

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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CHANGE OF FOCUS

Lucy Whedon

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

CHANGE OF FOCUS

By Lucy Whedon

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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Photo Description

A Japanese man with a black, wispy hair holds a camera. He is wearing a leather jacket and looking intently at the subject he is shooting.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This was supposed to have been my honeymoon. How ironic, we've been engaged for 2 years but as soon as Maryland Equality in Marriage passed, he started to get cold feet and then he breaks up with me.

We always said we would go to Japan together but only one of us made it. So here I am taking pictures and feeling a little sorry for myself, when I hear the sound of someone taking pictures to the side of me. I turn and there he is, smiling, camera pointed directly at me, laughing even, and daring me to be in on the joke.

Maybe this trip is just the thing I needed, who knew a honeymoon for one could end up for two?

Notes: HFN or HEA, no bdsm please, angst ok as long as they are together at the end.

Sincerely,

Melanie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, visual arts, HFN, masturbation, annoying ex

Word count: 15,774

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When Nikolas woke up the sheets were twisted around him. Not his own sheets, but much nicer ones. Without opening his eyes, he stroked them with his fingers. Three hundred thread count at least. But were his own sheets his own anymore? Who got custody of the linens? Was there a precedent for that in a not-quite divorce? He was terribly hung over, but not so much that he didn't remember where he was (*Japan, hotel*) or why he was there (*conference*) or why he had gotten so drunk (*major breakup*). He sighed and even this made his head hurt.

He knew he had to get up, if only so that he could take something pharmaceutical before his cousin Cara called and the ring of the phone struck him dead. She was merciless when she thought she was taking care of him.

She had tried to persuade him to stop drinking last night in the hotel bar, but when he refused her offers to go upstairs and talk it out, she had lost patience with him and left him to his fourth Manhattan. "At least drink something local," she had said to him before she picked up her sheaf of drawings and flounced out of the bar. Nik shook his head (*mistake*). Cara didn't understand the soothing qualities of bourbon and neon-red cherries. It was classic, a vintage drink. But maybe she was right. It was something Evan had introduced him to, and last night, every sip had made him think of Evan's mouth at the edge of a glass, every insanely sugary bite of cherry had the taste of Evan's lips.

Nik rolled his head back and forth gently, his eyes still closed. He didn't ask why he had drunk so much, since he knew. He knew also why he'd gotten up and started dancing by himself in the small crowd of people, mostly conference attendees, on the tiny dance floor. He had needed to move, and with five Manhattans sloshing through him, he had stood swaying on the dance floor to some very low-key jazz, his hands above his head and his hips moving slowly. He groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. He must have

looked ridiculous, as if he were trying to dance the hula, or as if he thought he was at a club, showing off so someone would come and claim him.

Oh-oh. Nik bit the pillow, worrying it with his teeth, because someone had. Someone had come up to him and put his hands on Nik's shoulders, pulling his arms down, and on his hips, stilling them. Someone had whispered in his ear, although now Nik couldn't remember what he'd said.

"I know you," Nik had said to him, his words slurred. "You took my picture."

Someone, who was a Japanese guy with dark hair and eyes, held Nik's elbows. "Yes," he said. "Don't you want to sit down?"

"Want to dance," Nik had said. He'd freed his arms and put them around someone's neck. "You took my picture so you owe me."

"Afraid I stole your soul?"

"What?" Nick said, and then he pointed a finger at the face that was smiling at him. A nice face, with high cheekbones and dark hair falling across it. Beautiful full lips, quirked at one corner. "You don't sound Japanese," he said, as if this was a point he need to make.

Nice-faced someone had said something else then, but Nik didn't hear because all of the alcohol he'd drunk seemed to be rising up in his body, making his head swim and his brain slosh. His eyes were fixed on those full, pouted lips, almost even with his own. He leaned forward, aiming, and got just the slightest touch before someone was pushing him back, but so gently that he thought he was falling. Maybe he had fallen, because that was the last thing he remembered. Someone's lips, so close, and then the feel of them, soft, before he was drifting away and down, gone until he woke twisted in the hotel's sheets.

His whole body jolted. Wait—dancing, kiss, passed out, bed? Suddenly, he was afraid of what he'd find when he took the pillow off his head and looked around. Was he even in his own room? Guilt poured through him. What would he tell Evan? What had he done? Evan would be devastated...

But, no, he reminded himself. Evan was the one who decided that now wasn't the right time to get married, just as it had become possible in their home state, Maryland. Evan had said that he wasn't sure he was ready for the big commitment. He loved Nik, he kept saying, it wouldn't hurt to wait a little while longer, would it? Everything was good now, why rock the boat? Nik had to worry about getting tenure at the university where they both taught, shouldn't he focus on that? And then after that, they could sit down and make some real plans.

Nik threw the pillow off his head and sat up, ignoring the pain that rocketed around his skull. He was almost disappointed to find out that he was alone in the bed. He was still wearing what he'd worn last night, but someone had put a blanket over him, and (*he wiggled his toes*) had taken off his shoes. He could see them, set neatly by the door. He felt relieved, but also a little miffed. Not good enough to marry, and apparently not good enough to date rape.

He got up and went to piss. He stared into the mirror. He didn't look too bad, he thought. His brown eyes (*your best feature, Evan had told him more than once: shut up, Evan*) were only a little reddened. His chin length dirty blond hair (*a good cut would give you a more professional appearance: shut up shut up shut up*) was only a little tangled. He didn't look bad enough for Cara to guess how much he'd drunk, and how much he'd made a fool of himself. He'd have to avoid running into the not-Japanese guy, who had looked very Japanese to him. No problem, he thought, and then remembered the barest touch of not-Japanese guy's mouth, dry and soft. Had there been more that he'd been passed out for? Well, it didn't matter.

He pulled off his clothes and stepped into the shower. When he came out, rubbing his head with a towel, the phone was ringing. He sat on the bed to answer what must be Cara's call, leaning over the unused pillow. Something crumpled under his hand, and he threw the towel off. Five photographs lay on the pillowcase. One was the photo that not-Japanese guy must have taken yesterday in the conference hall: Nik had been sitting in the auditorium waiting for the keynote speaker to begin. He had just been turning to talk to

Cara when the photographer caught his eye. Not-Japanese guy had smiled at him and clicked off the shot.

The second one showed Nik on the dance floor last night, his arms reaching toward the ceiling where there was an honest-to-god disco ball, glittering like a hundred stars. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back. His mouth was a little open, his shirt riding up to show his navel. The people around him were blurs. Nick flushed. He looked vulnerable and open, ready to be hurt.

The third showed him lying in bed, this bed. No blanket, so someone had covered him up. His hair half hid his face. His arms were flung out as if he'd been pushed there, probably from when not-Japanese guy had dumped him on the bed. His fingers were curled a little, as if he'd been holding on to something.

The fourth and fifth were arranged so that they were out of the line the others made, slightly overlapping one another, showing a cup of coffee sitting on a table, and a bottle of beer, uncapped.

Still looking at them, he picked up the phone. "Your panel is in an hour," Cara said without preamble. "Do I have to come up and pour you into the shower?"

"No," Nik said. "I'm all clean and pretty. Come up though, and please, please, please bring some coffee?"

While Nik tried to drink coffee and put his shirt on at the same time, Cara examined the photographs. "Creepy," she said. "You look hot in this one though." She put her finger on the second picture. "So who is this guy?"

Nik looked up from putting on his shoes. "I don't know. He was taking pictures at the keynote yesterday—that's what the first one is. I don't understand."

"It seems pretty obvious." She pointed to the first three pictures. "He thinks you're hot," then the last two. "And he's asking you out. You have your very own stalker." Cara bounced on the bed, making her curly hair, the same color as Nik's, fly around. They looked enough alike to be siblings, but they

were some kind of complicated cousins. “I’m so proud.” She drank some of her own coffee. “What will Evan say?”

“It doesn’t matter what Evan says.” Nik started stuffing the papers he needed into his backpack. “He dumped me.”

Cara lounged back across the bed, dragging and arranging the pillows to be comfortable. “He didn’t actually dump you. He refused to marry you and you dumped him.”

Nik looked over his shoulder. “Are you taking his side?”

“No, but technically—”

“We’ve been together for three years, living together and practically engaged for two. We were planning to do a commitment ceremony next summer. When Maryland passed the new law, I thought—crazy me,” he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, forgetting that he still had a headache, “that we’d jump on that. Ergo, I thought we’d start picking out metaphorical china. And all of a sudden, he doesn’t know if he’s ready.” He picked up his backpack, hefting it as if he couldn’t figure out whether he’d forgotten anything or not. “I should have stuck around after that?”

He hadn’t really moved out, not yet. He’d left for the International Fantasy Association conference the day after the argument, a trip long planned with Cara. He was moderating a panel on language and image in pulp fiction of the ’20s and ’30s, and Cara was going to receive an award for one of the fantasy book covers she’d designed. The thought of having to go back to the apartment and pack up all his stuff made him feel nauseous. Of course, Evan might have thrown it all out on the lawn, or given it away to Goodwill.

