

587,687

(LITTLE)

Words

Kathleen
Hayes



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

587,687 (LITTLE) WORDS

By Kathleen Hayes

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

Four photos of two young men. One is wearing a shirt that says, “I’m his” and the other is wearing a shirt that says, “He’s mine.” One photo is of them standing side by side kissing. One is of them holding hands and walking down a path between some trees. The other two shows them hugging intimately.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These men are in deep trouble, one of them in great danger, (preferably) seriously injured or near death. Kidnapping or being held against one’s will is always wonderful. Hospital scenes a major big plus, but if you give me that “OMG he’s gonna die and I can’t live without him” moment, I’ll be ecstatic.

Any genre but historical and high fantasy (not recognizable as Earth now or in the future) is fine. I love urban fantasy, mysteries, and thrillers in particular, but seriously, do what you want.

Traditional relationships only (e.g., no ménage, no open relationships, no D/s, no incest, etc.). I’d prefer the youngest to be at least twenty-one with no extreme age gaps. No cheating (not on wives either), and no BDSM, but if you have an amazing story, I can be flexible on the latter. And please no afterlife; I want them to be happy here and now!

I think that still gives you lots of room to play. Present tense or past, first person or third (even second if you can make it work!), established relationships, new, or rekindled, anything you want go for it. I just want men who are people I’d like, whose relationship makes sense to me, who are in deep danger that will have me clutching my chest in fear.

Can you help these boys get their HEA?

Sincerely,

Kelly H.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: slow burn/UST, hurt/comfort, injury, kidnapping, spy, no sex, emergency foster parent, journalist

Content Warnings: mention of human trafficking, violence

Word Count: 10,999

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Chapter 1

“Everything comes in time to him who knows how to wait... there is nothing stronger than these two: patience and time, they will do it all.”

—Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

Jeremy took one look at the person sitting at the conference table and wanted to turn around and go home. He looked like he could still be in college with his unkempt haircut and faded Star Wars T-shirt. The impression wasn't helped by his baby-faced look and complete nonchalance—as if this wasn't a life and death situation.

When Jeremy stopped in his tracks, blocking the doorway, Sarah bumped into his back. He turned his head slightly.

“This is the guy you think can help me.” His harsh whisper came out almost as a hiss.

Sarah shoved at his shoulders, forcing him to take two steps into the room.

“Yes, Baby Brother. This is the guy.” She spoke in a normal voice, and Jeremy glared at her.

Still whispering, he replied, “What is he, twelve?”

At this, the “probably twelve-year-old,” finally deigned to notice their presence.

He grinned at Sarah as he walked toward them. “Hello, Love. Good to see you again.” They embraced briefly before he turned toward Jeremy. “I'll have you know, I'm twenty-eight.”

Jeremy thought he must be seeing things because then the “probably unhinged person” (who was not twelve) winked at him before going to sit down again.

Jeremy glared at his back.

“Buck up, Baby Brother, and sit down,” Sarah said as she did her best to manhandle him toward the table without actually picking him up and carrying him. Somehow she had magical older sister superpowers that he didn't really understand because he found himself sitting and staring at Probably Unhinged with what felt like a glum look on his face.

Probably Unhinged stared back with a disingenuous smile spreading across his face as he placed both his hands palm down on the table in front of him.

“My name is Warren Alexander Ellison—” He paused. “—the third. And I can help you fix your problem. You may either believe me, and we can talk, or disbelieve me, and you can leave to go deal with your life and death situation all on your own.”

He lifted his hands and shrugged his shoulders. “Up to you.”

Jeremy glared for another moment because he could. And because he didn't like this guy. But he knew he was totally out of his depth without any other options.

Grudgingly, Jeremy nodded. “Fine, Mr. Ellison. What do we need to do?”

Jeremy noticed him grimace slightly at “Mr. Ellison” before he spoke again. “First of all, you never call me Mr. Ellison again. You call me War.”

Jeremy couldn't help himself. He snorted. “Really? War. I guess we'll be a regular pair. War Ellison and Jeremy Peace.”

He caught Sarah trying not to smile, and somehow the tension broke. All three of them burst out laughing.

After a few minutes, all three of them were finally able to get a grip on themselves. Jeremy pointed a finger at War. “I still don't like you.”

“Doesn't matter.” War's face went as serious as Jeremy had seen it up to this point, before he continued. “I have three rules. Rule number one: you never lie to me. I ask you a question and you answer it, in full, no evasions, no lies, no omissions. I find out you lied to me; I walk. Rule number two: when we are not in a safe place, I tell you to do something; you do it. No questions asked. Rule number three: you pay up front, in full. I reserve the right to add further charges if the parameters of the job change. I will tell you if that happens, and you will agree or I walk.”

War paused again, for affect, Jeremy assumed. “Are we agreed?”

Jeremy nodded again, slightly more confident that War might actually know what he was doing.

War caught his gaze and held it for longer than felt comfortable. Jeremy felt like War was trying to read his soul through his eyes or something trite like that, and no matter how much his brain told his eyes to look away, he didn't seem to be able to.

Eventually, War nodded, seemingly satisfied at whatever he had found in Jeremy's eyes. "Okay. Tell me what happened from the beginning, as if I know nothing."

Yesterday

Jeremy groaned as his phone rang. Rubbing his eyes, he looked blearily at the clock and was dismayed to realize that it was two thirty in the morning. He had just fallen asleep a mere hour and a half ago. Groaning again for good measure, he reached over to his bedside table and grabbed his obnoxiously jangling phone.

It took a second for his brain to grind into gear, but as soon as it did, he answered the phone as quickly as he could. That jangly annoying ring could only mean one thing: Child Protective Services. Jeremy worked as a freelance journalist and could mostly keep his own hours. A few years ago, he had done a piece focusing on the severe lack of foster parents and people willing to adopt older children in Philadelphia. During his research, he decided to become an emergency short-term foster parent. Jeremy had to travel enough that being a long-term foster parent or adopting was out of the question but couldn't help but want to be involved.

