

The Three of Us

Stephen del Mar



A Story From
Bennett Bay

THE THREE OF US

Ever fall head over heels in love with a guy or feel like you'd jump off a bridge for him? Well, that's Sam's problem. It's the first week of college and he's following his jock of a roommate around like a puppy dog. It's pretty pathetic and then he sits down next to this little nerd in his English class. And things change. "The Three of Us" is a story of first loves and friendship.

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE THREE OF US

By Stephen del Mar

Introduction

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

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

Three college-age men in a cuddle pile on the ground. The scene depicts deep friendship and affection between the men.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These 3 guys are sweet together. They met in college when they were on the same dorm hall. They became instant best friends. They hang out and goof off together, have similar schedules and are just great buddies.

Please tell me how did that friendship turn into the love that we see in the picture? What was the catalyst?

Would love HEA with maybe a glimpse into the future or told in flashback form. Angst and heart break (no cheating though) definitely welcome. Bigotry from minor characters is okay as long as no life threatening injuries. I would love to cry with these guys and know that love can conquer all :)

Sincerely,

Rosie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, coming of age, sports, friendship, first time, new love, interracial

Content warnings: off page non-con, violence

Word count: 24,016

Dedication

Thanks go to Rosie on the Goodreads M/M Romance group for the prompt that started this story and Cynthia A. Roedig, my buddy since high school and a great editor. Thank you to my readers: Kat Riegel, Rosie Moewe and Nan Greenwald.

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Friday

The elevator opened on the seventh floor of Stetson Hall. My new home. If I kept telling myself that, it might feel real. My home and Reed's. Was it a good idea for us to share a dorm room? He kept saying he was okay with it. But was I?

A girl stood in front of our door doing something to the dry-erase message board. I walked over and set the shopping bag full of textbooks on the floor.

"Excuse me."

She turned and blew a strand of honey-blond hair out of her face. She was flushed and sweaty. She wore a faded yellow Sterling College T-shirt, the one with the Conquistador mascot on it, and well-worn jeans. A rag was in her right hand and a bottle of something in the other hand. It smelled like nail-polish remover.

I looked at the message board. Someone had scrawled "Cock Suckers" and "Faggots" on the board in permanent marker. Most of "Faggots" had been scrubbed away, but there was still a ghost of the word.

The young woman's shoulders slumped. "I'm so sorry. Are you Reed?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at those words. There was a sinking, knotted feeling in my stomach. I'd just put that board on the door two hours ago, before I went to the campus bookstore.

"Sam, then? Sam Richards?"

She tucked the rag into the hand holding the bottle and held her free hand to me. I shook it.

"I really am sorry. We don't tolerate this at all. If I find out who did this, I'll see they're banned from student housing."

Well I guess this made it feel like home. My locker back in high school got graffitied at least once a week. Looks like college wasn't going to be much different. I figured all the diversity and affirmation stuff was just admissions hype.

I looked at her. "Maybe I overdid it with the rainbow stickers?"

"Bullshit."

I was impressed with the amount of venom and indignation she put into those two syllables. I smiled and reached out, taking the rag and bottle from her, poured some of the fluid on the cloth and started rubbing.

"So who are you?" I asked.

She turned and leaned against the wall. She tried to stick some of her hair behind her ear to keep it out of her face. It didn't work. I realized she was pretty in a simple, no-nonsense kind of way.

"Sorry. I'm going nuts today. Someone from Student Housing was supposed to help me check-in the residents but I got a no-show."

I tilted my head and gave her a little smile. She still hadn't introduced herself.

She tapped her head. "See. Scatterbrain. I'm Jacklyn Willows, the RA on this floor, and editor of the school's newspaper. Well, blog really. They stopped printing it on paper a few years back." She smiled. "And somewhere I fit in studying."

It looked like she was about to say something else, when her eyes darted over my shoulder. Her pupils dilated and her mouth parted just a bit. She exhaled. It sounded a bit like, "Oh my."

I smelled him; that mix of Old Spice and coconut shampoo. Reed Jackson, my best friend and roommate, was standing behind me. A strong hand gripped my shoulder and guided me out of the way.

"What the fuck?" he said.

Reed was mostly naked and wet from a shower. A bright yellow towel wrapped around him. I noticed Jacklyn's eyes roving over his smooth light-mocha skin and muscles. Reed, my pet football player.

He looked down at her. "Who did this?"

His anger pushed her down along the wall another step. I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder, soft, smooth skin over hard muscle. I wanted to squeeze and pull him toward me. Never going to happen.

"It's okay. She's our RA. Jacklyn."

He turned and put his hand on my face. "It's not okay."

I wish he wouldn't do that. I knew it was his way of showing his support. Showing me he didn't have a homophobic bone in his body. I really appreciated it, but it was also like one long tease. He didn't get that when he touched me it wasn't just a sign of friendship. For me, it was fucking foreplay. Six years of foreplay without release. Just call me Sammy of the Blue Balls.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He pulled his hand away from my face. "Why the hell are you sorry?"

I pointed at the board. "Look. It looks like it says 'Reed plus Sam' like we're boyfriends. You know, with all the rainbow stickers."

Jacklyn suddenly found her voice, a bit huskier than before. "You're not together?"

"See," I said. "Everyone will think you're gay too. Sorry."

"Let them think it. I don't care. And damn it, Sammy. You know I'd be proud to be your boyfriend, except for one little problem."

Jacklyn seemed fascinated by our exchange. "What's that?"

I laughed. It was a little joke we'd shared ever since I came out to him in middle-school. "He'd be my boyfriend, but my tits are just too small."

Reed started laughing. I noticed Jacklyn's hand moved over her chest. Was that a subconscious gesture? I noticed Reed's eyes follow the movement of her

hand. It irritated me that her shirt and his towel matched. Like they're linked somehow. Yellow was a stupid color.

I grabbed my bag of books and pulled my keys out, then unlocked the door. "You need to get dressed," I said

"Yes, dear," he said as he followed me into the room, but he was looking back at her. I dropped the bag of books on my bed and kicked the door closed a bit harder than I intended. I knew he could never be mine, but that didn't mean I was ready to share him.

Monday

It was a cool morning for September in Florida. A cold front moved in during the night, blowing damp cold air in from Bennett Bay. I sat on a low wall outside the Student Union sipping coffee, a great place to boy watch. Students were staggering across the Quad to their first class of the year like a herd of pretty, preppy zombies.

The natives were bundled up against the new Ice Age. The northern boys were still running around in their shorts and sandals. They just added socks and a fleece pullover. I liked boys in shorts. I took another sip of coffee and thought about strong, hairy legs resting on my shoulders...

"Hey, Sammy."

It was Reed. He approached from the east with the morning sun behind him like a halo. I tried to block it with my hand so I could see him. Someone was with him. I saw yellow through the glare. *Jacklyn.*

"Hi guys." I smiled. It was for Reed, but she didn't know that.

He came up and gave me a hug. *I wish he wouldn't do that.* He pressed my face into his neck. I couldn't help but breathe him in. *Just one kiss. Just one taste. Just one time. What was it about this place that kicked the hormones into overdrive?*

Reed pulled away. "Where'd you go so early?"

I took another sip of coffee to stall for time. I was trying to decide how to ignore the girl and not be rude. “Swim practice. Coach has the freshmen in at six all this week.”

Jacklyn gave me the once over. Whenever someone found out I was a swimmer, they’d imagine me in a Speedo. It kind of creeped me out when girls did it. The guys didn’t do it enough, or most of them were just too damn subtle about it. Jacklyn’s blue eyes met mine. I knew what she was thinking. The same image haunted my dreams... the swimmer fucking the football player, but she probably got it backwards. Hets always got it backwards. I gave her a cold smile and dropped the coffee in the trashcan.

I said, “That’s a great fleece. You know, yellow really is your color. I can see why you wear it all the time.” I think I sold it as a compliment. Yeah, I was becoming one of *those* gay guys.

She grinned and snuggled up next to me. “Thanks. Where are you boys off to this morning?”

Reed pulled his phone out of his pocket and keyed in something. “Anthro 101. We needed to get moving.”

“Do you have Professor Quinn?” Jacklyn asked.

I nodded. “What’s he like?”

She put her arm around mine and started leading me across the Quad. “He’s new. He filled in for one of the other professors last year and they offered him a permanent position over the summer. I’ve heard good things, but he doesn’t suffer fools.” She sighed. “And we have a lot of fools at this school. Rich, privileged fools.”

Reed had wandered around to her other side. She reached out and took his arm too. Why did this annoy me so much? She really was okay.

I looked west down the length of the Quad. Bennett Bay was a dark metal-gray in the distance. The Gulf beyond was gray-green. The wind was kicking up, tossing waves around. I felt like that. My feelings for Reed were tossing me around. I needed an emotional seawall.

Jacklyn brought us to the front of a modern looking glass and steel building. “Okay, this is the Social Sciences building. The big intro classes are usually in the auditorium on the first floor.”

She glanced up at Reed. “Maybe I’ll see you at lunch? I’m meeting some friends from the drama department at Louie’s.”

She turned and started walking away.

“Louie’s?” Reed called after her.

She turned back and said, “Yeah, Louie’s Lower Level. Kind of a dive burger joint in the basement of the Union. They have pool tables and video games. Fun hangout.”

“We’ll see,” I said, meaning no. I grabbed Reed’s arm and dragged him up the stairs into the building. He kept glancing behind, watching the bright yellow fleece disappear into the herd.

By the time we arrived at the classroom, Reed had managed to pull his arm out of my hand. He hadn’t said anything, just followed me. I knew I was being an ass, okay, a jealous bitch, but I couldn’t seem to stop. Maybe they put something in the water?

The room was a big auditorium. Students were filing in from double doors on the other side of the room and from doors down by the lecture stand on the lowest level. Reed pushed past me heading to the middle of the room. I followed him and took the seat next to him. He pulled his tablet out of his pack and started reading the syllabus for the class. I pulled a notebook and pen out of my pack and ignored him back.

It was still about fifteen minutes before class started. The room was half-full. Most of the students sat toward the back of the room, a few nerd types in the front row. A general buzz of young people chatting filled the space. The two guys behind us were talking about trying to bone some chick in their dorm. The girls in front of us were texting to their friends about some sorority party. We were a room full of stereotypes.

A man with long red hair pulled back in a ponytail and a neatly trimmed beard walked up to the lecture table and dropped his pack on it. The buzz of conversation paused. The man ignored everyone, and took a laptop out of his pack. He grabbed a remote off the desk and pointed it at the back of the room. A video projector came on and projected a large blank blue screen on the wall above him. Everyone went back to what they were doing.

I heard Reed whisper, “Hell. I think that’s J.J.’s husband.”

I looked at Reed. He was squinting down at the professor.

“What?” I asked.

He looked at me. “You know. My cousin, J.J., John Jackson, the deputy sheriff stationed in Cooter Crossing. I’m sure that’s his guy.”

Too much new data was coming in. Brain cells were overloading. I mean, my dick was bigger than Cooter Crossing. How could they have a gay sheriff in a place that small? And why didn’t I know about it?

“There’s a gay sheriff in Cooter Crossing, he’s your cousin, and that’s his lover?”

For some reason I felt the need to point down at the professor when I said this. Of course that’s the point where a random pause ran through the crowd. It turns out the room had very good acoustics. I looked down my arm, past the point of my finger and saw Professor Quinn looking back at me over his glasses. Even from this distance, I noticed the intensity of his green eyes. They weren’t amused. He shook his head and looked back down at his laptop.

I quickly shoved my hand between my legs and looked at Reed. His face was in his palm. He was trying like hell not to laugh at me.

“So, you know him?” I asked.

He looked over at me. His face flushed a darker brown and a tear welled up in his eye. He shook his head.

“No, not really. You know that big barbecue Gramps has down on the lake every Labor Day?”

I nodded. I'd been to a few. Half of east Big Cypress County showed up for them.

Reed said, "Well J.J. came and he brought Aidan and the kids."

"Kids? They have kids?" I still didn't believe all of this.

"Yeah. Two little boys, about six or seven, I think. They spent most of the time in the lake till a gator showed up. J.J. ended up having to shoot it. Grandma fried up the tail, of course. Those kids love the water as much as you. But my mom wasn't too happy about inviting them."

"Why?"

Reed shook his head. "You know how she is with the whole gay thing. But Auntie Lissa threatened to hex her if *her boys* weren't invited."

"Hex?" I'd known Reed forever but it was like I was just meeting him.

He looked embarrassed. "Well, yeah, and she's really a distant cousin, but we all call her auntie. Anyway, her mother's from Haiti. She was a mambo. Mom thinks Lissa's one too, but we don't talk about it."

I really needed more coffee. "What the hell is a mambo?"

He looked around, like someone could hear, and whispered, "Vodou priestess." Quickly he changed the subject. "I don't know why mom's so anti-gay. Her own brother is, no one else in the family cares. I think it's that damn church she goes to."

I wasn't sure where to go with the follow-up. Do we do Vodou, scary churches, or Reed's family full of queers?

"So, you have a gay cousin and uncle?" I went with the *gay thing*.

Reed nodded. "Why? What's the big deal?"

I sat back. How did I not know this?

He reached out and touched my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

I looked back at him. "So, for the last six years you've been there, listening to me trying to deal with being a gay kid in a backwater town in Florida,

feeling like I was the only one. Getting harassed all the time and you never thought to say, 'Hey, Sam, I have some family members that have gone through all of this, would you like to meet them?' Oh yeah, and one is a cop."

