

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

BAITED

Tami Veldura

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By Tami Veldura

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.

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Photo Description

A man reclined and driving his truck. It's an older vehicle, well used. He has tattoos on both arms and a quiet, intent expression on the road.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've been driving for the last three days. I was living in Philly and I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get back to the first man I ever loved, my best friend. We spent our nights all through high school fooling around, but when we turned eighteen and I wanted to come out to my family, he pushed me away and said he couldn't be open about himself. So I ran. I went to college as far away as I could and got a job in Philly. I worked hard every day and became successful. But I was never happy. I missed my first love. My mom called four days ago and told me that his mom died. So I quit my job, filled my truck with what it could hold, and started driving. This time I won't run from his fear.

No paranormal please, and a HEA or HFN as well.

Sincerely,

Amanda

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: small town, bigotry, coming out, long lost love, men with pets

Word count: 20,038

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It had been way too long. And maybe not long enough. Zach's truck growled past the city limit sign, *Edenburg, Pop: 763*, and he caught a hint of those butterflies he'd been expecting for the past three days. He sighed. It was a complicated sound of relief, trepidation, and regret. Both soothing and bracing.

In the passenger seat, Jasper lifted her mottled head to blink at him. She knew that sound was different somehow. Zach scratched her jaw. "We're home, girl. Let's hope we're welcome."

She purred.

Zach pulled off the highway and instantly recognized the curves of almost-germinated dirt that guided visitors into Edenburg. Keshel's farmland, a mixed bag of grains, stretched for a mile.

Motel 8. It was the only place for someone *not from 'round here* to crash for the night. There were only four rooms and as far as Zach knew, they'd never been occupied all at once. His truck crackled over loose stone. Jasper jumped to the dashboard and flicked her ears around.

The motel wasn't anything to write home about. Generally, Edenburg was the home people were writing to. It still could use a coat of paint around the gutters but it stood. Zach tapped the window at the front desk and waited.

Mrs. Amelia shuffled out of the back, smacking a piece of gum like she was still sixteen. She approached the dusty window and blew a bubble. "Lo there, son. Where are you headed?"

Zach smiled a little. He honestly thought she'd be gone. "Right here, Mrs. A. Thought I'd retrace some old ground."

At the first sound of his voice, Mrs. Amelia squinted at the glass like she could shoot lasers. "Zachariah?"

“Yes’m.”

“Well, I’ll be.” She shuffled back away from the glass. It took a few seconds but she popped the side door open and stepped into the sunlight. She held onto the doorknob. “Zachariah Benjamin Andrews, I never. You’re quite a sight.”

“It’s great to see you,” Zach agreed. “I can’t believe you’re still running this place.”

“Keeps me from sleeping in. It’s not good for you.” She waved him closer, “What are you—no, it’s Mason, isn’t it?”

“I got a call. His mother died?”

“Bless her. Owen’s doing his best to help. Mason didn’t tell us you were coming.”

And that was the crux of it really. He hadn’t even spoken to the man for nearly as long as he’d been gone. “He doesn’t know.”

“Foolish. And you think you’re sleeping here. Where’s your head? Back at university?” She pried the keys from his hand with more strength than he expected and made for the driver side door with deliberate steps.

“Wait, Mrs. A, I can’t just show up on his doorstep and expect he’ll put me up.”

“Course not.” She got the door open without appearing to need any help at all. “That’d be rude. You’re coming with me, boy.” She slammed the door closed, greeted his cat like they’d known each other for years, and started his truck. “You riding with me or walkin’ home?”

Zach started for his own passenger door. “Going where?” he muttered.

Jasper jumped to his lap. Mrs. A threw rocks around the parking lot and handled his stick shift like a pro. Zach couldn’t remember if she’d ever owned a car.

“You did all right at that big school, didn’t you?”

“Yes’m. Degreed in business and another in accounting later on.”

“And why aren’t you coming back with a lady on your arm?”

Zach sucked his teeth. Not a lot seemed to have changed out here. Had people’s opinions? “I’m not into women, Mrs. A.”

She clucked. “That’s right, I forgot. Why haven’t you got a man, then?”

“I haven’t managed to catch the right one.” Wasn’t that the understatement of his life?

Mrs. Amelia pulled neatly into her driveway and tossed the keys back to Zach. “Help me outta this bus you call a truck.”

It really wasn’t that big, but next to the oldest woman in town it was downright massive. Zach offered his extended arm to Jasper, who walked up to his shoulders. He helped Mrs. Amelia down to the ground. “I really didn’t want to impose on—”

“Stop it. You can’t stay at the motel. There’s no one there to check you in.” She propped the screen door open with a potted fern. “Now pull out some of those bags and take the blue room. I’ll get you some sheets.”

Zach’s phone buzzed. He saw a text from Baliey.

Condo sale is final. Just traded paperwork. You’ll see the deposit when the bank clears it in about a week.

Jasper jumped to the ground and trotted through Mrs. Amelia’s open front door. That was that, he supposed. He didn’t have a home to go back to. No turning around, now. Zach really hoped he wouldn’t need the bridge he’d just burned.

He texted Baliey.

Thanks, just reached town. Here goes nothin’.

Zach’s truck was packed with less than he had expected to take. He left his library of hardbacks to Baliey and sold just about everything else with the condo. He had almost two weeks’ worth of clothes, a few mementoes, and Jasper’s things. It all fit into two bags and a crate. The sum total of his life for the past twenty years.

He carted his things into the blue room as directed. A fresh set of sheets was folded on the corner chair. He found Jasper inspecting every corner of the kitchen while Amelia prepared something on the stove. "I'll have supper up in a minute. You moved in?"

"Well enough." Zach set up Jasper's litter pan next to the trash and wrangled her off the dining room table. He dropped her in the pan. She kicked litter off her paws and went back to inspecting kitchen corners.

"She looks like a little leopard."

"Her name is Jasper. She'll answer to it if you don't try it too often. Very smart."

"How did you get her?"

"She found me at a cafe corner. She stole half my tuna sandwich. I gave her the rest."

"You couldn't find anyone to take her while you visited?"

"I wasn't sure how long I'd be out here."

Amelia hummed and stirred her skillet.

Zach took a seat at the table. Jasper jumped up on the table and tasted the decorative palm frond in the center vase. She rolled her orange eyes at Zach. "It's not supposed to taste good. It's fake." Jasper abandoned the table. Zach asked Amelia, "Where is Mason living, now?"

"Same property. He's done a lot of good work with it."

"I wanted to drive by and see him tonight."

"You can. He might be out hunting, though. He is most afternoons. Here, eat up."

Zach racked his brain over dinner for what he should say, but after three days he still had nothing. What does one say to a man he hasn't seen in twenty years? A man he still loved more than life beyond this small town?

It was dusk by the time Zach drove past the familiar two and a half acres Mason grew up on. Nothing seemed different. The house still sat, squat, on the edge of the road, was still that strange not-green shade Mason's mother liked. One of the pines was missing along the border, barely even a divot in the land to indicate one had been there.

The house lights were dark. Zach knocked on the door anyway. The only answer he got was the distant cry of a hawk. He headed back to Amelia's a bit frustrated. He still didn't know what to say, and now he had another night to lose sleep over it.

Back at Mrs. Amelia's, he found Jasper curled up in her lap, listening while she read her book aloud. The cat had no interest in heading to bed with him so he settled down alone. This wasn't the greatest start, but he at least had a roof overhead. That was a sudden concern he wasn't used to. Until now, this had all seemed like a dramatic but well-intentioned life choice. Mason would be surprised to see him, welcome him in for drinks, maybe laugh about how they'd fooled around at The Ridge. Then... what? Settle down for happily ever after.

Zach grabbed his phone from the nightstand and texted Baliey.

This may have been a bad idea.

What happened?

Nothing, yet. I haven't seen him.

This is why you made me sell the condo. No turning back.

That's what I'm worried about. How desperate can I get?

Shut up. You haven't even talked to him, yet.

But what if he doesn't want to see me?

Can you live with yourself if you never try?

...

You wouldn't have made it out this far if you weren't serious about him, Zach. It's just jitters. Get some sleep. Text me when you talk to him.

That was what he really needed. A good kick in the ass. He smiled at the phone.

Thanks, B.

Hey, what are best friends for? Night.

Night.

Zach knocked on Mason's front door. Had it always been so quiet here? He heard crickets and the wind through grasses. Mason's mother's flowerbeds had gone to seed. Random spots of color were scattered in the yard. There was no answer at the door. He heard a small falcon chitter in the distance. Songbirds paused.

Zach felt like his life was on pause. Where was Mason? Hunting again? Zach hadn't ever seen the appeal, being more drawn to people than wildlife; technology rather than nature.

When the songbirds sprang back into chorus, Zach turned away from the door. He'd try again after lunch.

He drove through the middle of town and parked at the market. He had no direction, no plan B. He thought he'd at least have seen Mason by now. He didn't know how to fill a day in a small town, anymore.

He could at least fill Mrs. Amelia's refrigerator.

Zach was picking over the bell peppers when someone recognized him. He selected a red one and heard, "Zach? Z-man? For real?"

Owen. Zach smiled at the bell pepper and relished his memory—stick-in-the-mud Owen always following the rules, always getting sucked into Zach and Mason's chaos despite himself, utter loyalty even when they were all

caught. “Do you remember that afternoon when we ransacked Howard’s fresh hay bales and planted potatoes in the middle of them?”

“He never lets me forget.”

Zach put the pepper in his basket and turned. He was a cop now, tanned and with a thumb in his belt and a smirk on his lips. Military buzz cut. Ring on his finger. Zach grinned. “I still laugh when I order a baked potato.”

Owen’s smirk folded into a truly happy smile. “It’s been a long time, Z-man.” He extended his hand.

Zach took it, pulled him closer for a proper hug. “Don’t I know it?” He pressed his thumb against the ring on Owen’s finger. “You finally ask Jenny?”

A flash of sadness crossed Owen’s eyes. He shook his head. “She went to school on the west coast. Writes every now and then.”

“Then who’s the lucky girl?”

“Stacy Porter. We have a girl, Kelly.”

“No shit?” Zach squeezed Owen’s shoulder. “Congrats! I’m sorry I missed it.”

“What have you been up to?”

Zach shrugged and continued shopping. “Graduated up in Philly. Started a little business. It’s going well—”

“What do you do?”

“Event planning. Concerts, triathlons, the kind of stuff that needs a big venue and a lot of organized people.”

“Doesn’t sound small at all.”

“Just me and Baliey.” Now just Baliey but Zach didn’t feel like advertising that too widely yet. “Not surprised where you ended up, though.” Zach nodded at Owen’s uniform.

“Really? I always thought I’d be a lawyer or something...” Owen laughed at himself.

“And leave this place? Not on your life. You practically had roots here before we graduated high school.”

“You couldn’t wait to get out.”

“It was a good move for me.” Zach piled his groceries at the checkout.

“But you’re back? How long?”

“I don’t know yet. I heard about Mason. Wanted to check in on him.”

“He hasn’t talked much. Spends all his time out hunting. Maybe you’ll get through to him, though. You were closer than I was...”

Owen had no idea how much he understated the situation. Zach was more than closer, he’d never gotten his heart back.

The clerk rang up his groceries. “That’ll be a hundred even.”

Zach balked, a hundred for a few veggies and a chicken. “What...?”

Owen scowled. “Peter, that’s robbery. I’m standing right here.”

Peter Bench. Zach hadn’t recognized him. An additional hundred and fifty pounds could do that to a person. He had glasses now and a missing eyetooth. He sucked on a lollypop.

Peter turned the register sign and tapped it. “Says a hundred, Owen. Don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“You never did like Zach.”

Zach swiped his credit card. “I’m not here to cause any trouble.” He’d have to cut Mrs. Amelia a check instead if his money was going to go any distance.

Peter sucked his lollypop. “I remember the kind of trouble you dragged the boys around here into up on The Ridge. Some people might still have a grudge about that.”

“Some people not as forgiving as you.”

“That’s right.”

Zach bagged his own groceries. “Have a good one, Peter.”

“Later.”

Owen scowled as they walked out, “I’ll talk to him—”

“Don’t get riled up. It was bound to happen at some point.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s right.”