"Hello," he said, still slightly groggily.

"Mr. Peace, this is Ariana Lopez, the social worker from Temple University Hospital. I have an elementary-school-age girl who was in a car accident. The girl is uninjured but the adult driver is in critical condition, and he has no ID on him. We need an emergency foster parent to take care of her until we can figure out who she is and locate her relatives. Are you available?"

"Yeah. I'm available. How soon do you need me?"

"She will be released from the Emergency Department in about an hour and will be ready to go soon after that."

Jeremy sighed. It would take him at least an hour to get dressed and get across town to the hospital. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thanks. Ask for me at the security desk and I will take you back to her."

"Will do."

Ariana hung up without so much as a good-bye.

An hour and a half later found Jeremy walking into a curtained-off space in the Temple University Hospital, trailing behind a frazzled-looking Ariana Lopez.

As soon as she stepped out of his line of vision, he saw a frail, dirty-looking girl sitting in the hospital bed. She had her knees pulled up to her chest with her arms wrapped around them. Her dark hair was a messy halo around her emaciated-looking face. Her brown eyes were sunk into her face, the dark circles under them looking almost like bruises. She hunkered as far back in the corner of the bed as she could get and looked terrified.

As much as Jeremy hated to admit it, it was not unusual to find the children he took in cowering and terrified to meet him. Anger flared in his chest at the horrors human beings could inflict on each other. He tamped it fiercely down, knowing that any appearance of anger could, and probably would, be taken the wrong way by the frightened girl across the room.

He looked sideways at Ariana with a questioning tilt of his head. She nodded briefly back at him. Jeremy walked up to the bed slowly, keeping his body language open and not getting too close. In a gentle voice, he said, "Hello. My name is Jeremy. Is it okay if I sit in the chair here by the bed? I promise not to touch you."

He paused, not moving toward the chair until he saw the girl give a minute nod of her head. Jeremy sat in the chair but didn't look directly at her.

"Sometimes something bad happens to a little girl's or little boy's parents or those parents do something bad to their little boy or little girl. When those parents can't take care of their little boy or little girl, there is someone called a foster parent who takes care of them for a little while. That's what I am."

Jeremy glanced to the side to see if the little girl seemed to be understanding him. She was looking in his direction but remained huddled in the far corner of the bed. When he caught her eye, she didn't look away so he kept talking.

"Until they figure out who is the best person to take care of you forever, I can give you a bed to sleep in and give you some warm food." She seemed to shrink back a bit at that. "You wouldn't need to do anything in return, and your parents won't have to pay for it. I also promise that I won't ever hurt you on purpose."

Her eyes got big. If Jeremy hadn't been paying such close attention, he would have missed what she said. "Pinky promise?" It came out in a strained

whisper that carried such gravity you would have thought a pinky promise was the most important vow a person could make.

Jeremy leaned forward a little, reaching his right hand out toward her, pinky extended. “Pinky promise,” he replied with as much sincerity as he could convey.

She scooted across the bed jerkily and interlocked her pinky with his for less than a second before she let go and returned to her position on the far side of the bed.

“What’s your name?”

She shook her head, obviously not willing to answer that question. “Okay, is there something I can call you instead of your name? A nickname, maybe?”

Eyes wide, she whispered again, “Lena.”

“Okay, Lena. Would you like to go and get something to eat, or would you like to go straight to bed?”

For the first time, Lena spoke in a normal tone. “I’m a little hungry.” She had a lilting accent. It took Jeremy a second to identify it as Eastern European or Russian.

“Sounds good. What kind of food would you like?”

She was silent for a good thirty seconds before she responded. A tentative smile broke across her face. “Happy Meal.”

It was a close thing, but he managed not to chuckle. Kids could be so resilient. Whatever she had gone through before tonight, because it was clear the trauma wasn’t only from the accident tonight, she was still able to smile at the thought of a Happy Meal. McDonald’s would never be his idea of edible food, but it was the least he could do for Lena.

“All righty then. Let’s get your shoes on, and then we can stop by McDonald’s.” He just hoped the twenty-four hour McDonald’s would make them a Happy Meal at five in the morning.

While Lena got her shoes on, Jeremy went to sign the last of her discharge paperwork and the giant pile of paperwork Ariana had for him. It was nothing compared to the almost year-long process of getting approved, and however much he wanted to get home and go to bed, he knew that all the I’s had to be dotted, and all the T’s had to be crossed in order to keep the kids safe.

Six A.M. found him stuffed full of fast food in a way he hadn't been since college, and he tucked Lena into the bed in his guest room. He left Lena a glass of water and showed her the baby monitor so that she could just ask if she needed anything.

With that taken care of, he fell facedown on his own bed, not even bothering to remove his jeans.

Six hours later, he woke up with a start. He couldn't tell what exactly had woken him up, but he had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. He lurched out of bed and ran toward his guest bedroom. The sheets had been thrown on the floor, and one of the lamps was broken in front of the dresser. Lena's water glass had been knocked over, and the baby monitor was turned off.

Most importantly, Lena was nowhere to be found.

Frantically, Jeremy searched the rest of his medium-sized apartment. There was still no sign of Lena. However, when he got to the kitchen, there was a note magnetized to the door of the refrigerator.

We took the girl. Don't bother trying to get her back. Call the police and we'll kill her and the rest of them. -III

For some reason, the first conscious thought that got through his brain was that the note had handwriting that seemed much too pretty to belong to a kidnapper. The second thought was not so much a thought as a blast of anger mixed with a healthy dose of fear.

His chest felt tight, and his breathing sped up without his permission. As his vision started to fade, he reached an unsteady arm out to the countertop. He missed and ended up collapsing on the floor. Panic was overtaking him, and he was going to pass out soon if he didn't get a hold of himself. Squeezing his eyes closed, he tried to remember his techniques to calm himself down during a panic attack. He hadn't had one in so many years, it was no longer second nature to practice his calming techniques.

