

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood



by Gabriel Rasa

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The Ides of March



The phone rings at what could charitably be described as “god-damn early o’clock,” and Robert gives serious thought (as serious as can be when he’s only semi-lucid and semi-sober) to chucking it out the goddamn window. Probably wouldn’t work. Betsy would just think it was a game and bring it back.

BLOODY MARY, reads the display when he manages to crack an eye at it, and he tries to take her calls, he really does, even at ass o’clock in the morning, it builds character or something, so with a deep groan he rolls over onto his back and puts the phone to his ear.

“Ugggh,” he manages. More than she deserves, really.

“Rise and shine, loser, it’s time for mimosas and Craig-watching.”

“I’m calling in dead today.” He pulls the pillow over his face to block out the light creeping in around the blinds, but it’s too late. Betsy has realized that her *favorite person in the world* is awake and it’s play time. Her tiny paws are prancing around on his chest, at a pounds-per-square-inch ratio disproportionate to her size.

“I saw you leaving with New Guy last night,” Mary says smugly. “Is he still there? Kick him out and get your ass over here. Come on. I raised you better than this. Bros before hos.”

"It was a magical evening," Robert mumbles into the pillow. "Turns out that beneath the hideous, unassuming, cat-print button-down, he's actually a leather daddy with a penchant for breathplay and emotionally-compromising dirty talk. He's got a dungeon in his basement. He made me cry three times before he let me come. I think he changed my life."

"You struck out."

"I struck out. Still pretty magical though." Betsy's managed to snuffle her way under the pillow, like an ostrich sticking its head under the sand. Her wet nose nudges against his chin, her tail thwaps enthusiastically against his chest. He gives in and scratches her neck, and the tail thwaps faster.

It makes him feel a little better about the world. Like, 1.5% better.

"Don't make me break out the big guns, Rob."

He takes a deep breath and forces himself to sit up, shifting Betsy into the crook of his arm. The headache intensifies, but it's not the worst he's had, nothing that an ibuprofen and a pitcher of Mat's weak mimosas won't fix. "Keep your guns in your shirt, woman, I'm on my way."

Mary laughs. "Good boy."

"Woof," he agrees, and disconnects.

"So what really happened with New Guy?" she asks, once they're in position. By which he means: the Coffee Spoon has been open for twelve minutes; they have claimed the one outdoor table that manages to avoid direct morning sunlight; a pitcher of weak mimosas has been acquired and the first round is underway. Mary is her usual First-Wives-Club-glamorous self, makeup impeccable and hangover disguised behind a pair of oversized sunglasses. Robert would like to think he's got the debauched-rockstar-chic thing going on, but he probably just looks like he slept in a dumpster. Wouldn't be the first time.

"His name is Gene," Robert finds himself saying in lieu of an answer. It seems important.

"Tell that to someone who cares. So what happened?"

Mary's already two thirds of the way through her glass, but Robert makes himself sip his. It's almost like he's being virtuous.

He shrugs. "We chatted. He hit on me, really awkwardly." *Your face is, uh, good*, indeed. "We walked back from the bar together, because, as luck would have it, he has moved into the house *literally next door to me*, and I thought we'd maybe..." had a connection? something? there'd been *something there*, right? "...but when I invited him up for a fuck he got uncomfortable and said he had to go home."

Mary hums thoughtfully. "That'll make the barbecue fun."

He cracks an eye at her, feeling a sudden sense of foreboding. "What barbecue?"

She sucks in a breath that suggests she's going to do violence to the next thing she gets her hands on, but sets her champagne glass down on the table as delicately as a princess. "*Joseph*," she bites out, "found out about the new dad on the block. Brought him *homemade cookies* yesterday. Now he's throwing a barbecue on Saturday to *welcome him to the neighborhood*. Congratulations, you're invited."

"I'm not going," Robert says automatically. "I have plans." Plans to stay home and staple-gun his fucking hand to the wall, because *literally anything* would be less excruciating than attending a Joseph-Christiansen-hosted barbecue.

"No, you don't, and yes, you are. I've already RSVP'd for you."

"Woman, I will see you in hell first—"

"If I have to suffer, you have to suffer," she says, taking a placid swig from a glass with a depressingly low champagne-to-orange-juice ratio.

"Ugh."

Robert can tell when he's been defeated, and this is it. Ignominious defeat.

"It'll be great," she assures him blithely. "We'll hang out by the punch bowl and get shitfaced and watch Joseph's eye do that twitching thing."

"Ugghh." He puts his face down in his arms, feels her pat the back of his head benevolently.

"Cheer up. It's almost time for Craig to get here."

"I don't know why you think that forcing me to confront the inadequacy of my own existence before I'm even fully awake is supposed to cheer me up," he mutters.

"Do it for the spank bank," she advises sagely.

They fall into silence for a few minutes. Mary's good at that, surprisingly, and they stay that way until Craig's familiar, mesomorphic figure turns the corner, unexpectedly followed a second later by—

Oh, fuck him.

Mary squints up the street. "Is that...?"

"Oh, fuck me," he groans, and puts his face on the table again. "Tell him Robert's not here. Tell him I'm a mannequin you prop up in your passenger seat so you can use the HOV lane."

"I'm impressed with his resilience," Mary remarks, eyebrows raised as she takes a sip of her drink. She looks like she should be reviewing the scene through opera glasses. "He was matching you shot for shot last night, and you could barely haul your ass out of bed this morning."

"Right. A real trooper." A trooper who probably didn't drink half a bottle of whiskey after getting home. To his daughter. Who obviously adores him.

"Contact in T-minus ten seconds," Mary warns, as *the joggers* approach.

Okay, see, here's the thing: Craig usually has the decency not to attempt smalltalk—not with *them*, not at this *ungodly hour*. He's too busy... carb cycling or... glycogen-depleting... or... whatever the hell it was he'd tried to explain that first time, when he was new to the neigh-

borhood and didn't understand that Robert and Mary were not so much *up early* as *still up*, and they, blindsided by this Adonis in Adidas who was suddenly trying to make conversation with them, had only been stunned into polite attentiveness re: his discussion of *interval training* and *fasted cardio* by virtue of still being mostly drunk.

Anyway. That had gone well.

In his defense, Craig had been pretty quick to realize when he was playing to the wrong crowd and graciously excused himself (with a diplomatic nod to *keeping his heartrate up*), and thus they had achieved the current status quo—a comfortable equilibrium in which he waves to them as he passes and doesn't even judge them for their life choices because he's *genuinely too goddamn nice* for that, and they wave back and pretend like they're not ogling his ass when he goes by. Everyone is happy; it is a system that *works*.

Except today, for reasons unbeknownst to god or man, Craig and the New Guy—Gene—are making eye contact, are slowing down, are *stopping*, what the ever-loving fuck did Robert do to deserve this.

(Oh, who is he kidding. He deserves everything he gets, and then some.)

“Hey dudes!” says Craig, brimming with the uncomplicated zeal for physical activity usually only found in dogs. He has *The Baby* strapped to his chest, The Baby that always stares straight at Robert as if she's got a direct line to all the impure thoughts he's having about her father, and feels that he really ought to sit in the corner and think about what he's done. Craig grins, pants, favors the new guy with an (enviously long, enviously lingering) shoulder-clasp. “Dudes! Hey! This is Gene. He just moved into the cul-de-sac.”

Gene nods, considerably more winded than Craig, but then, who wouldn't be. He's got wisps of hair escaping from his bun and he's pink-cheeked from exertion, with a fine sheen of sweat over his face—more or less exactly how he might have looked in bed last night, if Robert had somehow played his cards better. Gene darts a shy, hesi-

tant smile at him; Robert has never been more thankful for sunglasses and the excuse not to acknowledge eye contact.

“Yeah,” Gene pants, leaning over to plant his hands on his thighs. “I met them last night. At Jim and Kim’s. For the Game.” He steals a glance up at Robert again. “Hey Robert. Hey—Mary.”

Robert tips his glass at them, forces his mouth into a smile. Mary’s probably annoyed that he managed to remember her name, because now she doesn’t get to rake him over the coals for it.

“Hello, Gene. Nice to see you’re making the right sort of friends,” Mary says with a smile, all barbed politeness. Robert knows enough to know what that tone of voice bodes, that it never bodes well, and he’d tell her to stand down if he could work up the energy.

Yet, inexplicably, that seems to be the right answer, because it makes Gene huff out a laugh, shaking his head, and as he turns to look at Craig his cautious smile for Robert relaxes into something infinitely more natural. “You mean Craig? Nah, we’ve known each other for ages.”

“Ages, bro,” Craig agrees. “Gene and I were like, best friends in college.”

“Since freshman year. And he’s actually a *terrible* influence.”

“Since we were eighteen. That’s like, more than half our lives.” Craig shakes his head. “Dude, the more I think about it, the more of a trip it is. Half our *lives*, man. Freakin’ wild.”

Gene nods, still trying to catch his breath. “Yeah, we fell out of touch for a while—”

“For like *ten years*, bro, but it feels like yesterday—”

Oh, *jesus fucking christ*, he has to still be asleep. This is too fucking on-the-nose to be anything except what his subconscious would dream up to torture him with.

“We’re going to the gym,” he hears Craig announce proudly when he resumes paying attention.

“Under duress,” Gene puts in, ducking his eyes in that self-effacing

smile that is, goddamn it, just as endearing in daylight as it had been under the shitty neon at Jim and Kim's.

"—and then getting a bro-brunch, just like old times." Accompanied by a fistbump, because Craig.

"Only if we can find a place that serves bread soup," Gene agrees, solemnly fistbumping him back.

For some reason, that makes Craig *completely lose his shit*, startling him into a peal of laughter that has him bending double, one hand on The Baby to keep her steady. "Oh my god, dude, I had forgotten all about that! I can't believe you still remember that."

"The Long Con of Bio 402," Gene says to Mary and Robert, straight-faced except for a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Noooo, my worst hour!" Craig moans. "Dude, don't tell them! I'm not proud of that one, bro."

"Well! This I have to hear," Mary announces, because this woman, the woman who can cut a swath of devastation through social niceties like Hannibal's elephants through the Pyrenees, who could have long since sent these two on their way with their tails between their legs, is also a harpy who lives to see Robert suffer. He kicks her under the table, but she just smirks.

Gene laughs, ducks his head. "Okay, so there was this asshole in our bio class—"

"Language, Gene, there is a *baby* in the audience!" Craig scolds with mock horror, covering The Baby's ears.

"Sorry, sorry. So there was this *jerk* in our bio class—"

"He wasn't *that bad*," Craig protests, with the air of a well-trodden argument.

"Yes he was. Swear to god, it was like he'd never met an Asian person before—"

"He was from some little podunk nowhere town, maybe he hadn't!"

"Craig, this was *junior year*, he had no excuse."

Craig heaves an indulgent sigh and takes over, “So in like, the first week of class, he’s trying to make friends, and he comes up to me and asks where I’m from—”

“He’s doing that ‘talk loud and talk slow’ thing,” Gene clarifies.

“—and I’m about to be like, Bro, it’s cool, I’m from Santa Cruz, when *this guy*,” affectionate nudge at Gene, “cuts in and is like—”

“I’m sorry, he doesn’t speak English,” Gene says, all wide-eyed sincerity. “He’s an exchange student from Kahnos, a small island nation off the Korean archipelago.”

“For the record: Korea is not an archipelago,” Craig hastens to add, as if there was anyone at the table unaware of that.

“We kept this going for the *entire semester*,” Gene says, practically misty-eyed with nostalgia. “Building lies upon lies.”

“Remember when he asked how I was attending the class, if I couldn’t speak English?”

“And I told him that you couldn’t *speak* English, but you could lip-read it.”

“And the bread soup thing.”

“That one was Smashley’s, not mine,” Gene reminds him, scrupulously fair.

“Yeah, but you guys tag-teamed it.”

“Right, so *this guy*,” Gene says, with affectionate nudge at Craig, “rolls up into class one day—”

“It was an 8 AM section,” Craig adds.

“Dude, stop, you’re giving me flashbacks to ‘Nam. So he shows up with breakfast in hand, which, because this is *Keg-Stand Craig*, still in his larval stage, not yet having metamorphosed into the beautiful butterfly of responsible adulthood you see before you today, is *toast in ramen*. Yes—you heard me right. Toast. In ramen. As if that were a thing that normal people eat.”

“Well when you think about it, toast is basically just noodles in a different shape, bro.”

“And the guy’s there, and you can tell that he is both horrified and enthralled by the sight of Craig shoveling ramen-soaked toast into his mouth, desperate to say something about it, and Smashley’s there—”

“She wasn’t even supposed to be in that section,” Craig says fondly.

“And she looks at the guy and explains to him, with a *stone poker face*, that bread soup is considered a Kahnosian delicacy, because wheat—”

“—‘and wheat by-products’—”

“Weren’t introduced on Kahnos until the late 20th century, so they’ve become synonymous with ‘modernity and cultural sophistication.’ And then we got him to *eat it*,” Gene says with relish.

“Like, I wasn’t very awake, so I just kinda held it out for him to try, cuz it wasn’t actually bad, you know?”

Gene gives him a conciliatory pat on the shoulder. “My dude, it was *vile*. But I was like, Psst! You have to take it, sharing food is a *big deal* on Kahnos, he’s going to think you’re rejecting his friendship if you don’t try it. So the guy choked down a bite, and then lied through his teeth and said it was *so good*.” Gene smiles, shakes his head. “What a stand-up guy.”

Fuck this fucking dream sequence, Robert wants to wake up already. Fuck the sort of world that would drop his soulmate right in front of him, only for said person to already be *Craig goddamn-perfect Cahn’s* soulmate.

He tunes back in to hear Craig saying, “Man, I felt so bad for lying to him about that.”

“You always were the weakest link,” Gene says darkly.

“I got him a souvenir from Santa Cruz when I went home for Christmas. And he was cool about it, in the end.”

“Only because no one can ever stay mad at you,” Gene says, and the—the *fondness* in his voice, the bottomless wealth of affection shining from his eyes, makes Robert want to flip the table and just walk away.

Because isn't that the bitch of it, really—who *could* stay mad at Craig? He's the sweetest guy you'll ever fucking meet. He's a beautiful person who deserves every beautiful thing the world has to offer. The most genuinely, uncomplicatedly, good and pure specimen of manhood that Robert has ever had the misfortune of winding up in a side-by-side comparison with. A puppy, with a chiseled jaw and an ass you could bounce a quarter off of. Jesus fucking christ, no wonder Gene hadn't been buying what Robert was selling.

He's vaguely aware that Craig's making their excuses now—keeping hearttrates up and all that, yessiree, good chap, whatever—aware of Gene's eyes for some reason lingering on him. Robert opts to concentrate on the champagne glass instead.

"Are you guys coming to the barbecue this weekend?" Gene asks suddenly, glancing at Mary to ostensibly include both of them in the question, but his gaze comes back around to Robert like iron filings to a magnet.

"Wouldn't miss it for the *world*," Mary assures him breezily.

Robert tips his glass at her. "She refuses to let me miss it."

Gene's eyes flicker uncertainly between the two of them, and Robert can see the thought as it occurs to him. They get it all the time, when people misinterpret the weird rapport between them as a romantic one, as something easier to understand than what it really is. Gene's taking the data—Mary hitting on him, then Robert propositioning him, now the two of them hanging out the way male and female friends usually don't—and trying to come up with a narrative, and failing.

"Later dudes, see you on Saturday!" Craig says cheerily as they start to peel off again.

"Later *dude*," Mary says flatly, the irony of it, as usual, lost on Craig.

"See you, *bro*," Robert contributes. He nods at Gene. "Gene."

They manage to hold the tableau until Craig and Gene have disappeared around the corner, off to lift heavy things and put them down

again, no doubt while gazing into each other's eyes and sharing fond memories of their disgustingly wholesome youth. Goddamn it.

Robert lets his head collapse onto the table again.

He's just so *tired*. Can't even decide whether he wants to be drunker, or whether he wants to sleep, to have the luxury of just *not existing* for a few hours.

"End me, Mary," he mutters into the tabletop. "Put me out of my misery. It'd be doing the lord's work."

"Aww, he's a little con man, just like you," Mary coos into her champagne glass. "No wonder you're sweet on him."

He can't even work up the energy to deny that, and it's not like Mary couldn't see through him anyway. She knows all the weak points in his bullshit-exoskeleton by now.

Deep breaths.

Fuck it, right? He barely knows the guy. A few drinks and one non-hookup aren't worth mourning like it's the end of some grand love affair.

He sits up, leaning back in his chair and tipping his face at the sky, where dawn pink is giving way to blue. Deep breaths.

"Well, that was nice while it lasted," he says aloud, pleased that it manages to come out with only a light *soupeçon* of bitterness on top.

"Gene is *doooooomed*," Mary sing-songs. "The softball moms are going to *murder himmm*."

"Dead man walking," Robert agrees on autopilot.

"They would Cask-of-Amontillado each other in a heartbeat to get into Craig's sweaty gym shorts."

"Most eligible dad on the block," he affirms numbly. For once, sleep is sounding better than alcohol.

Mary rolls her head to face him, her sunglasses boring into him like insect eyes. "You know he's too perfect to be real. There's no way that's an actual human being."

Robert takes a deep breath, lets it out. "Obviously an android," he says at last. "Built by aliens and sent to spy on us."

She shakes her head sadly, takes a drink. "Honestly, they're not fooling anyone. I'm almost embarrassed for them."

"They really should dial it back a notch."

"Guys, please—less is more."

Silence settles over them again, comfortable, routine. All the things they don't ever actually say to each other bumping around at its edges. Finally Mary reaches over and flicks his elbow.

"You wanna help me finish this, or are you tapping out?" she asks, indicating the half-empty pitcher. Her blessing to leave, if he wants to, or to stay and not talk about it anymore.

He stares at the pitcher for a long moment, trying to work up the energy to care one way or the other. It's all a tired jumble. The hang-over he's got coming. The image of sunlight streaming over his empty bed. That last glimpse of Craig as he jogged off, like a taunt of what Robert could be if he could just *stop*.

"I want it to be stronger," he says, sounding sulky even to his own ears. Mimosas are nice, but he'll have orange juice coming out his fucking gills before it gets him half as fuzzy as he'd like to be.

"Well, *bro*," Mary says. With her sunglasses fixed on him, she reaches into her purse and pulls out a flask, setting it on the table between them. "Good thing I got your back, *bro*."

He takes a breath. Tips his glass to her. "King me."

When he gets home and goes to let Betsy back inside, sunlight is streaming in through the patio doors.

And he's... good.

He leans on the glass, breathes out, closes his eyes and lets himself soak up the warmth, soak up the sunlight, painting red against the back of his eyelids. Betsy's jumping around his feet, barking, her nails skittering over the hardwood floor in her excitement. The weight has

lifted, for once, and for a long, quiet moment he lets himself just *be*. Feeling the sunlight warm on his arms. Listening to himself just breathe.

He lingers there, half-drowsing, before eventually he shakes himself awake again. He pushes away from the door and turns the blinds behind him, plunging the living room into darkness.

“Alright, sweetheart,” he grunts, bending down to pick Betsy up. “Naptime for bad boys and girls.”

He sets her down on the couch. Shrugs off his jacket. Toes off his shoes. Digs phone and wallet out of his pockets. His phone’s blinking the light for unread messages and—

Unknown number: Hey Robert! It’s Gene

Unknown number: Craig gave me your number, hope that’s okay?

Unknown number: It was good seeing you today

Unknown number: And meeting you last night

Unknown number: Hopefully I’ll run into you at the party as well!

Unknown number: :)

And all at once, the weight comes crashing back down, his breath leaving him in a rush. He’s sitting down hard on the couch, his hand on the phone dumb and motionless, his mind blank and on the retreat.

He needs to—

To—

Say something. Something normal, something flirty, something *whatever*, fucking *anything*, *goddamnit*, *Robert*, *you used to be able to do this*, even his signature, off-putting Robert weirdness would be better than radio silence, but—

He curls forward and lets out a ragged breath, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against the edge of the phone, a grounding pressure in an ocean that’s threatening to drag him under.

“Fuck.” His knuckles are tight around the phone. His eyes are heavy and hot with something that’s never actually going to turn into tears. “*Fuck.*”

Gene in the bar, aglow in the shitty neon, ducking his head shyly at Robert’s dumb lines but unable to keep from smiling and glancing back at him, bright-eyed and breathless with the *potential* of—

Gene on the night sidewalk outside Robert’s house, his smile freezing into something stiff and uncomfortable at the prospect of—

Gene on the morning sidewalk outside the Coffee Spoon, leaning into Craig and smiling and elbowing him, so comfortable in each other’s space, so full of each other’s history, with no room for—

“I can’t deal with you right now,” he whispers, as if there were anyone around to hear him. Anyone besides Betsy, that is, now whining and nosing against his arm, her dumb little paws sliding around his lap in a losing battle with gravity.

“Yeah,” he says aloud. He swallows. He finds her head with his hand, moves to rub the back of her neck. “Yeah, sweetheart, we’re going to sleep.”

He thumbs off the screen without looking at it again, lays the phone face-down on the coffee table, and lets himself sink down into the couch. The AC is droning in the background, and Betsy is taking twenty minutes to settle, like she always does, but even that is its own kind of comfort.

He breathes.

Breathes again.

This isn’t the worst day he’s had.

Sleep comes over him, gradually, and the weight begins to recede once more.

The Zara Shirt and the Corndog Con



BLOODY MARY: Yo

BLOODY MARY: What you doing today

BLOODY MARY: Call me when you wake up

BLOODY MARY: I have a mission for you

BLOODY MARY: Should you choose to accept it

“Morning, sunshine,” Mary says when she picks up.

“Morning,” Robert agrees. He’s puttering around the kitchen in his boxers, putting on the coffeemaker, still muzzy-headed from sleep but, for the first time all week, not feeling too bad. True neutral, though it’s a fragile state, like he’s balanced on the fulcrum of a seesaw and trying to hold very, very still. “So what’s the job, boss? Wet work? I’ll do it, but it’s twice my usual rate, and no women, children, or dogs.”

“Wanna be my date to the bake sale today?”

That startles him a little more awake, startles a disbelieving laugh out of him. “Christ, *no*. Why the fuck would I want to do that?”

“Because,” she says through clenched teeth, “*Joseph*—”

Oh no...

“—has conned the New Guy into helping him with it.”

And so it begins, Robert thinks numbly.

He's aware that he's slammed the box of coffee filters down hard on the counter-top, that his lungs are working like he's about to start dry-heaving. It's *stupid*, because he knew this was coming sooner or later—Joseph is nothing if not predictable—but it still feels like a suckerpunch that it's happening now. The thought of Joseph always makes him want to break things, but the thought of Joseph with Gene makes him feel physically sick.

"His name is Gene," Robert says aloud, because it beats anything else he could say.

"Whatever. I want to crash Joseph's date. I want to make him sweat. And I want him to watch Gene go *fucking starry-eyed* when you roll up."

Robert swallows. "You keep saying that."

"Because he keeps doing it. His crush is somehow even more obvious than yours."

And what the fuck is Robert supposed to make of that? Because he's not *blind*, and she's not wrong, but he's already asked and been shot down once, and he's not the kind of asshole who can't take no for an answer.

"Mary, he honestly thought I was going to get into a fistfight with an eighth-grader."

He can practically see her shrug. "And he wants to bone you anyway, mazel tov."

Robert has no idea what Gene wants, which is sort of the problem.

"Has he texted you since the date?" she asks.