“No, but I’m not here to make a scene, dude. Just want to say hi to some old friends. See if there’s anything I can do for Mason.” Lay his heart down at his feet and pray it doesn’t get trampled on.

“You should come over for breakfast tomorrow morning. I head out at seven. You can meet the family.”

Zach grunted. “Sally Porter. She’s Keshel’s daughter. The butcher?” Zach dropped the groceries in the passenger seat through the open window. “Didn’t she tag along with us to the carnival?” He snapped his fingers, “That’s right. I caught you two making out in the back during the elephant show.”

Owen crossed his arms. “We were sharing a churro.”

“Sure.” Zach laughed. “Yeah, I’ll come by tomorrow. Six-ish?”

“Sounds good.” They shook hands. “Good to see you, Z-man.”

“You, too, Owen. Say hi to Sally for me.” Zach laughed to himself and waved as Owen drove out of the parking lot, blipping the siren twice.

Zach walked around his truck and saw Mason leaning into the backseat of a shiny four-door Jeep. He was exactly the same. And so different. Brown hair spiked up, tan, perfectly sure of every movement. Mason smiled at something, he still had that dimple on the right. A small terrier jumped at the window. Mason stepped out of the Jeep to let the dog out. Two. He retrieved a bag and turned toward the grocer.

He was taller. Filled out in a way a man used to hard outdoor labor is. Zach’s mouth went dry. He was beautiful. Everything and more than he remembered. He didn’t remember walking, didn’t remember stepping in Mason’s path. But when Mason’s dark blue eyes flicked up to meet his, the

way they went wide—Zach remembered how they faded to grey when Mason was aroused, how he never closed his eyes when they were so close together.

“Zach?” Just a whisper.

“Mason.”

“Holy shit.” Mason blinked. Looked him up and down. Took a step back. “Oh my god, it *is* you. Holy shit. What are you doing here? Are you in town long? Where are you staying? Why didn’t you call me?” The two terriers picked up his excitement and barked. They danced around Zach’s feet. Mason looked down. “Gossip. Redd. Heel.” The older obeyed. The younger yapped and needed a nudge from Mason’s boot.

“Drove out here as soon as I heard, man. I’m sorry.” Zach put a hand on Mason’s wide shoulder and squeezed it. “I’m here for anything you need, just say the word.”

“We haven’t talked in *years*.” Mason laughed. “Where do I start?”

“I’m staying at Mrs. Amelia’s for now. Why don’t you come by?”

Mason shook his head, “She’s allergic to the dogs. Let me offload this pheasant with Keshel. Meet you at my place?”

“Done.”

“Good...” But Mason didn’t move toward the grocer. “Dude, it is *good* to see you.”

Some of the tension holding Zach’s heart captive released. “You too.” They grinned at each other. Just like before. Like nothing had come between them.

Like Zach had never left.

It took him longer than he thought to drop the groceries at Mrs. Amelia’s and drive back out to Mason’s. By the time he arrived Mason was pointing his little terriers into the back of the Jeep. Zach parked the truck. “Headed somewhere?”

“Yeah, hop in! I’ve packed some beer.”

“Sounds good.” Zach climbed into the Jeep and was immediately greeted by two wet noses. The older, more white than her original tan, sniffed at him from the back seat. The younger, a mix of bronzes, barked.

“Redd, shut up.” Mason sighed and climbed in. “The other one’s Gossip. They flush for me. Redd’s still learning.”

“Nice.” Zach turned his attention forward. The Jeep was clean—not shiny like it was brand new, but well cared for. Mason turned them onto the road out of town. Toward The Ridge. “I didn’t think you’d get into hunting,” Zach said. “I never really got it, myself.”

Mason smiled. “It pays. Nothing big like deer, but the farms around here need mice or gopher control. Sometimes rabbits. I haven’t needed to buy meat at the market except fish or beef.”

“That’s neat. Amelia said you go out every night?”

“Most afternoons and most mornings. I have a rotation around town.” Mason shifted his elbow up against Zach. He blocked Redd from making it up to the front. “Get back on the seat. Stay.” Redd reluctantly settled down next to Gossip. “When did you get in?”

“Last night. Pulled up to the Motel 8 around seven.”

“You should have called, you know I’ve got room.”

“It’s been a long time, Mason.” *You might have moved on.* “And running down here was sudden, I didn’t want to just show up on your doorstep. Amelia has me covered.” Zach smiled to the side. “Besides, this way you can kick me out when you get tired of me.”

“Very likely,” Mason agreed.

“So what’s been going on for... ever?”

“Dude. Everything. Did you know Owen married Sally Porter?”

“I saw him today. We’re supposed to do breakfast tomorrow. What a trip.”

“Remember catching them at the carnival?”

“He insists they were eating a churro.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Easter Bunny.” Mason pulled off the road. His Jeep handled the dirt and divots far more smoothly than the old pickup Zach had back in the day. There was a low wooden fence along the drop off that hadn’t been there twenty years ago. Mason parked under the pine. That pine had seen a lot of things.

Mason popped his door open and let the dogs out. They sniffed around the car, marked the pine, and tangled around Zach’s feet until they were satisfied with chin scratches.

“Here...” Mason sat on the wooden log of the fence and leaned up against the front of his Jeep. He held out a beer. “Tell me about you. Graduated?”

“Thanks. Yeah, in business. Met Baliey while we were going through school and started a company with her in senior year. Figured out really quick that we needed an accountant, so I stayed at school and got a second degree. Seemed easier than finding someone else.”

“What do you do?”

“Event planning. Get venues sorted for concerts and triathlons, organize volunteers, organize supplies and catering. Security.”

“Sounds big.”

“We re-use a lot of our vendors so it goes pretty smoothly, now. A lot of email and phone calls, though.” Zach stretched his feet out. His thigh pressed against Mason’s. “It’s fun. Great to see it all come together on the big day. Baliey’s good at handling the little fires that crop up at the last minute.”

“She sounds great.”

“Yeah, she needs to find a man and get laid, though. Sometimes she stresses.”

Mason laughed.

“You find anyone?”

“Naw.” Mason took a drink and shifted his leg away from Zach’s. “No, it’s just me, the dogs, and the birds. I like it, though. Peaceful. Owen’s got enough crazy with his wife and kid. I don’t need any of that.”

Zach hid his frown with a swig of beer. A wife and kids had never been on either of their plates. “Yeah, I hear he’s got a daughter?”

“And a handful. Didn’t get any of Owen’s follow-the-rules genes.”

“You’re not turning into an old man on me, are you?” Zach felt the mood turn serious in a heartbeat.

Mason sighed. “Maybe I am,” He said. “Mom and Dad are both gone, now. There isn’t a whole lot of young left in me.” Mason sat forward and put his elbows on his knees. He dangled the beer. “She stroked two weeks ago. We brought her to the hospital but it was downhill fast. She passed in her sleep. Owen and I were there. The heart monitor woke me up. Her hand was still warm.” Mason stared out over the edge of the drop off, over the small stretch of town in the valley. “I remember thinking the monitor had to be wrong. Someone can’t be dead if they’re still warm.”

Zach grabbed Mason’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, too.”

“Better you weren’t, probably. It... I got ugly for a few days. Spent a lot of time locked in her room. The past week has been better.” Mason sighed and sat back against the Jeep.

Zach moved his hand from shoulder to knee. Pulled Mason’s thigh back against his. “Still. I’m here now, so anything you need me to take care of...”

“Cremation is day after tomorrow. I probably shouldn’t go to that alone.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Owen is executor of her will, so he’s taking care of a lot of details for me.”

“Good. He’ll make sure it’s done right.” Zach’s phone beeped. Text message. He ignored it.

But Mason didn't have anything else to say and after a minute Zach was unwilling to break the silence. They sat for a few more heartbeats, finishing their beer. Mason moved away first. He pointed the dogs back into the Jeep. Zach climbed into the car and they rode home in somewhat comfortable silence. Zach tried not to feel discouraged by Mason's lack of response to his hands. The man was grieving, for goodness sake.

Still. That comment about not wanting a wife and kids stuck with him. Of the three of them, Owen was the only straight one. Last Zach checked, anyway. But Mason hadn't been able to come out with Zach after high school. What had happened in the past twenty years? Was the Mason he knew still here?

Zach kept his silence and tried to find encouragement in the fact that Mason wasn't seeing anyone. Male or female. There wasn't a big selection to choose from out here. The wife and kids line was probably just the familiar excuse he offered to the gossip mill that was a small town.

"Hey, I'm glad you're here, Zach. Thanks," Mason said as he pulled up to his house. "Call me next time, you idiot. I'll put you up."

Zach smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be free around noon, lunch at Joe's? You get the beer."

"Deal." Zach laughed and it put his worries at ease. He gave each of the dogs a chin scratch and waved.

Zach checked his phone. The text was from Baliey.

Landed a new project this afternoon. Obstacle course/run. Have a drink with me!

Attached was a photo of a shot glass full of amber. He smiled and sent her a photo of his empty beer bottle.

He heard Jasper's irritated meow before he ever got the door open. Amelia's voice snapped right back, "Don't you get fussy with me, little lady. You eat your dinner first or you won't see a lick of this."

Zach stepped inside and found Amelia holding a sandwich high overhead. Jasper stood on the dining table, dancing on back legs. “Meaaaaaow.”

Amelia scowled, “I don’t really care either way. It’s dinner or nothing.”

“What is going on in here?”

“She tried to get a jump on my tuna sandwich.”

“Mrrerrrow.” Jasper sat and licked one paw, feigning disinterest.

“Oh, I’m not falling for that one. Now get going.” Amelia pointed at the fresh pile of food in Jasper’s bowl.

Zach grinned, “She won’t give up, you may as well give her some.”

“Not on your life. She lives in this house, she plays by my rules. No dessert before dinner.”

Zach picked Jasper up off the table and she hung like dead weight in his hands, passively protesting the manhandling. He dropped her in front of the food dish. She complained loudly.

“AH!” Amelia warned. She pointed a stern finger at the cat.

Jasper flattened her ears. She stuck one paw in the bowl, worming wet food between her toes. She slapped it into her water dish, splashing everywhere. With obvious discontent, she licked the meal from the webbing of her paw, audibly protesting each bite.

Zach couldn’t stifle his chuckles. “It’s like you fed her dog food or something.”

“Hardly. Picked up a fancy canned food on my way home today. See if I ever treat her again.” Amelia took a bite of her tuna sandwich, maintaining the standoff in her own kitchen.

“Well don’t let her rile you up. Just lock her in my room.”

“I can handle one cat, Zachariah. Did you meet up with Mason?”

“Yeah, we had a good chat. Saw Owen, too. I’ll be up early to do breakfast with the family.”

“That’s good. Say hello to Sally for me.”

“Mrrrrrrr.”

Amelia pointed. “I’m on to you, Cat.”

Six AM sharp, Zach knocked on Owen’s door. A young lady around seventeen answered, way too cheerful for such an early hour. “Hi! You’re Zach?” She stuck out her hand. “Kelly.”

He shook it, “That’s right. Nice to meet you.”

“Ditto. Breakfast is this way.” Her ponytail bobbed as she turned. “DAAAAAD! Zach is here!”

A woman snapped, “Don’t yell!”

“You’re yelling,” Kelly observed.

Zach followed Kelly into the kitchen and found Sally at the stove rolling her eyes to the roof. “God, give me patience.”

From the back of the house, Owen’s voice popped out of a room. “Take a seat, Z-man. Be right with you.”

“Dad’s yelling,” Kelly said.

“Just set the table,” Sally sighed. “Hello, Zach.” She slid another pancake onto an already large pile. “It’s been a long time.”

“Morning, Sally. How are things with you?” Zach saw Kelly balancing dishes and beckoned to her. She shoved a handful of plates at him.

“Oh you know, the days go by.” She poured a new pancake. “I’ve got plenty to keep me busy.”

Zach circled the small wooden table. Kelly followed him with napkins and silverware. “That’s good. Nice place you have here.”

