



MOONDROP
KATEY HAWTHORNE

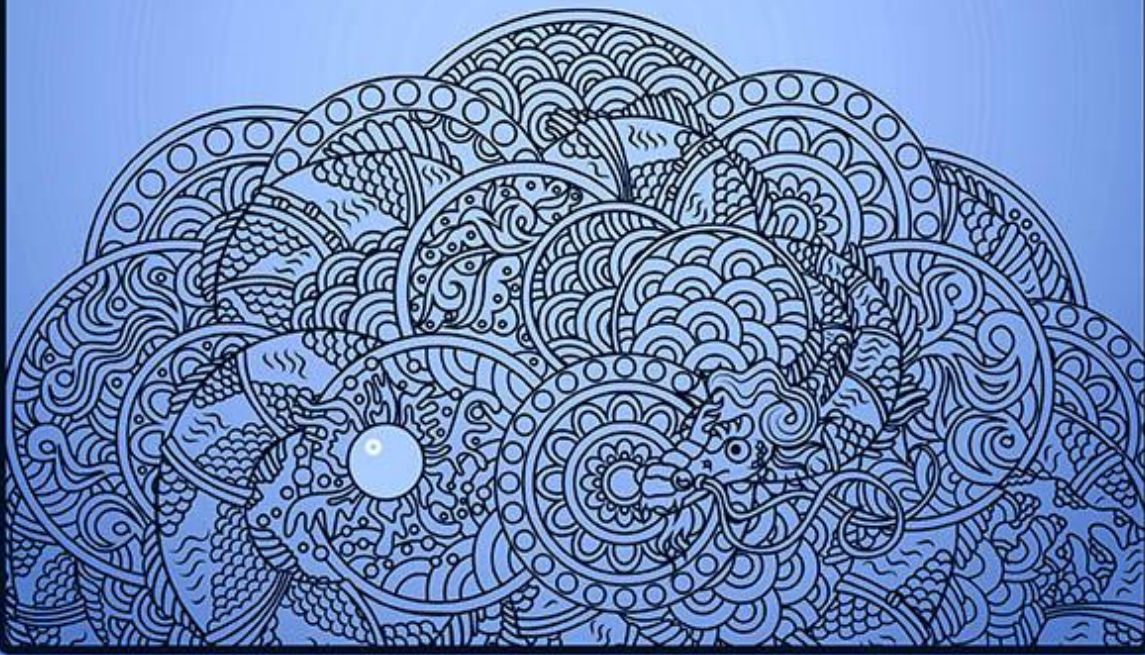


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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MOONDROP

By Katey Hawthorne

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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Photo Description

A Joe Phillips illustration of two men, one sitting up, one with his head in the others' lap, asleep against a graffiti'd wall, with a skateboard beside them. The man sitting up has his fingers in the other man's hair, as if he's fallen asleep mid-caress. Both are shirtless and tattooed—one with obvious dragon markings.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I thought I knew what a soul mate is...

We met when we were sixteen, were in love by seventeen. At twenty-two we bought a house together. At twenty-six we got a bigger house, a white picket fence and a golden retriever. The stuff dreams are made of right? At thirty-one, he comes home and says "I'm just not feeling it anymore," then he's gone... I've been replaced. Just. Like. That.

I thought I knew what a soul mate is; man did I have no idea.

Two years later, I found out.

I met him at a concert; he approached me like he's been waiting his life for me. Little did I know at the time, that was exactly the case. It was a while before I learned that this guy, that I am falling fast for, is a dragon shifter and not only are soul mates real, but he only gets one. And it's me.

I really need a HEA please, otherwise it's up to you :)

Please no BDSM or ménage

Sincerely,

Carey

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, urban fantasy

Tags: teaching, shifters non-wolf/cat, interspecies, soulmates/bonded, interracial, men with pets, tattoos

Word Count: 16,547

Acknowledgements

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Part 1

“I’m just going to sell it,” Dylan said.

Bender barked in reply, then hopped up on the couch and settled his furry head on Dylan’s thigh.

“Well, I have to,” he reasoned, reaching out idly to pet Bender. “I can’t keep the mortgage on my own anymore. I’m too goddamn old to live on ramen.”

Bender *whuffed*, but it was halfhearted. His golden-ginger tail whapped at the couch cushion a few times, but there wasn’t much life in that, either. Totally content.

Dylan smiled, refusing to compare the simplicity of Bender’s happiness to the struggle of his own emptiness. Sounded like one of the poems his students would compose after a breakup. Not, you know, the self-effacing, wry lamentation more suited to a thirty-one-year-old man.

“It’s been three months,” he reminded Bender.

Bender closed his eyes and sighed happily.

At least Eamon didn’t take the dog, Dylan thought. And that, at least, did make him feel better.

“At least two hundred words, remember!” Dylan said just as the bell rang to end eighth period. The kids were already out of their seats, dying to get home for the weekend. He said good-bye to a few stragglers and headed toward the office to grab his jacket.

A voice stopped him before he reached the door. “Mr. Woodhouse?”

Dylan turned, the teacher-smile plastered onto his face. “Emily. What’s up?”

She was a small, shy girl, who read like a demon. One of those kids he knew had the answer to every question he asked—and not just from her test scores—but lacked the confidence to speak out. He’d spent most of the year trying to get her to participate with reasonable success. And, in the process, learned that her home situation was absolute shit and reading was her escape. Which meant college would be an even bigger one.

Kids like Emily made navigating the politics and bullshit the Board of Education threw at their teachers worthwhile.

“I just—I wanted to see if you were okay?” Emily clutched her brown-paper-wrapped book to her chest.

Dylan leaned against the wall, guard still up, as it always was with the kids. More than once, he’d had a crying teenager back in the office, offering tissues and sympathy for academic, family, personal issues. It was part of the job.

It was sweet when they wanted to help him out, too. He appreciated the sentiment and hoped their sympathy served them better than his had served him. But yeah. No. “Of course. Is this your way of telling me you’re not, or...?”

She shook her head and bit at her bottom lip like she wanted to say more.

“It’s okay.” He took a few steps in her direction, to let her know he really was interested. She was too skittish to let things go without a little encouragement. “You know I won’t judge. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I heard that your, um, husband? Were you married?”

Caught off guard, Dylan shook his head.

Emily went on, “I heard your boyfriend and you broke up. And you’ve been really quiet this semester, so, I guess that’s why? I just—you helped me a lot when Mom was in rehab. So I thought... I just wanted to check on you.”

Touched, if still a little surprised, Dylan asked, “Where did you hear that?”

“Everyone knows.” Emily shrugged, relaxing her defensive posture. “Like, a few months ago people were talking about it. And you’ve been weird ever since. Less passionate about things. You made Nathaniel Hawthorne seem interesting in the fall, and now it’s like Steinbeck doesn’t do anything for you. So backwards.”

He followed her gaze to a vintage-style poster for *The Grapes of Wrath*, their final book of the year. Dylan loved Steinbeck; it was why he’d wanted to teach American lit. Every time he needed to explain America to someone from another country, he just asked them to read that book. And then they got it (even if they still didn’t like it). Steinbeck was his genius.

Eamon had bought him that poster for the classroom. Last Christmas.

Dylan pushed that thought, along with every other personal feeling, aside. “I’m fine, Em. Thanks for asking, though.”

“Really?” She chewed on her lip some more. “Because, I mean. I won’t judge, either.”

He smiled. Sweet kid. “I know. And thanks for that, seriously. But time heals all wounds, right?”

She looked uncertain. She hadn’t had much time, yet, so she wouldn’t know, he guessed.

Not that he did, either. He and Eamon had started dating when they were her age. Right here, in this school. Eamon had flirted with him at his locker, and they’d gone to the movies and held hands in the dark... then made out in Dylan’s room. They pretended not to be dating at school. Things had gotten better by leaps and bounds since they were young, but even now, it wasn’t easy on the queer kids. Even with him there, open about his sexuality and batting away the occasional fundamentalist parents who said a pervert shouldn’t be teaching their kid.

He wasn’t sure how he was going to weather the next time it happened, without Eamon for backup. Eamon to say bitchy things and laugh at them and tell him he could do it; they could do it together.

“I’m okay,” he said, more to stop the thoughts than to convince her.

“Well, I’m not the only one worried about you,” she said.

He was glad she decided not to push it, anyhow. He thanked her again and changed the subject to what she was doing this weekend.

Ten minutes later, after she left the room, he grabbed the *Grapes of Wrath* poster and crumpled it on his way back to the communal office. The sound was satisfying, anyhow. He dropped it in the wastebasket, berating himself. It was a miracle that was the first time a student had said something, considering how many of them came to him daily just to say hi, shoot the shit, blow off steam, and ask for help or advice. He needed to suck it up and move on with his life.

“Yo, Woodhouse.”

Dylan narrowly avoided sighing. Why he was in such a hurry to get home he had no idea, but he was. “What?”

Jack settled a hand on his shoulder. “Relax, bro!”

Bro, bro. Bro! Dylan smiled, though, turning to face Jack. He’d been a few years older in school, now the sort of typical jock-turned-coach, but was surprisingly cool. “Man,” Jack said, “what are you doing this weekend?”

“Shopping in New York, dinner in Paris, clubbing in Ibiza,” Dylan replied.

“Funny. I got tickets to this thing on Saturday, bro. You gotta come. It’s like cover bands doing 70s rock out in the park.” Jack smacked his arm and then shoved his hands into his pockets. “You love music, right?”

“I don’t know.” Unfortunately, Dylan couldn’t think of an excuse, and he was WASPy enough not to want to just say, *I don’t feel like it*.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. Maggie thinks you need to get out more.”

“Tell Maggie I appreciate the thought.” Dylan snorted. Jack’s wife was... loud and wild. And hilarious. “But—”

“Dude, she’s not gonna take no for an answer. Just come. Have a few beers, listen to some music—we’re packing a picnic, so she’ll even feed you.” Jack worked the puppy dog eyes that half of Deacon High had fallen for in his heyday. He’d been a legendary womanizer, even after he left for the local college. Dylan had heard stories, and now he knew the guy, he had no trouble believing them.

He sighed. “Fine. Just let me go home and chill out with my dog, for now.”

“You should sell that house, bro,” Jack said. “It’s dragging you down.”

“Don’t you have some basketball to watch?”

“March Madness is way over.”