He first pushed his pinky finger into his leg and then his ring finger and then his middle finger and then his pointer finger and then his thumb. Pinky finger. Ring Finger. Middle Finger. Pointer Finger. Thumb. Repeat. He had no idea how long had passed before his vision started to clear, and his chest loosened up enough to take a deep breath.

Tears stained his cheeks and snot ran into his moustache and beard. He felt like he hadn't slept in a week instead of just an all-nighter.

Almost on autopilot, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and called his sister, Sarah. She answered with a clipped, "Hello."

"I need you," he said. His voice was fundamentally wrong in some way he couldn't really identify, and Sarah definitely noticed.

Still businesslike, but with a thread of concern below the surface, she asked, "Are you safe?"

Jeremy took a deep breath, trying to sound more normal. "For now. I'm at home." He didn't really succeed.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. Do you want to stay on the phone with me while I'm in the cab?"

Stupidly grateful and more than a little embarrassed, Jeremy said, "Yes. Just talk to me about that asshole coworker of yours, the one you're always complaining about."

She huffed. "Well, I have to actually leave my office before I can start that."

He heard her making excuses to whoever she was with, getting her assistant to call her a cab, and grabbing all her stuff.

When she was finally settled into the cab and on her way, he let her words flow over him, not really paying attention to what she was saying. She complained about this woman so much, Jeremy was pretty sure there was something more going on. Either way, he'd heard it all before and didn't really need to pay attention.

It didn't seem like long at all when Sarah let herself into his apartment and found him sitting on the floor in his kitchen. Her face went from concerned to cold in about two seconds flat when she saw the note on the refrigerator. She tried to wipe the coldness from her face before she looked back at him, but once he had seen it, he couldn't forget it. He'd never seen his sister look like that before.

She leaned down to help him up, somehow managing to balance perfectly in her three-inch heels. "Come on, Baby Brother, let's get you cleaned up. Then we need to sort this mess."

Silently, he wondered how a corporate tax attorney could help him sort out a kidnapping by what was seeming more and more like the Russian mob.

Today

“And here we are. Although, I am still curious just how you and my sister know each other.”

Sarah and War shared a brief but speaking look before War looked at Jeremy and lied right to his face. “College.”

Jeremy looked incredulously at his sister, who had the nerve to look slightly guilty but merely nodded her head in agreement.

Jeremy shook himself and then leveled a glare at War. “So I guess the honesty thing only goes one way then.”

War returned the look with solid immovability. “For now. Is that going to be a problem?”

Jeremy’s first instinct was to argue with War. It was a fire in his belly and an itch down his spine. But then he remembered Lena cowering in her hospital room and the tentative smile on her face at the thought of a Happy Meal and pushed that instinct down. “No. Just tell me what we need to do.”

“First of all—” War pushed a small folded slip of paper across the table toward Jeremy. “—that’s the friends and family discount—on account of Sarah. Take it or leave it.”

Jeremy unfolded the slip and looked at the number. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. His eyes widened slightly. He had it. When their parents died, they’d left a huge life insurance policy that sat mostly untouched.

Somehow the reality of it hadn’t really set in until that very moment. Lena had been kidnapped, and this man was going to get her back, probably using violence. People were probably going to be killed whether he got Lena back or not. Much to his dismay, he felt another panic attack edging into his consciousness. He started tapping his fingers on the table consecutively to stave it off.

Sarah must have noticed because she put her hand on his arm and tapped the same rhythm out, helping to calm him down.

After a minute, Jeremy looked back up at War and was startled to see something akin to compassion in his eyes. As soon as he realized Jeremy was looking at him, it was gone, replaced with the cocky arrogance that had been driving Jeremy crazy all morning.

“I can pay it. Will you take a check, or do you need cash?”

War settled back in his chair, seemingly pleased at Jeremy's agreement. "Ten percent cash. The rest in a check is fine. But know, if it bounces, you being Sarah's brother won't stop me coming after you."

Jeremy nodded. "I'll need to go to my bank."

Jeremy noticed that next to him Sarah was shaking her head. She pulled her giant purse bag thing from the ground, where it was resting by her feet, and started counting out stacks of hundred dollar bills until she reached twenty-five thousand dollars.

Jeremy looked at her, mouth open and eyes wide.

"Come on, Baby Brother, you were in no condition to go to the bank yesterday, and I do know a little something about how War works. I came prepared."

Jeremy gaped some more.

"You can pay me back if you want."

Jeremy nodded manically while pulling his checkbook out of his back pocket and writing a check out to Warren Alexander Ellison, III for the remaining amount.

War took it and haphazardly shoved it in his front jeans pocket.

"Come on then," War said as he ambled out the door. Jeremy scrambled after him, leaving Sarah in the conference room that he had never thought to ask how she had access to.

A long cab ride, a few phone calls in languages that Jeremy didn't even dream of understanding, and quite a bit of walking through what he would consider dangerous streets later, Jeremy found himself shoved against a wall in a dank alley by War.

He had an arm across Jeremy's throat and was whispering furiously in his ear. Jeremy was briefly shocked by War's warmth pressed against the entire front of his body. It took him a second to move past that sensation and pay attention to what War was saying.

"We are about to walk into a bar full of mobsters. This is no time to show weakness. You are going to follow one step behind and one step to the right of me. Do not speak. No matter what happens, do not open your mouth to utter a single ever-loving syllable. I need you to look broody and aloof, and let me do the talking. If violence breaks out, run. Don't wait for me. I can take care of myself."

Jeremy nodded as much as he could with War's arm under his chin. War eased back. "Inspire violence often, do we?" Jeremy quipped at War. In a somewhat out-of-body experience, Jeremy smirked at War and continued, "Doesn't surprise me."

War's eyes widened in surprise and the left side of his lip twitched up like he was trying not to smile. Instead he turned around and stalked out of the alley. Jeremy barely heard him mutter, "Gotta love the ones with a mouth on them."

Jeremy almost stumbled but recovered and followed War's instructions to the letter as War spoke, in Italian no less, to a group of giant burly men surrounding one supremely creepy-looking guy in a suit who radiated power unlike anything Jeremy had ever experienced.

