

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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MEANT TO BE?

Chris Cox

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By Chris Cox

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

Two young men are standing on a beach, with sand and water in the background. The taller of the two, a brunet, is hugging the blond from the side, and kissing his cheek. The blond seems startled by the gesture, but in need of comfort.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have been together for years. They are still each other's first love. But reality creeps in—both get offers for their dream jobs after finishing university, unfortunately with thousands of miles between them. Are they going to try a “long distance” relationship or is one forced to give up his dreams? Or will they find another solution?

The pic can be the beginning or the end of the story. I just wish for an established couple who is very familiar with each other, some angst and a HEA.

Thanks,

Sunne

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, engineering, landscape design, twink, non-explicit, sweet no sex, coming of age, established couple

Word count: 7,587

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“How do I look?” Sean stood looking into the vanity mirror, wearing his crisp pink and white pinstriped oxford shirt, cherry pinstriped suspenders and tailored gray pants. On the white bathroom rug, his feet were still bare, his toes curled under. The New Orleans humidity popped tiny beads of condensation along his forehead and neck.

Standing so close behind his lover, Rusty could see the fine baby hair curling at Sean’s nape. He breathed in the scent of uniqueness Sean gave to Happy for Men cologne and let a smile surface on his kiss-swollen lips.

Rusty wanted to nuzzle Sean in that tender spot between his earlobe and shoulder. Wanted to sink his teeth in just enough to cause Sean to shudder with desire. Wanted to whisper into Sean’s ear that he was beautiful.

But that’s not what Sean needed to hear right now.

“Perfect.” Rusty gave in to temptation and put his hands on Sean’s shoulders, squeezing tight enough to emphasize the words he didn’t need to say. *I’ve got your back. I always will.*

Sean’s gray-blue eyes met his in the mirror. “Fourteenth time’s the charm, huh?”

Worry had completely washed out the dreamy look of passion that had been there only an hour and a half ago. It had only been a blow job, but it had been the best one Rusty could offer.

Sean had been too anxious to make love.

Rusty swallowed back his sorrow and his memories. There had been a time... But that had been before...

Now was not the time to think of that. Sean would see the pain in Rusty’s eyes and he would think of that time, too. Not that either of them would ever be able to forget.

With a need greater than desire, a need to protect, a need to wipe away the fear in Sean's eyes, Rusty wanted to take Sean back to bed and make his lover's world soft and safe.

Safe from failure. Safe from disappointment. Safe from the prejudice that cut into Sean's soul, reinforcing the damage done from the moment his father first suspected his only son wasn't like most of the other boys, making Sean feel less than okay because of who he was.

Rusty gave into temptation and leaned in close to whisper into Sean's ear, "They'd be fools not to hire you."

While Sean's GPA was decent, he came across as incredibly shy. And incredibly gay. Either one could be the reason behind his unsuccessful job interviews for an entry level mechanical engineering position.

Sean responded to Rusty's nuzzling by leaning his head back, ear to mouth, caressing him, soaking him up.

Most people thought Rusty was the stronger of the two. Physically, he topped Sean by an inch or two and fifteen pounds. Not much, really, but he looked sturdy. Sean looked delicate. Always had. But he was so much stronger than Rusty. Rusty could never have survived intact after enduring what Sean had endured.

"Then I've met a lot of fools, lately." Sean tried for a grin, but failed. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I'm really trying."

"No sorry to it." Rusty wrapped his arms around Sean's waist, tightening hard enough to feel Sean's ragged breath. "We've got each other."

Sean turned to face Rusty, his arms reaching up to wrap around Rusty's neck, seeking the comfort he never verbalized.

"If we have no other place to live, we can always share a box under the bridge." Muffled in Rusty's neck, it sounded more like a sob than a forced laugh. "Who knew my graduation would make us homeless?"

Rusty had caught Sean staring so often at the letter giving them two weeks notice to vacate student housing that he had finally ripped it from the refrigerator door, tore it into strips and took it out with the trash.

He thought about not reminding Sean about their bittersweet safety net. But it made him feel better to know it was there and he thought, underneath Sean's pride, it would make Sean feel better, too.

"Mom's got our rooms all ready for us. She's really excited that we might be moving in. You've seen the sitting room she's made out of Jolie's old bedroom so we would have our own little corner of privacy along with our bedroom."

Sean nodded. "Maybe it won't come to that. There's got to be someone who wants me."