He ran his hand through his hair. "Actually, they're both law enforcement. J.J. is the deputy and Stan is a detective with the Bennett Bay P.D."

I gave him my what-the-fuck look.

He asked, "So would that have really helped you? I love those guys. Hell, I love you. Gay is just the way some people are. I don't get what the big deal is. We all get hassled about something."

I didn't even know how to respond to that. Thank God the bell rang for class to start.

Finally, the lecture was over. I looked back down at the reading list. When was I going to have time for this? And this was only my first class. Wasn't Sterling supposed to be a party school? "Reed, what do you think..."

His seat was empty. I saw him pushing through the crowd down the steps to the lecture table. Professor Quinn was talking to a number of students. They were pushing some kind of forms at him to sign. Reed stood off to the side waiting for the crowd to thin out. I stuffed my notebook into my pack and followed him.

Reed asked, "Aidan, I mean Doctor Quinn, do you remember me?"

The older man looked up from his laptop. He studied Reed, glanced over at me and scowled. He looked back at Reed. "The Jackson family picnic?"

Reed held out his hand. "Yeah. I'm Reed Jackson, J.J.'s cousin. You know Stan too? He's my uncle. Mom's brother."

Quinn took Reed's hand. He smiled and his green eyes sparkled. "I know Stan and Zach very well. Bear, too, of course."

This was all too weird. My hetero friend was part of Bennett Bay gay society and here I was, standing in the background. I butted in, taking a step

forward, put my hand on Reed's shoulder, rubbed it a bit to make it more than friendly, and asked, "Who's Bear?"

I didn't like the scowl Reed gave me. He brushed my hand off. Quinn's eyes followed the movement. I leaned in, closer to Reed. I wasn't backing down. Damn it, I wanted to be part of this.

Quinn's eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "Zach's Newfoundland. Don't you know them?"

Reed cut me off before I could say anything. "Gotta get to my next class. Say 'hey' to J.J. for me." He backed away.

Quinn said, "We should do dinner. I keep an apartment down on the waterfront, or go out somewhere. We could include Stan and Zach. The boys love family get-togethers. They think Bear's a horse."

Reed was almost to the steps. "Those kids are great. And Bear *is* a horse. I'll let you know my practice schedule. Coach is working us late for the next two weeks or so." He turned and started scurrying up the stairs.

And there I stood, alone in an empty classroom with my professor. He cleared his throat.

I turned. He was looking at me over his glasses again. He pushed them up and stuffed his computer into his bag.

"So," he said, "do you always embarrass your straight friends like that or are you just stupendously socially awkward?"

I stood there like the fool I am. I had nothing to say.

He grabbed his bag and put it over his shoulder. "My office hours are on the syllabus if you want to talk. I suggest you talk to someone before you fuck up a friendship."

He turned at the door. "I know this is really none of my business, but I've found that Jackson men are worth the effort to keep around."

So, I said something stupid and more honest than I intended. "But I want him so bad."

He leaned against the doorframe and smirked. Not the support I was hoping for.

He said, “If you stop acting like a horny child, that man will be by your side forever. And that, little brother, is worth more than a fuck any day. That is love.”

“But... But I want more. I need...” He knew what I needed. I dropped my eyes to the carpet.

He snorted and turned to go. “Child, this is Sterling University. If a pretty thing like you can’t get all the cock he needs, then the Apocalypse is surely upon us. But play safe, for God’s sake.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

He disappeared into the hallway. His bright red ponytail swung back and forth, as he shook his head muttering something about the Mother of God and gay boys.

“Is a fuck *and* love too much to ask for?”

I was alone. No one answered. Damn, I was late.

I was really late. I had to use the GPS on my phone to find the little building where my freshman English class was. It was an old, yellowish, cream-colored deco building down by the waterfront. The room was full. The only free seat was in the front row. The instructor had already started talking and writing something on the whiteboard.

I stood in the doorway eyeing Reed. He hadn’t saved me a seat and was surrounded by girls. They kept sneaking looks at him. He stretched and leaned back in his chair. He spread his muscular legs out into the aisle. He was wearing his black jeans, the too-tight ones. I loved those jeans.

I didn’t need this; there were other sections of English I could take. I turned to leave.

“There is a chair up here.” The grad student teaching the class was talking to me. She had long curly hair, a kind of dark brown color with lighter streaks. She wore one of those gypsy-style dresses that pretentious artsy types seemed to favor. It was made of a shiny green and gold fabric. The light from the window reflected in her large round glasses, obscuring her eyes.

“Please, take a seat,” she said.

Shit. Everyone was watching me. I refused to look back at Reed. I flashed a false smile at the teacher and walked forward taking the seat up front, dead center. Someone snickered. College was feeling a lot like high school.

I gave the girl on my left a smile as I opened my pack to get my notebook. She frowned and leaned over to whisper in the ear of the girl on the other side of her.

Someone tapped my right shoulder and whispered, “Here you can look at my sheet.”

A tweeby-looking guy, with too-curly mousy-brown hair, black eyes and very unstylish glasses, was pushing a piece of paper onto my desk. It was an assignment sheet. At the top he had printed his name, Jeff North.

“Thanks,” I said, and gave him a pat on the shoulder. He just kind of froze, turned red, and made a little gasping noise. I expected him to whip out an inhaler; instead, he sat there real still, like a rabbit staring down a rattler. I decided to focus on the teacher.

That’s when I noticed the stillness in the classroom. I could hear the waves lapping against the seawall and the gulls calling through the open window. Everyone was looking at me. The teacher was leaning against the board with her arms crossed.

“As I was saying, the objective of Freshmen Composition is to provide you with the skills you need to effectively communicate your ideas during your academic career. The first assignment is an assessment to help me understand your strengths and the areas you need to work on. As you see on the assignment sheet, you will pair up with someone you don’t know and interview them. You will write a minimum ten-page essay about them. This is

more than what they did over the summer, people. I want to know who they are as young women and men. What are their hopes and dreams? This is important because your final assignment of the term will be to re-interview them and write an analysis on how they have changed, or not, during their first three months of college. The questions on the sheet are to get you started. They are not exhaustive.”

There was a lot of chatter as people were trying to size up partners. She stopped and let the talk die down.

“Please refer to the style guide posted on the English Department’s website. You may use the rest of the period to get to know your partner and schedule interview times.”

She looked right at me. “And you are all adults now. I trust you can make it to class on time from now on?”

Someone laughed. I heard “loser” from the back. I really wanted to hide. All I could do was slump down in my seat.

“So do you want to do it with me?”

I looked at the North kid. “What?”

He jumped and scooted to the other side of his chair. He was small enough that the desk actually looked big.

“Sorry,” he said.

I shook my head. This guy was just too twitchy.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Relax. Now what did you want?”

“Do you want to do the assignment together?”

I was looking around the room. Reed was in the back. He was chatting up three girls. I shook my head. Why was this getting under my skin? He had a new girlfriend every other week back home. Shouldn’t I be happy my best friend was going to get some play? Fuck, I should be cheering him on and being his wingman and not, well, whatever it was I was doing.

“Oh, I see.”

“What?” I said.

I looked back at the guy next to me. At least he didn’t jump this time. He was looking from me to Reed.

I asked, “What do you see?”

“You jocks want to stick together. The guys back home didn’t want to be seen with me either.”

“What?” Why did I keep saying that? “I’m not a jock.”

He tilted his head like a puppy that just didn’t get what you were asking it to do.

“You’re on the swim team?”

“How’d you know that?”

He pointed at my warm-up jacket. It had the swim team’s logo on the chest.

“Well, yeah, I don’t think swimmers are really classified as jocks.”

His black eyes found mine and held them. They were full of desperate need. The kind of need that just couldn’t be filled. I knew that need.

He exhaled. “I think you’re amazing.”

Ping! The gaydar went off. I whispered, “Are you...” The first time in six years, I couldn’t say the word “gay.” Why was I choking on this?

He realized what he had said and went from embarrassed pink to white. “Shit!” he squeaked, then grabbed his pack and bolted for the door.

“Interview going well?” It was the teacher. She was sitting at the desk watching me. It looked like she had a class roster in front of her.

“You are Samuel Richards, correct?”

I stood and slung my pack over my shoulder. “I don’t know,” I said. I had no idea who I was anymore. I headed for the door. Being southern, it was my duty to follow and offer comfort. God help the South. God help me.

It was getting colder. I zipped up my jacket. The wind had picked up and shifted more to the north. The university was on the north side of Bennett Bay so the water was calmer down by the school's little marina. I saw him sitting on a bench by the seawall looking out at the bay. I walked over and sat next to him.

He looked up at me. His eyes were red and puffy behind his glasses. His face was wet. Oh hell, he'd been crying.

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"What?" There was that damned word again. I just looked at him.

"When they found out I was gay, back home, they beat me. A lot. So did Daddy."

"Fuck, that's messed up man."

He looked down at the ground. "I didn't mean anything by it. Don't be upset. I'll make sure I stay away from you. I just kind of get nuts when I see a hot guy. I say stupid stuff. It's just all bottled up inside of me. Sorry."

He got up to leave. I reached out and grabbed his arm. He tried to pull away, but he didn't have much fight in him.

"Sit the fuck down."

He fell back onto the bench. I let go and unzipped my pack, pulled out my notebook and opened it to a fresh page, because I really didn't know what else to do. Who do you call for a gay emergency? God knew I wasn't qualified. I'd just pawed my best friend in front of a professor. Maybe just talk to him?

I asked, "Now, what God-forsaken place are you from?"

He looked down at my notebook. "So you going to interview me?"

I gave him an encouraging smile. I thought he might still make a dash for it. He had that scared rabbit look about him.

I said, "You're my partner, right?"

"But aren't you worried someone will think you're gay if they see you with me?"

If we have to do a research paper, I'm definitely delving into Karma.

I squeezed his shoulder. "No, I'm not. And if you ask the right questions, you will find out why."

He did that puppy dog head tilt again. I tried not to think it was cute. Too damn cute.

"So where are you from? I want to make sure I never go there."

He giggled. It was a nice sound. "Cotton. Cotton, Mississippi. But don't worry about going there. It's hard to find."

"Sammy."

We both turned and looked back at the classroom building. Reed was waving and heading our way. Two of the girls that had sat next to him followed him now, chatting to each other and texting. Why did girls text all the time? How could you possibly have that much to say to anyone?

Jeff said, "Is he calling for you? Is that your name?"

I reached out and mussed up his hair. The curls were silky and soft. "Yeah," I said. "Sorry. I'm Sam Richards."

He turned bright red, but held his ground this time. "Jeff North," he said.

"Yeah. I saw your name on the paper."

Reed came up and put his hand out to Jeff. The guy flinched just a bit. Reed frowned.

"You okay?"

"Reed," I said, "This is my friend, Jeff. We're doing the assignment together."

Jeff reached out and shook his hand.

Reed said, "Okay. Cool. So what's your next class?"

Was it too weird that I had his schedule memorized and he had no idea what I was taking? "Sailing."

He snorted. "What? Was basket weaving full?"

Jeff said, “I think sailing sounds like fun.” Well, it was more like he kind of cringed and mumbled it. Was the little rabbit standing up for me?

Reed said, “Okay.” He turned to me. “Got a late practice tonight. Want to catch dinner afterward, then we can study in the library?”

I nodded. He turned and walked away. The girls followed him. He hadn’t even bothered to introduce them or ask about lunch. The sound of a bell drifted over from the old building.

Jeff said, “We didn’t really get to talk did we?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “Where’s your next class?”

“I’m free till two. Monday is a light day for me.”

“The sailing class meets here.” I pulled the campus map up on my phone. “I have chemistry after lunch... looks like it’s on this side of campus. Any place over here to eat and talk?”

He was looking at his phone now. “Have you been to the student beach?”

I shook my head. “Just got here Friday, been kind of busy.”

“Yeah, me too. But there’s a student center over there. Looks like it has a place called Joe’s Snack Shack. Wanna check it out?”

I stood up. “Why don’t you go grab a table? I’ll see you around noon.”

He smiled at me. It was all warm and needy. I didn’t like how it pulled at me.

“Great,” he said.

I turned and headed for the docks. Several students stood around talking to an older woman wearing white pants and a yellow and sky-blue windbreaker, the school’s colors. I glanced back at Jeff, still on the bench watching me walk away. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

I walked south along the seawall. The beach and the South Student Center weren't too far from the marina. In the hazy distance, I could see the town of Bennett Bay, the big city of Big Cypress County.

Having grown up in the backwater town of Clear Spring, coming here had always been an adventure for the family, the chance to see a movie in a theater, not the drive-in over in Blackwater, and have dinner on the waterfront. I kicked a rock off the sidewalk and it splashed into the water. It'd been a long time since the family did anything like that. Dad lost his job and everything got hard. Joy kind of seeped away. Now it was about keeping it together. Making it month to month. Four years of keeping it together.

“Sam?”

Someone called me from the beach. I held my hand above my eyes to shade them. The lifeguard, a young woman in a sky-blue training jacket and yellow shorts, waved a yellow rescue-can at me from the beach. I hooked both straps on my pack over my shoulders and jogged toward the lifeguard station.

“Julie!”

I grabbed her, twirling her around in a big bear hug.

“Put me down! I need to watch the idiots in the water.”

I put her back down and looked out at the water. Four blond guys were splashing around in the surf.

I shook my head. “Are they nuts? Swimming in this weather.”

Julie climbed back on the wooden tower and took a seat on the platform. “They're from Minnesota. They think it's warm.” She patted the wood next to her. “Coming up?”