“I’ll give you a tour after we eat, there’s a nice garden in the b—KELLY! You don’t make a guest set the damn table, have you lost—”

“Whoa, Sally. It’s okay, I volunteered. I promise.” Zach held up his hands to accept the plate of flapjacks before they ended up on a wall or the floor. “You’ve a garden?” He tried to deflect.

Kelly scooted out of her mother’s line-of-sight to fetch syrup and other details.

Sally hurrumped, but let it go. “Yes, in the back on the south hill. There’s a nice draining slope and Mason keeps the worst of the rabbits out.”

Owen stepped in wearing a pair of boxers as he dried his hair. “Oooh, pancakes.”

“Honestly, Owen. You couldn’t get dressed for company?”

“Company? Zach?” He forked a stack of pancakes onto Kelly’s plate and went around the table. “We and Mason compared wieners in second grade. This is downright modest.”

Zach was proud of himself for not smiling. He didn’t think it would go over well.

Kelly coughed and looked interested in her milk.

Sally rolled her eyes and Owen smiled at Zach. “Come on, sit down, honey. Breakfast is no good if you don’t join us.”

Sally sat and made a show of laying her napkin on her lap. “So, Zach,” she said. “I hear you own a business.”

Zach regaled them with a tale of a concert gone wrong to get some smiles around the circle. Owen was just like he remembered, quick to critique but quick to laugh. Kelly was easy to entertain. Sally was harder to crack; she persisted in smiling mildly, an expression Zach suspected was her polite-but-I’m-not-interested face.

Owen’s watch beeped as they were polishing off the last flapjack. “Mmm. Time to go.” He tossed back his milk and gave Zach a high five over the table. “Lemme get dressed, I’ll walk you out.”

Sally looked up at Kelly. “You, too.”

Kelly sighed but dragged herself away from the table.

“How long are you in town, Zach?” Sally started picking up plates and turned on the water in the sink.

Zach was quick to help her bus the table. “I don’t know. The whole trip was a little sudden when I heard about Mason’s mom. We’ll see what he needs.”

“Well I think that’s very generous of you. It sounds like you’ve outgrown that tendency to cause a ruckus.”

“We were boys, Sally. Boys make messes,” Zach said, a little guarded.

“I know,” she sighed. “It’s just you would drag them up there to The Ridge and put crazy thoughts in their heads. Get folks in trouble.”

Zach’s goodwill died. “Folks like Mason.”

Sally passed her sponge over a dish. “You leave that man to his business.”

Zach frowned and crossed his arms. “Would you rather I go after the fairer sex? Women?”

“Well it would certainly be more proper,” Sally agreed primly. She settled the dish in the dryer and picked a new one.

“Women like your daughter.”

She fired her stare at him in a flash. “You leave my daughter alone.”

Zach put up his hands. That was a button he shouldn’t have pressed. He backed out of the kitchen.

Owen returned. “What’s this about now?” His smiles were gone.

“I’m sorry,” Zach said. “I didn’t come here for an argument.” But he wasn’t going to stand here and listen to this either. He made for the door.

From the kitchen Zach heard, “Sally? What’s going on?”

“That man better shape up before he gets what’s coming to him.”

“And what *exactly* is coming to him? Zach! Just a second!”

It was probably cowardly but Zach wasn't inclined to stay involved. He closed the door firmly behind him and walked out on the road toward town. Amelia's place wasn't far from Owen's and now that his blood was up Zach was glad he'd walked. The air was still chilled. Owen didn't run after him—he had work. The police cruiser rumbled by a few moments later, and Owen flashed his lights but didn't stop. Acknowledgement and apology. Zach waved him down the road. They'd talk later.

It took the entire hour walk into town, but Zach cooled by the time he strode past the high school. He shouldn't have riled Sally like that. There were better ways to handle her opinions than push buttons. Sometimes it just felt better to start an argument, though.

He heard Kelly call his name and looked up. She waved at him from the high school yard and jogged to the low shrub border. Zach didn't see Sally anywhere.

“Hey,” he said, gut knotted with sudden guilt. Kelly had probably heard their entire exchange. He really was a dick.

“You know,” Kelly said, “she's just trying to look out for people she cares for.”

“She's wrong.” Zack clenched his jaw. Maybe he wasn't as cool as he thought.

“She may be wrong, but she's still my mom. If you could not bait her, that'd be great.” Kelly crossed her arms. Her expression was something between truly annoyed and still trying to be friendly about it.

Zach gave himself a mental kick. “You're right. And I'm sorry.” He met her eyes sincerely. “I handled the whole thing poorly.”

Kelly uncrossed her arms. “Don't stress it too much. I argue with her all the time.” She smiled a little and shrugged at him. “Just remember not *everyone* around here thinks you're awful. You're helping Mason and I think that's cool. He's a good friend of Dad's. I like him.”

“I like him, too. Us three go way back.”

“Do you like-like him?”

Zach pulled his brows together, “How is that different fr...” She was smiling at him, a full grin. He clicked his tongue. “Don’t you have a class to be in?”

“Not until the bell.” The bell rang. She muttered, “Dammit.” A girl called her name and Kelly waved behind her. “You’ll be in town later?”

“Probably.”

“Cool, we should hang out!”

“Don’t let your mother catch you.” Zack smiled. “Get.”

She ran. “Bye!”

Zach held the door for Mason as they walked out the back of Joe’s, guiding him with a hand on his back. Mason didn’t react.

He’d been not reacting the same damn way for the last three hours they chatted at the table. A touch of fingers: Mason would pick up his drink. Foot against foot under the table: Mason just twitched away. At first, Zach didn’t want to pry too hard but Mason didn’t even glance at him with that knowing slant to his eyes. Just carried on the conversation as if nothing at all was happening.

More than infuriating, it was downright confusing. Why wouldn’t he even acknowledge it?

“So you had a good breakfast with Owen, then?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, up until I screwed up with Sally.” Joe’s back parking lot was deserted, Mason’s Jeep the only spot of color.

“What do you mean?”

“I argued with her about being gay.” Zach was far more interested in the way Mason’s expression shut down than detailing the story. “I left shortly afterward.”

“I caught a few gophers this morning while hunting. Redd is getting better at flushing.”

Zach scowled. Something was up. A total evasion was not what he expected at all. Zach leaned on the Jeep’s driver door and pulled Mason around by the shoulder. “What’s going on?”

Mason’s back hit the Jeep. “What?”

Zach kissed him and lost his breath. For a stunning second it was exactly how it should have been—sparking hot between them, an indrawn breath of surprise, wide lips against his—then Mason shoved him back. “Stop. I’m not like that.”

Zach caught himself in two steps. “Not like—are you kidding me?”

“I’m not going to argue about it.” Mason looked serious.

Zach goggled at him. “What, have these people talked you out of being gay? Talked you into liking women?”

“I like women just fine.”

That sounded so defensive, Zach choked on a laugh. “Fucked any lately?”

Mason crossed his arms. “More than you.”

“No kidding, I’m not hiding.” Zach had the sudden, deep urge to erase all signs of another body against Mason’s.

“You don’t know—”

“What it’s like?” Zach scowled, “Don’t give me that shit, Mason. I grew up with you here. I know exactly what it’s like.”

“You left me here.” Mason pointed his finger into Zach’s chest and swung it out. “You ran away to Philly. I was left to deal with it alone.”

“You were supposed to come with me.” Zach couldn’t decide between fury and pleading.

“Sure, and leave Mom alone. What was I going to do out there? Push papers? Accounting for your little enterprise?”

That hurt. Zack tipped to anger. “You could do whatever you want. Be yourself.”

“I am myself.”

“Bullshit.” Zach pushed past Mason’s wandering arm and stilled his head with both hands. He pressed their lips together. Chests. Bellies, groins, knees together, their feet tangled. Zach breathed the wild scent of his old friend and fell in love again. He let their kiss part gently. Mason’s chest heaved against Zach’s. “You want me. I can feel it.”

Mason lifted his chin. “What my dick likes and what my heart wants are not the same.” He pushed Zach clear of the Jeep’s driver door. “I need to go hunt Helena.”

Zach was certain the drop in his gut was his heart. “Who’s Helena?”

“See... You can’t come back here after twenty years and expect everything to be like it was. This town to be like it was. You don’t know me anymore, Zach.” Mason started the Jeep. He didn’t wave goodbye.

Zach watched him go, wondering what on earth he was supposed to do now.

This was such a bad idea.

He texted Baliey. Eat At Joe’s back parking lot remained empty except for Zach. He sat on one of the parking curbs with his head in his hands. Somewhere along the way he’d convinced himself that Mason was just waiting here for him. Waiting for the love of his life to come galloping back in his off-white truck and sweep him off like a fairy tale. How had he talked himself into this?

He hadn't even fucking called the guy in twenty years. No "happy birthday", no "how's it going", nothing! He was a first-class moron.

His phone buzzed:

On location, can't call you. Tell me everything.

So, he did. Writing it out line by line, he gave Baliey a novel of his screw-ups from day one, landing on (he checked the time) an hour ago, the kiss-and-run that sealed it all up.

I don't know what to do. He's right, I don't know who he is anymore.

Baliey texted,

Maybe it's time to stop trying to find what you left there.

I sold my condo for this. I was so sure... I can't just walk away.

Zach, you're dense. It's been so long since you've interacted. You're a different person. He's a different person. You don't know how to be with each other anymore.

So, I should put on my big boy panties and get over it.

He guessed she was right. It didn't make it hurt any less.

Moron. You need to woo him back.

He blinked at the phone.

I'm sorry, did you say woo him?

Yes. Woo. Seduce, if you prefer. Otherwise, re-engage as a NEW couple. Don't rely on what you remember. Learn who he's become.

No, hold on. I'm still stuck on woo. We're talking medieval thou and hither right? Chivalry?

:P Yes, Zach. Prove to me that chivalry is not dead. You'll get your man.

He laughed, a single, huffed, sound. Baliey never let him down.

Thanks, B.

Anytime.

Zach walked the hour and a half back to Amelia and Jasper lighter than the morning had brought him into town. And in the end, that was something to be thankful for.

Zach sat in his truck the next morning sucking his teeth as he watched folks shop at the grocery. Amelia had asked him to pick up a chicken for the Crock-pot, so here he was. Once parked, he'd remembered how much a chicken cost for a gay man in a straight grocery. He wasn't really thrilled with dropping another buck on a damn chicken. It wasn't *that* good.

Mason exited the grocery, game bag in hand still full. Gossip trailed at his heel. He didn't look happy.

Zach jumped out of the truck, "Maso—"

"Not now." Mason stiff-armed Zach in the chest and kept going. Striding toward the Jeep.

Zach knew he'd screwed up, but this was different. "What's wrong?"

"Keshel won't take my rabbits." Mason yanked the back door open and snapped his terrier into the seat. She went without a fuss.

"That's silly, I'll go talk to—"

"No, you've been enough help *already*," Mason sneered.

That didn't sound good at all. "I need to throw something into Amelia's Crock-pot. How much for both?"

Mason turned to him. His face was ugly. "Normally? Twenty a pop. For you? Thirty."

Zach winced. He deserved that. Still, sixty bucks was better than a hundred. He counted the bills without complaint and handed them over. Mason jerked the game bag at him and heaved his driver's side door open with more force than necessary.

“Is there any shot or something I need to clean out?”

“No.” He shoved the Jeep in gear and leaned out the window to back up.

“Well, what’d you hunt it with, an arrow?”

“My hawk.” Mason gunned the truck, sending rock everywhere.

Zach stood with the game bag, left in the parking lot for a second time in as many days. “Your hawk?” he asked quietly, looking at the bag. “Is that code or something?”

“Hey, Amelia...” Zach opened the screen door, still reflecting on the contents of the game bag. “Do you know anything abo—” He stopped in the entry. Amelia stood on her living room coffee table with the bristle end of a broom in one hand and a sandwich in the other. She was defending against Jasper who prowled like a lion around the table. Magazines and coasters littered the floor. “Amelia, just give her some tuna. She’ll let you have the rest of the sandwich.”

“Do you feed the dogs before yourself?”

“Generally, yes. Isn’t there something in the Bible about serving those less fortunate first?”

Amelia shuffled around the table in a small circle. “The Lord and I have an understanding—oh no you don’t.”