That utter train-wreck of a date, the date that makes Robert *cringe* when he remembers some of the things he did? "Yes."

She pauses. "Did you text him back?"

The silence speaks for itself.

Mary lets that dangle for a long moment, then snorts in exasperation. "So, anyway, about that bake sale—are you going to help me stage an intervention, or do you only cock-block yourself?"

The bake sale. Where he'll see Joseph. Where, heaven help him, he'll probably have to *talk* to Joseph. And see Gene, who, it is true, is always inexplicably happy to see him. And usually makes him feel a little better about the world.

"One conversation, that's all I'm asking," Mary says. He'll pretend not to notice the brief, uncertain dip in her voice, because that's how they roll. "One conversation with them, and then we'll set up somewhere that puts you directly in Gene's line of sight, just enough to ensure that he won't be able to think about anything else for the rest of the day. Then we can share PTA gossip and overindulge in shitty boxed baked goods, and drinks this evening are on me."

Robert takes a deep breath, makes his hands move again. "Throw in some pot brownies, and you've got yourself a deal, boss."

She allows him a generous hour to get ready ("Take a shower, wear the white shirt I got you from Zara, we want to remind him that you're hot") but Robert still arrives at the park to discover that he's been tricked into helping set up. It's okay—he can afford to be civic-minded once in a blue moon, his reputation can take the hit.

Mary's already there and terrorizing the other church moms, but Joseph and Gene haven't arrived yet. Robert is trying very, very hard not to think about the two of them unchaperoned at Joseph's house—he *knows* how that man operates, goddamn it, and Robert will *set him on fire* if he—and lets himself get roped into putting up a half a dozen pop-up sunshades.

It's a pleasant workout for muscles that don't normally get much use; also pleasant is the attention that The Zara Shirt nets him from the single church moms. He's no Craig Cahn, obviously, and they're not shanking each other to put a ring on him, but several are hinting that they might enjoy a walk on the wild side. Nice to know he's still got it, somehow.

Robert's just starting on pop-up #7 when Mary materializes out of

nowhere to grab his arm and drag him off, a blithe non-apology for the dismayed church mom she steals him from.

“Eagle One has landed,” she mutters under her breath, steering him around back of the line of tents.

“Guns are in position, admiral.” He cranes his head to scan the crowd, but doesn’t spot Gene anywhere.

“Well, *yeah*, that’s why I had you wear the shirt.”

“Where’s the target?”

“Booth near the water fountains. Count down from three hundred and then make your approach. When the mission is complete, rendezvous at the refreshment stand.”

“Ave, Emperor,” Robert agrees.

“Make me proud, son.”

She slips off to find a seat for the show. He mills around behind the corndog stand while he makes the silent countdown, then takes a deep breath and sets out.

So, the one consolation prize, the silver lining to being forced into social interaction with Joseph Christiansen, is that no matter how excruciating it is for Robert, it’s worse for Joseph. Because Robert has a lot of feelings (a *lot of feelings*) about the whole business—loathing for Joseph and loathing for himself currently tied in first place—but Joseph’s the one who so desperately needs it to stay a *secret*. He’s the one with the house of cards that Robert could send toppling over if he ever felt vindictive enough, and every conversation they have (with the underlying thrum of, *yes, motherfucker, you should be afraid*) feels like a hostage situation—Joseph’s good behavior, in exchange for Robert’s silence.

He spots Gene and Joseph sitting on a pair of lawn chairs under a pop-up, and angles his approach so that Joseph won’t see him coming until it’s too late. Gene’s saying something, his words accompanied by some nods, some smiles, some hand gestures. His expression is ami-

able and he doesn't look like he's hating every minute of Joseph's company, more's the pity.

It suddenly occurs to Robert to doubt his welcome here.

Joseph (fuck him) certainly knows how to turn on that oh-so-earnest charm when he wants to, and if the subject of Robert has come up, well. There's nothing Joseph could say that would paint him in a flattering light. And for chrissakes—it's not like he even needs Joseph's help to ruin his chances, not after his drunk-ass idea of a date was to drag Gene around after him for booze and petty crime (and a fistfight with an eighth-grader, just the cherry on top of that shit sundae).

Most damning of all—he remembers with a sinking heart, a thought that has him stopping in his tracks—is that he still hasn't read Gene's latest messages. It got to where he couldn't even bring himself to open them, it was too much on top of everything else, so for all he knows, the last thing Gene said was, *Never mind, obviously this was a mistake, you're a dumpster fire and I don't want you anywhere near my perfect life or my perfect daughter*, no no no, he did not think this all the way through, mission abort.

But before he can change course, Gene notices that someone's approaching, glances at Robert over Joseph's shoulder—and in the moment of recognition his eyes *light up* and he's stopping mid-sentence, a brilliant smile blooming across his face.

And just like that, the tightness in Robert's chest is easing. He can breathe again. He has yet to fuck this up beyond repair.

"Robert!" Gene calls out in surprise, eagerly straightening in his chair.

From behind, Robert can see Joseph's shoulders go tense, the split second he takes to steel himself before turning around, though when he does his face is composed and perfectly placid. You'd have to be looking for it to see the hard edge in his eyes, half panic and half calculation as he tries to predict what Robert (erratic, loose-cannon Robert)

is going to say, if this is the moment when he'll finally decide to blow it all open, and what Joseph needs to have ready to counter it.

Not that Gene is in any danger of noticing, because, well—fucking starry-eyed, indeed. Robert may have no idea what to do with this undeserved adoration, but it warms him to the bottom of his black and shriveled heart anyway.

“Mornin’, gentlemen,” Robert announces, ducking under the shade of the pop-up.

“Hello, Robert,” Joseph says. His voice is light, his smile pleasant; it’s only the eyes that give him away.

“Hey!” Gene says breathlessly. “Long time... no see.” A tinge of doubt suddenly colors his voice because, right—Robert just left Gene on-read for a week.

Robert gives a rueful smile, spreads his arms. “Sorry. You know how it goes, life on the lam—gotta double back and lay a false trail every once in a while.”

It’s not his best line, but Gene laughs anyway. “Say no more,” he agrees with a wink and a tap on the side of his nose. “I just didn’t—I wouldn’t have expected to find you at a... church... bake sale.”

He says it like he’s not sure how he got suckered into it himself, and Robert’s smugly making a mental tally of *Robert: 1, Joseph: 0*, that Gene’s not into the god-bothering.

Robert tsks. “Please, Gene, I’m not a *complete* reprobate,” he chides, easing up beside Gene’s chair and settling his hips against the folding table.

Gene tilts his face up to Robert with a smile. “You just play one on TV?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow playfully, like it’s a private joke, and suddenly *it is*. It’s Queensbury rules all over again, except this time there’s no doubt that Gene *gets it*, gets *him*, that he actually enjoys Robert’s nonsense, and—

God help him, Robert is so fucked. He knows it’s written all over his face, that Joseph can read him even if Gene can’t, knows that he

shouldn't be doing this in front of an audience, he's showing his soft underbelly to a predator, he's painting a target on Gene, and the *moment* that his back is turned Joseph is going to be whispering fuck-only-knows-what insinuations into Gene's ear.

But... to hell with it. He's tired of trying to play this off like he doesn't care. It only ends with shuttered disappointment on Gene's face, and Robert's tired of being the cause of that.

It's Gene who looks away first, ducking his head—which, thanks to their relative heights, means that his face is now at eye level and about ten inches away from Robert's crotch.

"You should, uhm—pull up a chair," Gene offers distractedly. His gaze has fallen to Robert's waist and gotten stuck there, on The Zara Shirt pulled tight across the vee of his hips, stretched practically sheer, and the curling outline of a dark tattoo just barely visible beneath it. Robert cocks his hips a little further, denim pulling tight across his thighs, and sees Gene's breath catch.

Bless that woman. Robert's going to buy her a fruit basket.

"Ah, would that I could," he says. He folds his arms behind his head and stretches. It makes the hem of the shirt ride up, just barely past his belt, exposing a sliver of the tattoo, and it's not subtle in the slightest, but it doesn't have to be; Robert knows the picture he makes, knows he's hot, he's got *that* going for him, at least, and Gene's rapt attention is infinitely more gratifying than the church moms'.

"But I'm afraid Mary's got me blackmailed into manning the refreshments stand." He folds his arms again and catches Joseph's eye, letting a little more teeth into his smile. "She knows all my dirty secrets. I can refuse her nothing."

Ah, and there's the eye twitch. It's the small things in life.

"Can we interest you in a brownie before you go?" Joseph asks pleasantly. "They're for a good cause."

He can feel himself stiffen at Joseph's voice, and fuck, he *hates him-*

self for how easily he lets the man get under his skin, *every time*, even when he should have been prepared for this.

He makes himself turn to Gene instead, smiles. "I don't know, can you? Tempt me, Gene."

"Did I ever tell you about my great-Nonna's secret brownie recipe, smuggled out of Russia before the fall of Romanovs? Good men died so that these brownies would live."

Joseph shifts and clears his throat pointedly—right, because he takes issue with *lying*, that hypocritical fuck.

"Five dollars says it's from a box," Robert says.

"It's from a box," Gene agrees.

"But made with love," Joseph puts in benignly, and Robert's fingers clench, nails digging into his arm.

He can't play this game. He has the nuclear option, he's the one who could end it once and for all, but he can't make smalltalk with Joseph and have it come out sounding even remotely normal, not while he's sober. Not when the very sound of Joseph's voice makes his skin crawl, not when he can't even look Joseph in the face without *choking*.

He needs to finish the operation and get out before he fucks this up. He's here to throw a wrench in Joseph's well-oiled machinations, to inoculate Gene against the bullshit somehow. To give him a reason to decline what Joseph's offering.

So give him a reason to choose you instead.

Robert draws in a breath. "Sorry, I'm afraid I'm going to be a harder sell than that. Polish your sales pitch and try me again later—it's time for me to get back to the salt mines."

He drops a hand onto Gene's shoulder, neighborly-like, except for the thumb he slowly drags down the back of Gene's neck. He swears he can feel the other man shiver under his hand, lean into his touch, and that makes it easy to bend close and murmur, "Stop by, if you get thirsty."

He catches Gene's eye and holds it for a beat, even throws in a wink for good measure as he's letting go and stepping back, and christ, this is the most obvious he has *ever been in his life*, he'd be embarrassed except that Gene is staring at him like revelation, like he wouldn't put up a fight if Robert wanted to bend him over the crappy folding table and have his way with him right then and there.

It's hard for Robert to drag his eyes off him, but he makes himself do it, makes himself smile at Joseph and toss off an ironic salute. "Be good."

Joseph smiles tightly. "Have a blessed day."

It's only the certain knowledge that they're watching him that keeps him from making his escape at a run, beelining for the chairs Mary's got set up near the refreshment stand. She has her sunglasses on for plausible deniability and is positioned with optimal line of sight on the other booth, but fuck if he can stand to watch Gene talking to Joseph for five hours, and he collapses into a chair that puts them squarely at his back.

"Mission accomplished. You're welcome," he says, his breath leaving him in a rush.

"What the hell did you say to them?" She sounds impressed. "Joseph looks like he's about to have an aneurysm. Gene looks like he just saw the face of god."

"I—a lot of bullshit, probably, knowing me." It's hard to focus, suddenly, over the blood pounding in his ears. He draws in a shaky breath, discreetly flexes his hands. "I think it was mostly The Zara Shirt," he offers after a minute. "Best thing you ever bought me."

"I shoplifted it. But it's the thought that counts."

"I need a drink."

Mary's mouth thins, and she twirls a hand to showcase the booth beside her, Vanna White style. "Pick your poison."

He looks at her, looks pointedly at her purse.

She huffs, flicks her hair irritably. "Fucking Joseph took it when I

wasn't looking. You want to go to Stop n Shop and get us something, you can borrow my keys."

He sighs, settles back into the chair. "No. Guess I'll survive without it."

It's strange, staying sober as the afternoon wears on; he's used to this time of day being softer, blurred around the edges, but the sounds of the park stay sharp, and he doesn't have to concentrate to follow the conversations ebbing and flowing around him.

Mary hadn't actually needed his help with the booth, so he's left mostly to his own devices as she deals with a steady stream of children and parents. He winds up drowsing in the shade of the pop-up as afternoon edges into evening and the crowd around them gradually thins.

"Look alive," Mary says abruptly, knocking her knee against his. He startles out of his doze in time to see her pushing herself up out of her chair. "You can thank me later."

She's gone before he can ask, leaving him alone, and he's still blinking awake when there's a light nudge on his shoulder a few minutes later. He turns around to see Gene, dual-wielding corndogs, looking hesitant at the prospect of waking Robert up for this.

"Uh... hi. I ran into Mary at the corndog stand, she told me to give you this. Said she had to see a man about a horse."

Bless that woman.

For a moment he's torn, since he doesn't have the greatest track record when left unsupervised with Gene, and the desire for liquid courage wars with the knowledge that he's marginally less likely to embarrass himself if he's not drunk.

"Yeah, she does that," he says nonsensically, reaching out and taking the corndog from Gene. He hates corndogs, hates them almost as much as he hates Joseph and smalltalk and fruity cocktails, but it's a sacrifice he will gladly make, a price he will pay ten thousand times over if that's what it takes to trick Gene into coming over here.

Maybe he can accidentally drop it.

And Gene's mission is discharged, but instead of leaving, he's taking the seat that Mary had vacated.

"Aren't you supposed to be—" Robert gestures vaguely over his shoulder "—brownie-mongering, or something? What's Joseph even paying you for?"

Gene smiles. "I'm union. We're entitled to regular breaks. Nice try, mac, but I know my rights."

So fucked.

They fall into silence after that. Gene, eating his corndog thoughtfully and watching some sort of soccer game in the distance. Robert, still drowsy, relying on his sunglasses to hide the fact that he's just watching Gene.

"You're in Mary's chair," he says at last.

"I'll fight her for it."

"You'll lose."

"No." Gene looks at him, smiles. "I'm pretty sure she'd let me win." He points to the untouched corndog in Robert's hand. "Are you gonna eat that?"

Robert looks at it. Shakes his head, and then hands it over without a word.

"Thought so," Gene says, taking a complacent bite. "I know a con when I see one."

If Robert could just—do this right, then it wouldn't matter what Joseph did or said. His slick, practiced seductions wouldn't work on Gene, because Gene wouldn't even be listening.

Give him a reason to choose you.

He takes a breath, moves his leg so his knee is nudging Gene's, the line of his calf pressed against Gene's leg.

Gene looks up, startled, but doesn't pull away, and after a moment he slowly, carefully extends a hand into the space between them, palm-up.

And Robert still doesn't know what Gene wants from him, really. What Gene thinks he's going to find when he makes it past the facade of Robert's habitual bullshit. Gene hasn't realized that it's too late, that Robert was wrung dry long before he ever arrived on the scene, that there's nothing left in him now but snark and self-preservation, but—

But—

But right here, right now, all Gene's asking is for Robert to hold his hand. And Robert... can do that much. Maybe it'll be enough to make Gene stick around a little longer, because there's no way this won't end in disaster, but Robert is so, so selfish, he'll take as much of this as he can get, he'll keep it going for as long as he can.

He draws in a breath, then reaches out and laces his fingers with Gene's.

Interlude: The Joggers



“So,” Craig says meaningfully as they jog away from the Coffee Spoon, and Gene knows what’s coming even before he sees Craig’s smirk. “Robert.”

“Argh.” Gene ducks his head. “Was I that obvious?”

“Only to me. I *have* known you for half our lives,” Craig points out. A few paces later he adds, more gently, “And I knew Alex.”

Gene jogs in silence.

Craig manages to land an elbow against him. “What can I say, dude, you’ve got a type—why do you think I wanted to introduce you? First time I met him, I thought of you. I was like, man, if Gene were here, he would want to climb this guy like a tree. Then it turns out you work even faster than I do.”

“I guess. I met him last night at the bar, and we hit it off. Or—I thought we did. When we were leaving he, ah, invited me up.”

“Yeah?” A grin spreads across Craig’s face and he offers Gene a fist for bumping. “Get it, bro.”

“Craig, I *turned him down*,” Gene moans. “I just—I wasn’t expecting it, not at all. It was literally my first night at the new house, and there

was still unpacking I needed to do before I could go to bed, and Amanda had school the next day, and I...”

Gene slows to a halt, leaning over to catch his breath, and Craig obligingly stops with him.

“Craig...” he begins unhappily. He glances back the way they came, then says, like a confession, “I’ve hardly dated anyone since Alex died. I had completely forgotten that this is *a thing grown-ups can do*, just meet a hot stranger in a bar and have sex with them. I’d been really enjoying talking to him, and then out of nowhere, *bam*, wanna fuck? Totally blindsided me. So I stammered about having to go home, like an *idiot*, and he backed off.”

Craig’s hand lands on his shoulder. “Bro, if you’re not ready, you’re not ready. You don’t have to jump right back into the dating scene yet.”

“But I think I want to? Like, *a lot*? Or maybe just with him, but—arggh, *fuck*.” Gene digs his fingers into his scalp. “I should have said yes. You saw him this morning, he won’t even *look* at me now.”

“Nah, dude, I wouldn’t worry about it. Rob’s just not a morning person. You’ll see him again at the barbecue, you’ll have other chances to dazzle him with the ol’ Gene Woods charm.”

Gene scrubs a hand over his face. “The Gene Woods charm might be kind of rusty these days. Christ,” he says tiredly, dropping his hand. “I didn’t think I’d ever find myself needing to know how to flirt again.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’ve still got it,” Craig offers. “He just needs to get to know you better. But...” He glances back toward the Coffee Spoon, bites his lip and absently rubs River’s head. “Gene, you should know—Rob’s a cool guy, and I know he’s your type and all, but... he’s not Alex.”

“I know. Craig, trust me, *I know*,” he insists. “Look, I’ve—done my mourning. It’s been four years. I’ve done my stages of grief, I’ve *accepted* it. I know he’s gone, and no one’s going to replace him, I just—” He feels Craig’s hand tighten on his shoulder, and he bows his head and sighs. “I just miss him. I miss him every day.”

"I know, man. I miss him too."

They stand in silence for a moment, then Craig nudges him. "But you know what Alex would want you to do."

That startles a weak laugh out of Gene, because, yes, he does know. "Tap the hottie next door?"

Craig grins. "Tap it like Craig taps kegs."

"He only ever had my best interests at heart," Gene admits.

"Well, whatever happens, you know I've got your back." Craig squeezes his shoulder once more, before letting go and stepping back. "So, you up for some murder sprints before we hit the weights?"

Gene winces. "Do we have to?"

"Well, no." Craig catches his eye, and there's a familiar twinkle of mischief. "But I *do* have a certain someone's phone number that I could give you. If you earn it."

Gene huffs a laugh, rolls his head heavenward. "Why did anyone ever believe that you were the good twin?"

"You gonna do it?"

"Bro. You have only known me for half our lives. What do you think?"

The Apple and the Tree



It's a beautiful day; the air is warm and crisp, with a playful breeze that ruffles the tablecloths of the waterfront cafe, and the sunlight is dazzlingly bright, glittering off the gentle ocean waves. A beautiful day, and Robert is in no state to appreciate any of it, because he's busy trying not to have a meltdown.

How on earth had Gene made this sound like something he could do, or even something he *should* do?

Val doesn't need him in her life. That isn't self-pity or self-loathing talking, it's just a fact. She's doing fine without him, fantastic, better than she ever did with her useless dad there to be a stone around her neck, with his black moods and his irresponsibility. There cannot possibly be an alcoholic-jackass-shaped hole in her life.

He shouldn't even indulge whatever misplaced sentimentality is making her reach out to him now. He's just going to break both their hearts all over again.

Because he knows this game, they've played it before—he'll try, he'll make the effort, and for a while they'll both fool themselves into thinking that it'll last. That *this time*, unlike every other time, things are going to be different, that he can be good and stay good. But he knows

how this ends, even if she's managed to forget—that sooner or later he'll fuck up and fuck off, like he always does, straight back to the same bad habits as if he never left.

Nothing's going to change until you do. Gene's voice in his memory, gentle and certain, the ghost of Gene's hand in his hair.

Robert already feels exhausted. *You think I haven't tried?*

God, how he's tried. He's spent his whole damn life *wanting* to be a better husband and a better father, wanting to do the right things, be the right person, but always falling short, always failing. Gene doesn't understand it, not at all; he's such an innately good person that he has no conception of what it is to be an innately shitty person. That what comes so easily to him, so naturally, isn't something Robert's even capable of.

You have the same capacity for good that we all have.

Robert focuses on his hands, resting on the tabletop, breathes deeply and tries to reach back to the sense of peace, of *possibility* that he'd felt briefly with Gene. That moment when the walls had finally come crashing down, and Gene had been there to pull him up out of the rubble. The realization that in Gene's chaste, confessional embrace, Robert had finally found what he'd needed all this time, the intimacy he'd been groping for with every ill-advised drunken hookup. Understanding, acceptance, forgiveness—someone to see him for what he is and think he's worth loving anyway.

Gene, who made him believe, for one wide-open moment, that he had it in him to change, that he really could do better in the future than he had in the past.

The cafe door swings open as someone comes out onto the deck, and Robert looks up with his heart suddenly in his throat—but it's not Val. It's an elderly couple who shuffles over to a table on the far side, and Robert breathes out, feels his heartbeat subside again.

He checks his watch, wondering if she's running late; the answer is no, not for another four minutes, he just had the bad sense to show up

too damn early. And fuck, he doesn't even know her well enough to know what to expect—whether she's the sort of person who's chronically late, or chronically early, or punctual to a tee. He searches his memory for clues from her childhood, but can only shake out rusty images of a quiet, serious child trying heartbreakingly hard to please her fucked-up parents.

Why is she even trying?

Robert can feel that borrowed confidence starting to slip away from him, like some fragile enchantment turning to dust in the light of day, and he is badly wishing he'd told her no. (Or, more his style—that he'd just never replied at all.)

It's going to be a trainwreck. It's going to be excruciating for both of them. He's going to be an asshole and confirm everything she already knew, and she's going to be reasonable and lovely, and inadvertently rub salt in his wounds, reminding him what he's missing out on for having driven her from his life, how all of this is his fault. He wants so, so badly to just get up and walk away, but by this point it's too late, and he can't bring himself to do that to her.

Because he can picture her arriving after he's left; at first thinking he's running late and waiting for him with the same agony of anticipation that he's feeling now. Anticipation that slowly transmutes into doubt, and then finally the realization that he's not coming after all. And he may be an asshole, but he can't put her through that.

He breathes out, tries to wrap himself in the memory of Gene again. Gene's quiet conviction that he can do this right if he tries hard enough. His faith in Robert as unshakable as the bedrock, so firm and certain that Robert can almost believe it's not misplaced. That maybe Gene sees something in him that no one else does.

Or he just doesn't know you very well. It's not like anyone who actually knows you has very high expectations.

And yet Val's still trying, isn't she? She hasn't given up on him yet. She still thinks that maybe *this time* he can be a better man, like Marilyn

always thought, like Marilyn *died thinking*, and christ, no, no, stop, *abort*, he cannot deal with thoughts of Marilyn right now—

Think of Gene. He has faith in you.

Gene's arms around him, his light touch on the back of Robert's head like love, like shelter.

Waking up in the middle of the night and finding Gene still there, curled up snugly under his arm, sound asleep.

Gene's hands cradling his face in the morning light, Gene's lips on his forehead before he left, *You've got this, I believe in you.*

He can be the person Gene wants him to be. Or try, at least.

"Dad?"

He looks up, and suddenly he's facing Val again for the first time in over three years.

