”

Jack shook his head. “It ain't about me, man. I just don't get it. There's gotta be lots of gay guys on campus. Shit, there's probably some on the team. Why aren't you hooking up with hot guys?”

Brandon laughed the comment off. “So you *can* tell if a guy is hot.”

“Fuck you.”

Corey *was* hot though. Jack just didn't see it. Brandon's guilty pleasure during the summers was reading online fiction, and the nerd/jock romances were his favorite. For some reason, he found brainy guys sexy. Especially a cute brainy guy like Corey, who embraced his inner geek with pride. Besides, Brandon was tired of hooking up with guys who were just like him. He talked about baseball enough with his buddies. It might be fun to try something new.

“You don't think you can do better, is that it?” Jack asked. “You don't gotta settle for someone like Corey.”

“I like him.”

Jack shrugged. “Whatever, man. Just don't dick him around. He's a nice kid.”

“I won't. But do you think he'd go out with me? You know him better than I do.”

“Dunno. I've never seen him with a guy before. Just... be confident. None of your wishy-washy shit.” Jack leaned back and closed his eyes again.

He was right. Guys liked confidence. Brandon stared out the bus window and imagined himself marching into the tutoring center and charming the pants off Corey.

CHAPTER FOUR

Corey was helping a girl with her algebra homework when Stat Guy walked into the tutoring center. He hadn't thought he'd see the guy again. He'd seemed pretty spooked last time they talked. To be honest, Corey had been a little spooked as well. He liked to keep his private life private, especially at work, so he'd been thrown off guard when the guy asked Corey about Jack.

Corey refrained from making eye contact. If he were lucky, Stat Guy would end up working with Avani today and there would be no confrontation. Corey had no interest in carrying on the kind of small talk that was expected of people who had mutual friends. Besides, he was still a little annoyed to learn that Jack had been talking about him and no doubt making fun of his cube (which he was pretty damn awesome at solving, thank you very much). Jack was cool, but not the most sensitive of guys.

After explaining for the third time why the quantity $(x + a)$ divided by x was not equal to a , Corey silently rejoiced when the girl said she had to go. He liked his job, and he enjoyed teaching, but some people *just didn't get it*. It was frustrating for both of them.

Corey twisted in his chair—first right, then left. He scanned the room to see who might be waiting for help and met Stat Guy's friendly smile. *Crap*. He was the only one waiting for help—no getting out of this one. At least statistics was higher-level math. It would be a welcome change from the past three hours of basic algebra. Corey waved him over. "Hey. Welcome back." He offered the guy a smile.

Stat Guy's face lit up. "Hi. I was hoping you'd be here."

"Oh. Well, most of the tutors here have taken statistics. If I'm not here, I'm sure someone else would be able to help."

"Yeah, I know. Still, I was hoping to see you."

Corey held his smile, but was unsure how to respond.

“My name’s Brandon. Sorry I left in such a hurry last time.” Brandon rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I kinda panicked. It was my first time here.”

“Yeah, I figured. It’s okay.” Brandon must’ve been one of those guys who had a hard time asking for help. That was all right; he’d worked with people like that before. “Let’s get started then. You still working on confidence intervals?”

Brandon nodded and opened to the page he’d bookmarked in his textbook.

“When you’re asked to find a confidence interval, there are five things you need to do: define your parameter, check your assumptions, name the procedure, compute the interval, and state your conclusion.”

Brandon blinked a few times, then stared at him blankly. “How do you remember all that?”

“It’s easy. Whenever I hear ‘confidence interval’, I think PANIC.”

“Now that I can do.”

“It’s a mnemonic device. P-A-N-I-C: Parameter, Assumptions, Name, Interval, Conclusion.” Corey wrote down each of the steps for Brandon, then helped him work through a sample problem. He watched as Brandon tried the next one on his own. He didn’t seem to have a solid grasp of the concepts yet, but Corey assured him it would get easier with practice.

Brandon smiled at him again. “Can I carry you around in my pocket?”

“It would be a pretty tight fit.”

Brandon’s eyes sparkled. “I’d be okay with that.”

Oh. *Oh. Awkward.*

He fumbled with his papers when Corey didn’t respond.

“So, keep practicing with those problems,” Corey told him. “You seem to be getting the hang of it. But come back if you need more help. The center is open Monday through Saturday.”

“Thanks. My schedule’s kinda crazy because of baseball, but I’m sure I’ll need some more help. I gotta get a good grade on my next test.” Brandon packed up his stuff and headed out.

It was near closing time, and there weren’t any other students there, so as soon as the door clicked shut behind Brandon, Avani jumped out of her chair. “That boy has the hots for you,” she said.

“What?”

“Please. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.” She rested her hands over her heart and said in her sweetest voice, “Can I carry you in my pocket?”

Corey rolled his eyes. “He was being friendly. He knows my roommate.”

“Mhm. And how do you explain the way he was checking you out when he first got here? He was practically salivating. He likes you. And he’s totally hot. I’m jealous.”

“Even if that’s true, I’m not interested.”

Corey grabbed his bag and headed out, leaving Avani to lock up. It was a short walk to his dorm, and when he arrived, he found Jack studying. He was sprawled across his unmade bed, reading a textbook. They exchanged cursory hellos, then Corey sat at his desk and booted up his laptop. Within five minutes, Samantha called.

“The answer is no, Samantha.”

“Corey, it’s been a week. What’s your excuse this time?”

He knew she was losing patience with him. She usually only called once a week, but since he’d lost that stupid game and had agreed to her flirting-with-boy demands, she’d been calling or texting every day to find out if he’d done the deed.

“I’ve been busy, Sam. Besides, it’s not that easy.”

She flashed him a look of disapproval. “It’s not that hard, either.”

“That’s what she said,” Jack called out in the background.

Corey glared at his roommate, who still had his nose buried in his book. “You never miss an opening, do you?”

“That’s what she said.”

Corey shook his head and turned back to Samantha. “You see what I have to put up with around here?”

“You poor thing,” she said playfully. “Don’t change the subject. Just walk up to the next guy you see, smile, and pay him a compliment.”

“Other than Jack, the next guy I see will probably be standing in the bathroom, wearing nothing but a towel. Are you trying to get me pummeled?”

“Jack!” she called. “Help me out here.”

Jack lowered his book and looked over, but made no effort to move. “What about Brandon?”

Corey made a quick back and forth motion with his hand, urging Jack to shut up.

“Who’s Brandon?” Samantha asked, her eyes wide. “Corey? Who’s Brandon?”

Great. Now he’d have to answer a zillion questions. Corey hadn’t said anything to Jack about meeting Brandon, which could only mean Jack and Brandon had been talking about him again.

“At least he’s gay,” Jack said. “Probably a safer bet than hitting on some dude in the bathroom.”

“I’m not hitting on anyone!” Corey said, throwing his hands up. “And quit eavesdropping.”

“WHO’S BRANDON?”

Corey sighed and returned his attention to Samantha. “He’s a friend of Jack’s. I met him the other day at work.”

“And he’s gay? Is he cute?”

Corey shrugged.

“Don’t hold out on me, Cor. Is he cute?”

“He’s all right.” But he was more than all right. He was tall with broad shoulders and nicely sculpted arms, and he had short blond hair and big, innocent green eyes. But he wasn’t about to tell her all that, especially not with Jack in the room.

“Sounds to me like you’ve found your guy.”

“I don’t know if I’m even gonna see him again. Besides, I don’t wanna give him the wrong impression. What if he thinks I like him?”

“Oh the horror!” she mocked. “I’m not letting you off the hook. If you don’t get your flirt on soon, I’m upping the stakes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she teased. “Streaking across campus maybe?”

“No, no, no. We’re not doing that again.”

“Again?” Jack said. “When did you go streaking?”

“High school,” Corey muttered. “She was always trying to get me out of my pants one way or another.”