I looked up the beach. The student center had a patio with tables outside, but they were empty. I could see a crowd inside behind the wall of glass. Jeff was waiting for me in there, somewhere.

“I have a few minutes,” I said.

I dropped my pack in the sand and climbed up. She scooted next to me. The warmth of her body felt good in the wind. “You were supposed to call me when you got on campus last week. How’s it going?”

Other than Reed, Julie was my best friend from high school. She was two years ahead of me.

I put my arm around her waist. “Sorry about that. Things have been weird.”

“You haven’t had any problem with the scholarship have you? Got your books okay?”

“Yeah. That’s fine. And thanks again for helping with that. I don’t think I could have afforded Cypress Community College, let alone this place.”

“Well, you’re the state’s freestyle champ and Sterling’s swimming program is nearly as well endowed as the male swimmers.”

I could feel my face flushing.

She said, “Aha, I see you’ve noticed.”

“Well yeah. I’m just surprised you did.”

She held her hand above her eyes, scanning the water. “Some things even a dyke can’t avoid noticing. So did you really move in with Reed?”

“Yeah.”

She shook her head. “Was that a good idea?”

I laid back on the wooden platform. It was warm from the sun and felt good on my back. I was a little sore from the morning’s practice. “I don’t know.”

She didn’t say anything. The sky above me was clearing out, the clouds blowing across the state to the Atlantic coast. I closed my eyes, focusing on the sounds of the beach, the waves, the gulls and the distant sounds of men playing. The sun was warm on my face. I inhaled the salty air. Couldn’t I just stay here?

She reached out and gently squeezed my leg. “Sam, you know you earned that scholarship. I just let them know you were interested. We’re lucky to have you on the team.”

Yeah, many schools were interested in my record, just not me. Being out and proud in high school had its costs.

“Sammy?”

I sat back up. “Yeah. I know. Just been a shitty morning.”

“Already? What, you’ve had like three classes so far?”

I smiled. “You know I’m an overachiever. I can pack a lot in.”

“What happened?”

“Reed. Well, not really him. I don’t know. I feel all whacked out. Maybe I’m more homesick than I want to admit. You know, get too far from that old black water, the cypress trees, and Spanish moss, and a boy gets nervous. Dad’s gonna be up this weekend, that’ll help.”

She nuzzled me with her shoulder, then pulled her knees up to her chest. “He still working down in Tampa?”

“Yeah. Almost been a year now. Only gets home one weekend a month now. It’s hard on Mom. My little brother Billy’s acting out a lot. I feel like I should be there helping. And here I am, obsessing about guys and taking a jerk-off class like sailing.”

She stretched her legs out. “You’re in the sailing class?”

“Yup.”

“They still get to crew on the *Basil* during the January term?”

“If we want.”

She looked at me. “How could you not want to? Ever since I took that tour in ninth grade, I’ve wanted to sail on that old windjammer. Isn’t it like a hundred years old this summer? I’ve seen the historical society posters up all over town.”

I looked south at the town. I could make out the massive old ship moored at the town's waterfront. I snickered, "Must be a lesbian thing."

She punched me. "Like you never dreamed about being a cabin boy?"

I rubbed my arm. "Actually, I dreamed about having my own cabin boy."

She turned and looked me right in the eye. "And he looked just like Reed."

I looked out at the surf. "No, they were blond boys rescued from evil Viking raiders." I lied and she knew it. Everyone knew I wanted Reed. I'd wanted him for six years. It was getting pathetic. Wasn't it time to grow up and move on?

"I need to go. Someone's waiting for me."

"New boyfriend?"

"No!"

She grinned at my overreaction.

"Really, no. Just a guy from English class. We're doing a project together."

"Okay," she said.

I didn't like how she said it.

"Just a guy from your class?" She didn't sound convinced.

"Yes. Just a kid from class. Now I got to go."

I started climbing down the tower.

"They're still looking for a few guards if you need to earn some cash. They prefer team members. You still qualified?"

I looked up at her. "Yeah, till April, but I don't know if I have time."

"Most of the shifts are on the weekend. The pay is good and so's the view."

I thought about being on the tower looking down on all the guys sunning on the beach. "I'll think about it."

Joe's Snack Shack wasn't much more than a large snack bar with a beach theme skinned over concrete walls. Faux fishnets and nautical kitsch framed the windows. It was just past noon and the place was packed. The cold wind had pushed everyone inside.

Jeff was sitting at a small table by the window picking at some carrot sticks. Maybe he *was* a rabbit. He glanced up at me as I sat down, and then looked back at the water.

He said, "I didn't know if you were going to show."

"Why not?"

He pointed with his chin toward the beach. I looked through the netting. Julie was down on the beach now. The blond guys were toweling off and looked like they were trying to hit on her. No luck there, boys.

I looked back at Jeff. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw you on the beach. You went up in the tower with her." He said *her* like it was something foul.

"You mean Julie? Man, she's a friend from back home."

He looked back at me. He was getting kind of twitchy again. "Your girlfriend?"

I froze with my notebook halfway out of my pack. "Are you really that clueless?"

He did the puppy head tilt thing. A puppy-rabbit-boy. My pet mutant.

"What?" he said.

Good it wasn't just me that was confused. Time for direct action. I looked him right in those damn black eyes of his. "Take off your glasses."

His hands twitched.

"Take them off." It was an order.

He did it. But sat there with his eyes closed, and his lips pressed together like he was getting ready to be punched. I stood up, leaned over and grabbed the front of his shirt. He whimpered. His eyes opened.

“Please, don’t hurt me. Not here.”

I pulled him to his feet and brought his face to mine. His lips were softer than I expected. Warm. He struggled and tried to push me away. I parted my lips and my tongue touched his lips. He gasped. His eyes widened. His mouth opened and we found each other. And he kissed back. He grabbed my head. Held me firm. His tongue dominated my mouth, sliding around mine. We pressed together. My arm moved down his back, a strong, hard, back under his baggy clothes.

What the hell was happening? I wanted to smooch the kid to show him I was gay too. I didn’t expect this. What was this? It was good.

Someone yelled, “Get a room!”

I realized people were whistling and clapping. We kind of stepped back from one another. His face was red and wet. Was he crying again? He made an awkward bend and fell back in his chair. I realized my sweats weren’t hiding things very well. I couldn’t believe I got wood from a kiss. I couldn’t believe that kiss. Shit. I did a little turn and slid into my chair. Awkward.

He wiped his face. “What the fuck man?”

I was fucking hard and breathless. And he was crying?

“Shit man, was it that bad?” My esteem was plummeting.

His face stayed red, but I don’t think it was embarrassment any more. He said, “Was it *bad*? What the hell are you trying to do to me?”

I really didn’t expect indignation. I said, “You weren’t picking up that I was gay too. I thought if I kissed you, you know, here, you’d know that it was all cool.”

He started putting his stuff in his pack. “You couldn’t just say, *It’s cool, Jeff, I’m gay too?*”

“I thought—”

He stood. “What, that public humiliation would be better?” And he bolted for the door.

Oh hell no, he was not getting the last word. I stuffed the notebook into my pack and went after him. He was on the walk that headed back to the center of campus. I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

“And why is kissing me humiliating? What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“Because you’re a man.”

I dropped my pack and spread my arms. “Fucking right I’m a man. I got a big dick, low-hanging balls, a tight bubble butt and an amazing swimmer’s build. Not to mention a winning personality.”

He cracked a grin. “I’m waiting on the last one.”

I stepped closer. “So you want me? Right?”

He didn’t say anything.

“I saw that your boy parts work, but are you really a man?”

He took a step back. “What?”

I pressed closer. “A man takes what he wants. What do you want, Jeff? What do you want deep down in your balls?”

He stood there and shook. I’d never seen anyone so angry. I took a step back. He lunged at me, grabbed me, and pulled my face down to his. He sucked my face hard. He took my breath away like some soul-sucking demon, a little rabbit from hell.

Eventually, we stopped kissing. He looked up at me. “I’ve... I’ve never done this before. I don’t know what to do.”

I still had my arms around him. I liked the feel of his hard little body in my arms. Hell, I didn’t know what to do either.

I said, “We’re just kissing man. You know, making out. No big deal.”
Yeah, Sammy, play it cool.

“So all kisses are like that?”

Oh hell, that was his first kiss? I embarrassed him during his first kiss.

I smiled. “No, that was special.” Like the best kiss ever. I also noticed I hadn’t let go of him. Did he think this much cuddling was normal? Maybe it was? I needed some experienced guy to talk to, because I had this guy with his arms around me, with his head on my chest, and people were starting to stare. I thought of Professor Quinn and then Reed came to mind.

“Damn, we have chemistry.”

He looked up at me. “We? Chemistry? What?”

“Yeah. Reed’s in the same class as I am.”

“Oh,” he said and looked a little disappointed. “Can I walk you to class?”

He pulled away and took my hand. We walked to the Science Building with Red Alert alarms going off in my head. I didn’t know if they were about him, or me. Here was Sam Richards boldly going where he’d never been before. I looked down at Jeff. He squeezed my hand and leaned against me as we walked. What a fucked-up morning. Was college always like this?

I managed to ditch Jeff in the lobby of the Science Building. He had a physics class on the third floor and my Intro to Chem class was here on the main floor. I saw a sign for vending machines. They were in the back of the building by the restrooms. I started feeding bills into the refrigerated one with sandwiches. I hoped they wouldn’t kill me.

The door to the restroom opened and Reed came out. A shit-eating grin spread across his face when he saw me. He put his right arm around me and gave me a bone-crushing hug. Was all forgiven?

“So, have a busy morning?”

We started walking down the hall toward the class. I looked at him. There was a mocking tone to his voice.

“Why?” Apparently, today was sponsored by the words “what” and “why.”

He stopped. “You don’t know do you?”

“What?”

He pulled out his phone. Keyed in his password and pulled something up. I heard a crowd of people clapping and wolf-whistling. Fuck no. He turned the phone so I could see the video. Two guys were making out in front of a large window with the bay in the background. The smaller guy pulled away and you could see the tall guy’s full silhouette. And I do mean the whole thing. Hell, it was me! I really needed to start wearing a jock with my sweats after practice.

“Nice showing, Sammy.”

I put my back against the wall. “How many views?”

He looked at the phone. “It was only posted about twenty minutes ago and you’re over fifteen hundred. I think you’re viral.”

“Oh hell.”

He looked back at the phone. He was playing the video again. “Is that the guy from English class?”

“Yeah. Jeff.”

“I don’t think this was what the teacher meant when she said to get to know your partner.”

“Are you enjoying this?”

“Immensely,” he said.

He grabbed me again and put his arm around my shoulders, guiding me down the hall. “So is that little guy really your type?”

“I don’t think I have a type.” Of course I did. He had his arm around me right now. I stared up at his face as we walked down the hall.

He looked down at me and said, “What, you want a kiss from me too?”

Could I? My heart really wanted to know why not. My brain was trying to answer that when he pushed me into the classroom. Everyone looked up from

their phones. I tried to turn and leave. Unfortunately, a rather large football player pushed me down into a seat.

“Maybe they won’t know it’s me.”

He snorted. “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. And eat your sandwich, lover boy. You need to keep your strength up.”

I stuffed the sandwich into my pack. I didn’t feel like eating anymore. The bell rang. Time for fun with chemicals.

The chemistry lecture was over and the herd was moving on. Reed looked over at me as he collected his things. “What do you have next?”

“We have lab. Remember, we signed up for the same section?”

He glanced away. “I changed it.”

“Why?” I was back to the single double-u question words.

“I decided I wanted to take the media production class and that was when it was scheduled. I picked up a lab on Thursdays.”

“Okay. When did you decide this?”

He stood and put his pack over his shoulder. “Last week. I was talking with Fox, he’s a media major. Sounds interesting... a good fit for us sports-hero types.”

I didn’t bite at the joke. “Who’s Fox?” I asked. Why did he avoid my eyes?

“He’s the team’s quarterback. We’ve hung out a lot the last two weeks.”

I knew the football players had to be on campus two weeks early. Did I expect him not to make friends, especially with the guys on the team? I was going nuts. Maybe I needed meds or something?

“Come to practice this afternoon, I think you’ll like him... And I miss having you there. It’s weird to not see you in the stands.”

I grabbed my stuff. I was just going up three floors in this building, I didn't see any reason to pack everything up. "Yeah, sure. Then we'll grab dinner. I'm gonna be starving."

He squeezed my shoulder and smiled. "Great! Fox texted, wants to take me— us out."

When did this happen? I said, "He wants to take us out? Why?"

He looked away again. Reed really wasn't the kind of guy to avoid eye contact, to be evasive. "There is a gay restaurant down on the waterfront. I guess there's a whole pier with a lot of gay shops and stuff."

Very slowly I asked, "And why does he want to take us to a gay restaurant?" But what I meant was, *Why are you so excited to have a man take you to a gay restaurant?*

He was totally engrossed in the floor now. Something sure the fuck was up. "Aha, well, he's gay too."

I should have thought, *Cool, Reed has another gay friend. This campus seems to be crawling with them. This will help me meet more guys like me.* But I didn't think that. I said, "Okay."

He turned and pushed his way past the last few students standing by the door. Reed liked pussy. He really did. I knew that. Then why did I feel like he was cheating on me?

There weren't many people in the stands at the practice field. It was still windy and cold. Another band of low clouds had moved in with the front. It was a gloomy afternoon. I caught a flash of yellow out of the corner of my eye. Jacklyn was wearing a yellow Sterling University windbreaker. She waved and started climbing up toward me. When she reached the top, she snuggled up next to me wrapping her arm around mine. Apparently, we were girlfriends now.

