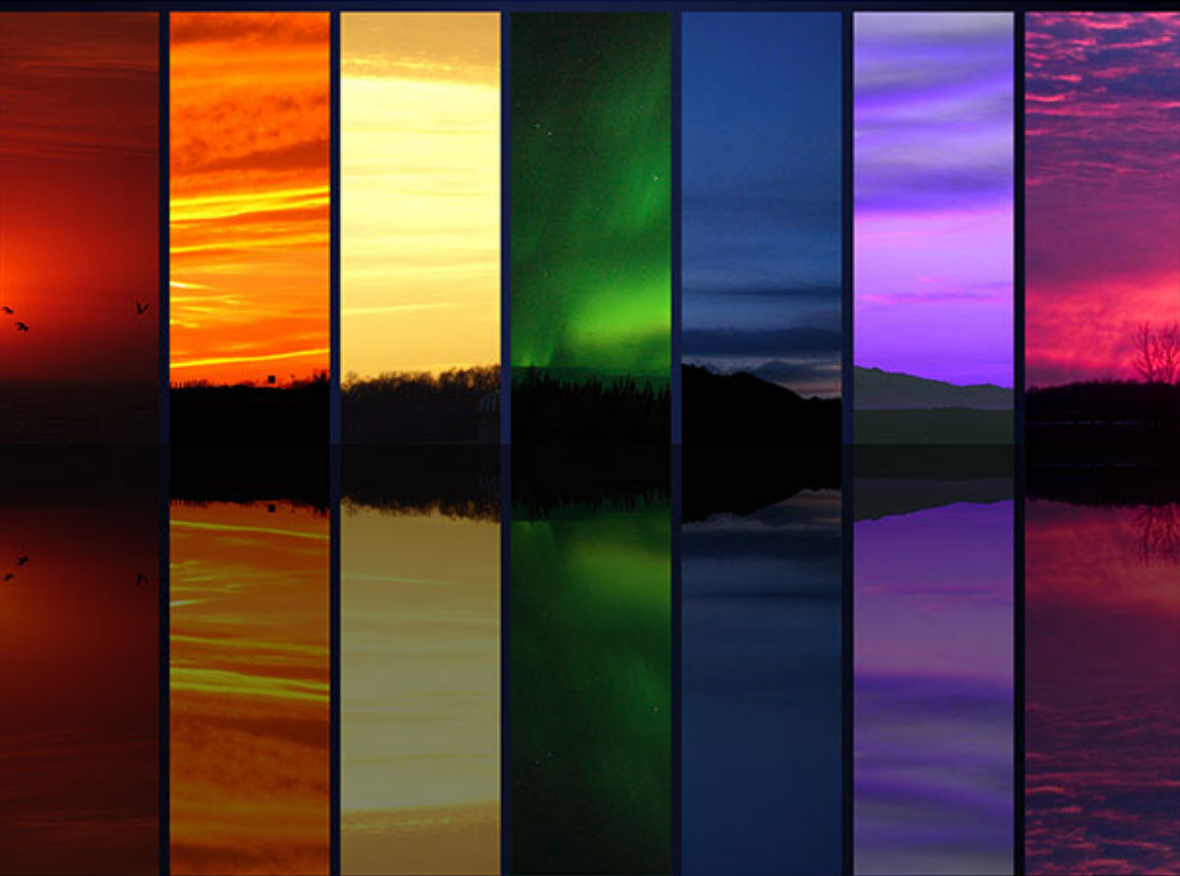


# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## ONE STEP AT A TIME

S.N. Kat

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## ONE STEP AT A TIME

By S.N. Kat

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors 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's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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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# ONE STEP AT A TIME

By S.N. Kat

## Photo Description

A black and white picture shows five naked men running toward the ocean's waves. The men seem to be of good physique, but it is unclear as some of the bodies are blocked. The shadows on the sand indicate it is either early morning or almost evening.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*There are usually six of them engaging in this early morning ritual run to the water. Where is the sixth one?*

*This story can go either happy or sad, but I prefer happy. Please NO polyamorous, ménage, group sex or BDSM. Everything else is up to the author.*

*Sincerely,*

*Enjee*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, sweet/no sex, established couple, angst, sap, fraternity, hurt/comfort, self-esteem

**Content Warnings:** assault

**Word Count:** 14,810

*Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Dani for playing table tennis with me and my ideas. It was a fun game; we shall do it again. Thanks to my job for allowing me to miss my first deadline ever... It was a new experience. A special thanks to Adara for teaching me not to be passive, and much more. Thank you M/M Romance group and everyone involved for putting on this event. And to those reading, thanks for taking the time to read this story, and I hope you enjoy.

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

By S.N. Kat

The sun had yet to rise over the ocean. The early morning breeze swept down the sand. A lone figure stood watching the waves crash back and forth. As a large gust swept through his sandy blond hair, he took a deep breath, breathing in the peacefulness, the relaxation that the sound, the smell, the sight brought him—or at least once brought him. Opening his hazel eyes, he saw a glimmer of light start creep up over the horizon. *It's a new day.*

As he took in another deep breath, a voice interrupted his thoughts. “Why are you here?”

Colton turned around to see Damion walking across the sand. “I could ask you the same thing,” he replied.

“Don’t avoid the question. You shouldn’t be here at all.”

“I’m fine,” Colton snapped. He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. “Sorry. I’m just a little tense.”

Damion put a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You should be resting. Go back to the house. Or to the hospital—”

“I’m fine,” Colton repeated. “I just needed some air.”

Damion let out a soft sigh. “We are only worried about you. You need to take care of yourself. You shouldn’t run today.”

Colton let his gaze go back over the dark water. He inhaled deeply, trying to draw in everything about the beach that had once calmed him.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be running today,” Colton said after a few minutes of silence. “I don’t have the energy to do it.”

“That’s ’cause you haven’t been sleeping.”

Colton wanted to give a sarcastic response back, but Damion was right. He hadn’t slept for two straight days. And it seemed like his mind wasn’t going to let him find rest anytime soon.

With a heavy sigh, Colton took a few steps forward, until he was inches away from the rhythmic water.

“Let’s go back to the house, C. We’ll make you some food.”

Colton allowed a small smile to form. “No thanks. You guys don’t need to give me food poisoning to get me to go to the hospital.”

“That’s not—”

“I know, man,” Colton interjected with a small chuckle. He let himself feel the emotion of joy for a minute before he turned to his friend with a serious look. “I will go back to the house and rest. Soon. Just give me a few minutes to enjoy the beach. I need to feel the morning breeze.”

Colton looked away from his friend’s sad eyes. He didn’t want to see that look anymore.

“Okay. But I’m staying with you.”

*I know you will.* Colton sighed. “You need to lead the run today. And make sure everybody in the group is emotionally okay.”

“Brett said he’ll handle that. I need to make sure you’re all right.”

The stare from Damion gazed right into Colton. *Stop being such a good friend.* The emotions he had held back from surfacing started to appear. He didn’t want to break down. Not now. Not ever.

“I’m fine,” Colton said mechanically. He turned back to the water. “I have a promise to keep with myself. And him.”

\*\*\*\*

### *Five Weeks Ago*

It started off like every Saturday morning in the Alpha Kappa fraternity house: wake up late, take some aspirin, go back to bed. The Phi Delta party last night had been more than over the top. It seemed the entire campus had attended, and the beer kegs had an endless supply of nourishment. And like usual, most of their guys had stumbled into the house as the sun was rising.

Colton stirred from his slumber as the sun’s rays sneaked through the blinds. He sat up in his bed to look for his phone when an arm slid down his waist. He turned to see the figure still asleep in his bed. Colton smiled down at the body and ruffled his hand through the dark locks that lay on the other pillow. The sleeping figure turned his head into the moving hand and murmured something inaudible.

Colton swiped his finger across the screen of his phone to read it was seven in the morning, too early for most of the house to be awake. He carefully moved out of the bed and dressed without waking the sleeping man.



Colton made his way quietly down the stairs and into the kitchen. A tall, dark figure stood by the refrigerator, drinking a glass of orange juice. "Morning, Colton."

"Morning, Damion. Are you the only one?" Colton asked as he sat down to put on his shoes.

Damion placed the empty glass down on the counter with a small smile. "Why do you ask that every time? You know nobody else is coming."

"You never know. One day, one of the guys might have the urge to—"

"Wake up three hours after he fell asleep to go run off the hangover from last night?" Damion sarcastically interrupted.

Colton gave him a defeated look. "Yeah, that."

Damion gave him a pat on the back. "Don't worry, man. I'll always be your running partner." The two men walked out the back door toward the trail which led to a sandy shore. "Even when your boyfriend is too exhausted to get up with you."