“Maybe he got cold feet,” Cara said. “People do, you know.” She was propped up on her elbows, examining his face.

“Why are you staring at me like that? Does my hair look bad?”

“I’m just trying to figure out how devastated you are,” Cara said. “But also, I hate that shirt. Why don’t you wear that blue one I like?”

“I am devastated,” Nik said. “Are you happy? Devastated and I have a headache, and now I have this panel—”

“In twenty-five minutes.”

“And there’s not-Japanese guy—”

“Who?”

“The photographer. He told me he wasn’t Japanese.”

“You had a conversation?” Cara sat up, interested.

“It was just something he said, right before,” right before I tried to kiss him, Nik thought. He hadn’t confessed this bit to Cara. “Before I passed out.”

Cara laid back, her hands behind her head. “If only we were still teenagers. I could get you in so much trouble with your parents. I would own you. You’d be my slave for life.”

“Shut up and come on. You need to go and get me some more coffee before I have to stand up and talk about Lovecraft.”

The hotel wasn’t a single building, but a compound, laid out around a central area with three swimming pools, one glass enclosed, and various gardens and plantings, some hedged in and some in neat geometric spaces between walkways. Nik’s room was in an almost motel-like U-shaped building with a courtyard in the U, full of flowers, miniature pine trees, and singing birds in cages. As he and Cara went through the gate that separated it from the central area, he could see other conference attendees going in the same general direction in pairs and groups, toward the Takasha Building, where most of the panels and talks were held. He could feel his heart speeding up. “I’m nervous,” he told Cara.

“You’ll be great. Who knows more about krakens or whatever, than you do?” She flung out her arms. “Nikolas Jewell,” she intoned, in her best horror movie announcer voice, “Lover of Lovecraft. Master of Monsters and Creatures of the Deep. Revered Pulp Mixologist.”

“Stop it, you weirdo.” Nik could feel his face heating up as other people glanced at them. His phone chirped at him and he pulled it out. <MISS U>, the screen read. “Crap,” he said.

Cara looked over his shoulder. “Is that Evan?”

“Who else would be missing me?” Nik felt as if someone had hit him in the stomach.

“He’s got a nerve,” Cara said. “Text him back something snarky. Tell him you met someone.”

“I thought you were on his side.” They were walking through a corridor of brilliantly colored roses whose petals were so thick on the path that their footfalls were softened.

“I’m always on your side,” Cara said, taking his hand. “I was just trying to be reasonable.”

“Please stop that right now.”

“Seriously though—tell him you met someone. Why shouldn’t he suffer?”

“He wouldn’t believe me,” Nik said. They paused on the steps to look at the conference schedule and map. “He knows I’m not good at that kind of thing.”

“Maybe you need to change,” Cara said as they went in.

Although I did meet someone, Nik thought. Even if he is peculiar.

When they had found the right room, and Nik had organized his notes and introduced himself to the two panelists he didn’t know, he was starting to feel better. He knew that his paper, “Strange Tongues: Repeated Words and Images in Lovecraft’s *Call of Cthulhu*,” was pretty good. He picked up the coffee that Cara had gotten for him and took a sip, determined to put Evan and his lying text out of his head. He looked at the clock—almost time to begin, and tapped his microphone to check if it was live. The room was three-quarters full, not bad for a panel with no big names on it. Some latecomers came in, and he prepared himself to begin.

Just as he opened his mouth, one more person slipped through the doors. Nik froze, his notes rattling in his fingers. It was not-Japanese guy, his neck strung with two cameras. Cara was making faces at him from the front row which probably meant something like “Start already,” or “What are you doing, moron?” Nik watched as his photographic nemesis made his way to a seat on the side. He sat and raised one of the cameras to focus it on the panel, and this, at last, snapped Nik out of it. He shut his mouth, which had been hanging unattractively open, and shuffled his papers again to give him a moment, and then began, introducing himself and the other panelists. Then, since his paper wasn’t first, he sat back, arranging his face into a listening expression, and tried to compose himself.

Not-Japanese guy was taking pictures of the panel and of the crowd, but for the most part, he sat, listening. He wasn’t as beautiful as Nik had remembered. His face was a little thin, his hair perhaps a little too long for Nik’s taste. His eyes—Nik was sorry that he was too far away to see their color—were they black, as he remembered from last night? But his mouth was still very nice. He was looking at Nik now, and as Nik watched, he raised one of the cameras again. Nik was sure he was blushing. He looked away to see Cara making exaggerated motions in what she no doubt thought was a subtle way. What? She mouthed at him. Nik pretended he couldn’t see her. He saw her swing her head toward where he’d been looking, and then saw her fix on the photographer. She turned back to face him with a knowing smile on her face.

So absorbed in this drama was he that Nik didn’t notice when the first paper had been concluded until the polite applause began. The woman sitting next to him nudged him, and he leaned forward to begin. “H.P. Lovecraft, the twentieth-century master of weird fiction, whose very name has become an adjective for all that is dark and uncanny...”

He kept his eyes on the page, even though Evan had always said how important it was to maintain eye contact with his audience. He was afraid to look up and see those (*black? brown?*) eyes fixed on him. All through the other papers and then the Q and A, he looked away from the right side of the

room, so resolutely that one of the other panelists had to point out a hand raised out of his line of sight. When they were done, and people were coming up with last comments and questions, he was afraid that not-Japanese guy would be one of them. Nik didn't want to face him with the memory of last night between them.

Or rather the not-memory. What had happened between the almost-kiss and his waking up alone with pictures strung across his pillow? His clothes felt tight, his body not his own, as if those five or six unconscious hours had taken something away from him. He had been touched by a stranger. Someone had put his arms around him to get him upstairs, had held him when laying him down on the bed, touched his feet when he took off his shoes. Nik raised his head, sure that he would see him there in front of him, demanding something, or laughing at him, but the person standing there was a young woman who wanted to tell him her own feelings about Lovecraft and explain Lovecraft's mistaken ideas about eastern religion.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," he said to Cara a little later, as she led him down the hall and toward the snack bar.

"You were brilliant," Cara said.

Nik dragged his feet. "I just want to go back to the room and lie down with my face in a pillow," which made him think of the photos in their carefully arranged line. "Oh god."

"Stop it," Cara said. "I have intel. Don't you want to know what I found out about your stalker?"

"No," Nik said. "Well, yes. But first tell me exactly how awful I was."

"You were fine, and you know it." She shoved a pomegranate juice at him, and dragged him toward one of the little outdoor tables. "Sit."

Nik sat and obediently drank some juice, wiggling the straw in the bottle.

"His name is Daniel Ito, and he's doing PR for the conference, all the social media and updating the Web site with photos and so on. He's a friend of the conference director, they went to college together, and she's the current

president of IFA, and he's doing it as a favor for her. He's half Japanese—his father is American, and his Japanese mother is dead." She sat back, waiting for applause.

"How did you find all that out?"

"I asked around while you were fending off your groupies. People like to talk—and there's more." She made a show of sipping deliberately at her juice.

"What more?" Nik squeezed her straw between his thumb and finger, cutting off the flow.

"Hey," she said. "After I played spy girl for you."

"So what else?"

"All the people I talked to said he's really nice. And that he's single. And that he's—" she leaned forward and said the last word in a seductive purr, "—gay."

"I really don't need this," Nik said. "Stop pimping me out."

"Just letting you know," Cara said. "What you do with this information is entirely up to you. Got to go. I have a meeting with somebody from that new urban fantasy press. They want me so bad."

Nik watched her walk away, twirling the straw between his fingers. It was sunny, and the small outdoor patio was attractive and cozy, a wash of earth tones, the tables and chairs made from bent metal in graceful forms. He had given his talk, and now he was free to enjoy the conference. He would sit here for a while and people watch, then he would go to browse at the book fair, maybe pick up something to read for the flight back, and then check out a few panels. There was one on history of steampunk that looked good, and another promising to debunk Tolkien, which might be amusing.

A little voice in his head reminded him that he should be making plans: what would he do when he went back? He'd have to move out of the apartment. He'd have to tell everyone about what had happened, admit that

what he'd said about true love was a load of bullshit. How could he have been so wrong about Evan?

They had met in the first week he was teaching, introduced by Nik's faculty mentor in the English department office. He'd noticed Evan's looks first, and also Evan's appreciative glance, the inquiring press of his hand, but as he got to know him he liked him for his intelligence and passion for his scholarship. Evan had done more mentoring for him than Dr. Jentosh had bothered to do, always ready with tips and insider knowledge of the university, who to befriend or avoid. Evan had influenced his work, too, giving him new ideas, new directions. Of course, he wasn't uncritical. He disapproved strongly of Nik's work on fantasy tropes, saying that no one would take him seriously if he worked in genre. Nik almost smiled at the memory of Evan saying this to him a month after they'd met, as they lay in each other's arms in Evan's bed, Evan's mouth moving against Nik's chest, emphasizing the word "genre" with a little bite.