“Okay, fine, tell me where to meet you and I’m there,” Dylan said, smile feeling more genuine. For someone who said “bro,” “man,” or “dude” in almost every sentence, Jack was all right.

“Sweet. I’ll text. Maggie will be pumped.”

“Maggie’s always pumped.” Dylan tried to sound cranky, but couldn’t. Hell, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to go out. Maybe he’d even find a new band to like. Been a while.

Three years later, Dylan was willing to admit that Maggie and Jack’s enthusiasm for his psychological well-being was still the only reason he went anywhere. Some things *had* changed, however. He’d moved into a modest condo in town—which left Bender with less to shed on, but he seemed happy enough so long as he got to go to the dog park regularly.

Okay, maybe Bender was responsible for *some* socialization too. There was a poodle at the dog park whose owner flirted spectacularly, but Dylan politely declined to return the advances.

“Come onnnnn.” Jack threw an arm over his shoulders on their way out of the school one fine spring afternoon. “It’ll be fun.”

“Being stuffed into a little club for three hours while a bunch of sub-par bands go on and off the stage—with a high probability of running into our students—”

“It’s eighteen and up,” Jack interrupted.

“Like that’ll stop them.” Dylan sighed. “It’s just not my idea of a good time. Anymore.”

“Bro, I’m not gonna let you be an old man. You’re coming. We’ll do a quick dinner at our place, then we’re off. Leave Bender with your mom; we might be late.”

And that was how Dylan ended up wishing he had a much higher Jack Resistance, that night. Metropol, the local club that hosted smaller bands rolling through Deacon, PA, was fairly packed with hipsters and punks alike—and they all wanted a drink. By the time Dylan got a beer, the first band was well into their set. He hadn’t caught their name, but he liked their sound, heavy without being overwhelming or grating. Lots of guitars, good drummer, and a bass player who liked to get interesting.

So that was something, at least. Dylan managed to slither to the end of the bar, but gave up on finding Jack and Maggie in the maul until after this band was done. Their backdrop was simple—everyone’s had to be, with four different bands slated to go on one after the other—a drop cloth painted up with two Chinese characters being circled by a dragon. At first, Dylan frowned, but when he noticed three of the band members were, in fact, Asian, he stopped judging and just let himself listen.

When their set was done, so was Dylan’s beer. Ears ringing pleasantly, a smile on his face, he turned to face the bar and wait for another. Roadies and the band members themselves scurried on stage to move their stuff out of the way for the next crew, and the sound of clashing guitars was replaced by a thousand voices, all of them with an opinion on what they’d just seen and heard. By the time Dylan got back to the bar, things had cleared out—the next band was apparently popular and no one wanted to miss it.

Dylan looked up to catch the bartender's eye, but caught someone else's instead: a sinfully good-looking, dark-haired guy in a tank top, a bright blue dragon tattoo creeping out of it and around his arm and shoulder. He was one of the guys who'd just been scurrying on stage, not in the band, but carrying gear. Dylan barely had time to smile before the guy started in his direction, weaving his serpentine way through the crowd like it was nothing, in and out.

Which was to say, not *his* direction, as in coming for Dylan, he was sure. Just, you know, in Dylan's general direction. The direction of the stage and the wall of amps and the emergency exit.

Dylan lost mystery guy for a second when the bartender asked him what he wanted, but as he was paying, an unfamiliar voice in his ear said, "Hi."

And, yep. Mystery dragon tatt guy.

"Hey," Dylan said, trying not to look as confused and uncertain as he felt. *Settle down, you lonely nerd.*

"What did you think?"

"Uh, of the beer? It's overpriced." Dylan tucked his wallet back into his pocket and smiled wryly. Stupid ass thing to say, but he had to. Just in case this wasn't what it seemed like.

"Mei Long," mystery guy said, one corner of his pretty, very pink lips pulling up in amusement. He nodded toward the stage. "The last band. My cousin's the lead singer. If you think that kind of thing is impressive."

Taken off guard by the honesty, Dylan barked out a laugh. "Is that important?"

"Might be." Mystery guy grinned. Cocky, but cute about it.

Dylan had to admit, "I'm a *little* impressed."

Guy held out one hand. "I'm Eli."

"Dylan." He took the hand and squeezed it.

"I was gonna offer to buy you a beer, to celebrate Mei Long's first gig in a club this size. But you beat me to it," Eli said. "So—maybe I buy three and we drink two together?"

Eli was gorgeous, that was the problem. Well, not a problem, really—or if it was then it was a good problem to have. Just, that didn't seem like a very good reason to agree to drink with a perfect stranger who'd walked right up to Dylan

out of nowhere like they were old buddies. Eli was charming enough, and that sweet, open smile he was rocking made him even more appealing, but...

Nope, Dylan only got a good feeling off him. No excuses, this time. He nodded, washing down the lump rising in his throat with a swig of beer. "Why not?"

Eli scored three beers, as promised, handed one off to Dylan, and then led him into the back of the club. A few tables were set up there, one occupied by two college kids making out, another by a cluster of girlfriends whispering and laughing, but otherwise deserted. They could still see the show over the crowd's heads, but they could also hear each other if they leaned in. They settled close to each other, Dylan's thigh brushing against Eli's, and—*Damn. Nice legs.* The worn material of Eli's jeans hugged well-muscled thighs closely, temptingly.

And here Dylan was: a thirty-four-year-old English teacher with the slightly squishy-in-the-middle body to match. *Ugh.*

He shook it off and asked, "So, does the roadie line usually work for you?"

"First time—you're the trial run," Eli said.

"Bullshit." Dylan chuckled, but the banter put him slightly more at ease.

"True story." Eli held up both hands, one with a beer in it, as if in surrender. The blue dragon at his shoulder rippled with his muscles.

Dylan tried not to look too fascinated. "Why?"

"You looked like you were missing something," Eli said.

"Another beer," Dylan guessed.

Eli smiled that sweet little smile, crinkling up the corners of his eyes. Dylan couldn't tell what color they were in the dark and flashing lights. At the moment, they looked purple; before, they'd looked red. Rock shows made everything look like magic.

The next band finally got rolling, so they listened, Eli nodding his head with the beat and tapping out rhythms on the table. Sometimes he'd move closer, say something clever into Eli's ear about a cheesy lyric or the way the bass player kept trying to dance and failing. Dylan had enough beer to last him the whole set, a chair to sit in, half-decent music, and the attention of a pretty guy. He could deal with this.

At some point, Maggie appeared and waved at him, grinning. Dylan waved back and ignored the way she winked before disappearing into the crowd again, dragging Jack after her.

“Your friends?”

Dylan nodded. “They like having a third wheel.”

“Like, in the poly way?”

“No,” Dylan couldn’t say fast enough. “God no. I mean—that’s cool, but. Not Jack. No. Anyhow, I’m a one man kinda guy.”

As soon as that last part was out, Dylan’s face burned. Maybe he’d been drinking a little too fast.

But Eli just nodded. “I thought so.”

“You did not.” Dylan snorted, though, amused. The cocky thing just got cuter and cuter, somehow.

“I did, I swear.” Eli chuckled. A little closer now, so he didn’t have to yell, he said, “It’s in your eyes.”

Dylan raised his eyebrows, trying to play it cool. Eli’s warm breath on his ear made him break out in goose bumps, and god, that was nice. He finished off the first beer and set it aside before gathering the nerve to say, “You telling me you can see into my soul?”

Another puff of air, a laugh against Dylan’s ear. Then Eli brushed his lips against Dylan’s earlobe and said, “Something like that.”

It sent a shock of heat directly to Dylan’s middle—something no one had done for him in a long time. It felt so nice, so easy, that he panicked. “I tell you I’m a one man kinda guy, and you think it means I want a stranger nibbling on my ear?”

Eli backed off so fast, Dylan suddenly felt cold. Eli literally facepalmed, drawing his thigh away, leaving a few inches between them. “Sorry, man. Wow, that—*really* sorry. Got carried away. Not cool.”

Aaaaand Dylan felt like a complete asshole. He actually *did* want this complete stranger nibbling on his ear, was the thing. And he’d sent out the signals on purpose, and Eli had responded. That didn’t mean Dylan didn’t have the right to say stop, not by any fucking stretch of the imagination, but he hadn’t actually *wanted* to.

Dylan took hold of Eli's wrist to pull his hand away from his face. "No—I'm sorry. I just—I don't know how to do this. Or I forgot how, if I ever did. I'm the worst."

That made Eli smile crookedly. "How long has it been?"

Dylan winced. "Um. Sixteen, seventeen years? Give or take?"

"No way." The smile was gone; Eli looked genuinely surprised.

Dylan let go his wrist and sighed dramatically. Trying to recover some face by laughing at himself generally worked. "High school."

Eli laughed. Whatever color his eyes were didn't matter—the way they crinkled at the edges and glinted was utterly charming. "I'll take it easy on you, then. Can I please have a do-over?"

Why, Dylan had no goddamn idea. He was being an awkward turtle, even for him, and there was nothing special about him tonight. He wasn't even dressed that well: a raggedy, soft BRMC T-shirt and his rattiest pair of jeans with Docs. Poster boy for nineties children.

But he said, "If I can." Then slid over a little, so their thighs were touching again.

A few more beers, a few more bands, and things got back to where they'd been fast enough. Jack and Maggie kept well away, but when the lights came up and people started filing out, Eli stood and stretched. The play of muscles in his arms, the little strip of tempting skin just below his navel when his shirt tugged upwards with it... damn, he was fine.

In college, all of Dylan's friends—the ones interested in sex, anyhow—had gone out and picked up random people at clubs or bars. One-night stands, sometimes something more, if it went well. He'd always thought they were insane; he'd had Eamon to come home to. The idea that a fling could be half as satisfying as the emotional connection they had was alien to Dylan.

Since Eamon left, he'd been rethinking that. Wondering if he'd missed out. Sure, he could go to pick-up places now, but he was too old for that bullshit. Guys at those places were so much younger, and in spite of being attracted to women, too, Dylan had no idea where to even start with one. He'd just never gotten there, never needed to.

Now, someone had actually come to *him*, someone hot and nice enough that a little one-night stand might be fun.

And he'd fucked it up.

Eli was grinning, though. "It's been great, man, but duty calls. I gotta go help load up the van." A slight pause, then, "Can I have your number?"

The wave of relief that crashed over Dylan just about knocked him over. "Definitely."