Jeremy wasn't really sure how well he pulled off broody and aloof, but since no violence had ensued in the twenty minutes they had been inside, he counted it a success. He hadn't even bothered trying to ask War what was going on until they had checked into a rundown motel.

He was momentarily thrown off when he entered the room to find only one large bed in the middle of it. War shrugged when Jeremy pointed it out. "It's what they had available. I didn't want to stay out any later looking for a different place."

"Okay." Jeremy paused. "Did we learn anything from the Italians?"

War nodded. "They knew of a warehouse where the Russians keep their stolen cargo while it waits for transportation."

"And little girls would be considered cargo?" Jeremy asked incredulously.

War nodded, Jeremy's horror briefly reflected in his eyes. After a minute of almost too intense eye contact, War shook himself, and the laid-back college student from the beginning of their first meeting was back. War changed personalities easily enough to unsettle Jeremy and make him a little sad that he was never sure which War was the real War.

He lay down on the bed and started clicking through the channels on the TV while War messed with his bags, unpacking and organizing. Out of nowhere something hard hit him on the chest and bounced onto the bed beside him.

He glared at War who was grinning at him from across the room, obviously having thrown whatever it was at him. Jeremy picked it up and saw that it was a book.

The cover was in Russian and he couldn't read it. He held it up with a questioning look on his face.

“What, too many big words for you?”

Jeremy scowled and responded darkly, “It's in Russian.”

War smirked. “Oops. My copy. This one's for you.” Another projectile hit him squarely in the chest. This one was practically flimsy compared to the brick that was the Russian book.

War and Peace: CliffsNotes, Jeremy read out loud. “Very funny. I'll have you know that I read all five hundred eighty-seven thousand and six hundred eighty-seven words of the real *War and Peace*. Big words and all. No need for *CliffsNotes* here.”

War snorted. “Don't expect me to be impressed until you can read it in Russian.” Then the smirk was back. “Literature is meant to be read in its original language.”

Jeremy threw the giant brick at War's head. It flew over his shoulder and hit the wall, leaving a large dent in the drywall.

And again, like at their first meeting, the tension broke and they couldn't help laughing until they cried. Jeremy didn't know what it was about War, but somehow he made this terrible situation bearable. Even if he was an asshole.

When they finally calmed down, War stripped to his boxer briefs and climbed into bed. Jeremy did the same and found himself unaccountably nervous. He'd known he was bisexual since high school and had shared a bed—both for sex and sleep—with a fair number of people, but War set him on edge, and he didn't understand why.

War shoved at his shoulder after ten minutes of tense pretending to sleep. “Come on, we've got a lot to do tomorrow. Get some sleep. I promise your virtue is safe. Though I make no promises about cuddling. I tend to turn into an octopus in my sleep.”

Jeremy could hear the smile in his voice and gulped at the momentary thrill that went through him at the thought of waking up with War wrapped around him like an octopus.

Unfortunately, he woke up alone and cold. He heard the shower running and assumed that War had woken up earlier. Jeremy shoved the disappointment down and rolled out of bed. He didn't need all these random feelings for someone who was, hopefully, going to be out of his life in a couple of days.

They spent a long day of gathering supplies and making plans. Jeremy appreciated that War included him in some of it but it was mostly War and his handler talking on the phone and discussing tactics. Jeremy was curious about War's handler but hadn't pried when War said she went by Milady, and they didn't use her real name.

A shock of grief hit Jeremy and he said, without really meaning to, "That's what our mom always called my sister."

War's ears turned pink and he looked away. The silence that had been comfortable turned awkward until War's phone rang again a few minutes later.

Around six P.M., War stepped away from the organized chaos that had become the table in their motel room toward where Jeremy had been half dozing, half watching TV on the bed.

Jeremy's attention snapped toward him as soon as he noticed the lack of commotion. He also noticed that War had changed into black BDUs and had various weapons and tools hanging off his belt and stuffed in pockets.

War pulled the chair up beside the bed. "I'm ready to go. You can't come with me for this part—" War handed him a disposable cell phone. "—If I'm not back in four hours, call speed dial one on this phone."

Jeremy's chest went tight with concern. They'd only known each other twenty-four hours, but for some reason, he didn't want War to get hurt, or possibly die. On impulse, Jeremy surged forward and hugged War. It was an awkward position with War in the chair and Jeremy half on the bed but something settled in his chest as War wrapped his arms around Jeremy as well.

"Be careful," Jeremy whispered.

War nodded once and walked out the door.

Three and a half hours later, War walked back into the room with Lena. After that everything was so busy for a few days—with the police wanting to interview him for the case they were building against the Russian mob for human trafficking, and with social workers trying to track down Lena's, or Yelena's, family in Russia—Jeremy barely noticed that War had gone and not come back.

Interlude 1

“Woo-hoo! You must really love me to find me a job like this,” War chortled through his headset, as he dangled from a rope on the side of a forty-story building in a city halfway around the world, about to break in and steal confidential documents (which had already been stolen from their rightful owner—at least according to his client—not that he really cared.)

“Focus,” Milady’s voice said over the radio. “I don’t want you to get caught because some local cops heard your whoops of joy from four hundred feet up.” War chuckled and got back to work.

Jeremy paced his apartment. He looked down at the text message from his sister that was open on his phone. After three and a half weeks, he had finally broken down and called her to ask for War’s number. He wanted advice on how to up the security on his apartment. War was the only person he knew who could be trusted to know what he needed. At least that’s what he told himself.

All he had to do was press the number in the text from his sister, and he would be able to talk to War again.

He closed his eyes and pressed the number.

It rang three times before War’s voice came through the phone. “Well if it isn’t Mr. Peace. To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?”

Jeremy’s throat went dry, and every thought in his head fled like birds going south for the winter. He hadn’t realized how much it would affect him just to hear War’s voice. He swallowed and tried to gather his thoughts.

“Umm. I—ah—was wondering if you would be willing to—umm—help me pick out a—ahh—security system for my apartment. So that no one can get in uninvited again.” He shook his head. He sounded like a teenager who’d never spoken a word to someone they had a crush on in their entire life. His cheeks flushed red hot at the thought of having a crush on War. He was a grown man, damn it.