"I want you." Rusty trailed featherlight kisses along his neck.

"And I thank God daily for that."

Rusty knew Sean did. His deeply spiritual lover was grateful for everything good that came his way, things that most of the world took for granted.

"So you think this will do?" Sean squinted critically into the mirror, picked up his eyeliner and frowned at it.

Rusty had advised him to dress however made him feel best about himself. With Sean, that would include eyeliner and mascara. The eye makeup was a sign of defiance. A sign of vanity. A sign of wanting to be beautiful for Rusty, knowing Rusty loved the way the dark lines and lashes accentuated Sean's light eyes.

Those eyes.

Rusty hadn't even known what gay was when he'd fallen into those eyes and fallen into love all those years ago.

For people who scoffed at the idea of soulmates, Rusty knew they were wrong. He had known he was meant to be with Sean since he was eight and Sean was nine.

Best friends to lovers. There had never been anyone else for either of them.

That first year in high school, Sean had tried dating a girl or two to get his dad off his back but it had done nothing but make Rusty sad and angry and jealous and made Sean more aware than ever that he couldn't be straight no matter how hard he tried.

How a man could throw away his own son—a person he'd made with his own sperm—because his son had been born gay was a concept Rusty couldn't wrap his mind around.

But Sean's father was another thing Rusty didn't need to think about right now. With that deep connection he and Sean shared, Sean would pick up on it. Depressed was not the best way to go into a job interview.

Seeing the vulnerability in Sean's eyes, the inevitability that who he was would lead to disappointment broke Rusty's heart. His biggest hope was that, during their lifetimes, he could find a way to show Sean how truly perfect he was just the way God made him.

Sean put down the liquid eyeliner tube without unscrewing it. The tube bumped the big zirconia stud that lay on the bathroom counter. "Probably not, huh?"

"Tonight, baby." Rusty caught sight of his own matching zirconia stud in his earlobe. "Tonight we'll dress. We'll be exactly who we are, okay? And we will party like there is no tomorrow."

Working for his family, the family that believed gay was as much a righteous part of him as being green-eyed was for his oldest brother and musically talented was for his younger sister, Rusty had never had to be anyone but himself.

He resisted the urge to kiss the tiny white scar too close to Sean's eye that still bore the reminder of his coming-out confession to his family.

Yes, Sean was the stronger of the two.

“Tonight, we’ll go out or stay in. Your choice. Either way, we’ll have fun,” he promised, trying to give Sean hope that today would end well, no matter what.

“We need to start packing up.”

“We’ve got another week.” Rusty didn’t remind Sean he had already started to cart a few things over to his mom’s whenever it was convenient or that he’d already arranged with his dad and brother to come over the weekend before their last day to help with the furniture.

He glanced at the watch on Sean’s wrist. “You need to get going, sweetheart.”

Slowly, Sean unclasped Rusty’s arms from around him. “Those who are about to die—”

“—salute you.” Rusty gave him a hard kiss on his cheek, knowing if he tasted Sean’s lips they would have a harder time pulling apart. He caught Sean’s hand and put it on his heart. “We’ll be okay. We have all we need right here.”

Sean left the interview trying not to get his hopes up like he had the other thirteen times he’d shaken hands and plastered on a smile as the recruiter promised to get in touch soon. If Rusty had been interviewing, he’d have companies competing for him. He had that kind of dynamic personality, even if his math skills were so poor he couldn’t keep his own bank account straight.

Still, losing this one would hurt more than the others. It was his dream job. Sean had been fascinated by underwater robotics ever since his dad had been stationed in Hawaii when he was seven. That’s where his dad had taught him to snorkel—where they’d actually spent time together—before the transfer to New Orleans, before his dad started to watch him closely. Before his dad made him feel like he was doing everything wrong, telling him to toughen up and be a man every time he had the chance.

Why did his mind always wander in this direction when he was under stress? Sean pushed away thoughts of his father and of home. Six years. Long enough to let it go.

Just like he needed to let go of any hope that he'd get a call for the job he interviewed for.

He'd done horribly, even worse than usual. His palm had been sweaty when he'd shaken the interviewer's hand and mumbled his introduction. Despite his determination to maintain friendly eye contact, he'd caught himself staring past the interviewer or looking down into his clasped hands at least a half-dozen times. His monotone answers to the interviewer's questions wouldn't impress anyone. And he'd stumbled, tripping on his own feet as he got up to leave the interview room.