Colton's step faltered at that remark. His cheeks glowed pink. He shot Damion a sharp look, but his friend looked away innocently.

"At least he has a good reason to not get up and exercise. I wouldn't want him to intrude on our little weekend ritual," Damion added with a smirk he couldn't hold back.

The blush was in full flame now. "Okay! Stop with the dirty comments."

Damion let out a laugh as they reached the beach entrance closest to their fraternity house. "I'm just teasing you. You need to lighten up. You guys have been dating for a while now."

"I know. I just can't handle the teasing." Colton glanced around the beach. "And sometimes you're too loud."

"Nobody is around us, and none of the guys care," Damion replied as he stretched his arms. "Well, at least they don't say they have a problem. If they do, they are at least considerate enough to keep it to themselves."

Damion was right. Most of their fraternity members did not care two of their brothers were gay. And dating each other. And one of them was their president. Sometimes it felt too surreal to have this much acceptance outside his family, even if the word of their relationship hadn't really been passed around the entire campus and community. They had a group of friends—*brothers*—to

support them. It was a nice feeling compared to the harsh reality of the outside world.

“How many miles do you want to do today?” Damion’s question brought him out of his thoughts.

Taking a deep breath of the salty air, Colton took off down the beach. “Until you can pass me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Two hours later, Colton and Damion returned to the fraternity house laughing. The sweat was pouring down Damion’s torso, and it made Colton’s shirt cling like a second skin.

“It’s a shame we can’t do this every morning,” Damion commented.

Colton looked puzzled. “Why not? We just have to wake up a couple of hours earlier.”

Damion let out a chuckle. “Fat chance you are getting me up earlier before I have to go to class.”

Colton opened the door to their fraternity house while shaking his head. “You don’t make any sense. You are up early now.”

“Give me a better reason to get up early on a weekday besides hanging out with your ass, and I will,” Damion replied as he walked into the kitchen.

The two were surprised to find some of the guys were actually up, eating and drinking their headaches away. The guys stared, annoyed by the two energized boys.

“You guys are too energetic,” one of their fraternity brothers, Alex, mumbled.

“You guys need to party a little less.” Damion spoke after calming down his laughter.

The others groaned. “I don’t get it. You drank just as much as us. How are you all bright and cheery?” Alex questioned Damion.

Damion flexed his biceps. “Because I have the body of a god.”

More groans erupted. “Oh, yes. We need to be reminded of your scholarship, football body. And what about you, Colton? You disappeared early last night.”

Colton felt a blush on his face that wasn't from the eight-mile jog and short swim he had just finished. "I, uh... wasn't feeling too well. So I turned in early."

"And before you ask where I went to, I made sure Colton got back to bed. Safe and sound."

A man with only basketball shorts and a smirk on stood in the doorway of the kitchen. Colton knew his face burned a brighter shade of red.

"Morning, Pres. You missed out on some of the Triple Beta girls losing their shit last night," Alex said. "And their clothes."

The dark-haired man walked across the kitchen to the blushing man. "Not a big concern of mine right now. Morning, Colt," the man said as his hand cupped the red-hot face.

"Hey, Eli. How—" Before another word could get out, Elijah had claimed Colton's lips with a soft and gentle kiss. Elijah's tongue slowly moved into Colton's open mouth and grazed the roof of it. As Colton was about to let out a moan, Elijah pulled off of him.

"I needed my 'good morning' kiss," Elijah said, wearing a sly smile, likely delighted that his boyfriend's face grew redder.

"It's enough some of us didn't get any last night. Don't be all *cutesy* in front of us," Alex commented. "Go get a room."

A soft chuckle left Elijah. "That's an odd comment considering we already have a room."

Could Colton's face get any hotter? The brothers of the house bunked two to a bedroom with each bedroom containing two twin beds. Colton and Elijah had been sharing a room for the past year, where their beds were pushed together.

"Have you eaten?" Elijah asked Colton.

"Not yet. I was going to take a shower and then grab some food. Wait for me?" Colton was walking out of the kitchen.

"Always. I'll be down here doing damage control on last night's party," Elijah shouted.

The moans and groans started up again. "Come on, Pres. We're in pain here. Be nice."

Like every Saturday night, Colton and Elijah had their date night. The small city their college was located in didn't offer much in variety of food or entertainment. But the people were friendly, and the community supported the university and its programs.

"This is odd," Elijah muttered as he was pulling his truck into the parking lot of their fraternity house.

Colton noticed it too. The only vehicles in the lot were those of their brothers. On a Saturday night, there was either a party at their house or the guys went out.

Colton and Elijah walked through the front door and saw the men of Alpha Kappa sitting around with a few male friends. There wasn't a girl in sight. And they were just sitting around talking. No drinking games. No music. The three kegs in the middle of the room and bottles of liquor in various places indicated the men were actually drinking.

Colton stood unmoving at the door. He wasn't sure how to proceed with what he saw. The guys of Alpha Kappa never sat around and... talked.

"I saw you leaving with Rachel from Triple Beta last night. You get some?"

Colton let out a soft sigh. That sounded more like the fraternity brothers he knew and loved. Elijah seemed to hear the conversation, too, and moved toward the only open sofa. Colton followed him, greeting his friends along the way.

"No man! We were starting to fool around in her dorm, but when I took off my shirt, she flipped out," one of their brothers, Peter, answered. "She said I am too hairy! And that it looks disgusting. Can you believe that?"

Colton sat down beside Elijah with a Solo cup full of beer.

"She wanted me to shave my chest and back hair. When I told her no, she kicked me out."

The other man looked at Peter with slight curiosity. "Why didn't you guys just turn off the lights?"

Peter groaned. "I mentioned that. But she said she would 'still be able to feel the nastiness.'" Peter took a sip of his beer. After he swallowed his drink, he asked quietly, "It's not that big of a deal, right?"

Colton flinched at the topic of conversation. Taking a sip of the beer, he glanced around the room, forcing himself to find another conversation. But it was too late. Colton could only hear the words from Peter. The more he listened

to Peter chat about his problems of last night, the harder it was to breathe. When he was at the point of hyperventilating, a familiar hand was there, rubbing small circles on his lower back. The hand was soothing and warm, and helped calm him down. He glanced over at Elijah, who was looking straight ahead, probably trying not to draw attention to his breathing-labored boyfriend. Colton was grateful for the touch and thought.

Colton turned his attention to his other brothers. It quickly dawned on him most of the guys were having similar talks.

“Did you hear Travis slept with Brittany after the party? I’ve been talking with her for nearly a month, and a douche of Phi Delta only spoke two sentences to her. Must be because of the Adonis-like body he has.”

“Two girls from Sigma Lambda were turned down because they weren’t skinny enough. By guys who were big enough to eat them!”

Not all of the conversations Colton heard were so compassionate. A fair amount of his brothers were discussing their latest conquest, boasting about their skills in the bedroom.

“I didn’t make it back to the house till late. The girl I was with couldn’t get enough of me... Who was it? Fuck if I remember her name. But she was hot.”

It seemed to Colton his fraternity brothers were split on their topics. There were some brothers who were wallowing in self-pity. Some were bragging to the extent they should be hit. And some were talking about other people’s pains. It was a very odd night. As the night wore on, the tension in the room seemed to thicken. It might have been the alcohol consumption, or maybe too much testosterone in the room. But you could feel a fight brewing amongst the brothers.

Elijah stood and slammed his Solo cup down when he saw Peter starting to march across the room. “Stop talking! All of you!” The room became still almost immediately. All eyes turned to their president. “Do you guys hear yourselves? It makes me sick.”

Elijah scanned the room and all, probably to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “You guys need to get your acts together. There are some of you”—he pointed to one side of the room—“who don’t have any respect for anybody. And there are you guys”—pointing to another side—“who don’t have any respect for yourselves. And finally, the rest of you are being silent about the problems. Agreeing to whatever is being said. It’s like a room full of girls.”

There was a quiet snicker in the back of the room. The brother standing next to that man punched him in the arm. Elijah stared hard at the man who had giggled until he looked away guiltily.

“This is an ongoing problem with individuals. Both men and women. This idea that the people we hang out with, date, have sex with is based on what the person looks like—that the first impression of the physical self is the only impression. And this goes for how other people view themselves. An individual needs to physically accept oneself; you only have one body.”

Elijah took a breath as his eyes scanned the room. “Why can’t we be accepted for what’s inside? I know that sounds corny as hell, but isn’t it true? As we get older, our outer appearances will change, but our personalities and beliefs will stay the same.”

The president started to walk the room as he gave his speech. “College doesn’t last forever, guys. I know this is supposed to be the time of our lives, and believe me, we should make great memories. But you develop as a person in these four, five, however many years it takes to get your degree. That’s the kind of person you are for the rest of your life.”