"Hi," I said.

She grinned and gave my arm a little squeeze. "So how's practice going?"

“Not bad, but this coach is a real ball-buster. Running the new guys hard. Hey, who’s the quarterback down there? He doesn’t have a name on his jersey.”

She looked down at the young men on the line of scrimmage. The ball was snapped. Reed rose up and blocked a defensive lineman, giving the guy behind him time to step back and pass the ball.

“What do you mean? His name’s on his shirt.”

“But, it says ‘Sterling’ the name of the school.”

She shrugged. “Well, that’s his name. Fox Sterling. You know, the Sterlings, one of the founding families of Bennett Bay. His father’s the mayor. Fox is our own little prince.”

The guy had his arm around Reed. They were talking about something. One of the assistant coaches ran over to them and called a huddle.

“So what’s he like?” I asked.

“Spoiled and privileged. He’s been in a few of my journalism classes. I find him rather annoying and he doesn’t like me very much.”

“Why?”

She blushed a bit and turned away. I reached up and stroked her hair. “What happened? Come on, you gotta tell me.”

She looked back at me. “I refused to blow him.”

“Oh shit. You were dating?”

“Well, I thought so. Turns out that Fox doesn’t actually date. He obsesses on someone, seduces them, and then moves on. He really likes having his dick sucked. Seems I’m a bit too picky about what I put in my mouth.”

The team was back on scrimmage. Fox was behind Reed. He seemed to be a little more intimate with Reed’s ass than the normal quarterback-center relationship.

“So he’s straight?”

She was looking down at the field too. Did she see what I saw?

“I don’t think it is about attraction with him. I think it’s about challenge and conquest. That’s why I said ‘no.’ He kept pushing. He was always trying to get me drunk.”

I looked back at her. “Did he?”

“No.” She shook her head. “And I’ve never heard that he has, but you know, it just didn’t feel right.”

“Shit.”

She smiled at me, and then sighed. “Yeah, the things we learn at college. So how was your first day?” There was a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh God, you saw the video?”

She gave me a little peck on the cheek. “Yeah. I think everyone has. I wanted to see if you were okay. Kind of a lot with the graffiti and all. Who was the other guy? I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

“I’m not seeing anyone. Just a kid from English class.”

I looked back at the field. They had finished the play the coach was trying to drill into them. Fox was touching Reed again. It was really annoying me. I was hungry and grumpy. Was everyone trying to fuck Reed? Did I need to take a number?

Jacklyn said, “So do you kiss everyone like that?”

Fuck it. “Sure,” I said. I reached out and pulled her toward me. Our lips met. There was a brief resistance then her lips parted. I pressed harder. My tongue entered her. Explored her. I pulled away.

“See just a kiss. Doesn’t mean a damn thing. Does it?”

Reed was down on the field looking up at me. Fox glanced up at me and shook his head. He grabbed Reed and dragged him to the huddle.

Jacklyn had let go and moved away a bit. “Why did you do that?”

I should have said, *Because I'm an impulsive ass*. Instead, I said, "Didn't you like it? I just wanted to show you a kiss is just a kiss."

She looked down at the field. Reed was still looking at us. The coach dope-slapped him on the helmet to get his attention and to look at the playbook he was holding.

"I really don't get what is going on with you two, but I will not be in the middle."

Too late. "There's nothing between us."

She kept looking at me. "Is he gay?"

I had to laugh. "Do you really think that Reed Jackson doesn't like girls?"

She pulled a strand of hair out of her face. I really needed to buy this girl some hair bands.

"No," she said. "Is he bi?"

I looked down at the field. Fox was standing next to Reed. He was actually leaning against him and looking over his shoulder at some chart the coach was showing them.

"Not with me he isn't." I got up and started walking down the bleachers, the aluminum rattling with each step.

"Where are you going?"

I called back to her, "Homework. This is college."

I had to pass through the Quad to get back to the dorm. It was early evening and kind of quiet. A few guys were tossing a Frisbee around but the wind was making it hopeless.

Some kid was shivering behind a hot dog cart. I got a dog and a Coke from him. He kept looking at me. Did he want to say something? I didn't ask. I walked a few yards away and sat down on a bench. The kid pulled his phone out. The wind blew the sound of my little bit of fame to me. He grinned and made juvenile kissing gestures in the air. I raised the hot dog to my mouth then

stopped. The kid was making blow job gestures now and he had his phone's camera pointed at me. The dog went in the trashcan next to the bench, and I gave him a rude gesture of my own as I headed for the dorm.

My phone buzzed. Another text from Jeff. *We need to talk. PLEASE.* I really couldn't put this off any longer. And we did have that damn assignment.

I texted my dorm room location back and said bring food. I thought of the carrot sticks the kid ate at lunch. Maybe I should say bring meat? But, then, he might get the wrong idea. Not that sticking my tongue down his throat would put thoughts into his head. God, I wanted this day to be over.

I sat on my bed with my back against the wall trying to wade through the first chapter of *Human Origins* by some guy named David Stokes. This was my first college textbook, so I didn't have a lot to go on, but this guy sure sounded full of himself. All I really needed was a bulleted list of facts that might show up on a test. But no, apparently I had to plod through sixty thousand years of human history. Or at least, human history as this guy imagined it.

The door to the room flew open. Reed came in. He didn't look happy. "Why'd you leave?"

"Why'd you have sex with Fox?" Shit, I'd said it. The idea had been there all afternoon. The idea I kept pushing away, because it was unthinkable that Reed would have sex with a man. A man that wasn't me.

His mocha complexion turned pale. I looked at his face; it was true. The shit.

He sat down on his bed. "I was drunk— real drunk. It was just a blow job," he said.

"So you suck dick now?"

He went from sheepish pale to dark olive. "He sucked my dick."

"Really?" I wanted to say, *prove it.*

There was a knock on the door. It was still wide open. Jeff stood there. He had changed into a pair of black jeans with a white T-shirt. He had an old faded red flannel shirt over the tee. He held two black Styrofoam food boxes. He grinned like he was the Easter Bunny and I was a giant egg. I smelled bacon— bacon cheeseburgers. My stomach rumbled.

“Hi, Sam,” he said.

He smiled at Reed and was ignored.

Reed said, “They are waiting for us.”

“They?” I said.

He stood. “Yes. Jacklyn is down there waiting for me. You remember her? The girl you were making out with in the stands?”

I put my hands on my head. Maybe if I squeezed my skull my brain would work.

Jeff looked like he was going to melt. “You kissed a girl?”

Oh my God. I said, “It was just a kiss, with a friend.”

“Like our kisses?”

“No. When I kissed her, I didn’t grow wood and nearly cum. Okay?”

I turned to Reed and said, “So have you talked to her about Fox?”

“Why would I do that?”

I put my hands up in the air. I really wanted to surrender. “Oh, I don’t know. How did you get her to go?”

“I... I like her. I asked.”

“Okay, why do you want me to go?”

“Fox asked.”

Was I being set-up on a double date with the guy that just blew the straight guy I had had a crush on since I was twelve? Did his mouth still taste like Reed? I shook my head. Nuts. I’m nuts. Nuts... damn... nuts, cocks and balls.

Jeff asked, “Aren’t we going to work on our English assignment?”

I stood up. “No, we are going on a date.” I took the food from him and pushed the containers into our little fridge.

He asked, “You and I are going on a date?”

I grabbed my jacket. “I thought the first kisses went well, didn’t you? So why not a date?” I looked over at Reed. “I’m sure Fox won’t mind one more.”

“Who’s Fox,” Jeff said.

“No one,” I said. “Just a guy with a car.” I put my arm around him and we headed for the elevator.

I was holding onto Jeff’s hand. I needed to hold on to something now, and he didn’t seem to mind. I pulled him into the elevator, through the resident hall’s lobby, and out the glass front doors. There was a short-term parking zone where a sky-blue BMW 6 series convertible sat purring, a four-seater. The car oozed style and *I’m gonna own you and fuck you* power.

The young man behind the wheel looked right at me. Like I was his and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. He had wavy blond hair and stylish scruffy facial hair. He brought a phone up to his ear. *God please don’t let that be Fox*. He said something into the phone. Someone in the back seat leaned into view. Yellow. Jacklyn and her fucking yellow jacket.

Jeff’s hand gave mine a little squeeze. It was a question. Fox was looking at me again. Fuck him. I turned to Jeff and pulled him toward me. I ran my hand through curly hair. How did he get it so soft? His black eyes looked at me, searched my face. Confusion? Trust? He closed his eyes and parted his lips. Epic kiss, the sequel.

I pulled back and took a breath. A tear was running down his cheek. Did he have to cry every time we kissed? I pulled him close again, my mouth next to his ear. “I’m sorry,” I said.

He held on to me and whispered into my shoulder, “Why?”

“I think I’m gonna be a real jerk tonight. Sometimes I can’t help it.” I squeezed him back, like I wanted to make him part of me. “I don’t want to hurt you. You’re really great.”

He said, “It’s okay. I can take a lot.”

Shit. I pulled back. Another tear ran down his cheek.

He went on, “I just want to be with you, Sam. I’ll do anything.”

God that was fucked up. But damn it, a real live man was in my arms telling me he wanted me. He wanted *me*. I bent my head down and kissed his cheek. I tasted the salt of his tears. He giggled and stepped away. I took Jeff’s hand again and dragged him to the car.

“Fox?” I said.

I was close enough now that I could see his eyes, bright hazel eyes and not very friendly at the moment. He looked from me to Jeff and back.

I said, “This is Jeff.” I took a breath. “My boyfriend. He’s coming with.” Well, he could be my boyfriend, maybe, someday. Fuck Fox.

I opened the passenger door, pulled the seat forward and scooted in next to Jacklyn. Reed came up behind us.

“Where am I supposed to sit?” he said.

I reached out and pulled Jeff in on top of my lap. “You can sit up there with Fox, we girls will take the back.”

Jacklyn gave me a what-the-fuck look. Jeff tried to turn around to do the same, but he froze. I hadn’t had time to change. I was still free-balling it under my sweats and the movement of his ass was waking the dragon big time. He squirmed again, trying to get his mouth as close to my ear as possible. He whispered, “What should I do?”

I spread my legs a bit to relieve some of the pressure and pulled him back so he was lying against my stomach. None of this helped. I breathed into his ear. “Stop moving! Or I’m gonna make a mess.”

His body went tense as he attempted to remain still. That meant he clenched his ass, tightly.

“Oh hell,” I sighed. This was not going to work. I picked him up and shoved him onto the armrest between the two seats. I leaned my head back against the headrest and started thinking of cold swimming pools, gators, and naked women. Anything to quiet the dragon.

Jacklyn snickered and looked away. Fox looked in the rear view mirror as he put the car in reverse and pulled out of the lot. His eyes caught mine. He winked. I wasn't sure what that meant. He pulled out onto Bayside Drive and headed south toward town.

Jeff leaned over against me. His hair brushed my cheek. I nuzzled him. I smelled cinnamon and apples. Like the pies Grandma would bake on Sundays. Jeff smelled like home. Damn. If every day was like this, I wasn't going to make it through one semester, let alone a whole degree program.

The town of Bennett Bay once had a small working waterfront. Fishing boats, cargo ships, and even passenger steamers docked and unloaded at the piers and wharves. However, not much came to town by water anymore and the area had decayed. The city redeveloped the area into upscale condos, restaurants, and shops.

One of the piers was the home of the Historical Society, and also the berth of the old, four-masted windjammer *Basil I*, named after Basil the First, a Byzantine emperor. Every ninth-grader in the county visited it on a field trip. They learned about the group of Armenian refugees that escaped the genocide in Turkey. During the tour, Reed and I had leaned against the railing at the bow of the ship, talking about being pirates and sailing the sea. There was a little pirate in every Florida boy, even the ones who grew up in the backwater swamps like we did.

We drove past the old ship. Small white lights lined the hull and colored spotlights illuminated the mast and spars against the night sky. Jeff said, “Wow, look at that. We didn't have anything like that back in Cotton.”

I gave his leg a squeeze. “Yeah, my sailing class is going to crew on her this winter. Wanna come?” So, I was trying to impress him now?

“You think I can?”

“I’ll find out. But I’m sure I could sneak a cabin boy on board.”

Fox just shook his head and I think Jacklyn snorted. I know I sounded ridiculous, but that’s just what my life was right now.

Fox pulled the car into a valet station and we all got out. A hunky guy in a red vest took the keys from Fox and drove the car away. Fox took the lead and headed for the wide boardwalk that ran along the seawall. We followed him to Pier Five. Those little white fairy lights lit everything. The first building was a converted wharf. It had a huge ship’s anchor and several tables out front. The mural painted on the front of the building depicted a sea battle between two sailing ships. A pirate flag flapped in the cool night breeze.

I asked, “What’s that place?”

Fox stopped and looked back at me. I didn’t like the twist to his smile. “The Jolly Roger, the town’s token gay bar. Touristy but you could get a blow job in there no problem.”

Jacklyn whispered, “Fox, don’t.”

I heard Reed clear his throat and scuff his feet on the pier’s planking. Jeff’s hand tightened on mine. I didn’t look away from Fox. His eyes reflected the many little points of light around us. Did he mean I could get sucked off in there or he’d do me in the bar? And why the fuck would he say that to me, here and now?

I let some of my pent up anger from the day seep into my voice. “Thanks, but I’m getting all the head I need.” I brought Jeff’s hand up to my lips and kissed it. Thank God, he didn’t say anything. Well, he might have wet himself.