The weight of his student loans, of Rusty's sympathetic smile, and his own crushed confidence pulled his shoulders down, making his neck ache.

Sean shook off his suit jacket before he climbed into Rusty's old Toyota Corolla. *Their car*, Rusty always corrected. When he'd first begun interviewing, he'd dreamed of buying something new, replacing Rusty's ride with a more reliable car that would look good in Rusty's parents' driveway when they went for Sunday dinner.

One that would tell Rusty's family that their baby boy wasn't making a mistake by loving Sean.

Too aware he was wallowing in the self-pity he had been unsuccessfully hiding from Rusty, Sean made himself take the stairs two at a time to their third floor apartment. The physical exertion felt good.

He hadn't run in over a week. Then again, the apartment needed packing up. Student housing was only available for students, not for newly graduated, unemployed mechanical engineers.

Standing in the bedroom he and Rusty had called their own for the last four years, Sean wasn't sure what he should do next. No more exams to study for. No more resumes to send out. No more plans to make about sharing the car. After this last interview, he had nowhere he needed to be.

In a burst of anger, he kicked an empty packing box, venting until the hapless cardboard lay torn and flattened on the floor.

Ashamed of his outburst, he neatly and methodically finished off the job, bending and folding the box small to take up less room in the dumpster. After changing into running shorts, a T-shirt and his battered running shoes that he would replace with his first paycheck, he took off for a last run around the campus housing that had been his and Rusty's first home together.

The last time Sean had nowhere to live, Rusty's family had taken him in. It seemed history was about to repeat itself, only for a different reason this time.

Only three miles into his run, he was gasping for breath. The stress of the last few weeks cut his wind. He slowed as he reached the campus pool, not even realizing where he'd been headed until he got there.

The water always soothed him. Rusty said it was the Pisces in him that made him part fish. When they'd lived in Hawaii his dad had taught him how to swim and then how to dive. The whole family had spent most of their time on the beach. Sean remembered being happy there.

When he'd asked for diving lessons for his tenth birthday, he had thought he could recapture those times with his dad. But it had been too late. His father had already recognized something in him that he hadn't yet understood in himself.

The pool was mostly deserted except for the bored lifeguard sitting on the stand. A sign on the pool fence advertised open positions for the summer. Sean had done that job since his teens. Maybe he should apply.

That's what five years in college and in debt got him. A job he was qualified for at sixteen.

Still, he went in, hung around the snack shop counter, then asked for a locker key instead of a job application, knowing his pride was standing in the way of making an honest living.

Pride. He would always associate that word with the word gay.

Gay pride. Yeah, all that had ever done for him was make him homeless.

“What’s wrong, Rust Bucket?”

Rusty settled into his older brother’s work truck and buckled his seatbelt. “Sean has another interview this morning. I’m just worried about him.”

His brother sent him a disbelieving glance. “Uh-huh. Wanna tell me the rest of it?”

As if he were dumping a pallet of landscape pavers off his back, Rusty took a deep breath and unloaded on his brother. How did Sean survive without family? “It’s not that I want Sean to fail. Really, it isn’t.”

He waited for confirmation that the judgment and condemnation he heaped onto his own head was justified. Instead, his brother simply turned on his blinker and slowed to hang a right and cut through a residential neighborhood, avoiding mid-morning traffic.

“I know you wouldn’t hurt Sean for anything in the world. What’s the problem?”

“I don’t want anything to change.” Rusty winced as it came out as more of a whine than a statement. “I even suggested he apply to graduate school, not because I thought he would like to go but because I like the life we have right now. I want it to always be like this.”

“And if he gets a grown-up job, it won’t be.”

Rusty nodded. “It won’t be.”

He stared out the window with a landscaper’s eye, automatically taking in the selections of plants and their arrangements as they passed by the tiny front yards in the older neighborhood.

“Is it wrong that I’m looking forward to moving back in with Mom and Dad? But Sean thinks it’s a step backward.”

“Isn’t it?”

Rusty hated the juvenile reply even as he voiced it. “You don’t understand.”

His brother, married for over a half-dozen years, hadn't lived in their parents' house since he'd turned eighteen.