“Hey,” she protested. “As I recall, you didn’t put up much of a fight. The skinny-dipping was your idea, remember? Our boy here’s a bit of an exhibitionist.”

“Dude, I never would’ve guessed,” Jack said.

“Teenage hormones, that’s all,” Corey stated in his defense.

“Well pump up some of those old hormones and flirt with that boy, Brandon. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Frak,” Corey mumbled.

“Sorry,” Jack offered in an amused tone.

What was Brandon’s deal, anyway? He could ask Jack about him, but he’d already spent too much time thinking on the matter. He needed to focus on things that were important, like cracking ciphertext for the next round of the cryptology contest.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You think he’ll be there?” Brandon asked as he and Jack waited for the elevator. He wiped his palms on the legs of his jeans. He still hadn’t worked out what he was going to say to Corey.

“Dunno. I don’t keep track of his schedule. But if he is, I’ll make myself scarce so you can talk to him.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Don’t be surprised if he shoots you down, though. He’s antisocial.”

Brandon could relate to that. Well, he could relate to *wanting* to be like that. He was tired of being around so many people all the time. People seemed to flock toward him wherever he went. In class, there were always a handful of people who sat next to him and tried to chat him up. He received countless invitations to hang out or party. He’d thought that when he came out in college, he would lose friends, perhaps even disappear into social oblivion, but that hadn’t happened at all. Sometimes he thought being gay actually made people *more* interested in being his friend, like he was a line item to be checked off on a list of things that made people cool.

Jack wasn’t like that though. They’d been friends since freshman year, largely because Jack never stopped talking about baseball and Brandon never minded listening. Besides, he knew Jack would always have his back. He’d proved it on more than one occasion when other players directed gay slurs at Brandon. Being a *pitcher* didn’t help any—he’d heard his fair share of pitcher/catcher jokes. Did people give Corey a hard time like that? He hoped not. It made him crazy just thinking about it.

Jack pushed open his door and entered the dorm room, but Brandon paused in the hallway. There was something about Corey that made his insides flip; he wanted so badly to make a good impression and to get to know him better.

Jack turned and gave him a dumbfounded look. “You coming in?”

Brandon entered the room, then immediately looked to his right to see Corey sitting cross-legged on his bed with a notebook in his lap. He had a

textbook open in front of him. Brandon offered him a smile, but Corey sat motionless with a bewildered look on his face.

Jack slapped Brandon on the shoulder. “Hey, wait here a minute. I gotta use the john.”

“S-sure.” The door clicked shut behind Jack, but neither Brandon nor Corey moved. Brandon knew he had to get his act together. *Confidence is sexy!* He walked over to the edge of Jack’s bed and smoothed the blanket, then sat down. “So, how’s it going?”

Corey fidgeted with his notebook, which only drew Brandon’s attention to Corey’s bare legs. His eyes traveled up Corey’s thighs to the red boxers Corey was trying to cover, and Brandon licked his lips involuntarily.

“Fine. Just doing math homework.” Corey looked down and returned to writing in his notebook.

So much for conversation.

With Corey’s attention diverted, Brandon allowed himself to study Corey more closely. He looked as though he’d just come out of the shower. His hair was damp and pushed back as though he’d been running his fingers through it. With his left hand, Corey was absentmindedly rubbing his bare foot and flexing his toes. God, Brandon wanted to be the one touching him like that. Should he have worn one of his muscle shirts to show off the definition in his shoulders and upper arms? Maybe that would’ve held Corey’s attention. Corey was wearing a plain, loose-fitting T-shirt, but he still looked damn sexy in it. Brandon focused on the front of the shirt.

“ $1+1=10$?”

Corey looked up. “Huh?”

“Your shirt. It says one plus one equals ten.”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s a joke.” Corey smiled. “It actually says one plus one equals two. Ten would be one, one, zero.”

Brandon had no clue what Corey was talking about.

His confusion must have shown because Corey explained further, “One, zero is how you write the number two in binary.”

Yeah, that still didn’t make any sense.

“It’s complicated,” Corey said, as if to reassure him he wasn’t a complete idiot.

Brandon looked around the room, desperate to find something to talk about. “So, Jack told me you like *Battlestar Galactica*.”

Corey’s face brightened momentarily. “Yeah, do you?”

“Uh... no. I mean, I don’t know. Maybe we could hang out and watch it together sometime?”

Corey considered it a moment. “I’m pretty busy with my classes and tutoring and everything.”

That didn’t sound promising. Brandon scrambled for a recovery. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. About tutoring. I could really use your help with my stats class. Outside the tutoring center, I mean.”

“Like a private tutor? But the center is free.”

“I know, but the hours don’t really work with my schedule. And I like the way you explain things. You really helped me the other day with my confidence intervals. Jack said you might be willing.”

Corey tapped his pencil against his notebook. “All right. I have some time on Sunday.”

“That would be awesome. Thank you so much.”

That would give Brandon enough time to come up with a game plan.

CHAPTER SIX

Corey sat at his desk and worked on his latest cryptology challenge—cracking a Hill cipher—while he waited for Brandon to arrive for their tutoring session. He'd just finished writing a Python program that would drag a set of likely quadgrams across the ciphertext to determine the key matrix when he heard the knock on his door.

"It's open," he yelled, then lowered his voice as Brandon walked in. "Just give me a second to save my..." Corey did a double-take when he saw Brandon. He was wearing basketball shorts and a sleeveless shirt. His shoulders and arms were as beautifully sculpted as Corey had imagined they would be. Corey bit down on the side of his cheek to keep from smiling. Brandon was clearly trying to show off his goods. Corey supposed he should be flattered that Brandon wanted to impress him. Or maybe it was an attempt to manipulate Corey into helping him study. Was Brandon genuinely attracted to him? He wondered briefly how Brandon might react if Corey were the one showing a little skin.

"Hey," Brandon said with a smile. "Where should I put my stuff?"

Corey sat on the floor in front of his bed, then patted the space beside him. "This okay?"

"Yeah." Brandon joined him on the floor. "Thanks for doing this. You're a lifesaver. I've got a test on Tuesday, and I really need to get a good grade on it."

"Okay. Well, let's get started." Corey looked over Brandon's sparse notes to see what he was supposed to be learning: hypothesis testing. He took some time to explain the purpose of conducting a hypothesis test and then went through the steps involved. Brandon seemed to follow along okay when Corey did a problem, but he struggled when he had to work one out on his own. Corey noticed that Brandon became quieter and more deflated as time went by. "Let's take a break for a minute," he suggested.

Brandon pulled his knees up and buried his head in his arms. “This is pointless,” he muttered. “I’m never gonna get it. I’m just not smart enough.”

“Hey.” Corey tapped him with his foot, and Brandon lifted his head. “You’re not dumb. Don’t give up.”

“I used to be good at math. But at some point, it just got ridiculously hard.”

Corey bit his lower lip. The joke was on the tip of his tongue. Should he say it? No. Oh, but Samantha would be so proud. And Jack would too. “That’s what she said,” he blurted.

Brandon looked startled but then chuckled. “I see Jack’s rubbed off on you.”

“That’s what she said,” Corey repeated, then laughed along with Brandon. Was that considered flirting? Would it satisfy Samantha’s request? It was the first time he’d ever made a “that’s what she said” joke. He liked that he was able to make Brandon laugh, especially after how miserable he’d looked for the past half hour. “Everyone’s got different talents. So you’re not a math genius. I’m sure there’s lots of other things you’re good at. Like baseball, right?”

Brandon shrugged. “I guess. Coach thinks so. But I’m not even sure I wanna play baseball after college. I love the game, but I don’t know if I want to live the lifestyle—always on the road, away from home and family, constantly worrying about injuries and being traded. And the organization isn’t exactly gay friendly. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Wow, I never thought about it like that. I assumed all you guys dreamed of making it in the big leagues.”