I think Reed was about to say something, when four men came out of the bar laughing. The youngest one, a black man in his late twenties, looked over at us, and called out, “Reed? Reed Jackson is that you?”

He came toward us pulling a man with long red hair and a beard behind him. It was Professor Quinn.

The man was about a half-head taller than Reed and built like him— broad shoulders and heavy muscles. I wondered if he'd been a ball player too? He gave Reed a big hug. "Hey, little cousin, what you doing down here?"

Reed hugged the man back. "Hey, J.J., good to see you. We're going out to eat. You know, to celebrate the first day of school."

Is that what we were doing?

Professor Quinn shifted a bit. J.J. reached over and pulled him close. "You remember Aidan from the picnic don't you?"

Aidan said, "Reed and his friend are in my intro class." He looked over at me. Me and Jeff. His green eyes sparkled behind his glasses and he had this bemused smile on his face.

J.J. was looking at me. His head tilted slightly to the right. He reached out his hand. "I'm John, well J.J., do I know you?"

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I stuck out my hand. "I'm Sam. This is my friend, Jeff."

He shook our hands, but he kept an on eye me. The other two men, one black and one white and both older, now joined us. Reed grinned. "Uncle Stan!" He went over and hugged the black man. Stan stood out in the casual crowd wearing a crisp dark suit, but he had undone his tie. Reed moved to the other guy, a big bear of a man with white hair and beard and bright blue eyes. Reed hugged him too. "Oh man, Zach I've missed you."

Zach hugged him back and said, "My word. You're like a brick. How much working out do you do?"

Reed laughed. "Coach thinks I need to do more! I have to protect my quarterback." He glanced over at Fox when he said that, but Fox didn't notice. He was standing to the side with his arms crossed, focused on me. J.J. was still looking at me too. I squeezed Jeff's hand. The squeeze back helped for some reason.

Reed introduced all of us to the men. I noticed Stan's smile became flat and somewhat forced when he shook Fox's hand.

"And how is the Mayor?" he asked the young man.

Fox smiled. It was a politician's smile. "Father is just fine, Detective Wolf. I know he thinks highly of the Police Department's efforts." There was something in the way he said *efforts* that grated on me.

Stan seemed to let it pass. He just widened his smile. "That is very kind of him. Serving the *people* of Bennett Bay is the goal of everyone at the Department."

J.J. cut in, "We're all going to The Drake. Do you want to join us?"

Jacklyn spoke up. "I think that'd be lovely." She'd been quiet, just observing. I wondered if she felt awkward surrounded by all of these men.

Zach came forward and put his arm around hers. "You know, I love that jacket. Yellow really suits you."

She giggled. "I've been told." She winked at me as they took off down the pier. Jeff pulled me after them. I turned around to follow.

J.J. said, "The video. That's where I know you from."

I looked back. Aidan was shaking his head and whispering something into J.J.'s ear.

J.J. looked at him and said, "Yeah. Well. I'm sorry. You know, law enforcement training. It bothered me. I knew I'd seen him."

Jeff looked up at me. "A video? Of what?"

Zach looked back now. "Yes, what kind of video?"

Shit. I could tell what he was thinking, as he looked me up and down. I couldn't decide if it was creepy or kind of hot to be looked at that way by an older man. I was edging toward hot, when Jeff asked again, "What video?"

No one said anything. Then J.J. whispered to Aidan, "Isn't that the other guy?"

Aidan tried to whisper back, but everyone could hear, “Oh for the Mother of God, shut up.”

Jeff moved around and faced me. “The other guy?”

Oh joy. “Yeah. When I kissed you at Joe’s, someone recorded us, and, well, we went viral.”

He pushed his glasses up on his nose. *God please don’t let him cry.* He said, “So everyone has seen a video of us kissing?”

Reed added, “You kissing and Sammy throwing major bone.”

I pointed at Reed. “Not helping.”

“Well, I haven’t seen it.” I think Zach was trying to be nice, but like I told Reed, not helping.

I looked down at Jeff. “I’m so sorry.”

He broke out into the biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen. “Fuck yeah,” he yelled and pumped his fist in the air.

“What?” I was lost.

He reached up and grabbed my head and pulled my face down. Epic Kiss Three.

One of the older men cleared his throat. I heard Fox say something about getting to the restaurant. I came up for air. “What was that for?”

Jeff was all smiles. “There’s tangible proof that I made out with a totally hot jock. The guys wouldn’t believe me otherwise.”

“Christ sakes, he’s only a swimmer.” Fox turned and walked toward the restaurant. The others followed. I watched him go. *Like you don’t want some swim-ass.*

I put my arm around Jeff. “What guys? I didn’t think you had any friends back home.”

“In Cotton? Hell no. But I have some good friends online. I found a gay youth site a few years ago. They really helped me make it through all the

bullying at school. And the guys in my online AP classes were cool. The nerds tend to get being different.”

“AP classes?”

He smiled up at me. “Yeah. I took a lot of advanced math and physics classes. The college let me skip right to junior level classes.”

I stopped. “So are you like, some kind of genius?”

He looked away. “Well, I’m really good at math and science. Don’t know if that helps in the real world. Does it bother you?”

I pulled him back to me. “What? If you can handle me being pretty, I can handle you being smart. But one thing.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to help me with chemistry. That just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

He leaned on me as we walked. “I think we can work out the chemistry between us.”

I put him in a gentle headlock. “Funny too, I see.”

I looked at the guys in front of us and felt the warmth of Jeff in my arms. You know, it was a good day after all.

We’d fallen behind. Everyone was milling around the front of the restaurant. The Drake was about halfway down the pier. It had an area roped off for outdoor seating, but the chill had driven all but the hardiest Yankees inside. Stan and Zach and Aidan and J.J. were chatting with another couple, a skinny younger guy with long black hair and a big older man with a full black beard and mustache. Reed and Jacklyn were off to one side whispering. He leaned in and kissed her. I smiled. Yeah, I was okay with it. Things were changing.

Jeff pulled me over to the group of men. The big older guy was saying, “Yeah, the crab in lemon-butter sauce was amazing tonight. Marco put it on a

bed of tomato basil pasta. To die for.” He looked over at us and smiled. “And who are these delicious young things?”

The younger man put his arm around him and said, “Down. You’ve already eaten and you’ll get plenty of dessert back home.”

The other men laughed. I was starting to like the ego stroking the older guys were giving us.

Stan said, “These are my nephew’s friends, Jeff and Sam. We just ran into them. They’re out celebrating surviving their first day at Sterling.”

He looked at us. “The bear is Kip and his little lost Irish lad is Innes.”

I put my hand out to shake, but Kip pulled me into a bear hug. “We’re family, boy, handshakes are for strangers.”

He passed me off to Innes and started to squeeze Jeff. I nearly said, “Don’t break my boyfriend.” Yeah I thought *boyfriend*, and I think I was starting to mean it.

Innes whispered in my ear as he hugged me. “Sorry, he can get a little intense, but he means well.”

I whispered back. “I think he’s amazing.”

He took a half step back and gently held me by my shoulders. His bright blue eyes scanned my face. What was he looking for? He smiled. Did he find it? He reached over and pulled Jeff into a group hug.

“Well met, little brothers. Blessings be with you.” He kissed our foreheads.

Jeff slid his arm around my waist. He was beaming. I felt it too, kind of warm and tingly and being right with the world. Like for a brief instant we belonged. Like we weren’t the queer ones in the world. *Weird*.

Kip took a step closer to Stan. “Speaking of Sterling, is that who I think it is inside?” He nodded toward the glass front of the restaurant. Fox was having an animated conversation with the hostess inside. Stan nodded. Kip continued, “Kind of awkward isn’t it?”

Stan's face turned hard. "You know I can't talk about that, especially not here. And neither should you."

"Right." Kip held up his arms. "Sorry, too much wine. Glad Innie's driving tonight."

That was odd. I wanted ask Jeff what he thought, but he wasn't paying attention. He was busy chatting with Innes about gator tails and imported beer. My stomach rumbled. They all looked at me.

Kip reached out and mussed up my hair. "Better go grab a table. Don't want to have these boys faint from hunger. You might have to give them mouth-to-mouth."

Innes rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Okay, time for bed, old bear."

Zach held the door open and Jeff and I walked into the lobby of The Drake. It was like stepping into an old English manor or something— all dark wood panels and old paintings of ships and exploration. Several old maps of the Caribbean and Gulf were framed, and in the center of the back wall was a life-size portrait of an old guy wearing something out of a Renaissance fair.

"Who's that?"

Jeff looked at me like I was an idiot. He pointed at the plaque. I read it, "Sir Francis Drake. Like I said, who?"

He whispered at me, "The greatest navigator and privateer of the Elizabethan era. How can you not know that?"

Disappointment flickered across his face. Apparently, science and math weren't the only things he was good at. The disappointment stung. I missed the over-the-top adoration. Yeah, like that was going to last.

I said, "Remember, I'm the pretty one."

He shook his head and smiled. He kissed me on my cheek.

"Damn it, I want a table."

We looked over at Fox. An older man in a suit had joined the girl standing at the hostess podium. Fox's face was getting redder.

The man said, "I'm sorry, sir, but you don't have a reservation."

Fox hissed, "Do you know who I am?"

The man looked at Fox. "Yes, you are a person without a reservation on a busy night."

Jeff and I moved further in as the others came into the lobby. The man in the suit looked up. "Ah, Stanley and Zachary, I was so pleased to see your names down for tonight. Your usual table?"

Stan said, "Rolf, I know you're packed, because of the chill, but we've picked up a few more. Could you possibly seat nine?"

The man looked down at a seating chart. "I'll have to put you in the back. Will that be satisfactory?"

Stan was about to speak, but Fox cut in, "I thought you didn't have any seats?"

Rolf was clearly annoyed. "He has a reservation and is a friend."

"I have friends."

Rolf's eyes narrowed. "How nice for them." He turned to Stan. "Give me a moment to arrange the tables."

An awkward silence settled into the space. Professor Quinn was next to me. "So what do you think of your classes so far?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. "I think I need time to process, but chemistry is going to be hard. I get to write a paper about Jeff for English—that's how we met."

He nodded, "I was wondering about that."

"Yeah. Sailing's going to be fun. It'll be nice to get out on the water a couple of times a week. Oh and I started the reading for your class."

Reed asked, "Is that the book you were bitching about?"

Like, not in front of the teacher dude!

I noticed Aidan going red. J.J. was watching him and smiling. He looked over at me. “So what did you think of the book? And be honest, I’m a law enforcement officer.”

Shit. “Well, all I got through was the Introduction...”

J.J. leaned in. Why was he enjoying this so much? “And?”

I swallowed. “He seemed like...”

Quinn cut in, “A pompous ass?” I couldn’t believe a professor had said that.

J.J. started laughing. He reached out and patted my shoulder. “Oh, you have no idea. He’s Aidan’s ex and such an ass.” He turned to his lover. “I really don’t know why you’re using his textbook.”

Aidan exhaled. “Because it’s one of the standard introductory texts in this country, Seabrook had already approved it, and the bookstore had them ordered.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked rather uncomfortable.

J.J. reached over and played with Aidan’s hair. “And you didn’t want to cancel his book and look like a spiteful jilted lover?”

“Yeah, well, there were a lot of reasons.” Aidan looked at me. “Don’t worry, Sam, I know where the good parts are. I’m only using those for class.”

“That’ll be good, sir.”

He smiled at me. “And call me Aidan. Like Kip says, we’re family here.”

Rolf came back accompanied by a young man dressed in a gold and black formal waiter uniform. The waiter said, “We are ready for your party, sir.”

I looked at the waiter and glanced into the dining room. “I’m really not dressed for this place.”

Zach stepped back and whispered in my ear. “Son, this is an upscale restaurant with a gay male clientele. Rolf would cut his balls off before he’d refuse to serve a college boy in tight sweats. You’re eye candy for the other

cliente. You know, good for business.” He just snickered at my shocked expression, and then followed his partner into the dining room.

“And where are you going, sir?” Rolf had blocked Fox’s way. “I told you we did not have a table available.”

“But I’m with them. They’re the ones I was trying to get a table for in the first place.”

“I find that highly unlikely.”

Fox called out, “Detective Wolf.”

Stan turned around. “Rolf, he’s with the kids.”

Rolf stepped aside. Fox pushed his way past everyone and went into the dining room.

J.J. said, “You do know who he is?”

Rolf said, “Yes, and I know *what* he is and that’s why I don’t want him in my restaurant.”

J.J. whispered, “Be careful.”

He snorted, “The Sterlings are just bullies. I’ve dealt with bullies all my life. You have to stand up to them.”

Jeff said, “But what if they’re bigger than you?” I couldn’t believe he’d jumped into the conversation.

Rolf looked down at him. “Then, little one, you find people to stand with you. You are not alone. You know that, right?”

Jeff didn’t say anything. He didn’t look like he believed it. I tightened my grip on his hand to remind him I was here. He smiled at me, but I wasn’t sure I bought it. I looked at Rolf. I opened my mouth, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

Rolf interrupted and pushed us toward the dining room. “You boys go be pretty. Dessert’s on the house.”

Dinner was winding down. The older men at the other end of the table talked among themselves. Zach and Aidan chatted about family stuff like kids and trying to be a part of the massive Jackson clan. Stan and J.J. had their heads together whispering. It sounded like something about a criminal case, but I couldn't hear much. Reed was next to Fox talking football. Every time Reed tried to turn to Jacklyn, Fox would pull him back. It was weird. Jacklyn kept glancing at Reed and then back to her plate of pasta. I felt sorry for her.