They got out their phones and traded info, then Eli said, "Right, then. See you, Dylan."

As he turned to go, though, Dylan reached out and touched his shoulder. "Eli."

Eli turned, a silent question in his eyes. They were hazel, as it turned out, a fine ring of green around the centers, otherwise the warm golden brown of sweet tea in the sun.

Dylan swallowed hard. *Grow a pair, you big baby.* "If I hadn't stopped you, before... what were you going to say? I mean, into my ear?"

The way Eli smiled gave Dylan goose bumps again. It was impish and sweet all at once. Eli said, "Meet me by the stage door at one."

"Is that—is that what you *would've* said?" Dylan frowned. "Or are you saying it now? I got my tenses confused."

Eli chuckled and turned, disappearing into the crowd even as Maggie and Jack emerged from it.

"Oh my goooood, Dylan." Maggie clutched his arm and bounced. "What. A. Babe."

"Even I'm kinda jealous, man," Jack said.

"Why are the fine ones gay?" Maggie asked.

"Jesus, Mags." Jack frowned. "He could be bi—you don't know!"

Dylan was still looking after Eli, even though he'd long since disappeared. He cut in suddenly with, "I'm uh. I'm gonna hang out for a few."

Maggie kissed his cheek. "Be safe! If you need a ride later, call us. Oh, but don't drink enough to get drunk. And don't go anywhere east of 12th street, because my sister's best friend got carjacked just—"

"Mags." Jack threw an arm over her shoulder and pried her off Dylan. "He's a grown-ass man. Good luck, brother. Go with god."

Dylan suspected he'd need it. He suspected Eli was just playing around about the stage door, but something told him to follow up on it anyhow. Just in case. He wasn't usually the leap-before-looking kind, though, so by the time one rolled around, he'd very nearly talked himself out of it. He slipped down the alley to the back of the club, where a small group of people waited with T-shirts and CDs to be signed (wow, people still bought CDs, that was dedication). There was another group of two or three smoking—and Dylan recognized them. One was definitely the singer of Mei Long, Eli's cousin.

All Dylan's courage bled out just like that, and he turned to go right back the way he came.

And ran straight into Eli, of course. They were about the same height, but Eli was broader; he caught Dylan in both arms and held him. Even though he wasn't in any danger of falling, Dylan didn't complain.

Eli smelled nice. Like rain or something blue. Which was a strange thought, since those weren't even smells. What the hell?

"Wasn't sure you'd come," Eli said quietly. "If you changed your mind—"

"No," Dylan replied. "No, I..." He put a hand on Eli's chest, intending to push off. But then just left it there. Because. Damn, this guy was fine. All he could think to say was, "No."

Someone near Eli's cousin catcalled, which snapped Dylan out of it. Eli flipped them off, but laughed. Before Dylan could say anything, Eli took his hand and started pulling him down the block. "There's the van." He pointed to it as they went by. It was one of those conversion things painted with the same dragon and symbols logo, then the transliterated MEI LONG below.

"If not for the logo, that'd be an urban legend waiting to happen," Dylan commented.

Eli snorted. "Don't worry, I was thinking somewhere more public might be better."

Which was a sign that Eli was actually a decent guy, since it was probably a reaction to Dylan's little freak-out earlier. Something told Dylan that Eli was the kind of guy who could generally get laid on a first date—or even meeting—without much trouble, creeper van or not.

"I know I came on strong," Eli said out of nowhere. He let Dylan's hand go, but walked close enough that their shoulders bumped now and then. "Sorry about that. I mean, it hasn't been sixteen years, but I don't do that often, I swear."

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” Dylan said.

Eli laughed some more. “You’d think. But nah. I just saw you standing there, and I couldn’t help it.”

Dylan used the excuse of examining the street at nighttime to delay his response. He could guess where they were heading; there were only a few places in town open this late, and they were all bars, mostly in this general direction. He’d lived in Deacon his whole life, so there were no surprises to be had here.

Or so he’d thought, anyhow.

He wanted to ask *why* Eli couldn’t help seeking him out, but it was too much like fishing. So instead, Dylan just said, “I’m flattered. You’re—beautiful.”

Which sounded better in his head, honestly. But it was true, so this time, Dylan didn’t mind.

Eli clearly didn’t either. “Am I?”

“You know you are.” Dylan chuckled.

“I still like to hear it. Don’t you?”

Dylan flushed like a teenager with his first crush, even though he should’ve seen that coming. He just gave Eli a look and kept walking. When they reached the first available bar that didn’t have bad karaoke happening, they went in and settled in the same side of a booth, ordering up a few more beers—this time on Dylan.

As if they hadn’t had a huge pause in the conversation, Eli said, suddenly earnest, “It wasn’t just that, though. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’d be down for a hook-up. But I wanted your number more.”

Bemused, Dylan repeated, “Hook-up.” Not that he didn’t understand the meaning—it was exactly what he’d been thinking he missed out on. Just, could it really be this easy? Was this a thing that happened?

God, no wonder his seventeen-year-old students saw more action than he did. He was pathetic.

Eli’s brow furrowed. “Unlesssssss that’s not a thing you’re into. Which is cool. Obviously. But, I do find you attractive in that specific way, and I thought maybe you—”

Fuck this. I haven't been kissed in three goddamn years. I am going for it. Dylan reached out, grabbed the front of Eli's T-shirt, effectively cutting off the rest of whatever he was saying, and pulled him in for a kiss. Eli made a little sound of surprise, but it turned into a happy hum as his lips went soft against Dylan's, then parted just enough to get a good taste of him. Eli's wet tongue slipped along their lower lips, and Dylan turned his head to get in closer, then sucked gently at it. Eli settled a hand on Dylan's thigh, up high; Dylan cupped Eli's jaw and traced the hard, sharp angle of it with his thumb as their mouths worked together.

When he pulled back, Dylan was dizzy with the rush of it. A first kiss, something he hadn't thought he wanted, but now realized he'd needed. And the guy was *good*.

Thick eyelashes fluttering open, Eli cleared his throat and said, "Okay, then. Good."

"Is that really what you would've said? Back there at the club? If I hadn't been—so *fail*?"

Eli smiled, his lips even pinker from the kissing. He had such sweetness for such a sharp face, all angles and straight lines, all sword-point prettiness. Maybe it was the intelligent eyes, the pouty, soft mouth that made him seem so open. "I like your fail, so far. For the record.

"But no. I probably would've just asked you to come out to the van so I could get my mouth on you."

Beer forgotten, all Dylan could now picture was Eli's mouth on him. All over him. He swooped in for another kiss, sliding one finger into Eli's belt, still caressing his face with the other. It had been so long, maybe he'd genuinely forgotten what kissing Eamon had been like, but Dylan couldn't remember anything like this. This feeling, this bone-deep warmth coiling tighter and tighter at the base of his spine, was nothing like what he envisioned when he saw couples kissing on the street or TV or porn—because, oh yeah, he had turned to porn *years* ago, all things considered. To have someone's mouth working against his, someone melting into him like this, it was extraordinary.

It didn't matter if it didn't mean anything. This was a kind of alive Dylan hadn't felt in forever—if he ever had at all. One night would be enough. It was about time something woke him up.

Dylan bounced down on the bed and threw Eli's shirt across the room. Eli was on top of him before it even landed on the kitchen counter—Eli lived in a studio on the cheap end of town, as it turned out. *This isn't me, this isn't me, but, god, it feels so good*, was all Dylan could think, running his hands up Eli's sides. His skin was cool to the touch, hard, probably a symptom of the flat, toned muscles beneath. No complaints from Eli, not even a hint of self-consciousness over his own less impressive midsection. The way Eli was on him, like a big fucking tiger, feeling him up and down and kissing him breathless, left zero room for that.

"Dylan." Eli huffed into his ear, settling his ass into Dylan's lap. Shirtless, jeans on, for both of them. "You want sex?"

Involuntarily, Dylan arched, lifting his hips to rub his cock against Eli's inner thigh. "I..."

Eli sat up a little to look him in the eye, brown hair falling forward to frame his face.

Dylan reached up and traced Eli's lips with one finger, fascinated. "Yeah."

Eli smiled and kissed his finger. Then shifted his hips in one snake-like motion, smooth and elegant and really damn dirty. "Can I blow you?"

Dylan attempted to reply—that had been, of course, precisely what he was thinking when he was touching those lips like that—but the sound that came out of him was more like a whimper.

What followed was a series of mind-blowing impressions, in Dylan's memory. He hadn't had a blow job in so goddamn long—and god, he loved them. Loved them more than anything else, especially when paired with a really intense make-out session. Eamon had been obsessed with anal, which was fine, but sometimes—okay *most* times, what Dylan really wanted was an enthusiastic sucking.

And that was exactly what Eli gave him.

First, the kissing, one hand down Dylan's pants to free his cock. Then, the stripping, jeans, underwear, until all Eli was wearing was that impish smirk, and Dylan was sitting on the edge of the bed with his knees apart. Then, more kissing from Eli at Dylan's thighs, now his belly, now his cock. When Eli slipped downward to kiss the base, Dylan's cock dragged against his smooth cheek, his soft hair, and started to leak.

Then, the sucking. And holy shit, Eli gave sudden new meaning to the phrase “could suck a golf ball through a garden hose.” His cheeks hollowed out as he went down, his eyes closed, little hums and spit-sounds escaping him now and then.

Dylan had no idea how his night had ended here. With this utterly beautiful, apparently cock-starved man on his knees in front of him. It didn’t take long before he couldn’t help himself shifting his hips up, into Eli’s mouth, burying his dick. Eli stayed down, and reached up to tweak at Dylan’s nipple hard. Dylan moaned at the electric-shock sensation, and might’ve given some direction or another, because Eli did it again and again, still sliding up and down his dick. Those pretty lips, just loving on him, begging for it. Eli rolled Dylan’s balls in his free hand, and that was it. The shocks all melted together into a sudden explosion. “I’m gonna—”

Eli went down, as in *all the way* down, and then hummed around Dylan’s cock.

Dylan came with a moan and a few choice words, one hand in Eli’s hair, the other propping himself up. Thrusting into Eli’s willing mouth, fascinated as Eli took a few days’ worth of *it’s been years since I had a blow job* cum.