Jesus, he does not got this.

She's hovering a few yards away, the uncertainty in her face and posture at odds with her perfect makeup and her smart, fashionable suit. She shifts her weight awkwardly, hands tight around her purse like a lost tourist.

He's wondered, over the years, how she's changed in his absence, how she's grown. And the reality isn't wholly unexpected, but it's still a shock to see it in person.

She looks different, of course—older. She's lost the last of her adolescent gawkiness, filled out in face and body, from a teenager into a grown woman, and she looks beautiful and *so much like her mother*. She's always had Robert's coloration and her mother in her features, but now the resemblance is so strong it nearly knocks the breath out of him, to see her suddenly with Marilyn's heart-shaped face, Marilyn's large, luminous eyes. It's twenty years of hurt and heartbreak and failure all at once bubbling to the surface again, choking in his throat, and *he does not got this*.

"Uh. Sit down?" he offers, because she seems to be waiting for an

invitation, and because it's too late to back out now unless he wants to throw himself off the pier and fake his own death.

"Yeah. Sorry I'm late," Val says, even though she's still two minutes early. She takes the chair opposite him—cautiously, like she's about to spook and bolt. Or like she thinks he is.

"It's okay, you're on New York time," he says easily. God bless his mouth's ability to produce bullshit without requiring input from his brain.

"Mm, New York time," she agrees, taking a gulp from the glass of ice water that's been thawing for her on the tabletop. "Known colloquially as 'whenever the fuck we feel like it.'"

He doesn't remember her swearing before, and he wonders briefly whether she pre-gamed a few shots before showing up for this lunch (wishes he'd thought to do the same) or whether they just outgrew the polite fiction that his baby girl doesn't know bad words, and he missed that memo because he wasn't paying attention.

"Did you already order?" she asks, as if that's a thing that people do when they're still waiting on someone. She flips open the menu and scans down it like she's assessing data for a plan of attack.

"No, I just got here," he lies.

He opens the menu too, even though he knows he's just going to pick whatever looks like a full day's worth of calories and be done with it. He skipped breakfast, first lingering with Gene and then edgy with nerves, and the moment he gets home he's going to drink until he passes out, so he might as well try to pack his food needs into one meal. It's almost like he's taking care of himself. Rounds up to it, anyway.

"Well, I'm ready to order if you are," she says, like she wants to get this over with as fast as possible, which makes two of them.

He shrugs. "If you can flag down a waiter. They've been ignoring me since I came in. Pretty sure they think I'm a tramp who wandered in here by accident."

“Don’t worry, I’m used to being assertive,” she assures him, craning her head to look for the waitstaff.

“I must have been out of the city for too long, if I’ve lost my touch.”

It’s all—too easy, so far. Is the whole lunch going to be like this, just bantering like strangers at a party and ignoring the elephant in the room?

You’re not trying to fix everything in one lunch, you’re just making a start, Gene had said as they lay on the couch that morning, calm and sure, his hand stroking Robert’s hair. *Follow her lead—if she wants to keep it light, keep it light. If she has something she wants to say, then hear her out.*

What matters most is just that you’re there—it shows that you care and you want to fix things.

But caring and wanting don’t guarantee a damn thing. He’s learned that by now.

Anyway, it turns out the whole lunch *isn’t* going to be that easy—because as soon as the menus are cleared away and they’re facing each other without any distractions, the banter dries up and the silence is suddenly bursting like a pressure cooker with all the things they’re not saying to each other.

“The weather’s nice out here,” Val offers after a minute. “New York’s already starting to get hot.”

Jesus, they’re talking about the *weather*—smalltalk at its asinine finest. It’s been forever since he got forced into making smalltalk (a perk of being notoriously weird and antisocial) and he’s remembering all over again why he hates it so much; it’s tedious, it’s insincere, it’s as much *bullshit* as the nonsense he spews, except it doesn’t even have the grace to be entertaining.

But it doesn’t matter that he hates it, *he is going to do this*, it’s the least he can fucking do. He can be a grown-up, or at least fake it for the duration of one goddamn lunch.

“Yeah, it’s all the concrete,” he agrees.

He can’t decide whether he misses New York or not. He hasn’t felt

the urge to move back, so probably not, but it's not like Maple Bay has been any kinder to him than New York ever was—just that by this point he's accepted that it doesn't matter where he goes, the common denominator in his unhappiness is him.

"So you're looking... good," she ventures.

He snorts. "Yeah, well." Not dead in a gutter yet, anyway. "You should see the portrait in the attic."

There's a moment of awkward silence, and then he realizes that's because it's his turn to ask the question.

"How about you?" he asks belatedly. "You doing alright?"

"I'm good," Val says. As if she were going to say anything else, because smalltalk sticks to the fucking script. "I've been... good."

Maybe he really should just throw himself off the pier already. He'd be doing both of them a favor.

"You still working for that... new media thing?"

Fuck, he wishes he'd brought Gene, Gene is so much better at this than Robert is. *Congratulations, Gene is your new dad now. You've traded up.* Or Mary, or *anyone*, really, he'd take Hugo's kid if no one else was available on short notice, anyone he could throw in front of him like a human shield when the awkwardness reaches critical mass.

"Yeah." She pauses. "We've expanded a lot over the past year. I got promoted to lead editor for the fashion division."

"Congratulations."

If it were anyone else he'd ask if she got the job by killing the previous lead editor, long live the king, but he's trying to be serious here, he's trying *not* to alienate her, so he bites it back.

God, he wants to go home and sleep. He wants to go back to Gene and lose himself in the other man's body and not-talk about this, which even he knows is not going to happen, since Gene has a terrible habit of not letting Robert use him as a distraction.

He tears little pieces off his napkin, wracks his brain for something else to say, and manages to come up with, "I got a dog."

"Yeah? What kind?"

"Three-legged pomapoo."

Her expression closes at being reminded that she can't actually believe a word that comes out of his mouth, and he sighs internally.

"Boston terrier," he amends. "If you see the world's dumbest-looking dog wandering around town, it's probably mine."

"I'll keep an eye out." She pauses, then volunteers, "Our building doesn't allow dogs, but we've been thinking about getting a cat."

He blinks at the plural pronoun. "We? Does that mean you're, uh. Seeing someone?"

Val shoots him a level look. "Yeah, Dad. Naomi. You've met her."

How the fuck was he supposed to know that she's still with her college sweetheart? Except, right, that's exactly what he *should* know, if he hadn't been falling down on his goddamn job. He manages to clamp down on a lesbians-mating-for-life joke, because really, who the hell is he to talk? He should be glad that she can do commitment, and, bonus, if she's a lesbian then no one's getting knocked up by accident. That's two generations of Small mistakes she's managed to sidestep.

"Right. So... how's Naomi doing?" he hazards.

From Val's expression, this is nearly as excruciating for her as it is for him, and she's regretting this ill-advised lunch. "She's... fine. Good. She has a show coming up next month."

And what the fuck does Naomi do again? Was she the painter or the cellist? Robert's pretty sure it's written all over his face that he has no idea what his daughter's partner of five years does for a living, that he probably couldn't pick her out of a lineup if his life depended on it.

Jesus fuck, he's bad at this.

"Jesus fuck, I'm bad at this," Robert mutters, tossing down his napkin.

Val gives him a look like, *well, I wasn't going to say it, but, yeah.* And he can see the resignation settling into her eyes, that she thinks he's

going to get up and walk out, and she's disappointed but not really surprised.

The impulse to do it, to escape, to run the fuck away and damn the consequences, is hammering at him like a physical compulsion, and honestly, he's not sure what stops him. It's not Gene, who's still smitten enough to forgive Robert for most anything, and it's not Val, because if she's forgiven him this many times then she'll probably forgive him once more, it's just that he's so goddamned tired of *needing* to be forgiven.

He's tired of himself and all his bullshit, of always running out the moment things get hard, of fucking up in the same predictable ways every time. He doesn't *want* to be forgiven, doesn't want to put himself further in debt. He wants to have done the right thing from the start, for once, but he has no idea what that right thing is, only that running away isn't it.

"Fuck it," he mutters, running a hand through his hair. Fuck a lot of smalltalk, he's shit at it, and it's not working anyway. He takes a deep breath and looks her in the eye. "Okay, what do you *actually* like to talk about? Not with your loser dad. With, y'know—" he waves a vague hand "—your friends."

"Well," Val says with a ghost of a smirk. "I *do* brag to all and sundry about my amazingly hot and talented girlfriend. Who—by the way—is a cellist, and landed a spot with the New York Philharmonic last year because she is just that amazing. But I'd venture to say that the other ninety percent of our conversations revolve around fashion." She gives a shrug, and a slightly rueful laugh. "You don't really get to be a fashion editor in New York City if you don't eat-breathe-and-sleep the job."

"Okay." He can work with that. He spreads his arms. "So, ranked from least-egregious to most-egregious, what am I doing wrong?"

Val's eyes dip down to take in what he's wearing, and the smallest

hint of a smile touches her mouth. "It's a... look," she allows diplomatically.

"I'll have you know, I showered for this," he informs her.

"And the people of Maple Bay thank you for it," she replies, saluting him with her glass. Then she clears her throat and says,

"Robert Small, making a daring statement in straight-leg denim directly from the Ross couture collection, paired with a vintage, 1950s-styled leather jacket, for a look that industry insiders are calling 'midlife-crisis chic'—proving that it's never the wrong age to channel your inner James Dean. Not a polo shirt or a tube sock in sight, this ensemble makes a bold, innovative challenge to mainstream notions about 'dad' fashion. An ironic t-shirt rounds out the look, the perfect way to prove that you're hip and in touch with The Youth. Hashtag, dads-on-fleek, hashtag, fierce-not-Sears."

Robert's startled to find himself laughing, because—christ, it sounds like exactly the kind of nonsense that would come out of his mouth, if he knew a damn thing about fashion. And he can't tell whether it's nature or nurture, whether she's somehow genetically predisposed to bullshit or if there was once a tiny Val who hero-worshipped her dad and his dumb jokes and tried to copy him.

And it's been so, so long since he was anything like a father to her, he doesn't get to take credit for the fact that she's *smart*, she's *funny*, she's *doing alright*, he doesn't have the right to get choked up about this, but there's a lump rising in his throat anyway. He doesn't want to run away anymore, but through his smile he can feel the corners of his eyes stinging.

He presses his lips together, swallows down the lump. "There's nothing ironic about surviving the Maple Bay Ghost Tour."

She nods gravely, but her eyes are dancing. "My apologies. We'll run a correction in the next issue."

Yep, she's his kid, alright.

"So how about you?" Val asks. And she sounds warmer now, like

she's asking because she really wants to know, not just because she's delivering the expected lines. "What do you talk with your friends about?"

Booze. Cute dogs. What a shitbag Joseph is. Craig Cahn's ass in those yoga pants, Jesus. How To Not Fuck Up This Thing With Gene.

"Ah..." And he finds he's almost afraid to say it, like that's going to jinx it somehow, like telling someone other than Mary about Gene is going to remind the universe that he's not allowed to have nice things. "I've... kind of started seeing someone."

Her face brightens. "Yeah?"

He ducks his head, and feels himself smile. "His name is Gene."

Eventually they've paid for their meal and are walking over to the train station. Val's a consummate New Yorker, it's a point of pride for her not to own a car, so she's riding the Amtrak back and he's accompanying her as far as the station.

And he's... good.

Obviously, one lunch hasn't fixed two decades' worth of failures and disappointments, but for once he's managed not to fuck it up, managed not to make things worse.

He finds that he really likes the woman she's grown into—not because he's obligated to, or out of some proprietary egotism because she carries half his genetic material, but as a person in her own right. He likes her sense of humor, her dry wit and her ability to hold her own. She's the kind of person he could actually be friends with, that he would *enjoy* hanging out with, if they didn't have so much history between them.

"I'm glad I came," Val says when they pause on the steps of the train station. "My therapist will be very proud when I tell her about it."

"You have a therapist?" What for? She seems fine to him.

"Dad, please. I live in New York City. *Everyone* has a therapist."

Robert has his mouth open to say that he and Marilyn never did,

but—ooh, the look in her eye tells him that’s exactly what she was baiting him into, and that she has some choice opinions on the subject. Check and *mate*.

“Here in Maple Bay we repress our problems like men,” he says instead. “And when it all gets to be too much we turn our back on civilization and disappear into the woods for weeks on end. Wrestle a grizzly. Swim naked in the ice-cold ocean. Forget human language. Fuck a cryptid, if you’re lucky. Return to society outwardly unchanged, but with something dark and haunted around the eyes.”

Val nods. “Yeah, I think I’ll stick with my therapist. She’s really hot.”

“Oh, well then.”

“Just kidding. She’s old enough to be your grandmother. She’s a nun who lost an eye in World War II.”

Goddamn, he’s proud.

“So...” Val says nervously. “We should do this again.”

“Uh... yeah,” Robert replies, although it’s less than sincere. Because their track record for successful adult conversations is *really good* right now—seriously, they’re batting a thousand—there’s no need to overreach and bring down that average. “Sure thing.”

Like, a year from now, when her *therapist* starts getting on her case to make another try at talking to her old man. He thinks he can manage this once a year.

“I’d like to meet Gene sometime,” she continues. “It sounds like he’s been really good for you.”

And that’s—ah hell, that’s his weak spot, because he does want Val to meet Gene. Not just because Robert’s hopelessly infatuated with him, but because the fact that *Gene likes him* is a better character reference than anything he could produce himself. And he wants Gene to meet Val too—to show off how well she’s done for herself, to show off that his kid is a pretty cool person.

Maybe he can manage another round of this. He did alright this

time, he can probably, maybe handle more of the same. And it'll be easier with Gene there; it'll be easier now that the ice has been broken.

"If you," he begins. He almost chickens out, but makes himself continue, "If you want to come back next Friday... Gene's throwing a surprise party for his daughter's graduation."

Val looks surprised by the offer, then thoughtful. "Do you actually have permission to bring a plus-one?" she asks. "Because it sounds like you are the plus-one."

Robert shrugs. "He's invited everyone in the neighborhood, he wants to make it a big deal. I'm pretty sure I can get you past security." He thinks a moment, then adds, "There's going to be free food. A mac-and-cheese bar and an ice cream cake."

"Well shit, how can I say no to that?" Val asks with a laugh, although he would bet money she's supposed to be on some low-carb thing, he saw what she had for lunch. "Alright, count me in. But I'm going to pretend like I don't know you."

"That's reasonable," he allows.

"We'll see how long it takes people to figure it out."

He considers warning her not to let the cat-print lull her into a false sense of security, Gene's a savvy little con artist, but she can learn that for herself.

"So, next Friday?" Val asks, putting out her hand.

"Next Friday," Robert agrees, and they shake on it. "Six PM, you know where to find me."

"I do indeed." She flicks him a salute. "See you around, Dad."

She turns away, toward the entrance to the train station, starting down the steps.

"Val," he calls abruptly, but when she turns back to look at him, he finds the words on his tongue drying up.

Because god knows the easiest thing to do would be to let her just walk away without ever touching on anything serious, a bullet dodged. But it feels like—cowardice, somehow, to come all this way

and then spend the whole lunch skating over the surface of their issues, never saying anything genuine. She's letting him take the easy way out, even though that can't possibly be what she came here for, and part of him appreciates it. But she put herself out there when she extended the olive branch; the least he can do is be honest with her in return.

He swallows. "I'm—I think you've—grown into a really amazing woman. And I'm proud of you. Even though I can't really take any credit for it. I'm glad. I'm glad you're doing well. I'm glad you're happy."

She's blinking a bit faster than normal, and the look in her eyes and the tension in her mouth says she's holding back a lot of something, though god only knows what.

There's so much else clamoring for a voice in Robert's head, but what good are apologies when they can't change the things he's done and can't guarantee a better future, what good are promises that he probably won't be able to keep? What can he even say to her that she hasn't heard before?

"And I'm glad you came too," he manages. His chest is tight and he can feel his breath coming harder. "I've thought about you a lot, I just... I—"

He breaks off because *no, no excuses*, he has no good reason why he didn't just pick up the phone and call her at any point over the past three years, he's not going to pretend like it was somehow not his fault and so she's supposed to forgive him for it. He just wants her to know that she's great, she's amazing, he's so proud of her, that he really does care about her, oh god, he cares *so much*, even though he's always been such shit at showing it—

His breath hitches and he finds himself pressing the heel of his hand to his eyes, *jesus fuck*, he's about to start crying right there in front of the fucking train station. He takes a deep, steadying breath, and lowers his hand to find Val climbing back up the steps to him.

“Dad...” she begins, her voice breaking.

For a moment all he can do is look at her, helpless and overwhelmed and wishing so badly that he knew what to do here, that he knew how to bridge the gap between them. Story of his life, it seems.

He reaches for her, an aborted motion that he breaks off instinctively. Then, very deliberately, he musters up his courage and opens his arms to her. It’s not something he has practice with, at all, but—

Val blinks, hesitates, and doesn’t look convinced, but before he can back down, she’s coming forward and cautiously stepping into his embrace. He can’t tell whether she’s not one for hugging either, or just not with him, but she’s making the effort even though her body is stiff and her arms around him are awkward.

And there’s a suspended moment where the whole thing is just weird and uncomfortable, that they’re not people who know each other well enough to do this—but then Robert takes a deep breath and finds that beneath her perfume she smells the same, she still smells like his baby girl. It triggers a sudden, vivid memory of how she used to climb on his lap as a child to watch *The Game* with him, happy just to spend time with her dad, and he feels the coil of unbearable tension in him start to unwind. He sighs, pulls her tighter, and feels some of the strain leave her body too.

“Thank you for coming,” he whispers, stroking the back of her head. “Thank you for asking me to come.”

Val gives a watery laugh against his shoulder, and her arms tighten around him briefly. “My pleasure,” she says with shaky irony. “Since when do you hug people?”

“Since now, I guess.” He huffs a laugh. “To tell you the truth, I’m just cribbing from Gene’s playbook. He’s all about that emotional honesty stuff.”

“He sounds like a wise man.”

“He is. It’s awful. He wants me to talk about my *feelings*.”

“The worst,” Val agrees.

Robert draws in a breath and lets go of her, stepping back. "He might even be teaching an old dog new tricks." He lifts his eyes to meet hers. "Val, I..."

"Hey," she cuts him off gently, taking his arm. "We done good today. Let's just take it one day at a time, okay?"

He nods. "Okay."

"So, Friday," she prompts.

"Friday," he agrees. "And then next time you get to pick the venue."

Because he finds that he *wants* there to be a next time. He does want to see Val again, not just to please Gene, but for his own sake, and hers. Not a year from now because they're feeling obliged to make the attempt, but regularly, because they actually like each other.

Val smirks. "What would you say to seeing *Return of the Jedi* accompanied by a full orchestra? I have it on good authority that a very talented cellist is going to be performing in that next month."

There's no guarantee that it's going to work in the end, that he'll be able to make this last, but if it doesn't, it won't be because he didn't try. The future is still kind of terrifying if he tries to look too far down the road, but... one day at a time. It seems slightly less daunting when he thinks of it like that.

He looks at her, and smiles. "I'd say count me in."

Interlude: First Impressions



To be honest, Val had been expecting someone considerably older before she met Gene.

Dad had said *widower, he'd said wears terrible cat-print shirts and has an eighteen-year-old daughter and his name is Gene*, which is a grandpa name if she ever heard one. She'd seen the difference in her dad's mood—not just happier but more relaxed, more *stable*—and had been under the impression that this new boyfriend was going to be older than him, someone with the years and maturity to be the ballast her dad so desperately needed.

So it takes her by surprise to arrive at the party and have her dad point out Gene as, *him, the guy with the glasses and the man-bun*, and her first thoughts are, in succession, *there is no way that man has an eighteen-year-old daughter, was he ten when he had her, and jesus, dad, trophy boyfriend, much?*

“Jesus, Dad, trophy boyfriend, much?”

Her dad scowls. “He’s thirty-eight. He’s not *that* much younger than me.” And then he wanders off to the snack bar instead of going to say hi to his maybe-boyfriend-maybe-crush (he hasn’t been very clear

on that point), because ignoring people is how her emotionally-stunted dad shows his affection.

And yeah, okay, on closer inspection she can believe that Gene is thirty-eight, even though he's rocking the hip-young-English-professor look. And it's weird that Dad's taste in men is apparently nothing like his taste in women. Val would have expected someone more like Mom, like the gay men she works with—jet-setting, polished, glamorous in monochrome—not this unassuming, slightly swishy man who colorfully straddles the line between geek-chic and just geek.

Then, as she watches, Gene catches sight of her dad and is immediately much more interested in that than the WASPy-looking guy he's talking to. She can see him turning his efforts to wrapping up the conversation, keeping an eye on her dad in case he tries to slip off again, and then Gene's breaking away and circling around to Dad where he debates the offerings at the snack bar. As she watches, Gene sneaks up behind him, taps his far shoulder and then playfully ducks around the other side.

Dad falls for it, makes the full turn, and then breaks into a smile when he sees Gene, even though he's trying to scowl at him for the prank. He gets Gene by the scruff of the neck and gives him a good-natured shake; Gene just beams, delighted to let himself be manhandled.

And she can see now why Dad hasn't been clear about their relationship status, because they're obviously head over heels for each other, everyone for twenty miles around must be able to see it, but they're not quite *together* yet either. They haven't worked out what kind of PDA they have permission for, so it's just Dad stealing a touch under the guise of roughhousing, and Gene's hand fluttering at her dad's elbow, like he wants to pull him in closer but doesn't know if that's allowed.

Inasmuch as she's ever spent time thinking about her father's bisexuality—which, weird, so not really—she'd assumed that it had been

more about convenience, about being secure enough in his masculinity not to say no if it was a guy offering sex rather than a woman. He's just so... *butch*, is all. Straight-acting, as they say in the biz.

Not to mention that she'd never seen him with anyone but Mom, and he'd *loved* Mom, even if they hadn't always known what to do with each other, and she's realizing now that her vague notion of 'dad dating again' (if he could ever get his shit together enough for that) had always involved a mom-shaped other. That she could wrap her head around the idea of her dad having sex with men, but she hadn't expected that he'd fall in love with one.

And yet here he is, not even knowing how to hug Gene but looking at him like he hung the moon. And she doesn't know how this trophy boyfriend is the one who managed to pull Dad out of his hole, who's gotten him to talk about *feelings*, of all things, but she'll take it. If Gene's going to be good for her Dad, if Gene can maybe, just *maybe* keep this from turning into the same cycle of dashed hopes and heartbreak that it always has before—she'll take it.

Interlude: After the Barbecue



“So how about it, Manda-Panda, what do you think of the neighbors?”

“Mmm, they seem nice,” Amanda decides judiciously. “Daisy and Carmencita are cute. Lucien is, er—*really cute*.”

Probably also *really gay*, if Gene is any judge, but he opts to keep that hunch to himself. He’s been wrong before, and he certainly doesn’t understand this ‘goth’ thing, so there’s no need to dash Amanda’s hopes out of hand.

“But Joseph’s kids creep me out,” she declares.

Joseph creeps me out.

The thought springs into his head before he can process it, immediate and fully-formed, like an equation he hadn’t put together before but snaps into place now.

But he keeps that to himself too, because it’s baseless, and he doesn’t want to prejudice her against their new neighbors for no reason.

“That’s probably our fault, for raising you to be a godless heathen,” he says instead. “And I admit, the Jesus-whispering is kind of weird,

but you don't have to agree with people about everything in order to be their friend."