I leaned over and asked her, "So who was Seabrook and why did Aidan take over for him?"

She took a sip of her iced tea and looked at me. "You don't know? I thought you were local?"

"Yeah, Clear Springs. You know, the next town of any size up the river. What's that got to do with anything?"

She glanced over at Aidan and J.J., like she didn't want them to overhear. "Don't you remember the shootings a year ago, over Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

"Kind of." I hoped that didn't sound as pathetic as a "no." The mileage I could get out of being a State Swim Champion was rapidly running out. Until a week ago, my world was mostly a pool. People didn't get how much training I had to do. That I still had to do.

"Well, Doctor Seabrook was one of those killed. Actually, Professor Quinn and his nephew were shot too."

I looked over at him. He'd been really nice so far and he was kind of hot for an older guy, you know, in his thirties or something. "Who did it? Why would anyone want to shoot college professors?"

She snuck a look at the guys then leaned back to me. "Well, they think they found the guy that did it. But..."

Okay, I was hooked. "But what?"

“I’ve done some research on this for the school’s blog. I’m sure the man they found was guilty, but he was found shot. And he was a professional hit man.”

“No fucking way?”

She said, “Yes. So someone ordered a hit, and then killed the assassin.”

I glanced at Aidan again. “No way. You’re kidding me?”

She reached down into the big purse she’d lugged around all night and pulled out a tablet. She pulled something up on it, and then handed it to me. It was an article in the *Bennett Bay Gazette* dated over a year ago. The headline read “Sterling University Professor Found Shot.”

Jeff looked over. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” I said. I pushed the tablet back to Jacklyn. I didn’t think it’d be cool to start sharing this at the table.

I took a bite of the triple chocolate rum cake Rolf had brought us. *Damn, that was good.* Fox and Reed were laughing about something. I leaned back to Jacklyn. “So what’s up with Stan and Fox?”

She looked at Fox and Reed. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s more about his dad, you know he’s the mayor?”

“Yeah, you told me.”

I didn’t know how long she’d put up with my questions, but I had to ask one more. “So was he like that when you were with him?”

She looked back at me. “Like what?”

I leaned in real close. “You know, all rapey and stalker like? He’s giving me the creeps.”

Her face froze and her good-natured smile vanished. I’d crossed a line. She sighed. “People change a lot from their freshman to their senior year. Sometimes not for the best.”

I looked over at Fox. He had his hand on Reed's shoulder. But his eyes kept drifting over to me. I realized they were almost the same color as Reed's. But there was no joy, no life in them. Something had broken that boy.

A cold clear sky stretched out above us as Fox's convertible hummed through the silent streets of Bennett Bay. Jeff was back on the armrest between Jacklyn and me. She hadn't said much in the last hour. I didn't understand why Reed was ignoring her. I knew he liked her. Hell, I was starting to like her too. I didn't get the hold Fox seemed to have on him. Did a drunken blow job really mean something to him? What kind of power did Fox have over him?

Jeff shifted. His right leg moved down between mine. He rubbed it up my inner thigh. He was a small guy, but I could feel he was well built. I rubbed his leg and looked up at him. "So do you work out much?"

"No, but I run a lot. I try to do a few miles every morning. Helps me clear my head and it's good for avoiding the bullies. They can't beat on you if they can't catch you."

I gave him a little smile and stroked his leg. I turned and looked out into the night. Getting called names in the hall back in high school and a bit of graffiti on my locker wasn't really that much harassment. No one ever laid a hand on me. I couldn't even imagine my dad hitting me, especially for being gay. Mom and Dad were a little surprised by the whole thing and it took a while to adjust. Hell, it did for me too, but the first words they said to me were, "We love you. That will never change."

When I saw Dad this weekend, I really needed to say thanks. Big-time thanks. I leaned my head against Jeff's side. His red flannel was soft and warm against my face. His fingers ran through my hair. His index finger traced the edge of my ear and ran down my cheek. I quivered. I fucking quivered. What the hell did that mean? Guys playing with my dick had never even made me feel like this. I reached up and took his hand. I really couldn't take him touching me like that—not in the car. I so wanted to fuck him, but that wasn't enough. I wanted, needed, something beyond fucking. And I had no idea what

that was. What was beyond or more intense than sex? God, I sounded like a chick.

The car passed through the gates to the campus and moments later we were pulling into the loading zone in front of Stetson Hall. Reed whispered something to Fox, but I didn't catch it. They both got out and pulled their seats forward so we could get out of the back. Jacklyn got out and headed for the front door of the dorm without saying anything.

Reed followed her, and Fox called out, "See you at practice tomorrow."

Reed stopped like someone had stunned him. He turned on the spot. "Yeah. Thanks for dinner," Reed said. He turned and jogged to catch up with Jacklyn.

I got out and gave Jeff a hand.

Fox said, "North, don't you live over in Fletcher Hall? Come up front. I'll drop you off."

We both looked at Fox. That was the first time all evening he'd really even acknowledged Jeff's presence. Jeff looked at me with those big black bunny eyes. I hadn't really thought about what would happen when we got back. It was late. I had schoolwork, and six a.m. practice. I really wanted him to come up. Reed and I really needed to talk about bringing people to the room. But hell, I wasn't ready to say goodnight right now. My hand went up and touched my ear. I wanted that feeling back.

Fox said, "Don't you have early practice?"

"Yeah, at six."

Jeff said, "Could I come by the pool and watch after my run?"

I felt my face go all smiley. "That'd be great. I can introduce you to the guys on the team."

He looked surprised. "You want them to meet me?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Fox got back behind the wheel of the car. "Well, aren't you all out and proud?"

I said, “I try to be. I don’t have anything to hide.”

“North. Get in the car, now.” It was an order and Jeff hopped to obey. Fox put the car in reverse and backed out, then squealed away. I think he had more to hide than most.

Tuesday

Sterling University’s Swim Complex was mostly outdoors. Being in Florida, most of the time it wasn’t a problem. They kept the pools well heated. We had lots and lots of solar power. But on cold mornings like this, the pools created their own fog banks. If I weren’t trying to compete in practice heats, it’d be fun swimming through the steam. But right now, it was damn annoying. It was also obscuring the viewing stands. I kept looking up to see if Jeff was there. He wasn’t and the distraction was killing my time. Coach was going to have my ’nads, if the cold air didn’t get them first.

I pulled myself out of the pool and Enrique brought a towel over to me. It was warm and fluffy.

“Your time sucks, Richards. What’s wrong? And why do you keep looking at the stands? No one’s there.”

“Just an off day,” I said.

I looked back at the stands as I headed for the locker room. They were cold and empty.

I finished dressing and pulled my phone out of my locker. I texted Jeff. “Missed you. Breakfast?”

Nothing.

I pushed cold scrambled eggs around on my plate. Reed was sitting across from me holding a limp piece of bacon in his hand. The morning crowd in the Student Union thinned out as everyone headed for their first class.

I checked my phone again.

“Oh God, will you give it a rest.” Reed looked pissed. “If he wanted to talk to you, he’d call.”

“But why wouldn’t he call? We had a good time last night. We made plans.”

He stood up, slinging his pack over his shoulder and grabbing his food tray. “Maybe you just couldn’t give him what he wanted.” He kicked his chair out of the way and headed for the dish-room window.

“Reed, what the hell is wrong with you?”

He didn’t say anything. He threw his tray in the window and headed out of the cafeteria. I packed up my things, grabbed my tray, dumped it with the dirty dishes, and headed for history class.

As I walked across the Quad, I texted, “Lunch? Come on, we have the English paper. Did I do something?”

The not knowing was killing me. If he just told me to fuck off, I could deal, but this total freeze-out was just fucked up. What was I supposed to say to him tomorrow in English?

I stood in front of his door. The only thing on it was a poster for the band Ghost Ship. I heard music coming from the room, loud rock music. I didn’t really see Jeff as a rock kind of guy. But I didn’t know, because I’d never got around to asking.

I took a breath and knocked.

Nothing.

I knocked harder and the door opened.

I exhaled. Okay, I lost my breath.

A tall man with long, curly blond hair and blue-green eyes stood there naked. Well, mostly naked. He had a towel. The gold rings in his nipples reflected the light from the hallway. A Chinese dragon tattoo wrapped itself around his body. The head looked out at me from between his pecs and the tail ran down the fuzzy trail disappearing under the towel. Did the end of the tail wrap around his cock? Why was I here again?

“Jeff.” It was more of a squeak— all I could get out.

The guy looked at me. “Nope. I’m Randy. He’s not here. Come on in, I need to get dressed.” He stepped to the side and I got sucked into the room by his presence.

He shut the door and dropped the towel. I tried to look away, I really did. And yes, it did, the tail wrapping thing.

He sat down on one of the beds and started pulling on socks. “So you a friend of his?”

“Yeah.” My mouth was really dry. I needed water or maybe bourbon.

He stood up and pulled a pair of black jeans out of a laundry basket in the closet. He slipped them on, the man kept his junk loose and free. “I really like Jeff. He’s a good kid, but kind of twitchy. Caught him watching some porn on the Net the other night and I swear he nearly jumped out of his skin. Like I care if the little guy’s gay or wanks all the time.” He pulled on a black T-shirt. It had the Ghost Ship logo on it, so the poster was his? “I think he met someone. There’s a video going around of him kissing some dude. He didn’t come home last night so I think he hooked up. I hope so. That guy really needs to get some.”

My brain snapped into focus. “What do you mean he didn’t come home last night?”

Randy went over to a desk and put on a pair of glasses, then he pulled his wet hair back and slipped on a hairband. He sat in the chair and started pulling on a pair of well-worn biker boots. He looked up at me. “I mean the dude didn’t come home.”

Randy stood up and walked over to me. He studied my face. I was very aware he was a good head taller than me. I’d seen him naked, but the muscles stretching the shirt and jeans moved my brain from lust to the fact that this guy could do some serious damage. And, he was wearing steel-toed boots.

Randy was now in my face. “You’re the guy that was sucking his face in the video?”

“Yeah.”

“And he wasn’t with you? Last time I saw him he said he was going to get some take-out and meet a friend. He was jumping around like a kid on Christmas. I saw the video after he left. I just figured that’s who he was going to see.”

I took a step back. “Yeah, he came over and we went out.”

He took a step forward, closing the gap again. “What happened? You leave him somewhere?”

“No. We said good night outside my dorm and he got a ride home.”

He stepped away and grabbed a large set of keys off his desk. He pulled a biker jacket off the back of the chair. “Who gave him the ride?”

“Fox Sterling.”

“Sterling? Like the school?”

“Yeah. His family started the place. He’s the quarterback.”

“You know where to find him?”

I looked down at my watch. “Yeah, he should be at practice.”

“Good, come on.” He started for the door, then stopped and turned. “That was some kiss on the video.”

I didn’t know where he was going with this. “Yeah,” I said.

“What are your intentions?”

“What do you mean?”

“The little dude’s been through a lot. I mean major shit. He’s my friend. You hurt him, I’ll take your balls.”

I realized that wasn’t a metaphor. “Randy, I think I love him. I’m going nuts not knowing where he is. Fuck it. I’d give you my balls right now just to know he’s okay. I’m freaking out man.” I stepped back and sat on Jeff’s bed.

“You love him?”

I looked up at the man. “I don’t know how I feel. I just want to be with him. God, I sound like a silly faggot.”

He walked over and squatted down so he was eye level with me. “Nothing silly about love, brother.”

“But I only met him yesterday. How can I feel this intense about someone I’ve just met?”

He took my hands in his. They were strong and rough and gentle. “Love is energy. It’s like fire. It can be a slow burn or it just flashes. But like a fire, it needs tending. You have to feed it and poke it and never leave it unattended. Now come on, let’s go find Jeff. I’m sure he’s okay.” He stood. “Oh, and what the hell’s your name?”

“Sorry, Sam Richards.”

He thrust his hand out to me. I took it and he pulled me up to my feet.

“Glad to meet you, Sam.”

I was behind Randy on his motorcycle. He insisted I put my arms around his waist. “You have to move with me. We have to be one on the bike,” he had said. So, as his torso flowed and rippled under my hands, I leaned my body with his. We were speeding through campus heading for the practice field.

He pulled up to the lot behind the aluminum bleachers. I heard the tweets of the coach’s whistle and the calls of the players. I got off the bike and headed for the gate that led onto the field. I saw Fox out on the field calling the offense into a huddle.

“Sammy?”

I turned around. Reed had his helmet off and was leaning against a light post behind the bench. I jogged over to him. “Why aren’t you on the field?”

He looked out at the huddle. “I don’t think I played the game right. They seem to have special rules here.”

“What?”

He shook his head. "Never mind." He looked behind me. "Who's that?"

I turned. Randy was standing there. "Randy, this is Reed, my best friend and roomie. Randy's Jeff's roommate." The two men sized each other up as they gripped hands.

"Reed, Jeff never went back to his room last night."

"What do you mean? He left with..." He looked out at the field. "Fox."

"You mean that guy?" Randy was pointing out at the players.

I nodded. He started walking out on the field. Reed grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. Randy spun around ready for a fight.

Reed held his hands up. "Just wait. They're almost done."

Randy grunted, but he waited. He stood there with his legs shoulder-width apart and arms crossed, a tower of badass.

The coach blew his whistle. The guys on the bench jumped up and sprinted off toward the locker rooms. The men on the field were slower to drift away.

Reed called out, "Sterling!"