Colton still had his cup touching his lips. He couldn’t move due to the words Elijah preached. It wasn’t the most eloquent or articulate of speeches Elijah had given, but it hit upon a touchy subject amid the group, particularly because they were college students.

Elijah gave one more look at his brothers, frozen around him, before he finished his speech. “You guys think about it, or whatever. I’m going to bed.”

The fraternity watched as their president stomped out of the common area and up the stairs. The men waited for the slam of a door, but it never came. Most of the eyes turned to Colton as he remained sitting with the cup to his lips.

*Great.* Colton closed his eyes and downed the rest of his drink. He slowly stood up and threw the cup into the nearby trash can. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll go talk to him. But know I agree with everything he said.”

Colton made his way up the stairs with more grace than the man before him. He leaned against the doorframe of their bedroom to see his boyfriend lying face down on the bed. “That was some speech you gave down there,” Colton said quietly as he shut the door.

“It was a crappy speech and you know it.” The muffled sound of Elijah’s voice reached Colton’s ears. “But, damn, did it need to be said.”

Colton sat down on the bed beside Elijah and rubbed his hand over the broad back. "It was an inspiring speech. I think it has them thinking differently down there. And you know us guys; it takes something big to get a group of us actually thinking."

A chuckle vibrated through the sheets. Elijah turned on his side and looked up at him. He laced their fingers together and brought their hands to his lips. After the gentle kiss, he tugged Colton to lie beside him. Colton went willingly.

The kiss this time was placed on Colton's lips. They kissed slowly, gently, exploring each other's mouths. Elijah rolled on top of Colton, his hands rubbed up and down Colton's body. Colton moaned into the kiss and arched into the touch. When Eli tried to lift Colt's shirt up, Colt grabbed Elijah's hands and broke the kiss. Breathing heavily, he stared up into his boyfriend's eyes and saw the mixture of emotions. Passion. Lust. But then, hurt and regret.

Elijah looked away from Colton. "Sorry," Elijah softly muttered. When Colton caught his breath, he lifted his hand to cup his boyfriend's cheek.

"No, I'm sorry." Elijah still didn't turn his way. "Let me up to turn off the lights. I'll be right back." Colton tried to relax as he walked across the room. The conversations he overheard earlier had him feeling more tense than usual.

He sat back down on the bed, this time the covers turned down for him. Elijah, lying under the bedspread already, pulled the sheets over them and wrapped his arms around him. Colton felt Elijah rub his head against his hair.

Elijah's breath evened out, and his hands tightened around Colton. Moments passed and nothing happened. When Elijah didn't progress any further, Colton asked, confused, "You don't want to do anything, Eli?"

Elijah left out a soft sigh. "Sorry, I shouldn't have pushed you. I'm just a little upset from the earlier uproar. Mind if we just snuggle tonight?"

Colton chastised himself for making Elijah feel that way. He needed to sort out his internal battle. One day. Hopefully soon. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. You know I'll never make you do something you don't want to."

Colton smiled into Elijah's chest. "I love you."

Colton felt Elijah's lips turn upward on his head. "I love you too. And remember, one step at a time. I'll wait for as long as it takes."

It hadn't been twenty-four hours since Elijah had made his zealous address. And surprisingly, the men of Alpha Kappa were acting almost normal. Usually when their president was upset, the men were either too nice or overly cautious around the man. But on Sunday night, the weekly Alpha Kappa meeting progressed smoothly in the fraternity house.

For forty-five minutes, different brothers talked about what events had happened the past week and what the next few weeks looked like for Greek and campus life. After starting late, of course, it was actually over an hour into the meeting.

Colton tried to hide a yawn. As he looked around the room to his semi-attentive brothers, he noticed he was the only one pretending to be enthused. This was the duller part of their weekly meeting. Usually everyone was trying to stay awake.

To keep himself awake, he began to focus on that puzzle. His thoughts didn't last long when their vice president, Brett, stood to give the closing remarks.

As he walked into the middle of the room, complete silence took over the room. Instead of everyone's eyes focusing on Brett, they were turned to their president, still seated.

"Pres. Your reprimand did a good number on us last night." Brett held up his hand when Elijah looked as if he was going to stand. "Hang on. Let me say this. We've been talking nearly non-stop about what you said. And we agree. We do need to do something about this problem. We need to change and show ourselves—and others—that someone's worth should be assessed based on who a person is, not what he or she looks like."

There were a few whispers in the room, probably from the men who didn't live in the house and had missed out on all the talking that apparently had happened today.

Brett continued with his prepared speech. "People do need to be more accepting of both themselves and others. And like you said, college is the time where we develop these ideals."

Colton glanced over to Elijah and saw his normal stoic face. But Colton knew better. There was a glimmer in Elijah's eyes that spoke of pride for his brothers.



### *Present Time*

Colton took a few steps back from the water's edge. Standing on the beach did nothing to help him relax as it used to. He wanted to feel okay, to feel normal. And if he couldn't get that sensation on the ocean front, where could he go? His other, better choice was not an option right now.

He flinched at the thought and then scolded himself for letting negative thoughts return. Colton stared down the still-deserted sandy shore. He felt Damion's presence behind him, keeping a watchful eye on his friend.

Colton needed to do something to relax. "Want to go on a run?"

After a short silence, Damion responded firmly, "I know it is Saturday morning, but I don't think we should. You need to get to the house and rest."

"No. I need our ritual. I need something normal right now." Colton stared at his friend, pleading with him.

Colton could see Damion's resolve crumbling. Damion looked up and down the barely-lit beach as if he was trying to find a way to deny Colton his running pleasure. "Fine, but not too far. We don't need you passing out before you get to a bed."

Colton gave a soft nod and fake smile, but he had different ideas than Damion. *If my mind will let me, I'll pass out on this very beach.*

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### *Three Weeks and Five Days Ago*

The plan seemed too simple to Colton. How was this going to change how people felt about themselves or others?

Over a week ago, the men of Alpha Kappa decided to start up the *Run for Self*. The idea was inspired by the Nearly-Naked Mile that a few campuses did every year. The Nearly-Naked Mile was a jogging event where you shed your clothes before running and donated them to the homeless.

If people of all shapes and sizes could be comfortable running after shedding and then donating the clothes off their backs, why couldn't a bunch of students feel comfortable about running for themselves? It was silly, right?

Six men stood on the soft sand in various arrays of clothing. The guys, whether they had athletic bodies or not, were surprisingly shy about this task. The brothers decided to add that the run could also be a positive method for those who wanted to shed off the beer gut or get into better cardiac shape.

All the brothers understood that no one was obligated to participate in this cause. It was an individual choice. Not one man would be seen any differently if he decided to not participate.

Over the last week, the men of Alpha Kappa held meetings to discuss the philanthropy they wanted to start. They wanted to do a four-week-long running event where people ran in the clothing most comfortable for them. The running around campus and the community was mainly to promote the cause. The big part of their idea was to bring in counselors and public speakers to their campus. They already had five people who were committed to come throughout the month, and the college's counseling department was on board. All they needed was the approval of a few deans. Which, on Friday, they easily obtained by using Elijah's and Brett's persuasive and organizational skills.

On Saturday, Elijah and Brett had an informal meeting with the presidents and vice presidents of all fraternities and sororities on campus. The men explained their philanthropy idea to their fellow students but were met with mixed support. Most of the students seemed excited and promised to talk to their chapters at their next meeting. But some seemed very indifferent to the idea.

Brett believed it was a successful meeting. Even if some people didn't want to participate, word of their event would still get passed around.

The men of Alpha Kappa decided to have three groups run every day for a span of twenty-eight days. The frat brothers would run on the beach in the morning, and on campus around noon and in the evening.

For the first run, the group consisted of Colton, Elijah, Damion, Brett, Alex, and Peter. Elijah thought it was a victory this many of his brothers had woken up early to go running. Colton took it as a small insult since they didn't want to run with Damion and himself on Saturday morning. Damion laughed at him and commented, "At least we get to run every morning like you wanted."

Colton let his gaze travel across the beach. There were not many people visible along the sandy shore this early in the morning, but that didn't hinder the men's attitudes. They needed to feel comfortable where they were running, and if it had to be a semi-deserted beach, then that's where they would run.

Colton took a deep breath, as he always did before a run, to bring in the taste of salt. He let his arms stretch in the breeze to feel the cool air rush over him.

"You guys ready to start day one?"

His boyfriend's voice pulled him away from the pleasure of the beach. Elijah was already stripped down to basketball shorts. Damion also showed off his physique and had body paint on his chest and back reading "Run for Self." Brett also had only shorts on, while the other three men wore T-shirts.