“Well, yeah, I do, sometimes. But sometimes I think the reality of it would never live up to the fantasy.”

“I don’t know. I mean, you can’t really know unless you try, right?”

“Yeah, but the thing is, in order to make it, to go all the way, you gotta want it more than anything. And I’m not sure I do.”

“So what do you want to do, then?”

“That’s the problem. I have no idea. I’m not really good at anything besides baseball.”

“Hmm. Well, you have a couple years to figure it out, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. What about you? Do you know what you wanna do after you get out of here?”

Corey grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve pretty much had it figured out since I was fifteen. I went to math camp that summer and learned about cryptology.”

“Math camp?” Brandon looked bewildered. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing.”

“Yep. Have you ever heard of *Kryptos*?”

Brandon shook his head.

“It’s one of the most famous unsolved codes in the world. It’s carved into a big sculpture in front of the CIA building. Three of the four sections have already been cracked, but the last one remains a mystery. I wanna be the one to solve it before the artist keels over.”

“Wow. You think you can do it?”

“I *know* I can do it.”

“So that’s like a real job? Solving puzzles?”

“Well, solving *Kryptos* would be for fun, but yeah. It’s not just about solving puzzles. Ever hear of data encryption? Every time you buy something online, thank a cryptologist for protecting you from identity theft.”

“That sounds... really important. Not like baseball.”

Corey’d never thought much of sports, but it seemed rude to say so. Even if it wasn’t his thing, other people certainly got enjoyment from it. “People need heroes, right? And athletes have been part of the human experience forever. I bet even cavemen competed in athletic events.”

“And solved puzzles too.”

“You see? We’re both on the right track. And I love games too, just not of the athletic variety. I like board games and stuff. Just be glad we’re not in ancient Greece. We’d probably have to play naked.”

The flicker of heat in Brandon’s eyes was unmistakable. When had Corey turned into such a flirt? And why did he enjoy the feeling so much? Brandon seemed incapable of speech at that moment, so Corey redirected their attention to Brandon’s notebook. “I have an idea. I want you to look over these notes while I make up a practice quiz. For every question you get right, I’ll take something off.”

“Huh?” Brandon’s eyes widened. “You mean... clothing?”

Corey smirked. “Yep. But if you get a question wrong, I get to put something back on.” It was a ballsy move. He was only wearing a T-shirt, jeans, boxers, and a pair of socks. If Brandon got the first five questions right, Corey was screwed. Then again, if he got them all wrong, Brandon would be terribly discouraged about his upcoming test. Corey really wanted to help boost his confidence. He made the first two questions really easy, then mixed up the difficulty level of the others. Bare feet weren’t such a big deal.

Brandon studied his notes with renewed interest, but was it sinking in?

“Ready?” Corey said.

Brandon slapped his notebook shut, then inhaled and exhaled deeply. “Okay. First question.”

Corey handed Brandon the quiz and waited with bated breath as he worked on the first problem.

It didn’t take him long to arrive at an answer, but Brandon hovered over the value with his eraser. “I’m not sure if this is right.”

“Let’s see...” Corey scratched his chin and wrinkled his brows to build suspense. Then he grinned and nodded. “You got it.” He whipped off his left sock and tossed it onto the bed. Then he flexed his foot and wriggled his toes shamelessly. “Next!”

Brandon gulped and moved on to the next question.

He was doing well so far. As much as Corey didn't want to strip down too far, he was happy to see that Brandon had remembered the steps and was on his way to finding the correct answer. It didn't take him long to finish.

"Awesome," Corey said as he removed his other sock. "You'll have me naked in no time."

Brandon attempted to say something, but only managed a squeak.

"Next?"

Brandon read the question aloud. "Explain the meaning of my T-shirt and why it's funny."

Corey loved his math jokes.

"Uh..." Brandon stared at Corey's chest, attempting to decipher the symbols on the fabric. "Y zero?"

He knew Brandon wouldn't get this one right. It wasn't exactly a fair question, but he was in a playful mood, and besides, he wasn't about to get completely naked. "Is that funny?"

"Dude, nothing about statistics is funny."

"Give up?"

Brandon nodded.

"What's this?" Corey asked, pointing to the letter y on the shirt.

"Y."

Then he pointed to the subscript.

"Zero."

"What's another word for zero?" Corey asked.

"Zilch?"

Corey laughed. "Naught. N-A-U-G-H-T. So it reads 'why not?'."

Brandon still looked confused. "And that's funny?"

"Yes! That's funny. And I get to put my sock back on. Don't feel bad, though. I'm pretty sure that one won't be on your test."

“You don’t like to play fair, do you?”

Corey shrugged. “They say *all’s* fair in love and war.”

Brandon waved his hand back and forth between them. “So which one is this?”

It was a good question—one Corey didn’t have an answer for. He tapped his fingers on Brandon’s paper. “Back to the quiz, Romeo.”

Three questions down. One sock off. So far, his virtue was intact.

Brandon mixed up his p and p -hat in the next problem, resulting in a faulty conclusion. Corey put his other sock on with exaggerated motion. “Gosh, it’s warm in here,” he teased. “I have so many clothes on.”

Brandon poked him with the eraser end of his pencil.

“Come on, you can do this,” Corey reassured him. He pointed out the error and walked him through the correct procedure once more.

Brandon got the next question right. And the next. Six questions down. Two socks off.

When Brandon failed to check the “nearly normal” condition for number seven, Corey reached for his sock.

“Wait, wait,” Brandon said. “I got this.” He found the mistake and proceeded to complete the problem correctly.

Corey had to decide whether he’d strip off his shirt or his pants. He’d feel more exposed without his shirt since he was wearing boxers, which were almost like shorts. Still, a rush of excitement spread through him as he stood, then unzipped his pants and slid them down his legs. Brandon wouldn’t be able to see his *equipment*, but the suggestion was a powerful one, and Corey was acutely aware of the reaction he was causing in Brandon. Those basketball shorts didn’t hide much, and Brandon hadn’t made an effort to cover himself. Corey sat back down beside Brandon, where he could feel the heat coming off his body. He feared his plan had backfired. They were both distracted now.

Corey cleared his throat. “Just a few more problems now.”

Brandon's nostrils flared as he breathed heavily. "Corey," he whispered roughly.

"Come on." Corey tapped the paper insistently. "Almost done."

Brandon attempted to solve the remaining problems but missed one after another. His concentration was shot.

Corey didn't stand when he put on his pants, as he feared his arousal was noticeable. But by the end of the quiz, he was fully clothed again, and had regained his composure. When Brandon reached for him, Corey pulled away. He was attracted to Brandon. He seemed like a really nice guy, but Corey had always been certain he didn't want to get involved with someone at this stage in his life.

Brandon leaned forward. "Can I kiss you?"

Corey needed more time to sort his feelings out. It was a tempting offer, but he didn't want to rush into something he'd regret. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll let you kiss me if you get at least a B on your test."

Brandon smiled at him. "Consider it done."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Test paper in hand, Brandon rapped on the door to Jack and Corey's room. The spot where he'd been clenching the paper as he raced across campus was damp, but he'd been careful not to smudge the large, red B at the top of the page. Nervous energy caused him to bounce slightly while he waited at the door.

"Open!" Jack yelled.

Brandon pushed on the door and searched for Corey.

"Hey man," Jack said. "What's up? Were we supposed to hang out this afternoon?"

Brandon exhaled loudly. "He's not here."

"Who? Corey? Nah, he's probably in class. Or working. You all right?"

"Fucking fantastic!" Brandon waved his paper in the air. "I got a B on my stat test thanks to him. I gotta find him. I'll catch you later, man." He turned on his heels and ran back out.

He jogged over to the tutoring center, hoping to find Corey there. He was out of breath and a little sweaty by the time he arrived, but he couldn't wait to see him. Brandon poked his head in the door, and his stomach flip-flopped when he saw him. He was working with a student while fiddling with his cube under the table. The sight was so quintessentially Corey, it made Brandon's heart flutter.