When the waves of ecstasy faded, Dylan collapsed backwards. Eli sat up, still on his knees, and slowly slipped his way up Dylan’s dick. It was softening, but he kept toying once he got to the head, licking into the slit like he was trying to get the very last drops.

“Jesus Christ, Eli... you’re fucking *good*,” Dylan managed. He tried to sit up halfway to get a better view, but was too weak.

Eli smirked. “Is it bad of me if I say *I know*?”

“You should know.” Dylan gave up on trying to sit for the moment and just held out a hand, gesturing for Eli to come to him. He did, and Dylan pulled him down for a kiss, both of them still a little breathless, the taste of Dylan heavy on Eli’s tongue.

“I like your dick,” Eli mumbled into the kiss.

Dylan chuckled, then started a new kiss. At some point, he said, “It likes you.” He rolled them over, so Eli was on his back, Dylan straddling his thighs. “I want yours, now. That okay?”

Eli nodded, swollen lips parted, chest heaving. The way he looked up at Dylan, there was something in it... something like surprise on top of the lust-

fogged happiness. Or it was just Dylan's imagination. It was, after all, almost three a.m. by then.

But he had a job to do. Funny, how he hadn't really thought of it when he was getting blown—maybe because he'd been a little too focused on Eli's mouth—but it occurred to Dylan now that he'd never been with anyone but Eamon before, not really, not like this. And now there was a beautiful body under his, complete with a hard, good-looking, uncut (*unf*) cock that needed his attention. If there was anything Dylan loved as much as getting head, giving head was it.

And he was going to give the best head of his life, right here, right now, to this guy he'd just met. Because he wanted to, because he could, and because frankly, Eli deserved it for making his night... week... okay, month.

Dylan started out slow, toying with Eli's nips, rolling them between two fingers as he shifted his ass back and forth over Eli's cock. Just enough friction to make him crazy. When Eli started whimpering, clutching at Dylan's hair, Dylan had mercy... sort of. He started working on Eli's balls, rolling them, licking them, then sucking gently. He wrapped a hand lightly around Eli's cock and tugged upward, rolling the skin up and down.

"I'm gonna come before you get it in your mouth," Eli said with a laugh, fingers ruffling Dylan's hair affectionately.

Eamon never used to laugh in bed. He always took it badly, like Dylan was mocking him, somehow. Admittedly, Eamon's dick was less impressive than Eli's, but come on.

The thought just made Dylan smile. He lifted his head and mouthed Eli's dickhead, then pulled at the foreskin with his lips.

Eli propped himself up on both elbows to watch. With a huff of air, he said, "Christ, you look *incredible*."

A strange warmth flooded Dylan's body. It was unfamiliar; his dick was semi-hard, but that wasn't it. It wasn't sex, exactly.

No time for that now, though. A little more playing, a few more sweet words from Eli—"God, you have the greatest face" and "You're fucking gorgeous. You're fucking *good*."—and Dylan began his work in earnest. Eli was vocal the whole time, encouraging, telling him he was good, telling him yeah just like that, oh god, oh fuck yeah, yeah, ohhhhhh—

Eli jerked suddenly, stomach going taut under Dylan's fingers. "Dylan. Dylan. Close your eyes."

Dylan looked up without stopping, pulling on Eli's cock.

"Please." Eli huffed. "Please, baby. Close 'em for me."

So Dylan did.

"Ah—*fuck*, yes, unnnnnh *goddamn* you're—ahhhh, fuck yeah Dylan... fuck yeah..."

Eli tasted, oddly enough, like seawater. Light, less musky, more salty than Eamon. Dylan's gag reflex didn't kick in, so he swallowed and kept moving, slower now, gently, milking the last of his orgasm for more.

When it was over, Dylan collapsed at Eli's side, and Eli curled up against him, throwing an arm over his middle. "Mmm, thanks for coming home with me," Eli said, smiling.

"Thanks for, uh..." Dylan laughed.

"Annnny time," Eli said.

Dylan had just enough energy to wonder if that was true before he fell asleep, bare-ass naked in a stranger's room.

The next morning, Dylan left without ceremony, picked up Bender from his mom's, and didn't really give the night before too much thought until he was in the shower. Then, it was hard *not* to think of Eli. And his gorgeous tattoo on his gorgeous shoulder. And his arm thrown over Dylan's middle all night. And his mouth.

A morning jerk-off was pretty standard, if Dylan wasn't feeling too down or rushed, but he had no idea how he could need one right there and then, after the orgasm he'd had last night. In a really, really gorgeous mouth, that belonged to an even more gorgeous man.

But once he had that taken care of, Dylan took Bender for a walk and spent a quiet afternoon grading essays. As usual in late May, his seniors had given up completely—and he couldn't blame them. Trying to prepare the college-bound ones for their future English courses was an uphill battle anyhow, so he'd just asked them to write about their favorite book or music. Everything from *Siddhartha* to Taylor Swift (both things Dylan approved of, incidentally, on a

personal level) came up, and he was smiling by the time he finished, much to his own surprise.

Not bad for a bunch of almost-adults facing down the end of their long high school servitude.

He was just about to curl up on the couch when his phone lit up with a text. All it said on the screen was “Eli Quan.”

Huh. So that was his last name. Dylan hadn’t known, seeing as Eli had put in his own info.

That Eli had texted was unexpected. But also not. Yeah, Eli was too hot for Dylan, and obviously led a very different life, but last night had been a good time. Random as hell, but not the sloppy drunken hook-up Dylan had expected would be his first experience of “getting out there.” It had been nice. And sweet, honestly. Like, did one-night stands usually sleep with arms around each other?

What the hell did he know?

Dylan popped open the message and read: *Have some time off this week. Want to hang out tonight? Or tomorrow. Whatever is cool.*

Part 2

Eli was waiting on the appointed corner of Main and 20th, looking more like a rock star than a roadie in his white button-down with its rolled-up sleeves, battered jeans, Chucks, and shades. He had one foot on an old-looking skateboard, and was making an adorable face at something on his phone. While Dylan had a moment, he paused, just watching. Admiring the way the soft shirt hugged the contours of Eli's arms and back. His hair was dark, but it glinted with highlights in the sun, and the sharp angles of his face were softened by the lack of shadow.

Yeah, so, he was definitely a beautiful man. Dylan had almost wondered if he'd imagined that in the, oh, twelve hours since he'd last seen Eli. But no. No, this was real, and this guy had just asked him for a date.

Feeling slightly fluttery, Dylan approached. Eli looked up and grinned, and when they were within grabbing distance, threw an arm over Dylan's shoulders and squeezed him. He asked, "Did you know I'd call?"

"Kind of," Dylan admitted, a little wry. "I know how that sounds, but—"

"It sounds accurate," Eli said. "Not every hook-up has to be shallow and meaningless. Maybe sometimes it's just a preview."

Dylan took a deep breath, enjoying the blue rain scent of him. That wasn't the way guys were supposed to talk, he was pretty sure. Maybe he was being naïve to think Eli was in earnest. Maybe the way Dylan had acted initially last night had told Eli everything he needed to know about how to play him: He was a softie, a romantic, skittish, inexperienced. Brokenhearted? Had he said anything about Eamon? Dylan didn't think so, at least, so there was that.

But even if it *was* all a ploy to get as much easy sex off him as possible, Dylan was okay with that. He'd thought it'd be terrifying, but being out on a date was actually *nice*. The secret looks, the laughs, the company, the promise of it all. The fun.

In that spirit, Dylan led Eli to a wine bar where he and Maggie liked to drag Jack sometimes, just to hang out and people watch on Main Street. They always had the front windows open wide on warm summer evenings—or almost summer, in this case—and it was all very casual and easy. Seemed about their speed.

Eli asked Dylan to order, so he started off with something easy, a bottle of his go-to Pinot Grigio, and some caprese and squid salads to share. Eli seemed amused throughout the process. When the server left them with their bottle, he said, “Finally, somewhere hipster enough.”

Dylan laughed. Eamon used to get so pissed at him when he’d make jokes like that about the places he liked to eat, like it was a personal insult—or an insult at all. Dylan thought of what Eamon would say about the skateboard under their table and laughed even harder. “I was just going for a place civilized enough that I wouldn’t want to jump you right away.”

Eli lifted his glass and leaned back in his chair, looking pleased with himself. “So we’re on the same page there? Because, man...” He whistled low, running his gaze all over Dylan in a way that, for a public place where they were fully dressed across a table from each other, still managed to seem obscene.

It was perfectly ridiculous. Not that Dylan was bad looking, but he was woefully average and that was that. His best assets were in his head, and Eli hadn’t seen the first thing that was in there... well, apart from his blow job technique.

But Dylan amazed himself by not having a single fuck to give. They were here, and he was going to enjoy the hell out of this gorgeous, funny guy while it lasted. “Same page, yeah, definitely. Still, I wouldn’t mind knowing you. Which is to say, I really want to know you, because you seem...”

“Brilliant? Amazing?” Eli offered.

“Interesting,” Dylan finished, chuckling. “Worth knowing.”

“Even better,” Eli allowed. He sipped at his drink, then gestured with it. “Okay, ask me anything.”

“What do you do?” Easy place to start, right?

Eli said, “Apart from the weekend roadie thing—which I’m off the hook for just now, yay—I design tattoos. You know that little place above Renfros?”

“Yeah, the place that just says *Tattoo Shop*?”

“My brother owns it,” Eli said.

“So, your dragon?” Dylan asked.

Eli blinked rapidly, like he’d just seen a ghost. His olive skin went a little white around the lips. “I... what now?”

Not the reaction Dylan had expected. He patted his own chest and shoulder, where Eli's dragon tattoo was.

Eli sighed and settled down into his chair again. "Shit, right, yeah, I designed it. Sorry. Ethan—that's my bro—he did the ink. Great work, right?"

Dylan nodded. He had no idea what that had just been, but didn't want to make things weird by asking, either. Especially not when everything else was going so well. "I always wanted one."

"You should come get us to do it," Eli said. "What do you want?"

"A quotation. Either Steinbeck or Fitzgerald. Haven't decided." Dylan had never told anyone that. His parents hated tattoos—like most old people—and Eamon always laughed at him for it.

Eli, on the other hand, leaned forward, fully engaged. "That'd be awesome. Beats the thousand crappy Chinese writing ones most people get, right?"

"Is it true that artists purposely write the wrong things on unsuspecting white people?" Dylan had to ask.