He sees her steal a sidelong glance at him, and something in her silence is troubled.

"Do you remember what Dad used to say about trusting your instincts?" she asks.

Gene pauses. "Yes."

That humans have instincts as good as any animal, we're just the only species that tries to talk ourselves out of listening to them. That if you're getting bad vibes from someone, there's a fucking reason for it, even if you can't articulate why. That if your instincts are screaming at you to get away from someone, then *get the fuck away from them*, don't convince yourself to ignore your better judgment because that person is being so *nice*.

And Gene knows that Alex was never entirely rational on this subject, that his was a case of *once-bitten-twice-shy*, so while he wasn't going to argue with Alex about it, he's also aware that first impressions can be wrong. That it's easy to misjudge people, and we're not always right just because we think we are.

But—

Even if you can't articulate why.

He thinks about talking to Robert (and *argh*, could he possibly have been more obvious, he was practically panting after the man), about Robert's easy, silly stories, delivered with such a convincing deadpan. Robert's gaze catching on his, lingering, like maybe he has a chance after all.

Robert's face freezing for a fraction of a second when Joseph's name came up in conversation, there and gone so briefly that Gene could almost think he'd imagined it.

Robert's flinch, infinitesimally small, when Joseph's laughter reached them from a nearby knot of talkers.

Robert's eyes always, always flickering back to Joseph, the unsmil-

ing beat whenever he tracked the other man's progress around the party, like keeping watch on something venomous.

And Joseph, who was perfectly nice, perfectly neighborly; nothing about him to merit Gene's mistrust. Nothing, that is, except for the naked, animal wariness in Robert's dark eyes.

"Yeah," Gene says at last, uneasily. He puts an arm around Amanda and gives her a squeeze. "Go ahead and trust your instincts, kiddo."

This House Just Sings (This House Just Screams)



“—so for a prank, she and some of the other girls on her wing sealed the RA’s door over with duct tape. I think she got that one from me, actually; I know Alex and I helped Smashley do it to Craig for Valentine’s Day one year. Not sure what that has to do with valentines, although she did write him a creepy love note and stuck it on the inside.

“Anyway, the RA didn’t find it as funny as Craig did, and on one hand, I feel like I should be encouraging Amanda to work on developing more productive strategies for dealing with asshole authority figures, because, at the end of the day, this woman is still the one calling the shots, but on the other hand, well... it really does sound like her RA is just a petty tyrant and, y’know—fuck the police.”

It’s Date Night, and they’re in Gene’s kitchen. Robert’s sitting at the counter and sipping a beer, trying to avoid thinking words like *hopelessly charmed* while Gene (“getting ideas above my station”) attempts to make a quiche Lorraine. Gene is at the stove, frowning at the bacon sizzling in the pan; Robert’s thoughts keep catching on the idea of coming up behind him, sliding an arm around Gene’s waist and pressing his lips to the back of his neck.

He stays where he is, takes another sip of beer.

"If you need someone whacked, I know a guy who knows a guy," Robert offers.

"My hero," Gene says dryly. "But I think we'll leave that on the whiteboard for now. Oh, and don't think I don't know who gave her the pepper spray before she left for Chicago."

Robert regrets nothing.

"In other news, Craig wants me to go jogging with him tomorrow morning. At 6 AM, 'before it gets too hot,' he says." Gene makes a face that suggests he's as much a fan of the right side of 6 AM as Robert is. "Robert, save me. Give me a reason to say no."

He tips his head, makes a show of eyeing Gene's ass. "I don't know. I kind of enjoy the benefits of you jogging."

"...Or you could give me a reason to say yes, that works too, I suppose." He hesitates a moment over the pan, eyes flicking briefly to Robert before he says, "You know that Craig would be thrilled if you ever wanted to join us, right? We all have to start somewhere."

Robert tips the beer bottle at him severely. "Brother, you knew when you picked me that I am not that kind of girl."

"Alright, just thought I'd offer," Gene concedes, all easy acquiescence that Robert doesn't trust in the slightest. He's hitched his horse to a con artist; he knows better than to think he's heard the last of this.

"But you should definitely come to a softball game sometime and help me run interference between Craig and the single moms brigade. It is a battle of wits, fought for the highest of stakes, and I've got some *great ideas*, but I need an accomplice to execute them. Ooh, and there's one I want to borrow Mary for too."

Robert's not sure how the friendship between those two thrives on Gene cock-blocking and Craig *thanking* him for it, but so it goes. He's about to say that Mary will be onboard for this plan because she lives to fuck with the other suburban moms, when he realizes his pocket is vibrating, and digs out his phone.

BLOODY MARY

"Speak of the devil," he says, bemused. "Hold that thought, I'll be just a second."

Gene motions that he should take it, by all means, and turns back to the stove.

Robert swipes to accept the call, leaning back in the bar stool. "Evening, sheriff, what's going on?"

There's a long silence on the other end, and then he hears a deep, shaky indrawn breath. "...Rob?" she asks, in a thready voice only just above a whisper.

He hadn't realized he'd been smiling until he feels it draining off his face. The legs of the stool come down hard as he sits up, pressing the phone closer to his ear and lifting his fingers to cover the other. "Mary?"

In the corner of his eye he sees Gene's head come up and turn to look at him, but his world feels like it's narrowed to the quiet stream of air coming through the earpiece. There's silence, then another unsteady breath. "Can you come over?"

It sinks in, finally, what this is about, and his eyes close. "It's yacht night, isn't it."

Not even a question, really.

"Yes."

He silently clenches his fingers around the phone, breathes out. "I'll be there in five minutes."

He lowers the phone from his ear, thumbs the end-call button. Gene's watching him from the stove and he heard all that, he has to know what's coming next. Perhaps by now he's even pieced together the *why* as well, because for all that Robert still hasn't said a word to him about Joseph, Gene's not stupid and Robert hasn't exactly been subtle. There's a shape to what he doesn't say, and he knows that Gene's been starting to trace the outlines of it.

"I have to go," Robert says, inadequately. He has the knee-jerk urge

to bullshit, to spin a funny story with one hand to distract from what the other one's doing, but... "Mary—needs me."

Said Mary *never*, but anything else is likely to get lost in translation.

Gene's nodding. "Okay."

Robert can see him on the verge of asking the obvious question. He'd be within his rights to, since they've had only a handful of Date Nights and now Robert's bailing without any real explanation, but then Gene visibly decides to leave it be for now.

Instead he just asks, "Do you need anything?"

It's almost nonsensical. Robert doesn't know what he thinks he's offering (bacon for the road?) and shakes his head. "No, we usually order pizza."

Pizza, and red wine mixed with orange juice because she doesn't like to get *drunk-drunk* when she's the only one at home with the kids, and a shitty movie marathon, and then tomorrow morning she'll kick him out before Joseph gets home. More than once over the years he's run into neighbors while making the dawn trek between her house and his, Joseph's car conspicuously absent from the driveway, and he knows what it looks like, but *fuck them*, they don't know *shit*.

"If you—" Robert starts, then stops because he has no idea how he was going to finish that. He swallows. "Can I come over tomorrow?"

"Of course," Gene says without hesitating. "Any time."

Gene doesn't know what he's promising and Robert won't hold him to it, won't actually come banging on his door when Mary kicks him out at ass o'clock tomorrow morning, but he appreciates the sentiment.

He hangs there for a moment, uncertain how to make his goodbye, then Gene carefully opens his arms, an invitation if Robert wants to take him up on it, and he does, he *does*, so he steps forward and lets himself lean into Gene. He feels Gene's arms wrap around his waist and hold him there, and he presses his face into Gene's shoulder, breathes deep.

But lingering isn't going to make leaving any easier, and Mary's waiting for him.

It's her eldest who answers the door, his small, pale frame silhouetted against the darkness of the hallway. He steps aside wordlessly, keeping his distance as he lets Robert over the threshold, his sullen eyes tracking the older man's movements. He closes the door on the fading daylight behind them and locks it.

"Mom's upstairs," he says flatly.

Robert wants to love her kids, god help him, he really does—they're half-Mary, after all—but they're also half-Joseph, and with a feral caginess that always has him expecting to see blood on their teeth.

"Thanks," he says, and heads up the stairs, feeling the boy's eyes on his back the whole way.

The second story is oppressively dim, and he steps onto the landing with a feeling like pushing into deep water, the air thick and chilly on the skin of his arms, swallowing the sound of his footsteps. The windows down the long hallway, set with institutional regularity, cling to the last of the draining daylight, gloomily outlining the slats in the blinds like bars. There are no photographs hung along this stretch, no portraits of the family or the kids, just oil paintings of serene maritime vistas, sailboats on the open ocean, blues bleaching to gray in the twilight.

He finds his pace has quickened by the time he reaches her bedroom, and gives only a brief knock before ducking inside.

Mary's sitting on the edge of the bed, illuminated by the light from the adjacent bathroom like an actress on an empty stage. She's not crying—Robert can count the number of times he's actually seen her cry on one hand, with enough left over to give Joseph the finger—but her eyes are dull and tired, and defeat hangs in the air like smoke.

"Hey boss," he says softly, shutting the door behind him and padding over to join her. "Heard you needed someone whacked."

That startles the ghost of a laugh out of her, briefly easing the strain in her face, though it fades nearly as fast, and when he sits down and puts an arm around her, her eyes sink closed and she leans into him like she's past caring.

Robert never saw this room, their marital bed, until long after he'd become friends with Mary, so he's never once seen Joseph in here, never seen more evidence of him than a dip on the far side of the bed, a pair of leather gloves on the night stand. He could almost pretend like this isn't where the man sleeps most nights, if not for some hind-brain instinct distantly screaming that he's in the lair of the beast—that it's Joseph in every line of the room's accouterments, sterile as a catalog, and that beneath the rank sweetness of the air freshener is the smell of Joseph's body.

The room is silent except for the metronome-tick of the clock on her dresser. After a minute, she lifts a hand to pluck at his shirt.

"You're wearing the Zara shirt," she says hoarsely.

"Yeah."

"And you're wearing cologne."

"...Yeah."

A sigh escapes her and he feels her shoulders slump further. "Fuck. You were going to see Gene tonight. I'm sorry, I wouldn't have—"

"Hey, no," he cuts her off, reaching around rub the side of her head. "It's okay. Bros before hos, right?"

"No, it's not okay, it's *crap*." Her voice shakes, hands clenching into fists in her lap. "*One* of us should be allowed to have their shit together."

That'll be the day.

She sighs again, lifts a hand to scrub over her face. "What time is it?"

He glances over her head to the clock on the dresser. "Seven thirty-seven."

Mary draws in a deep breath, leans forward to rest her arms on her

knees. "The kids are going to a lock-in at the church tonight." She swallows. "Julie's coming by at eight to give them a ride."

He nods. "Best get your game face on, boss."

And she closes her eyes, draws the curtain over her heartbreak, and stands.

It's always strange to watch her go through the ritual of putting on makeup, a sort of nostalgia that he can't decide is comforting or painful, because he only ever knew this sort of intimacy with Marilyn, and their relationship was so poisoned by the end that even the good memories are overshadowed by the bad that came later. Like the story of most things in his life.

"You look like a million bucks," he says when she finishes and steps out of the bathroom, and for once he's not even bullshitting.

"Great," she says dryly, mouth twisting into an attempt at a smirk. "We just need to find a buyer."

"I'll put my ear to the ground." He rises to follow as she leaves the room, and they head back down the stairs. "Want me to order the pizza?"

She snorts. "Sure. You can even put it on Joseph's credit card, but you're not bringing any pineapple under my roof, you goddamn degenerate."

When they come downstairs, the oldest child immediately stands and ghosts out of the room, but the toddler is chattering to itself in a pen in the corner, and the twins are at the kitchen table doing math homework; apparently they've been told they have to finish it before they can go to the lock-in, and Robert wonders if they recognize that for the empty threat that it is.

He doesn't know what the kids think of him, this man who only ever comes into their house on the nights when their father doesn't, but he finds it grimly satisfying to turn his talents to charming Joseph's children—because he is, in fact, pretty good with kids, which

shouldn't surprise everyone as much as it does. He's just got no staying power.

Thing 1 is trying to con him into answering one of the homework questions for her, beaming up at him with her feral little teeth, and, fuck it, they're not his kids, what does he care if they learn long division or not, so it devolves into a negotiation over what she'll give him for it. He winds up taking a pterodactyl sticker as payment up front, that she presses onto the back of his hand with cold fingers, along with the promise of an original picture of a Sparkle Pony to be delivered later, upon confirmation of a correct answer. He's definitely made worse deals in his time.

Julie arrives to pick up the kids at five minutes to eight, and there's a last-minute clamor as they rush out the door. Robert's helping chivy things along, making sure that the children-to-sleeping-bags ratio is on par, catching Thing 2 before he can "forget" his math homework—and looks up to see Julie watching him with barely-disguised, salacious glee.

He knows what this looks like. It seems to be all that anyone can ever see, when they see how much the two of them mean to each other, but tonight it's more damning than ever—his presence, in Joseph's absence, as the children leave and the two of them are left alone in this house. And he doesn't know whether it's more important for the world to know that Mary is innocent, or for them to know that *fuck you, there is someone that loves her, even if he doesn't.*

"So... what's Joseph doing this evening?" Julie asks once the kids are off loading themselves into the car, halfway between prurient and pointed.

Mary's mouth twists. "Jerking off on his yacht? I don't know. I don't ask what happens during 'ocean time.'"

Robert, standing in her shadow like a villain waiting in the wings, feels his anger rise. Not just at Julie, for leaping to the conclusion that anyone would, but at this whole goddamn town, because it's not the

first time that he's been afraid, in his heart of hearts, that even if he did go nuclear, even if he forced himself to strip bare for these people, and held up his shame and her heartbreak for all the world to see, it wouldn't make a difference. They've already decided what they want to believe, and they won't thank him for rubbing their faces in how wrong they've been.

Because *everyone knows* that Mary is crass, is difficult, is a bitch. *Everyone knows* what a saint her long-suffering husband is, how he's stood by her all these years even as she makes a drunken spectacle of herself at every turn, even as she throws herself at every new face that passes through Jim and Kim's. Robert could tell them the truth—he could scream himself raw on all the ugly truths rotting inside him—but he's not certain they would care.

And *that*, in the end, is the only reason why he really keeps Joseph's secrets.

"Thanks for taking the kids, Julie," he cuts in abruptly, coming up to put an arm around Mary. "It's so hard to find a babysitter for bridge nights." He flashes the woman a hard smile and leans forward to take the door. "Have a nice evening."

Mary lets out a breath as the door closes. "Fucking cow," she mutters. "Like she has a leg to stand on. You know she let the air out of her own tire at the last softball game so she could cadge a ride home with Craig?"

"Gene's offered to start the rumor that he's got syphilis." Quoth, *What are bros for?*

Mary shakes her head. "At this point, I'm not even sure that would slow them down."

With the older kids gone, a deadening quiet settles over the house, muting even the toddler's chatter, gathering in the darkened corners like a presence about to manifest. The pizza arrives, and Robert tips Damien's slouchy son a twenty, because fuck it, it's on Joseph's tab.

He eats his pizza, drinks his wine, and watches Mary try to cajole her youngest into eating some watery orange baby-mush.

He feels—he's not sure what he feels, watching Mary with the toddler, this child whose birth he held her hand through, this child who bears the stamp of its father's features more strongly than any of the others. Robert remembers locking eyes with Joseph when the man finally showed up at the hospital, *Congratulations, it looks like you*, doesn't know whether Joseph ever believed there was any danger it might not. The baby is as close to blameless as any of them are in this house, but it has Joseph's eyes, and sometimes when Robert catches it looking at him, it's Joseph staring out at him through holes in the baby's face.

"I'll have you know, that is some Michelin three-star mush right there," he tells the baby, but it's a little pleb who's not impressed, just watches him with hard, flat eyes.

After dinner, Mary takes the toddler upstairs and puts it to bed, while Robert goes into the living room and sits on the couch. The first movie has just ended and the credits are rolling, but he can't concentrate through a rumbling, hindbrain disquiet.

He can smell Joseph on the couch.

There's no telling whether it's because Robert's in his usual spot or whether there's just no escaping it in this house, but for a brief moment, a moment that sends his pulse skyrocketing, it's as vivid as if the man is there in the flesh, his breath hot on the back of Robert's neck.

He tips his head back and sucks in air through his mouth while he waits for Mary to come back downstairs, and silently wills her to hurry up.

"What'd I miss?" she asks when she returns, dragging a blanket over herself and curling up under Robert's arm.

"'Third bulldog wrangler: Humphrey Cameron.' Mary, do you ever wonder where it all went wrong, what choices we made along the

way that closed these doors? Like, maybe if I had just studied harder, stayed in school, I too could have been a third bulldog wrangler.”

“Your ambitions are petty and small. ‘Stunt double to Mrs. Bennett’ is the job I was put on this earth to do.”

The credits end and the next movie starts, *Pride and Prejudice 2: 2 Pride, 2 Prejudice*, and they watch the opening sequence in silence as Elizabeth Bennett drives a Maserati out a third-story window and lands on the back of a semi. It’s prime heckling material—this was the original plan for his evening with Gene, after all—but Mary’s gone quiet, like a boat with its engine cut and left to drift. Like she dragged herself this far but ran dry doing it, and Robert leaves her be. There are times when their gallows humor is the only way to get by, but other times when being forced to smile only twists the knife.

He thinks she’s fallen asleep, because it’s not until the scene where Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are making out in the front seat of an Aston Martin that he feels her shift.

“I’m sorry I ruined your date night,” Mary says quietly.

Robert draws in a breath, rubs his thumb against the back of her head. “I’m not.”

He’s sorry for—a lot of things. God knows that most days there are more things he regrets than not, but he doesn’t regret being here. He might wish that she never had a reason to call him like this, but he wouldn’t ever, ever wish himself back at Gene’s and wish Mary alone in this house.

“Yeah, but you nerds need all the help you can get.” It’s only got a shadow of her usual acerbity, but he’ll take it. This is how their recovery begins—nailing down the planks over their sorrow, sealing it out of sight and suffocating it, until it goes back to being nothing but a faint heartbeat beneath the floor.

“I think we’re doing alright.”

She lifts her head to look him in the face, skeptical. “Does that mean you finally shagged him?”

He dodges eye contact, which, yeah, probably tells her everything she needs to know. “We’re... taking it slow.”

“Jesus,” she huffs, settling down against his shoulder again. “How has that man not died of thirst yet.”

Robert can’t explain that he doesn’t trust his own treacherous brain not to wreck this for him. That somewhere along the line (Joseph) a switch got flipped, a wire got crossed, and sex has come to feel like betrayal (*Joseph*). That he pushes, he comes on strong, but when people say yes he hates them for it. That it’s out of his control and he would *turn this off* if he could, because he’s seen it douse the fragile spark of interest too many times before, and now he’s terrified that he’s going to pull away from Gene in the shuddering aftermath and find himself looking at a stranger, all the warmth in him gone cold and curdled. And if he just *stopped loving* Gene then what would even be the point of going on? He might as well fill his pockets with stones and just walk into the sea.

But Mary’s not going to push—because she’ll needle him a bit, she’ll make her opinion known, but *why don’t you stop being such a fuck-up?* is the line that their friendship doesn’t cross. After all, it’s not like either of them has any room to judge.

The night stretches on. The world outside the house goes silent, and sometime during the third movie Mary does eventually fall asleep. Robert wishes he could sleep too, but his brain is too busy chasing its own tail, an endless cycle of Mary, Gene, Mary, all the problems he wants to fix but can’t, luridly imagining all the ways that things might go bad, might go from bad to worse. It’s exhausting but he can’t shut it off, like disaster footage playing in a loop.

The only warning he has is the sound of a key sliding into the lock, and then the door is opening and—

Robert is fully awake in an instant, heart hammering, blood pounding.

Joseph stands framed in the doorway, hand with the keys paused

midair. He doesn't look alarmed, but his eyes are on Robert like a predator assessing a threat, and he's gone just as still.

It's Robert who should be the intruder here—he's the one in Joseph's house, after all, the one holding Joseph's wife asleep in arms—but his immediate, irrational thought is, *you, how dare you set foot in here.*

And in that moment Robert's hatred for him, the anger that rumbles endlessly under his skin like a beast sleeping beneath the earth, rises up and *roars.*

Robert's aware of his arm tightening around Mary, his jaw clenching, because this is it—this is him, the man responsible for all this fucking misery. For Mary's humiliation and heartache, for the scorched earth that is Robert, for this whole miserable evening and so many others before it. Robert, in this house that preys on him, trying his helpless best to put Mary's broken pieces back together, heartbreak glued to heartbreak, cleaning up the wreckage that this man, this shitstain of a human being, leaves behind while he cuts his bloody swath through the world.

Robert can feel himself breathing hard, can feel his white-knuckled grip on the arm of the couch, clamping down on the kinetic violence threatening to burst through his skin, and in the space between one heartbeat and the next, his rage peaks, flares into something white-hot that burns away all other thought, and in a moment of pure, shocking clarity he realizes that he could *kill this man*, he's got a knife on him, of course he does, and he's never taken a knife to another living creature before, but in this moment he could do it, he could drive that knife into Joseph's face, could cut him from this world like a cancer if that's what it takes to *stop him*, if it means he never has to see the dull misery in Mary's eyes again, never has to feel his lungs seize up and his limbs go numb at the sound of Joseph's voice. Worth it to know that he'll never again fuck up anyone else the way he fucked up Robert, he could kill

him without a shred of remorse or regret, *just give me a fucking reason*, Robert's always thought he'd be good at prison—

"Fancy meeting you here." It's Robert's mouth speaking, his voice weirdly level, as if detached from the maelstrom in his head, but he can still hear the menace thrumming beneath the surface.

Joseph closes the door behind him, keeps an eye on Robert as he hangs up his keys. "I could say the same to you."

Which is when Robert realizes, half with exhilaration and half with terror, that for the first time in four years *there are no witnesses*.

There's no audience to play for. No one around to make them keep up their ghastly facade of civility, to force him to pretend like this is *normal*, like he doesn't hate Joseph with every stretched-thin inch of himself, to force him to pretend like it *never happened*, like he's not choking on blood and bile every time he has to look this man in the face and *smile* through it.

For the first time, Robert could confront him. He could finally, finally lash out with all of the accusations that have been festering inside him in silence, all of the questions, he could *demand answers*, he realizes, his eyes stinging and his muscles shaking, he could finally ask *why, christ, why*—

But he already knows why, even as it brings him nothing but despair.

Because there's no sadism in Joseph, there never has been. There's nothing vicious, no sign that he delights in the suffering he causes—it's merely collateral damage in the face of his utter, sublime indifference. *Because he wanted to* is the only *why* there's ever been to his actions—he wanted to, and it didn't matter what Robert wanted or didn't, only that Robert was too fucked up to stop him, and *there's no closure in that*, and there never will be.

And in the end, that's what destroys him worse than anything else: the crippling disparity in what they are to each other.

That it's carved indelibly into Robert's memory, an ugly wound

that won't ever stop bleeding, that he can't go one single day without some reminder to rip off that fragile scab, but there's no sign that Joseph ever thinks about it much at all. That Joseph looms so monstrously large in his mind, yet Robert was nothing, *nothing* to him—an easy mark, an easy fuck, and just as easily forgotten.

Cold is constricting his chest, clenching around his lungs. His entire focus is locked on Joseph where he stands poised to move, and heaven help him, if that man comes *one step closer* Robert is going to lose his goddamned mind, he's going to lash out like an animal, and then Joseph opens his mouth to speak, and fuck, *fuck*, he *cannot listen to this*—

"You should go upstairs," Robert interrupts tightly. "I'll tell her you're here."