Jasper got a paw on the end of the broom and yanked it down to the floor. Amelia let it drop. She was an old woman, not a javelin thrower. Jasper jumped to the table. Amelia hobbled down off the furniture and made for the kitchen. Jasper crouched.

“Um.” Zach pointed.

Jasper leapt. She caught her claws in Amelia’s blouse and scrambled up to her hunched shoulders. “No, Cat! BAD CAT!” Amelia yelled. She held her sandwich out as far as she could. “Zach! Do something!”

“Give her the sandwich, Mrs. A.”

“It’s my sandwich!” Amelia stood in the hall with her hands out before her, Jasper sitting on her shoulder.

The cat’s tail twitched gently over her arm. “Mrrow?”

“What is she doing?”

“She’s waiting.” Zach smiled.

“For what?”

“Well you can try to eat, but she can reach now, so you’ll just be giving her what she wants.”

“No!”

“Or you can try and put it down, at which point she’ll jump down and get some anyway.”

Amelia made an annoyed face. “You’ve probably ruined my blouse, Cat. I’ll have you know it’s older than you are.”

“I’ll take you shopping for a new one,” Zach said. He left the game bag in the kitchen sink. “I bought two rabbits off of Mason for the pot.”

Amelia stomped into the kitchen. She slapped the tuna sandwich down on her plate. “There. Fine. Happy?”

Jasper jumped to the table and sniffed around the corners of the sandwich. She flipped the top bread over with her nose and picked over the contents. She selected a single chunk of tuna, dragged it off the sandwich, and settled in for her meal.

“Honestly,” Amelia sighed. She disappeared into her room for a moment and returned wearing a new blouse. She held the assaulted one up for inspection. “Your feline has no manners whatsoever.”

Jasper finished her single tuna selection, assessed the remainder of the sandwich, and found nothing more that interested her. She hopped down to the floor and pawed at her water.

“Are you serious, Cat? You’re not even going to eat it?” Amelia threw the old shirt in the trash. She turned on Zach. “I was going to eat that sandwich.”

“Oh, are you done? I can finish it.” Zach grinned. He ducked Amelia’s cooking spoon. It clattered against the cabinets. “Is that a yes?”

“Get out of my kitchen!”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

When Zach pulled up to the funeral director’s office, Mason’s Jeep was already there. He almost forgot the daisies on his way in. Owen’s cop car pulled in beside him when he turned back to fetch them.

Denied former relationship in one hand, awkward fight with the wife of a friend on the other. Today was shaping up to be an excellent one.

Owen stepped out of the car and looked as unready for this as Zach felt. Zach jumped before the silence could get weird. “I’m sorry, dude. I was out of line.”

Owen held up a hand, “Hold on. I’m not sure that’s true. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Sally yet—”

“Doesn’t matter.” Zach said. “I was a guest in her home and I knew I was pushing buttons before I went there. So, I’m sorry.”

Owen smiled a bit. “Feel better? Got it off your chest?”

“Heh. Yeah, a little bit.”

“I’ll talk to Sally when I get home today and figure out what was going on in her head. I don’t think there will be any problems.”

“Still, let her know? Kelly, too. I wasn’t thinking.”

Owen frowned at that. “Her, I’ll sit down separately.”

“She already gave me a talking to at school.” Zach smirked. “She’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“Did she now?” Owen smiled again. “She didn’t get it from me.”

“Yeah, right.” Zach held the office door open and nodded at the funeral director.

Mason threw a “Hey,” over his shoulder. He was understandably glum.

The funeral director was a balding man in his late seventies. “We’re just about done here. Just need paperwork signed with Owen as executor.”

Zach took a wall seat with his flowers while the three reviewed cremation procedure and interpreted the details of the will. With everything in order, they signed.

The director accepted Mason’s check. “You’re welcome to add something to the fire if you like. A photo or some memento?”

Mason’s frown took on a deeper crease. “I don’t have... my watch, maybe? She gave it to me—”

The funeral director shook his head. “Sorry. It has to be organic or paper, something that won’t melt up in the oven.”

Zach leaned forward. “I have daisies?”

Mason turned to face him, expression a complex mix of grief, annoyance, relief, and discomfort. “Why?”

“They were her favorite.” Zach shrugged. “I thought I’d put them wherever she’s going to be... interred?” He flicked his eyes to the funeral director, was that the right word?

Mason nodded, “They’re okay?”

“Yes. We can do that.”

Zach handed them over. Mason held the bundle for a second, touching the petals and breathing their light fragrance. Owen busied himself with one of the pens until the moment passed.

Mason held the flowers out to the funeral director. “Can I see her... before...?”

“I’m sorry, son.”

“But I just—”

Zach interrupted. “Hey, Mason. Remember that summer when it was so hot we couldn’t even walk out to the lake?”

Owen caught on. “Yeah, we just lay out on your front yard like we were going to die even though the bugs were all over your mom’s wildflowers.”

“She ambushed us with super soakers,” Zach reflected. “And kept the biggest one for herself.”

Owen smiled down at the pen. “So we all ganged up on her.”

Mason stared back at them, exhausted, upset. “We called a truce over the ice cream truck from Joe’s,” he said quietly.

“That’s right.” Owen nodded.

Zach addressed the funeral director. “If we’re done here, sir?”

“Yes. There’s nothing else we need to cover. Owen, I’ll contact you regarding funeral arrangements if I may?”

“Please.”

Zach stood, “Come on. Let’s get us some ice cream.” He held the door. Mason shuffled out. Owen followed him.

“Hey, Z-man. You’re helping out with the sale tomorrow, right? I could use a hand with the heavy stuff.” Owen jingled his keys. “And maybe your truck if people want to take some things home.”

“Of course.”

“See you at Joe’s!” Owen waved.

“I think I’ll pass on the ice cream.” Mason stuck his hands in his pockets.

Zach paused at Mason’s Jeep. “That’s not fun.”

“I’m not really feeling... fun.” Mason said. He climbed into the Jeep.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“Later.”

The weather was warming. It was a good day for an estate sale. Not so great a day for heavy labor. And there was labor to be had. Zach and Owen hauled couches, armchairs, armoires, side tables, benches, all sorts of parts and pieces that had once belonged to Mason's mother. They lined them up on the front lawn. Mirrors, collectible trinkets, whole sets of china.

It seemed like the entire town was there haggling with Mason and Kelly on prices. *Another twenty dollars and I'll give you another place setting. Knock that price in half. This shouldn't even sell for five dollars. Those match my bed-set, how much for the pair?*

Approaching noon, Zach stripped off his T-shirt and brought two large pitchers of lemonade out for everyone to enjoy. The chaos of the morning settled down a bit after that.

And Mason looked at him.

They were little sideways glances. Nothing that made eye contact, certainly nothing notable between friends who'd grown up together, but it was the first sign of interest Zach had seen since showing up three days ago. He was making it a big deal and really didn't care.

Zach caught him looking while they haggled different ladies out of their forty dollars. He flexed. Mason looked away and didn't look back. Zach couldn't help but smile. Baliey had said to woo his friend back. Zach could play that game.

He deliberately brushed past Mason whenever he could. He flexed his biceps, his pecs, his back whenever he caught Mason's gaze passing in his direction. Zach avoided eye contact but otherwise inserted himself deliberately into Mason's path at every opportunity.

Zach wasn't entirely sure if it was working, but Mason kept looking. He had to know Zach was baiting him. He kept biting anyway.

The day waned with most of the clothing and small trinkets gone. The smaller bits of furniture like side tables and single chairs were in new homes, but most of the larger pieces hadn't been claimed. Zach and Owen hauled the leftover bits back indoors while Mason and Kelly compared the day's take.

Zach fetched three beers and a lemonade. The four of them sat around the kitchen table. Zach lifted his glass. They all clinked. “So what’s the damage?” he asked.

Kelly closed her shoebox till. “The total is just over a thousand.”

Probably because the big furniture hadn’t moved. “Is that going to cover expenses?”

“Not all of them.” Owen shook his head. “But that puts a good bite in it.”

“We can sell more things online,” Kelly suggested.

Mason nodded. “Tomorrow.” He swirled his beer. “We’ve had a long day today.”

“Can I go see Helen?” she asked.

“You remember the rules.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go ahead. Don’t be surprised if she yells at you. She took two rabbits this morning.”

Rabbits Zach had put into Amelia’s Crock-pot that morning. Mason said Hawk had taken the game. Did he have another dog? Two? He counted on his fingers. Gossip, Redd, Hawk, Helen—

Owen laughed, “Oh, boy. Zack have you gone lightweight on us? You’re counting your fingers already. You’ve got ten, I promise.”

Zach scowled, “Just because you fall over at the sight of tequila doesn’t mean the rest of us are so easily swayed.”

“Hey,” Owen grinned at him, “That is entirely out of context. We had at least two cases of beer before the she-devil made an appearance.”

Mason laughed despite himself. It came out like a strangled snort. “Four beers is still enough to knock you over, Owen.”

“Four beers is a perfectly respectable number.”

Zach tilted his head. “For a lightweight.”

“Two against one is hardly a fair fight so I’ll spare you both the indignity of failure.” Owen stood from the table. “I have a perfectly respectable dinner waiting for me with my perfectly respectable wife.”

Zach flinched.

Would you like me to go after the fairer sex? Women?

It would certainly be more respectable.

The others didn’t seem to notice his social tic. Mason got up to walk Owen to the door and wave him out. Zach followed. How much of a disruption was he, coming back here? He didn’t think it would be this... tangled.

Lost in his thoughts, Zach didn’t move when Mason closed his door and turned. “Oh.”

Zach grunted to himself and blinked at Mason. They were close enough to feel each other’s breath, to see Mason’s pupils dilate at Zach’s proximity. Zach wanted to kiss him. He really wanted to press their bodies against the door and re-learn the old angles he could still sense like a phantom limb.

“You have tattoos now.”

He *had* been looking. Zach turned his hands out and spread his arms a bit to show them off.

Mason lifted his hand. He put it down without touching. “Why?”

“They’re each for something different.”

This time when Mason brought his hand up, his fingers came to rest against the tattoo on Zach’s left arm. His thumb brushed the black ink lines. “Scales?”

“A reminder that justice is blind. Color or creed are irrelevant, it’s the equality that matters.”

“It’s upside down, though.”

“Just a matter of perspective. I had the ink done before I walked in a protest. With my arm up, they’re right side up.”

“Protest against what?”

“An anti-gay marriage proposition going through Philly.”

Mason let him go fast. That hurt. Zach crowded closer with a frown. He saw Mason’s breath catch. The pulse in his throat fluttered. Mason whispered, “Stop.”

Like hell. “Deny it.” Mason wanted him, all the signs were there. Zach couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t let things be like they were before.

“I don’t want you.”

But Mason’s eyes flicked down. He backed against the door and held his breath. Zach stepped into Mason’s space. “You’re a liar.” Zach braced his left hand on the door. Mason looked at the scales and avoided Zach’s eyes. “You’re attracted—”

“What do you want to hear, Zach?” Mason met his eyes with an intent look of his own. It was Zach’s turn to catch his breath. The Mason he remembered was in there—buried and locked behind doors, but there. He spoke in that challenging tone, tilted his head in that are-you-sure-you-can-keep-up angle. Mason’s voice dropped. “How about, ‘You make me hot’?”

“Tell me what you actually want,” Zach whispered. He felt his blood rush. “Not the excuses these people have you stuck hiding behind.”

“I should say, ‘Fuck me now,’ and that’ll make it all better?”

“It would be a nice start.” Zach stared him down, daring him to back out of it all again. Mason’s blue eyes melted into grey and Zach knew he’d been right. The Mason he had fallen in love with, the one that dared him at every step, stared back at him unflinchingly. Zach’s breath came hard. He had forgotten how powerful Mason’s full attention could be. It made his blood scream and his chest throb. His lips ached for contact. He licked them and waited.

Mason grabbed Zach’s hip and pulled him in close. This was what had been missing in the back of Joe’s parking lot. The unwavering sureness. Zach had pushed until he got a kiss but that was all backwards. The real Mason had

always pulled him along, daring him to keep pace. Zach's lips hovered over Mason's. His whole body buzzed. He wanted with an ache that consumed him.