Had Evan ever loved him? Was Nik merely convenient, the only other gay man in the department, someone to mold and shape? (*Push around*, his inner voice commented.) The sun was shining on Nik's face, and he pulled his chair further into the shade. Had he loved Evan? Or had he only been dazzled by the attention of someone a little older, more sophisticated and knowledgeable? This was possibly the most horrible result of Evan's backing out of what Nik thought they'd agreed on—that he was doubting his own feelings, as if with a few words, Evan had changed the past into something unrecognizable.

Nik began to gather his things, when his phone chimed again. Evan, of course.

<*U R being childish,*> it read. <*Y all or nothing?*>

He clutched his phone hard, wanting to bash it on the table until the words disappeared from the screen. <*Love IS all or nothing*>, he texted, jabbing the screen to send it.

So quickly that it was impossible to believe that they were separated by however many miles of continent and ocean, Evan texted back: *<Cant we just forget abt all this? Rnt u lonely?>* There was a pause, and then, *<Phone sex?>*

Nik stared at the juice bottles on the table without seeing them. He knew that Evan intended this to be conciliatory, but it had only made him more angry. He grabbed his phone and pushed his chair back with a harsh scraping sound. Heads turned, and a group of men getting drinks glanced at him. One of them was not-Japanese guy, Daniel whoever he was, looking at him with a question in his eyes.

Nik got up and went over to him, getting close and in his face. “You really are stalking me, aren’t you? What’s your problem? Wasn’t last night bad enough?” he added incoherently.

The guy, Daniel, didn’t step back from Nick. “I’m here with some people.” He nodded toward the two men behind him, both trying to pretend they weren’t listening.

Nik was still angry, but now he felt like an idiot. “Whatever,” he said eloquently. “I’m—” he shook his head. He was still clutching his phone as if he could squeeze the Evan out of it, and he put it in his pocket. “I’ve got to go,” he said.

Daniel put a hand on his arm, but Nik pulled away. I should have gone with Cara, he thought. I apparently need a keeper. He turned and left, walking through one of the rose-lined aisles.

He meant to go to the book fair, but he found himself on the path to his room. The hidden courtyard of flowers and birdsong was soothing, and the feeling of the door of his room shutting out the world even better. He did what he’d told Cara he wanted to do earlier, flung his bag on the floor and lay facedown on the bed. “I am such a moron,” he said out loud. He tried some yoga breathing, and then doing math problems in his head, but neither calmed him down.

If he hadn’t already decided it was over with Evan, that last text would have made him sure of it—one of Evan’s tricks, using sex to settle an

argument. The trouble was that now he was thinking about sex. He groaned and rolled over, rubbing the heel of his hand down over his cock. Oh, he so did not want to think about sex with Evan now. He wanted to burn all those memories out of his head. But somehow his hand kept rubbing, and then stroking. Not Evan, he said to himself, trying to think about his pre-Evan fantasies. The kid in Boy Scouts who had always maneuvered it so they were lagging at the end of the hike, so they could kiss. His tenth-grade English teacher, with sexy glasses and wide shoulders. (*Hmmm—was that how he'd picked his major in college?*) Evan, the first time they'd danced at a club. Not Evan, not Evan, he chanted.

His hand was inside his good pants now (put on to look professorial at the panel), his belt and zipper undone. He stroked his cock, feeling the soft skin slide over the hard, blood-filled length, pushing Evan out of his head. It could be anyone's hand, he told himself, anyone bending over him. He tugged harder, feeling a space open inside of him, sensation rushing in. Someone's hand on him, someone pushing his legs farther apart. He lifted his hips toward this someone, and as he came, spurting hard, someone took shape in his head. Not-Japanese guy, watching him with his quiet eyes, his beautiful mouth pursed a little as if he were about to ask a question.

“Fuck,” Nik said a few moments later, lying sticky and spent on the hotel bedspread, come all over his favorite shirt. Yes, he was an idiot.

At two o'clock, he and Cara were sitting in the audience, waiting for the intimate chat with Darius Gavent, famous and revered author of fifty-seven books of fantasy and thirteen graphic novels, six of which had been made into movies. Intimate apparently meant that the author would sit onstage in a comfy armchair in front of several hundred worshipful people. “Where did you go?” Cara was searching through her purse. “I thought you were going to the book fair.”

“I was tired,” Nik said. “I went to lie down for a while.”

“You sound like my grandma. It's a good thing you and Evan broke up. He's been turning you into another old man.”

“Evan isn’t old,” Nik said. “He’s only thirty-eight.”

“Did you ever see his driver’s license? I bet he shaved off a few years.” Cara came up with the package of gum she was looking for, and held it out to Nik.

He shook his head. “I wish you’d make up your mind. Are you glad I broke up with him or not?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Cara said, unwrapping her gum.

“Mmhhh.” All around them, people were rustling and shifting, checking their conference schedules, paging through the books they’d found at the book fair. There were a fair number of cosplayers in the audience, dressed as various characters in Gavent’s books. A group in the rags and metal cuffs and hats—the street children from *Iris and Fred*. Several representations of Lord Languor, the anti-hero in *Beautiful Kingdomz*. He counted at least twenty women wearing the slashed velvet rags and long curls of Fair Katrina, the doomed heroine of *All Desire in a Day*.

This dressing up was another thing that Evan hated—he found it childish and demeaning. “No one dresses up as Jay Gatsby or Jake Barnes,” he liked to say. “The more serious works of literature don’t encourage that kind of fandom.” Evan wrote books on American literature of the early twentieth century, which he persisted in calling “contemporary.” The last time they’d had this argument, Nik had pointed out snappishly that nothing could be contemporary if it was from another century. And furthermore, Nik had said, he didn’t like *The Great Gatsby* all that much. “I’m tired of hearing about those giant spectacles and the fucking green light.” Evan had sucked in his breath, reeling back as if Nik had struck him. They had made up, of course.

“But I **don’t** like *The Great Gatsby*,” Nik muttered. And he found the cosplayers interesting—a kind of embodied fan fiction—even endearing.

“What are you talking about?” Cara asked. “Look, there he is.”

Darius Gavent was standing by the comfy chair on the stage, talking to several other people who all seemed anxious to do something for him. A young woman was adjusting the lamp beside the chair, another setting out a

water bottle, pouring some into a glass. The stage curtains were drawn back, and more people hovered in their shadow. One of them was not-Japanese guy. Of course, Nik thought. He's everywhere. He shifted in his seat, feeling uncomfortable and resentful. Because of the whole wanking interlude, which he felt Daniel whoever had unfairly intruded on, and because he, Nik, had behaved so badly earlier, and probably last night, too. He ought to apologize. He sighed.

"Stop sighing over stupid Evan," Cara said. "Look, your guy is up there. Maybe he can get us an intro to Darius."

"I'm sure he'll want to do that," Nik said. "Not."

"Why not?" Cara folded up her program and waved it in Daniel's direction. "He's all 'I like you with random impromptu photos'."

"I might have been rude to him," Nik said, not loudly at all.

"What?" Cara said. "Shhh, they're starting."

Now it was Nik's turn to sit in the audience and look at Daniel. He stared at him, as Darius Gavent rambled on pleasantly in answer to fond, foolish questions from his admirers. Where did he get his ideas? Was Fair Katrina based on someone he knew? What was his agent's name? What advice did he have for someone who had a completed 1000-page fantasy trilogy?

Nik half-listened to Darius' gentle humor, his eyes on Daniel. He was wearing a dark-red shirt, his hair slicked back from his forehead today. This should have made him look a bit demonic, but instead he looked delicate, a little fey. Nik's head ached. Why couldn't he have been at this conference under different circumstances? If he and Evan were solid, he wouldn't have gotten drunk, he wouldn't have given this guy a thought. He might have noticed him, admired him, but then he would have passed on without all this angst and damage. That would have been best, and he wished it were so.

But, his inner voice argued, it would also have been excellent if this was pre-Evan, or better yet, if there was no Evan at all. Then he would be free to enjoy someone's unusual seduction, if that was what it was, and to watch him move gracefully on stage, setting up shots, circling Darius Gavent but

somehow keeping discreetly out of the way. Nik had the fantasy that he was invisible to everyone else, that only Nik really saw him. He noticed things he hadn't seen before: the glint of silver in his earlobe, the length of the fingers that manipulated camera and lens, the way his forehead wrinkled and his mouth drew up at one side when he was concentrating on the next shot.

Afterward, Nik dragged Cara away for a late lunch in another one of the little snack bars, this one set up near one of the swimming pools. Cara had her iPad out, looking at the conference Web site. "Only two more days," she said. "I'm having so much fun, I'll hate to leave. I got three more 'expressions of interest' from presses, did I tell you? It's the award, probably."

"I guess," Nik said. He'd had another text message from Evan, which he'd deleted without reading.

"Look, there's a page of conference pictures. It's me getting my award!" Cara frowned at the picture. "Why did I wear that dress? I look like a sick cat in that color."

"What does a sick cat look like?"