Jeremy could hear the grin on War’s face when he replied, “Having trouble with your big words there, Jeremy?”

Jeremy felt his cheeks burn even hotter, but he also felt a ball of sunshine practically explode in his chest at the friendly, teasing tone of War’s voice.

He couldn't help the smile on his face or in his voice when he replied, "Of course not. I just know you need the little words." He paused and continued, under his breath, "Or the words in Russian."

War laughed through the phone. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. And I'll help you with your security. I won't even charge you labor—just for the hardware."

Two days later, when War walked through his door (without a key and without knocking, mind you), it was all Jeremy could do not to rush him. They stood there staring at each other across his living room, and the words were out of his mouth before he even realized he had been thinking them for the last month. "I didn't even know if you'd been hurt or not."

He could feel tears stinging at the edge of his eyes and reined them in stubbornly. War looked shocked at his concern and took two long steps across the room, putting them in each other's space. He reached one hand up to Jeremy's shoulder and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm fine. A few bruises but nothing that bothered me for more than a day or two."

Jeremy nodded, not trusting his voice, not even understanding the rush of emotion that washed through him. He'd only known War for two days before all this. Unexpectedly, War pulled Jeremy into a hug this time. It lasted longer than just about any hug since his parents had died, and Jeremy didn't know who needed it more—him or War.

War slept in his guest room for a week, while they were installing his security system, and Jeremy decided not to worry about how he was feeling and to just enjoy it while it lasted.

Interlude 2

The woman's lips pressed against his, and all he could think about was how he wished it was Jeremy's lips. A roil of disgust—at both the kiss and at himself—flashed through him. He was on a job. He needed to get Jeremy out of his head so he didn't get killed. This is why he didn't do relationships. He forced his mind back to the task at hand. As he made out with the diplomat's daughter in the secure wing she had dragged him into, he subtly reached into the clutch hanging at her side and took her keys. Surreptitiously, he pressed one after the other into the band of putty wrapped around his wrist, just inside his shirt cuffs. Time to get this show on the road. He broke away from the kiss and made his excuses before Milady started yelling at him in his earpiece to get a move on.

Jeremy didn't hear from War for two months after that. He was worried sick. War said sometimes he went on extended jobs and was out of contact for long periods of time, but Jeremy hadn't really understood what that meant for him.

He was moping. At least that's what his sister told him. He denied it. It wasn't like he and War were dating. He had no claim on War. That's when his sister had snidely told him it was perfectly normal to worry after friends—even if you weren't dating them.

He decided he just needed to get out of the house and do something, anything to take his mind off War. So he called Sarah, and they went to the rock-climbing gym together and spent the afternoon yelling insults at each other as they tried to win the race to the top. By the time he got home, he was sweaty and had laughed more that afternoon than he had in months.

He couldn't have been more shocked to come home and find War asleep on his couch. His heart leapt into his throat at the shock of it. As he stepped closer, he saw that War's face looked tired and drawn. He looked older than Jeremy had ever seen him.

Jeremy kneeled on the floor beside the couch and laid a hand on War's forehead. War opened his eyes, and there were shadows there that Jeremy didn't know how to interpret.

“Hi.”

War rubbed a hand over his sleepy eyes. “Hi, back.”

Jeremy looked at War, sleep ruffled and beautiful, and couldn’t stop himself. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to War’s forehead, where his hand had been a moment before.

War startled, badly, and Jeremy immediately regretted the kiss. He rocked back to lean on his heels, away from War. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have.”

War shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was weary and a little frightened, “I’m sorry. I can’t. It’s not that I don’t, I mean...” He shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry.”

Jeremy stuffed his disappointment deep down inside and didn’t let his heartbreak show on his face. “No. No. It’s fine. I’m sorry.”

He tried to project as much earnestness and sincerity as he could, and it must have been enough because War nodded in understanding. Jeremy wanted to be whatever War needed. He just wanted to be in his life.

He stood up and walked toward the kitchen. “You want something to eat?”

War stood up and followed. “You cooking?”

Jeremy smiled back at him. “I was going to make my grandma’s famous tomato sauce with meatballs and spaghetti if you’re up for it.”

War nodded and sat at the bar in the kitchen while Jeremy cooked.

“What brings you to my neck of the woods after so long?” Jeremy asked.

War got a hunted look about his shoulders before he started talking.

“Last job went tits up. A dozen people died before we could get it contained.”

Jeremy was shocked. He knew War’s work was dangerous. He carefully didn’t think about whether or not War had killed any of those dozen people. He wasn’t ready to have to deal with that kind of moral dilemma quite yet.

He must not have done a very good job, though, because War almost immediately responded with, “Not by my hand. My job was helping to stop the people doing the killing.” He paused before continuing. “I almost didn’t make it out. I was in the hospital for a few weeks. That’s why I’ve been gone for so long.”

Jeremy’s heart clenched. “Are you okay now?”

War nodded. “Yeah. I just, I didn’t want to be by myself today.”

“What’s today”? Jeremy asked, curiously.

Jeremy briefly thought that a spy or a fixer or whatever War was ought to be able to hide his feelings better because the grief that showed on his face after Jeremy asked the question was enough to fell a grown man.

His voice was wet with it when he answered, “My dad was killed five years ago today.”

Jeremy put the lid on his pot to let it simmer for a while and went to sit next to War. “What happened?”

War’s voice was quiet, and he was ripping the paper towel in front of him to shreds as he spoke. “My dad was a cop, you know.” He smiled a bit ruefully. “We lived in a small town, not much crime. It was mostly teenagers doing stupid stuff and desperate people in over their heads. Until a new gang moved into town. They brought hard drugs with them. Dad did his best, but he was in over his head, and they ended up killing him.”

Jeremy reached over and put his hand on top of one of War’s. “That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.” After a few minutes of silence, War continued, “That gang was my first and last kill mission.”