Mason said, "Kiss me."

It wasn't a request. That was the Mason, Zach remembered. Quiet and friendly in public, but when it came to getting what he wanted there was no room for discussion. Zach let their lips come together, gentle pressure, and move against each other. He made a tight sound in his throat. There was so much they had missed out on, so many things Zach wanted to share, so much he wanted to convey in this simple contact.

Mason's hand stroked down Zach's right arm, bringing his palm to Mason's jeans. Permission. Zach pressed him against the door with more hunger. He groaned at the full contact.

Mason gasped like he'd forgotten what it was like. "Strip. Now."

Zach lost his clothes. He was faster than Mason who struggled to unbutton his jeans. Zach helped, dragging his fingers over new/familiar skin. He squeezed Mason's ass and had to brace his head on the door to catch his breath. "I want you." He wasn't above begging.

"Take me." Mason went to his knees before Zach could even process it. Mason's fingers traced his cock and balls. His tongue slicked the way. His mouth closed. Zach dug his fingers into the door and shook. This was no sensual wooing like Baliey had suggested. Mason drove himself down on Zach's shaft and rolled his tongue against the underside.

Zach aborted a jerking thrust and had to pull himself back. "Bad plan."

Mason slid himself back to his feet. "Right here. Fuck me on the door."

Like Zach could possibly go anywhere at this point. He pulled a just-in-case condom and travel lube out of his crumpled jeans. Mason braced his back on the door. Zach pulled his ass up and flexed to hold him there. It wasn't for show this time. Mason was enough man by himself—Zach was very happy his job kept him active and fit.

Zach pulled Mason's cheeks apart and found that spot between. Mason was tight. Zach went slow. It took everything he had not to thrust himself home. Mason squeezed his own cock through it all, moaning with every small retreat Zach made. He was hot. Zach had never felt a man so tight in his life.

Tight like Mason hadn't had a single man take him in twenty years.

Zach gasped. He looked up and found Mason's ice-grey eyes staring him down. Zach forgot how to breathe. This was exactly it. Everything perfect, as he'd imagined and better. He didn't even know how to express the way his heart was racing, how strongly his blood surged, how awesome it was to re-establish that old connection.

Mason said, "Make me yours."

He was not going to survive this. Zach drank Mason's stare with his own. He let those grey eyes drill down into his soul and see everything. The pain of leaving, the loneliness, the impossible search for a replacement—as if anything could replace that predatory intent, the hopeless truth that Zach was so far in love he didn't know how to go on without Mason.

Mason's grey eyes saw it all and offered nothing back. No comfort, no pity. It had always been that way—Zach needed to be strong enough on his own to love Mason so deeply, he was worth nothing less.

Mason pushed a hand against Zach's shoulder to brace himself more firmly on the door. "Yes, Zach."

"Fuck," Zach grunted, far less eloquently than the whole experience felt. His hands hot on Mason's ass, his cock deep. He placed open-mouthed kisses to whatever skin he could reach. Mason's T-shirt got in the way.

Mason groaned deeply. His climax rolled through him in a series of jerks that squeezed Zach hard. Zach saw white and lost his legs. It was a barely controlled fall to his knees. Mason slid down the door—his shirt riding up under his arms. Zach held Mason close and cried his name. His climax was long, as if in waiting for twenty years and only now could he really let it go.

He gasped against Mason, spent and so impossibly happy he couldn't express it properly. He kept stroking Mason's leg and tried to catch his breath.

Mason twisted. He rummaged in his jeans for something and pressed paper into Zach's hand. "Here."

Zach held it up. Twenties, three of them. "What's this?" For the rabbits?
"Come back tomorrow."

"What for?" Not that he didn't want to come back, but what did that have to do with the cash?

"I feel like being nailed in my kitchen."

Zach sat up enough to blink at him.

"You're good for it, right?" Mason wasn't laughing.

Zach shoved him against the door as he stood and threw the cash at him.
"The fuck is this?"

"You'll make a poor whore if you give your services away for free."

Zach clenched his fists, "I'm not giving you my dick, you fucker. I'm giving you my heart!" He bent and grabbed his pants.

Mason exploded to his feet, "I don't want it! You took mine when you left and you never brought it back."

"I wanted you with me."

"You were selfish!" Mason yanked his shirt over his head and threw it at his feet, beautiful and terrible in his rage. He pointed into Zach's chest. "It was either you or Mom and that's not a choice. I had to stay here and you went anyway. Off to your high-rise condo. Well, I learned my lesson. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. I've made my own way. Maybe I don't have a damn Mercedes but I took care of Mom and me."

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Mason wasn't supposed to be angry and resentful at him for leaving. How did it ever get like this?
"Mason—"

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry.”

“I didn’t want to leave you here but I had to get out. These people can’t see past their own noses, we couldn’t be together here.”

“Then why are you back? Nothing is different here.”

“I am. I’m not afraid of them.”

“You were willing to shout about us before, so what? I built something here, Zach.”

“I’m not leaving again without you.” He couldn’t handle it—not a second time. Not after risking everything to come back.

“Get comfortable on the couch.” Mason slid past him and walked up the stairs. He left his clothes at the door.

Zach watched him go, too stunned and feeling awful to even appreciate the view. How had this gone so horribly wrong? He felt disgusting. He heard Mason close his bedroom door. When he didn’t come back out after several minutes, Zach started a shower in the lower bathroom. He spent a half hour trying to scrub away the weird feeling that he’d just been assaulted.

Zach woke up on the couch. He hadn’t intended to take Mason at his word, not at first. Baliey had a point that they didn’t know how to be a couple together anymore. She was right—they were both different people. But a wooing wasn’t what Mason was looking for. At least, not a wooing from one Zachariah Andrews, he who left Mason broken-hearted in a small town that couldn’t ever know him like Zach knew him.

He’d made a mistake, but that mistake had been twenty years ago when he walked away from the one thing he knew he wanted. He wasn’t going to make the same mistake a second time.

So he’d showered and got comfortable on the couch they hadn’t managed to sell yesterday, without so much as a pillow. He had a blanket now. It was just pushing seven in the morning. Zach’s back was tight from the workout the day before and a poor sleep on top of it. He didn’t remember Mason coming

back down last night nor had he heard him this morning. His Jeep was gone from the front, though.

And Zach had a blanket.

He hadn't gone to sleep with a blanket which meant Mason had put one over him this morning on his way out. Zach folded it neatly over the arm of the couch and smiled at himself. He'd yelled yesterday that he wasn't leaving again without Mason, but maybe that was only half true. Maybe he just wasn't leaving at all.

Amelia didn't ask questions when he showed up to pack his few bags and Jasper into the truck. She didn't complain that he hardly gave her any notice or criticise his timing. She simply packed him a lunch and waved him off her property with the promise he'd come back and visit.

He called Owen on the road. "Hey, you free for a few hours?"

"Not 'til tonight. What'd ya need?"

"Mason's out, and I wanted to get a chunk of the items left from yesterday up on the internet. Could use another hand for photos and such."

"Sounds dull. Swing by the house and grab Kelly, she works for food."

In the background, he heard, "Hey!"

Owen laughed. "See you in five?"

"On my way."

Despite her protest, Owen's daughter was waiting at the end of the drive when he swung by. She and Jasper became immediate friends.

Kelly helped him lug his few suitcases into the entry and set Jasper up with her food dishes in the kitchen. "I brought my laptop," she said. "And my phone takes decent photos."

"I've got a good camera on mine—between us we should be able to knock this out."

“Oh—where’s the cabinet with all the—here.” Kelly opened the bottom doors of a china cabinet. “Dad says we’re not supposed to sell this stuff down here. It’s being given in the will later.”

“What about the cabinet?”

“I think that’s safe—he didn’t mention it. Just the china.”

“Do you know where Mason keeps his toolbox?”

“Should be one in the shed.”

“Grab it, please?”

Kelly jogged out the back door of the kitchen. Jasper ran to keep up.

It took nearly three hours, but they photographed and listed every piece of furniture they hadn’t been able to sell the day before. Even Jasper helped; walking all over the keyboard when their descriptions were boring—or she was hungry.

Kelly stuck her tongue out. “I know Dad said you would feed me but I need to go. I’m supposed to meet my friends at the movies.”

“Do you need a lift?”

“Not if I get going.”

“Here.” Zach dug in his wallet for cash. “Get yourself some real lunch before the film. Don’t fill up on popcorn.”

Kelly rolled her eyes as she took the money. “Yes, Mom.”

“Hey, you can eat whatever you want. I get to tell Owen I told you to eat real food and I even paid for it.”

Kelly laughed and waved her way out. Zach tidied up the clutter of tape measures and non-saleable items while Jasper complained about how empty her food bowl was. He hefted the toolbox. “I’ll get to you, just sit tight.”

She didn’t sit tight. Zach headed out the back to put the toolbox away and Jasper followed right at his heels. She meowed at him.

Across the yard, a falcon screeched back. Zach stopped. There was a wood structure across the yard that looked weathered but hadn't been there twenty years ago. Another screech issued from the coop-like building. Something winged moved across a chicken-wire window.

Zach dropped the toolbox just inside the shed and picked up Jasper, just in case. She squirmed, uninterested in being manhandled. They both stopped at the little chicken-wire window. Jasper's ears flicked forward. Zach watched a very small falcon preen its wing on a perch in the back.

"It's a kestrel."

Zach jumped. Jasper complained. Mason was some twenty feet away and closing. His left hand was gloved in dark, worn leather. Gripping his wrist was a hawk with talons the length of his fingers, and a beak curved like a scythe. The bird hunched and flicked its wings around its feet where a fuzzy chunk of rabbit had already been shredded. Zach heard a bone break. The bird gulped meat down.

Zach didn't know what to say. He pointed at Mason. "That's a hawk."

"I told you I hunted with one."

What did you hunt it with?

My hawk.

Zach nodded. "I thought you were talking about another dog."

"Why would I name a dog Hawk?"

"I don't know. You named your first one Gossip." The kestrel twittered to their right. Jasper tried to pull herself out of Zach's grip and get closer. He held tight. "You actually hunt with it?"

"Yes." Mason gave Zach a wide berth and opened a door on the coop-like building. The hawk on his hand hopped obediently to a perch and continued tearing apart the rabbit leg. It plucked fur from the skin and flicked the clumps in every direction. Mason undid a connection on his glove, did some sort of clinical check of his bird, and backed out of the cage. "I'm a Master Class

Falconer. I hunt every day with Helen. Sometimes twice if we don't have any luck in the morning or I have something scheduled."

Zach adjusted Jasper in his arms. She was very interested in the small falcon. She wasn't going to get anywhere near it. "Scheduled?"

"I hunt for most of the farms and gardens around here. Keeps the rodents in check." Mason continued what appeared to be a regular routine of checking equipment, the coop-building, and cleaning things.

Zach didn't know the first thing about it all. "The bigger stuff goes to Keshel at the grocery."

"Yeah. Rabbits and pheasant, mostly. The smaller mice and gophers aren't worth selling. We avoid the squirrels altogether, too risky for the birds."

"What about the little one?" The kestrel Jasper desperately wanted to get her paws on.

"His name is Arrow. He's an imprint so he can't be released. We hunt dragonflies out on the lake sometimes, but he's mostly in retirement.

Imprint, retirement—it was all so different. Zach wasn't sure where to start, but he wanted to know everything. When had Mason started all this? How did it start? Where had the hawks come from? How did he hunt with them? On a leash? How else do you keep a bird from flying away?

He started with: "Can I make you some lunch?"

Mason looked up from the coop-building's redundant latches. "That would be nice." He whistled to the dogs. "Give me ten minutes to finish up here."

"I'll get started," Zach said, more absently than anything. They stood looking at each other for a long moment—a mutual realization that there were additional depths to each other. That maybe what they both knew from the past was only a part of what made them each whole now. In that moment, Zach realized that as much as he wanted his lover back, what he really needed was his friend. It made him smile and Mason smiled back.

Jasper was quite used to being queen of her house so there was an uneasy truce between the cat and Gossip. So far, Jasper took her frustrations out on Redd. She currently lay on Redd's back even though the terrier was barely large enough to fit her. He was tough: all muscle and activity from the constant hunting, but his personality bent easily to Jasper's and he sighed, carrying her from room to room as her will dictated.