Cara didn't answer. She was frowning at the photo set. "You know," she said. "You are in a lot of these. Here, after my award ceremony. And in some audience shots." She pointed. "Some are close-ups, even."

Nik leaned over to see. His face leaped out at him from the Web page, here profile, here full face, a few times from the back—he recognized his *Weird Tales* T-shirt. "It's just random," he said. "If you looked for someone else, you could probably find as many of them."

"Right," Cara said. "There certainly aren't as many pictures of me."

"Jealous?" Nik said lightly, although he was feeling a little flushed.

"I'd only be jealous if I was interested in being seduced by a certain gay photographer." Cara smirked at him.

"Stop it," Nik said, and surprisingly, Cara did. She let her iPad lie on the table, going back to the counter for more napkins. Nik extended one finger and

tapped the screen to refresh it. There was something almost comforting about seeing all these images of himself dotted on the Web page, as if he were being seen by someone who knew him, although that was ridiculous. This man didn't know him. And when people did get to know him, obviously, they lost interest. They found fault, they overlooked his wishes, they pulled back just when he was starting to feel content. He tapped the screen again when it faded. There was one of him sipping juice through a straw, one of a crowd at the snack bar. He must have taken that one this morning, Nik thought. His lips looked very pink.

Had Evan ever taken a picture of him? He pushed the iPad away. Now that was ridiculous. As if a photo showed proof of love.

“Did you bring your swimming stuff?” Cara asked when she sat down.

“Yes,” he said. “You?”

“Of course.” There was a sign that proclaimed the temperature of the water, in Japanese characters, English, French, and German. “What are you doing this afternoon?”

Nik poked at his rice bowl. “I don't know. A couple of panels, I guess. Did you want to go swimming?”

Cara was tapping at her iPad. “We should do some sightseeing. They list some tours on the conference Web site—here's a historic tour of old Tokyo.”

“I'm not sure—” Nik began.

“Are you really going to come all the way to Japan and then just sit around in your hotel room?” Cara pointed her chopsticks at him.

“I've gone to lots of stuff,” he said, scowling at her.

“Conference stuff. It's a small, small world, populated with people just like you, Mr. Xenophobe.”

Just then, a man and woman passed them, holding hands, dressed as Tolkienish elves, all pointed ears and hair extensions. Nik nodded toward them, grinning.

“You know what I mean,” Cara said. “If you just barricade yourself here and go from panel to reading to lecture, you’re acting like—I don’t know,” she spluttered, “the ugly American.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to let you call me ugly,” Nik said, pretending to preen, smoothing his hand over his hair with a fake sigh. “So where do you want to go?”

An hour later they were sitting on a tour bus, one of two that would take them on one of the historic tours.

Many stops later, the bus drew up at a building that looked hundreds of years old. Another temple. Nik groaned. Cara elbowed him. “I’m not a xenophobe,” he whispered to her. “I wouldn’t be any more excited about going to fifty-six American churches either.”

“It was only five,” Cara said. “Come on, it’s the last stop.” She had brought her sketchpad along, and she’d been making quick pencil drawings that Nik knew she would use as ideas for her illustrator work. “Look at those cool columns,” she said, making a beeline for them.

Nik saw that this temple had a garden, and he broke off from the bus tour crowd so that he could be alone for a while. He didn’t need to see another Buddha. The garden was enclosed, but not small, bounded by head-high stone walls. Three-quarters of a football field long, Nik estimated. It was cool and shaded and quiet, with paths that curved between smooth plots of grass or raked stones.

The space seemed open and randomly laid out, but the way the few trees and bushes were placed formed private spots, some with benches. Meditation stations maybe, Nik thought. He followed one of the paths until he found a tiny sub-garden, hardly larger than a queen-sized bed. There was a circular pool in the center, only three feet across, with orange fish swimming slowly in the green water. Five fish, Nik counted. This space had no bench, but there was a flat rock under some willows that hung over it, making a leafy cave. He sat down to watch the fish and think, but somehow his mind refused to settle.

He didn't want to think about Evan or his career, or anything at all, really. His head was filled with images, floating as slowly as the fish.

The garden was silent. If there were other people who had escaped the promised onslaught of historical information, he couldn't hear them. He could hear the air moving through the trees, a rustling, sibilant whisper. A flurry of pink and white followed the breeze, cherry petals maybe, falling into the water of the little pool and drifting across the pavement surrounding it. The fish rose to test the petals' edibility and then sank, unimpressed.

I wish I could stay here, Nik thought. I could build a hut and become a hermit. He imagined himself staring into the pool for inspiration, the fish, his brothers, existing on cherry petals and beauty. That would work, he thought, if I could stand to be alone for half an hour. If I could speak Japanese. If I didn't have to go back to my insecure job. He'd have to take what inspiration away that he could gather now. He waited expectantly to see if something would come to him, an idea about his life or the universe, or something. He abandoned the fish and closed his eyes, shutting them tightly as if this would help the process. I'm thinking, I'm thinking, of... What? He could see the shadow of an empty page, or rather a page in a book that was lying open. Wow, he thought, I'm good at this. He hoped it wasn't his dissertation, which he was supposed to be turning into a book which he had begun to hate. He squeezed his eyelids down harder, trying to get more.

"Are you okay?"

Nik's eyes flew open. "What?" he said intelligently.

It was (*of course it was*) the guy, camera guy, not-Japanese guy. Again. "Really?" Nik said. "I mean, really?"

He said nothing for a moment, just looking Nik not quite in the eye and fiddling with one of his cameras. He half turned, as if he would go.

Nik sprang up and took hold of his arm. "Don't go," he said. And then, when the other man looked at him, almost smiling, "I mean, you owe me an explanation." He looked down at his hand on the unfamiliar arm. He flexed his fingers and then let go. "Don't you think?"

“What kind of an explanation do you want?”

“Well,” Nik fumbled. “Why are you here? You’re always turning up. What are you doing?”

“We should introduce ourselves before we have a deep philosophical discussion.” He bowed his head slightly. “I’m Ren.”

“I thought your name was Daniel.” When the other man raised an eyebrow, he flushed. “Cara said, my cousin said—well, it doesn’t matter.”

“Daniel Ren Ito for formal, Ren for usual. You’re Nikolas Jewell. I looked you up.”

“Nik,” he found himself saying. They were still standing close, not touching, but closer than Nik found entirely comfortable. This man has had his hands on me, he thought, and it made him a shiver a little, he hoped undetectably. “And you’re here because?”

Daniel, or Ren, laughed. “In Japan? A favor for a friend, and a sort of vacation before I start a new job.” When Nik started to protest, he went on. “And here, in the garden? I heard your cousin say you were coming and I bought my own ticket. I was on the other bus.”

“But—” Nik waved his hands around.

“I came because I wanted to see you and talk to you.” He raised one hand when Nik sputtered. “You’re not going to ask why, are you?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

Ren grinned at him. “One, I am a free person and can do what I want, within reason. Two, I am emotionally unencumbered and so are you. Three, I find you entirely beautiful and enticing, although maybe a little slow.” He spread his long-fingered hands, as if there could be nothing more to say.

“How do you know I’m unencumbered?” Nik said.

“Do you want to sit down?” Ren asked. He moved to the flat rock and arranged himself, angling his body so gracefully that Nik was almost speechless.

Almost. “How did you know?”

“It’s a story,” Ren said. “Not terribly long, but not short.” He patted the rock and after a moment, Nik sat down.

“Okay,” he said. Again, they weren’t touching, but their bodies were close. Ren’s hand lay on the rock, fingers close to Nik’s hip. Nik found that he was breathing more quickly. It had been a long time since he’d been this close to another man, in just this way. For three years, only Evan—but no, he wasn’t going to think about Evan. “How do you know? Did Cara say something?”

“You told me,” Ren said. He extended his hand and tapped one of his fingers against the back of Nik’s hand. “When I was taking you back to your room. You don’t remember? You told me you’d broken up with someone named Evan on a matter of principle.”

“I told you that?” Nik felt a little horrified that he’d had essentially a blackout, that he’d been walking around and talking unguardedly and couldn’t remember any of it.

“You did.” Ren’s finger drew a little circle on Nik’s hand and then pulled away. “You were very chatty.”

“And the pictures?” Nik was beginning to get a headache.

“Did you like my story?” Ren grinned.

“Yes,” Nik said, “I mean no, but that’s not the point. I meant why have you been taking all these pictures of me. Cara showed me on the Web site—” Ren put his hand on Nik’s knee and the words dried up in his mouth.

“I let my eye draw me to things. My eye is drawn to you.” Ren had something in his hand, his phone, and he brought it up between them. He paused courteously, giving Nik time to object, and then he clicked off several pictures, moving a bit this way, a bit the other way. He leaned toward Nik and held the phone out so that Nik could see the screen. “You see?” Ren said. “It’s simple. You’re rather beautiful, and I’d like to know you better.”

Nik felt his jaw loosening, and clapped his teeth together so that he wouldn't gape like an idiot. "It's not that simple." He stood, as if this would clarify matters.