He took a seat and waited for Corey to finish with his pupil. Corey glanced over briefly and smiled. They hadn't seen each other since their tutoring session four days ago. God, Brandon had hardly been able to focus on anything the past few days other than thoughts of Corey stripping out of his pants. He'd never gotten so aroused so quickly as he had that moment Corey tugged down his zipper. And now Brandon was here to collect his kiss. He would actually get to touch Corey. If only that bunghole sitting at his station would leave!

Brandon got his wish ten minutes later. As soon as the guy stepped away from Corey's station, Brandon walked up and slapped his test on the table.

"So that explains the cheesy grin. Congratulations."

"You know what this means, don't you?"

Corey tried to hide his smile, but didn't quite succeed. "That you'll no longer be needing my services?"

Brandon shook his head. "Try again."

Corey leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Let me tell Avani I'm taking my break. Then we can go outside."

Brandon's body hummed with anticipation as he followed Corey out the door. Corey seemed to be in a good mood. Had he been looking forward to the kiss as much as Brandon had?

"So..." Corey said. "You're happy about your test?"

Brandon smiled and nodded. "More than you know."

"And you're here to hold me to my promise?"

"Yeah. If you're still willing."

Corey rested his back against the wall. "Go for it."

"What, here?" Brandon looked down the hall in both directions, noting a few students milling about. "I was hoping for a little more privacy."

"All right." Corey pushed off the wall. "Lead the way. I only have a few minutes though, then I have to get back."

"Would you rather meet up tonight instead? When we have more time?"

Corey shook his head. "No, I've got a lot of stuff to do later."

"Okay, let's go in there," Brandon said, nodding toward the restroom.

Corey took off toward the bathroom, leaving Brandon to follow like a lost puppy. Once inside, Corey opened the door to one of the stalls and ushered Brandon inside. It wasn't a romantic setting by any stretch of the imagination, but at least they were alone. And standing very close to one another.

Corey stared up at Brandon expectantly. Would it be okay for Brandon to touch him? He wanted to, but didn't know what the boundaries were, so he merely bent down and pressed his lips to Corey's. A dizzying heat spread through his insides, and he grabbed Corey's waist to steady himself. Corey's hands ran up and down his biceps, then squeezed his arms gently. So maybe Corey *did* like his muscles after all. God, he wanted to press his body against Corey's. He wanted to feel those hands on every part of him. But it wouldn't be right to take more without asking. It felt like Corey was enjoying it too, though. His lips moved softly but surely against Brandon's. More. He wanted more.

Corey broke the kiss and pulled back. "That was..." he said in a rough whisper.

"Good?"

Corey smiled and nodded.

"Can I see you later?"

Corey averted his eyes and licked his lips. "Brandon... I don't think that's a good idea. You're a nice guy and everything, but... I don't think it would work out. I don't really have time to get involved with someone and... you and I are so different."

"You mean I'm not smart enough."

"No. That's not what I mean. I mean you play baseball and I play *Warhammer*. You like to go out. I like to stay in. I've got the next five years of my life mapped out in detail, and you're still trying to figure things out."

There had to be something Brandon could say in response, but what?

"I'm sorry. I have to go." Corey unlocked the stall and walked away.

Brandon swallowed the lump in his throat, closed his eyes, and rested his head against the wall. What had just happened? He'd been so sure Corey was into him. That kiss had meant something, for both of them. He was certain of it. So they liked different things? That didn't mean they couldn't like *each other*. But how could he get that message across to Corey? Brandon

straightened his slumped shoulders as an idea formed in his mind. A *secret message* just might do the trick.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s this?” Corey said aloud, even though he was alone in his room. He’d just returned from taking a shower to find a small, folded card sitting in the middle of his desk. Jack must have left it for him before heading out to class. The front of the card was blank, but inside he found a message: HCC CFG PXN ECDP BHGA JP KDCCZ HM PXN CFG JF ECDP BHGA PXNS BDS ADJJFS.

No signature. *Weird*. He glanced over his shoulder and looked around the room to see if anything else seemed out of the ordinary. No, nothing unusual except the card. But who could have left it? And why? Jack didn’t know the first thing about cryptology. It couldn’t be from him. Was this part of the cryptology competition? Would they deliver random notes to the participants? That didn’t seem likely either, not unless it was hand delivered. How else could they be certain he’d received it?

He checked his watch. *Damn*. He only had a few minutes before he had to leave for class. The message would have to wait. No, he’d take it with him. If the lecture was slow, he could play around with the code. He probably wouldn’t be able to crack it by hand, but who knew? He could get lucky. He couldn’t wait to figure it out. Once he knew what it said, he might be able to determine who’d sent it.

He sat in class, half listening to the lecture and half scribbling notes about character frequencies. He first tried swapping C for E, P for T, D for A, F for O, and G for I, which gave the result: HEE EOI TXN CEAT BHID JT KAEEZ HM TXN EOI JO CEAT BHID TXNS BAS DAJJOS. He sighed, knowing that the message was too short for him to be able to expect the frequencies to behave in any predictable way. What he wouldn’t give for ten minutes alone with his laptop! One of the three-letter words was likely “the” and another “and”. And he noticed that there were some repeated words too.

His physics professor droned on as Corey continued to work on deciphering the message, hoping the cryptographer used monoalphabetic substitution. Without knowing the key and ciphering scheme, however, his

attempts were futile. As soon as class ended, Corey speed-walked to the library, where he found an empty table and set up his laptop. He launched Python and ran the ciphertext through his cracking programs. Bingo! The cryptographer used an affine cipher with a multiplicative key of seven and an additive key of three. The deciphered message read: ILL LET YOU PLAY WITH MY BALLS IF YOU LET ME PLAY WITH YOUR WAR HAMMER.

Corey laughed out loud, then clapped his hand over his mouth as he realized he was in the library. Holy shit, it was from Brandon! But how had he learned to encrypt a message? And why? Okay, it was obvious *why*. Corey sighed and thought about their conversation in the bathroom last week. He'd told Brandon things between them would never work. He remembered his exact words: *you play baseball and I play Warhammer*. Did Brandon even know what *Warhammer* was?

A smile crept over his face as he reread Brandon's message. So it wasn't the most romantic of sentiments, but it was funny and clever. Still, he didn't need this kind of distraction. He'd barely paid attention in class this morning. He sighed, then pulled out his physics book to read over the material he'd missed from the lecture.

He found a new message waiting for him on his desk later that night. Once again, Jack was nowhere to be found. He and Brandon must be working in cahoots to deliver them. Corey's pulse quickened as he opened the card and read the message within: PSS SLA FVB ZAHF PUZPKL MVY HZ SVUN HZ FVB SPRL. As tempting as it was to sit down and crack the code, he folded the card, then stuffed it in his desk drawer instead. He had far more important things to do with his time than decipher secret love notes!

Corey kicked off his shoes and settled on his bed with his philosophy textbook. He glanced briefly at his desk drawer, where the secret message lay safely hidden. *No. Focus*. Schoolwork was more important.

He flipped through his text until he found the chapter he needed to read for homework: *Freedom and Determinism*. The title mocked him from its

conspicuous location on the page. Corey uncapped his yellow highlighter, ready to mark key points as he read.

Every so often, his thoughts traveled back to the message in the drawer. Would this one be a dirty joke too? Maybe, if he finished his homework early, he'd allow himself to decipher the note. *Focus!*

Corey returned his attention to his text. Did he believe in fate or free will? Free will, of course. He was master of his own destiny! All this talk of determinism was silly. All his life, he set his own goals and achieved them through hard work and perseverance. He did what he did because it was what he decided to do. Like this homework assignment, for example. Even though it wasn't due until Friday, he'd decided to finish the reading and work on the essay tonight.