Baliey called while they sat on the still-unsold couch quietly enjoying each other's company and the antics of the animals. Mason barely glanced up from his book. Zach answered the call. "Hey Bee. How's life?"

"Oh. My. God. This customer. These people, they're driving me up the wall. Zach, they want a fifty meter mud crawl—our venue is barely sixty meters long."

"What's wrong with a forty meter crawl? That's a long crawl, anyway."

"I know! But forty is bad luck. So is a right-hand turn. I'm not even sure how these people drive in traffic."

Zach laughed, "Well three lefts make a right... eventually."

"Have you ever tried to take three lefts downtown? Actually, don't answer that—"

"Baliey, relax. If they're so crazy why not cancel?"

"It's a charity project, we're not even getting paid for it. I thought it would be good karma or something but, damn. And now I've got a box full of handwritten cards from cancer kids telling me how much they're looking forward to an obstacle course with swing ropes over a live alligator pit."

"Ah, the cancer kid bit—can't say no to cancer kids."

"Zach!"

"Sorry. But I'm serious. Call up James for the legal paperwork and issue a cancellation."

"Shouldn't I tell them first? 'Hey stop being crazy or we'll back out'?"

“No, you don’t want to make it something us versus them. That’s definitely not good karma. James can handle the legal but you’re the PR girl, spin it with something like ‘we’re not equipped to handle their specific needs’. Give them Jennifer’s number—maybe she’ll take over.”

“Oh, good thought. We owe her from the big Lancing job she passed to us.”

“Try not to stress over the cancer kid box. Sometimes you just have to say no to a job—that’s the way it goes.”

“Still, I feel bad about it.”

“It happens with charity things more than I’d like. Next time try to get the details hashed out in contract.”

“It just takes so long to get things moving that way.”

“I know, but it saves you the guilt of saying no to cancer kids.”

“Right. Point taken.” She sighed into the phone and Zach heard her typing. “How are things with you—oh, is this even a good time to talk?”

Zach flashed his eyes up, Mason was still in his book. “It’s fine. Nothing much going on at the moment. We had some lunch. Just hanging for now.”

“He’s in the room, isn’t he? Your tone got careful.”

“Yes.” And he smiled into the word. Trust Baliey to know more than he ever meant to say. She really was dangerous in person.

“So on a scale of one to marriage, how are things?”

Zach laughed once—a bark of sound. “You should look into getting a cat from the shelter. Something shorthair or you’ll never keep the computers running.”

Baliey was silent on the other end. Her typing stopped briefly. “Jasper’s not coming—? No, wait. *You’re* not coming back, are you?” She was quick.

“Hopefully not.”

“Gay man in a small town. How’s that working out for you?” She was honestly worried.

Zach was, too. “There are a lot of kinks to work out still.”

She snorted.

Zach rolled his eyes at the ceiling even though she couldn’t see it.

“You really okay with that? Staying out there? You left for a good reason.”

“I have a lot more to learn.”

“Good,” she said, as if Zach hadn’t just altered an entire year’s worth of plans in one afternoon. He owed her a better explanation. “If that’s the case, you get to brainstorm a better way to fix this charity cause. I want to do it—and not just because of the cancer kids box—I just need some logistical help.”

“Fair enough. Start with the contract. Did they sign the standard?”

“That’s probably the only thing that’s gone right...”

Zach got comfortable on the couch and talked Baliey through the details of her customer’s crazy requests for nearly two hours. They parsed the contract line-by-line, conference called Jason from legal for several questions, and established a plan of attack.

“Bee, don’t forget you still have Jennifer up your sleeve. Since it’s charity work anyway I think you should call her and her team up. She has different contacts than we do and a good portion of our support can’t afford to do the work for free. She can boost your on-site numbers.”

“And maybe help keep me sane.”

“That too.” Zach smiled.

“Okay. I can work with this—thanks Zach. I might text you later in a panic.”

“I live to serve.”

“Later.”

“Bye.” Zach smiled at his phone for a second. Talking with Baliey never failed to cheer him up, even when things were already going well. She was the best kind of friend one could have as a business partner.

“Sounds like she really needs your help.” Mason said, half-involved with his book.

“She’ll work through it. It’s her first project without me there to oversee the details so she’s just second guessing. She’s been there from the beginning. Probably just misses Jasper.”

Mason set his book down. “Why *did* you bring your cat?”

“I wasn’t sure how long I’d be here and there wasn’t much notice when I hopped in the car. I couldn’t just drop her on someone. ‘Hey I might be gone for two months but I really don’t know, here’s a cat.’” Zach smirked, “And Jasper would never forgive me. She likes going where I go.”

“You’re prepared to be here for a while.”

“As long as you need me.”

Mason hummed and went back to his book.

Mason’s cell rang as he was collecting his things for an evening of hunting with Helen. He tossed it to Zach. “Answer that, it’s Owen.”

Zach answered it. “Yo.”

“Z-man?”

“Mason’s got his hands full. What’s up?”

“Canceled plans, that’s what! Peter’s first calf of the year just dropped. All the wives are getting a barbeque going.”

“Is that a thing now?”

“Makes it easy for people to take shifts overnight if they’re already there.”

Mason asked, “Is what a thing?”

“Barbeque for the first calf of the year?”

Mason pressed his lips together. “We’ll take Arrow. Helen’s off the hook. I’m sure Keshel will be there, I can reschedule the hunt when we see him.”

Zach asked Owen, “Keshel will be there?”

“Dude, everyone goes. Are you in the car yet?”

“We’re going. Chill-pill. See you in twenty.”

“Later.”

Zach tried to stuff the phone in one of pouches Mason had slung around his hips but Mason swiveled, “Not that one, it’s got raw meat in it. Put it in my jeans. Front.”

Mason probably didn’t mean for his hip thrust to be overtly sexual but Zach took in the full view. He stilled Mason’s hips with his free hand and slid the phone in with one finger. He licked his lips. Looked up. He caught Mason looking away. Zach didn’t push it. “The birds travel in boxes, right?”

“Yeah they’re both set up in the back of the Jeep.”

“Can I carry Arrow?”

“Well, technically no. But…”

“Technically?”

Mason shook his head and led the way out the back kitchen door. “It’s all government oversight and federal this or jail time that. If I keep too many feathers they can take the birds away. Technically. But a lot of it is honor system, and I wouldn’t have started this if Jake hadn’t let me exercise his bird before I was licensed. So, yeah, you can walk Arrow to the car.”

Zach was a lot more excited about this than he expected. “What do I do?”

“Not much, really. Here, put this on your left hand.”

Zach accepted the well-worn leather glove, distantly similar to a work glove, with a bigger sleeve and a latch. Thicker, too. “It’s stiff.”

“It’s just meant to be a perch. Trust me, you don’t want those talons getting anywhere near your skin.”

“Even Arrow’s?”

“Your eyeballs will make a fine snack.”

“Eew.” The wooden structure in the backyard that functioned as a holding pen was called a mews, Zach learned. He squeezed into Arrow’s smaller half behind Mason, shut the door, and accepted a small piece of meat.

“Just pinch that in your glove there so he can see it. Hold it out—just like that.” Mason put a small brass whistle to his lips and let out a sharp chirp. Arrow twitched around on his perch. He spotted Mason. Zach. The meat. He flew down to the glove, the leather jesses on his legs tinkling with tiny, tiny bells.

“Wow... I can’t even tell he’s sitting there, he’s so light.”

“I had to get a special scale to weigh him, four decimal points, to make sure he was at the right weight for flying.”

“I thought he couldn’t go free.”

“He can’t be released.” Mason nodded. “Into the wild. He’ll just follow people around and starve when they don’t feed him. He thinks people are family. But he can still fly and he’ll catch little bugs. Sometimes.” Mason manipulated Zach’s fingers so that Arrow’s leather jesses crossed between his fingers and lay across his palm. He tied a lead and hooked that onto the sleeve of the glove. “Just hold that still with your last two fingers.”

Zach carefully closed half a fist. Arrow rocked on the glove. “He doesn’t look stable.”

“The glove is a lot bigger than his little feet. Just keep an eye on him. He might put his wings out for balance. You keep your hand closed on his jesses so if he thinks about flying away you’ve got him, ok?”

“Yeah, sure.” Zach nodded. The little falcon on his hand nodded at him. “Hey, that’s cute.” Zach pointed with his right hand and got a beak in his finger for his trouble. “Ow!”

“You deserved that.”

“That wasn’t cute.”

“Let’s go.” Mason laughed. “Remember, keep your fist closed. Just walk slow.”

They exited the mews. Mason locked it behind him and checked on Helen. Together they paced slowly to the Jeep. Arrow rocked a little on the glove and Zach was still amazed that he couldn’t feel his weight at all. The kestrel was smaller than his cell phone, and all feathers. Arrow peeped and twitched his head around.

“Is he afraid?” Zach asked.

“Just cautious. He’s smaller than everything else out in the world. It pays to have your eyes on everything.”

“This is so cool.”

Mason laughed. They reached the Jeep. Mason popped the back door. “Wait there for a second, let’s see if he’ll accept his hood.” Mason retrieved a small leather helmet-shaped item from one of the tall white boxes. He let Arrow look at it, then slowly fit it over his beak and head. It tightened in the back. The bird appeared unruffled.

“Now reach your hand into the box and let the perch touch the back of his feet.”

Zach leaned in and did as he was told, letting the cross bar on the perch bump the small falcon. Arrow hopped onto the perch. “Ha. Look at that.”

“Use your other hand and unlatch the line from the glove. You’ll see a ring attached to the base of the perch- clip it there.”

Zach transferred the tether. “I can let go of the strings?”

“That’s it.” Mason took the leather glove and closed up the white box. Arrow peeped. His bells tinkled.

It didn’t take even ten minutes to drive out to the ranch. A bonfire was already lit and a long iron grill stretched over the flames. It seemed like the whole town turned out for the party. Cars lined the road on both sides. A

steady stream of people headed out toward the pasture to get a look at the new calf.

Mason took the entire bird box out of the Jeep and divided his supplies between himself and Zach. Together they approached the bonfire. Mason's white bird box was immediately the center of attention for children and adults. They peered into the air holes, trying to catch a glimpse. "Arrow doesn't mind the attention?" Zach asked.

"He can't see it. The hood does a lot to keep him calm."

"Hi, Mason! Zach!" Kelly waved from the grill line. "We're sitting over there."

They followed her pointing finger and found room at a picnic blanket. The collection of kids followed, a few adults trailed along. They set everything down and Mason appointed one of the older boys to watch the bird. They joined Owen and his daughter at the grill. It smelled delightful—all roasted meats and barbeque sauce.

Kelly grinned, "Did you bring Helen?"

"No, Arrow." Mason said. "He hasn't flown for dragonflies in a while. I thought we'd go out to the creek."

"Yes!" Kelly threw her hands up and spilled her Coke. "Oops."

They reached the grill and asked for ribs, sausage, chicken, or steak. Peter himself doled out the meat while his wife manned the grill. "Ribs, I think." Zach said. "They look delicious."

"Sorry, all outta ribs." Peter said, his tongs hovering over half a rack.

Zach frowned. In front of him, Owen paused. "What was that, Peter?"

"Said we're all out of ribs. These ones are no good. I don't give out food that's no good."

Sure, he didn't.

"That's okay." Peter's wife turned from the grill, "I just finished this batch," she said, oblivious to the tension. She added another pile of ribs to the

table. With his wife and Owen both looking on, Peter silently served Zach his requested ribs. They moved on to the salads and drinks without thanking him. Mason was served his sausage and chicken with a dark eye.

Zach saw the tension ratcheting up Owen's shoulders and put a hand on him. "Chill. It's not worth it." But he appreciated the quick defense.

"It's just so stupid."

"Are you going to arrest him for stupidity?"

"I can hold him for forty-eight hours," Owen said brightly.

Zach laughed. "Let's eat."

They all clustered on the blanket and watched Mason put Arrow out on a lawn perch for everyone to see. He answered questions between bites of food, most of them correcting the kid's ideas of having a "pet bird".