"It is," Ren said. "Can we have a drink together tonight?" He stood, too, and touched Nik's elbow.

"I don't even know who you are," Nik said. "Why are you not Japanese?"

Ren grinned at the question. "I'm not from Japan," he said. "I'm half. My mother's parents were. She was born in Virginia." He gestured toward himself, his arm a graceful arc that swept from head to foot. "I look like that side, not like my father."

"Oh," Nik said. Now that he'd asked, this didn't seem like the most crucial thing he had to know. If he had to know anything.

"It's not a big thing," Ren said. "Say no, if you don't want to. But, just to be clear—I do want to. Want to know you better. Want to have a drink with you. Want to kiss you. Want to—"

"Stop," Nik held up his hand, a signal for Ren to wait, and he did, closing his mouth. Nik felt hot and a little angry, a furious swirl of turbulence in the calm order and beauty of the garden.

The petals were still falling. A handful of them decorated Ren's hair. Nik didn't know what he wanted—to shove Ren away, to turn and walk farther into the garden, to touch that soft black hair. He felt stuck, a feeling that had started when Evan had turned to him with what he now remembered as a patronizing smile and blown their life apart. Stuck, paralyzed, unable to go forward. Evan had done this to him, he thought. Stupid Evan.

"Okay," Nik said.

"Fine. Hotel bar at seven?" Ren said, his hand coming up to pull at one of the buttons on his shirt.

Was he nervous? Nik wondered. "Fine," he said.

They stood there for a moment longer, and Nik waited to see what Ren would do. Would he lean forward for a kiss? Would Nik let him? He was very

conscious of his lips, he had to sternly repress an impulse to wet them with his tongue. Wrong message, he said to himself. (*But was it the wrong message?*) It seemed like a long time, this business of possibly leaning toward one another, Nik feeling Ren's eyes on him.

"Nik!" Cara was calling him, and he pulled back from Ren so quickly that he stumbled, almost stepping into the fishpond. Ren grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Not now," Nik said, and then blushed, as if this had committed him to something. He couldn't look at the other man's face.

"Coming," he called.

Nik and Cara were whispering at the back of the big room where the History of Steampunk panel was debating the importance of the zeppelin. He'd filled her in on the latest in what she had taken to calling his stalking romance. "I've never passed out," she said. "What was it like?"

"It was like nothing," Nik said. "That's the whole point of the blackout—you remember nothing."

"Like amnesia," Cara said, as they bent their heads together. The room was very full. It felt as if there weren't enough air. "Remember, you used to have amnesia fantasies."

"That was when I was fifteen," he said. For a while, after he'd seen *Spellbound* at a Hitchcock festival, he'd thought that it would be rather nice to wake up after a not-too-severe head injury without any memory of his life. He'd have to start over from scratch, surviving on his good looks and intelligence. (*He'd had an unrealistically high estimate of both, probably.*) He'd imagined living under a new name, perhaps in a small town, working as a librarian (*which, apparently, he'd considered to be a job that didn't require skills or education*). Cara knew about these fantasies, although she didn't know that one of their standard features was that when he woke up as a blank slate, his gayness was one of the things that had been wiped away. Rightly,

he'd been too ashamed to tell her that. He'd forgiven himself though; fifteen was not a good year for him.

"Never mind that," Cara said. "What are you going to wear?"

"I don't think I should go," Nik said.

"What!"

"Do you mind?" The woman in front of them had turned around to hiss at them.

"It seems like a bad idea," Nik whispered.

Typically, Cara didn't bother asking him why, since she knew him so well. "Come on," she said. "This is almost over."

"But—" Cara had his arm and was dragging him out of the row they'd been sitting in. "Excuse me," Nik said to the people whose knees he was bumping, "excuse me, excuse me."

When they were out in the hall, Cara turned on him with a fierce expression. "You are going."

Nik looked down at his feet.

"Aren't you going to ask me why?" she asked. When he didn't answer, she said, "You're not asking me why because you know why."

"To metaphorically flip Evan off?" Nik said. "Because I need to 'get back out there'?" He hooked his fingers for air quotes.

Cara shook her head. "Evan is out of the equation. Yes, he's an asshole who doesn't appreciate you, as well as having one foot in the grave, comparatively. But that's beside the point. You should go because this Daniel—"

"He likes to be called Ren."

"This guy Ren is 'A'—very hot, and 'B'—he's interested in you, and 'C'—I want you to. That last one is the most important, you know."

"Right," Nik said. "I'm doing it for you."

“Now you’ve got it,” Cara said, smiling.

At 6:45, Nik was hovering in front of the mirror, holding bits of his hair out in front of the mirror, wondering if he should give himself an impromptu trim. He snipped some, only a quarter inch of dusty blond, and then another quarter inch. He shook his head to let his hair settle. Nervously, his fingers itched to cut more, but he was afraid that if he gave in, he’d end up with too-short hair standing up on his head in ugly stubs. (*Once, in that bad year of fifteen, he’d cut his hair to within an uneven inch of his scalp.*)

He was dressed in unreasonably nice clothes—gray slacks and a dark-blue shirt with cuffs that required cufflinks, very nice enamel ones that had belonged to his grandfather. He had on the jacket he’d worn to his panel. Frowning, he took it off, and put on his leather jacket. He put the nail scissors away in his duffel bag, to remove the temptation to snip away more hair.

It was 6:49. If he waited a little longer, he could argue that it was too late, and take that excuse for deciding not to go. He slid his feet into his shoes, and stood still, waiting to see what he would do. He picked up his phone to put it into his pocket, after checking to see if he had a text, but Evan was silent. He hadn’t texted Nik for hours, which was annoying. He didn’t want Evan to text him, but apparently, he didn’t want him to give up so easily either. I am not rational, he thought. And going to the hotel bar to see this virtual stranger was certainly not rational. So maybe he should go.

“Stop thinking,” he advised himself, and the sound of his own voice propelled him to open the door and go out. He hardly noticed the madly singing birds in their wicker cages, they were lovebirds, Cara had told him. He walked toward the hotel bar as if he were going to something dreaded—a test he wasn’t prepared for. And yet he was walking quickly, as if he wanted whatever it was that would happen.

The soles of his shoes tapped on the stone walkway with a cheerful sound. All around him, conference attendees were walking or sitting in pairs, talking about the panels they’d attended, looking at books they’d bought, trying to decide where they’d eat dinner on the second-to-last night of the conference. Cara was going out with some people she’d met, a group of illustrators who

had banded together in mock solidarity against what Cara called “all you word people.” They were going to talk images, she’d told Nik smugly, “You know, those things that are worth a thousand of your text-y things.”

Nik stood at the entrance to the bar. This was not, happily, the same bar where he’d made a fool of himself with the Manhattans. This one was small and intimate, more Japanese in style than the other two bars that the hotel boasted, although whether this was genuinely Japanese or only what tourists expected, Nik didn’t know. The lighting was low, the workings of the bar hidden behind screens, which also divided the main room into smaller areas. There was a sound of softly moving water, although Nik couldn’t see where it came from. Music was playing, nothing he recognized, the sound so low that it almost wasn’t there.

He took a step forward, looking for Daniel—Ren. There were other couples here, and one larger group of what looked like businessmen of varied nationalities, laughing over a tableful of half-filled glasses, their drinks glowing oddly in the light of the small shaded lamps. He didn’t see Ren.

While he was trying to decide whether he should stay and wait, or flee, someone took his elbow. Someone—Ren. Nik felt the muscles in his arm tense up, and as if he felt it, too, Ren smoothed his hand over Nik’s bicep. “You’re here,” he said. “I had a bet on whether you’d show or not.”

“A bet with who?” Nik swung around.

“Only with myself.” Ren laughed. “A win-win.” He waved to the hostess, who led them to one of the little tables, sheltered by a set of screens, its own alcove. Ren sat down on the bench seat and slid over.

Nik hesitated, but there was no separate chair to put him safely on the other side of the table, and he’d feel silly asking for one. He sat down, leaving a little space between them, feeling as prim as a Victorian maiden.

“Do you like sake?” Ren asked.

“Not really,” Nik said.

“Good,” Ren said. “I hate it when people think that’s all the Japanese people, or half-Japanese drink. You wouldn’t believe how many times I’ve been faced with a bottle of cheap sake when I go over to someone’s house.”

“Hopeful dates?” Nik said, relaxing a little.

“Those, or dinners with acquaintances.”

“They’re trying to be nice, probably,” Nik said. “Sensitive to your perceived cultural identity.”

Ren grimaced, which should have made his mouth look ugly, but didn’t. “I know. But I hate it anyway. I wasn’t brought up any other way than American. I wouldn’t have known I was part-Japanese when I was a kid if everyone wasn’t always reminding me.”

“Your mother?” Nik said. “She didn’t want you to know about your background?” They were sitting half turned, so they could look into each other’s faces.

“She died when I was two, so, no.” Ren shrugged.

“Sorry,” Nik said. “And your father probably didn’t have time for any of that?”