He sat at his desk and booted up his laptop so he could work on the essay. The Python program window was still open from when he'd used it earlier that day. Corey moved the mouse cursor over the button to close the program, then hesitated. The last message had been relatively easy to crack. This new one probably would be too. Brandon wouldn't know how to use advanced encryption techniques, would he? Most likely, Corey would be able to decipher the message in a matter of minutes, then he could focus on his essay. Or he could let the cracking tools run in the background while he worked on the essay. That would be more efficient.

He slid the desk drawer open and retrieved the message, then entered the code into one of the programs. He rummaged through his backpack for his philosophy notebook and pulled out the assignment sheet with the essay question on it.

Ding! The program had deciphered the message. A simple Caesar shift. A wave of excitement coursed through him as he focused on the screen. The message read: ILL LET YOU STAY INSIDE FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE. He thought back to their last conversation. What was it he'd said? *You play baseball and I play Warhammer. You like to go out. I like to stay in. I've got the next five years of my life mapped out in detail, and you're still trying to figure things out.* Heat rushed to his face as he realized the double meaning in

the message. The image of a naked Brandon sitting on top of him popped into his head. *Fuck*. It was an image he would certainly revisit later.

For now, he had homework to finish. He picked up his philosophy handout and read the essay prompt for the chapter on freedom versus determinism: *If I can get someone to do something by “pushing” the right “buttons”, does that constitute evidence that humans are not free but are conditioned animals and not much different from a mouse, pigeon or monkey?*

“Aw hell,” he muttered.

No new message came the next morning. He’d had his chance to ask Jack about them before leaving for work that afternoon, but Corey had avoided the subject. He couldn’t risk seeming too eager. Jack might get the wrong idea and encourage Brandon to continue his pursuit. No, if the messages stopped, it would be for the best. Besides, the messages weren’t exactly sentimental. Was Brandon simply looking for a hookup? While that would certainly be fun, it wasn’t worth the headache. Corey had never been good at detaching his feelings when it came to sex.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Another half hour until he could pack up and go home. This was the time Brandon usually stopped by for help, but there had been no sign of him this evening. Was he doing all right in his Stat class? Would he come back for more help? The minutes dragged on as the questions persisted. Would there be a new message waiting for him when he got back to his dorm? He grabbed his cube, then twisted and turned the rows and columns in a futile attempt to distract himself from his thoughts.

After work, he stopped by the cafeteria to get a quick bite to go before returning to his dorm. A brief scan of the room confirmed there were no new messages. Jack was gone too. *Damn*. He felt stupid for having rushed back. His only reward for his efforts was a lukewarm burger and a bag of soggy fries.

He’d just finished eating when his laptop rang, indicating an incoming call from Samantha. “What’s up, buttercup?”

“Hi, Sam. How’s it going?”

“Just calling to say ‘hey’. What’re you up to?”

“Not much. Getting ready to do some homework.”

“Fuuuuuuuun. So how’s Brandon?”

“I told you—there’s nothing going on between me and Brandon.”

“You’re so stubborn. Seriously, Corey, I don’t get you. You have the balls to halfway strip in front of the guy, but not to go on a date with him?”

Balls. He thought of yesterday’s message and chuckled.

“It’s not funny. You’re gonna be a thirty-year-old virgin before you know it.”

“I’m not a virgin,” he reminded her.

“Scott Migley doesn’t count. He was a jerk.”

“Uh... I’m pretty sure that still counts.”

“Whatever,” she said with a wave of dismissal. “This Brandon guy sounds nice. And he’s a friend of Jack’s so he can’t be that bad. Aren’t you even a little bit tempted?”

Corey bit his lower lip. Should he tell her? Nah, what was the point? He wasn’t interested in a hookup.

When Corey woke the next morning, he found a new card waiting for him on his desk. Jack was still asleep and snoring softly. He’d come in late last night after playing an away game. He must’ve set the card up while Corey was asleep. They sure were going to a lot of trouble to deliver these messages.

Corey opened the card and examined the message: TEE DLIEZ PAV FSKUIXK TLT SW TYTA N CIUI YFN HSU OXI SYHBQU NOZEI MYFMEV XO WHYJZGX TLRVLX RLYRE. He didn’t have anywhere to be today, so he had time to work on deciphering the message right then. Did he want to do it in front of Jack though? He glanced at his sleeping roommate,

then set about the task. If he was quiet, Jack would probably sleep for another hour or so.

Corey ran the code through several of his programs before deciding it wasn't monoalphabetic. Brandon had upped his game. Corey opened his web browser and navigated to his Vigenère cracking tool. He was just about to enter the ciphertext, when he heard Jack stir. Corey quickly minimized the window before turning to see Jack stumble out of bed.

Jack stretched his arms overhead, then yawned and scratched his balls. He grunted something incomprehensible before leaving the room.

Whew! Corey let out the breath he'd been holding. Why was he so nervous? He was more worried about Jack catching him decipher Brandon's message than he was about Jack catching him jerk off in their room. He only had a couple minutes before Jack would be back from the bathroom. He needed a decoy. He could always say he was working on the cryptology competition. Jack wouldn't know Corey had submitted the solution for the last round and was waiting for the next set of code. Even so, Jack wasn't stupid. He'd see through the lie in a heartbeat.

Corey jumped when the door swung open and Jack reentered the room.

Jack looked over and cocked his head. "You look guilty."

"Huh?"

"You watching porn or something?"

"Me? I'm not doing anything." Corey's voice was an octave too high.

"Riiight. Just keep the volume down." Jack crawled under his covers and closed his eyes.

Corey scooted his chair to block Jack's line of sight to the laptop screen. He muted the volume, then got back to work cracking the code. Although the message was longer than the previous ones, it was still too short to make cracking easy. After half an hour of trial and error, the closest he got was: ONE KHIKW VVE FZGUOUQ OUT ZS TEQG I LIBE YLK NND OEE SEEHLD NVVEO JEAVEC TO CEEEIGE PLXSRS ALFNE, using keyword FRATEAUDU. If the first word was "one", then the fourth or fifth letter in the

keyword was wrong. He shifted the “T” one letter at a time, checking the frequency histogram, the keyword, and the plaintext message. When he set the keyword to FRAKEAUDU, he paused. He recognized a few words in the plaintext: ONE THIKW VVE FIGUOUQ OUT IS TEQG I LIKE YLK NND ONE SEEHLD NEVEO JEAVEL TO CEEEIGN PLXSRS ALONE. He stared at the key word until it suddenly clicked. Frak Earth!

“Oh my God!”

Jack shot up in bed. “What? What’s happening?”

“Frak Earth! It’s Frak Earth!”

“The hell?” Jack glared at him.

“The keyword! It’s...” His voice trailed off. “Sorry. I guess I got a little overly excited.”

“Are you watching *Battlestar Galactica* again?”

“No, I’m... uh... nothing. Sorry. Go back to sleep.”

Jack crawled out of bed and crossed to Corey’s desk. He glanced at the computer screen, and then at Corey. “Let me guess. You got Brandon’s message.”

“Well... I haven’t read it yet, but I think I just cracked it.”

Jack lifted an eyebrow. “Well go on.”

“Um... are you just gonna stand there? It’s private.”

“Yep. Now read the fucking message.”

Damn, he was grumpy when he woke up. Corey turned around and focused on the screen. The decoded message read: ONE THING IVE FIGURED OUT IS THAT I LIKE YOU AND ONE SHOULD NEVER TRAVEL TO FOREIGN PLACES ALONE. Corey smiled as he read it aloud for Jack.

“That’s it? *That’s* the super-secret message? What the fuck does it even mean? Are you going on a trip?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Where to?”

Corey chewed on his bottom lip. “I thought I knew, but now I’m not so sure.”

“He really likes you, you know. We’ve been friends for two years, and I’ve never seen him go after someone like this.”

Corey nodded but said nothing. He had some thinking to do.