"This bird bites," Zach interjected. He held up his finger to prove it. "So don't get too close."

Only when they were mostly done with their meals did Mason give in to the demands to see Arrow in flight. He organized a walk over to the spring-flush creek on Peter's property and directed everyone to sit down and be quiet.

Zach sat next to Kelly on a rock jutting over the creek bed. "Have you seen Arrow fly?"

"Oh, yeah, lots of times. It's still fun, though. He's really fast."

"He would have to be to catch dragonflies."

"Sometimes lightning bugs, too," Kelly said. "They like the meadow behind our house and sometimes Mason will bring Arrow when he comes for dinner."

"That so...?" It was ridiculous that he hadn't stayed in touch with his two best friends to know these things. It hadn't seemed like such a big deal when he was away in Philly, building a career and a life beyond all of this. Now he wasn't even sure he knew how to relate to a small town anymore. They didn't even have a Starbucks.

Mason commanded the side of the creek, showing off Arrow's small feathers and explaining the hood and how he couldn't go back to the wild. He was utterly comfortable out here in the forest with a raptor on his fist. Zach snapped a photo on his cellphone and sent it to Baliey.

This is the new Mason Foster.

She texted him back.

Nice ass.

Then Arrow was in the air and Zach didn't care about a witty comeback. The little falcon flapped up to a branch along the edge of the water and looked around. He had no string attaching him to Mason, nothing to prevent him from simply flying away. Yet he stayed and scanned the water and reeds. He tipped forward off the branch and dove almost too fast to see. He skimmed the reeds and flashed sideways. Arrow banked down toward the closest spot of solid ground—the rock outcropping that Zach and Kelly had claimed. He flapped up to land and Zach saw that he had a dragonfly gripped in one foot.

Then Mason was there with his glove, kneeling between Zach and Kelly, and gave a short whistle burst. Arrow considered the dragonfly. He nipped at the wings and flicked one away into the water. It glittered as it fell. His head twitched to watch it. Mason added a bit of meat to his glove, just a small pinch for a small bird, and blew his whistle again. Arrow abandoned the dragonfly and hopped to the glove for his prize.

Kelly picked up the dragonfly and jogged down the bank to one of the younger boys, "Here, what is it?"

The boy cradled the dead bug and turned it over with one finger. The kids around him leaned in. "It's a green darter," he said.

"But it's brown."

"It's a girl. The boys are green and blue."

"She's got some purple on her, look."

"Will you keep it?"

“No, I’ve got one already.”

They passed the dragonfly around and looked back to Mason, who smiled. “Ready for another one?”

Zach watched Arrow and Mason catch dragonflies for an hour. Sometimes he caught one, sometimes he didn’t, but the whole spectacle was awesome to watch. In the end, it was Arrow who decided dragonfly catching was done.

“Why won’t he fly?” one of the kids asked.

“He’s full. I tempt him away from the dragonflies with a little piece of meat, and a hawk only hunts when he’s hungry.” Mason gestured everyone up. “Come on, let’s get back to the party. People are missing us.” He fit the hood back over Arrow’s head and led the way back to the bonfire.

“Hey, let’s check out this new calf we’re partying for.”

“Sure, yeah,” Mason said, “Let me put Arrow back in the Jeep for the night. It’s getting dark.”

Kelly jumped to help, so Zach fetched the three of them dessert, root beer floats in mason jars. He bent the straw on his to sip while he walked and found them both at the car.

“Ohhh, floats!” Kelly said. “Hey! Why do you two get bendy straws and I don’t?”

Mason reached for her straw. He flipped it upside down. The other end was bent.

“Oh.” Kelly sucked on her float. “Well that’s more like it, anyway.”

Zach laughed all the way to the barn. Near the middle, the warmest spot, a small cluster of people tried to lean over the stall half-door and get a look. They didn’t even see the hay in the stall when Sally’s bright voice barked from the barn door. “KELLY!”

Everyone jumped. Kelly whipped her head around. “What’d I do?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“Mom, I’m serious. I’ve been here the whole time.”

“You’ve been with him.” Sally’s finger landed directly on Zach’s chest. “I told you to stay away from my daughter.”

Zach put up both hands, “I was invited to a party, Sally, that’s it.”

“Him?” Kelly said, clearly confused. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s tainting you, you shouldn’t hang out with people like him. I’ve taught you better than that.”

Kelly sipped on her root beer and got sarcastic in a blink. “What exactly is he, Mom? A nice guy helping his friend out?”

Sally grabbed her daughter’s free hand and almost spat, “He’s a *homosexual*.” She said the word like she was afraid it would come alive and bite her. She spun and dragged Kelly out of the barn. Kelly saluted with her root beer and jogged to keep up.

Zach rolled his eyes and turned to see the calf in the stall. The six or so people that had been straining over the half door stood watching them, flicking their eyes from Zach to Mason and back. Zach crossed his arms. “What?”

One of the women said, “So, who wants a root beer?”

“Me!”

“Yes.”

“Good idea, Molly.”

The group left in a hurry. Zach just shook his head and leaned on the half door. The calf in the stall stood on wobbly legs and blinked huge black eyes up at Zach. He dangled his arm in the stall and let it nibble his fingers. Mason sighed deeply.

Zach said, “I don’t know how you deal with this all the time.”

“For the most part, I don’t.”

“That’s right, I forgot. You’re not gay.”

Mason set his jar of root beer down heavily on the stall door. “You dealt with it by leaving, I deal with it by keeping it out of sight of those who don’t care for it. Don’t judge my solution when yours is no better.”

Zach pulled a hand down his face, chastised. “You’re right. Sorry. Shit.”

“Let’s go,” Mason said.

“Yeah.”

Amelia caught them on the way out the barn door. They slowed to match her speed with the cane. “You still owe me a blouse, Zachariah.”

Mason shot him a confused look.

“Jasper,” Zach said by way of explanation. “I haven’t forgotten. Would you like to go tomorrow?”

“No, no. I’ll wait for the sale in the paper. Just making sure you’re not running out of town any time soon.”

Mason said, “He’s staying with me for now.”

“Yes, that’s good. It’s about time you two got together.” She pinched Zach’s arm, “And here you got me thinking you were just back for a couple weeks.”

Mason frowned. “Mrs. Amelia, we’re not toge—”

“It’s really not a good time for this, Mrs. A.” Zach spoke right over him.

“A good time?” Amelia’s voice dropped and she stopped walking. She rested her hand on her hip. “Is that what you’re waiting for? A time that works better for you?” She didn’t wait for an answer. Amelia turned and shouted toward the bonfire, “HEY! Zach and Mason are gay and have been in love with each other for the past thirty years. What are you going to do about it?”

The party at the bonfire ground to a halt. Mason put a hand to his mouth. Zach choked. How many times had he wanted to do just that? How many times had he swallowed those words before moving to Philadelphia? Peter threw his grilling tongs on the rack over the fire and marched in their direction.

Amelia turned back to Zach and Mason unperturbed. “You don’t find a good time to live what you believe in, Zachariah. You don’t hold it in reserve until there’s a day more convenient. You either own it every day or you betray it.”

Before Peter reached them, Amelia swung her cane up and smacked him solidly in his overweight stomach. “Peter Bench, if you don’t have anything congratulatory to say you will keep your big trap shut.”

Peter lifted a finger and swallowed his words. He pointed at Zach and then to the Jeep. He leveled a heavy glare at Mason. He tried to move Amelia’s cane out of his gut but she appeared no less stable with it off the ground and the struggle made him look foolish.

Zach reached for Mason’s hand and was quietly thrilled when the man didn’t pull away. “Thank you, Amelia. Good night.”

“You too, Peter,” Mason said. They loaded themselves into the Jeep and drove home in silence.

Parked in the driveway, they looked at each other. Zach felt the corner of his lips turn up. Mason didn’t look amused. Zach took a breath to speak and Mason put a finger up on his lips. Zach stilled.

“Just kiss me,” Mason said.

So he did.

Mason’s bed was infinitely more comfortable than the couch, not the least because Mason was in it. When Zach woke he was hugging a pillow, though, not the man he was expecting. All his plans for early morning apology-slash-reunion (for real this time) sex went out the window.

He revised plan B while he showered and headed downstairs. At least Mason could come home from hunting to a hearty breakfast.

The front door was open. Mason sat on the porch step beside a large basket of peaches. The first batch of peaches from Kale’s trees were always the sweetest. Zach remembered talking Owen and Mason into the orchard in the

middle of the night to raid those big juicy fruits. Kale didn't give them away lightly.

Zach saved plan B for a later day. He stepped out onto the porch. "Not hunting this morning?"

"Keshel and Franklin both called and canceled my services."

"Oh, did they reschedule?"

"No."

Oh. Zach sank down on the step beside Mason but didn't touch. He was turning a large jar of honey over in his hands. Also from Kale's property. Peach blossom honey. The most expensive item here in town. "Did you go to the grocery?"

"No, they were here when I opened the door."

Zach winced. He was single-handedly dividing a small town in two, all because he couldn't get over a love he wasn't entirely sure wanted him back. "I'm sorry, Mason. I've really screwed up a lot for you by coming back here."

"Yeah," Mason said without any accusation in his voice. "You have." He left the honey on the step and stood up.

"I never meant for this to happen. Any of this."

Mason paused on the porch. "What did you expect, exactly?" His voice was still low, like he'd given up.

What had he expected? White knights, shining armor. A fairy tale. He was too damn romantic for his own good. That kind of thing didn't happen in real life. People were too complicated for that. "I don't know," Zach admitted. "I just... I couldn't stay away without trying one more time. But nothing is like it was."

"Why me?"

Zach jerked to his feet. "Mason, it's only ever been you."

And then Mason's face twisted, a disappointed distrustful look. "Don't give me that. Our moms called each other every week. Mom told me every time you started dating someone new. What, seven guys? Eight?"

"Did she tell you they were all built like you? Brown hair and blue eyes like yours?" Zach stepped up to the porch, his hands open. "Did she tell you every time I held them I dreamed of you? How I kicked one out of my bed because he wouldn't stare me down while I fucked him." Zach stopped a breath from Mason. "I let one of them move in with me, I let him into my life. Almost two years."

Resentful. "So why aren't you with him?"

"Because no matter how many times we had sex his eyes never turned grey like a storm rolling in, and every single time I thought about how he wasn't you." Zach shook his head. "I found every look-alike in Philadelphia and none of them were you. None of them laughed at potatoes or shared a look with me over an upside-down bendy straw. None of them were my best friend since I could crawl. None of them have my heart."

Still, Mason just stood there, looking abandoned.

"Please. Mason. We had something once. You can't tell me you're not gay, don't insult me like that." Zach clenched his fists. "But if you're not into me anymore then just tell me. Just say it so I can pack. Say it to my face so I can move on—"

"Don't—" Mason put up both hands and looked down, shaking his head. "Don't go just yet." His voice shuddered and he fisted his hands. Let them come down gently on Zach's chest. "Owen reads the will tomorrow and the funeral is the day after that. Just stay until then... Please." He wouldn't meet Zach's eyes as he walked back into the house.

Zach stood on the porch staring at the peaches until Jasper came to check on him. She repeatedly bumped her nose into his calf until he gave in and tracked down her feathers-on-a-string toy.

There were more people at the reading than Zach expected. He'd never been to one before, but certainly half the town wasn't necessary? The turnout was almost as good at the town hall during a debate. It was about as boring, too. Legal paperwork was dense at best; Zach was not envious that Owen had to wade through it all.

He tried not to slouch in his chair as Owen droned on into a microphone reading the will from top to bottom. Owen was seated behind a small desk facing rows of foldout chairs. Zach sat next to Mason directly across from their best friend. It felt like being in a fishbowl with everyone else waiting for a trick. Except for Owen's steady voice, the room was silent.

Zach's phone buzzed against his thigh. He started into better posture. It was Baliey.

How's things?

Dull. Never knew this read the will stuff could take so long.

Usually doesn't for personal stuff. How long have you been there?

An hour at least.

That's odd.

It's all legal, I can't make heads or tails of it. What's up with you?

Working with Jennifer like you suggested. She's been a great help. Better at the PR stuff than I am. So far so good.