The waitress had come over for their orders. Nik hadn’t looked at the drinks list, since he almost always ordered the same thing. But he found that he didn’t want to drink a Manhattan in front of Ren, as if it would be disloyal to someone. (*He couldn’t work out whether this someone was Ren or Evan.*) He made a face at the list, undecided.

“So, beer?” Ren asked.

“What’s good?” Nik asked the waitress, and when she’d pointed out a few recommendations, they ordered.

They were silent while they waited for their drinks, Ren looking out into the main room, tapping his fingers on the table. Nik was feeling a little let down. After the way that Ren had chased him, he’d been expecting more in the way of a seduction (*not that he wanted that, not at all*). Ren hadn’t even touched him since that grip on his arm when he’d gotten there. But Nik could

feel him, even though their bodies were separated by those crucial inches. The heat along the length of his thigh, the touch of Ren's scent, the movement of his longish black hair when he turned his head.

"What are you going to do with all those pictures you took?" Nik asked. "Of me," he clarified when Ren turned to look at him.

"They're on the conference Web site," he said. "You saw." Ren had a complicated expression on his face, which Nik couldn't interpret.

"You're not going to build a shrine in the secret room in your house, are you?"

Ren laughed. The waitress was back. She opened the bottles and poured the pale golden beer into tall-footed glasses. "That's the plan," he said. "It's in the Stalkers for Dummies rules." He took a sip of beer.

"Aren't you supposed to offer to sell me the negatives?" Nik said. He found himself leaning toward Ren.

"You know that the whole negatives thing is meaningless with digital, right?" Ren had moved, too, so that his knee brushed fleetingly against Nik's.

"Are you laughing at me?" Nik drank some beer and looked at Ren over the rim of his glass.

"Yeah." Ren put his glass down. "Should I take you more seriously?"

The words "take you" made Nik feel as if he had started to burn, slowly. "How do you mean?" Wow, that sounded intelligent, he said to himself.

"Have we gotten into the innuendo now?" Ren said. "Good." He leaned closer to Nik, his mouth almost touching Nik's ear.

"Umm," Nik said, taking a quick drink of beer. "What's Ren? A nickname or something?"

"It's my Japanese name—Daniel from my father, Ren from my mother. And since we're backing off on the innuendo, why don't you tell me about this Evan guy? What happened?"

Nik took another drink to stall, suddenly sorry that he'd changed the subject. "We broke up. End of story."

Ren frowned, turning the glass in his hands. "You told me about the whole marriage thing," he said. "How he wouldn't go through with it."

"My god," Nik said. "Did I never shut up?" He pulled away from Ren, starting to get up.

Ren put his hand on Nik's arm, stilling him. "Sorry," he said. "I just wanted to know more about you."

Nik stayed seated, but he pulled away from Ren's hold. "I hate it that I said and did all these things and that I can't remember any of it. From the time I—" he stopped himself from saying 'tried to kiss you'—"you came up to me until I woke up next morning with those stupid photos on the pillow next to me—it's all gone. A black hole. Nothing there." He found that he was trembling. "I hate it."

The closeness and dimness of the bar around them suddenly seemed cloying, suffocating, the laughter of the businessmen mocking and triumphant. Nik rubbed his eyes, feeling tired. "I should go," he said.

"Don't," Ren said. "I'm sorry I brought it up. I can see how it would be upsetting." He didn't move closer or touch Nik, but Nik could feel that he wanted to. "Stay," he said. "Stay here for a little, and then, maybe," his voice got lower, "maybe come back with me, to my room. Or yours." His voice was just a whisper in Nik's ear.

"I want to," Nik was surprised to find himself saying, "but I really, really don't think I should. It's like this is a fantasy, not anything to do with my life. I don't think I can afford a fantasy right now." He laughed. "Ironic, right? I'm at the International Fantasy Con, and I'm rejecting what I came here to discuss."

Ren nodded. "If that's what you want," he said decisively, as if they'd been discussing a business deal.

Nik thought that he looked sad. Impulsively, he leaned across the little space between them and touched his mouth to Ren's. "Good-bye," he said.

Nik was expecting Ren to return his kiss in kind, chastely and regretfully. But after the first touch, Ren opened his mouth a little and licked between Nik's lips, and when Nik stilled, but didn't pull back, he lunged forward, angling his body so that they pressed against one another from shoulder to hip, one arm bracing himself against the seat, the other catching Nik at the nape of his neck, fingers under Nik's hair.

Nik's elbow caught on the tablecloth, dragging it toward them, and he thought that he ought to do something about it so that their beers didn't fall into their laps. But instead, he found himself sinking a little in his seat, his legs sprawling under the table. With one eye, he tried to see if anyone was looking at them, but then Ren took his hand away from Nik's neck, still kissing him fiercely, and touched his waist, just above the hip. Nik's shirt had pulled up, and Ren's hand was laying against skin, hot and gentle. Nik didn't want anything more than for that hand to skim down past his belt and the front of his pants to cup and smooth over where his cock was pushing against his zipper.

But then Ren was pulling back, his hand and his mouth releasing Nik. "Sorry," he said, holding his hands up as if to keep Nik from hitting him. "I know. Sorry. Okay," he said. He turned away a little and picked up his beer. "Right—good-bye."

Nik got up, tucking his shirt in as unobtrusively as he could. He walked out, not even thinking about paying, and walked back to his room, trying to think, or even just to walk without stumbling. When he had shut the door behind him, he lay down on the bed. The phone was blinking at him, probably a message from Cara wanting to know what had happened, but he ignored it.

Stupid, he said into the pillow. I am so stupid.

At breakfast the next day, the last day of the conference, Nik sat alone in the white table-clothed splendor of the breakfast café. Cara was sleeping off

what she'd described in a late-night text as an epic-drinking bout with her illustrator buddies. Nik ate his bacon and poked at his eggs, thankful that the server had brought him a pot of coffee instead of only a cup. He'd brought a book to read, but he couldn't concentrate on it, choosing instead to watch the other early breakfasters.

He saw someone wave at him and jumped a little—it was one of his fellow panel members. He was relieved that it wasn't Ren, he told himself. How awkward would that be? But this was the last day of the conference, so opportunities for the awkward would be limited. Nik poured himself more coffee. Probably Ren didn't want to see him any more than Nik wanted to see Ren. No one likes being rejected. I certainly didn't, he thought.

That was what it was with Evan, he realized. It wasn't a betrayal so much, but just that Evan was saying he didn't want me that way, the way I thought he did. Was it always me who talked about marriage? Did Evan smile and nod instead of arguing? Evan didn't like to argue. He liked to state his opinion and wait for you to agree with him.

All right, Nik thought, that was a little unfair (*but only a little*). What had he really been to Evan? Nik had thought that they loved each other, but maybe it was just attraction and liking and compatibility. And convenience? He sighed. It didn't matter, he supposed. He was going home tomorrow, and he'd have to meet with Evan at least briefly, to settle things, and to move out. And of course he'd have to see him at work—what a nightmare that would be.

Determinedly, he opened his book, one of those he'd bought at the book fair. A noisy group came into the café, talking and laughing. Nik looked up, and his eyes zeroed in on Ren, as if he knew he'd be there. They looked at each other across the room crowded with little tables and people drinking coffee. Ren's hair was tousled, as if he'd just gotten out of bed, his sleeves pushed up to show his forearms. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his jeans. He looked sulky, only half awake, but as their mutual gaze went on, his face, his whole body, seemed to soften and open. He stood still in the middle of the group waiting by the hostess station, looking at Nik, and Nik knew that

all he had to do was raise his hand, or even nod, and he would come over to him.

Nik didn't move, he felt as if he couldn't, the hand that had been about to pick up his cup frozen to the table, the other cramped on his open book. He didn't look away for a long minute, but then, as if there had been a time limit, Ren nodded, grimacing. He turned and left, melting away through the line of late-arriving breakfasters.

It's just as well, Nik told himself. He made himself finish his coffee and linger, pretending to read his book. (*Pretending for whom?* he asked himself.)

He kept repeating that to himself all day, while he made a last run at the book fair with a hungover Cara, went to some panels, and met for a farewell lunch with a few colleagues. Just as well. The timing was wrong. Couldn't go anywhere anyway. When Cara asked, he told her that they'd had a nice time, just a friendly drink, no big deal. Headachy and hiding behind dark glasses, she hadn't pushed, only asked him if he had some more extra strength Motrin.

Nik thought he'd see Ren and have to avoid him, but if he was still at the conference, he'd made himself invisible, for he didn't see him all day. And all day, perversely, Nik kept thinking of him, wondering what would have happened if he hadn't pushed Ren away. Stupid, he told himself. Stupid... stupid... stupid. But he didn't know which stupid thing it was: Saying no? That he kept thinking about it? But, as he'd said brightly to Cara, it didn't matter much, since he was getting on a plane tomorrow.

That night he went back to his room early. He and Cara had had dinner together and vowed to get to bed by ten. "Who scheduled us to leave at that crazy hour?" Cara had moaned, although they both knew it had been her. "You've been so quiet," she said to Nik before they parted to go to their own rooms. "Is Evan still hounding you?"