"Fuck yeah. Ethan's half-white himself—our mom's white, our dad's family came from Shanghai like a bunch of generations ago—and I've seen *him* do it."

"No mercy." Dylan raised his glass. White boy, he was, but he tried not to be a culturally appropriative dickbag.

Eli clinked his glass against Dylan's, then they both drank. Eli asked, "So what do you do?"

"High school English teacher," Dylan said.

"No way."

"Oh yes. Very way."

"How many students fall in love with you every year?" Eli asked.

"They're seventeen; they're in love with everything, poor kids." Dylan shook his head, but fondly.

"I was. Every damn thing," Eli agreed.

"Then we got old and jaded," Dylan said, and they drank to that, too. Which was funny, since Eli didn't seem jaded at all, but Dylan kept that observation to himself for the moment. "Where'd you grow up?"

"Just outside Pittsburgh. We used to play Deacon in soccer."

And there followed an extended discussion on teenage pastimes, their own and how things had changed since (turned out, Eli was just thirty, himself, so not *that* much younger). Then they moved on to friends, family, job satisfaction, and general happiness while they drank their way through two bottles of wine and ate through three rounds of tapas-style plates.

Eventually, it grew dark, and it was obvious they were done eating—if not done talking. Dylan considered going for a repeat of last night, but remembered that tomorrow was going to be a gauntlet. “I have five different graduation parties to show up at,” he said with a sigh.

“I bet.” Eli grinned, that pretty, lopsided one. It didn’t help with Dylan’s regrets. Then, Eli said, “Look, I know we jumped into things last night, but—I want to do this right.”

Dylan’s brow furrowed, as much as he didn’t want to show his surprise. “Really?”

Eli made a face.

“Right, sorry, I—so did not mean that as an insult,” Dylan said quickly. And he hadn’t, but as much fun as he was having with the guy, Eli was... different. He was fun and free and good-looking, not the tied-down kind. And as entertaining as the fling was, as sad as Dylan would be to see it end, when it did... it kind of had to. Right? “Okay, forget I said that, sorry. I went all night without putting my foot in it...”

Eli laughed. “No, it’s okay. I know. I don’t seem the type. But, I mean it.”

Dylan tried to think of reasons why—nefarious reasons why. But why buy the cow when you get the milk for free, right? Here he was, offering it. “Good. I mean, that’d be great. For me. I’d like to do it right, too.”

Whatever that meant.

“Cool.” Eli relaxed back into his seat and finished off his wine. “So, what’s next?”

For a moment, Dylan was uncertain. Eli was asking *him*? “Well, you said you wanted to meet Bender?”

“Totally,” Eli said.

“Okay, so. Come over Wednesday?” Dylan suggested.

“I’m there.”

“Are you making dinner?” Jack leaned against the counter in the teachers’ lounge.

Dylan pushed him aside so he could get to the coffee maker. “I don’t cook. Eamon always cooked.”

“Okay, bro, first rule of dating: Do *not* mention your ex.”

Dylan shot a glare at him. “I know that.”

Jack cocked an eyebrow and settled just to the right of the coffee maker while Dylan made use of it. Jack said, “Woodhouse, you know two things: Jack and shit. And Jack’s right here.” He pointed at his own chest.

Dylan poured his coffee and sighed. “Did you just butcher a line from *Army of Darkness*?”

“If by *butcher* you mean *make more awesome* then yes, I did. Whatever, my *point* is that you gotta play it cool. Stuff is moving fast—”

“It’s just a date,” Dylan protested. *Far too much, methinks.*

“Yeah but you were super easy on the first one, to be fair,” Jack reasoned.

“I wasn’t *easy*.”

“Did any part of you touch his dick?” Jack asked.

Dana Ray and Melissa Cox looked up from their midday gossip session to laugh, at that.

Dylan facepalmed with his free hand and said, “Ease off with the slut-shaming, okay?”

“Bro, you’re the opposite of a slut, which is why I think you should be careful,” Jack said, all seriousness. It was hard to take him seriously under any circumstances—he just looked too much like your typical high school jock for that—but this was even more difficult, considering the topic. “Nothing wrong with digging someone hard on the first date. I mean, Maggie had my pants off like fifteen minutes into ours.”

“I kind of love her,” Dylan said.

“Right?” Jack beamed for a moment, then went all serious-face again. “But you’re a sensitive plant, Woodhouse. And gun-shy. *Not* that you don’t have reason, but I’m just saying.”

Wow, so not a conversation Dylan wanted to have with anyone, let alone *Jack*. “Yeah, okay, well *anyhow*, my point is that I don’t cook.”

He wasn't sure if he should be amazed or not when Jack followed with an immediate, "So pick something up on the way home. Nothing huge, though. Too much food makes sex impossible. Double for dudes because you gotta use your butt."

"We don't—" Dylan winced, realizing what he was about to say and to whom. "Nevermind. I'll pick something up, good call."

"Something light, man. Nothing that'll give anyone the shits."

"Why are we friends, again?"

"Sage advice." Jack clapped him on the shoulder. "All the sage advice. Ever."

Bender knew something was up. Dylan didn't have people over often, so when he started cleaning and prepping food outside of his normal schedule, the big fur-ball got a little overexcited. Dylan fed him and took him for a walk which took some of the edge off, but when the doorbell rang, all bets were off. Bender raced to the door, but then sat when Dylan insisted he do so, just off the edge of the welcome mat.

When he was calm, Dylan opened the door.

And, damn, Eli was cute. Today he was casual again, wearing a Mei Long logo tank top that showed off part of his dragon and his glorious, glorious arms, plus those same battered, soft jeans that had dropped to the floor so fast that first night. Dylan smiled at the thought and stepped back. "Come on in. Meet Bender."

Bender's tail *thwapped* at the floor, but he stayed put—barely. Eli kissed Dylan's cheek easily, like they'd been "Hi, Honey, I'm Home" for years instead of on two dates, and continued right past to the dog.

Bender froze, nose twitching. Looking... confused? Unsure?

Well, there was a new reaction. Dylan didn't think he'd ever seen Bender not either maul a new person with happiness or just outright growl at them. Bender *whuffed*, sniffed at Eli's outstretched hand. And then, when Eli knelt in front of him, murmuring softly, Bender finally mauled him joyfully.

Eli laughed and hugged him. When that was over with and Bender trotted off to find a toy, Eli stood and brushed off his jeans. "Happens all the time. I smell funny, I guess."

“Well, he forgave you pretty quick,” Dylan said. “I got Italian, if that’s okay?”

“Got? Wait—lemme guess.” Eli smirked. “You don’t cook.”

“Not even a little.” Dylan waved him into the kitchen, where a pan of pre-made baked pasta was waiting, along with some take-and-bake bread and a huge bowl of shaved parmesan. Plus, the requisite bottles of wine.

They talked and laughed about work—some tattoo client Eli and his brother had earlier in the day, something his cousin, the lead singer Jimmy had said to him about picking up dates at Mei Long shows, something one of Dylan’s students had said about old white guys and apologetic literature. Anything and everything, and if it was something one of them wasn’t familiar with, it was all the more interesting for the explanation involved.

It was so *easy*. Like making a friend, almost, but better... or worse. Because Dylan didn’t want to be Eli’s friend—or, not *just* his friend, anyhow. Not even a little.

With this dangerous thought in mind, Dylan allowed himself to be led to the couch after dinner. Eli flopped, throwing his legs over Dylan’s lap, and Bender settled beneath them on the floor, head on paws, with a soft *whuff*. Eli reached out and ran one finger up the inside of Dylan’s arm—the finger was cold, freezing, almost. Amazing, considering they were halfway through the second bottle of wine.

“You’re cold.” Dylan took his hand and interlaced their fingers.

“I don’t mind. I’m a water creature,” Eli said, nonsensically. He leaned over his lap to kiss Dylan once, not like he was trying to start anything, but just gently. Sweetly.

Dylan chuckled into it, then pulled back and tucked some stray hairs behind Eli’s ear. All that sharp prettiness, all that warmth inside Eli, and his hands, his skin, so cold. It didn’t seem plausible. “Need to sun yourself on a rock now and then, maybe.”

“You have no idea,” Eli said, bumping their foreheads together.

They watched reruns of *Spartacus*, cheered for the slaves, booed at the Romans, and talked Roman history for hours. After dinner had settled and the wine was long gone, Dylan whispered into the dark, “You can stay. If you want.”

“I want,” Eli said.

They did it all over again, this time with improvements. Fingers teasing, tongues licking, mouths giving and taking. This time, Dylan wanted to get Eli off first. When he was about to come, Eli said, “Dylan, baby. Please. Close your eyes. Close them for me.”

So Dylan did.

A week, two weeks, three weeks flew by like nothing. Dylan’s students were out for summer, his seniors enjoying their last months at home before school or work or both started in earnest; Eli had a few weekend shows with Mei Long, for which they paid him craptastically, and to which he always invited Dylan. Sometimes, Dylan even went.

One night after the band went off, Dylan gestured to Eli’s Mei Long shirt and asked, “What does it mean?” He’d tried to look it up, but Chinese was complex, to say the least. Apparently, there were four tones in Mandarin, and in Cantonese there were even more possibilities.

But they were, he knew, written the same. So there was that.

“*Sleeping Dragon*,” Eli said with his trademark smirk. “It’s the name of a tiny dinosaur they discovered in, like, northeast China.”

“Did Jimmy have dreams of becoming a paleontologist?” Dylan asked. “I mean, I know I did, as a kid. *Jurassic Park*.”

“So good, right?”

“The best.”

Eli chuckled. “Mei is kinda a raptor—the dinosaur, I mean. I read they found the first skeleton curled in a circle, like it was asleep. Anyhow—I’ll introduce you, come on.”

Before Dylan could respond, he was being tugged backstage. The club was more a very large bar with a stage up front, but they did at least have a back room for their band of the evening. Eli inserted himself into whatever was going on with the band like he belonged there. Dylan, on the other hand, was very aware that he did *not* belong there. All these people were dressed like rock stars—small town or not—and they had jewelry and hair product and other glamorous things that high school English teachers, in general, did not.

And yet, the conversation went nicely enough. Eli introduced Jimmy, Kath, and Tian-Shu, the three members who were there. Dylan said hello, shook hands. Everything was great, until Jimmy laughed and said something in Chinese. Eli's face darkened, and he flipped Jimmy off, then said, "Don't be a dick."