His brother smirked. "All of us Duchenes are momma's boys. Those first months I was on my own, I ate supper every night with Mom and Dad. We're still over there every Sunday for dinner. Thankfully, Amanda puts up with my need to be so close to my family, but it took a lot of discussion—a lot of fighting, if you want to know the truth—for me to understand that we needed to build our own family ties, too. We almost didn't make it."

"I didn't know that."

"It's not something I'm proud of." By the tightness of his jaw, Rusty could tell how deeply this still bothered his brother.

"But Sean loves Mom and Dad."

"And they love him." His brother grinned. "Wanna know a secret?"

"Sure."

"It was Mom's bread pudding with praline rum sauce that won Amanda over. Mom promised to make it every Sunday just for Amanda. It made her feel special."

"I can't even figure out what *I* can do to make Sean feel special. Much less what Mom and Dad can do."

His brother gave him a sympathetic smile. "The boy does have some issues, but he's definitely got his reasons. You've got a good heart, Rust Bucket. He's lucky to have you."

Sean tried so hard to make Rusty happy. To please him. To be everything he thought Rusty might want or need.

"I'm the lucky one."

The pool manager handed back the application form Sean had carefully completed once desperation had trumped ego. "Sorry, Sean. The lifeguard position is a campus job and since you've graduated..."

Great. He couldn't even get hired for a part-time, minimum-wage position he had years of experience in.

"Thanks for checking for me." He shrugged away the sympathetic look trying to hide his own disappointment that bordered on dread behind a look of stoicism.

Head down, he headed straight for the door before his mask cracked.

His student loan repayments would start next month. He had applied for an extension, but that would only make the interest pile up.

And graduate school, Rusty's suggestion, would only dig them deeper into debt—assuming he could actually get into graduate school with his GPA.

"Sean, wait," the pool manager called. "Did you see the notice on the bulletin board? The Dive Shop is looking for help."

"Thanks. I'll check it out," he said without turning back. Rusty always said Sean didn't need to talk much. Everyone could read what was on his mind by looking into his eyes.

But then, Rusty had special privileges to look as deeply into Sean's eyes as he wanted to.

Or he always had. These last few months, Sean had pulled back, trying to protect Rusty from the direness of his worries.

Reversing direction, Sean headed to the community bulletin board and scanned the flyers stuck there.

"Upper right corner," the pool manager said.

There it was. Black print on white paper when most of the other flyers were Day-Glo orange and neon green.

Counter help needed. See George.

Sean's diving certification card lay heavy in his wallet.

He reached out to grab the job notice but then clenched his fist.

This was so not how everything was supposed to turn out.

He and Rusty had talked and planned for hours about how Sean would get a decent job, then they would get a nice condo and save for a house. They would buy a second car—used until they paid off the student loans—then celebrate with something better.

Modest dreams. Affordable dreams. Not anything extravagant, although Rusty always threw in a vacation to Hawaii where Sean would teach him to surf.

And now...?

He grabbed the flyer, tearing it from the pin.

Fine. It was a job, right? And it paid something, which was more than he was making now.

Moving in with Rusty's folks was bad enough, but knowing he had nothing to contribute to the added expense of two more bodies in their household was beyond damaging to his self-esteem. He'd already lived off them those last two years of high school. He couldn't add to the debt, no matter how hard the Duchenes insisted he was family, as much for being himself as for being Rusty's partner.

But, at twenty-three, most men were moving out of their mother's house instead of back in.

Rusty pushed open the truck door, grabbed his gloves from the side pocket and pulled them on as he walked back toward the trailer full of Formosa azaleas.

Levi Graham, of Graham Contracting and the general contractor for this job, loped toward them. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes and a baseball cap shielded his face and made his hair curl up in the humid temperatures. "Rusty, got a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?" He tried to give Levi a strong look without being too obvious. He and Sean had an ongoing discussion on whether Levi was straight

or gay. All they could figure out was that he was presently unattached and they had a friend...

Under his loose tank top, Levi shrugged his shoulders to stretch them then reseated his cap before rubbing his earlobe as if the empty piercing there bothered him.

Levi was one of the most laid-back men Rusty knew but now his twitchiness made Rusty uneasy.

“The client wants a rock garden with a fountain in the backyard, but she wants some greenery, too. Can you give me some ideas and an estimate?”

One of those clients? Rusty raised his eyebrow, showing he understood Levi’s unspoken message.

Levi gave him a nod.

Rusty grinned at the challenge. “Show me.”