Colton knew he should at least remove his shirt. He had a pretty good body. Running and lifting weights with Damion kept his body toned. But he could never bring himself to work out or run without a shirt on. He was more comfortable being covered.

Colton glanced over at his friends getting ready for their first run of many. He shyly glanced over at Elijah. Today was going to have many firsts. He had never run with his boyfriend before. Just seeing Elijah's body shine in the early morning sun had him holding his breath.

*Focus!* Colton scolded himself for having such lewd thoughts in public. Maybe that was why he never pushed Elijah to go running with him.

"You sure you want to keep the shirt on this time? You have to have a body to show off." Damion thankfully interrupted his thoughts.

"My body just can't compete with your athletic figure," Colton said with humor. "Don't worry, though. By the end of the month, I'll be running bare-chested with you."

Colton glanced over at his boyfriend to see him smiling back. He had already made that promise to himself. And Elijah.

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#### *Four Weeks and One Day Ago*

"You know you are going to want to change by the end of the week. Just go with the afternoon group. It fits your classes better."

Elijah's eyebrow rose. "Nah. I need to learn to get up earlier anyways. And besides, I have always wanted to go running with you on Saturday mornings. I could never just roll out of bed. This cause is to help all of us in some way."

Colton and Elijah were nestled up on their bed working on homework when the topic of the philanthropy event started again. They were going to start running on Monday. Just three days away.

Colton nervously shifted to look at Elijah. "Eli? Does this run have anything to do with me?"

Elijah hesitated a bit. "No. And yes. It wasn't started because of you, you know that. But I think it's a good opportunity to help you accept yourself."

Colton pushed away from Elijah and got out of the bed. "We've had this conversation. I'm fine with myself. I like myself." Colton stared down at his boyfriend with shame. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

Elijah placed his textbook down and crawled across the bed to Colton. When he reached the edge, he grabbed Colton's hands and brought them to his face. "I love you. And I know you love me. But there is a part of you that you don't want anybody to see. And it seems like me especially."

Colton could feel Elijah's eyes gaze into his, like he was looking inside him and seeing all of his painful experiences. So Colton did the thing he knew best when he was backed into a corner: deny.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Colton muttered.

Elijah gave an incredulous look. "Really? You're going to play the denial game?"

*Damn, he knows me too well.* "Well, it's not that big of a deal now. I've lived with it so far."

Elijah's eyes softened with a hint of sadness. "Let's make love right now."

Colton's eyes got wide. "Now? It's four in the afternoon. And there are still some of the guys here."

"The guys being here never stopped us before. We can be quiet." Elijah wiggled his eyebrows and added some pleasure in his voice. "I'm good at making you breathless in bed."

Colton tried to extract his hands from Elijah's vise-like grip, but Elijah wasn't letting him escape this time. "Let-let me go."

"Never. You have to know by now that I'll never turn you away, that I'll always want you." Elijah's eyes softened and his thumbs started running soothing circles over Colton's hands. "I want you in every way you can give me, body, mind, and soul. And also I want to give you all of me." Elijah let a smirk escape. "Not that I haven't already."

Colton's body relaxed a little, to the point where Elijah pulled him over his lap, straddling the man. Elijah's hands roamed Colton's back.

Before his emotions got the best of him, Colton rested his forehead on Elijah's and whispered. "You already have all of me. I told you that months ago, on our one-year dating anniversary. That this wasn't a college fling. That this was forever for me."

Elijah tipped his head back to look into his boyfriend's eyes again. After a moment, he placed a gentle kiss onto each eye. Colton saw the moisture on the departing red lips. He was crying.

"I know. And I feel the same. But I want you to be comfortable in your own body so you can show me all of it, not hide the scars of your past."

Colton placed a soft kiss on Elijah's wet lips. "I will. Just keep giving me more time. I promise, one day, I will be ready."

A hand stroked through Colton's hair. "Take your time. I'll wait forever if I have to."

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### *Present Time*

"Stop! Come on, man, stop!"

Colton's heart beat faster and faster with every stride he took, his breathing more ragged than ever in his life. He was losing control of his body's feelings and functions, but, damn, did it feel good.

He passed another pier when he finally noticed a little more light had begun to shine on the shore. Colton slowed to a leisurely jog as he took in the scenery. The sun peeked above the horizon, letting off an assortment of colors. The sky and water lit up like a beautiful, artist's painting. *How can it be this beautiful when I feel like dying?*

"Gotcha!" A hand grabbed his arm in a death grip and halted his movements, nearly bringing him to the ground. Damion leaned over, heavily panting. "What the hell? Didn't you hear me?"

Colton took deep breaths of oxygen. "Sorry. I didn't. I guess I was in the zone."

"*The Twilight Zone*," Damion muttered. After a few deep breaths, Damion straightened up with his fingers still wrapped around Colton's arm. "I know you're in pain. But you can't run yourself into the ground. You're not the only one who is hurting."

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### *Two Weeks and Six Days Ago*

It was not one week into Alpha Kappa's *Run for Self* when Abby, the president of the Sigma Lambda sorority, made a visit to Elijah.

Abby informed Elijah that the women of her sorority wanted to be part of the run. The sorority girls appreciated the idea of the cause and held high respect for the fraternity for starting the event. The men of Alpha Kappa were beyond happy. Having more people express they wanted to increase their self-acceptance was the reason why the guys were doing this. More so, the fact the fraternity would have females running with them delighted most of the brothers.

The next day, Elijah booked the quad and gave a short speech to gathered students about what Alpha Kappa was doing and why. Some took interest and some completely ignored him. It was hard to make a stand when you were afraid to accept you needed help. And it was hard to support a cause when you were some of the people causing the mess.

As the days passed, the running groups became larger. Because the college was located in a small town, word quickly spread through the community. Students from both the college and local high school had come dressed in various levels of clothing, wanting to participate in the event. Some people wore clothes that showed off who they were as a personality. Some people showed off the scars, the hairiness, or the God-given body they were proud to have. It became a different type of run than what the fraternity started with, but the theme and meaning were the same: Be proud and accept yourself.

The six brothers who ran in the morning decided not to change to another time. They had a routine to help push each other and the large group that had formed with them. After week two, Colton had removed his shirt. He was a little uncomfortable and hesitant at first, but as he continued to run with people who were half-naked like him, he stopped thinking.

Along with the runs, Colton decided to go to a few of the talks and counseling sessions throughout the week. He sat quietly in the group sessions, which he was told was okay to do. He wasn't ready to open up to strangers when he couldn't fully open up to Elijah. The speakers did bring inspiration and a new perspective on what he thought about himself and other people. Elijah sat quietly with him at every event, just being his support pillar.

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### *Present Time*

Colton looked up at the glowing sky. His hands were behind his head and his body covered in sand. Damion stood nearby, making sure he wouldn't get

up after being thrown down. Colton knew he was no match for the football player's strength.

A few minutes ago, Colton had become hysterical. He couldn't get himself to calm down. The hands on him were not soothing or calming. He had started to hyperventilate when Damion finally got through to him. "Pull it together, man! You're doing this for Elijah! You have to do this for him!"

The words had the effect of ice water poured on him. After he had stood frozen for a few moments, he had started shaking again, but this time from a different emotion, anger. Colton had launched into a tirade of everything that had gone wrong and who to blame—himself. Damion had finally thrown him to the ground, telling him to "calm the fuck down."

The only sounds heard for minutes had been the waves crashing and deep, heavy breaths.

Damion sat none too graciously beside his stretched-out friend. "Sorry I threw you down, but you were losing it. I guess football is my second nature."

Colton stared at his best friend. "No. I needed that. Thanks. Just try to remember I'm not built like a tank as you guys are."

Damion let a smile appear. "You are strong, C. Physically and mentally. You just need to see it."

Yes. Yes, he did.

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### *Five Days Ago*

It was the beginning of week four of the *Run for Self* when motivation finally hit Colton. Over the last three weeks, nearly all of the Greek societies on campus had helped with the event. Many of the groups were able to get enough speakers and counselors to come to the college to give daily talks and outreaches to both students and people in the community. The men of Alpha Kappa never would have thought something so small would have grown into what it became.

The month-long run was almost over, and Colton was feeling a little freer. The runs themselves didn't spark any self-discovery. Well, besides seeing Eli's half-naked and sweaty body in the outside light. But the talks and groups helped him learn more about himself, about how he could both accept what had happened and how to let others in.

Colton had sent Elijah a text earlier in the day to come back to their room after his afternoon class. While waiting for three p.m. to arrive, Colton tried not to talk himself out of his plan. He tried pacing and reading chapters from a textbook he had a test on tomorrow. Running was out of the question; he would keep running and not come back until dark.

The sound of the door opening had Colton tensing up, and he dropped the textbook he was holding. Elijah poked his head in with a curious look. "Is everything okay, Colt?"