Jimmy just laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, then said something-or-other to Dylan about the band. Dylan took it all in stride, unwilling to introduce more strife than Eli's frowny face was already causing. He wasn't going to be That Guy.

Instead, he spent a few awkward moments chatting before Eli pulled him away and out the stage door, into the street. "Sorry," he said.

Dylan considered his next words carefully. Eli wasn't easily upset—not that Dylan knew of, anyhow. He hardly ever frowned, let alone looked legitimately pissed off. "So, you speak Mandarin, right?" Dylan finally ventured.

"Yeah," Eli said. Then he shook his head. "No, I mean, not very well. More like I can understand it and swear. I'm like fourth generation or something. We had great-grandparents who were railroad slaves. Not just me and my brother, Jimmy too. But he actually made an effort to learn how to speak beyond a kindergarten level."

"A scholar and a rock star." Dylan kept his voice level, not quite flippant. Eli didn't talk about his family that much, except to say that he had one and tell work stories about Ethan. Jimmy was the only one Dylan had met so far. Not a bad thing—not like Dylan had introduced Eli to his mother yet, either, if only because he didn't want to freak the guy out—but it did limit his knowledge. "But seriously, don't be sorry. I'm not in the 'speak English' camp."

"I know." One corner of Eli's mouth tugged up, and he grabbed for Dylan's hand, suddenly much more relaxed. "It was just annoying because it was so obvious he did it *just* so you wouldn't understand and I would."

"Well, can't blame him," Dylan pointed out.

Eli chuckled. "It actually was kind of funny."

Dylan shot him a look.

"He said, *I'm not surprised you got a ghost boy.*" Eli smirked.

"A ghost boy?" But Dylan realized as soon as it was out of his mouth. "No, wait, I get it. I am like, super white."

“And my mom is too, so, you know. My dad. Me. Ethan’s still unattached, at least.” More chuckling, if silent, from Eli. He squeezed Dylan’s hand and started down the street again.

Dylan fell into step, laughing. “Are you *attached* enough for that kind of commentary?”

“Eh, Jimmy knows. Once we Quans make up our minds, it’s set in stone, more or less.”

Which should’ve been terrifying, Dylan guessed. But it wasn’t by any stretch of the imagination. As they came up on his parked car, Dylan said, “I feel like there’s a good story there.”

“I’ll tell you, some time.” Eli was all smiles by then. He took his hand back and put it into his own pocket. “I know, you gotta go. But—hanging out Wednesday? Dinner Friday?”

“Yeah. All of the above.”

Things went just as they’d planned, and Eli slept over Wednesday and Friday. It was getting to be a three-or-four times a week thing, and neither of them commented. What was that joke: *What does a lesbian bring on the first date? A U-Haul! Ha-ha, what about two bi dudes?*

Saturday morning, Dylan wandered out onto the balcony in his shorts—the neighbors never minded so why should he?—with two mugs of hot, black coffee. He handed one off to Eli, who lounged comfortably in one of the lawn chairs. Dylan flopped into the other and crossed his legs at the ankles, making sure his junk was tucked into the open flap, obviously. Just in case of a *Rear Window* type situation. The June sun was already hot, and like the proverbial lizard, Eli looked to be basking in it. Dylan couldn’t help but want to join him.

After a few silent sips of coffee, Eli opened his eyes slightly, just enough to look at Dylan when he said, “Tell me a story.”

Dylan laughed. “What?”

“Come on. You tell your students stories all the time.”

“Yeah, because they’re too lazy to read them.”

“Tell me a story I can’t read anywhere.” Eli took a deep breath, smooth chest rising and falling, the dragon moving with it like it had a life of its own. “Tell me your story. About why you don’t want to fall in love.”

Mid-sip, Dylan almost choked. “I never said...”

Eli cocked an eyebrow.

Dylan laughed. How the hell Eli did that, he had no idea, but at least he made it funny.

“Come on,” Eli said. “We’ve been doing this for over a month. Neither of us is seeing anyone else. We spend every freaking second together that we can. You can tell me about the guy—girl? Okay, the guy who broke your heart. It seems like it might be good info for me to have.”

Which didn’t require an explanation, even if Dylan wanted to ask for one just to stall. It *would* be good info for Eli to have, considering how close they’d gotten and how quickly. It was baggage that Dylan carried, as much as he didn’t want to.

It was why he didn’t want to be in love, and definitely not after just a month of dating.

Dylan sipped at his coffee for a second, collecting his thoughts. Then said, “High school sweethearts. I probably wouldn’t have come out as soon as I did, if I hadn’t met him. It was rough, but we were together. We had friends. It could’ve been worse.

“We adopted Bender. Got a house. Two houses, actually, since we outgrew the first one way faster than we thought.” Dylan smiled at the memory, even, of the spare room full of his books. The second house had held them all in the den. Now they were half in his tiny second bedroom here at the condo, half at his mother’s. “The last one even had a white picket fence.”

“Sounds nice,” Eli said.

“It was, while it lasted.”

“You don’t want it again?” Eli asked. From anyone else in the world, it probably would’ve sounded like fishing at best, implication at worst. But from Eli, it was a real question. He just wanted to know.

So Dylan actually thought about it, for the first time since he’d lost it. Did he want that back? Not Eamon, obviously, he was long past that. But the life, the house, the dream. “It looked like a happily ever after,” he decided. “So I let myself believe it was. Then he met a guy at work and moved to Ohio with him.”

Eli's thick eyelashes fluttered. "He... just like that?"

Dylan nodded. It was weird to remember how shocked he'd been, how amazed, how speechless. Then, for about a year after, he kept coming up with things he should've said the day Eamon announced he was leaving. That Dylan had been replaced, and that was it, no discussion, just the facts.

It had hurt worse than anything Dylan ever felt. His dad had split when he was just a kid, which had sucked, but in a kind of constant, dull ache way. That sharp, initial moment of betrayal, Dylan never had to go there with his dad—and anyhow, it probably would've been different. In retrospect, his dad's abandonment had probably contributed to Dylan's willingness to believe in the dream, in the appearance of the perfect life, yeah. "There were probably signs," he said with a little shrug. "There had to be. I just didn't see them. I was wrapped up in all the—you know. The appearance of security."

"I get it." Eli frowned. A slight pause in which they both sipped their coffee, then Eli asked, "Do you miss him?"

For half a second, Dylan thought Eli meant his father—whom he didn't even know, let alone miss. Then he realized he meant Eamon, and Dylan shook his head. "No. I used to miss what I thought he was, sometimes. Up until last year, probably. But it wasn't real. I don't miss my own daydreams."

"You sound surprised," Eli said.

"I am." Dylan hadn't realized it until Eli said it, but it was true. "I didn't notice when it happened. When I stopped missing him."

"Want me to guess?"

"Sure." It should be interesting, at least.

"When you let it happen," Eli said.

Dylan chuckled and held out his mug for a toast. "You're wise beyond your years, Eli Quan."

They clinked cups and sipped again, watching the courtyard wake up slowly. Then, after a few minutes, Dylan asked, "Ever had a broken heart?"

Eli shook his head. "Nope. I saved my heart."

"For what?"

With devastating simplicity, Eli looked directly at him and said, "The one."

Dylan flushed—stupid, to think it referred to him at all, but he couldn't help it. Not with that look fixed on him. "You believe in that?"

"With all my heart."

The force of his earnestness was too much; Dylan had to glance away, into his coffee. "Well, you obviously dated around, though."

"I wanted to know how to work it, when I met the person meant for me," Eli said.

How the hell he managed to sound so *reasonable* about something so absurd, Dylan had no idea. But he had no right, okay. Still, he smiled. "Well, I'm sure they'll appreciate it."

When he finally glanced up, he caught Eli smirking at him. The flush crept into Dylan's ears, and he said, "Okay, your turn. You tell me a story."

"Sure. How about I tell you the story of my dragon—like my dad used to tell me when I was a kid."

Kids' story or not, Dylan didn't care—he loved a good one. The thought sapped some of the intensity from the moment for him, and he managed to relax into his lawn chair. Feel the sun beating down on him again. Smile a little. "Sounds good."

Eli, as usual, didn't seem to know or care that the moment had been slightly awkward. He just stretched out his prettily muscled legs in front of him, took another sip of coffee, and said, "Blue dragons belong in the sky or the water. They bring rain, springtime. They rise up from their lakes, where they sleep, and"—he gestured expansively with his free hand, unconsciously making the jewel-toned blue dragon at his shoulder dance—"sprinkle their blessings."

"So that's why you chose it? It's a benevolent protector thing?" Dylan asked.

"Kinda," Eli said. As he talked, Bender padded out onto the balcony to settle at Eli's feet. Eli patted him. "I like the idea, you know, bringing luck and rain—all the good things people need to thrive. There's a legend that says the dragon swallows the moon little by little as it wanes."

"Makes sense though." Dylan was in full-on literary analysis mode, now. "The moon's phases control the tides, and if dragons live in the water..."

"See, English teacher." Eli grinned proudly; Bender rested his head in Eli's lap. "I knew you'd get it. You see this?" Eli pointed to a small, round object just in front of his dragon's mouth.

“It’s a pearl, right?” Dylan had looked up dragons at some point during the last month. Eli’s tattoo was too fascinating to ignore, so he hadn’t even tried.

“Or the moon,” Eli said, wagging his eyebrows and petting the dog. “Or a piece of it. A drop.”

Now he mentioned it, it *did* look like his dragon was trying to swallow it. “I’ve heard that dragons love treasure, but eating it seems kinda extreme.”

Eli chuckled and settled his mug against his belly. “It’s more of a spiritual treasure—a symbol of a spiritual treasure, I guess. The Euro dragons are different, all Smaug and shit.”

“So, Asian dragons—or just Chinese ones?—go for the spiritual pearl.” Dylan smirked.

Eli made a face at his skepticism. “Hey, Buddhists say it’s a jewel that represents wisdom.”

“Yyyyeah, but—correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t dragons in China predate Buddhism in China?” Dylan asked.

Eli’s annoyance broke apart into laughter. “Damn, you’re good. Yeah, yeah, okay, they do. I mean, I’m not a historical expert, but—yeah. There was other shit there first, I do know that much.”

“So what is it?” Dylan asked. He’d almost lost the plot, but something about this had obviously been important, or Eli wouldn’t have bothered. “Is it a literal pearl, or a figurative one?”