This was the part of the job Rusty loved. His grandfather said he was a natural at assessing the micro-environment and coming up with the right plantings for both effect and long-term viability.

He’d been told the humid subtropics of lower Louisiana were different than any place on earth. He wouldn’t know, having been nowhere else, except for the rare family vacation spent mostly in their SUV as they traveled to the mountains of Arkansas where the terrain was definitely different than his home turf.

Unlike Sean, who had been everywhere, living in exotic places like Hawaii and Germany and Japan. But Sean wouldn’t know a boxwood bush from a bay tree.

Then again, Sean could talk diving depths and underwater caves for hours.

If only the corporate recruiter spoke his language, Sean would have no trouble acing his interview.

For the first time since he'd lain in Rusty's arms that morning, he felt the tension leave his shoulders and neck. Dive shops did that for him.

There was something about the smell of neoprene that settled him.

He found his way to the counter, partly hidden by a display of sunglasses and a rack of fins. Laying the flyer on the counter, he cleared his throat and said, "I'm here to see George."

And smiled when his voice didn't break.

The girl at the counter gave Sean a nonchalant shrug, said okay, and sauntered off to the back room behind the counter.

After several minutes of hovering near the counter, feeling uncomfortable near the unattended cash register, Sean decided to look around instead.

He fingered a mask before wandering over to the board advertising guided dives. Staring blankly at them, he took a deep breath, readying himself to talk to George, should he ever make an appearance.

We'll be okay. We have all we need right here. Rusty's parting words had sustained him all morning.

The bell above the door rang, and Sean looked up to see Bill Frazier, the interviewer from this morning. And there went all feelings of being okay.

The man saw him, did a double take as he recognized Sean, then said, "Hi."

Sean nodded, and managed to say, "Hi," back.

Bill moved toward the board. "Planning a dive?"

"No." It was short and clipped. Not what Sean had intended, but he didn't want to tell the guy he was applying for a counter job. That he was giving up on using his degree. That he was settling for a paycheck of any size from anyone.

His terse answer didn't seem to bother Bill, though. "See anything here you recommend?"

Sean looked through the list. "How experienced are you, Mr. Frazier?"

“Call me Bill. I’m Master Scuba Dive Instructor rated.” He peered over Sean’s shoulder. “I remember from your resume that you’re Rescue Diver rated, right?”

“Yes, sir.” From the corner of his eye, Sean noticed a man coming around the counter toward them. George, no doubt.

How was he going to handle this?

“Our waters are pretty murky around here. Lake Pontchartrain is popular if you want a quick dive that doesn’t require a lot of travel time.”

“Which one would you go on this time of year?”

“I think I’d pick Al Hernandez’s dive at Manila Village. For one thing, I know the crew. They’re safe, but won’t smother an experienced diver. And the ride out to the site will give you a taste of our marshes and wildlife.”

“Great. Thanks.” He patted Sean on the shoulder. Sean was proud of himself for hiding his flinch at the contact. If only he could be the outgoing touchy-feely type like Rusty, or at least comfortable with a stranger’s friendly gesture, he might have a job by now.

Instead, he took two steps back before he could stop himself.

Bill gave him a nod, acknowledging the boundaries Sean had just put up between them, then turned to George.

“I’d like to sign up for a dive.”

“Sure. Step over here and I’ll get you fixed up.” George ambled toward the counter gesturing to both of them.

Not knowing what else to do, Sean trailed them.

George pulled a notebook from under the counter. “Got your card?” he asked Bill.

“Right here.” Bill pulled out his wallet and sorted through his various credit and identification cards. Fumbling for his dive card, he dropped his PFLAG card on the counter.

There goes that excuse for not getting the job. Immediately, Sean mentally kicked himself for his pitiful attitude. Sure, prejudice existed, but he wouldn't be a victim to it.

“And you?” George asked, his pen poised over the notebook entry he was making.

He forced his chin up, ready to confess. “I'm not here to sign up for a dive.” Words failed him, so he gently touched the flyer still lying on the counter. “I was hoping...”

George studied him, then shook his head. “Sorry, kid. I've hired my niece for this job.” He looked up into the shoplifting mirror at the girl who thought she was hiding among the swimwear, texting. “But check back in a week or so, in case it doesn't work out.”

“Okay, thanks.” Under Bill's scrutiny, he wanted nothing more than to disappear into thin air. Instead, he gave both men a nod then controlled his steps along with his breath, using all the willpower he could gather to leave the shop with dignity.