War looked up at Jeremy nervously, as if Jeremy were going to kick him out for what he’d just said. Instead, Jeremy took a deep breath and said, “My parents were killed by a drunk driver three years ago. He died in the accident, too. But if he hadn’t, I know I would have wanted him dead.”

War’s eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he returned Jeremy’s sentiment of a moment before. “That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.”

Interlude 3

“Don’t tell him,” War rasped as blood seeped out of the wound in his chest.

“He deserves to know,” Milady replied.

“I don’t want him to worry.”

“He’s going to worry if you disappear on him for two months again. You’ve visited him between every job for the last four months. He’s going to know something’s wrong if you just stop.”

“Please.”

“You’re not in your right mind. I’m invoking my medical power of attorney. As soon as you get to the hospital, I’m going to call him and tell him your stupid ass got shot. Again.”

“That’s not how that works, asshole.”

“Too bad you’re shot and can’t do anything about it.”

War sighed. Even if he knew it could only end badly, he did actually want to see Jeremy. More than anything right now, really. Except maybe a surgeon. A surgeon and then Jeremy. At that thought, War passed out.

Jeremy paced the surgery waiting room of Temple University Hospital. Sarah was sitting in one of the chairs sipping coffee as if she didn’t have a care in the world. But Jeremy wasn’t fooled. He could see the tight lines around the corners of her eyes and the tense way she darted her eyes to the door anytime someone walked by.

He felt so helpless. It was like his parents all over again.

Before he could work himself up too badly again, someone in scrubs burst into the room.

“Are you Mr. Ellison’s family?”

“No, but we’re all he’s got,” Jeremy said defiantly.

The doctor looked taken aback by his vehemence. He also looked like he was about to argue about HIPAA and confidentiality until Sarah calmly stepped forward and said, “I’m his medical power of attorney. Do you need to see the documentation?”

“No. That’s fine. You will need to give us a copy for his medical record though.”

Sarah nodded. “Can you tell us how he’s doing?”

Jeremy boggled for a second. Sarah was War’s medical power of attorney. He’d never even heard of War before Lena had been kidnapped, and they were close enough that she had a form saying she could make medical decisions for him. A wave of jealousy ripped through him. He wanted to be the one War trusted that much.

Sarah nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. “Pay attention,” she whispered.

The doctor stopped talking for a moment and stared at them. Sarah urged him to continue, with a wave of her hand.

“As I was saying, the surgery went well. The bullet had entered between two of his ribs and punctured his lung. He suffered from a pneumothorax. We were able to remove the bullet and stabilize his breathing. We still have to wait and see if he will develop an infection, but if he doesn’t, he should be able to make a full recovery.”

Jeremy breathed a sigh of relief and practically collapsed onto his sister.

“When can we see him?” Sarah asked.

“We’re moving him into the ICU right now. It usually takes about forty-five minutes for them to get a patient settled into the ICU. One of the aides will come and get you when you can go into his room. The ICU waiting room is on the fourth floor, and you can take the elevator just around the corner. He won’t wake up until tomorrow, though, if you want to go home and get some rest.”

Jeremy shook his head stubbornly.

The doctor sighed. “Of course not. I’ll see you all tomorrow when I follow up with Mr. Ellison.”

Jeremy had fallen asleep in one of the chairs next to the bed. His arm was flung over the bed guard so he could hold War’s hand, and his head rested on his own shoulder.

A shooting pain lanced through his back and neck when he jerked awake at about ten in the morning.

“Jeremy?”

He leaned over the bed to get a better look at War. “Hey, War. I’m here.”

“I told her not to call you. I didn’t want you to worry.”

Anger, hot and righteous, filled Jeremy’s chest. “If you don’t want me to worry, then stop getting shot. As your friend, I’ve earned the right to worry about you. I don’t need protecting from you.”

Resignedly, War said, “Yeah, I guess you have.”

“Damn right I have.”

War seemed to fade back into sleep after their brief conversation, so Jeremy grabbed his book off the table and started to read.

War woke up again an hour later and asked Jeremy to read to him. His ears turned pink as he said it, and it made Jeremy feel warm and fuzzy inside.

However, “Umm, I don’t think I can.” He held up the Russian copy of War & Peace that War had thrown at him all those months ago. He also held up a Russian dictionary and a much-used pad of paper. “I’ve been teaching myself Russian.”

War snorted. “Won’t find very many little words in that. You sure you don’t want to start with something a little more basic?”

Jeremy smiled wryly. “It probably would have been smarter, but I’ve got a particular attachment to this book.”

They grinned stupidly at each other for a minute before Jeremy turned serious again. “Why does my sister have your medical power of attorney?”

The grin slipped from War’s face.

Sarah took that as the perfect moment to breeze in the door carrying breakfast and coffee for both her and Jeremy.

She took in the looks on their faces and asked, “Who died?”

War gave her an indecipherable look. “Can I tell him?”

Sarah’s shock at the question only showed on her face for an instant before her whole face softened and, to be honest, looked ridiculously gooey.

“You really want to?”

War smiled. “Yeah.”

“Well then, have at it.”

During this little interchange, theory after theory flew through Jeremy's brain: they're secretly married, or he's somehow their half-brother, or... actually both of those were horrifying enough all on their own.

"Calm down, Jeremy. It's nothing bad." She put his breakfast sandwich and coffee on the little table by the bed, said, "I'll leave you two to it," and breezed back out of the room.

Jeremy turned back toward War.

"You've heard me talk about my handler, code named, Milady."

Jeremy nodded.

"Well, you've met Milady. You've actually known her longer than I have."

Jeremy puzzled over that statement for a minute, trying to make some sense of it.

"But Sarah is a corporate tax attorney," he protested.

War shook his head. "That's her cover."

"Ohh." Jeremy clamped his mouth shut.

"You okay?"

He nodded without really thinking about it. Then he thought about it and said, "Yeah, I mean I'm shocked, but I'm glad you're not secretly dating her or something."

War groaned. "Don't make me laugh. I've tubes in places you don't want to think about."