Joseph nods, as if that's a reasonable suggestion, shrugs out of his coat and crosses the living room. "Goodnight, Robert," he calls as he starts up the stairs.

He can't move. He watches Joseph go, listens to the sound of his footsteps grow fainter, but it's not until a light comes on at the top of the stairs that he finally forces himself to squeeze his eyes shut, tipping his head back and breathing heavily through his nose, jaw clenched so tightly it hurts. His mind is made of broken glass, filled with noise and static.

He swallows and gives Mary a jittery shake, then another when she doesn't wake.

"Mary," he manages to get out.

She stirs, draws in a drowsy inhale. "Mm?"

"Joseph came home early." His throat is so tight he can hardly choke out the words.

He feels her tense. "Did he say—"

"I didn't ask." He sucks in a short breath. "I sent him upstairs."

She draws back from him then, turning her head to the light at the top of the stairs. Her eyes are glassy, resigned, like she's too exhausted

to even dread what's coming, and he feels like it's crushing the last of what wasn't already broken in him.

"Mary," he manages, his voice breaking on her name. He grips her shoulder, leans in to press his head against hers, swallows hard. "You're always welcome at my house. Any time, day or night, if you ever need to—" But there's no way to finish that without crossing a line, all he can do is cling to her tighter. "If you ever need to."

Please, please, don't stay here.

An offer he's made so many times before, that she has never, ever taken him up on.

"I know," she says quietly.

He has to get away. He has to run, has to get *out of this house*, and it bubbles in his gut like a sickness to just *leave her here*, but—

"I have to go," he whispers.

Her hand moves on his back. "Yeah."

He doesn't remember standing up, or walking to the door, or stepping outside, but the next thing he knows he's on her porch, the clunk of the deadbolt echoing in his ears like a hammer-fall, alone in the placid outdoor darkness.

For a moment all he can do is stand there, braced against a column, gulping in lungfuls of warm night air, dizzy with adrenaline, until the ringing in his head resolves itself into the hum of crickets in the bushes, the jutter of a sprinkler in the next yard over. He's shivering despite the warmth of the evening, and when a wave of nausea sweeps over him he finds himself bent double, swallowing hard against the taste of sickness and pressing a fist against his mouth to keep from vomiting in Mary's hydrangeas.

He's stumbling up the path, away from that house, before he's even steady on his feet. And he means to go home, he really does, it's the middle of the night, where else would he go, but—

The lights are out when he reaches Gene's doorstep, even his bedroom window is dark, and Robert balks at dragging Gene out of bed in

the middle of the night for—what? What does he expect to do, pick up Date Night where they left off? What does he even want, besides just to *see* Gene, see him smile, listen to him talk, give Robert something to focus on besides the clawing and scrabbling in his head, and yeah, Gene's gonna be *delighted* to get woken up for that.

Robert slides to the ground beside the front door, his back pressed against the side of the house. He's aware that he rang the doorbell, heard the chime trail off into the darkness. He swears to himself that he's only going to do it once, that's the compromise, and if Gene doesn't hear it, or doesn't get up for it, then he'll leave it alone and walk away, he'll take himself home and just—

And then Gene's opening the door. He's in his pajamas, his hair loose for sleep and his face vulnerable without glasses, looking mildly surprised to see Robert sitting on his doorstep.

For a moment the sight of him takes Robert's breath away, like he's the only good thing in a world of ugliness. Like Robert's been drowning, and he's the lighthouse promising safe harbor.

"Hi." Robert flashes him a brief, weak smile. Then offers, "Technically, it's tomorrow."

Gene looks amused, and reaches a hand down to help Robert up. "Technically it's *never* tomorrow," he points out good-naturedly. Robert lets himself be drawn to his feet, but then doesn't let go of his hand, and finds himself swaying forward. It's not even a hug, just pressing himself against Gene, who obligingly puts an arm around his waist. "But then, I had some idea of what I was getting myself into when I—Robert?"

He's distantly aware that he's started shaking again.

"Robert, what's wrong?" Gene's voice has gone sharp with concern and his arm tightens.

Robert has his cheek pressed to Gene's forehead, his lips against Gene's hair, and he closes his eyes and breathes in deep. He wants Gene in all his senses, wants to touch him and hear him, smell him and

taste him, wants the other man's presence to envelop him, to fill every space inside him, leaving no room for anything else to get in.

"Joseph came home early," he hears himself say.

Gene stiffens in his arms. "And?"

Robert swallows, shakes his head. "And nothing. I left."

Left Mary to walk up those stairs and lie down next to that man, *christ*, how can she *stand it*, day after day, night after night, Robert would bash in his own skull, he would *claw off his own skin* before he'd let that man touch him again—

"Oh, sweetheart," Gene whispers, wrapping both arms around Robert, rubbing steady circles on his back.

They stay that way for several long minutes, Gene a solid presence in his arms, the buzz of the crickets loud in the night air around them. Gradually, Robert feels his breathing settle, his pulse slow, and the painful knot in his chest starts to loosen. When he feels steadier he draws back slightly, though he doesn't let go and neither does Gene.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Gene asks carefully, his expression difficult to decipher in the low light.

Robert draws in a deep breath, though it's still shaky when he lets it out. "No." It's nearly a plea. "Not now. I swear, I'll tell you someday, but I can't—not right now."

The violent energy that fired him earlier has burnt itself out and gone cold, and he feels like the battered survivor of a storm—cast up on a rocky shore, bruised and scraped raw.

Gene studies him somberly for a moment and then nods. He takes Robert's hand and lifts it to his lips, kissing his fingertips gently. "Okay."

"I just—" He can't look at Gene. He closes his eyes, says quietly, "I hate him *so much*."

And it's so terribly inadequate to everything pent-up inside of him, emotions that rocket between violence and self-loathing and utter, depthless despair, but it's the first time he's ever said those words

aloud, to anyone. The first time he's ever given a voice, even an inadequate one, to the feelings that won't stop haunting him, that leave him cold and exhausted and so very, very tired of being himself, the weight of everything he's lived dragging behind him every moment of every day, until sometimes the only thing he wants, the only thing he can think of, is to slough it all off, like a snake shedding its skin, and be reborn unencumbered.

"I know." Gene lifts his hands to cradle Robert's head, guides him down so that their foreheads touch. "And when you're ready to tell me, I'm here to listen."

Robert doesn't deserve any of this—Gene's easy affection and unconditional acceptance, the love that he offers up without strings or preconditions, without demanding anything in return.

But then, when has life ever been about what they deserve, any of them?

Gene draws in a hesitant breath and makes a small gesture toward the door behind him. "So..."

Fuck, right. Because it's o-dark-thirty and it's not like he can make Gene stay out on the porch and hug him until the sun comes up, much as he might like to.

"Yeah, sorry. You need to get back to bed," Robert acknowledges, disengaging from Gene even though it feels like wrenching out a bone. "Thanks for coming down to deal with my—yeah. You're a saint, Gene, a saint in... terrible cat-print pajama pants."

Gene catches him before he can draw away, pulls him back in firmly. "Robert, I'm asking you to come with me. To sleep," he clarifies, with a flash of uncertainty. "Or—you can sleep on the couch if you're not comfortable with that. But I want you to stay."

And Robert *wants to*, he doesn't want to let Gene out of his sight, and god knows anyone who gambles on Robert's self-control is going to lose. So he lets himself lean into Gene for a moment, then says, "Lead the way."

When they pass through the living room Gene does ask whether he wants the couch, but it was never even a question, really. Right now he'd crawl inside Gene if he could; holding his hand and being led to his bedroom is a pretty nice second.

"Do you... want to borrow some pajamas?" Gene asks when they reach the bedroom, ever the gracious host, as if anything he owns is going to fit. Robert's got roughly four inches and forty pounds on Gene, and Gene tends to wear his clothes distractingly tight.

Robert would be fine sleeping in t-shirt and boxer-briefs, but the Zara shirt smells like Joseph's house, keeps making him flinch when a breath of it sneaks up on him, and he wants it off his skin. "I'll take a t-shirt, if you've got one on offer."

While Gene's digging around in the closet, Robert takes his first good look around the room, Gene's bedroom. It's tidy, relatively bare, dresser and desk and full-size bed, lamp on the nightstand casting a warm glow over the pale mauve walls. There are several framed photographs over the desk, prints of dogs and sunsets and flora that he's guessing were taken by Amanda, but the one that catches his eye is a close-up of the spiraling leaves of a fern, calming in its fractal precision.

Gene nudges his arm, offers him a shirt. "Try this one."

As he strips out of his jeans, it occurs to him with bitter amusement that he'd even worn *nice* underwear for Date Night, tight and slinky boxer-briefs that ride low on his hips, like he always does even though he and Gene aren't at a point where they're seeing each other's underwear yet. These aren't the circumstances he would have imagined for their first stage appearance, but it could be worse, he supposes. An accident involving his femoral artery, for instance.

He strips off the Zara shirt and in the corner of his eye he sees Gene, sitting on the edge of the bed, inhale sharply and avert his eyes from where he'd been idly watching.

Which rubs it in, yet again, how unfair he's been to Gene. *Dying of thirst*, indeed.

Gene's a normal, healthy adult, he deserves a normal, healthy adult relationship, not this erratic courtship that Robert's putting him through, not when Robert won't even give him the *one goddamn thing he's good for*. Gene's been maddeningly careful not to go looking for the edges of Robert's boundaries, not to push and see how much he can get away with, and Robert's torn between being pathetically grateful, because it means he doesn't have to explain everything that's fucked-up in his head, and being disgusted with himself for needing such careful handling in the first place.

It's ridiculous that he's made Gene feel like he has to avert his eyes from his own goddamn boyfriend, in his own goddamn bedroom, undressing right in front of him, and it's on the tip of Robert's tongue to tell him, *chrissakes, you're allowed to look*, because he's never been shy about *that*, but what comes out instead is—

“Like what you see?”

He catches the moment when his words land, sees Gene blink when their meaning registers, and he turns his head to give Robert a *look*, halfway between chagrin and *Robert, you little shit*.

Then his face softens and he does let himself look. As Robert watches, Gene slowly lowers his gaze, his eyes moving over the lines of Robert's body as if this is the only chance he'll get and he wants to memorize it, lingering on the breadth of his shoulders, tracing the path of his tattoo as it curls down over his hips. And Robert's—not what he used to be, but he's still a *type* (Gene's type, all evidence would indicate), and Gene's looking at him like he's something beautiful, not something he dug out of a dumpster.

Then he looks up to Robert's face again, and smirks. “Russian judge gives it eight out of ten.”

And Robert was about to pull on the t-shirt, but, well—their fighting words.

“Is that so?” He flips the shirt over his shoulder and steps closer, still clad in nothing but boxer-briefs, nudges Gene’s knees apart and insinuates himself between them. “Maybe the Russian judge needs to take a closer look.”

Gene’s breath hitches and his eyes dart down to Robert’s body, but his hands stay curled into light fists, resting on his knees and touching nothing, conscientious as any seasoned strip-club patron.

But Robert’s never been as good in the face of temptation, and that doesn’t seem likely to change now. He reaches down and picks up Gene’s hands, guides them to his own hips and smooths them flat, and *oh*, that is nice.

This is uncharted territory for them—because they’ve made out once on Robert’s couch, and spooned once on Gene’s, but it’s never been like this, with so much of Robert on brazen display, with the air between them so charged.

Gene draws in a shallow breath. He’s keeping his hands meticulously still, but his fingers flex like he can’t help it, like he’s dying to touch but doesn’t know what he has permission for.

Robert feels the muscles in his stomach tighten, nerves coming alive at the warm, feather-light pressure of Gene’s hands on his body, and his hips sway forward like an invitation. He’s distantly aware that this is probably a bad idea, that he’s skirting dangerously close to the edge of what his messed-up brain will let him get away with, but Gene’s touch on his bare skin is like something he hadn’t even realized he’d been starving for.

Gene lifts his face then, his expression open and trusting, his hands braced on Robert’s body like reverence. It’s dizzying, to be touched like this, to be looked at like this, and he knows he’s going to disappoint in the end, but who could refuse this now, in the moment. He lifts his hand to Gene’s head and runs his fingers through the soft curls, watches Gene lean into the touch like a cat, his eyes drifting closed in contentment as Robert rubs his scalp.

Then on impulse, he wraps his fingers around a handful of Gene's hair and draws it—carefully, firmly—into a fist. Gene sucks in a shallow breath and bites his lip, eyes fluttering half-lidded, still loose and pliant under Robert's hand.

Robert steps closer without thinking, his knees grazing high against the inside of Gene's thighs. Keeping one fist wrapped in his hair, he closes his other hand over the back of Gene's neck, and with a slow roll of his hips, pulls Gene's head against his waist.

Gene sucks in a startled gasp but goes easily, lets himself sink into Robert with no more than a shiver of acquiescence, his cheek warm against the skin of Robert's stomach, his chest heaving where it's pressed along Robert's thighs. Robert can feel himself growing hard, only inches away from Gene's wet lips, his warm breath.

He presses his nails into the nape of Gene's neck and rakes them upward, dragging a breathless, full-body shudder from him that Robert can feel along every inch. He does it again, slower and deeper, and this time Gene can't help the soft keened that escapes him, can't keep himself from arching up into Robert's hands, pushing hard against his body. He's so beautifully responsive, so hungry for every touch, and Robert badly wants to see how much more he could do if given free rein, the pleasure-wrecked mess he could make of this man.

He rocks his hips again, a slow thrust that brings him flush against Gene's neck, hardly anything to merit the shock of pleasure that goes shooting through his body, that startles a breathless gasp out of him. Through the haze of arousal his hand finds Gene's face, cupping his cheek and turning his head inward, pulling it tight against him.

Gene's fingers clench over his hips.

"Robert..." he whispers, half-question half-plea, his breath coming fast and hot against the waistband of Robert's underwear. He sounds like every fantasy Robert's had since he first laid eyes on him, and christ, he wants Gene's mouth on him, wants Gene shuddering under his hands more than he wants air in his lungs. He can feel the desper-

tion in every line of Gene's body as it strains toward him unthinkingly, but—

But when he presses a hand on Gene's head, tries to guide him downward, Gene stiffens and doesn't let himself be pushed.

And Robert closes his eyes, and makes himself stop.

Because he's so, so close to trusting himself with this. He wants Gene as badly as he's ever wanted anyone, god, wants him *right now*, but this... not like this. Not while half of him is still in the Christiansen living room, locking eyes with Joseph and feeling blood under his fingernails.

With difficulty, he forces himself relax his grip on Gene's hair, and strokes his head apologetically.

"I'm sorry." He swallows. "I'm a fucking tease."

"You don't say," Gene pants. He closes his eyes—Robert can feel Gene's eyelashes flutter against his stomach—and then nods. "Okay."

It takes Gene another moment to collect himself before he can sit back and let go of Robert's waist, the reluctance in his hands like one last caress. He's still flushed, pupils wide and lips parted, and it's all Robert can do not to haul him back in and finish the job.

"It's okay," Gene repeats, like he's telling it to himself as much as to Robert. "I meant it when I said I'd wait for you. And I don't think this would be a good time for it." He's still breathing hard as he looks up and raises a wry eyebrow. "But I would also like the record to state that you are an *asshole* sometimes."

Robert smiles, tousles Gene's hair. "Yeah, but you like me anyway," he hears himself say, and it's not what would have come out if he'd thought about it for half a second, because what the fuck is he going to do if Gene contradicts him, but—

"I do," Gene says ruefully, smiling and leaning forward to gently headbutt Robert's stomach. "I really, really do."

There it is again, that lump in his throat, the groundswell of affection and longing and *love* so powerful that it feels like terror, because

he always loses everything in the end, and he doesn't know how he'll survive losing this. That someday he's going to be looking back on this moment, and it'll be a memory so sharp it hurts to touch.

"Alright, hotshot," Gene says, taking Robert's hand and giving it a light tug. "If you're done showboating, put your shirt on and come to bed."

Robert complies, pulls the shirt on over his head. It's old, worn thin and soft with age, and clean, but still infused with the scent of Gene, of safety.

Gene apparently has Opinions about which side of the bed is his, and makes Robert climb over him to take the side by the wall. Robert's struck by the sense that this should feel stranger than it does—obviously they've skipped some steps to get to this level of intimacy, but it also feels natural, like coming home, to watch Gene get into bed next to him and pull up the covers as if this is something they do every night.

"How'd the quiche turn out?" Robert asks as Gene leans over to switch off the lamp, enveloping the room in darkness.

"Aha. You know I have other talents, right?" Gene settles back into the bed, settles himself against Robert without hesitation, dragging Robert's arm over him and tucking his hand against his chest.

Robert pulls him closer, breathes in, lets himself cling for a moment. "Of course you do. Sexiest con man in Maple Bay."

Gene huffs. "I think that title goes to you."

"Come on, who's the one that adapted the Pigeon Drop to work on a horde of bloodthirsty softball moms?"

"Yeah, I am kind of proud of that one," Gene acknowledges without much modesty. He stretches in Robert's arms, the line of his body going hard and lean, and *fuck*, it would not take much for Robert to let himself get worked up again, but that way lies madness.

"I want to run a sort of reverse Monte Carlo scam at the next game,"

Gene continues through a yawn, half rambling, "but I need someone to back my play. Or at least give me a convincing alibi."

"Is that the one where you steal a baby?"

"If you like," Gene says agreeably. "Who am I to interfere with your creative vision?"

In his mind he sees Julie again, the smug malice in her eyes. His arms tighten around Gene. "Count me in."

Gene lifts Robert's knuckles to his lips. "Mm. You're my favorite."

And I am so in love with you, he thinks reflexively. There's an echo of the usual knee-jerk fear that accompanies the thought, but it's less intense and it fades quickly, hard to sustain with the reality of Gene warm in his arms, with the scent of Gene all around him. He lets himself press his lips against the other man's neck, feels him sigh with contentment and go boneless in Robert's arms.

And it's not—the end. Everything that was wrong before he stepped into Gene's house is still lurking outside, but for now, at least, there's a layer of insulation between himself and the world. He finds that he can prod at those thoughts without being assailed by them. That he can *stop* prodding at them.

That he can sink into Gene, and sleep.

Interlude: After the Storm



Robert comes awake slowly, drifting upward through layers of sleep. A dream becomes the knowledge that he was dreaming. The feel of covers around him, followed by the awareness that he's not in his own bed. Someone is next to him; *Gene* is next to him. He can hear Gene's wakeful breathing, the sound of him tapping at something, can feel his arm shifting minutely where it brushes against Robert.

Robert opens his eyes half-lidded. His forehead is pressed up against Gene's pajama-clad hip, and the other man is sitting up against the headboard, working at what feels like a tablet. He lies there for another few minutes, just drowsing, then reaches up to wrap his hand around Gene's ankle and gives it a squeeze.

The typing stops and Gene moves to rest his hand in Robert's hair. "Good morning."

"Mmm." He pats Gene's ankle contentedly.

Another minute passes and the fog of sleep continues to clear away, which is when it comes to his attention that he has an armful of soft warm boyfriend, and a respectable morning hard-on. He tugs on the corner of Gene's t-shirt, urging him down, and Gene obligingly puts the tablet on the nightstand and takes off his glasses to join him.

Robert's memory of the night before is hazy and comfortably distant, like something that happened years ago, so it's almost a surprise to find himself here, the unmistakable evidence that yes, he did wake Gene up in the middle of the night and manage to invite himself into bed.

Granted, Gene's always shown a remarkable willingness to indulge Robert's impulses, and he certainly doesn't look put out to have Robert waking up in his bed now.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Gene asks, resting his hand on the back of Robert's neck and studying his face.

"Comfortable and well-rested. Ten out of ten, would crash your night's sleep again."

That makes Gene smile, but it's a little forced and it slips away too quickly. He bites his lip, visibly hesitating over what he's about to say, and Robert finds himself bracing for impact before the words are even out.

"Robert," Gene begins slowly. "I wanted to talk to you about last night."

Goddamn it. And he'd been feeling so good, too. Robert mashes his forehead into Gene's chest so he doesn't have to look at him.

"I killed Joseph," he mutters. "He came home to find me locked in a torrid embrace with his wife, it was a crime of passion. The cops will be here within the hour, but I'll be halfway to Mexico by then. Tell Betsy I love her, that this was never the life I wanted for her, and she can have my DVD collection."

"I wasn't going to ask about Joseph," Gene says mildly, his hands stroking lightly over the back of Robert's head. "You'll tell me in your own time. But... I did want to say —"

Gene pulls back so that they're lying on their sides, facing each other. His expression is sober and slightly uncertain.

"Robert, we don't have to have sex if you don't want to," he says quietly. "I know you're feeling... pressured to. Like it's something you

need to do to make me stay, but it's not, and you don't. I enjoy your company, with or without sex. I haven't just been hanging around because I'm waiting to trip you into bed."

Would have been the world's longest con if he were, and by this point, has involved way too much of Robert crying on him to be worth the payoff.

"And I don't mean 'right now,' I mean ever," Gene continues. "If you don't want to have sex, just tell me, and we can take it off the table permanently. I'd be okay with that."

Robert doesn't know how Gene missed the fact that he was two seconds away from throwing him down on the bed and having his way with him last night, given that the evidence was unmistakable and about three inches from Gene's face, but if he needs to be reassured of Robert's interest, that can be arranged.

He slides a leg across Gene and rolls the other man onto his back; Robert's hands are on his wrists, pressing him to the mattress, and their hips are slotted together snugly. Gene's expression is still cautious, but he lets himself be moved, doesn't call a halt as Robert bends down to kiss him.

They haven't... done this, really, which might have given Robert pause if he'd been thinking. For all that Gene's been easing him into other physical expressions of affection, they haven't actually kissed since the time they wound up at Robert's house on their third date, right before Gene had the good sense to pull the plug.

Robert had only been trying to prove a point, so he's unprepared for how the first touch of his lips against Gene's makes something catch in his chest, his pulse suddenly pounding, his body all at once incredibly conscious of every inch of Gene spread out beneath him. A split second ago he would have characterized his feelings as *affectionate*, but god, he is on a hair-trigger for this man, because now he can't think of anything but sex, of Gene's narrow hips bracketed between his

thighs, of the line of Gene's cock separated from his by only a few thin layers of fabric.

He bites down on Gene's lip, feels him gasp into his mouth, feels his body go tight as he arches against Robert, and Robert wants to just lose himself in this, torn between the urge to yank down those terrible pajama pants and bury himself between Gene's hot thighs, and the urge just to keep going, keep grinding against Gene until he comes in his underwear like a teenager.

It's Gene who puts on the brakes, unsurprisingly; after a few minutes of this his shoulders go tense, a signal Robert knows by now, so he breaks off the kiss but stays where he is, breathing hard into the curve of Gene's neck.

"Believe me, I want," he says huskily.

"Robert," Gene manages through jagged breaths. "It's not news that you're—good at revving *my* engine." But there's something tense and distracted in his body, an off note in his voice, and—

Gene doesn't believe him.

He thinks that Robert's still going through the motions, that he's just saying what he thinks Gene wants to hear, doing what he thinks Gene wants him to do. And Robert is drawing an utter blank on how to convince him otherwise.

"I'm the one who's been trying to get in your pants since the first night I met you," Robert points out. "You're the one who keeps stopping me."

Gene sighs. "Yes. Because you never seem to be very happy about it."

He puts his hands on Robert's shoulders and pushes him up to look at him.