CHAPTER NINE

“Step, behind, throw!” Coach called out. “Keep those hands centered.”

Coach had Brandon doing long toss drills every two to three days to stretch and strengthen his pitching arm.

“Good follow through. Again.”

Brandon concentrated on keeping his movements smooth and maintaining a consistent release point.

“Good. Now back it up ten feet. Let’s do another five throws.”

As Brandon shuffled backward, a figure walking along the opposite side of the chain link fence caught his attention. *Corey?* What was Corey doing there?

“Let’s go!” Coach barked.

“Yes, Coach.” Brandon looked down at his feet and lined them up, shoulder width apart. *Step, behind, throw!* The movements were automatic at this point.

He snuck a quick glance in Corey’s direction. Was he here to see Brandon? Would Corey be able to pick him out of the dozens of people on the field? Brandon could wave to him, but Coach wouldn’t take kindly to the loss of focus. No, better to just power through and hope Corey didn’t leave. He must be here to talk to Brandon about the messages. Was he upset about the sex jokes? They’d seemed funny at the time, but now... *Shit.* He wouldn’t dump him here—in front of all the guys—would he? Brandon’s stomach twisted in a knot.

“Hart! Keep that center of balance.”

Brandon worked on the long toss for another ten minutes before Coach let him take a break. Brandon jogged over to the fence to where Corey sat on the bleachers. Corey, who appeared to be talking on his phone, hopped down to meet him.

“Hey,” Brandon said, slightly out of breath.

Corey shielded his eyes from the sunlight with his hand and smiled at him. “Hi. Hope you don’t mind me coming by.”

“No, of course not. I can only talk for a minute though.”

“Hello? Hello!” A girl’s voice called from the phone in Corey’s hand.

“Oh, sorry,” Corey said. He held up the phone to reveal a girl smiling and waving. “Say hi to my friend, Sam.”

Brandon chuckled. “Uh, hi.”

Corey turned his back on Brandon, then lifted the phone and muttered, “Happy now?” before turning back to Brandon.

Brandon lifted his baseball cap and wiped his brow with his sleeve. “Friend of yours?”

“Yeah, she wanted to say hi. Sorry.”

“Okay...”

“Um... I stopped by to give you this.” Corey handed him a small slip of folded paper.

Brandon opened it to find a garbled message: QHSTPEHY IBIR KG GY PJJG WRHP YJTP OHQDRSOHFF QAJPSQ. Corey had written to him in code? *Fuck*. He had no idea how to unscramble these things. “Oh, uh...”

Corey chuckled. “You know, generally, when you *want* someone to decipher your message, you give ’em the key.”

“Oh. So you didn’t—”

“I figured them out. Now this one’s for you. It’s a simple keyword cipher. The keyword is *homerun*.”

“Homerun,” he repeated. “Okay.” It sounded promising.

“Make sure you read it before Saturday.”

“Number Seven! Let’s go!” one of the coaches yelled.

“I will. I gotta go.”

Corey waved, but stayed on the bleachers and watched Brandon as he returned to the field. That had to be a good sign. If only Brandon knew what the note said.

Brandon checked his watch: quarter to nine. He didn't want to show up early. He could hang here in the lobby for a few minutes. Or he could take the stairs. Yeah, that would kill a little extra time. The seventh floor—that wouldn't be too bad. He would take it slow to avoid breaking a sweat. His nerves were already shot, making that likely.

When he got to the seventh floor, he paused in the stairwell and pulled Corey's note from his pocket. He had read it a hundred times over the past three days. He'd printed the decoded letters above the ones Corey had written: SATURDAY NINE PM MY ROOM WEAR YOUR BASKETBALL SHORTS.

It was an unusual request, but he was wearing his basketball shorts, just as Corey had asked. Brandon took a deep breath, then pulled open the door and made his way to room 714.

Corey answered moments after Brandon knocked. "You made it!"

God, he was beautiful when he smiled.

"Come on in." Corey motioned at his bed, then took a seat on Jack's mattress, facing Brandon, and looking him up and down. "You can take your shoes off if you want."

"Okay." So, they weren't going out. And he was gonna be here for a while. "Did you... wanna do something? Watch a movie or something?"

"Actually, I thought we could study."

"Oh." Study? Corey invited him over on a Saturday night to *study*? Of all the things Brandon had imagined they might do tonight, studying hadn't been on the list.

"Like last time, you know? If you get a question right, I take something off. If you get it wrong, I put something back on."

Brandon's pulse quickened. He made a swift assessment of Corey's outfit: T-shirt, jeans, socks, boxers? He could have him completely naked in five questions. Assuming he could answer the questions. More likely than not, Corey would be completely clothed the entire time and Brandon would leave humiliated. Was it a trick? Was Corey trying to make him look stupid? "I didn't know I was gonna be taking a quiz," he said weakly. "I would've looked over my notes."

"It's okay. Just do your best." Corey got up and handed Brandon a pencil, paper, and calculator from his desk, then remained standing a few feet in front of him. He nodded and pointed to the paper. "Question one..."

Brandon held the paper with sweaty palms. He really wasn't up for this. "Okay. Question one. A baseball player gets seventy-two hits after one hundred eighty times at bat. What is his batting average?" Brandon searched Corey's eyes to see if this was some kind of joke.

Corey responded with a raised eyebrow. "Well?"

"That's a really easy question." He punched the numbers into the calculator, then computed the ratio one more time to be sure he hadn't made a mistake. "His batting average would be four hundred."

Corey lifted a leg and stripped off his sock. "Well done. Question two?"

"A smoking hot pitcher—" Brandon glanced at Corey, and the room suddenly felt much warmer. "—allows four runs in forty-eight innings pitched. What is his Earned Run Average?" Another easy one. He took a few seconds to compute the answer. "Point seven five."

Another sock flew off. "Next?"

Brandon swallowed. "A player gets three home runs, five triples, twelve doubles, twenty singles, and forty outs. What's his slugging percentage?" Didn't Corey know how easy these questions were? It was a simple calculation. "0.888."

"You're really on a roll," Corey said as he peeled off his shirt.

Brandon's heart pounded at the sight of Corey's small, dark nipples, at the way they contrasted with his smooth white skin. He was almost within arm's reach. "Jesus," he whispered.

"Next question?"

He wasn't ready to look at the next question. Surely they'd get harder now, and the clothes would go back on. Couldn't he have a few more minutes to admire the view?

Corey cleared his throat.

"Okay. Number four," Brandon said. "How many outs are there in one inning?" Now that was just ridic—Brandon looked up and met Corey's eager gaze. His hand was already on his zipper, waiting for Brandon's answer. *Holy shit*. This was gonna happen. Brandon's breath quickened. "S-six. Six outs in an inning."

Corey tugged down his zipper, pushed his pants down his thighs and stepped out of them.

Brandon let out a moan at the unmistakable bulge in the tight, blue briefs. What was that design on the front? *Oh fuck*. Baseballs and mitts. "So hot," he whispered.

Corey hugged his chest and shrugged. "You like them?"

"C'mere." Brandon reached for Corey's hand, then reeled him in close.

Standing between Brandon's legs, Corey leaned down and captured Brandon's mouth in a heated kiss. Those lips Brandon had fantasized about so often were now locked onto his.

Yes, his entire body hummed. Did he have permission to touch? No, he should let Corey set the pace. Holding back would be a lot easier, though, if Corey weren't practically naked. Maybe a little touch would be okay.

Brandon gently gripped the outside of Corey's thigh. Corey responded by running his tongue along Brandon's bottom lip. Brandon opened his mouth and their tongues brushed, softly at first, and then more urgently. God, Corey was a good kisser. Brandon had never been so turned on in his life.

He ran his hand across the front of Corey's briefs, and Corey softly gasped and pulled away.

"Sorry," Brandon whispered, moving his hand away. "You've got me so worked up." He didn't need to say it. The tent in his shorts had signaled his interest at question two.