Fox looked over at us. I could tell he was studying Randy. He pulled off his helmet and ran his hand through his hair. He slapped several of the players on the ass as he made his way toward us.

"Well, Richards, your taste is improving. That other one was disposable."

Randy didn't move or say a word. Reed was on his other side and shifted a bit.

I said, "Where the hell is Jeff?"

Fox slowly turned his head toward me. Like he didn't want to take his eyes off the new man. "Who?"

I lunged forward, but Randy's left arm shot out and blocked me. "You fucker," I said. "You gave him a ride home last night."

"Oh that." He gave a little laugh. "Yes. Well, he wanted to taste a real man's cock, so I took him home."

“You what?” I was pushing against Randy’s arm with all of my might. I don’t know how he was holding me. I’m not exactly a small guy.

Fox smiled. “I gave him what he wanted. I don’t know where he went afterward.”

Reed took a step forward. “You mean you didn’t take him back to his dorm?”

“No. He seemed very eager to leave my apartment and, well, I was done with him.”

I felt Randy’s arm pull from my chest. There was a blur to my right. Before I could even turn, I heard a smack and a crunch. Reed and Randy pulled their fists back as one. Fox was flat on his back. Blood flowed from what used to be a shapely nose.

The coach ran toward us. “Reed, God damn you! You’re off the team! That’s assault! You’ll be arrested and expelled for this.”

“Shit!” Reed held out his hand. “I need your phone, Sammy.”

I pulled it out of my pack.

He started talking to Randy. “His apartment’s in a converted warehouse on Fourth and Bayside. Take Sam and find Jeff.”

Randy reached out and grabbed Reed’s forearm. “Bro,” he said. He grabbed me and pulled me toward the bike.

Reed started talking into the phone, “Stan, I need help...”

I was on the bike again— stuck in traffic. I knew we were heading for Fox’s apartment, but I didn’t know why. Did we really think Fox was keeping him there?

“What are we doing?”

Randy turned his head to the side, so I could hear him better. “I thought we’d go to that asshole’s apartment and work our way back toward campus and try to figure out what happened.”

Traffic moved a bit. I said, “But it’s almost been a whole day. He should have been back. He told me he jogs several miles every morning. Campus isn’t that far. Where would he have gone?”

Randy shook his head. “I don’t know. Does he know anyone in town? Have any family?”

Why the hell didn’t we get that damn interview done? “I don’t know. I think all of his family’s back in Mississippi. Has he made many friends in the dorm?”

“Not that I can tell. He’s kind of a quiet twitchy little guy. Keeps to himself, mostly.”

I sighed. “Yeah, like a scared rabbit.”

“Oh man, with those big black eyes of his, yeah, our little bunny.”

The light changed up ahead and the traffic began to move. The bridge over Sandy Creek was up ahead. It had ornamental railings and ornate lamps. It marked the north side of the Old Town district of Bennett Bay. We began to pick up speed, when I saw something red fluttering on the bridge railing.

“Oh fuck no!” I yelled. “Pull the damn bike over.”

Randy slowed down and pulled over to the curb. “I can’t really stop here man, what’s up?”

Cars were starting to honk. The old bridge wasn’t wide enough for the larger cars to pass the bike. I jumped off and ran to the railing. An old red flannel shirt was tangled in the bars of the railing. I pulled it free and held it to my face. It was warm, soft, and smelled of apples and cinnamon. Jeff. I turned and held it out to Randy.

He said, “Damn. He was wearing that last night.”

People were starting to yell out their car windows. Randy said, “Okay, I’ve got to get off this bridge. I’ll call the cops.” He looked right at me. “Don’t do anything stupid.” He put the bike in gear.

“Ask for Detective Stan Wolf. He knows us.”

Randy nodded as he pulled away.

I turned and looked down to the water. It really wasn't that far down. But then, most people probably hadn't done high diving. I'd gone off the ten-meter platform a few times just to show the divers I wasn't a pussy. But I didn't know how deep it was. If Jeff survived the fall, what would have happened? What was the tide like here? How fast was the creek? I thought of Jeff's hard little body getting swept out into the bay. I looked out at the wide expanse of dark water. The bridge was over the mouth of the creek. It formed a little inlet. A rock breakwater ran along the north bank out into the bay. The gulls were circling and fussing at the end. Something white and black moved on one of the larger rocks down by the water.

It was a person. A person was laying on the rock. I looked at the wall of tumbled rocks. There was no walkway out that far. No way to get to the point except by a boat or...

I started taking off my clothes. At least I was wearing boxers today. I started breathing heavy to get as much oxygen into my blood as possible. I looked over the railing. There was just a bit of a ledge. It was enough. I wasn't a good enough diver to be on the diving squad, but I could do it, and I was a damn good swimmer. Actually, I was the best in the state.

I climbed up on the railing. I heard cars honking and screeching to a halt. I lowered myself onto the ledge. Took a few more breaths, and stepped out into nothingness.

It was cold and dark. I fought to keep my breath and kicked my way to the surface. Damn, I had drifted back under the bridge. The tide was coming in, pushing me upstream away from the bay, away from Jeff. Fuck it. I got my bearings and started swimming toward the bay and the end of the breakwater. I had to pace myself. I needed to go as fast as I could, because the cold would get to me eventually. But I didn't want to use up my strength too soon. This is what I did best, stroking and kicking and taking a breath. Again and again and again.

The tide was slowing me down more than I expected. I had to roll over on my back for a while to catch my breath. Shit, I should have been there by now. How far was it? How long had it been? I rolled back over and started it all again.

I heard splashing. I stopped and held my head up. The waves were breaking on the rocks in front of me. I could see Jeff on the rock curled up in a ball. Had he moved? Oh, please, let him be okay.

There seemed to be an eddy in the current that was moving me toward the rock he was on. I swam with my head above the water trying to figure out how to get up on the rocks. They bristled with barnacles and oysters. The sharp shells could shred me like razor blades.

“Jeff! Hey Jeff!”

He moved. He sat up and looked around. His face bruised and arms cut up, but he was fucking moving. He was alive. “Sam, is that you? I lost my glasses.”

“Yeah, I’m over here.” I moved closer to the rock. “Can you give me a hand up? My legs are starting to turn to rubber.”

He moved to the edge. “Be careful. Those shell things are sharp. I cut up my arms pretty bad... I have an idea.”

He stood up and started taking off his jeans. I gagged on a mouth full of water. He was wearing tiger-print bikini underwear. And I have to admit, he filled them out quite nicely.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why?”

“It sounded like you’re drowning.”

“No, okay. What are you doing with your pants?”

“The denim should give you a bit of protection from the rocks. My legs didn’t get cut.”

He placed his pants on the edge of the rock, knelt down, and held out his hand for me to grab. I took it and he pulled and I kicked. The pants helped. I only got a few cuts on my legs. I sat down on the rock. He came over and wrapped his arms around me. He was shivering, but still warmer than the water. “Sam, why are you here?”

He had to ask? “Well, you know, I’m not very bright. A friend jumps off a bridge, I jump too.”

“But Sam, I didn’t jump.”

The hospital bed was a little tight for the two of us, but they’d need to call the Marines to get me out of it. I was wearing a pair of dark blue scrubs. Jeff was in one of those hospital gowns with no ass. He kept bitching about it, but I liked it. His jeans were so damn loose I had no idea he had such a little bubble butt. His arms were bandaged up and there were a few stitches in his face. They had an IV tube in his arm for hydration. Right now, he slurped some soup.

“So how did you find me?” he asked.

The Marine Rescue boat got to the breakwater moments after I did. We’d been surrounded by people ever since and hadn’t had time to talk to one another. My stomach clenched every time he looked at me. I’d never seen anyone so battered and bruised. There was this white-hot animal rage in me. It was like bile rising in my throat. I kept pushing it down. The only thing keeping Fox alive right now was my fear of being taken from Jeff.

“Sam?” he said.

“Stan told us not to talk about anything until he got back.”

He took my hand. “He said to not talk about what happened with... you know who.”

Yeah, I didn’t want to say his name either.

“I... I just didn’t expect anyone to look for me? I thought it’d be better if I just died there.”

I wanted to hit something.

I yelled. I didn't mean to, but there was a mess of pissed off inside I just couldn't control. "Why in hell do you say shit like that? Do you really think no one cares for you?"

He looked away. "No one ever has."

I felt like my brain was going to slide out my ears or something. How could that be? How could anyone feel like *no one* cares for them? The anger spewed.

"Fuck that!"

He nearly jumped out of the bed. I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around to look at me. He winced. I didn't care.

"Okay, I know you're like ten times smarter than I'll ever be, but you're still a dumb ass. A total, fucking, dumb ass. I don't know what kind of demon-infested hellhole you came from, but you're not there anymore and you're never going back. You've been here less than a week and there are people who care a whole lot for you."

He glared at me. I knew he wanted to say, "Who?" but was scared of me right now. So I was gonna tell the dense little shit.

"You know Randy, your roommate?"

"You know Randy?" he asked.

"Yes. I went to your room looking for you. Because I care. He thought you and I hooked up last night. He saw the video of us kissing. He was all excited, because he thought you had a boyfriend. Do you hear that? You have a straight-as-fuck biker roommate that is excited that you found someone. Because he cares. But wait—there's more. He fucking threatened to cut my balls off if I broke your heart. You hear that? How long have you known him? And he's getting all big-brother protective over you. And when he found out you were missing, he pulls me on his motorcycle and we go over to confront Fox and well... both he and Reed deck Fox. Because they both care. His face looks worse than yours, by the way."

“What?”

“Shit, I don't know if I can talk about that. But Reed and Randy assaulted him. Fuck man, they're probably going to jail. For you. Back in the swamp, we call that love. And I jumped off a fucking bridge for you. I jumped off a god dammed bridge! Do you get that? So how long have you been here and three people have risked a lot for your little butt. Imagine how many people will be falling all over you by the end of next week?”

He pulled away from me and out of his gown. He yanked the IV tube out of his arm and ran into the bathroom. I heard the lock click.

I jumped out of bed and started pounding on the door. “Jeff. Jeff. Jeff.” I turned around and slid to the floor. I was shaking and crying. What had I done? Fuck me. Fuck Jeff.

“Sam?”

It was Stan. Aidan and Kip were with him along with the nurse that put the drip in Jeff's arm. I wanted to run to them and just be held. I wanted to scream and beat on them.

Kip came over and knelt down in front of me. He took my hands. I looked down at them. They were all sweaty and shaking. What was wrong with me? I felt like I was trapped in a pool and couldn't get to the surface.

Kip said, “Nurse, can you ask the attending to prescribe something for anxiety?”

She said, “Yes, Doctor.”

“Doctor?”

Aidan sat down on the floor next to me. “Kip's a doctor of psychology. He works over at the V.A. helping the troops deal with trauma and PTSD. Do you know what that is?”

I nodded. It was hard to breathe.

Aidan went on. “I... well, my whole family had to deal with a lot last year. He helped us.”

I tried to smile.

Kip said, “Sam, what happened?”

“Fox... he...” I looked up at Stan. I just couldn’t say it.

Kip shook his head. “No. I mean right now, between you two. Why is he in the bathroom and why were you pounding on the door? Is he safe? Do we need to get in there?”

I pulled my hands from him. Oh my God, I didn’t even think of that. I turned to pound on the door again. My chest was constricting. *Jeff*. Nothing came out. Kip was saying something to Aidan and Stan. Strong arms were pulling me out of the room, away from Jeff. I screamed “No!” but nothing came out. I couldn’t breathe. *Jeff*.

The bench in the hallway outside Jeff’s room was hard. I looked down at the crumpled brown paper bag the nurse had given me to breathe into. She’d also given me a pill. Aidan was sitting next to me, trying to convince me that I shouldn’t be embarrassed about having a panic attack. I wanted to ask if it was okay to be embarrassed about having one in front of your professor, but I didn’t have the energy.

“Sammy.”

I looked up. Reed was standing there with Jacklyn. I stood up and his arms went around me. He whispered in my ear. “You okay?”

I let my arms fall to my side and sat back down. “No.”

I reached out and took Jacklyn’s hand. “Thanks for being here.”

Reed dragged two chairs from the other side of the hall and put them next to me.

“How’s Jeff?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Stan and Kip are talking to him right now.”

Reed said, “Kip?”

I shook my head. “He’s a shrink or something.”

Aidan shifted next to me. “Do you all want to be alone?”

I grabbed his arm. “Not really. If you don’t mind hanging with students?”

Reed sat down in the chair next to me. “He’s not. He’s with family. He’s my family. You are my family. We are family.” He reached out and took my hand.

“Fuck,” I said and tears started running down my face. “Why the hell can’t Jeff get this? I tried to tell him how much he meant to all of us and he just freaked out.”

Reed asked, “Why would he do that?”

Aidan stood up and started pacing. “You boys grew up in good families. You knew you were loved. Jeff wasn’t so lucky. He doesn’t trust love. Probably doesn’t think he deserves it.”

“I don’t get that. I mean what that would be like. What should I do?”

Aidan exhaled and shrugged his shoulders. “Hell, I don’t know. This relationship thing is hard. My first one was a freak show. Just go slow. Realize he’s going to have issues. Talk to people. You have to have friends.”

I put my head back against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. “So by go slow you mean, I shouldn’t fall head over heels in love with him in the first twenty-four hours and then jump off a bridge for him?”

Aidan leaned against the far wall and smiled. “Well, don’t make a habit of it. And you’re kind of new at this. It settles down. Just let it be. Don’t put too much on the relationship. Don’t think about being together forever. I know the rush of passion makes you feel that way, but that can be a heavy expectation at first. Just be together for today. Because right now is really all you have for sure.”