"Am I wrong?" he asks quietly, carefully. He searches Robert's face, and his expression is troubled when he looks him in the eye and says, "Tell me I'm wrong. And next time I won't stop you."

The spike of fear those words send through Robert is its own an-

swer, and he finds himself unable to hold Gene's gaze. It drives home just how much he's been relying on Gene's judgment to set their pace, and half of him is panicking because *no, no, no, you can't leave this to me to decide, I'm going to fuck it up*, and the other half wants to argue that *you're the only thing that makes me happy*, but even he can tell that neither of those is the right answer.

And Robert—*fuck*, Robert's never been about *saying* what's on his mind. He bullshits, he throws up smokescreens; he doesn't crack open the calcified shell around his heart and hold out the soft, crawling meat of it for scrutiny. He doesn't want to have to explain himself, he wants to just *do* and be understood. So far he's been able to get away with it, since Gene seems to have a veritable sixth sense for understanding what's going on in his head without being told, for knowing what he needs, but...

But this time Gene misunderstands him, and if Robert wants him to get it, he's going to have to say it.

He sighs and slumps down, half on the bed so Gene isn't taking his full weight.

"Gene, trust me, I am not faking anything." How much more clearly does he have to spell it out? "I am a person who likes to have sex, and you are a person I would like to have sex with. I may be full of bullshit, but I don't *lie* to you."

He has the urge to follow up on that in more graphic detail, but bites it back because that would just be another misdirection, and it's not like Gene would let him derail the discussion for very long.

Gene strokes the back of his head in silence for a moment, and Robert can feel when he comes to a conclusion because some of the tension leaves his body. "Alright," he says at last, nodding. "I believe you." He shuffles onto his side to put them eye-to-eye again, and reaches up to stroke his thumb gently against Robert's neck. "So talk to me. What's holding you back?"

Robert draws in a breath. Here it is, then. No more bullshit, no more misdirection. He drops his eyes and scrubs a hand over his face.

"I... have a bad habit of losing interest in people after I sleep with them," he admits, frustrated with the words before they've even left his mouth, because they're so woefully inadequate to the grief this has caused him over the years. They make it sound like something small and unremarkable, not something that would gut him if it falls the wrong way on Gene, and he struggles to convey that. "You're—one of the best things in my life, and the thought of losing interest in you is... I don't know what I would do with myself."

Inexplicably, that makes Gene break into a smile. "That's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

Wow, Robert needs to up his fucking game, if that's what passes for a personal best around these parts. "It's crazy and stupid, is what it is," he grumbles.

"I don't think it's either of those," Gene says, and he sounds so matter-of-fact that Robert can pretend he's not being patronized. "I'd be worried too, if that were a pattern I'd recognized in myself. But, that said... do you really think you're likely to?"

Robert mulls over that for a moment—it's hard to weigh the *likelihood* of it against the catastrophe of the worst-case outcome.

"Maybe you would have if we'd hooked up earlier," Gene concedes, "and I am suddenly very glad I didn't have my wits together enough to say yes when you propositioned me the first time. But we're not strangers in a bar anymore. We know each other better now, and we're still learning more every day, of course, but we've got a... foundation now, that we didn't have before. That maybe you didn't have with those other people? I don't know, that would be for you to judge."

Is that all it takes? Is having a *foundation* before fucking someone enough to make his mercurial, self-sabotaging brain just *stop* for once?

Gene leans in and kisses his forehead. "You don't have to figure it

out right now. It's just something to think about. And whenever you're ready, I'm here."

Of the two of them, Robert is still of the opinion that he isn't the one who should be trusted to make that call. "I'm deputizing you to tell me when I'm ready."

"Mmm, I'll reserve veto power, but no—this needs to be your decision." He brushes the hair back from Robert's forehead. "I can tell when it's the wrong time, perhaps, but you're the only one who can decide when it's the right time."

They might be here for a while.

Gene lets go and sits up then, swinging his legs off the edge of the bed and making a slow stretch. "And now, I am starving. I can offer you coffee that is slightly better than Mat's and breakfast that is way worse, or we can go out and have the opposite."

"I'm happy where I am," Robert says. And he is, actually. Even if nothing's been resolved, he still feels oddly... lighter, just knowing that the pressure is off, for the moment at least, and Gene is sticking around anyway. "Also I don't know where my pants are, which doesn't bother me, but..."

"Right. Bean juice and burnt toast, coming up."

"Gene," Robert starts.

Gene looks back at him inquisitively, but Robert finds the words catching in his throat, because the thought at the front of his mind is *why are you doing this for me, how have you still not realized that I'm not worth all this trouble*, but hell—if it's somehow escaped Gene's notice, then Robert's not going to be the one to bring his attention to it.

"What if I said it's the right time now?" he asks instead.

Gene watches him steadily. "Is it?"

It could be. It might be—or that might just be the memory of Gene underneath him, so fresh he can still feel it, teasing at the back of his mind and agitating for him to finish the job. But ultimately he finds

that something's holding him back, which probably means it's not, so once more he makes himself let go of the idea.

He gives Gene a cocky smile. "I think it's the right time to let me kiss you again."

"You know what, I think I agree," Gene says, smiling back and leaning in to meet him.

The In-Laws



“—your dog doesn’t seem to be clear on the concept of ‘fetch,’” Gene observes.

“She thinks outside the box. Colors outside the lines. It’s proof that she’s exceptionally gifted.”

Gene squints into the distance, where Betsy has gone tearing off into the woods with her prize. “She’s something, alright,” he agrees.

It’s a gorgeous, late-summer afternoon—there’s a warm breeze off the ocean stirring the pines overhead, and sunlight is slanting bright and golden across a vivid blue sky. The smell of pine is rich in the air, and Robert feels like he could stay out here for hours—which is good, because if Betsy’s run off, they very well might.

Gene lays back down next to Robert in the bed of the truck, settling his head onto Robert’s shoulder. “Well, I hope you weren’t too attached to that... whatever it was.”

“Letting go of material attachments is the path to enlightenment,” Robert says amiably. He feels good; not even losing the whatever-it-was can dent that.

Gene pokes him in the side. “Oh, so you won’t be needing your Criterion Collection anymore?” Which is a provocation *and he knows it*.

And yeah, it's not like Robert hasn't noticed that they wind up tussling more often than two full-grown men ought to, but it's the safest way to put his hands all over Gene, and he'll take it. He rolls over and pins Gene to the truck, one hand laced with Gene's and holding it down, the other rucking up the shirt at his waist and moving to tickle him. Gene is laughing and squirming underneath him, hardly making even a token attempt to fight him off. Robert finds himself slowing, putting more of his weight on Gene, his lips only a breath away from the other man's collarbone, his palm pressed flat and possessive against the smooth skin of Gene's waist.

Then there's a buzz from the vicinity of Gene's pants, and they both pause.

"I feel like there's a joke to be made here," Robert says.

"Wait—sorry, hold on a second." Gene pushes at him, and Robert withdraws to let Gene sit up again. He digs the vibrating phone out of his jeans pocket and checks the screen. "Ah—it's Amanda. Do you mind if I take this?"

"Go for it," Robert says, and means it. He lays back down to wait out the conversation—and to wait for his half-hard erection to die down again. They still haven't *done the deed*, as Mary keeps asking, but it's... really only a matter of time now. Even if he's not sure how much he trusts himself, he trusts Gene not to let him fuck this up.

Gene's smiling when he puts the phone to his ear. "Hey sweetie."

Robert's getting better at watching Gene with Amanda. It's not jealousy, exactly—obviously, Amanda is always going to be Gene's top priority, and Robert's never once begrudged him that. It's more that seeing the two of them always stings a little because it reminds him how much he missed out on with Val. She and Robert may be building bridges now—slowly, cautiously—but it's never going to be the easy rapport that Gene has with Amanda. Still, it helps to be talking to her and healing those old hurts, however slowly, it helps him be happy just to see Gene happy.

So it's striking that at the first words out of Amanda's mouth, Gene freezes, the smile dropping from his face like a stone. Robert sees him blink and then lower his eyes unhappily, pressing his lips together and swallowing in silence. "What did they say?" he asks after a moment, managing to keep his voice neutral despite the tension in his jaw.

Robert finds himself reaching over to take Gene's hand, and Gene doesn't look at him, but he does take the offered hand and clutches it very tightly, keeps holding on as he listens to Amanda.

"Yeah," Gene says to Amanda. "Yeah... Well, it would certainly be an experience." He doesn't sound happy about that.

Robert hears Amanda stop, then hears her ask distinctly, *What do you think?*

Gene draws in a breath. "I think it's your choice. They are your grandparents."

Ah. Well, better family drama than some new-and-present crisis. Probably.

Whatever Amanda says next takes some of the strain out of Gene's body. "Then you don't have to," he replies easily, and he gives Robert's hand a squeeze as his grip loosens. "We don't need their money. Or if you want, you can make like a bandit, take the money and run." He laughs, and it's rueful but genuine. "That's what Alex would have told you to do."

"Take the money and run," advises Robert. "I don't know what you're talking about, but that's always the right answer."

Gene laughs again. "Did you hear that?" he asks her. "Robert also votes money-and-run. Three out of three dads give you their blessing. ...Nah, we're just out with Betsy. Teaching her the finer points of 'fetch.'"

It gives Robert a claustrophobic jolt to hear himself lumped into the same "dads" category as Gene and Alex, because being Gene's low-key boyfriend is a far cry from getting volunteered to be Amanda's new dad. But then, it's possible Gene didn't mean it like that; Robert is

technically a dad in his own right. He's going to assume Gene didn't mean it like that.

"It's... a work in progress," he hears Gene say, and for one uncomfortable second he thinks Gene is talking about him, or their relationship, until he realizes that they're still discussing Betsy. "She's having trouble with step 2: 'bring it back.'"

The conversation stalls out on the subject of dogs for a bit—and jeez, father and daughter both, how do these two not *own a dog already?*—and then it sounds like Amanda is making her excuses because Gene says, "Alright, kiddo, well take care of yourself. And don't worry about the grand-parental-units—you can make up a polite excuse to get yourself out of it, I'll back your play, or you can tell them to fuck right off."

Robert hears her mock-scandalized *Language, Pops!* through the earpiece.

Gene laughs. "You got me, I'll mail you a quarter for the swear jar. Just don't spend it all in one place."

A few more goodbyes, and then Gene's ending the call and slipping the phone back into his pocket.

"Right," he says somewhat uncomfortably as he settles back down, pillowing his head on Robert's arm. "So, I guess I should explain. You probably gathered that that was about Alex's parents, not mine. They're..." He stops, and sighs. "Well, they're very rich, and very Catholic."

"I'll take the first half," Robert offers.

Gene huffs a humorless laugh. "Would that we could choose our in-laws *a la carte*. Christ, where do I even begin? I guess... you could say that they always had a very firm idea of what they wanted their son to be, and Alex was absolutely not it—he was practically a changeling. It's not that they rejected him, or threatened to kick him out or disinherit him or anything, it's just that they never stopped trying to bend him to their will, to force him to be something he wasn't. But Alex

wasn't exactly... malleable, so the harder they tried, the harder he fought back."

Robert's experience has always been one of benign neglect, both on the giving and the receiving end, but if there's one thing he's learned from this world, it's that there's more than one way to be a shitty parent.

"Did I tell you they sent him to one of those 'pray away the gay' camps when he was a teenager?"

Robert snorts. "Sounds like a recipe for success."

"Right? Alex always said he never got more tail than he did at that camp—but he also didn't like to talk about it, so I doubt it was all fun and games.

"Anyway, their problem wasn't just that Alex was bi, it was a lot of things, but the upshot was that he was only barely on speaking terms with them by the time I met him as an undergraduate, and he was dead broke because they were trying to use their money as leverage to bring him to heel, and he was having none of it."

Given what Robert has seen of Gene's hot, hot problems-with-authority, he's not surprised to hear that Alex shared them. Or perhaps that Alex's experience was where they came from.

"He didn't keep it a secret when we started dating, but they weren't interested in meeting me, or even acknowledging my existence—which, honestly, I didn't give a fuck, because I wasn't keen on them either and it's not like I wanted us to spend our vacations at their place. But it bothered Alex, it bothered him a lot—he was furious with the way they disrespected our relationship. When we'd been together for about a year it finally came to a head, and he got into this massive, blow-up fight with them and ended up cutting contact altogether. He said that I was the most important person in his life, and until they were willing to recognize that, he wanted nothing to do with them.

"I think they expected to wait it out. They took it for granted that our relationship wasn't going to last, so we went a full year without

talking to them at all, and it wasn't until we were adopting Amanda that they changed their position. Alex was an only child, and they dearly wanted a grandchild to spoil, so they were willing to compromise enough to be allowed into her life. Or so they claimed, anyway."

Gene sighs. "Also, they paid for our first house. We were already facing the prospect of having to take out considerable student loans, or that one of us was going to have to put our schooling on hold and get a full-time job, or both, which was when his parents stepped in and offered to help.

"Alex was used to the way they offered money with strings attached, but we talked it over and decided to take them up on it anyway. Alex insisted that the house be fully, legally in our names, so that his parents wouldn't have any say in the matter once they signed it over to us, because he knew their M.O. They agreed, because I don't think they expected that he would *actually* take the money and run, and he didn't, exactly, he just... didn't let them use it as leverage. Like, thank you for the house, we are genuinely grateful for this gift—but you still have to acknowledge that this is my husband, the love of my life and the other parent of my child, or else you have to leave.

"For god's sake, we'd been together for two and a half years, we were legally married, we were *raising a child together*, and they were still referring to me as his 'friend' or 'roommate.' Christ, one time they even tried to introduce me to someone as his 'classmate.' I think eventually the compromise was that they didn't call me anything at all. I was just 'Gene'—just some guy who was always hanging around their son's house when they went to visit their granddaughter."

Robert feels a flare of anger—distant, because clearly this is an old hurt, and well papered-over with time, but it still makes him angry that anyone could possibly know Gene, could see his warmth and his overflowing empathy, and think that his love was worthless. His arm around Gene tightens.

"Which I guess isn't much of a compromise, and Alex was always

fighting with them about it, but I convinced him to leave it be. I thought Amanda deserved to have grandparents, and my dad certainly wasn't taking an interest, so—whatever, I decided, I could put up with it for her sake. And it worked fine until Amanda started getting old enough to pick up on it, and then... then suddenly it wasn't fine at all.

“Because she'd loved her grandparents, they doted on her, but every time they were around they were—undermining her parents' marriage, pretending like one of her dads wasn't real, like he didn't matter. At first she was just confused, then it started to make her upset, and then... I can't even remember what the last straw was, just that it reached a point where we couldn't keep going. Broke Alex's goddamn heart, trying to explain homophobia to an eight-year-old.”

He shakes his head. “It still took a long time to cut ties with them for good, because *every time* they would plead with Alex to give them another chance, they'd swear up and down that *this time* they'd abide by the rules we set—and these were his parents, for fuck's sake, of course he wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt. We gave them so many chances but they never changed a damn thing, and in the end... we just gave up. Alex told them to get the fuck out, that they weren't welcome in our home anymore. Full stop. No more second chances.

“So apart from the annual passive-aggressive Christmas card about how much they *missed him*, we had no contact with them at all after that. Alex died before they were reconciled, and his funeral was the first time I'd seen them in five or six years.”

Gene closes his eyes, takes a deep breath.

“And this is the worst part. This is the part I'll never forgive them for.

“They thought they were going to take Amanda after Alex's death. They just—*assumed*. As if I were nothing more than some glorified nanny, not the only parent Amanda had left. They approached me about it at the funeral, and... I'm not sure, I don't remember exactly

what they said, but I was still in shock, still reeling from Alex's death, and they were talking like it was already a done thing? Like this was *settled*, that they were taking Amanda from me? Like they'd already organized the whole thing and it was out of my hands, and I just—"

He breaks off, breathing hard, then swallows and says with difficulty,

"It was the worst moment of my entire life. I had just lost Alex and suddenly I thought I was losing Amanda too, and I just had this *vision*—" his voice breaks "—of being alone in that house. That house that had been *our home*, where *our family* had lived, except suddenly everyone I loved had been ripped from me, and now it was going to be just me, all by myself in that house full of memories." He breathes out hard. "Robert, I honestly think I would have killed myself."

There isn't a trace of hyperbole in his voice, only a fine tremor running through his body. Robert can't think of a single thing to say to that, only rage and relief in equal measure—relief that they didn't manage to do that to Gene, but rage that they'd even tried. He pulls Gene closer, and presses his lips to the top of Gene's head.

"I was on the verge of throwing Amanda in the car and driving to Canada that very night. I called our lawyer, practically in hysterics, and she had to talk me down and assure me that Alex's parents couldn't actually take Amanda from me, not without my consent, or not without some protracted legal battle that they were never going to win.

"So in the end it was just a matter of saying no—and then saying it again, and again, and again—until they finally understood that they weren't going to get their way. Which," he adds dryly, "I already had plenty of practice with.

"But I'll never forgive them for it, because they wanted to take *everything* from me. Which was no more than what they'd wanted all along, I'd just never realized what it meant until that moment. That they wanted Alex and Amanda but not me, and they would have cut

me out of my own family if they could, without hesitation, without sparing a single thought for what it would have done to me.

“And the hell of it is, they genuinely believed they were doing the right thing. They really, truly thought that I wouldn’t *want* to raise Amanda without Alex around. Like I saw her as just this... burden that I’d be happy to get rid of, like I wasn’t her father, like I didn’t *love* her, and what the *fuck*, Robert? Who thinks like that?” Gene’s voice breaks again, and he tips his head back, breathing unsteadily as he tries to regain his composure.

“Alex was so—*loving*,” he struggles to articulate. “He loved with his whole heart. And sometimes I don’t understand how parents like that, whose own idea of love was so narrow and blind and *selfish*, could possibly have created someone like Alex. And other times it makes terrible, perfect sense.

“And I hate them for everything they put Alex through over the years, and I hate them for trying to take Amanda from me, but sometimes I also just feel really, really sorry for them. Because they had an amazing son, and they have an amazing granddaughter, but all they’ve ever managed to do is drive them away, first Alex then Amanda, and *they have no idea what they did wrong*. They were hurt when Alex refused to see them, they’re hurt that Amanda won’t see them either, and now they’re growing old, without any kids or grandkids to love and take care of them, and they’re going to *die* like that, sad and alone, without ever understanding why.”

It’s far more sympathy than Robert would have been able to muster in his place, but then, that’s probably a large part of why he likes Gene. And it’s probably the only reason why Gene likes him—that he can find compassion for anyone, even someone who’s done the shit that Robert has.

“Does Amanda know?” Robert asks.

“That they tried to take her after Alex died? No. She was fourteen, and devastated by the loss of her dad. She’d just been getting to the age

when kids start to assert their independence, but suddenly all that stopped and she was clinging to me like... like one of those koala babies. She'd practically follow me from room to room, like if she let me out of her sight for even a minute I'd disappear too. So no, I didn't tell her, because she would have freaked out even worse than I had if she'd thought there was a danger they might take her away." He sighs. "I could tell her now, I suppose. I probably should, but it's not going to endear them to her at all, and at this point it feels unnecessarily petty to twist that knife."

If Gene doesn't want to do it, Robert would cheerfully twist that knife for him.

"So yeah," Gene concludes. "They're still around, sort of. Don't worry, you'll never have to meet them, because lord knows they don't talk to *me*, but periodically they try reaching out to Amanda, usually with cash in hand. They found out that Amanda's going to Horne—I don't know how, I certainly didn't tell them—and it's no secret that Horne is quite expensive, so this time they're apparently offering to help pay for her tuition... and also they want to take her to Italy over winter break."

Conveniently leaving Gene alone on Christmas. It's probably for the best that Robert's not going to meet these people, because punching senior citizens in the teeth doesn't play well in court.

"I bet you can make her a better offer," he says.

Gene grimaces. "After tuition, I'm afraid my current budget covers 'burritos on the waterfront' and not much else."

"Get a dog," Robert suggests. "I've got the hookups, I can get you one under the table. High quality, only lightly used."

Mary's been waiting for *ages* for the opportune moment to try to sell Gene on a dog.

"Could do," Gene says thoughtfully. "Anyway, it doesn't matter what they try to bribe her with, she is steadfastly on my side. I still wouldn't care what they think of me, except that it's hurtful to

Amanda, but she's like Alex—she can't stand the way they treat me, it makes her spitting mad on my behalf, and so, trip to Italy or not, she still doesn't want to spend time with them. She's a good kid," he adds, and Robert can hear the smile in his voice.

"She is," Robert agrees, and squeezes Gene's shoulder. "She's got a good dad."

Gene stretches, and when he settles back against Robert, the tension in his body has eased. "Anyway, thanks for letting me rant. I appreciate it."

"Sure thing." He strokes Gene's head. "We can go egg their house if you like."

"Mmm, not worth the drive, and it would require a *lot* of eggs before they'd notice. They've got this McMansion in upstate New York."

"So... if they die under mysterious circumstances, do you get to inherit? I ask for a friend."

Gene cracks up laughing, rolling over and pressing his face into Robert's shoulder. "Oh, *shit*. Not to encourage you, but yeah, I think Amanda probably would."

"I have an idea."

"We are *not* murdering my in-laws."

"I don't have any ideas."

"Sure you do," Gene says, propping himself up on his elbows to smile down at Robert. "You told me I should get a dog. And I think you may be onto something, because given the choice between a trip to Italy or a dog, I know which one my girl would pick."

"You done raised her right."

Gene shrugs, but looks pleased. "I did my best."

From the distance comes a familiar, chipper bark, and Gene sits up to scan for Betsy. He locates her quickly, but whatever he sees makes his brow furrow as he squints at her.

"Well, I think she lost your whatever-it-was," he reports. "But she's

dragging back something... bigger? She looks very proud of herself, anyway."

"If it's edible, I get first dibs."

"You may have traded up," Gene agrees. "Shall we go take a look?"

Robert takes his hand and lets Gene pull him upright. For a moment he just sits there on the tail of the truck, watching Gene tromp off through the dappled underbrush toward Betsy; he wants to fix the details of this moment in his mind, to preserve it in his memory forever, but he can already feel it turning into a blur of sunlight and intimacy and Gene, with Betsy's antics a background counterpoint.

Then he pushes himself off the truck, and goes to join them.

Her Dad's Dumb Crush



So, like—Amanda's not *stupid*. She knows that Pops hasn't even really tried to date since Dad died, and it's not just because he's exceptionally considerate of her feelings. Yes, he reads all those single-parenting self-help books religiously and highlights the sections on the hazards of dating while raising a kid on your own, but there's a difference between *balancing your needs with the needs of your child* and being flat-out stubborn and antisocial.

And, yeah, there was definitely a time when it would have been *too soon*, when Amanda would have *screamed* if Pops had tried to bring home some rando, as if he could just *replace* Dad like that, but—

But...

But it's been four years, and while Dad's loss is probably never going to stop hurting, it's stopped bleeding, at least, and yet Pops... still isn't dating. Isn't even looking. And it's starting to feel like a remix of the 'denial' stage—like he's keeping the home fires burning because he's still half-waiting for Dad to come home, any day now.

She's tried to hint that he doesn't need to hold back for her sake, that he can meet people without it compromising her *stable home environment*, that he doesn't have to be *alone*—

"I'm not alone, I have you," he'd replied easily.

—and that she appreciated it while she was younger, but next year she's heading off to college, that excuse isn't going to hold water forever—

"You're right," he'd said thoughtfully. "Around the time you hit thirty I'll probably have to find a different excuse."