“Maybe it’s a moondrop,” Eli said with a shrug. “Maybe it’s wisdom. Maybe it’s spiritual well-being. The point is, it’s something the dragon upholds and protects, once he catches it. Something that gives his being purpose.”

Suddenly, things became clear to Dylan. “Wait. Am I accidentally morning-drunk, or are we talking about ‘the one’ again?”

“Would it be so bad?” Eli smiled, his gaze raking over the courtyard—obviously, almost painfully *not* on Dylan. “To be treasured like that?”

“Now I think *you’re* drunk,” Dylan said. But he was smiling. And flushing.

“Not yet, but hey. It’s a weekend.”

Bender *whuffed* in agreement.

The next day, Eli went to work and came right back to Dylan's apartment. He was barely through the door before he grabbed Dylan around the waist, put him against the wall, and kissed him until he couldn't breathe. He rolled his hips into Dylan's with that smooth, snake-like motion he was so good at, coaxing a hard-on out of him in record time.

"What's that for?" Dylan mumbled.

"I need a reason?" Eli asked.

They laughed and ended up naked on the couch because going all the way down the hall to the bedroom was apparently too much trouble. Bender politely averted his gaze, burrowing into his bed in the corner and falling asleep.

When they finished petting and kissing, getting each other off, Dylan and Eli replaced their underwear and settled back onto the couch, Dylan playing big spoon, his palm to the flat of Eli's belly. He kissed Eli's neck and pulled him close, wondering at the feeling of his skin, so taut and almost hard, but smooth. In that state of post-orgasmic honesty and amazement, Dylan finally asked, "Why do you always do that?"

"Hmm?"

"You tell me to close my eyes when you come," Dylan said.

Eli chuckled, belly bouncing under Dylan's hand. "I'm self-conscious."

Dylan bumped his forehead against the back of Eli's head. "You are the opposite of self-conscious. Someday I'm going to catch you wandering around downtown in your underwear just because all your clothes are dirty or something."

More laughter from Eli before he said, "I don't know, Dylan. Maybe it's just another of my charming little quirks."

Which was cute, but the more Dylan thought about it, the more he wondered if there wasn't something to it. Something in Eli's past, or something he needed. It was a troubling thought, anyhow. "You know if there's anything you need... anything I can do..."

Eli shifted in his arms until they were facing each other and he could put his forehead to Dylan's. Their legs tangled up. Eli said, "You're perfect."

"Okay, you don't have to flatter me." Dylan smiled. "I'll stop asking, if you want."

“I’m not flattering.” Eli gave him a peck on the lips before settling his head so they could look each other in the eye. “I love you. I love the way you talk about your students. I love the way you play with Bender. I love the way you don’t even realize you’re smiling when you’re reading a good book. I love the way you make me want to stay.”

If Dylan’s face got any hotter, he was afraid his head would explode. “Christ, Eli...”

Eli put a finger over Dylan’s lips. “Don’t say anything. Just c’mere.” Then he gathered Dylan up in his arms and shifted, letting Dylan rest his head against Eli’s broad chest. Just over the dragon.

This is a dream. I’ll wake up and it’ll be a lie. But Dylan knew it wasn’t. He was safe, with Eli, and always had been, and some things just couldn’t be explained. That wasn’t how he knew it was all true, though. He knew it was all true because he’d never felt so *alive*.

Eli had come into his life to wake him up. Just like he did with everything he touched.

“Should I say it back?” Dylan wondered aloud. He was slurring his words a little, even more than usual when he got together with Maggie and Jack at their place. After dinner drinks got a little out of hand, this time. Jack was already snoring in his recliner, but Dylan and Maggie were gossiping like the proverbial sewing circle.

Dylan needed it, though. He needed to tell someone what happened with Eli and all that “love” stuff. “I mean, I feel like it’d be weird now, if I did.”

“Well, don’t just say it to say it.” Maggie wrinkled up her nose. “Say it if you *feel* it.”

“I do,” Dylan said readily. It was different than with Eamon, so he hadn’t recognized it right away: it wasn’t easy and quiet; it was challenging and... invigorating. But he was sure it was love. “It’s weird but—but I feel like I always have. Since we met, I mean. Like he activated something in me when he showed up. Life started when I saw him.”

“You are so goddamn cute,” Maggie said.

“Shut up.”

“Look, just...” Maggie considered for a moment. “Say it if the moment is there. Don’t do it out of nowhere. That’d be awkward.”

Dylan was seized with the rightness of it all. He stood, swayed on his feet, then leaned over to kiss Maggie's cheek. "Thank you. And your idiot husband. For getting me out of my house. To that show at Metropol."

"So cute," Maggie said with a sigh.

Dylan took a moment to steady himself before staggering in the direction of the door. "I gotta go talk to him. Later, Mags, thanks for dinner!"

"Dylan! Don't you dare drive!"

"No, no, I'll leave my car here. Mom has Bender. He just lives—like, down on Fifth!" And before Maggie could say another word, he was out the door.

Deacon was quiet at night, mostly, apart from the occasional jacked-up truck zooming down the street or the odd booming bass from a party. The summer evening air was invigorating, and even if it wasn't the best part of town, Dylan knew the place like the back of his hand; he wasn't worried. He was in love.

He was almost to Eli's rundown building when he heard footsteps. He turned to see who it was, all curiosity, but something poking into his back stopped him. Something hard. Like a gun—or something he was meant to think was a gun, anyhow.

"Wallet," said the voice.

Heart in his throat, Dylan nodded. Slowly, he reached down for his back pocket. He looked towards Eli's building—it was *right* there, he could *see* his window lit up. Who mugged people in Deacon?!

Well, apart from one of the hundreds of out-of-work coal miners or steelworkers who'd been reduced to desperate measures. Or one of their kids who had nothing better to do but heroin. Dylan saw it every day at school, and it broke his heart.

Fuck it; the guy could *have* his wallet. He probably needed it more than Dylan. He was just about to pull it out when movement caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. The streetlights were mostly busted, but one illuminated a flash of something blue—a person moving, but too smoothly, too fast.

"What the—?" Dylan's would-be mugger said. Just before he hit the ground with a thump.

Dylan spun, and the martinis in his system made him sway. Still, he saw his rescuer, all dark blue, glinting in the moonlight like...

Scales? What the—?

Dylan squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep on his feet. When he opened his eyes, he looked down at his attacker on the pavement, face down, with four huge slashes torn in his jacket. No blood though—was there blood? He hoped there wasn't blood.

A strong hand took his arm, and Dylan leaned into it. That smell, like rain, like—"Eli." His arm was cold. Scaly.

"Come on, Dylan," Eli said.

And when Dylan looked at him again, it *was* Eli, his sharp, pretty face in the shadows. Shirtless—why was he out here shirtless? His skin rippled—or was that just the dragon? "Eli, what did you... how...?"

Eli shushed him and led him up to his apartment, and that was the last thing Dylan remembered.

Part 3

Dylan woke to Bender licking his face. It took a moment to figure out where he was, but the posters for various Ed Wood movies and tattoo designs all over the walls were familiar, after all. They usually hung out at Dylan's place, for Bender's sake, but yeah, this was definitely Eli's apartment.

Dylan pushed himself up to sitting and his head sloshed a bit, but at least he didn't feel nauseous. Not much, anyhow. "How did you get here, buddy?" he asked.

Bender cocked his head.

"You don't remember?" Eli appeared in the doorway to the bathroom, leaning against the jamb and grinning.

In that moment, all Dylan could remember was Eli's skin rippling, like scales were flipping over to let his skin replace them.

What the fuck had Jack put in those martinis?

"Your mom called this morning. You were incoherent, so you gave your phone to me and said to talk to her." Eli chuckled.

Dylan winced. "Oh god. Did she give you hell?"

"Nah. I mean, a little, but mostly about how you were too old to be this irresponsible."

"She said she'd watch him," Dylan said, but the hangover was making it difficult to muster indignation.

"She got called into work last minute. I figured since you were out of it, I'd go get him and bring him here. He seems cool with it."

Bender hopped up onto the couch and flopped beside Dylan. Dylan smiled and petted him. "Thanks, man. Sorry about..."

"Last night," Eli finished. His smile faltered, there.

"So not cool. I just. I got trashed with Maggie and we were talking about you. I—God, this is so stupid. I just wanted to see you." And Dylan had seen him. But he'd seen more than that. The longer he thought about it, the more he thought it had been real. He'd *felt* it.

Eli sat on the coffee table facing Dylan. He picked up a bottle of water that had been there and held it out. "What do you remember?"

Which kind of confirmed it, right? Dylan accepted the water gratefully. After a few long chugs, he asked, “What happened to the guy who tried to take my wallet? I didn’t recognize him.”

“I don’t know. He was gone after an hour, when I went to check.”

“Did you...? His clothes were shredded.” It was the only thing Dylan could bring himself to mention.

“That was all. I don’t hurt people,” Eli said. “I just scared the piss out of him.”

Dylan stared for a long moment, wondering if he was also scared. He had no idea.

Eli reached out to pet Bender, expression thoughtful. Bender wagged his tail.

“Eli...” But what was Dylan even trying to say? Jesus.

“Go get cleaned up,” Eli said suddenly. “Nurse your hangover. Tonight, I’m taking you out.”

Baffled, Dylan asked, “Where?”

“To look at the moon.”

The rest of the day went by in a half-dream state. Dylan made himself a huge omelet to soak up the leftover gin, napped with Bender on the couch, and drank a gallon or so of Gatorade. But he couldn’t stop thinking of Eli’s smooth skin, the way he moved. He wasn’t sure if he was anxious or scared to meet up that night; it didn’t matter much, because he was going to do it anyhow. There was something inevitable to it, like this was where life had been leading him from the moment he set foot in Metropol that night. From the moment Mei Long took the stage. From the moment Eli Quan smiled at him across the bar.

Well, maybe that was a little dramatic. Maybe not so much life leading him, but Eli leading him, anyway. There was something comforting in that.

Which was either another sign that Dylan was losing his mind, or... not. Only one way to find out.

Stargazer Hill was on the edge of town, a public park that Dylan’s students used for make out sessions. There were a few cars scattered around when he pulled up, but far enough apart that it wouldn’t be too awkward. Dylan

crunched his way through the lot, toward the huge, grassy area that overlooked the Deacon valley—his whole little city spread out before him like a twinkling patchwork. The moon was up, but only halfway full and waning.