"An e-mail this morning," Nik said. "He wanted to know if I knew where his old electric razor was."

Cara laughed. "Romantic bastard." She ducked her head. "Sorry. But really?"

“I know,” Nik said. “But it’s how he always was, mind on the practical.” He realized that he’d put Evan in the past tense. If Cara noticed, she didn’t say anything.

Back in his room, he started to pack, laying his clothes in his suitcase and filling his duffel bag. This took much less time than he’d thought it would. He stretched out on the bed and turned on the TV, flicking through the channels. He wasn’t the least bit tired. The bedside clock informed him that it was 9:15. For a minute, he tried to figure out what time it was in Maryland, but as usual the consideration of international time zones made his head ache.

TV was boring, and he didn’t want to read. Shower, maybe? He sat up on the side of the bed, considering, one hand on the table. First, he decided to go through all the crap he’d been carrying around in his backpack. He dumped it out on the bed and made two piles—trash and save. Most of the colorful brochures he’d picked up here and there were trash, also business cards various people had pressed on him. (*He could find them on Google if he really wanted to get in touch.*) Lots of napkins. He set aside the notes he’d made on various panels and events to go through later—something for the long plane ride.

Thinking he might as well go through all his pockets and clean them out as well, he got out his two jackets. The sport jacket was clean except for some stray change. His leather jacket had more odds and ends, since he’d worn it more—a pencil stub, Cara’s Chap Stick, more change, and, oddly, a postcard. It showed a garden, stretches of green and raked gravel, pink-blossomed cherry trees, and—he straightened up—a small pool? Someone sitting next to it?

Nik held it closer to the light. It wasn’t a postcard at all, but a photo on cardstock paper. It was the garden at the temple, and the person sitting on a rock by the side of the pool was himself, knees drawn up, chin resting on them, hair falling forward in his eyes. He looked like someone dreaming, or waiting. Slowly he turned it over. On the back, someone had written a number—272, with a W after it. W for west he thought, for the farther end of

the hotel, where much of the conference staff were staying. Ren must have put it in his pocket at the bar.

Nik stood up, staying very still for several minutes. Then he picked up his leather jacket and put it on. He went out, leaving the mess from his backpack on the bed. The love birds were asleep in the courtyard, only one or two chirping when he passed.

When he found 272, he knocked on the door as if he'd always meant to be here tonight. Why not? He asked himself. Why shouldn't I?

When Ren opened the door, Nik lost his focused calm. Ren was wearing jeans and an unbuttoned shirt. Behind him, Nik could see his half-packed suitcase on the bed. All the lights were turned off except for the one on the bedside table. Ren stood there, not saying anything, not even really looking at him.

"I thought I'd," Nik said, "I mean." He stopped. "We didn't really say good-bye," he settled on.

"Actually, we did," Ren said. "You know, with the words and all." He put a hand on each side of the door, hanging between them a little, which made his open shirt part wider.

Nik could see the paleness of his chest. He couldn't think of anything persuasive or sensible to say, so he put his hand on Ren, on the hard bone of his sternum, flattening his palm against his skin. "I'm really pretty stupid," he finally came up with. "If you couldn't tell."

Ren took in a breath. "They let you teach college with the stupid thing going on?"

Nik didn't want to talk, he really didn't. He held out the picture he'd found in his pocket, showing it to Ren. "Maybe I'd like to have my picture taken."

Ren took Nik's hand, crumpling the photo a little between them. "I don't know if I'll have time for that," he said.

He pulled Nik into the room and closed the door. They stood there, looking at each other, linked by the hands that held the photo. Then Nik moved

forward, wanting to show that he didn't have doubts, this time. He stretched, tilting his chin up a little, putting his mouth on Ren's, who stood there, not yet responding. This was the first time they'd kissed standing up—Ren was only a little taller, an inch or two.

Nik moved his lips over Ren's. "Are you going to kiss back?" he asked. "Or am I going solo here?"

In answer, Ren put his arms around Nik and opened his mouth. They stood there, kissing, swaying a little awkwardly. Ren's mouth and hands were warm. "Are we going to—" Ren gestured toward the bed.

"Please, yes," Nik said, and Ren pulled him across the floor, while he kissed his neck.

When they were on the bed, he rolled so that Nik was half under him, keeping their mouths fused together. Nik felt Ren's hand come down on his waist, his hip, just as it had in the bar the night before, but now it paused for a moment and then moved down, pushing firmly across his groin, finding his cock under the denim of his jeans and rubbing it, one hard stroke after another.

Nik had a moment of panic. It had been three years since he'd been with anyone other than Evan. The moment that was coming on so quickly, when he'd be naked, his arousal and desire there for someone else to see, for Ren to see—was he ready for that? He struggled for a minute, pushing at Ren's shoulders, twisting away from his stroking hand.

"What—" Ren said into Nik's mouth. He pulled back to look at Nik, and somehow this made Nik feel calmer, as if Ren's eyes and his hands would anchor him to the bed. "Okay?" Ren asked.

"Okay," Nik said breathlessly.

Ren rose up, and for a minute Nik was afraid that he hadn't been clear enough, but it was only to push the suitcase off the bed. When he had done that, Ren put his hand on Nik's belt, opening the buckle, and then the button of his jeans. He looked at Nik, who looked back at him. "Okay," he said again.

Ren tugged the jeans down along with the briefs under them. It seemed to Nik that Ren couldn't look away from his cock, and he had to look himself, to see if it was more wonderful than he remembered. Ren bent down, putting his mouth against it, nuzzling it with his lips, rubbing his cheek over the head. "What do you want?" he asked Nik. "What do you want me to do?"

In answer, Nik pushed his jeans and briefs down, wriggling out of them, kicking them off. He reached for Ren, who almost fell on top of him. Nik curved his spine to rub against Ren. "You know," he whispered in his ear, licking into it.

Ren was pushing off his own jeans, and scrabbling at the suitcase half-emptied on the floor. Nik wished that there was more light—he wanted to see all of Ren, the curve of his shoulders, the bend and twist of his back as he bent toward Nik, one hand on his cock, as if reminding Nik of where they were going. He watched Ren put the condom on, and almost laughed when he offered Nik a palmful of lube. Ren was sliding his fingers under Nik's balls, a soft touch that got firmer and more insistent, circling and rubbing against Nik's entrance. Nik smoothed lube down over Ren's cock. He was moaning, he knew, and was embarrassed for a minute (*Evan had hated it when he did that*), but the look on Ren's face made him forget everything but that fierce grimace and Ren's hands on his ass and his fingers pushing inside him.

When Ren entered him, Nik's breath came out in a long sigh. He felt the burn and welcomed it. Ren's arms were wound around Nik's thighs as he pressed himself closer, farther, all the way in. Ren's hair fell around his face, curtaining it, and Nik wished that he could see his expression better, to know if he felt as much as Nik did. And then Ren was thrusting into him, every push inside a wave of desire and pleasure, and he forgot to think about who felt what. Ren crouched over him, touching him, holding and stroking Nik's cock, and the orgasm broke over him in waves, washing over them both, so that they rode it out together, clinging to each other.

After, Ren pulled out and rolled to the side so that he could hold Nik against him. He said something, but Nik was too blissed out to pay attention. He felt Ren get up and then come back to sit on the side of the bed, and he

tried to open his eyes. But he fell into sleep as if it were the blackout of that first awful night. He was aware of Ren moving around, and then of the comfort of a sheet pulled up, and then of nothing at all.

When Nik woke, the room was dark. He was lying on his stomach, nudged up against Ren, who had his arm draped across Nik's ass. He could see the red numerals on the bedside clock: 4:13 a.m. He turned his head carefully so that he could see Ren's face. His eyelids were twitching a little, as if he were dreaming, and Nik started to put his hand to Ren's cheek, to soothe him in case it was a nightmare. What would it be like to wake up with this beautiful face every morning, this long lanky body against his?

Nik sighed. Again with the stupid. Wasn't this how he got into the Evan situation? Thinking that wonderful sex meant soul mates? He had only gotten four hours sleep after round two, but he felt horribly awake, and his airport shuttle left in about forty-five minutes. Slowly, he pulled away from Ren, and felt around for his clothes. When he was dressed, he stood by the bed for a minute. Ren had turned over when Nik got out of bed and was lying on his side, the sheet pulled down so that Nik could see all the places he'd put his hands a few hours ago. Should he leave a note? But he didn't know what he could say, and so he went to the door and slipped out, closing it carefully so that he wouldn't wake Ren up. He wasn't sure who he was protecting—Ren or himself.

Epilogue

Three months later

Nik gathered his papers and books together as his Contemporary Lit students left the classroom, trying to remember where he'd put his calendar.

"See you next week, Professor Jewell." Janelle, a junior stopped at his desk. "I've got an idea for my final paper. Can we meet next week?"

"Sure," Nik said. "Study hard this weekend."

"Mm, maybe," she said. "In between waves. I'm going to Ocean City."