"You've got one more question," Corey said, practically panting.

And Corey had one more piece of clothing. Brandon trembled with anticipation as he gripped the quiz paper. "Question five: If bases are loaded, how many runs are scored for a homerun?" *Sweet Jesus*. "Four runs."

"You," Corey said, resting his hands on hips, "get an A-plus." He slipped his thumbs under the elastic band of his briefs, then slid them down part way, just far enough to reveal his hip bones and a patch of dark pubic hair. His eyes seemed to be asking if this was what Brandon wanted.

Brandon responded by stripping off his shirt.

Corey licked his lips at the sight of Brandon's chest and took a step closer. The front of Corey's briefs revealed a small, wet patch that was too tempting to ignore. Brandon placed his hands over Corey's, and together they pushed Corey's briefs down until they fell to his ankles and he kicked them off. Brandon barely had time to shimmy out of his own briefs before Corey jumped onto his lap and wrapped his legs around him.

"Touch me," Corey whispered roughly, then seized Brandon in a hungry kiss.

Their lips locked together as their hands explored each other's bodies. Brandon tried to hold back, wanting the pleasure to last as long as possible, but his body was no longer under his control. He stuttered a few incomprehensible syllables as he climaxed, spilling onto Corey's hand. He continued stroking Corey until he followed moments later.

Corey rested his forehead on Brandon's shoulder for a minute before getting up and grabbing his T-shirt. He wiped Brandon's torso, then his own, and tossed the shirt onto the floor.

This was the awkward part of sex, the moments after. They hadn't talked about it before they'd jumped on in. Was this just a casual hookup? Should he lie down? Would Corey want to cuddle? Would he want Brandon to stay?

Corey turned off the lamp, climbed onto his bed, and scooted towards the wall, where he stretched out on his back. He was so beautiful.

Brandon followed his lead and rested beside him. He should say something. Jack always called him out when he was being "wishy-washy". *Be confident*. Brandon slid his leg over and rubbed the underside of Corey's foot with the top of his own. He held his breath, waiting to see how Corey would respond.

Corey threaded his fingers into Brandon's, then turned on his side and smiled at him.

It was exactly the reassurance Brandon needed. He scooted a little closer and allowed Corey to settle on his chest. Then he ran his fingers through Corey's soft curls until they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Corey stirred as his internal alarm clock roused him. Brandon tightened his grip around Corey's waist and pulled him closer. At some point in the night, their bodies had shaped themselves into a comfortable sleeping position, with Brandon spooning Corey from behind. Corey carefully flipped around to face Brandon, who was apparently a heavy sleeper. So this was what it was like waking up with someone in his bed. He studied Brandon's face as he slept. So peaceful. Corey ran his finger along Brandon's jawline. He'd never felt another guy's whiskers before. How often did Brandon have to shave? What was his morning routine like? Was he grumpy in the mornings? What did he like to eat for breakfast? Corey wanted to know everything.

He rubbed his fingers in small circles over Brandon's chest. Brandon murmured softly, rocked his hips against Corey, then sighed contentedly. Corey was aroused, but didn't want to wake Brandon yet. Instead, he nuzzled against Brandon's warm chest and closed his eyes, soaking in the scent of him and enjoying the feel of skin against skin.

Thoughts of last night came to him. Had Brandon sensed how nervous he'd been, or had Corey done a good job of concealing it? He knew Brandon wanted him. He'd never doubted that. The question was, where was this going, and was it going too fast? Did Corey have room in his life for a relationship? He'd never seriously considered it before. Not after the disastrous fling he'd had a year ago. But now... Did Brandon mean what he'd implied in that last message—that he'd be there for Corey, *with* Corey, that Corey wouldn't have to go it alone?

If it hadn't been for those messages... or rather, the *absence* of those messages... It was only after they'd stopped coming that Corey realized how much he missed having that special connection with someone. It was the sweetest, most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for him. Especially since Brandon wasn't into cryptology. How had he pulled it off? He'd have to remember to ask. Or maybe not. The mystery added to the allure. Would the

messages end now that they were together? *If* they were together. They hadn't really talked about it. But if last night was anything to go by...

Last night. So hot. Corey inched his hand downward, tracing his fingers in a spiral motion along Brandon's happy trail until they reached his semi-hard dick. He grasped it firmly, then used his thumb to rub a small circle just below the head, which, for Corey at least, was his most sensitive spot.

"Mmmmmm," Brandon moaned.

"Oh, my fucking eyes! Blanket, dude. Blanket! For fuck's sake." Corey jerked his head to see Jack turn and scamper out of the room.

"Oh God. I forgot about him," Corey said, climbing over Brandon. Jack had kindly agreed to spend the night elsewhere so Corey could be alone with Brandon, but they hadn't discussed the possibility of Brandon staying the night. Corey quickly stepped into his briefs and tossed a still-sleepy Brandon his clothes. "Do you think he's pissed?"

Brandon rubbed his eyes. "Nah, he's cool."

"I guess he got an eyeful," Corey said.

"Could've been worse. A few minutes later, who knows what acts of depravity he'd have walked in on."

A loud knock drew their attention to the door. Jack reentered the room, using his baseball cap to shield his eyes.

"It's safe to look now," Brandon said.

Jack lowered the hat. "So? You finally got your heads out of your asses?"

"That's what she said!" Corey blurted, which made Jack laugh, and the tension in the room dissipated.

"Hey, I'm gonna run to the bathroom," Brandon said. "You wanna go get breakfast?"

Corey nodded. "Yeah, right behind you."

"That's what *he* said," Jack added.

Corey chose an empty table near a large window, and Brandon joined him moments later. Corey's eyes bulged when he saw the amount of food on Brandon's tray. So that answered the question about what Brandon liked to eat for breakfast. *Everything*. Eggs, toast, bacon, hash browns, pancakes, fruit, milk, orange juice. He looked down at his measly bowl of cereal and laughed. "Geez, do we have *anything* in common?"

Brandon smiled. "We both like dick."

Corey snorted, spraying milk all over his tray.

"Niiiiice. Food all over your face and a wicked case of bedhead. Adorable. I should take a picture."

Corey glared at him. "Don't you dare."

Brandon fished his phone out of his pocket.

"No!"

"I won't," Brandon said, laughing. "I just wanna show you something."

Corey eyed Brandon suspiciously as he tapped his phone.

"It's this really cool app called Cryptology. I found it a couple days ago, after you gave me that message to decode. Look, I can type in a message and it'll code it and send it to you over my phone. Isn't that awesome?"

Corey fought the urge to jump across the table and kiss him. "That's... that's..."

"Cryptastic?"

He and Brandon might not have much in common, but Brandon sure knew how to make him feel good. "Yeah," Corey said with a goofy grin. "I'll download it right now."

Brandon stuffed a forkful of pancakes into his mouth. "Your cereal's getting soggy."

"I'll multitask." Corey installed the app while he finished eating breakfast. "Should we keep *homerun* as our keyword?"

"I like it. I know I hit a *home run* with you."

Corey shook his head. “That was super cheesy. But I like it too.”

“Baseball’s full of all kinds of fun phrases.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, just off the top of my head there’s a blowout, eat the ball, barehand it, ding dong, doubleheader, four-bagger, grand slam, hardball, in the hole, power stroke, salami, shagging flies, squeeze play, sweet spot, up the elevator shaft—”

“Jesus.”

“And then there’s terms specific to pitching, like cockshot—”

Corey’s eyes bulged. “Cockshot? Seriously?”

Brandon nodded. “Yeah, that’s when you throw a fastball down the middle of home plate at belt level. You don’t want ’em to hit that one. There’s also a comebacker, screwball, spitter, herky-jerky, high and tight, knee-buckler, nibble, pound the batter inside, pound the strike zone, stick it in his ear—”

“Holy crap. Jack must be in that’s-what-she-said heaven. No wonder he loves baseball.”