—and yeah, grief is different for everyone, there's no wrong way to mourn, everyone recovers from loss at their own pace, etc (she read all those books too), but, but...

But she's about to *leave*, and what's he going to do then? She's going to be *halfway across the country*, who's going to make sure that he actually ventures out of the house sometimes instead of sitting on the couch all day eating chips and binge-watching *Long Haul Paranormal Ice Road Ghost Truckers*? Who's going to be there with the fire extinguisher when Mario Batalli puts the idea in his head that flambeing is fun and easy?

She was excited about the move, because it felt like a fresh start—new house, new scenery, friendly new neighbors to drag Pops outside and make him go to barbecues and stuff. *Handsome* new neighbors, most of them single, and Amanda was finally starting to be optimistic that Pops might come out from under his rock and notice that other people existed, that he could potentially *date* those people, but—

But of all the dateable guys on the block, why did he have to go for *Robert*?

At first, she thinks it's a midlife crisis.

No, that's not true—at first she doesn't notice at all. Because Pops is walking the fine line between *maintaining clear boundaries between your child's home life and your romantic life* and **keeping secrets**, and he manages to hide it for a while. He's been dutifully putting himself out there, hanging out with each of the neighbors in turn without visibly more enthusiasm than his other half-assed forays into dating since Dad

died, so it's some time before she discovers that he's actually got a crush on *Robert*, of all people.

A massive, obvious crush, on the guy that she's been mentally referring to as *Mr. Bad Idea*.

She already knew that Robert is the only guy on the block who takes her dad out and returns him drunk, which is *so* not Pops' M.O., she knows whose idea it was, it was the guy mainlining whiskey at 3 PM in the corner of the neighborhood barbecue. And yeah, Robert's funny, and hot, in an aging-bad-boy sort of way, and when he's hanging out with jesus-dad's drunk wife (who is *fantastic*, she's like the cool aunt Amanda never had) they are comedy gold, but that doesn't mean he'd be *good* for Pops.

Mat—now *he* would be good for Pops. He's like, the only legitimately cool dad on the block, he's not her teacher, he wouldn't fill their fridge with weird health stuff, and she would have a *sister*, oh my god, she can see it now, she would be the *coolest big sister ever*. Carmencita is sooooo adorable, they even *look* like sisters, they could hang out all the time, and Amanda could show her the ropes, she could tell people *this is my sister*, but—

But instead she gets up for a glass of water and a midnight snack to find her dad (who was supposed to be *asleep*, thank you very much) coming in the front door and sheepishly telling her that Robert woke him up in the middle of the night to go cryptid-hunting—

(Cryptid-hunting? Is that some kind of euphemism?? She doesn't want to know.)

—which is when she realizes that he's sort of... low-key glowing. He's trying not to be obvious about it, but he keeps smiling and ducking his eyes when he talks about Robert and oh my god, is he *blushing*?

He is.

And it strikes her, suddenly, that this is the first time she's seen him like this since Dad died. He's gone on a number of by-the-book dates, both before and since they moved to the cul-de-sac, but not a single one

of them has elicited more than a bland “It was nice, he was nice” that makes her *despair* of his prospects for not dying alone and being eaten by cats.

But really—Robert?

It has to be a midlife crisis. Some dads buy a motorcycle jacket; her dad gets a crush on someone who already has one. Someone who brings excitement into his bland life by dragging him out in the middle of the night to go cryptid-hunting (??), someone who is obviously *way too cool* for him and his embarrassing cat-print shirts.

Anyway, whatever. It’s not going to go anywhere, because it’s pretty obvious that Robert’s one true love is whiskey and, like, knife fights or something, and as stated above, he is *way too cool* for her dad. Pops will be disappointed, which will suck, but he’ll get over his dumb crush and maybe then he’ll realize that Mat is far and away the most dateable dad around, and wouldn’t it be awesome if Amanda could have a little sister?

There’s no way the thing with Robert is going anywhere.

They’re at the supermarket; Pops has a shopping list for each of them, because *divide and conquer*, like the dork he is, bonus points if you can steal it from someone else’s cart, and she’s coming back around to drop off a load of frozen stuff while he pretends to know what he’s doing as he picks out produce.

But on her approach, she realizes that there’s someone else with him—someone all up in his personal space like they’re cruising him in the middle of the produce section, which is the most *clined suburban pick-up maneuver in history*, and it takes her a moment to realize that it’s Robert, for once not wearing his jacket.

She stops. She’s too far away to hear what they’re saying (probably dumb dad-puns about lettuce) but she can read their body language, the way they’re steadily drifting closer to each other, can see her dad’s bright and slightly impish smile, more self-possessed than she would

have expected, given how the subject of Robert makes him stammer and blush when the man's not around. And Robert—

Robert doesn't look like he's cruising.

She knows what it looks like when people are deliberately turning up the charm—it's why she doesn't trust Joseph, because the man's *married* but she still gets the unnerving sense that he's hitting on her dad. People, especially hot people, give off a certain vibe when they're flirting with someone they think is a sure thing, but that's not what Robert looks like now.

Instead he looks—soft. Almost startled by it, like he doesn't know what to make of his own feelings, watching her dad like he can't take his eyes off him. He's... smiling. A small one, but it's real, not the hard, *acknowledging-I-just-told-a-joke* smile that she's seen on him before. That he's also low-key glowing.

It is, she realizes, the first time she's seen Robert looking like he's actually happy.

And she's torn between continuing to watch them or making another circuit of the store to give them some alone time, but the bags of frozen peas (and the pint of Ben & Jerry's skillfully hidden between them) are starting to make her hands hurt, so she reluctantly goes ahead and interrupts them.

They don't *quite* leap apart when they realize they're not alone, but there is a definite moment of suddenly-noticing-how-close-we've-been-standing and they both take a hasty step back. Robert's expression shutters and he looks almost guilty, like he got caught reaching for something that wasn't his; Pops looks flustered, like she caught them making out instead of just making eyes at each other.

"I have acquired your frozen vegetables," she announces. "There is definitely nothing in my hands but frozen vegetables."

Pops nods solemnly. "Good work, recruit. You should put those frozen vegetables, which assuredly contain nothing but frozen vegetables, in the cart."

And she was *going* to leave them alone again, but—like delicate woodland creatures who can only perform their mating rituals when they think themselves unobserved—the mood’s broken and Robert’s excusing himself, giving nothing more than a noncommittal grunt when Pops is like, *See you around!*

They finish up their shopping without incident, catching just another brief glimpse of Robert across the checkout lines, and it isn’t until they’re in the car driving home that she brings it up again.

“So,” she says, kicking her foot against the upholstery. “What’s the deal with Robert?”

He darts a guilty look at her. “Deal? There’s no deal. I definitely wouldn’t cut a deal. You can’t prove anything.”

“You’ve got a rotten poker-face, Pops. Spill.”

“Nothing to spill,” he insists. “We’ve hung out a few times. He’s an interesting guy.”

“Right. So if I asked you to rank our neighbors in terms of which you’d most like to date, who’d be top of your list?”

He’s silent for a long moment, but he never lies to her, so eventually he lets out a sigh and admits, “Robert.”

And it’s not like she didn’t know that already—Robert’s the only one he’s reacted to with any real interest—but it still sort of stings to hear it, because *seriously, Pops, of all the neighbors*. It doesn’t matter that his dumb crush seems to be reciprocated; just because Robert likes her dad doesn’t mean he’s going to be good for him.

There are a lot of things Pops could be saying to her right now—reminding her that she’s been urging him to date for ages, pointing out that he’s a grown man and allowed to make his own decisions, trying to convince her that Robert’s not the terrible idea he *self-evidently is*—but instead he stays quiet and waits for her to speak first.

But what’s she going to say that he doesn’t already know? Pops can be really dumb sometimes, but he’s not dumb about feelings and he’s not dumb about people. He can see what she’s seeing, he knows that

Robert is trouble with a capital T, and he wants to go cryptid-hunting with him anyway.

“So that’s your type, huh? Bad boys?” she asks at last.

He snorts a laugh. “Have you *seen* the pictures of your Dad in his youth?”

She has. And it’s weird to think that, once upon a time, Pops had a crush on Dad like he has a crush on Robert now. Except Dad had his shit together in a way that Robert clearly doesn’t, and she feels for Robert, she really does, but she also doesn’t want him dragging Pops down with him.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks after another long spell of silence.

Amanda shrugs, a little awkwardly. “Sure? I mean, it’s not really my call.”

They’re in the neighborhood now, only a few minutes from home, but at that, Pops steals a glance at her and pulls them over to the side of the street, puts them in park so he can look at her properly.

“Manda-Panda,” he says seriously, “you’re my number one. Always. I’m not going to bring anyone into the house who makes you uncomfortable.”

“It’s not that,” she says, struggling to find the right words. “I’m not worried for *me*. I’m worried he’s going to break your big dumb heart.”

Her dad smiles, though it’s a little sad. “He might,” he acknowledges. “Or I might break his. That’s how life goes sometimes—you take risks, and sometimes they pay off, and sometimes they don’t and you get your heart broken. But you’re not really living if you never take those risks at all, and a broken heart isn’t the worst thing that can happen.”

Which—yeah. She still thinks Robert is a bad idea, but it helps a little, maybe, to know that Pops is being as smart about this dumb crush as he can be. And when Robert inevitably lands himself in jail or whatever, she’ll be there to give Pops a hug and bake him an I’m-sorry-you’re-sad cake, even if she has to fly back from Chicago to do it.

“Well, I’m just saying, if he breaks your heart I’m going to break his face,” Amanda grumbles at last.

He laughs, puts the car back into drive. “That’s my girl. Friends to make, faces to break.”

It’s after school one day; Amanda’s taking the long way home, along the edge of the woods, because it’s not like she has any *friends* these days and if she goes home Pops is just going to look at her with big sad eyes and repeatedly drop hints that *if something’s bothering you, you know you can always talk to me, right?*

Which, yeah, she knows, she just doesn’t *want* to right now. It’s all a bunch of stupid bullshit anyway.

That’s when the dog finds her—the cutest, dumbest-looking Boston terrier she’s ever seen, who is *so thrilled!!* to meet a person there. Amanda looks around for an owner, but there’s no one in sight, so she crouches down to eye-level with the dog.

“You’re a cutie, aren’t you?” she says aloud, scritching the dog on the back of its neck.

It goes into absolute raptures over the attention, rolling over onto its back for belly-rubs and flailing around in the dirt like this is the *best thing* that’s happened in its entire life.

And despite everything, she finds herself smiling; it’s hard to wallow in misery when there’s an adorable dog emoting happiness at you. Maybe she should lean on Pops to get her a dog. Or get himself a dog, to keep him company when she goes off to college.

Then the dog bounds to its feet and takes off toward the woods. She’s disappointed—ditched again—until she realizes that it’s only gone about thirty feet away, and is looking back at her expectantly.

“You want me to follow you into the woods?” she asks aloud. “You think I’m going to fall for your obvious trap just because you’re cute?”

The dog wags its stubby tail so hard its entire butt is wiggling, tongue lolling in a grin.

“Well, you are absolutely right. Lead on, small dog.”

She leaves the road to follow the dog into the underbrush, even though it’s slow going and her backpack is threatening to overbalance her. The dog keeps pace with her, and after a dozen yards she finds a footpath that makes it easier. It keeps looking back to check that she’s still following, and eventually leads her into a clearing—

Where Robert is sitting on a fallen log, working on something in his hands. He looks up when the dog barks to get his attention, and freezes at the sight of Amanda there.

Well, damn. In her defense: she knew it was a trap when she walked into it.

“Hey,” Robert says after a moment. The dog, oblivious to the fantastically awkward situation it has just engineered, cheerfully runs up to him and starts pawing at his leg, and he absently pets its head.

“Uh—hi,” she replies. *Hello, guy who wants to bone my dad.* Or maybe already has. From the look on Robert’s face, he’s feeling just as uncomfortable about this as she is, and for the exact same reason.

“Your dog is really cute,” she offers.

“That’s exactly what she wants you to think,” he says, still staring like he’s expecting her to grow a second head.

“Okay. Well it’s working. Uh—how long have you had her?”

“Three years. Ever since she saved my life.”

“Yeah?” Amanda sits down on the other end of the log. Not because it’s stopped being awkward talking to her dad’s dumb crush, but it does feel rude to keep hovering like she’s about to make a break for it.

“It was in Serbia in the late nineties,” he says. He picks up the thing in his hands and starts working on it again—whittling, she realizes, though she can’t tell what he’s making yet. “Nasty place. I’d run afoul of the Russian mob, and they’d had me tied to a chair in a basement for three days. No food. No water. They’d knocked out half my teeth. I’m in there by myself, thinking about how I’m going to die in that filthy hole, thinking about all the regrets in my life, and all of a sudden

there's a dog in there with me. I thought I was hallucinating—I mean seriously, *look at her*. You'd have thought you were hallucinating too.

"And she looks at me—really looks at me, like she was looking into my soul and deciding whether or not I was worth saving. Apparently she decided I was, because she chewed through the ropes and then distracted the guard. Gave me the break I needed. I got out of there and never looked back. Two days later I'm at the train station with a fake mustache and a fake passport and a ticket to Kiev, and guess who shows up again? She'd chosen me. It was fate, and I knew better than to leave her behind."

That's about the time Amanda realizes he's got a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels sitting at his feet, which explains some of it, anyway.

And it occurs to her that maybe she should be getting nervous? Like, here she is alone in the woods with the sketchiest guy in the neighborhood, while he's drunk and playing with a large knife and spinning this messed-up story about the Russian mafia knocking his teeth out. She gets the feeling that Pops would be very disappointed with both of them right about now.

But—she's not nervous, she finds. A little uncertain, sure, because this conversation jumped the shark about three lines in, and Robert is weird and quiet and *drunk in the woods at four in the afternoon*, and she has no idea why her dad picked this guy, of all guys, for his dumb crush, but he doesn't feel scary. He just feels... sad, really.

"She's a good dog," Robert offers in conclusion. "Brilliant mind."

"I can see that," she says politely. With Robert's hands occupied, the dog has come back around to Amanda for attention.

"Just kidding," he says. "She's dumb as bricks. Took me ages to teach her English, because she only spoke Ukrainian when I met her."

"What's her name?"

"Betsy." Then he adds darkly, "You don't want to know how she got her name."

"Probably not," Amanda agrees.

She scratches Betsy's chin, and they sit in silence for a few minutes. Eventually Robert stops whittling and looks up, and in the corner of her eye she can see him watching her.

"You look glum," he observes neutrally.

She turns, her eyes flicking down to the bottle of whiskey. "So do you."

He nods. "Touche. Contemplating the meaninglessness of existence."

She draws in a breath, rubs Betsy's head. "Stupid teenage drama."

"Friends being little shits?"

She huffs a humorless laugh. "How'd you guess?"

"Because you're in high school, and high school's a fucking hellscape," he says matter-of-factly.

She raises an eyebrow at him. "You're not going to tell me it's the most magical time of my life?"

That startles an actual laugh out of him, like she said something genuinely clever. "Christ, *no*. Nobody in their right mind misses high school after they've escaped it."

That's—oddly reassuring, although she doubts he was trying to be. She wonders how much attention he's actually paying to the things coming out of his mouth right now.

"Underdeveloped prefrontal cortex," Robert adds, apropos of nothing, as he goes back to whittling.

"What?"

"It's why they're being little shits. The prefrontal cortex doesn't finish developing until you're in your early twenties. It's the empathy center of the brain. That's why kids are basically all fucking sociopaths. They'll get over it."

She can't tell whether that's true or whether he's still pulling her leg.

"Or they won't," he reflects. "Some people stay assholes forever."

They sit in silence for a few more minutes. A lot more minutes, ac-

tually, because the woods are lovely in spring and it turns out that Robert's company is unexpectedly restful when he's being quiet instead of being weird. Betsy has managed to clamber up and put her chin in Amanda's lap for more pets, looking blissed-out over the head scratches, tail thwapping against the log. Amanda winds up letting herself just rest for a while, taking in the quiet and the pine-scented air.

And she's feeling... better, actually. Credit probably goes more to Betsy than Robert, but she's still glad she decided to follow the dog into the obvious trap. Maybe when she gets home she'll tell Pops about the stupid drama after all; it'll make him stop worrying.

Finally she draws in a breath and reluctantly pushes Betsy off her lap. "Well, I should probably be heading home," she says as she stands up.

Robert nods. "Godspeed. Watch out for cryptids, they're attracted to teenage angst."

"Thanks for letting me pet your dog."

"First hit's free. Next time is when I start gouging you."

The thing in his hands seems to be almost done—she still can't tell what it is, but he's down to putting the fine details on it, and curiosity gets the better of her.

"What are you working on?" she asks.

"Wood."

"Yeah, *thanks*, Captain Obvious. I meant, what are you making?"

He stops. "It's, uh." He holds it out to her, and she takes it.

It's Betsy—or a Boston terrier that looks just like her, which is probably what he'd say just to be contrary—and Amanda finds herself smiling at it.

"Aw, it's so cute!" she says, because it really is. He's even managed to capture Betsy's dumb, bug-eyed smile.

"You can keep it if you like." He shrugs. "I was just going to bury it in the woods."

“Okay. Thanks.” It’s like a prize for surviving their first real conversation.

She wonders what Robert’s like when he’s around Pops—if he still goes out of his way to be this weird, or if he tones it down a bit. It’s... different, to be sure. And she can see how it might be fun once you get the hang of him, but it also seems like it would get exhausting really fast.

“I’ll tell Pops you said hi.”

He scowls and points at her with the tip of his knife. “Don’t put words in my mouth, kid.”

Whatever. Like he doesn’t have a dumb crush of his own.

“Word. Singular,” she says. “And I do what I want.”

That makes him finally crack a smile. A small smile, but a genuine one, and it feels weirdly like an accomplishment. Achievement unlocked: made Robert smile, for reals.

She wonders if this is why Pops can’t leave him alone—because Robert seems to walk around in a cloud of low-key unhappiness, and it feels good to be the one to make it lift a little. It’s the sort of thing that Pops would like, since he’s congenitally incapable of just letting the people around him be sad.

She’s still not convinced that Robert’s going to be *good* for her dad, but... she’s starting to think that if he does break Pops’ heart, it’s probably not going to be on purpose.

And he has an awfully cute dog, at least.

POPS: Manda-Panda, I’m going to be staying the night at Robert’s.

POPS: Make sure you lock up before going to bed.

POPS: And if there’s an emergency I’m, uh. Literally right next door.

Well, *Pops* certainly just unlocked an achievement: get laid again, for the first time in forever.

And it's not like Amanda had been fooling herself into thinking that *Pops* was some kind of vestal virgin (Dad's sex-ed talk pretty well blew that comfortable delusion out of the water), but there's a difference between knowing, objectively, that he's a healthy (albeit slightly antisocial) adult who once had a healthy sex life, and the reality of eating breakfast alone because he spent the night at his... Robert's house.

She's eating cookies, because *if you didn't want me having cookies for breakfast maybe you should have been here to stop me, POPS*, and trying to work out how she feels about all this before he comes home. He'll be able to tell if she's *conflicted* and *having emotions*, and he'll want to *talk about it*.

And, like—she knows she's not being rational. She's been on his case for *years* to get out there and date and meet people, because he deserves to be happy and have someone to love him. It's not fair for her to change her mind just because the guy he finally does pick is—argh, *such a bad idea*. And yeah, if she pitched a screaming fit and put her foot down, *Pops* probably would dump Robert for her sake, because he's painfully earnest when he says that she's his top priority, but she doesn't *want* to sabotage the only crush she's ever seen him have, to make him ditch the only person who's made him happy since Dad died.

(Not to mention that at the rate *Pops* moves, it'll be another twenty years gone before he finds someone suitably weird enough to crush on. Who, knowing their luck, will probably also be a Bad Idea.)

And it's not—just Robert, either. She thinks she'd be feeling like this, or something like this, no matter who *Pops* was out with. Because it sort of... drives home all over again that Dad's gone.

Because if Dad hadn't died, *Pops* wouldn't be dating, he wouldn't be at Robert's house right now. He would be *here*, they would all be *here*, they'd be having breakfast as a *family*, and—

It's been a while since she cried about Dad's death, but she finds herself putting down the cookies abruptly, suddenly breathing hard, her eyes hot and tight.

It's just not *fair*. Why? *Why?* Dad was so important to both of them, they all loved each other *so much*. Of *all the people* to die in a stupid, senseless accident, why did it have to be *her dad*? There's so much he's missed out on. There's so much she wants to tell him and show him, so many times she broke her heart all over again when she looked up and thought, *Dad should have been here for this*, and she just misses him *so much*. He's been gone, and Pops has been so, so lonely, and sometimes she thinks they're both going to die alone, and she wishes Dad could just *come home* already.

And that's what it is, to know that Pops is finally out there dating again. It's not that she's eating breakfast by herself; it's knowing that even if Robert had stayed at their place last night and the three of them were having breakfast together this morning, or if Pops had been smart enough to go for Mat instead and all *four* of them were eating breakfast together, it's still never going to be Dad again. Ever. She's never going to have breakfast with her actual Dad, and listen to him tease Pops for being scared to open those pressure-sealed tubes of biscuits, and roll her eyes at their dumb toast-puns, and make gross-out faces when she catches them kissing in the kitchen. If Pops ever gets back around to kissing, it's going to be someone else, not Dad, not ever again.

Maybe she'd still been a little bit in denial too, because that hurts—it hurts so much more than she'd expected it to, and she puts her head down on the table and cries.

Then she hears the fumbling of a key in the front door and she jerks upright, hastily wiping at her eyes. She has time to hide the evidence of tears or of cookies, but not both, so Pops comes in to find her sitting guiltily at the table with a half-empty box of Thin Mints in front of her.

He is wearing a shirt she has never seen before.

“Uh—hi,” she says, trying to discreetly slide the box behind the napkin stand.

“I see you were having a party without me.” He looks amused as he shucks off his jacket and takes the chair opposite her, snagging the box and taking a couple cookies for himself.

She snorts. “You’re one to talk, Mr. 10-AM-Walk-of-Shame.”

Okay, so apparently they’re doing this, because she can’t keep her mouth shut.

Pops gives her a tolerant smile; it seems his night was *just that good*.

“Amanda, my dearest of daughters—I am a thirty-eight-year-old man, and Robert is a gentleman friend with whom I have been getting acquainted for some time. We enjoyed a very pleasant evening and then stayed up late talking. There is no shame in my walk.”

Does he really expect her to buy that? “Pops, you are *wearing his shirt*.”

He looks down, as if he’s just noticed it. “Oh! No, this is mine, actually. Or it is now. Robert and I crashed a ghost tour last night and won the cool free t-shirts.”

...Okay, that sounds just dorky enough for her to believe, and it does say “I Survived the Maple Bay Ghost Tour” in a ~spooky~ font, and oh my *god*, how is she related to this man, that he thinks that counts as a ‘cool’ shirt?

Fine—so they went on their goofy ghost tour, but he still *spent the night* at Robert’s house afterward, when no one else over the past four years has even been able to get her dad out on a third date. He can’t keep playing this off like they’re just *hanging out sometimes*, like they’re just *guys being buddies*.

And Pops is looking at her like he can read that train of thought right off her face, because he gives a slightly rueful smile and says, “But I guess it is time to talk about Robert.”

Buckle in, folks, it’s *talking* time. Man, Pops and Dad both—why have they always had such a hard-on for *open and healthy communica-*

tion, when any normal person would have the grace to be flustered and tongue-tied and save everyone the awkwardness?