Suddenly, Jeremy leaned forward again. "Hey War, is there something else I can call you? War always makes me think of you hurt."

Jeremy was almost afraid to look at him, but when he did, there was a vulnerability there that he hadn't been expecting.

"Sawny," War said, voice a little rough. "That's what m-my dad used to call me. It's a nickname for Alexander, my middle name."

Jeremy smiled. "Sawny. I like it."

He really wanted to kiss Sawny but held himself back. If he hadn't made it clear that kissing was on the table, then Jeremy wasn't going to overstep those bounds again.

Instead, he reached for his hand and laced their fingers together as he used his other hand to put something suitably entertaining on the TV using the bedside controller.

Chapter 2

“The same question arose in every soul: “For what, for whom, must I kill and be killed?”

—Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

The trial for Pyotr Chernyavsky, head of the Russian mob in Philadelphia, was set to begin in two weeks. As one of the primary witnesses, Jeremy had been put into protective custody leading up to the trial. He spent most of his days in witness prep with the prosecutor and wishing he could be anywhere else, preferably with Sawny.

He was staring at the wall in his hotel suite, zoned out by the chirp buzz of the air conditioner, when someone climbed in the back window of the room. For one brief, glorious minute, he thought that Sawny had snuck in to see him. Later he would wonder if that three-second delay in realization would have given the US Marshals in the next room time to save him or save themselves.

Instead, he was tied up and a bag put over his head, and the Marshals were shot in the head before he had time to react. His kidnappers threw him into their vehicle hard enough that he hit his head on the metal side panel and blacked out for the rest of the ride.

When he woke up, his position had not been improved. He was tied to a chair now, and while his head was no longer covered, water had just been dumped over it to wake him up. In the cold damp of the open warehouse, the near freezing water was making him shiver violently.

A large man with gravitas beyond his appearance walked into Jeremy’s line of sight.

“I think you know who I am, yes?” the man asked, Russian accent strong. His eyes had a sparkle that most might associate with Santa Claus, but it belied the cruel intent in every line of his face.

Jeremy shook his head to try to get the water out of his eyes. “I’m going to take a wild guess and say Pyotr Chernyavsky.”

“You would be correct.” Pyotr paused, before continuing. “You are here for two reasons. The first is to find out what you know and how you know it. The second is to send a message to anyone who dares cross me.”

Even though he knew better, Jeremy said, “And what might that message be?”

Pyotr grinned. “Do not cross me.”

After that, Jeremy didn’t remember much. The Russians knew how to break a man, and he wasn’t really sure how much he’d told them, but he knew he’d told them about War. Guilt and pain rode him into the darkness over and over again until he wasn’t sure anything else ever existed.

Finally, one bout of consciousness was interrupted by an avenging angel. In the harsh lights of the warehouse, he could see the angel, dressed all in black, dancing around his captors, and it made no sense. One by one, they fell as they danced, and the angel’s halo turned red.

The pain and guilt were nothing compared to the angel’s embrace as his black wings enfolded Jeremy in darkness once more.

War had known he was in too deep for a long time now, but he’d thought if he could ignore it, keep from acting on it, then everything would be okay. But then he’d gotten the call.

Sarah had called him from her personal cell. He’d thought it was just a social call. Jobs always came through Milady’s official line.

But then she’d said those words. “They’ve taken him.”

He hadn’t even needed to ask who “he” was or who “they” were. He’d known.

Every warm feeling, every blush and soft touch, every smile, and every laugh from the last year coalesced into a ball of cold fury in his chest.

He replied with finality, “I’m going to get him.”

Sarah’s voice, through the phone, had been as cold as his. “Make them pay.”

“I will.”

Jeremy was on fire. No one thing hurt, but everything burned. He tried to open his eyes, but the effort was too much.

Vaguely, as if at the end of a tunnel, he heard a familiar voice. “Come on, Jeremy. You can do it. Just hang on until the ambulance gets here.” In the midst of his burning, one cool spot erupted as his angel’s lips pressed to his forehead.

He knew that voice. If only his brain could work properly. From somewhere deep inside, he whispered, “Sawny.”

“Oh God. Not Sawny, not right now.” The voice was pleading. “I’ve got to be War right now.”

Jeremy felt wet drops land on his face and somehow knew Sawny was crying. He gasped out, “Always, Sawny. Don’t cry.”

A broken sob, which Sawny only managed to half strangle, made it to Jeremy’s ears. His dark angel wrapped him up again and whispered, “I love you,” to him over and over again until there was nothing else.

He tried to say it back, but the darkness took him, and he was finally cool.

He gasped as he woke up, a tube down his throat, making it impossible to speak. Panic gripped him tightly, and quickly his senses were overcome, between hearing rapid beeping and his sight fading, as he struggled to breathe.

Then he felt it, five fingers counting down a rhythm on his arm. Pinky finger. Ring finger. Middle finger. Pointer finger. Thumb. Repeat. He focused on that until the panic subsided. It was only moments before a nurse was in his room.

They were quick to order the removal of his breathing tube as soon as it was determined that he could breathe on his own.

His throat was scratchy and dry as he tried to speak, but he managed to get out one word.

“Sawny.”

He leaned in from the side of the bed where he had been standing, tapping his fingers on Jeremy’s arm.

“I’m here.”

Jeremy’s heart just about burst in his chest. The heart rate monitors reflected his surge of emotion, and it was another ten minutes before the nurses were sure he wasn’t going to code and die on them.

When they finally cleared out, Jeremy turned back to Sawny. There was no little amount of awe in his voice when he croaked, “You came for me.”

Sawny leaned over and put their foreheads together. “I’ll always come for you.”

Jeremy snorted. “It’s my turn to tell you not to make me laugh.”

The tender moment was broken, but it was worth it to see Sawny smile. Sawny held a cup with a straw up to his lips. “Take small sips. It’ll help you not to sound like rocks grinding against each other when you talk.”

All of a sudden Jeremy was parched.