The dragon's halfway done eating it, this month.

As he had the thought, he spotted Eli's familiar figure at the edge of the lookout, leaning casually against the railing. His ass looked so damn good in those jeans, it was almost criminal. Which was a weird thought to be having about him right then, considering, but there was nothing else for Dylan to do but go with it. He strolled up behind Eli and leaned into the railing, too, looking out at the lights of Deacon.

Eli smiled at him in greeting, like this was any other normal evening together. Then he said, "I'd have to tell you eventually. Sorry I took so long. That's not how you should've found out. Thing is, there just no good way to tell someone you're a dragon."

Yes, of course, a dragon. The thought rattled around Dylan's head, wry and amused and *bemused*. It was meant to be irony, except it wasn't. Because yes, of course, a dragon.

"I have good control, usually." Eli turned to face Dylan, settling one hip against the railing. "Just, when I have really strong emotional reactions to things—like when I'm happy or scared or angry—it comes out a little."

"Dragon," Dylan said. *Mei Long*, Sleeping Dragon. The dragon eating the moon, the pearl like a little moondrop. The dragon tattoo. Skin like scales, movement like a snake.

Eli said, "What you saw last night—it's kind of halfway."

"Between dragon and..." Dylan gestured to Eli's perfectly human figure, clad in his beat up jeans and a tattoo-baring tank top.

"This," Eli confirmed. "I can't really explain it. We have a lot of old stories, like the one I told you, but they're vague."

"About the moon."

Eli nodded and looked up at it. Dylan knew, he *knew* Eli was thinking exactly what he had been only moments ago, about it being half-eaten.

Dylan said, "Everything is different than I thought." Not just Eli, either, but the world, reality. If this was truly possible, if this wasn't some joke the universe was playing, then what else didn't he know?

“I know, right?” Eli said with a snort.

“Show me,” Dylan said.

Eli jerked his head in the direction of some trees, and Dylan followed to them. Once they were under cover, Eli’s skin began rippling, that same look like scales were flipping over one after the other in rapid succession, replacing his skin. They were a deep azure, deeper than any water or sky, glinting in what moonlight filtered through the trees. Eli’s figure stayed mostly the same, but bigger; his tank top stretched, his jeans didn’t fit anymore. He held out one hand; it had four fingers instead of five, and they were clawed viciously.

Numb with too much emotion and confusion, Dylan reached out and took it. It was smooth, cool. Like Eli always was. He stared at the hand, wondering.

“In Kublai Khan’s court, five-clawed dragons were for the emperor only. Four and three, the lesser nobles could have. But even before that, they say the first legendary emperor, Huangdi, turned into a dragon. And his brother, Yandi—well, his father was a dragon. Via telepathy, I think? I don’t know, I mean, they’re just stories. But there’s some truth in them, somewhere, obviously.”

It was so strange, hearing Eli, his voice, the cadence of his words, and seeing... someone else. Dylan kept hold of the hand, but couldn’t reconcile it. “Is it true about the claws?”

“No one knows, anymore. At least, not that I’ve ever met.” Eli shrugged; scales glinted. “I’m strongest in spring. That’s when I met you. That’s how I knew.”

“Spring. Is that why you bring everything to life?” Dylan asked. “Bring me to life?”

Eli smiled. Even in this strange, half-dragon form, it was still *Eli’s* smile. “You anchor me safely to the ground. The world.”

“I’m a chain?” Dylan asked. If this was real, if he wasn’t hallucinating, there had to be more to it. He had a million questions but couldn’t articulate any of the good ones.

“You’re a reason,” Eli said, stepping nearer.

He smelled like rain. Like spring. Dylan asked, “A reason for what?”

“For everything.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.” Eli let go his hand. “I’m sorry I’m not better at this. We don’t... we only ever have to do it once, if we’re lucky.”

On impulse, Dylan reached up to touch his face. The scales felt seamless, almost like silk, but hard. “Why?”

“You know why.”

Dylan refocused on Eli’s eyes, which had gone a deep, cobalt blue, evident even in the dark as if they glowed slightly. That conversation, about the pearl. About “the one.” Dylan nodded.

Eli held out his other hand like he wanted to give him something, so Dylan accepted. When he looked, there was a large, white pearl in his palm. “What does it mean?”

Eli smiled. “You know.”

The pearl seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, like even it came alive, with Eli around.

Eli said, “There’s no time limit. There’s no contract. You decide if you want to keep it, when you want to keep it.”

“If I don’t?” Dylan asked.

“Maybe someday, someone else will be the one for me. Maybe I’ll be alone, and there won’t be anything to tie me to the ground. Maybe I’ll end up in the water or the clouds forever, and the world will lose some rain. It won’t be the end of anything.”

That didn’t make sense, but Dylan had long since stopped expecting things to. The whole thing was a giant metaphor. Metaphor, Dylan could do. “And if I do keep it?”

“I’ll treasure you forever,” Eli said, as if utterly unaware of how absurd it sounded, in this day and age. Where nothing was forever, where people left without warning, where boyfriends surprised you by turning into large reptiles of legend.

Dylan closed his hand around the pearl.

“Think about it, for now. You know where you can find me.” Eli turned to walk away.

“Eli.”

He paused and looked over his shoulder.

“What do *you* want?” Dylan asked.

“You,” Eli said. “It’s always been you.”

He disappeared through the trees. By the time Dylan thought to follow, he was gone. But something dark flashed in the sky, like a giant snake, and Dylan knew with sudden and unexpected certainty that he wasn’t mad.

That resolute belief in his own sanity wavered regularly over the next week. Dylan took Bender on a long weekend trip to the Poconos. They fished and hiked and spent a lot of time in the woods, around living things. The whole time, Dylan could only think how much *more* alive it’d all feel if Eli had come with them. But this time, Dylan didn’t go running to him. He waited, sober and thoughtful. He read a few books and got the cook at the bed and breakfast to prepare the fish he caught. He talked to Bender, who, as usual, listened patiently, so long as he was being petted.

The day they came home, Dylan kissed his mother and dropped Bender off, then went to the local bar where Mei Long was playing. He waited by the back door at one o’clock, and sure enough, Eli emerged carrying Jimmy’s Orange amp.

He handed it off to Tian-Shu and made a beeline for Dylan. “I felt you. I hoped you’d find me.”

Dylan had rehearsed this moment several thousand times. The things he’d say, the apologies he’d give, the questions he’d ask. But looking at Eli, this beautiful man who had a beautiful myth inside him—for real and true—there were no words. Dylan kissed him, hard, hungry. If Eli was surprised, he didn’t show it; his hands went to Dylan’s waist, fingers digging in hard, and his perfect lips parted willingly under Dylan’s.

When they closed it off, Dylan said, “I love you.”

Eli smiled. “There’s no rush to—”

Dylan kissed him again, this time even more insistently. When he settled his hand on Eli’s shoulder, the skin there rippled slightly. “Want to go out to the van?”

Eli chuckled. “Yeah. You can even keep your eyes open, this time.”

Dylan had thought he enjoyed sex with Eli before, but seeing his skin ripple and change when he came unraveled like that... now *that* was a masterpiece of a blow job.

It was less of an adjustment than Dylan had imagined, having a boyfriend who was, well, a dragon. A benevolent dragon, one who brought balance and life to the world just by existing, but still. A *dragon*. It changed the world, and it was going to take more than a month or two to get used to it. Dylan was looking forward to the challenge. So much so that he asked Eli to move in immediately—which made Bender almost as happy as them.

It was going to be a different life than the one he'd thought he wanted with Eamon. Together, they weren't the white picket fence type. They were the matching tattoos and long vacations with no itinerary type.

One evening, Dylan was near the bar at Metropol, sipping a beer and admiring Eli's fine ass as he unfurled the Mei Long backdrop on stage before the show, when he heard a familiar voice. “Mr. Woodhouse? Wow, you look great.”

Dylan turned and started. “Emily? Hey, so do you.” And she did. As expected, college had been good to one of his favorite students—didn't look like her compassion had done her any bad turns, or none she couldn't recover from, anyhow. “Call me Dylan, please, you graduated years ago.”

She laughed and held out her arms for a hug, which he provided, careful not to spill his beer. When they separated, she asked, “Did you find him? Is he one of them?” She nodded towards the stage where the band was setting up.

Dylan's brow furrowed. “What?”

Emily smiled, and her skin rippled, glinting red. Her eyes flashed a deep amber color. Just an instant, and then she was herself again, his old student Emily. Far less shy, but still as sweet.

Dylan felt like a total idiot. “I... oh my god. You too?”

Eli vaulted off the stage and trotted up to them. The crowd hadn't thickened yet, and everyone who *was* around was busy getting ready or chatting or drinking—it was all very chill. Still pretty flash of her, though. When Eli bounced up, he immediately said, “You didn't tell me you knew a Euro Dragon. 'Sup, Smaug?”

Emily stuck out her tongue. “Oooh, Mr.—I mean, Dylan. You ended up with a water snake. Surprise, surprise.”

They both laughed, and Dylan stared. Just when he thought things couldn’t get any weirder...

“I knew Mr. Woodhouse had the shine on him,” Emily said, like she and Eli were suddenly old pals. “I just didn’t know for whom.”

“I can tell you taught her.” Eli grinned. “Perfect grammar.”

“Emily!” was about all Dylan could think to say.

“Enjoy your night, Dylan. Glad you found the one.” Emily waved him off. “We should catch up sometime.”

“We... yeah... clearly,” Dylan said, feeling like he’d just fallen off a superspeed merry-go-round.

Eli said his good-byes, then clapped Dylan on the shoulder. “Good kid.”

“I knew *she* was special.” Dylan shook his head. “I just didn’t know... that.”

“The world is a much more incredible place than people like to admit.”

Dylan snorted out a laugh. “Yeah, well. I’m glad you want to stay in it.”

“As much as the sky and the oceans appeal...” Eli kissed his cheek. “You appeal, way more.”

The End

Author Bio

Katey Hawthorne is an avid reader and writer of super powered romance, even though the only degree she holds is in the history of art. (Or, possibly, because the only degree she holds is in the history of art.) Originally from the Appalachian foothills of West Virginia, she currently lives in Ohio. In her spare time, she enjoys comic books, B-movies, loud music, Epiphones, and Bushmills.

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