As soon as he slid into the Corolla's worn seat, he realized his phone had been buzzing for a while.

Pulling it from his pocket, he checked, seeing Rusty's smiling face on the text message.

Thinking of you. Love you.

He texted back,

Love you, too.

And in the end, that's what mattered, right?

“Rusty Duchene? It's been a while since I've seen you. How are your mom and dad?”

“They’re just fine, thank you.” With a happy grin, Rusty let Mrs. Filler trap his palm between her two beringed hands. Levi, standing slightly to his left, gave him a relieved nod.

“How is Julie, Mrs. Filler?”

“Doing well. You know she’s engaged, don’t you?”

“No, ma’am, I hadn’t heard.”

“We miss you at church.” She turned to Levi. “Rusty and Julie always sat next to each other in catechism class. They made their First Communions together at St. Anne’s.”

“Our family is going to St. Andrews Episcopal now.”

“Episcopal? The Duchenes have been Catholic ever since I’ve known them.”

“A few hundred years.”

Curiosity overcame good manners when she asked, “Why...?” before letting her invasive question trail off.

Rusty gently pulled his hand free, feeling his grin turn to plastic. “It’s the gay thing.”

It seemed Mrs. Filler was suddenly fascinated by his earring.

To break her stare, Rusty turned and gestured toward her rock garden. “What mood are you wanting to create here?”

A half-hour later, in the privacy of Levi’s truck, he finished drawing out his ideas and making a list of plants to purchase.

“I’ve added fifteen percent to the overall price because I have a feeling we’re all going to earn that much and more in time spent reassuring Mrs. Filler that she made the right decision before this project is done.”

“I’ll leave the reassuring up to you. You had her giggling like a teenager before you were done.”

Rusty blew out his breath, trying but failing to hold back his frustration. “She only got giggly when she found out I was gay. Now she’ll feel politically correct because I’ll be her token gay landscape designer, like her hair stylist. How many times did she tell me she wanted to introduce me to him, even though I told her I already had a boyfriend? I hate being typecast.”

Levi smirked, “It’s better than hiding who you are, huh?”

Something sharp in Levi’s voice made Rusty pause. He’d wondered a few times about Levi, but the man didn’t obviously ping his gaydar. Maybe a slight ghost echo? Maybe Levi was bi?

And now who was typecasting. Rusty rolled his eyes at himself.

Levi shrugged. “As long as it pays the bills, right? To tell you the truth, Rusty, I think you got her soothed more because her family has known yours for centuries, and not because of your sexual orientation. And your skill did the rest. Your ideas are brilliant.”

“I guess.” Rusty thought of Sean, trying so hard to get a job on his own merits. But Levi was right. The job market was mostly about *who* you knew, with a bit of *what* you knew thrown in.

“Talking of paying the bills—my boyfriend just graduated in mechanical engineering and is looking for a job. Is Graham Contracting hiring?”

“Mechanical, huh? If he were a civil engineer, I might be able to help.”

“The job doesn’t have to be in his field. He’s good with math and paperwork.” Rusty signed the design and handed it off to Levi. “I wish he would just chill and wait for the perfect job but he’s driving himself crazy about being unemployed.”

Levi noted the hefty profit margin, knowing Mrs. Filler would agree to the price solely because of the Duchene influence. “Let me see what I can come up with.”

Precariously balancing a box of textbooks on his hip, Sean pulled the door to their apartment shut for the last time, wishing Rusty was here. Rusty always

knew what Sean needed. If he were here right now, he would wrap his arm around Sean's neck, pull him close, and growl into his ear that it would be okay.

Instead, Rusty was working on-site at a cabin on Lake Pontchartrain, working with Levi to put in spring plantings for a new vacation home.

Sean still fumed and felt ashamed that Rusty had used family influence to practically coerce Graham Contracting into offering him a job they had clearly made for him. But he couldn't afford to let ego get in the way of a paycheck.

He'd asked for time to think about their offer, but he already knew he would be calling them on Friday to accept the job.

As he pushed on the door to make sure it had locked, his phone vibrated his pocket and he couldn't help but smile.

Before he even dropped the box to fish out his phone, he knew it had to be Rusty. Rusty always knew when Sean needed him. He'd use the excuse to call to remind Sean about meeting him for lunch, but they'd both know he was calling because Sean needed to hear his voice.