“Yeah, he gets a lot of zingers in there. And he doesn’t let anyone give me shit, either. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he’s a good roommate too. I don’t even mind the mess that much. You think he’ll let us have sleepovers again? I mean, if he ever had a girl over, I think I’d freak. That’d just be... weird.”

“We’ll bribe him with cookies.” Brandon reached across the table and took Corey’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to him after our game today. And we don’t have to rush things.”

“Thanks.” He squeezed Brandon’s hand. This was all new to him. Slow sounded good. He still needed to learn how to fit having a boyfriend into his busy schedule. But Brandon was busy too, with baseball, so if Corey managed to do the bulk of his schoolwork during those times, they should be able to work in spending time together.

“You look worried.”

“No.” Corey smiled. “For the first time in a long time, I’m *not* worried.”

“Okay. Well I should probably get going. I’ve got a couple things to do before I head to the field. Can I walk you back?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m gonna get a coffee then head back.”

“I really wanna kiss you before I go.”

Corey nodded at the exit. They dropped off their trays and found a semi-secluded spot outside behind a large oak tree. Brandon’s kiss tasted like maple syrup and made Corey tingle from head to toe.

“Can I call you later?” Brandon said.

“Yeah. Good luck with your game. Let me know when the next one is and I’ll try and make it.”

Brandon beamed. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. If you wanna come over tonight, I’ll introduce you to your first Cylon.”

“What’s a Cylon?”

Corey shook his head. “You’ve got a lot to learn.”

“Ready and willing, as long as you’re my tutor.” Brandon gave him one more quick kiss, then said good-bye.

Corey went back inside and got a coffee to go. He was halfway back to his dorm when he got a notification from Brandon: B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU WAHS WR EBE OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

It was quickly followed by another: KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJS ;-)

Corey smiled and ran up to his room to decipher the message. He could’ve used the app, but he wanted to solve this one by hand. It was more exciting that way.

Three minutes later he had:

i had a _rea_ _i_e _a__ _i_h_ _o_ _____ ca__e o_
ha _e did

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU
WAHS WR EBE

___ ca__e i _a_ _i_h_ _o_

OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

Followed by:

___ _a__e _a_er _o_ ca_ he__ ___ _ork o_ ___ cock_ho_
KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJS
;-)

He laughed as he filled in the final letters of the message. Brandon Hart was a keeper.

THE END

Author's Note

I considered deciphering Brandon's last message for you in its entirety, but Corey wouldn't let me. He wanted you to experience the thrill of decoding the message—that moment when you're three-quarters of the way there and everything suddenly falls into place. Although he insisted that I make you work for it, he did allow me to give you a few hints. The message was encrypted using a keyword cipher. To crack the code, first write out the alphabet.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Then write the keyword, one letter at a time, below the alphabet, omitting any duplicate letters if necessary.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HOMERUN

Next, add the remaining letters of the alphabet, taking care not to duplicate any letters that have already been placed.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

HOMERUNABCDEFGHIJKLPQSTVWXYZ

Now, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the ciphertext (coded) characters and plaintext (English) characters.

a=H

b=O

c=M

d=E

e=R

f=U

g=N

h=A

i=B

- j=C
- k=D
- l=F
- m=G
- n=I
- o=J
- p=K
- q=L
- r=P
- s=Q
- t=S
- u=T
- v=V
- w=W
- x=X
- y=Y
- z=Z

To solve the cryptogram, replace the ciphertext (UPPERCASE) characters in the coded message with their corresponding plaintext (lowercase) characters. So, for example, everywhere you see the letter B in the code, replace it with the letter i, like so:

i ___ _ _____ _i___ _____ _i_____

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Then replace every instance of the letter A with the letter h, like so:

i h___ _ _____ _i___ _____ _i_h_

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Next, replace every instance of the letter H with the letter a, etc.

i ha_ a ___a_ _i___ _a___ _i_h_

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Good luck cracking Brandon's code! (Or, if you're really not up for the paper and pencil method, you can search online for a "keyword cipher tool" like the one at secretcodebreaker.com and let the computer crack it for you.)

Once again, here is Brandon's last message:

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU

WAHS WR EBE OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJS

; -)

Glossary of Baseball Terms

barehand it: when a fielder catches a ball with the hand not covered by his glove

blowout: a game in which one team wins by a large lead

cockshot: a fastball thrown just above the belt and down the middle of the plate

comebacker: a ball batted directly back to the pitcher

deep in the count: when a pitcher gets to three balls and zero, one, or two strikes in the count, a situation that favors the batter rather than the pitcher

ding dong: a home run

doubleheader: when two games are played by the same two teams on the same day

eat the ball: The act of fielding but holding on to a batted ball rather than attempting to make a throw to a base to retire a runner

four-bagger: a home run

grand slam: a home run hit with the bases loaded

hardball: type of ball used in baseball (as opposed to softball)

herky-jerky: an unusual or awkward wind-up or motion by the pitcher

high and tight: a pitch thrown above the strike zone and close to the batter

home run: a base hit in which the batter is able to circle all the bases, ending at home plate and scoring a run himself

in the hole: the spaces between the first baseman and second baseman and between the shortstop and the third baseman, one of the usual places where a ground ball must go for a hit

knee-buckler: a ball (usually a curveball) that breaks very sharply, so much so that it freezes the hitter

nibble: pitching just at the left or right edges of home plate rather than over the heart of the plate where a batter can get the meat of the bat on the ball

pound the batter inside: pitch the ball over the inside of the plate (typically with a fastball)

pound the strike zone: pitching aggressively by throwing strikes, not by trying to trick hitters into swinging at pitches out of the strike zone or trying to nibble at the corners of the plate

power stroke: a hitter with a good power stroke is one who is capable of hitting for extra bases

salami: a grand slam home run

screwball: a pitch that curves to the same side as the side it was thrown from

shagging flies: catching fly balls in the outfield when not involved in actual baseball games

spitter: a spitball pitch in which the ball has been altered by the application of spit, petroleum jelly, or some other foreign substance

squeeze play: a tactic used to attempt to score a runner from third on a bunt

starting pitcher: the first pitcher in the game for each team; a starter is expected to pitch at least five innings, in contrast with relievers who often pitch just three, two or one or even fractional innings

stick it in his ear: a cry that that may come from fans in the stands, appealing to the home team pitcher to be aggressive (throw the ball at the opposing batter)

sweet spot: a location that's perfect for the batter to swing at and hit a pitch very hard on the meat of the bat

three up, three down: to face just three batters in an inning; having a "three up, three down inning" is the goal of any pitcher

up the elevator shaft: a pop-up that travels straight upwards off the bat, very easy to catch

Author Bio

Madison Parker grew up in Germany where she feasted on Gummibärchen, wandered through the woods on many a Volksmarch, and dreamed of one day living in a castle on a mountain with a boy who knew how to rock a pair of lederhosen. The Fates had other plans for her, but she's not complaining. Although she aspired to be an author at an early age and often wrote for fun, she pursued a career in teaching instead. Madison has a Bachelor's Degree and two Master's Degrees in Mathematics and Education. She has taught both middle and high school and enjoys working with young adults.

Madison has a passion for math and art, and likes to dabble a bit with web and graphic design. She also has an affinity for all things geeky (read: Star Trek and TRON). Although she is extremely left-brained (logical, rational, orderly), her artistic, creative side never ceases to flail around in a desperate attempt to be noticed. Madison now spends her days reading, writing, solving math problems, and playing with her feisty German Pinscher. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, her pup, and her troop of sock monkeys.

Madison began writing LGBTQ fiction to help address issues of bullying and low self-esteem among young adults. Her short story, Sock It To Me, Santa!, explores one boy's struggle to come out in a hostile school environment. Her debut novel, Play Me, I'm Yours, takes the reader on an emotional journey in search of love and self-acceptance. Learn more about Madison and her writing at her website.

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