"Ah, summer school," Nik said. He waved to a colleague in the hall, and then stopped in the department office to check his mailbox.

"Nice to see you, Dr. Jewell," the secretary said. "You're looking pretty happy. TGIF, right?"

Nik grinned at her, grateful that she never mentioned how he'd avoided the office at the end of spring semester, afraid to run into Evan. She would have known why—the department secretary always knew everything.

Should he have gotten over Evan so quickly, he wondered as he walked out to the parking lot? Didn't that mean that the feelings that he'd thought were so deep, so permanent—hadn't been?

"Hello, Nik." He turned to see Dr. Jentosh, his faculty mentor. "I saw your article in the *New Studies Journal*," he said. "Some interesting angles."

"Thanks," Nik said. He opened his trunk and put his book bag inside.

"What are you working on now? A few more of those articles, and you'd have the beginnings of your next book."

"I am thinking about a book," Nik said. He got in and waved.

No need to tell Dr. Jentosh that the book he was thinking about centered on a shy giant, who teamed up early on with a dog that sang opera. Nik grinned as he pulled out of the lot. Without Evan to make supercilious comments about wasting his time on writing genre, Nik had made a good start on a story that might turn into a novel, but if it didn't, he was having fun writing it. It had

even given him some insight to the theory and criticism on fantasy. Maybe he would get a paper out of that, he thought, the writer's take on the theorists.

Without Evan, he thought as he drove to the supermarket, and before he'd gone to Japan, those words would have represented an emptiness, a tragedy. And now—he was doing okay. He'd spent a couple of weeks on Cara's sofa, and sure, he'd done a little wallowing. The first time he'd seen Evan, when he'd gone to the apartment to pack up his things, well, that had been pretty awful. But moving into his own place had helped, and having to plan his summer school classes, and Cara, of course. He'd had to restrain her from her wilder plans of revenge. (*Keying someone's car is not only juvenile, Cara, but also illegal.*)

Nik browsed the produce section, picked out some strawberries, a head of lettuce, a bag of apples. He liked cooking for himself, or for Cara, sometimes, instead of finding things that pleased Evan's fussy palate. He pretended for a minute that he was going to buy a package of Hamburger Helper, just to imagine Evan's horror.

Stop Evan-bashing, he told himself. He didn't need to see Evan unhappy in order to feel okay. Which was a good thing, since Evan already had a new boyfriend, someone he'd met at an art gallery. Nik had heard him telling a colleague at a faculty party that it was so nice to be with someone who wasn't an intellectual. That had made Nik laugh, since he was pretty sure that he himself hadn't been nearly intellectual enough for Evan.

But whatever. He was okay, his work was going well, his classes were good. I'm good, he told himself, and he meant it. If he thought sometimes about someone, well, that was how life worked. You met people and then you parted. If he got himself off thinking of someone's high cheekbones, his soft black hair and long fingers—well, that was natural. There was nothing wrong with regret.

He'd gotten to the wine department, and he found himself in the International Wine Boutique. He wondered, since he was thinking of Ren—yes, of course, they had sake. He remembered how Ren had complained about the ubiquitous bottle of sake. He put his hand on the neck of the bottle, and

suddenly, he was flooded with a memory of Ren on that last morning, when Nik had left in the dark, Ren lying sprawled out on the hotel sheets, his hair in his eyes, his long pale body almost entirely uncovered. How beautiful he'd been.

Nik tried to smile. Things were fine, but he could still be stupid. He picked up the bottle to look at it. Decisively, he put it in his cart—a way to defuse the past, he thought. Nothing wrong with regret, but not too much of it.

On the drive home, he called Cara. “What you doing, hon?” she said.

“Going home,” he said. “What about you?”

“I’m going surfing,” she said. “I don’t suppose you want to come.”

“Please: no. Remember what happened the last time?”

“Everybody gets hit in the head with their board, wuss.”

“Once is enough for me. I’m going to do some reading, maybe go to a movie.”

“The joys of the single life. Well, have fun, sweetie.” She paused. “I know you will.”

When he pulled into the driveway of the double he was renting the top of, he gathered his grocery bags and, juggling them with his book bag, made his way up the back steps. He had his key out when he noticed something taped on the door. Pushing the key in, he leaned in closer to see what it was.

A photograph.

His hands were cold suddenly, and he took in a quick breath. Hand still on the key, he looked around at his landlady’s backyard, but there was nothing and no one to see among the flowerbeds.

He looked at the photo. He’d expected to see himself, he realized, another one of those stealth photos Ren had taken, something from the conference, or even a more intimate picture. But it wasn’t him—it was Ren himself. A black and white photo of him in a winter jacket, his beautiful hair wispy. He was

holding a camera (*of course*) and he was smiling a sort of Mona Lisa smile, a smile that almost wasn't there, that promised something. Or someone.

Nik dropped his bags and pulled the photo off the door, turning it over to look at the back. No message, he thought, more disappointed than someone ought to be who was trying to give up regret. But looking closer, he saw that there was a series of numbers written very small in the bottom corner. A phone number.

Fingers shaking, he punched in the numbers and waited, hearing the ring of someone's phone. When he heard a voice say hello, he leaned against the door, unable to stay upright.

"Hello," Nik said, trying to sound calm.

"Nik?"

Nik nodded his head, and then said, "Yes. Where are you?"

Ren hummed into the phone, and then said, "I didn't know if you'd want to see me."

I'm dying to see you, Nik thought. "If you're in town, we could get together."

"Sure." Ren paused, and Nik tried to analyze what "sure" meant, what level of enthusiasm it showed. "What about your boyfriend?"

"Who?" Nik said. "You mean Evan?" For a minute, he had forgotten Evan had ever existed. "He's still my ex."

Ren's voice was lower. "Do you want me to come over?" When Nik didn't answer right away, he went on. "The way you left, I thought it was just a one-shot for you."

Nik was clutching the phone hard enough to make his fingers white against the screen. "If you thought that, why are you here? Wait—why are you here anyway? How did you get my number?"

He heard Ren clearing his throat. "I—well, I got it that first night. Your phone sort of fell out of your pocket. It seemed like an opportunity."

“You liked me even drunk and blacked out and falling all over the place,” Nik said, feeling smug.

“Well, yeah. And I got your address from your cousin.”

Nik leaned his head against the door. “Come over, I guess,” he said.

He heard footsteps coming around the side of the house, and straightened up. Ren appeared, looking up at Nik. He climbed the back porch steps and stood there. His hair was a little shorter. He was wearing jeans and a Pokémon T-shirt, and had the usual two cameras slung around his neck.

“You’re here,” Nik said stupidly.

Ren stepped in and put one hand on Nik’s hip, tentative at first. But then when Nik leaned toward him, he pulled him in, not kissing yet, but laying his cheek against Nik’s and rubbing a little. “You smell good,” he said.

“You smell like you’ve been on an airplane,” Nik said. He felt so overwhelmed, he could hardly think.

“You care?”

“No,” Nik said, and then they were kissing, their lips soft on one another, the grocery bags around their feet and Ren’s cameras between them.

“I have sake,” Nik said when they pulled back.

“I’m so disappointed in you,” Ren said, laughing. “Should we, you know, go in?”

“Right,” Nik said, flustered. He gathered up the groceries and his backpack.

Once inside, he took Ren’s hand and led him to the living room, thinking they would sit on the couch and talk. But Ren turned to Nik and began kissing him again.

“Why are you here, though?” Nik asked. “You didn’t move here, did you?”

“No,” Ren said, “although that would be a pretty good stalker thing to do. I should have thought of that.”

“But—”

“Please,” Ren said, “let me.” He kissed Nik again and pushed him toward the couch. “Let me.” He stopped, looking into Nik’s eyes. “Unless you don’t want to.”

Nik answered this by dropping onto the couch and pulling Ren with him. “I so want to,” he said.

Wrestling against each other, they didn’t bother to take their clothes off. All the times that Nik had spent in the shower thinking about Ren, or in his bed, trying to remember what it had felt like when they’d been together—none of those memories or imaginings was anything like having his hands on Ren’s back, his arms, stroking the hair lying smooth on the back of his neck. Ren’s mouth on his jaw, and then his shoulder, Ren’s hands cupping his ass and pulling them more tightly together, Ren’s voice harsh in his ear—it was nothing like the Ren in his head. This Ren was infinitely more satisfying, his little grunts, the hardness of his elbow against Nik’s ribs, their knees knocking together. They held onto each other, thrusting up, first finding a rhythm and then losing it. When they came, seconds apart, they were breathing and crying out into each other’s mouths.

After, they lay there, shifting a little so they were awkwardly side by side. “My new job is in Washington,” Ren said into Nik’s ear. “DC.”

Nik touched Ren’s mouth with his thumb.

“No pressure.” Ren licked at Nik’s fingers.

“That’s not so far away.” Nik rubbed his face against Ren’s.

“I know,” Ren said.

THE END

Author Bio

Lucy Whedon has been writing and publishing for a while, but this is her first m/m story. She may have liked writing it way too much: look out for more.

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