But the display showed an area code and phone number Sean didn't recognize.

Great. He'd dropped that heavy-assed box for a wrong number.

"Hello?"

"Sean Delahunt?"

"Yes."

"Bill Frazier, from Oceanic Mariner, Incorporated. You interviewed with me a little over a week ago."

"Yes?"

"We are prepared to make you an offer for an entry level mechanical engineering position."

"Yes?" Sean cringed at his inane reply, pacing because he couldn't stand still.

This was it. He'd done it. He would not only be pulling his own weight, but actually be able provide for all the things he and Rusty had dreamed about.

"I'll give you the details then follow-up with an email, okay? The position pays industry standard and comes with a moving package and a signing bonus to help you relocate."

One word stood out above the rest. "Relocate?"

"Yes." Mr. Frazier paused, then said, "The job is in our corporate office in Boston, Massachusetts."

"Oh."

"Will that be a problem?"

He wanted to blurt out "no", but Rusty—family meant everything to him. And Rusty had his own career, also tied to family. This was his home.

Sean tried to think of a diplomatic reply, but finally had to go with blunt honesty when nothing else came to mind. "Uh, I don't know."

He heard a strained clearing of throat on the line. "We have a new hire orientation starting in two weeks. We'll need to know by this Wednesday, at the latest, to start processing your paperwork and get you moved up here in time. Can you get us an answer by then?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have an answer by then."

"You are a strong candidate for this position. We really hope the answer will be yes."

"Thank you, sir." Flipping the phone off, Sean squeezed his eyes shut, trying to breathe through the chaos zinging every nerve ending.

Pure peace. That's what Rusty felt as he sat on the grassy bank of Lake Pontchartrain. A breeze kept the humidity at bay while waves set a soothing rhythm for his soul.

New Orleans. Everyone who had every traveled said there was no other place like it on earth. All Rusty knew was that New Orleans was home.

No matter what life handed him, he knew he could handle it as long as he had his roots firmly planted here.

He was halfway through his sandwich when he felt that certain awareness that told him Sean was nearby.

“Hey, you.” He searched Sean’s face, seeing pain there. Leaving the apartment was bad for both of them, but especially for Sean. The apartment had been the first place where he’d felt at home, like he had a right to belong there, since he’d been five or six.

“Hey you, back.” Sean’s forced smile stabbed through Rusty’s heart.

Rusty would do anything to keep the world from hurting his lover. If only he had that power.

As Sean came into range, Rusty reached out and pulled him tight into his chest with an arm around his neck. “I started eating without you. I was starving.”

“It’s okay. I’m not hungry.”

Getting Sean to eat was one of Rusty’s hardest trials. With relief, he realized he would soon have his mother to help him out. Nobody, not even Sean, could resist her cooking especially with her insistence to “have another bite or two” to please her.

The way Sean burrowed into Rusty meant he wanted to be held tight and Rusty obliged.

“Rusty?” Sean’s muffled voice sounded unsure. “I gotta tell you something. We’ve got a problem.”

Rusty smiled into Sean’s hair. His partner always seemed to think problems were bigger than they were. “Okay.”

The gulp of air Sean sucked in sounded watery before he cleared his throat. “I got a job offer.”

“What?” Not what Rusty had expected to hear. He wanted to push Sean back to look into his face, to read his eyes, but Sean clung too tightly to peel away. Instead, he squeezed the shaking shoulders tighter. “Fantastic, baby!”

“It’s in Boston.”

It took two full breaths as Rusty’s brain tried to wrap around Sean’s words until he got the big picture.

Softly, feeling Sean’s pain, he whispered to the most important person in his life, “I’m so sorry, baby. But there’ll be other jobs. The right one will come along. Until then you’ve got Graham Contrac—”

Sean stiffened, trying to break the bonds Rusty hadn’t even realized he’d tightened so much. “I think I want to take it.”

Sean woke from his uneasy sleep with Rusty snoring on the other side of the bed in the room that had become so familiar to him those last two years in high school. How could two men put so much distance between them on a queen-sized bed?

But then, the arguments that had preceded this worried him even more.

“What about all the debts I’ve accumulated, Rusty? The years I’ve put in for us, for our future.”