I looked at him and said, “You must be a great dad.” I know it was random, but my brain was in random mode right now.

Aidan turned red. He seemed to do that a lot. “Aha, well, I try. It is much harder to explain the world to seven-year-olds.” He looked over at Reed. “Are you okay? Stan said there was some trouble at school.”

I turned. “Yeah, what happened? They gonna to arrest you?”

“I don’t know. I’m definitely off the team, at least for this season. Probably lost the scholarship.”

“Shit man. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, don’t worry. I really don’t think this program is for me. There are other schools out there.”

Damn, I didn’t want to lose Reed.

Aidan said, “Relax. It might not come to that. I can’t say anything, but I think there’s more to this than you know.”

The door to Jeff’s room opened. Stan and Kip came out.

“I took his statement,” Stan said. “They’re going to keep him overnight to make sure he’s okay. Really, other than the cuts and the dehydration, he came through the whole thing pretty well. He’s one tough little guy.”

“Can I stay with him?”

Stan looked over at Kip. “Sam, I think he needs some time alone to process things.”

“No. He’s been alone all his life. He needs to know he’s not alone anymore.” I was ready for a fight.

Kip came over and put his arm around me. “Sam, he’s getting there, but you need to take care of yourself. You have to go to your classes and swim practice, so you can be there for him when he’s ready. He will need you.”

Reed asked, “Stan, what about Fox? Did you arrest him?”

His face hardened. “No. Not yet.”

I yelled, “What? Why the hell not?”

“Because I don’t have any hard evidence right now. We are processing the evidence we took off Jeff, but assault cases are hard to prove without witnesses. It takes time and I can’t say any more about it.”

“Uncle Stan, I... I think I need to tell you something.”

Stan walked over to his nephew, “Reed. Did he do something to you?”

Reed stood there looking embarrassed.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Not really,” Reed said. He looked at Jacklyn, then pulled Stan down the hall a few steps and started whispering into his ear. Stan started to clench and unclench his fist and shake his head.

Kip leaned in to me and asked, “Do you know what this is about?”

“Maybe,” I said.

Stan yelled, “Oh hell no!” He started moving down the hall.

Reed was trying to hold him. He looked back at us. “Help me.”

Aidan and Kip ran forward and pushed Stan back against the wall. Kip said, “Stan, calm down.”

“Calm down?”

“Yes, you’re a police officer.”

“I’m an uncle first. And that slime messed with blood. What do you expect me to do?”

“Work the goddamn case and put his pretty blond butt in prison so he can get jailhouse justice every night.”

Aidan turned and looked at us. “I think you all should go.”

Jacklyn grabbed me and Reed by our arms and started pulling us toward the elevators. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Wednesday

I swiveled around on my desk chair. Reed was on his bed reading. I said, “Didn’t Aidan say he was going to only assign the good parts of this book?”

Reed closed his book. “I think his view of what’s good might be different than ours.”

“Yeah, I really love the guy, but God, his field is mind-numbing. Like a brain freeze.”

“So,” Reed said, “hear from Jeff yet?”

“He emailed me. Said he’s okay. He got out of the hospital late and missed English. He needs to get a new phone. His old one is in the bay somewhere.” I reached out and grabbed my phone without really thinking about it. No new messages. “I’m trying to give him space and go slow like Kip and Aidan said.”

“Easy for them to say.”

“No shit. They both have husbands. Hey, what’s up with you and Jacklyn?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think she’s kind of out of my league? I mean she’s damn smart and a senior. I know we’ve gotten a little flirty, but you know. You think she’d really be interested?”

I went over and flopped down on the bed next to him. “Man, I’d say most of the women on this campus are interested, and more of the men than you know.”

He snickered. “From now on, there’s only one man in my life.”

“Yeah, who?”

He jumped on top of me and started tickling me. “Stop!” I laughed. He didn’t. God I missed this. I pulled a wrestling move on him and rolled him off the bed. I landed on top. “I got you, bitch.”

There was a knock on the door. We both looked at the door then back at each other. We just started laughing. He flipped me over on my back and pinned me down. “Who’s the bitch now?” He leaned down and gave me a

peck on the cheek. There was another knock. He got off me and opened the door.

Jeff and Jacklyn stood there. They both looked a little nervous. They looked from Reed to me on the floor. Jeff's face was purple and puffy. I jumped up.

I said, "What's up?" It was taking everything I had to not run over and pull Jeff into my arms. Yeah, I was in full chick mode.

Jacklyn said to Reed, "Get your things. You're staying in my room tonight."

"What?" we both said at once.

Jeff said, "Sam and I need to talk about things. Do you mind?"

Reed was running his right hand through his hair. "Yeah. Okay. Sure. What do I need?"

Jacklyn smiled. "Well, what do you need for the morning and what do you sleep in?"

"Nothing." He blushed. "Usually... I mean."

She said, "Just get your shower kit and clothes for the morning."

Reed crammed a clean shirt, underwear, and socks into his pack and grabbed his shower-caddy. "Uhhh, later," he said to me.

The door closed. Jeff and I were alone. "Are you okay with this?" he asked.

"I don't know. You okay? We can wait until you are better."

He dropped his bag on Reed's bed and unzipped it. He pulled out a large candle, a box of condoms, and a bottle of lube. He put the candle on the desk and lit it. He went over to my stereo and tuned in the jazz station.

"Turn off the lights," he said.

I turned off the lamp on my desk and the overhead lights. The only light came from the candle. Jeff took off his glasses. Then he kicked off his shoes.

He walked forward and stood before me. I swallowed. My mouth was going dry.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt you.” I said.

He reached up to his face. “It looks worse than it is. And I need to clear my palate.”

I said, “I don’t understand?”

He reached up and stroked my ear. “The only dick I’ve ever had in my mouth was his. That was my first sex. I need something amazing to wash it away. Be my first. My real first. The one that matters.”

The ear thing was starting to drain the blood from my brain to the lower regions. I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to have a functional conversation. “And you think I’d be amazing?”

His face moved in closer. I felt his breath on my lips. “You already are.” He took my lower lip in his teeth and bit ever so gently, tugging on it and then releasing. The dragon roared to life.

He stepped back and began unbuttoning his shirt. Slowly, one button opened after the other. I started to pull my T-shirt off.

“No,” he ordered. “I want you to watch me. Don’t touch your clothes.”

And the dragon wept with joy.

He slowly opened his shirt then shrugged it off. It fell to the floor. The warm candlelight danced across his smooth torso. He had flat abs and nice pecs. Hard nipples cast small pointed shadows on his chest.

He undid his belt, pulled it from his pants and let it slide through his fingers to the floor. He undid the button on his jeans. The zipper parted and they fell to the floor. He took a step forward and left them there. He stood there smooth and naked wearing only his socks. He had shaved himself. God, that was hot. I wanted to shave him the next time.

I didn't know how much longer I could just stand there. His cock looked so good. It was full and hard. A drop of pre-cum glistened on the tip. Every fiber of my being wanted to taste that. To smell it.

He came forward, reached up, and played with the hair on back of my head. He pulled me to him. Pushed his lips against mine. His tongue found its way into my mouth. His dick pressed against the hardness trapped in my pants. Two dragons ready to do battle.

"Let me undress." I panted through our kisses.

He stepped back and grabbed the front of my shirt, pulled me around, and pushed me back on my bed. Hell, he was strong. He pulled the shirt over my head, and then pushed me back down. He started undoing my jeans. I tried to help him. He slapped my hands away, hard.

"Hey," I said.

Those black eyes looked right into my soul. "I said not to touch your clothes."

He undid them. I lifted my ass a bit and he pulled the jeans and my boxers right off. I was naked and the dragon was unleashed. I scooted all the way up on the bed. He laid himself down on top of me and kissed me again. He started kissing and licking his way down my body. His stomach and then his chest kept rubbing against my cock. I was going nuts. Finally, his face was at my crotch. I grabbed his hair and tried to move his mouth to my cock. I needed some suckage.

He looked up at me. "No. Not yet." And moved my hands away again. He pushed my legs apart and settled in between them. He licked around the base of my dick, then pushed my legs up. He was going for my balls, taking them in his mouth. Then, he pushed my legs up further. My knees bent up to my chest as he began to go south of my balls. No one had ever done that before. Oh my God. His tongue entered me. It was warm and wet. It went deep. He pulled his face away from my ass. He looked at me. "I'm gonna fuck the living shit out of you Samuel Richards." And he grinned like the devil himself.

Fuck the bunny. My rabbit was a tiger. A tiger with a pet boy. I pulled my knees up toward my ears. Coach did say I needed to work on my flexibility.

“Fuck me hard, baby.” Yeah, I said that. And meant it.

Friday, Again

I made it to Friday. The cold front was wreaking havoc in the Atlantic now, and we were back to sunny Florida weather. I stretched out on the grassy lawn of the Quad trying to get my head around Avogadro’s Number and why I should care how many molecules were in something, like I’d ever need to know that. Maybe Jeff could explain it to me. He was turning out to be a good tutor. I noticed when I thought of him, my butt gave a little involuntary squeeze. Getting fucked two nights in a row was a new and very good thing. Of course, he was letting my dragon hide in his cave too, so I was a very happy boy. Happy and tired. I really needed to get my times back up or coach was gonna give Jeff another hole to fill.

A shadow crossed my book. “Hey, Sammy.”

Reed plopped down in the grass on my left and gave me a one-armed hug. I closed my book and hugged him back. I asked, “Have you heard from the Athletic Director?”

“Yeah,” he said. He pulled at the grass. “I’m suspended from the team for the year, but I get to keep my scholarship. Fox being accused of sexual assault and attempted murder has kind of worked in my favor. I mean, the guy drugged me, and well, you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that when it happened?”

He looked at me. “I don’t know, Sammy. I was so fucked up at the time; I thought maybe I really wanted it to happen. And I did kind of enjoy it; hell, it was a blow job. Then he just kept pushing me for more all week. And he made threats about my scholarship. But I kept thinking two things. How in the hell did I get that fucked up on one beer and, well...”

“What?”

“If I really wanted a guy to go down on me, it’d be really shitty not to ask you to do it.”

Men. Gotta love us. “Yeah, I thought so. Sorry about being kind of a jealous crazy bitch over the whole thing.”

He held his fist up to me and I bumped it.

“So are we good?” I asked.

“Always, Sammy. Always.”

I asked, “Have you heard from Stan? Are they going to fry Fox?”

“I don’t know. He keeps saying shit like ‘Justice moves slow’ and he can’t talk about the case. And that I shouldn’t talk about it with anyone, but you guys, that is. But I think there is more going on.”

“Like what?” I said.

“I’ve been hearing rumors. Something happened when he was a kid in Boy Scouts and his freshman-year roommate disappeared.”

“What the hell?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Records have been sealed and things shushed up, but people still talk. His dad’s money can’t fix everything.” He looked out across the Quad. It was busy as students were moving from one class to the next. “Hey, there’s Jeff.” He started waving. He looked over at me. “So how’s Jeff doing?”

I watched my man wave at us and head over our way. And yes, I went all gooey inside. I was so becoming a chick and I was okay with it. “He pretends he’s okay. But you know he was forced to give a guy head, drugged and thrown off a bridge. How in the hell can you be okay after that? And all that shit from home. He has nightmares. He started screaming in his sleep last night.”

“Damn. Is he talking to anyone about it?”

I nodded. “Yeah. We’re going to see Kip on Sunday. I’m gonna use all of my boyfriend super powers to make sure he keeps talking to him.”

Reed grabbed me and pulled my head into his chest and gave me a noogie.

I pulled away and tried to fix my hair. “What the hell was that for?”

“‘Cause, dude, I love you, and hearing you talk about a boyfriend is the best.”

Okay, extra gooey.

Jeff dropped his pack on the ground and said, “Hi guys. We doing lunch later?” Jeff sat down and leaned against me.

“Sounds good,” I said. Reed nodded.

Jeff asked, “Hey, Reed, where’ve you been? You stay at Jacklyn’s again?”

Reed shook his head and arranged his pack like a pillow on the ground then stretched out in the sun. “No. I’ve been hanging with Randy. He’s cool. You know, I need more het guys in my life.”

“Right.” I snorted and kicked his leg. He just snickered back.

“So where were you?” I asked.

“Well, I knew Jeff’s bed would be empty, so I slept there. I tried not to wank too much.”

“Gross.” Jeff tried to sound all miffed. It didn’t work. Hell, he’d probably stain the sheets himself just thinking about it. Yeah, I knew that look. He was thinking about it.

“Really?” I said and gave him a little push. “Speaking of sheets, we gotta do something about ours.” Yeah I said *our* sheets. And the world continued.

I lay back on the ground. The grass was cool on my back and the sun warmed my face. Jeff shifted and put his head on my stomach. I started playing with his soft curls. “My Dad’s coming up from Tampa tonight and wants to take me out to dinner. I want you to come with.”

Reed rolled over and put his arm across my chest. “Sounds great. I haven’t seen Ron in ages.”

Jeff didn’t say anything.

“Babe?”

“Are you sure you want me there?”

“I guess I wasn’t clear. I was inviting Reed. You have no option. I’m not going without you.”

I wasn’t going anywhere without my two guys. There was a lot of shit ahead, but the three of us together would handle it. We could handle anything. After all we just made it through the first week of college.

THE END

Author Bio

Stephen del Mar is a writer living in the Tampa Bay area. He writes contemporary, science fiction, and a bit of fantasy, often with gay characters and themes.

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