When he’d had his fill, he closed his eyes. “I thought you were an avenging angel. You were so beautiful and so dangerous. I was out of my mind with pain.” Tears started flowing down Jeremy’s cheeks. “But you rescued me.”

He paused, the silence heavy.

“I told them about you. I tried not to, but it hurt so badly, and I couldn’t help it.”

Sawny leaned close again. “Shhh. It doesn’t matter. They’re all dead now.”

Jeremy started. “All of them?”

“They took you, and they hurt you. Death was a lucky punishment for them.”

Just as the thirst had hit him a few minutes ago, exhaustion tugged at Jeremy now.

He was fading quickly when he said, “My angel said he loved me.”

The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was “He does.”

Jeremy was a terrible patient. He was lucky that Sawny loved him, and that Sarah had the mind of a general at war when it came to planning and directing.

He was finally sent home from the hospital a whopping twenty-two days after his admission, having spent the last week in a rehab center. He still had trouble moving around and had a few months of outpatient rehab to get through, but he was finally back in his own apartment.

Sarah got him settled on the couch and said her good-byes, leaving Jeremy and Sawny truly alone for the first time in over a month.

Sawny was puttering—putting things away, tidying, babbling about ordering dinner.

Jeremy’d had a long day and no longer wanted to be sitting alone on the couch.

“Sawny, stop fiddling with everything, and come sit down with me.”

He practically dropped the roll of paper towels he was in the process of putting in its dispenser. “Just let me finish up in here.”

“If you don’t get in here in ten seconds, I’m going to think you don’t like me anymore.”

Sawny walked toward the couch from the kitchen. His ears were pink, and he looked guilty as hell. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Jeremy grumbled, not in a particularly good mood. “Don’t be sorry. Just sit with me.”

Sawny sat down but remained stiff.

Jeremy sighed. “Do you regret saying it?”

They both knew what he was talking about. When Jeremy had been mostly unconscious, Sawny had not had trouble professing his love. But as soon as Jeremy was awake to make any return professions or for either of them to act on said professions, he clammed up. He said to focus on getting better, and they would talk about it later. Jeremy was frustrated to say the least. And more than a little hurt.

Sawny was quiet for a bit before he responded. “No. It’s just, since we met, I’ve been shot twice, you’ve been kidnapped, and we’ve never even been on a real date. I don’t know how to do this. I haven’t ever been with someone since I started this job. I tried so hard to keep my feelings for you separate, to not allow them to become romantic. But, God, Jeremy, I love you so much. I just don’t know what to do now.”

Jeremy didn’t think he could grin any bigger if he tried. He turned to look Sawny in the eyes, as much as he could with his limited mobility, while sitting on the couch, and said, “Sawny, will you do me the honor of going on a date with me?”

“That simple?”

“Yes, that simple. It’s fourteen little words that only need one little word as an answer.”

Sawny finally got on board and smiled back at Jeremy. “Yes, asshole. That’s two words. Ha.”

“Come here and kiss me. I can’t move any closer in your direction without pulling something.”

Sawny only hesitated for a second before he gently pressed his lips against Jeremy's. It wasn't fireworks and explosions, but it was warmth and home. And that was what both of them needed just then.

Epilogue

Somehow Sarah seemed more excited about their budding relationship than they were. When she walked in on them the next day, tangled in each other's arms, asleep on the couch, the noise she made probably woke up every dog in a ten-block radius.

She then disappeared for two weeks to "give them space to build their relationship."

Then, as abruptly as she had left, she reappeared.

"I've got a job for the two of you."

"The two of us?" Jeremy replied incredulously.

"Yup. It's a two-man job, and I was going to give it to a couple of my other fixers, but now that you two are together, it's perfect."

Jeremy glared at her. "You do know I don't work for you."

"That's the best part!"

Sawny finally broke in. "Just get on with it."

"I need you to attend a Queer Cruise together. We've been asked to supervise the handoff of some highly sensitive documents that must take place in international waters. Jeremy, you'll be on the cruise to write up an article on the growing phenomenon of Queer Cruises or whatever you can come up with, and War will be there as your arm candy." She grinned. "It's perfect."

Jeremy groaned, "No, it's not." He was ready to categorically refuse when he looked over at Sawny. He looked hopeful.

"You really want to do this, don't you?" Jeremy asked him.

Sawny blushed. "Not if you don't."

Jeremy sighed. "Yes, you do. I can tell." He turned back to Sarah. "Fine. We'll do it."

Sawny rewarded him with a shy kiss to his cheek. They'd never really done any PDA before, even if it was just Sarah, but it made Jeremy's heart feel warm in his chest.

Sarah skipped off toward the living room where she had left her purse bag thing and came back carrying two T-shirts. "I have gifts for your cruise."

Jeremy groaned again. In no way was this going to be good.

He took the one she handed to him and looked at it. It said, “I’m His” on it. The one Sawny had in his hands said, “He’s Mine”.

His ears were pink again. “You love them don’t you?”

Sawny grinned. “Probably just about as much as you hate them.”

Jeremy couldn’t help but smile back. “I like them—if only because they make you smile.”

Sarah made a gagging noise. “Come on. If I have listen to you two lovesick puppies any longer, I’m going to at least get photographic evidence. Let’s go outside, the light’s great today.”

With minimal grumbling, Jeremy followed Sarah and Sawny to the small park behind his apartment building.

Before Sarah had them pose, Sawny grabbed his hand and pulled him close into a hug. “You know I haven’t told you again recently, but I love you.”

Jeremy smiled into his neck. “I love you, too.”

There was nothing for it except to kiss him after that. Their lips slid together, and Sawny’s arms tightened around Jeremy’s hips. Jeremy threaded his fingers into Sawny’s hair and closed what little space was left between their bodies.

It wasn’t until he heard the click of Sarah’s camera that he remembered they had come outside to take pictures.

Once they stopped kissing, she had them pose for a few pictures, but the candid shots of them hugging ended up being their favorites.

After the cruise, and after more dates and more making out and after mind-blowing sex, many months down the road, they chose those pictures to be on their wedding invitations.

The End

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats, and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

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