“Our future? Don’t you mean your future? I never asked you to go to college or to become an engineer. And don’t worry about the debts. Dad’s already said—”

“I don’t want your father paying my debts. They’ve already given me room and board since I was sixteen. And I know they slip you money all the time. Don’t you get it, Rusty? This is about us becoming our own men. Standing on our own feet. Being independent. I *need* to do this.”

Rusty had looked at him like Sean was out of his mind.

Sean took a shaky breath, trying to find the words to reason with Rusty. “Don’t you understand? I’ve finally got my chance. Things have always been

easy for you. You've never felt indebted like everything you own is from charity. You've never had to fight for every scrap of self-respect you could scrape together."

"What are you talking about? Charity? My family loves you just like they love me." The way Rusty looked past Sean's eyes instead of into them proved he wasn't listening. "Damn it, Sean, don't you realize what you're asking me? You want me to give up my career to move to a place I don't know anything about. I don't even know what grows in Boston's environment. And what about my family? I know it's no big deal to you, since you don't even talk to your folks, but it's a big deal to me. Do you know what you're asking of me?"

"Family? I thought I was your family. I thought I was enough."

Rusty had clenched his fists, bitten his lip, and turned away.

Moving to Boston would mean Rusty would be giving up his family—a safe harbor for both of them—as well as his own career where he was working hard to build a respected reputation.

Passing on this job would mean Sean would be giving up his chance for his own self-respect, his opportunity to be his own man, the ultimate climax of all they'd worked for and sacrificed for as he went through school earning his degree.

They'd hurled barbed insults. Both of them were selfish. Neither of them listened to the other. And then Sean had stopped talking, not able to bear another agonizing exchange that ended up with him fighting the urge to cry and Rusty fighting the urge to hit the wall.

Maybe he should have called Mr. Frazier back immediately and turned down the job. Or just packed up his stuff and left.

Or—

He didn't know what he should have done to avoid all the hurtful things they'd said and left unsaid between them. After all these long, torturous days of heated words and cold silences, he still didn't know what to do, and he had to give his answer to Oceanic today.

In his sleep, Rusty rolled over, reaching for Sean. When his flailing hand found Sean already sitting up, Rusty blinked and Sean watched the awareness of pain wipe the dreamy sleep from those beloved brown eyes.

“Hey.” Rusty’s voice was growly from sleep, his hand frozen in mid-reach.

“Hey, back.” Sean gave him a tight smile, but couldn’t hold it in place as Rusty let his hand drop.

“I’ve got something for you.” Rusty reached over to his nightstand, pulled open the drawer and came up with a small box.

He gripped it tightly in his fist while he scooted closer to Sean in the bed.

Slowly, carefully, he trailed a finger down Sean’s cheek then across his lips.

Sean couldn’t stop himself—didn’t want to stop himself—as he kissed at those fingers.

He wanted to lean into Rusty, be wrapped in his arms, lose himself in Rusty’s heat and hear everything was going to be okay.

Instead, he held himself firm.

If he lost himself this time, he might never find himself again.

Rusty swallowed hard enough Sean saw his throat convulse, then said, “You know, extended family is still family, even if they’re thousands of miles away.”

What was Rusty saying? The tone of his voice—soothing, placating, loving—made more sense than his words.

Rusty fidgeted with the box in his hand. “And with your new job, you can carry all the bills for a while until I get work, right?”

Sean blinked, trying to see past that earnestly intense gaze Rusty was giving him to the message underneath. Could he let himself hope?

“And Sean,” Rusty shoved the box at him, “the best thing about Boston is we can be married there.”

Sean opened the box to see two matching copper rings inside. Each band had a continuing pattern of fleur-de-lis around it.

“Will you?”

Sean gulped in enough air to answer. “Yes.”

Then he was gasping for breath again as Rusty lunged toward him, tackling him and pinning him to the bed.

Raised over him, his weight pressing Sean into the mattress, Rusty said, “I love you. I’ll love you forever.”

And Sean felt the truth of that in every cell in his body.

“I know.” He pulled Rusty down close. “I’ll love you forever, too.”

THE END

Author Bio

Published in a different genre under another pen name, Chris Cox is new to writing M/M romance. Having the freedom to write about issues that matter, as well as to write about loving relationships, gives Chris's muse great pleasure. Rusty and Sean's short story is part of the Bayou Boys series set around New Orleans, in Chris's home state of Louisiana. New Bayou Boys short stories, novellas and novels from Chris Cox will be available at most places where you buy your books.

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