Colton let out a soft breath and reached down for the book while Elijah came into the bedroom and shut the door behind him softly. After placing the book on his desk, Colton extended his hand to Elijah. Without hesitation, Elijah took Colton's hand in his.

"What's wrong? And don't lie, because you are a horrible liar."

Colton inhaled softly. "There is no one in the house now."

Elijah looked at his boyfriend perplexed. "Okay. They're probably in class, or out running, or at the quad. Why? Do we need to call a meeting?"

Colton let out a soft chuckle. "Gosh, no. Not for this." He squeezed Elijah's hand and looked into the dark eyes he loved so much. "Want to make love?"

Elijah's eyes were as wide as saucers. "Right now? It's the middle of the afternoon."

The shocked look on Elijah's face made Colton smile. He moved his hands around Elijah's back and pulled him close. "Yes, right now."

Many emotions traveled across Elijah's face. He first showed elation, but then his face fell to a frown. Elijah placed his forehead on Colton's. "We don't have to rush this. You don't need to push yourself to do something you're not ready for."

Colton's heart skipped a beat. *How did I get such a loving man in my life?*

"I want to do this, Eli. I'm ready to show you everything."

Elijah searched Colton's eyes for a few more moments. Colton kept strong, not letting any of his past hesitation or regret show. He wanted to allow the man he loved to see he was ready.

Elijah gently lifted Colton's shirt over his head. His fingers and eyes grazed softly over the toned muscles. Colton shuddered at the thought of Elijah memorizing every contour of his body.



“Shhh. It’s okay. We’ll go as slow as you need. If you say stop, I will stop.” Elijah’s eyes followed his fingers as they traced up Colton’s bare chest. “All you need to do is think about how much I love you.”

Elijah led Colton to the bed. They softly fell onto the mattresses and allowed their hands to just roam.

This wasn’t anything new to them. They had made out, pleased each other, had sex. But in the light—where they could see each other’s entire body and every emotion—it was a whole new experience. Colton felt the fear of doubt return as Elijah removed his own shirt.

His boyfriend was a little more buff than he, but that was because Colton ran more than he lifted weights. When Elijah reached for the button on Colton’s jeans, Colton pushed the hand away.

“Sorry,” he quickly said, looking away. “It’s a bad habit.”

His boyfriend’s hand tilted Colton’s face so they looked into each other’s eyes. “Don’t be sorry. You don’t ever have to be sorry with me. I said it once, and I’ll say it again: we can stop whenever you want to.”

Colton loved hearing those words, but he knew there was only so much time a person could wait. And he had made Elijah wait a long time.

“I don’t want to stop. I want to show you everything. I want you to do everything. I want you to... feel everything.”

Colton couldn’t look away from those dark eyes. And he tried. Thoughts of their past love-making appeared in his mind. It had always been dark, their hands the only source of sight. But even then, Colton hadn’t let Elijah see all of him. Colton loosened himself every time Elijah took him.

The first few times had been very awkward. It had taken a while for Elijah and Colton to find the right rhythm for their lovemaking. When Colton had first explained his situation to Elijah, he had thought he would be dumped right there. Who could want a boyfriend with his condition?

But, like every time, Elijah had surpassed all expectation. He had taken Colton’s hand and kissed each finger slowly. “Thank you for telling me. I know that was very hard for you, to put all of that pain out there, but I’m happy you want to be with me as much as I want to be with you.”

They had talked the rest of that night, just holding hands and being with each other.

“Colt, I want all of that, too. But I don’t want it unless you are ready.” A gentle smile appeared on Elijah’s face. He ran his hand gently over Colton’s chest and down his side. “I love you far too much to push you into something you’re not ready for. I’m a patient man. You know that.”

The comforting hand continued to go up and down Colton’s side. “I’ll wait because I love all of you. All of your perfect imperfections.”

*Damn him.* Colton launched himself on top of Elijah. The kisses were demanding and needy. Colton felt Elijah trying to slow him down, but he wasn’t going to stop. If Elijah could be that kind of man for Colton, then he deserved the same treatment.

Colton pulled back for air. “I want this. I really, really want this.” Colton held strong as he looked into Elijah’s dark pools.

Elijah let his hands wander down to Colton’s jeans. Colton let out a loud moan when Elijah squeezed him through his pants. Elijah’s eyes grew darker with desire as he watched Colton’s face. His tongue licked his lower lips, and he leaned in for a deep kiss.

Colton tried hard to stay relaxed as Elijah flicked his jeans button open. When Colton didn’t push him away, Elijah started to pull down the zipper.

There was a knock at the door.

“Hey, Pres. There are some guys here from Phi Delta to see you,” Damion said through the wood.

Elijah groaned. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

Damion coughed on the other side of the door. “I’ll let them know. And... sorry for interrupting.”

The two men heard Damion hurry away from their room. Elijah planted a small kiss to Colton’s lips. “Want to come with?”

Colton remained motionless. The perfect opportunity was ruined. He rolled off his boyfriend and grumbled into his hands.

“Don’t worry. If you want, I’ll go kick them out and come right back.”

Colton looked over as Elijah pulled his shirt back over his torso and adjusted his pants. The moment was already destroyed. He needed more time to work up the courage to do this again. “I’ll come with you. It won’t do you any good if I’m here all by myself.”

Elijah gave Colton a sensual look and a moan to follow. "Good idea. I don't want to think about you pleasuring yourself while I'm not here to help."

Colton blushed. "Not what I meant." And then he added, "Pervert."

Elijah chuckled. "Just a man in love."

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If Elijah was sexually frustrated from their interruption, no one could tell. It seemed that he was now trying not to yell at the three Phi Delta fraternity brothers in their common room.

"Explain to me again why you want us to stop the *Run for Self*. I must have had an aneurysm when you were telling me." Elijah spoke through gritted teeth.

Colton stood on the far side of the room with Damion, watching the action. Elijah and Brett were sitting on a couch opposite the Phi Delta members. It was probably also a good thing there was a coffee table in between them. As cheap and broken as it was, the table was still a barrier.

Daniel, a Phi Delta, repeated his condescending speech. "We want you to stop the event you guys started. You've been doing this for about three weeks, and you've had a good run, pun not intended." He stated the same joke for a second time. "It's great for the community and all, but it is actually hurting some of us on campus."

Elijah clenched his fist. Brett was smart enough to notice he needed to take over the talking. "Who are these people that our cause is hurting? If you let us know, we would like to have a polite talk with them to discuss their problems. We did not intend for our idea to injure anybody."

"Smooth, Brett," Damion whispered. Everyone in the room knew who the "injured party" was.

Daniel didn't even blink. "There are some people on campus who are having difficulty with... the new way of thinking. It is too different, and it is affecting the lifestyle of many people."

Brett sat back in the couch. "It's a good thing people are thinking differently about themselves and others. The original idea came from men and women on our campus having low self-esteem and viewing others as nothing but a physical object. For these people who are having trouble coming to terms with the fact others are bettering themselves, my advice to them is to take a good, hard look in the mirror. What kind of person wants to prevent individuals from being happy and reaching their full potential?"

This was one of the many reasons Elijah and Brett were voted as the president and vice president of Alpha Kappa. They were organized, eloquent, and knew how to stand up for what was right. Yes, they did go crazy with the fraternity shenanigans, but they made sure to keep their brothers in line.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably. The two men with him remained silent as one of them figured out how to respond. Elijah got to it first.

“Thank you for stopping by to let us know of the concerns from around campus. We take it to heart and want to make sure everyone is happy. Please tell those people having trouble with our event to come talk to us personally so we can get this sorted out.”

The Phi Delta trio left soon after. Brett laid his hand on Elijah's shoulder, stopping him from leaving the room.

“Don't let those jerks get the better of you. We're doing something good.”

Elijah let out a loud sigh. “I know. And I won't do anything stupid. I'm just dumbfounded those assholes thought they could get the running and seminars to stop because they can't get laid.”

Brett nodded his head in agreement. “Some people don't like change. Especially when it is against something they've had come easy to them all their lives.”

“Then those people need to learn what a little hard work is. It might change their attitude for the better.”

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### *Present Time*

Colton stood up and brushed the sand off of his clothes. With a heavy sigh, he finally said something he had been keeping to himself.

“I could have done something.”

“No, man, you couldn't have,” Damion quickly interjected. “It's not your fault.”

“It doesn't matter that it wasn't my fault. Something could have been done differently, and we'd be getting up right now, like always, eating and joking around about who we are going to see this morning.”

Damion stood next to his best friend. “Life can be a bowl of shit sometimes. And there is nothing you can do to make it something other than shit. There was a shit platter waiting for you guys.”