No cancer kid guilt?

Haha. No. :P

She said.

Any progress with you and your man?

It's complicated. He's been keeping the fact that he's gay under the radar. My showing up really screwed up that plan.

Oh, no.

It's not all bad, but it's not all good either. People are taking sides. There's been some backlash. He's lost some income with the work he does. I want him back but every time I push a bit something else goes wrong for him. It's not worth ruining the life he's built here.

Has he thought about coming up to Philly with you?

I haven't even brought it up. He asked me to stick around at least until the funeral tomorrow. We'll see what happens after that.

“Possessions.” Owen said from the desk up front. Tension in the room crystallized and Zach felt every hair on his neck rise. He glanced around. Everyone sat up straight and silent. Holding their breath. What was going on?

“All of my earnings, every dollar and object to my name, every asset under my legal control is hereby left to my son, Mason Thomas Gilbert.”

The quiet was crisp. Then Peter Bench yelled, “WHAT?”

Owen continued, “There were several verbal agreements made between the citizens of Edenburg and myself. This will supersede all such agreements.”

A woman in the crowd scowled. “That can't be right.”

Owen's face was neutral but Zach saw a crease forming between his eyebrows. He knew what was coming and he didn't like it. Zach glanced at Mason and whispered, “Do you know what this is about?”

Mason shook his head. “Mom left her will with Owen months ago, I never thought to look at it.”

Owen continued. “To address a few of those verbal agreements, and in the likely event of dissent in the execution of this document, I present the following comments:

“Molly Fields, though you are often silent in public, you are a wretched gossip in private and homophobic. I promised you several dresses and a pair of

shoes. These things I suggest my son instead gift to your daughter. By the way, she asked me to tell you that she's a lesbian."

Every head turned to Molly, sitting to the left of center. Zach recognized her from the barn when Sally had stormed in to collect her daughter. Molly's head turned very slowly to the back corner of the room where a young woman stood quietly but proudly holding the hand of another woman.

"Peter Bench," Owen said into the dead silence. All heads swiveled back to him. "You are two-faced and actively afraid that 'the gay' will rub off on you. I'm sorry that you're so insecure in your gender that you feel even being in the presence of a respectful man like my son causes you convulsions."

"This is outrageous." Peter stood, scratching his chair back loudly.

Keshel said from the back, "We didn't come here to listen to a list of insults from a dead woman."

Zach twisted around, eyes wide. He saw Mason's expression shutter coldly. Owen lifted his attention from the will. "No, you came here to take a dead woman's possessions and that woman is now putting you all in your place."

Peter knocked his chair over trying to get out of the aisle. "I don't have to stay here and take this."

"Yes, you do," Owen said mildly. "Richard, if you could bar the door, please." A uniformed officer Zach didn't know closed the doors in the back of the room and locked them. "And Peter, please return to your seat so I can finish this."

"This is bullshit."

"Phillip, please assist Mr. Bench to his seat. Richard, if you would." Owen glanced at Peter and the two officers grabbed him on either side. "Peter, you can sit or they can make you sit."

"This is harassment. Police brutality. I'll call your district."

Owen looked back down at the paper. "Go right ahead. Just as soon as we're done here. Where was I... Keshel..."

Zach whispered, “Oh my god,” as name after name came off the list and outlined their worse offenses. People whispered at each other. Murmured. A fight broke out between two men against a woman. Molly’s daughter and her partner joined sides to outnumber the men. It went downhill after that. Fists flew, insults crashed across the room followed by chairs. Zach grabbed Mason by the hand and dragged him up to the front with Owen. “Holy crap, Owen.”

The man pulled a whistle from his belt. Zach covered his ears. It pierced through anyway. When the ringing stopped there was only silence, all eyes on the front. Owen tucked his whistle back in his belt. “Richard if you could unlock the door, please. Go home, everybody. This isn’t worth someone dying over and I can’t stick you all in jail, it’s not big enough.”

“You’re not welcome in my field.” Keshel pointed his calloused finger in Mason’s direction.

“You already canceled my services, Keshel. Good riddance.”

From a corner, out of the brawl Amelia said, “You’ll regret that when the mice move into your grain in two days. You’ll have no crop this year.”

Owen held up his hand, “Enough! Start walking out of this building. All of you.”

A few people darted out the door, no doubt to spread the word around town. The exit was more-or-less orderly with both Richard and Philip there to keep things calm. Molly’s daughter approached the front instead, her partner behind her.

Owen sighed, “I’m sorry June—”

“No, I asked her to do it, I was ready for it. Although... I’m not entirely sure I have a home to go to.”

“You can stay at my place until something works out. Both of you.” Owen put a hand on June’s shoulder and led them out at the end of the line.

Zach turned the will. There were at least twenty people on this list. They hadn’t even gone through half. He flipped the page. Had Owen read through

this before coming today? Zach hoped so. He tucked the paperwork in his jeans and followed Mason to the truck.

Sally, take a lesson in friendship from your husband and daughter. They are excellent role models.

“Don’t go home,” Mason said from the passenger side of his Jeep.

Zach turned at the fork and headed up to The Ridge without question. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to be in town after that spectacle, anyway. He missed Philadelphia. He missed Bailey. Zach glanced at his best friend. He missed their youth, when things weren’t so complex. He backed into their spot under the tree.

Mason got out and stood looking over the town, hands in his pockets. Zach opened the back of the Jeep so they could sit, but Mason didn’t seem to notice. Zach touched his shoulder. Mason was shaking. It was a small tremor, but it felt like his whole body was vibrating. Zach hugged him from behind and watched the town below.

They stood like that until the sun stepped below the horizon. They watched house lights wink on and cars lazily trail around town. The wind picked up.

Zach said, “Let’s sit in the Jeep.” So they moved. Zach sat against the back seats and Mason lay between his legs against his chest. Zach stroked Mason’s chest and they saw the first stars shine against the darkness. There were no streetlights up here. No bustling city or mansion homes. The dark was deep and the stars took Zach’s breath away. “I forgot how beautiful the sky was out here.”

Mason trailed his hand down Zach’s thigh. “I remember coming up here, sneaking out of our houses. We’d push your truck for a half mile so your mom wouldn’t hear it start up.”

Zach ran his thumb down Mason’s jaw. “I remember laying under this tree in the bed for hours. We’d lose track of time.”

“Help me lose track again.”

Zach turned Mason's head up. They kissed slowly, full of breath. The hum of tension in Mason's body sighed out of him. Zach pulled Mason's shirt out of his jeans and pressed his hand across the skin there.

Mason threaded his fingers in Zach's hair and pulled him closer, tightening their kiss. He popped the buttons on his jeans.

Zach helped him push them down. He stroked Mason's rising cock and felt his own flex tight in his jeans. "I want you," he whispered.

Mason twisted to face him and undid Zach's jeans. Zach flexed up to slide them and his boxers off. His cock pulsed against his thigh. Mason breathed hot air down the length of it. He swirled his tongue around the head.

"Please, Mason. Don't tease me."

Mason's bright blue eyes flicked up to meet his, full of mischief, and Zach knew his plea would go unheeded. Mason took his time slicking the length of Zach's cock. He curled his tongue, dragged it over veins, flicked it across the tip. When Mason finally closed his mouth over the end and sucked, Zach cried out. Mason swallowed him down to the end, all hot and slick. Zach had to pull him up or be lost. His fingers wouldn't work on the condom. Mason had to tear open the lube.

Mason straddled him and together they guided Zach's hard cock through that tight ring. Mason slid up and back down further, up and down again. Each time Zach pushed deeper and they gasped. Zach palmed Mason's ass and guided him down all the way. Then the stroke was easy. Mason flexed as he balanced, and all his muscles squeezed Zach in all the right places.

Zach dropped his head back on the wrong side of the headrest and panted. "I've always loved you, Mason."

Mason's hands gripped the roll bar of the Jeep overhead. "I never doubted you. You've always been steady. I can rely on you."

Zach lifted his head to watch Mason's strong body flex over his. "Please—" Mason's blue eyes caught his and the words stuck in his throat.

Please let me love you, please don't make me leave, please, I want so much with you.

“Zach, I—” Mason’s eyes greyed. They stared at each other and the rhythm of their bodies hardened.

“Please.”

Mason whispered, “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m right here,” Zach said quietly.

“Swear it, like you swore you would love me.”

And he dragged words from the past into the present, “Mason Gilbert, I don’t have a ring to prove it or a priest to confirm it, but I swear I will always love you with everything I am and I will never leave you.” Mason’s body shook over him. “Will you do the same?”

Mason whispered, “Yes.”

“Will you have me?”

“Yes.”

They surged against each other, just gasps and whispers. When Mason came, arched back and bathed in starlight, he cried Zach’s name. It was the most perfect moment Zach had ever known—better than the kiss behind Joe’s, better than any memory he kept dragging around like a silver lining around storm clouds.

Mason unbent and slid himself gently up and down Zach’s still-hard cock. He met Zach’s eyes and said, “I love you.”

Zach flexed his arms and moved Mason more quickly up and down. “Tell me again.”

“I love you.” Mason arched and tightened every muscle around Zach. “I love you,” he said. “I love you, I love you—”

Zach reached his climax with those words in his ears and Mason’s grey eyes fixed on his.

The Jeep wasn't a comfortable place to sleep when it wasn't planned for. Zach couldn't feel his left leg. Mason lay on top of him, curled and asleep. Zach could handle a dead limb to keep that vision forever.

Mason's phone rang. Both of them jerked. Mason rubbed his eyes and fumbled in his jeans for the device. "Lo?" A pause. "Yeah, dude, we're fine. Up at The Ridge. No, we didn't go home last night, I wanted to stay away for a little bit." Mason rolled off Zach. "Yeah." Zach kicked his dead leg and hissed as the needles moved up to his hip.

Mason said, "I'm not interested." A pause. "No, I'm serious. Cancel it. You have the urn? Bring it up to The Ridge, no just you." Pause. "I'm sure, we'll see you in ten? Okay, bye."

"Owen?" Zach asked.

"Yeah, he's on his way up with Mom's ashes. I want to spread them here."

"No funeral?"

"Funerals were never really my thing. Owen thinks we should have one but it'll be for the benefit of the town more than anything and... well."

"They're not too deserving right now."

"Yeah. Something like that."

They dressed. Zach was standing out at the edge of the ridge trying to banish the last pins and needles when Owen's cop car turned over the gravel. He parked beside them and produced the urn from his side seat.

Mason took the jar and turned it over in his hands. It was smaller than Zach expected and unornamented. Mason walked to the edge of the ridge.

"Shouldn't we say something?" Owen asked. Zach put a hand on his shoulder.

Mason stood at the edge for a moment. With a sudden movement, he broke the urn's seal and swept his arm wide. Ashes spread on the wind and blew

down the side of the cliff. They swirled out in space over the morning light. “Zach.”

Zach stepped up next to him and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Yeah?”

“There were no women, that was a lie.” Mason glanced at him. “There’s been no one else since you.” He looked down at the town. “But I can’t leave. My birds... there’s nothing for them up in the city.”

“I’ll stay.” Zach said without hesitation.

“But your business?”

“Baliey owns it outright. I’m just a consultant.”

Mason turned. “The condo?”

“Sold it the day I came down here. I don’t need it.”

“You really won’t go back, then?”

Zach reached for Mason’s hand and kissed his knuckles. He answered the real question. “I’m not leaving you ever again.”

Mason smiled at him; a little sad around the edges, but a full, bright smile that left Zach’s heart beating fast.

“So,” Owen said slowly. “Are congratulations in order?”

The sad edges broke into laughter. Owen joined them at the edge of the ridge and wrapped an arm around either of their necks. Behind his back Zach held Mason’s hand. As they took in the view, Zach realized why Mason’s hawks didn’t fly away when he let them off the glove. Being with him, experiencing life at his side, was far more fulfilling than life on your own. Zach was happy to have been baited and caught.

THE END

Author Bio

Tami Veldura is a writer, reader, lover, artist, and the product of a childhood with no puppies. She currently resides in sunny California. Her current writing interests include fantasy and science fiction of every kind as well as gay erotic romance and the occasional nonfiction memoir piece.

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