Colton stared at Damion with amusement. "Wow. That was a colorful analogy."

"Sorry, C. I'm tired, too." Damion spoke softly. "But you know it's true."

Colton looked out to the ocean. Yes, he probably knew it better than any guy in their fraternity. But even though it was true, that didn't mean he had to like the idea.

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### *Two Days Ago*

They were out celebrating. The event had raised so much awareness on campus and in the community. It seemed that instead of doing this for a month, it was going to be all the time.

Who knew that one little thought and some exercise could change so much? If they hadn't had the support from all of the students and community, none of this would have happened. That was what Elijah said in his speech, before the crowd cheered for him and Alpha Kappa's work.

Colton took another gulp of his beer as he watched people in McCalister's mingle. The local pub, which had been supporting their philanthropy with money and apparel, had opened its doors for a celebration tonight. So much money had been raised for speakers and support given to the students.

"How're you feeling, handsome?"

Colton glanced over at his boyfriend, making his way toward him. Elijah started to signal the bartender for a beer, but Colton already had one waiting for him.

"I'm feeling like I'm on cloud nine. All this energy in here is just... amazing." Colton looked over the crowd again and saw the people chatting happily, dancing crazily, having a great time.

Colton leaned over to speak in Elijah's ear. "How does it feel to be the man of the month?"

Elijah smiled as he swallowed his beer. Looking out into the crowd, he said, "I don't feel like the man of the month. I feel like I'm part of something huge that has started a change, even in our small town."

Colton gave his boyfriend a skeptical look. "Just like you to be modest. Please accept your role as our fearless leader and take the credit for this. You never take credit."

Elijah shook his head. "Credit is given where credit is due. No one person did this. We all had a part in it."

Colton smiled. He took Elijah's free hand and squeezed firmly. Elijah smirked and took another sip of his bottle.

Colton leaned into his boyfriend's ear again. "Let's get out of here. We were interrupted last time, and I want to give you all of me." Then, with more heat in his voice, "With the lights on."

Elijah choked on his beer. After catching his breath, Elijah started to pull him out of the pub. They said goodbye to a few of their brothers and began walking down the street.

"Let's walk. I want you totally sober when we do this. No regrets."

*None with you*, Colton thought happily.

They walked down the street, a mere two-mile walk from their frat house, laughing and bumping into each other.

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### *Present Time*

"You should be with his family."

Colton stopped walking. Damion took the opportunity to catch up to him and stand beside his best friend.

"They need all of the love they can get. They are going through a hard time, too," Damion said.

"I know," Colton said softly. "I was with them all of yesterday. And last night. I just needed some alone time. To see the ocean."

"Can't get out of your routine for Saturday mornings?"

A light chuckle left Colton's lips. "I guess not. It's a place I can relax, let off steam, go for a run with my best friend. I love this place."

"But now it has become something bigger."

"Yeah. The meaning is different now."

"Acceptance of self?"

Colton looked at Damion. "Acceptance of self. One run at a time."

The two men continued walking, but this time, in silence. Colton knew he had to go back to the house soon. He needed to take another shower. He couldn't seem to remove the smell of alcohol or blood from his skin.

There had been so much blood and alcohol. "I read the report yesterday. They said they didn't mean to do it. They only wanted to scare us a bit."

"It is crazy what people will do when their life has been changed. And the thought that they were heavily intoxicated and drugged didn't help their sense of logic," Damion commented. "At least they were caught."

"It wasn't hard to identify them. We knew who they were before they even attacked us. And then they ran scared after they... stabbed Elijah."

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### *Yesterday Morning*

Colton had his head cradled in his hands. Around him was the movement and loud talking of the busy waiting room, but all he could concentrate on was the floor, the unmoving floor below him.

A few of his fraternity brothers sat with him, and others were pacing.

The waiting area in the small hospital's Emergency Room was already full with people anticipating answers. The doctors told the fraternity they could only allow fifteen of them in at a time.

Colton pulled out his cell phone for the countless time. 3:47 a.m. Elijah had been in surgery for about three hours. He hadn't heard any news from the doctors once Elijah went through the surgical doors.

After they had pushed Elijah through the emergency room doors and beyond Colton's sight, Colton had finally called Damion. In between stopping the bleeding, calling 911 and riding in the ambulance, he thought of no one but Elijah. Colton then called Elijah's parents to tell them the news of their only son. After being on the phone for twenty minutes, trying to answer their questions, Elijah's parents were on the road, driving the six hours it took to get to the college campus. The police arrived from the crime scene an hour later to take Colton's full statement about the attack. After giving his statement and the attackers' names, he felt more exhausted than after having run a marathon.

When the police left, Colton collapsed into the plastic chair behind him. He went back to his comfortable pose where his hands cradled his throbbing skull. With his head down, he almost fell asleep. As he closed his eyes and tried to relax, all he could see were images of his bloody boyfriend.

Colton forced his eyes open, never wanting to see those images again. But he was tired, so tired. Tired of answering questions. Drained of energy from the agony and disorder of the last few hours. Worried that Elijah wasn't going to—

He shut out that thought immediately.

Thankfully, Damion, his savior, stayed nearby, answering any questions that came Colton's way. A hot, fresh cup of coffee stayed on the table next to him, courtesy of his best friend.

All Colton could think about was his injured boyfriend. He was in critical condition because of Colton. Elijah was an idiot for what he did. What a brave, loveable idiot.

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### *Two Nights Ago*

They could probably leave the fight with minor injuries if their attackers didn't pull any weapons. Elijah and Colton were no wimps. They kept in shape and were pretty agile.

On the walk back to their house, four drunken guys stumbled towards the couple, shouting obscenities. Colton and Elijah recognized the students from school and tried to keep their distance from the belligerent men. After they unleashed words of anger, the men launched themselves, fists flying, at Colton and Elijah.

With the inebriated state of their attackers, Colton and Elijah dodged most of their punches and landed a few of their own. But it was still four on two.

After a few minutes of bad dancing, the one that seemed the most dazed pulled a knife. The knife-wielding man swung at Colton. As he evaded the attack, Colton tripped on the curb of the sidewalk and fell onto his back. The man took the opportunity to fully charge the downed Colton.

Then Elijah suddenly appeared, tackling the attacker to the ground, but he paid a price for his bravery.

When the drunk and drugged students realized the damage they had caused, they all fled. Colton scrambled to Elijah to assess his injuries. There was blood everywhere. It seemed like there was more blood soaking into the earth than remaining in Elijah's body.

Colton tore off his shirt to apply pressure on the most critical wound, making sure not to jostle the embedded knife too much. His frantic shouts to his boyfriend only received a blank look from the bleeding man. A small smile slowly formed on Elijah's face, and it seemed he tried to lift his hand up.

"You're the injured one, idiot! Stay still and stay awake!"



Colton pulled out his phone and dialed 911. During the ten minute wait for the ambulance, all Colton could do was apply pressure, wait, and pray.

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### *Yesterday Morning*

“Colton. Colton, baby. How is Elijah?”

Colton slowly moved his head out of his hands. His head felt like it weighed a literal ton. Colton saw Elijah's mother standing in front of him, worry etched all over her face.

Checking the wall clock, he saw it was five fifty in the morning, more than an hour earlier than he expected them.

Colton stood to give Elijah's mom a warm hug. Thank God Damion had brought him new clothes. He didn't think Elijah's parents could handle seeing their son's blood all over him. “Hi, Mrs. Anderson. Elijah is still in surgery. At least, that was the last thing I was told. But he should be out soon.” *At least, I hope so.*

Colton offered a reassuring smile. He needed to stay strong for his boyfriend's parents.

“Don't lie to me, Colton. Elijah always said you were a horrible liar. I just need the honest truth,” Mrs. Anderson said with a firm voice. Colton looked down at the woman in front of him and saw the dark circles, the tear stains from the five-hour drive.

“I would never lie to you. But if you want to hear everything, then can we wait for your husband to come in? I'm not sure if I'll have the energy to keep repeating this story.”

Elijah's mother patted Colton's arm. “Of course. Let's sit down first.”

A few minutes later, Mr. Anderson came rushing into the waiting room. Colton retold the events of the past few hours to his boyfriend's parents. He tried to keep his voice level as he restated everything. He needed to stay mechanical so he wouldn't break down, especially when the man and woman in front of him looked like they took the news in the worst possible way.

“How much longer will he be in surgery?” Mr. Anderson asked softly.

Colton held the somber gaze of the man seated near him. “I'm not sure. The doctors haven't been around for a few hours.”

For the next hour, the men of Alpha Kappa hovered around Elijah's parents, trying to tend to anything the couple might need.

At seven thirty, the doctors finally emerged with news.

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### *Present Time*

"How are his parents holding up?"

"Like any parents would be: Upset. Angry. Scared."

Colton kicked some sand up. The grains flew into the air and blew over the waves. The sun now lit up the entire beach in an orange hue. In the distance, Colton could make out the morning walkers and joggers that frequented the beach. The new day arrived too quickly. He wanted time to slow down.

"How are you holding up?"

Colton sighed. He hated that question. It'd only been a day, and he had been asked that too many times to count. "Fine."

"Don't lie. You can tell me anything. You know that."

Colton let out a heavy groan. "I'm angry it happened, and more upset that I didn't stop it."

"Again, not your fault. He did it because he cares about you. You need to remember that."

"And what am I? The damsel in distress—"

"No! But, by your story, you were going to have a knife in your chest."

Colton clenched his fist in a deep rage. "Well, fantastic, because Elijah got that instead."

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### *Yesterday Afternoon*

Colton didn't want to be there. There was too much hustle and bustle. He just wanted to be with his fraternity brothers and Elijah's parents. It was a little over twelve hours since the attack, and he already wanted to forget it ever happened.

"Thank you for coming down to the station and identifying Mr. Anderson and your attackers. Do you have any questions?"

“Yes. There was a fourth man who wasn't part of the lineup. Daniel Clark. He was the one who... stabbed Elijah.”

“We have Mr. Clark under hospital arrest at the moment. You can identify him at a later time, when he is released to us.”

“Why is he in the hospital?”

The police officer led Colton into the office area and handed him a cup of dark coffee. “When we found the four men this morning, two of them had large traces of cocaine in their system. Mr. Clark had to be taken to the hospital because he was starting to go into cardiac arrest.”

Colton's eyes widened. “But he is only twenty-one.”

“When mixing large quantities of cocaine with alcohol, a heart attack can arise, no matter the age.” The officer set down his own cup and looked Colton deep in his eyes. “I have to ask you again. Did these men attack you and Mr. Anderson because you are gay?”

A sigh escaped Colton. “As I said before, this attack was not a gay bashing. We were attacked because they were drunk and drugged and did not agree with an event our fraternity is holding. That's all. Please do not make this into something it is not.” And in a whisper, “I beg you.”

“We're not trying to blow this out of proportion. I only asked because the media has asked again. We'll continue to keep the story as local and small as possible.”

Colton allowed a soft smile to escape. “Thank you.”

The officer took down a few more notes before he stood up to walk Colton out of the station. “How is Mr. Anderson doing?”

“He came out of surgery a few hours ago, but the doctors still have him on life support, and he hasn't woken up yet. All we can do is wait.”

“We'll be hoping and praying for him down here. You guys have really helped my daughter and her friends out. We really like what you guys are doing for the community.”

For the first time in fifteen hours, Colton felt joy from his fraternity's cause, in spite of what had happened.

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After returning to the hospital, Colton sat with Elijah's parents in a cafe lounge. His own parents were out of the country on a business trip, but the

international phone call he placed to them was as good as if they were here. His parents had been continuously texting and emailing him for information about Elijah.

“Why don’t you go in and sit with him?” Elijah’s mom asked for the third time.

Colton gave her a sad smile and patted her hand. “I don’t want to interrupt your time with him.”

The truth of the matter was he didn’t want the possible last image of his boyfriend to be him injured in a hospital bed. At the moment, the last image he had of him was full of blood and pain. He wasn’t sure which image was better to have.

Elijah’s mom returned the pat to Colton’s arm. “We are going to grab something to eat. Why don’t you watch over him for the time being?”

Colton stood up. “That’s okay, ma’am. I’ll go get you some food.”

“Just go in there already,” Elijah’s father said decisively. “We know you are dying to see him. Stop trying to act strong for everyone.”

Colton flinched at the honesty. Maybe he was as bad of a liar as everybody said. Colton sighed in defeat and nodded his head slowly. He walked down the hall toward the room that held his still-sleeping boyfriend.

When he closed the door behind him, Colton could not move. He saw tubes and machines hooked up to his Elijah’s body. Colton slowly walked toward the bed and stood a foot away. He wanted to reach out and touch him but was afraid of pulling any of the cords that kept the man alive.

Thick gauze covered the left side of his face. Elijah’s right eye was shut as he slept peacefully in the sterile room. There was a large amount of gauze and padding covering the broad chest of his boyfriend.

Colton reached out and gently stroked the visible dark locks, the one part of the injured man’s body that he deemed safe to touch.

Colton sat in the plastic chair next to the hospital bed. As he looked over his helpless boyfriend, looking so weak and battered, all of the emotions he had kept hidden surfaced. He managed to hold the tears back this time, but his breathing labored.

“You have to wake up, Eli. I need you to wake up.”

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*Present Time*

“How’d the runs go yesterday?”

Colton and Damion were now on the walking trail that led to their fraternity house. They had finally left the beach when they knew the first group of runners would show.

“Our brothers didn’t go on the morning run, but the other students still ran. A few of the guys ran during the day. Word of the... incident didn’t really spread around campus until noontime.”

Colton didn’t want to hear that last bit. “Yeah, I know.”

“Are you going to run tomorrow? I know it is the last day, but you need to get some rest.”

Colton held his head high. “I’ll be running tomorrow. I made a promise I intend to keep. Even if I run only a single mile, I’m going to be there tomorrow morning.”

Damion opened the door to the house and let Colton in. “I’m not trying to stop you. Just let me run beside you so I can catch you before you pass out.”

“I can still run farther than you, even without any sleep.” Colton made his way to the refrigerator and pulled out the orange juice. “And before you tell me again, I am going back to the hospital after I take a shower.”

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Colton snuggled closer to Elijah. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of his boyfriend. He wrapped his arms around the body next to him, the warmth lulling him back to sleep.

He knew he was dreaming, that this wasn’t reality. After Elijah got out of surgery, Colton could actually get a few hours of rest since the images of Elijah bleeding to death lessened.

His boyfriend was in the hospital, and he was trying to, once again, escape the pain with sleep. For the first time in two days, he was actually successful.

He felt a soft touch in his hair. Colton sighed and turned into the touch.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Colton groaned. He didn’t like that idea. He snuggled closer into the warm body.

Elijah let out a soft chuckle. "Colt. Come on, babe, wake up."

Why was his boyfriend trying to get him out of bed? Shouldn't it be the opposite? Colton squeezed his arms tighter around Elijah's body in protest.

A sharp hiss and intake of breath had Colton pulling away from Elijah. Had he hurt him? Colton stared wide-eyed at the man wrapped in bandages.

Colton wasn't dreaming. He was in Elijah's hospital room. Elijah had his right hand on his chest and his face was knotted in pain. "Oh God, Eli. I'm so sorry."

Colton didn't know what to do. He didn't want to hurt his boyfriend further than he had in his dreams.

*Wait.* "You're awake."

Elijah's right eye focused on Colton. "Yup. And before you. That has to be a first."

Colton stared at his boyfriend. The bandages covered the left side of Elijah's face, but there was a small smile next to the gauze.

Colton put his hand up to his cheek and pinched himself, hard. "Ouch."

Elijah's smile dropped. "What are you doing?"

Colton rubbed his pained cheek. He now looked at Elijah with relief. "I needed to make sure this really wasn't a dream."

Elijah's right eye softened. He started to lift his right hand to Colton. Colton gently grabbed the raising hand, lacing his fingers with Elijah's, and placed it back to the bed.

The tears started to drip down Colton's face. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to cry."

"Hey. It's okay. I'm okay."

"No. No, you're not. You are in the hospital wrapped up like a mummy. How do you call that okay? And stop smiling, damn it."

Colton had no idea how Elijah could smile with his situation. "I'm okay because I'm alive." Elijah's face turned stern. "Mummy?" He unlaced his fingers and reached his hands up to touch his face, feeling the bandages for the first time. Then his right hand traveled down to his chest. He hissed a little when he reached the muscles over his heart.

Elijah looked back to his boyfriend. "What happened to me?"

Colton had known all along he would have to repeat the story one more time. This time, he didn't want it to be mechanical. "As you tackled Daniel to the ground, you tried to disarm him of his knife. But he had the advantage and managed to strike it down the left side of your face. And then it continued... Daniel, he... stabbed you right beside your heart." Colton clenched his fists. "Your left lung collapsed from the puncture of the knife. The surgeons were able to remove all of the excess air, but the chest tube has to stay in for a few days." He raised his hand to wipe the tears falling. "The doctors said if the knife was any closer, you would... you wouldn't be here now."

Colton couldn't stop all of the emotions and thoughts from surfacing. He had held them in for the past two days, trying to stay strong for Elijah's parents and the fraternity, and for himself. Crying meant he accepted Elijah wasn't going to wake up. That he was grieving.

Colton felt Elijah's hand lift up his chin. "I'm not gone. I'm here, for a long time." Elijah gave Colton a smile, but Colton couldn't bring himself to smile back. Yes, he was happy Elijah was awake—overjoyed—but Elijah had still wound up in the hospital, undergoing nearly seven hours of surgery.

"You're still going to love me when I have more scars than you?"

Colton looked horrified at Elijah. "How could you even ask that? I'd love you no matter what you look like."

Elijah chuckled. "Then I don't see a problem at the moment."

"Stop being so optimistic! Why aren't you angry? Or depressed? You almost died!"

Colton flinched at the hurt look on Elijah's face. He really didn't want to make his boyfriend upset. His emotions were going haywire from the past two days.

"You're right," Elijah said after a few moments. "I am upset, and angry—angry we were attacked, and upset I'm lying in a hospital bed. I don't even want to think of the recovery I'll have to go through to breathe without it stinging."

Elijah took a soft, slow breath and laced his fingers back with Colton's. "But I'm also happy—happy to be alive. And happy you aren't hurt. I'm feeling both. I just prefer to feel the one that makes me feel better."

Colton stared at him in shock. "I never knew you were so simple-minded."

“Get used to it. You’re stuck with me.”

The smile Elijah wore finally became contagious. “I would never change that.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, discussing their four attackers, Elijah’s parents and the last couple of days of *Run for Self*.

“I’m going to do the last run tomorrow. I still have a promise to keep with you.” Colton stood from his chair to stretch.

Elijah wore a worried expression. “Only if you really want to.”

“Stop saying that. I really want to.” Colton smiled down at his incapacitated boyfriend. After taking a breath, his face turned serious. “Since we’re on the subject, I need to show you something.” Colton walked over and locked the door to the hospital room.

Elijah’s eyes were wide. “Here? Now?”

“Yes, here and now. I almost lost you without showing you all of me. It doesn’t need to be a big special moment. I just want you to accept me how I am.”

“I do accept you. I just want you to accept yourself,” Elijah replied resolutely.

Colton returned to the plastic chair. “I do. I finally do.”

Colton kept his eyes locked with Elijah’s as he pulled off his shoes and removed his shirt. He stood and slowly stripped off his jeans, tossing them on the chair. With a deep inhale, Colton pulled down his boxers and stood still so Elijah could see him completely naked for the first time.

Elijah stared at his nude form. Colton watched as his boyfriend’s eyes roamed over his body, engraving all of the contours and muscles to memory. Colton fought to keep his hands at his side, to not prevent Elijah from seeing anything.

“Come closer.” Elijah spoke softly. Colton took a step forward when Elijah reached out his hand. “Can I touch you?”

Colton took a small gulp and nodded slowly. Elijah reached out his hand and lifted Colton’s penis.

Colton let a sharp hiss escape him.

“Sorry. My hand is probably cold.”



Colton just stared at his boyfriend's face. He tried to read Elijah's thoughts. His nerves started to get the better of him when he couldn't interpret Elijah's focused face.

"You're so handsome," Elijah finally whispered, his eyes now locked with Colton's. Those dark pools expressed so much love and happiness.

"You don't think it's weird or disgusting?"

"I don't think any part of you is disgusting, especially not your genital region," Elijah said with slight amusement.

Colton's cheeks gained some color, and he looked away from Elijah. "I always thought a missing testicle would be a horrifying sight to you. It's like there is a part of my masculinity missing, like I'm not whole." Colton blinked back his tears. "And when my body rejected the prosthetic, it was at that point I knew I could never be a full man again."

"Hey," Elijah said quickly, "losing a testicle to cancer doesn't make you less of a man. It makes you more of one. You survived testicular cancer. You should be so proud."

Colton swallowed the lump forming in his throat. "I am happy and proud to be a survivor. I just always assumed people would see I am missing a ball and think less of me. It's what happened in my hometown."

Elijah again took Colton's hand in his. "You never told me, but is this why you also wear a shirt when you work out? Why you wake up early to change clothes?"

Colton squeezed Elijah's hand softly and nodded. "I was young, in middle school, when I was diagnosed with testicular cancer and had my right testicle removed. The day I returned to school was the last day I changed clothes in front of others for P.E. class. It became a habit to be fully clothed all the time."

Colton shrugged his shoulders and tried to wear a smile. "Kids can say some mean things. And during those years, in the peak of puberty, when your emotions are unstable, you believe anything people say to you. I truly believed that nobody would like me because of what I was missing. That, when it came time to have... sex, I would be rejected."

He looked away from Elijah, not able to look into his boyfriend's pained eyes. "I thought I could become emotionally secure if I escaped my hometown and went to college. Leave the place of my pained past. It helped a little, but as you know, running away doesn't solve everything."

Colton turned back to Elijah wearing a genuine smile. "Then you came into my life and eased all of my past scars. Crushing the insecurities I had, slowly and effectively. I wanted so hard to keep you and please you that I was too worried and tense most of the time around you."

"I remember it all," Elijah said. "I thought it was adorable, but I also knew there was more to the man than the boy of your traumatized past. I believed that you could walk away from your painful memories, one step at a time, as long as I could be beside you. That you don't have to worry about what others think as long as you're happy with yourself."

Colton smiled down at Elijah. "Yes. I've finally learned that over the past month." Colton leaned down and placed a gentle kiss to Elijah's lips. "What did I do to deserve such a guy like you?"

Elijah moaned into the kiss. "Let's see. You agreed to go out with me after I stalked you for a semester. There were many nights you stayed beside my bed when I had the flu. You then helped me come out to my parents in junior year. I'll never forget the first time you said you love me. I'm actually not sure what I do to keep you with me."

Colton lifted his face so he could see Elijah's visible eye. "You love all of me. Period."

A warm smile appeared on Elijah's face. "That's great. It's the feeling that comes to me most naturally."

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### *The Next Day*

The cool breeze swept across the sandy shore as the sun barely peeked out from behind the water. The beach was completely deserted except for five shivering men.

"Are we really going to do this? It's freezing," Alex complained, his arms wrapped around his chest.

Peter laughed at his friend. "I guess you should grow some hair on your chest. You'll stay warm all year long."

Alex gave Peter an amused look. "At least my chest doesn't need a blow dryer to completely dry."

"I told you that in secret," Peter exclaimed.

Damion walked over and set his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Dude, we all knew. You have more hair than some girls. You *need* a blow dryer."

After a few more words, Brett put their bantering to a halt. "If we wait too long, people are going to come for their morning walk."

The men went rigid and looked around to see if the beach was still vacant. No one moved from their spot as they knew what was to come.

"Remind me why we couldn't do this in front of a mirror in the house?" Alex inquired.

Colton stepped forward. "For the past twenty-seven days, you have been running on this beach to prove something to yourself. We need to finish it on this beach."

Alex glanced away nervously. "I'd join a nudist colony if I wanted to do this," he muttered.

"Listen guys," Brett interjected, "this is the last run, and we are out here before dawn to complete this event. Is this any different than what we're used to? Well, yes. We aren't actually going to run. Think of it as the final test of this journey. If you can't be comfortably naked in front of your brother, then you probably won't be in front of a girl."

That seemed to make some of the guys stop talking. *Is it always about sex?* Colton thought, entertained.

The five men on the beach hesitantly stripped off their clothes while glancing around for people walking on the beach. Once all clothing was discarded, a weight seemed to be lifted from the group. The guys glanced at each other quickly. They were more fixated on their own bodies, out in public during the dark morning.

When the men were comfortable enough to look at their brothers with little awkward glances, they picked up their clothing and began to walk along the sand. A few minutes later, they were talking to one another as if they were fully dressed.

Colton stayed with Damion most of the walk, in the front of the group. He tried not to hold his clothes in front of him, blocking his genitals from being seen, but it was harder than he imagined.

Damion noticed the extra tension in his friend. "There's no rush to change yourself today, C. We are all taking this one step at a time."

Colton smiled at Damion and thought of Elijah's words. Then he felt giddy. He looked at the barely lit waters and breathed in a lungful of salty air.

“Hey, Damion.”

“What’s up?”

Colton gave Damion a playful smile. “I’ll race you.”

Colton dropped his clothes and took off for the ocean. He heard Damion give chase. When he was close to the water’s edge, Colton turned and saw all four of his brothers had started to run toward the water.

As he fought the waves to go further, Colton could only hope the amount of steps he and the others had taken over the past four weeks would help them finish their journey.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*S.N. Kat is an avid reader of M/M fiction. Located on the East Coast of the U.S., she spends her days doing analytical research, and her nights watching and playing sports. With the free time she never seems to have, she reads, cooks, and occasionally gets sleep.*

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