She picks at the icing on her cookie. "So does this mean you and Robert are like, a thing now?"

And Pops—doesn't answer right away. He presses his tongue against his teeth, lets out a breath like a sigh, and drops his eyes to where his fingers are laced on the table.

She was expecting a yes. She was *braced* for a yes, she was ready to start the process of reconciling herself to Robert—drunk in the woods at 4 PM on a Wednesday Robert—being, if not quite her new dad, at least someone she was going to have to get used to.

But this... somehow this is worse, because *yes* is clearly the answer that would make her dad happy, but his hesitation says everything.

"You're not like—bailing on him because of me, are you?" she asks, suddenly alarmed. Because yeah, while she really, really wishes that it could be *someone other than Robert* making her dad happy, the fact is, it *is* Robert, and if she's managed to screw up her dad's first real shot at a relationship, his first shot at *happiness* in four years, she's never going to forgive herself. "I said I was fine with him."

He looks up, startled. "What? No, it's not you. Of course I'd take your feelings into consideration, but..." He stops, sighs. "It's not you. I'm not trying to be coy, it's that I really don't know what we are right now. I'm very fond of him, and I would like us to be 'a thing,' but it's going to be up to him."

Amanda looks at him in disbelief. "You really think *he's* going to hit it and quit it?"

Seriously—are they talking about the same guy? The guy who gets all soft and glowy and only ever looks happy when he's looking at her dad? Does Pops think *Robert* is going to be the one to bail?

He rolls his eyes. "Child of mine, there was no 'hitting' going on last night. I told you, we stayed up talking, and that is all we did. Robert

is..." He pauses while he searches for the right words, and settles on, "Robert has a lot of things he's working through."

That's a diplomatic way of saying *more issues than Cosmo*, which, *yeah duh*, she already got that memo, but it's reassuring to hear him acknowledge it. She never did tattle on Robert about that day she ran into him in the woods, but she hasn't forgotten about it—the idea of having to accept his authority would be galling, considering that she is *literally a teenager* and she still makes better choices than he does.

"So I take it Robert's not about to become my new dad?" she says instead.

The look on Pops' face is almost comically pained. "I don't think either of you are ready for that," he says tactfully.

And that's reassuring too, because she doesn't *want* a new dad. She used to have Dad & Pops, and now she just has Pops, but he gets the job done fine even though they both still miss Dad. She doesn't *need* anyone else trying to be a parent to her.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Pops says to her silence. "I know you had your heart set on Mat."

"I didn't—" she starts to protest, but stops when he gives her a *look*.

"You ain't as subtle as you think you are, kid."

Oh come on, she hasn't been *that* obvious about suggesting he go get coffee at Mat's cafe. Only a few times. A week. Definitely not more than once a day.

"I just..." she begins. She's trying to figure out how to put it politely, but then decides screw it, he's a grown-up, he can take the hard truths. "I just don't understand why you'd pick Robert over Mat. Mat's hot too, and he has so much more going for him. He has his cool cafe and his music and a daughter who would have been such a cool sister, and you're—*argh*, it's like on *Paranormal House Hunters*, where they're all 'We have this beautiful, recently-renovated neo-Victorian cottage available,' and you're the guy who's like, 'Nah, I'd rather take the

haunted shack in the woods with a hole in the roof.' Like—why are you on-purpose going for the one that's got problems?"

She's kind of worried he might take offense, either on his behalf or on Robert's, but Pops just looks faintly bemused.

"The haunted shack in the woods with a hole in the roof," he repeats thoughtfully, like he's remembering that line for later. "Well. You're not wrong about Robert having problems, but..." He pauses, then sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I don't know what to tell you, sweetheart. Just that we don't fall in love with people because they're going to be easy. Or apparently I don't, anyway."

He looks back at her then; she can see him debating whether or not to say what's on the tip of his tongue.

"It wasn't always easy loving your Dad either," he tells her quietly. "But he was worth it. I never regretted any of it, not even for a moment. And I do know what I'm getting myself into with Robert, and I think he's worth it too." He tips a wry smile at her. "To extend your real-estate metaphor—yes, he's a fixer-upper, but I see a lot of promise there."

And how's she supposed to argue with him when he's coming over all *wise* and stuff? Like, she still thinks he's being stupid, but apparently he *knows* he's being stupid and he's choosing to walk into it anyway, eyes wide open. And maybe he's courting a broken heart—but maybe he was also right when he said that there are worse things.

"Well," she mutters around a cookie. "I'm just saying. If he breaks your heart I'm still going to break his face."

He smiles at her sadly. "Manda, my panda—I don't think he could break my heart without breaking his own too."

It is, in Amanda's opinion (and since this party is *all about her*, hers is the only opinion that matters), an *excellent party*.

There is a mac-and-cheese bar.

There is an ice-cream cake.

The only two food groups, as far as she's concerned.

All the neighbors have come, which, yeah, some of them she could take or leave—she still can't pinpoint why she doesn't like or trust Joseph, just that every time he talks, all of Dad's words about instincts are suddenly ringing in her ears—but it's sweet that they're here for her party, and it's a beautiful evening and Pops has outdone himself with making the backyard look festive.

She has reconciled with the Emmas, who shamefacedly apologized for the way they'd treated her, and there were tears and hugs all around. And yeah, she's still a little sore, but mostly she's relieved to be able to patch things up, because ten years is a long time to be friends, and she'd really missed them.

She has *networked* with Robert's daughter who is—*yowza*, like, the hottest person Amanda has ever met. Maybe it's okay that Robert's not going to be her new dad anytime soon, because she's going to have trouble thinking of Val as a *sister* anytime soon.

She has made Pops cry happy-tears. Present: delivered. Hugs: given and received. It's probably never going to stop hurting that she's down to only one dad, but Pops is so good even on his own, he's the best dad anyone could possibly ask for, and he says he's proud of her, but really, she's proud of him. She is so, so proud, and oh hell, she's going to start crying again.

And now, because Pops has dutifully played host for her party instead of sneaking off to go make out in the corner with his boyfriend like he so clearly wants to, she has given him her blessing to go join Robert.

They're sitting on the bench under the cherry tree, glowing in the sunset and also just glowing at each other generally, because that's what they do, and they look like a still-frame from the end of a movie. She'll look away if they actually start kissing or something, but for now, she's watching them as she helps herself to a fifth slice of ice-cream cake.

She still hasn't quite gotten over the knee-jerk *Why Robert?*, but... he

really does make her dad happy, radiantly so, and maybe that's the only answer she needs. Robert has his arm around Pops, and Pops is leaning on his shoulder, laughing and shaking his head at something. And Robert's still looking at him like Pops is a gift he's half-convinced someone gave him by mistake, that they're going to take away from him any moment now, but come on, this is *Pops* they're talking about, the guy who married his first real boyfriend, he's not going anywhere. She watches as Robert presses a shy kiss behind her dad's ear, watches Pops smile and close his eyes as he leans into Robert.

"Can't decide whether you want to congratulate them, or gag at how sweet they are, am I right?"

She turns to see Val piling macaroni onto her plate with a sardonic smile.

"Yeah," Amanda says. "It's just... still kind of weird."

Weird to see them touching, anyway. The heart-eyes have been going on for *months*, she's pretty used to it by now.

Val gives her a considering look. "Let me guess, you weren't thrilled when your dad started seeing my dad."

"I—uh." Because, well, *no*, but it seems rude to say it.

Val snorts. "Oh, trust me, hon, I know what a piece of work my old man is. I don't blame you for a minute."

There's a thread of bitterness in her voice that makes Amanda inexplicably want to defend Robert. Because yeah, obviously he's got issues, but he's also completely smitten with her dad, and he seems to be doing the best he can.

"I think he's really trying," Amanda says at last.

"Yeah," Val agrees, watching them, an odd note in her voice. "It seems like he is."

There's a queer mix of emotions on her face, like longing and sadness and anger and hope are all fighting it out at the same time, and Amanda's struck with a faint sense of what it must feel like to look at your dad like that, to love someone but not be able to just walk up to

them and say it. Or not know whether they'd say it back. She wants to give Val a hug, and like, offer to share Pops with her, because everyone deserves an A+ dad like him.

"I've... never seen my dad like this before," Val says quietly. "I haven't seen him this happy in a very long time." She looks at Amanda and pulls a smile. "So. Thanks for not murdering him and dumping his body in the woods, even though he's a trainwreck. It means a lot to me."

"They make each other happy," Amanda admits. "My dad's been sad for a long time too. He just hides it better."

Val smiles and lifts a forkful of macaroni like a toast. "To dads no longer being sad."

"To dads," Amanda agrees. Even though they are totally sappy and gross about it.

And Robert's still weird and maybe a bad idea, but apparently Pops is the freak who goes for that, and they make each other happy, and that's what matters in the end. She's not going to have to break any faces, she doesn't have to worry about leaving Pops alone when she goes off to college, and hey, it turns out she might get a sister after all.

They're going to be alright, she thinks. They're really, truly, going to be alright.

The Zara Shirt

(Wake Me Up When It's Over Remix)



When Joseph first texts to ask for his help at the bake sale, Gene is briefly very excited, because he hears the phone buzz and gets his hopes up that it might be Robert.

JOSEPH: Hey neighbor! Don't suppose I could hit you up for a favor?

JOSEPH: The church is having a bake sale this afternoon, and I could use a hand making brownies and/or manning the booth.

JOSEPH: Don't worry, it's not a religious thing! Just a good old-fashioned community bake sale!

Gene sighs and puts the phone down, scrubbing a hand over his face.

For god's sake, he needs to let it go already—it's been a week since he and Robert went out, and he hasn't heard from the man even once. A week of trying to convince himself that maybe Robert has just been busy, a week of progressively less optimism every time the phone buzzes. Robert hasn't replied to a single text, hasn't even *looked* at his messages in days, it really doesn't get much clearer than that.

As the kids would say: he's just not that into you.

It would help if Gene knew where he'd messed up, but he's gone

over the date in his head a hundred times now, and he can't for the life of him figure out what he did wrong. Sure, the evening had started kind of rough, with Gene thrown off-balance by Mary's unexpected presence, and then how she went out of her way to make him feel like a third wheel (mission accomplished, lady), but it had smoothed out by the end and Gene had been honestly enjoying himself. It was like that first night at the bar again—the fun of keeping pace with Robert's unpredictable shifts, the spark of attraction between them, the excitement and the potential there—and he really thought Robert had been feeling it too, but...

But now it's been a week and Robert doesn't seem interested in ever talking to him again.

Maybe it wasn't any one thing he messed up; maybe Robert was just more bored than he was letting on and *ugh*, maybe Gene's too much of a square to interest someone like Robert after all.

God, he misses Alex.

Most days it's a background ache, but every time he tries to date, it all comes surging back to the surface—how much he lost and how little he wants to be doing this again.

He'd always known that he'd gotten lucky with Alex—that most people don't marry the guy they fall in love with in their first week of college, and even fewer are still in love and still married fourteen years later—but he'd never realized just *how* lucky until suddenly he's venturing into the dating scene again and discovering that he's just... not into most people.

He's gone out with a handful of men since Alex died, mostly dates arranged by mutual acquaintances, men who were friendly, intelligent, charming, often quite handsome, everything he *should* be interested in, but just... wasn't. And every time he walks away from one of those dates, he despairs a little more of ever meeting someone who makes him feel what he felt for Alex.

And maybe he just needed to give them more time—he knows Alex

is the standard he's judging everyone else against, and that it's wildly unfair to compare the tentative attraction of a first date to the depth of love that comes from a decade of marriage. Maybe he could have come to love those other men if he'd stuck it out and gotten to know them better.

Or maybe he really is just *not into most people*, and Alex was some one-in-a-million jackpot win. (His adolescent fumbblings pre-Alex don't really shed much light on the question—all he remembers is being a sexually frustrated gay high schooler eager to fool around with any boy who was willing.)

Robert evokes a different kind of despair, because Gene is suddenly, inexplicably feeling the thrill of infatuation again... but now he's also remembering that it takes two to tango. That not only does Gene have to find that one-in-a-million guy he's interested in, said guy has to be into him too, and, *oh god, what are the odds? At his age?* He already got luckier with Alex than most people get in a lifetime, how can he possibly expect lightning to strike twice?

The phone buzzes again and his pulse jumps. *It's not going to be Robert*, he tells himself sternly before looking at the screen.

JOSEPH: Would love to have you along! :)

He sighs.

Fine, whatever—he'll do it, even though a church bake sale isn't exactly Gene's idea of a good time (and Alex would be pitching a *fit*, but he's not here, is he). There's nothing better on the agenda for today, and Amanda has been campaigning for him to get more involved in the neighborhood social life, so it'll make her happy, at least.

Who knows. Maybe he'll even have fun.

Well, 'fun' might be overstating it, but he's spent worse mornings than hanging out in Joseph's kitchen and trying to reconstruct a box brownie mix from memory.

"I know it's got oil in it," Gene says. "Maybe... one-third cup?"

"I think it's more than that," Joseph says with a frown. "Because every time I make them I find myself appalled at how much fat is going into them, and then I have to wait at least a month for my brain to purge that data before I can make them again."

"Memory like a goldfish," Gene says approvingly. "Only way to live."

Joseph prods at the batter. "Are we supposed to put water in it too?"

"No, I'm pretty sure that's cake mixes. I mean, I could google it—"

"That's cheating."

"—I have my phone *right* here—"

"We do this by the code. We live and die like men," Joseph says seriously.

"Like men who let an eight-year-old lose the box of brownie mix."

"She's a wily one," Joseph agrees. "How about an egg? I'm feeling... one egg."

"I'm feeling three. Split the difference?"

He still can't help wishing it were Robert who'd texted him instead, but this isn't awful. Joseph's kids are less unnerving when you realize their creepy twin shtick is a game, and Joseph's tactful enough to ease off the Jesus-thing with people who aren't into it. He's not Robert, he doesn't light a fire in Gene's blood, but he's not bad company—smart, funny, and surprisingly laid-back for a youth priest or whatever he is.

Joseph is also, however, flirting with him.

He's not sure whether the man's even aware he's doing it, but Joseph's interest is... pretty unmistakable. Gene's spent most of his adult life being a married man; he knows what it looks like to have someone hitting on him (or, as happened more often, hitting on Alex) when they know full well it's not kosher. There's a certain... testing of the waters. Venturing a line to see if it gets a bite. Flirting, but with plausible deniability, that could be played off as innocent friendliness if it doesn't get the desired response. And even though he's not the one

who's married anymore, that's the distinct sense he's getting from Joseph now.

It's uncomfortable, the way one-sided interest always is; it would be even if Joseph weren't married with an unreasonable number of kids, because Joseph's perfectly handsome and perfectly nice, but not the one in a million that does it for him, apparently.

As it is, Gene feels sorry for him—for his unhappy marriage and his obvious loneliness, for whatever conflict with his faith that's made him unable to accept his sexuality—but he's not interested in being party to adultery, and he's not interested in being the one to hold Joseph's hand through his big gay epiphany, with all its accompanying crises and freak-outs. Gene's own big gay epiphany is far, far too many years in the rearview mirror for him to muster up the appropriate patience.

(Alex, he reflects, wouldn't have had any patience for Joseph at all. As someone who'd fought back hard and fought back *young*—and been made to suffer for it—he'd always had very little sympathy for people who, as he saw it, had tried to take the easy way out. *They decided they'd rather be 'normal' than be happy*, he'd once said. *So I find it hard to feel sorry for them when that's exactly what they fucking get.*)

Luckily, flirting that's easy for Joseph to disavow is also easy for Gene to pretend he doesn't notice.

Within the first twenty minutes of arriving at the bake sale proper, Gene finds himself discreetly checking his watch no fewer than four times. Joseph has said they usually pack it in around five-thirty or six, and it's, oh *jeez*, not even noon yet. Again, this isn't the worst time he's had, but honestly he'd be good after one or two hours of community service—six or seven is pushing it. If he'd realized the bake sale was going to be an all-day commitment, he might have made an excuse and stayed home watching *Toddlers: Terrors of the Deep* instead.

He and Joseph are set up on a pair of lawn chairs under the sunshade. They haven't made any sales yet, but the people passing by

have been eyeing the brownies with interest and several have promised to come back around later.

They've been chatting; at first Joseph had tried subtly fishing for information about Alex (curious what goes on in a gay marriage, perhaps?) but that's not something Gene wants to discuss with him, not least because there's no polite way to say *he hated religion and he would have hated you*, so he steers the conversation to child-rearing instead. It's a relatively neutral topic that (mostly) manages to avoid both the Jesus-thing and Joseph's leading compliments, and if there's one thing Gene's learned, it's that dads will never, ever run out of things to say on the subject of raising kids.

They're trading stories about conflicts with classmates—how to coach your child to a resolution, discussing the dad's role in that and when it's appropriate to intervene—when his attention is momentarily drawn to someone cutting across the grass, and—

And then suddenly Robert's there, and *argh*, no no no, *play it cool, Gene, he's not into you like that, but he's still your neighbor, you're still going to be seeing a lot of him, don't make things awkward—*

Oh god, he's gorgeous.

Gene hadn't *forgotten* that in the week since he saw Robert, but it's something else entirely to find himself face-to-face with it again, and no, he's not managing to play it the slightest bit cool, the man is just *so, so gorgeous*, movie-star handsome, radiating that rugged, confident sensuality that makes Gene go weak in the knees. Robert's traded his leather jacket for a close-fitting white t-shirt that offsets his deep tan, that hugs the breadth of his shoulders and the taper of his waist, shows off the corded muscles in his forearms.

And he's being abashed and apologetic (in his evasive Robert way) for having disappeared for the past week, but venturing a tentative, hopeful smile at Gene, and—

Well, Gene reflects, there goes any progress he might have made in walking back his crush.

I'm yours for a smile, sweetheart, he hears Alex saying in his memory, and it's so true, he really, really is. He doesn't even want to fight it, just finds himself smiling back and taking the line Robert throws him, sees Robert's relief at the tacit forgiveness.

"I wouldn't have expected to find you at a church bake sale," Gene remarks as Robert takes the liberty to come lean against the table beside him.

Robert nudges him playfully with his hip. "Please, Gene, I'm not a *complete* reprobate."

"You just play one on TV?" Gene asks giddily, and the look Robert gives him is...

No, there is *no way* he's misinterpreting this. Everything he's feeling, he sees mirrored on Robert's face—the affection, the breathless anticipation, the *happiness*—and Gene wants to sigh and gaze into his eyes and indulge in all manner of romantic clichés, and—

Joseph clears his throat, pointedly busies himself with rearranging the brownie display, and Gene is reminded that they're not alone, that they are in fact still at a church bake sale.

He ducks his head, blinking and feeling the sudden need to catch his breath. "You should, ah, pull up a chair," he offers. He's trying to think of some way to include Joseph in the conversation, because it's pretty insensitive to fawn over Robert when Joseph is *right there* and has been making his clumsy, closeted overtures all morning.

"Mmm, would that I could," Robert says regretfully, and Gene's distracted again by the press of Robert's hip against his shoulder. Robert shrugs and stretches around a yawn that pulls the shirt taut across his waist—oh *jesus*.

Because that's when Gene realizes that what he'd taken at a glance for designs on Robert's shirt are actually *Robert's tattoos*, showing *through* the shirt, a shirt that is practically sheer, he's got *tattoos* curling all down his ribs and disappearing into his pants, when did this happen.

Good genetics, he thinks dumbly, because it sure as hell isn't clean living, but Robert's stomach is still flat and trim, and Gene is mesmerized by the glimpse of bare skin where the shirt rides up, by the line of dark hair leading downward from his navel. Gene's fingers itch to stroke down that line, to trace the path of those tattoos with his fingertips and then follow up with his mouth, and *argh, Robert, this is a family-friendly event, why are you doing this to me.*

In his distraction, he almost misses what Robert says next—would have, except that Robert plants a solid arm on the table behind him, leans over him in a way that's unmistakably possessive, and he's looking *right at Joseph* as something hard and dangerous creeps into his voice, something that makes Gene's hindbrain sit up and think, *shots fired*, and he finds himself rewinding that last line.

She knows all my dirty secrets. I can refuse her nothing.

Because Robert's here with Mary, apparently, which explains what he's doing at a church bake sale, but doesn't explain—

Gene looks up at Robert, just in time to see him flinch at Joseph's bland response, his jaw going tight and his smile threatening to slip until he very deliberately looks away from Joseph and looks at Gene instead.

"I don't know, can you? Tempt me, Gene."

Right, because they're trying to sell him a brownie, even though brownies do not even make the top ten list of things-on-Gene's-mind-right-now. He spins a sales pitch anyway, some big-fish story that he thinks Robert would enjoy. He sees Robert's smile soften, sees the corners of his eyes crinkle fondly.

Sees the smile falter, sees the hitch in Robert's breath as Joseph snags his attention again, even though Robert resolutely doesn't look at him, stays facing Gene.

He's getting a sudden sense of *deja vu*. It's the barbecue all over again—pleasant and polite on the surface, but with something very wrong creeping in around the edges. It's the tension thrumming in ev-

ery line of Robert's body, the way he doesn't talk to Joseph, doesn't even look at him, but isn't *ignoring* him either, because it's clear that Robert is acutely, painfully aware of every move that Joseph makes. That Joseph's very presence puts him on edge.

And Gene can see the moment when Robert reaches as much of this as he can take, a flash where the stormclouds in his face darken and his knuckles go white, and then his shoulders slump as the fight goes out of him.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I'm going to be a harder sell than that," Robert says, pushing himself away from the table, unsmiling. "Polish your sales pitch and try me again later, it's time for me to get back to the salt mines."

Gene has only the briefest warning and then Robert's hand lands on the nape of his neck. For a moment it feels like manly camaraderie, until Robert gives a slow, proprietary squeeze and strokes his thumb down the line of Gene's neck.

Gene sucks in a breath through his teeth, feels his body go rigid at the spark that goes shooting down his spine, a sudden surge of *want* that has him biting back a moan and fighting not to arch into Robert's grip. There is *no way* Robert knew that was a sweet spot for him, Gene thinks in a moment of lucidity (although he probably knows *now*). It was a lucky guess, but one that has Gene pliant and nearly panting under Robert's hand, unable to focus on anything except the blood pounding in his ears, on each point of pressure from Robert's fingertips spread across his neck.

Robert slides his hand around to cup the side of Gene's throat and leans in close, lips brushing his ear. Gene can feel himself tilting his head to the side, baring his neck in submission or invitation, *please, please, please*.

"Stop by, if you get thirsty," Robert purrs into his ear, fingers dipping down to play along Gene's collarbone.

Gene's eyes flutter briefly closed even though *oh god, Joseph is right*

there, they are in the middle of a church bake sale, and Robert is turning all his talents to driving Gene out of his mind.

Robert draws back, catches Gene's eye as he strokes his neck again, his dark eyes hot and intense.

Come on, what are you waiting for, just do it, just kiss me already, Gene thinks desperately, drifting toward him. It couldn't be more obvious that Robert's there to stake a claim, christ, he might as well have peed on Gene's leg to mark his territory, you want to show Joseph I'm taken, then go ahead and kiss me, it doesn't get any plainer than that.

For a moment he thinks Robert's going to do it—a moment when they're suspended in a world of their own, lips barely a handspan apart, close enough that Gene can feel Robert's lungs moving like his own, close enough that it would be *so easy* to bridge the gap between them and press himself against Robert's broad chest.

But then Robert's eyes flick to Joseph again, and his smile turns to black ice.

"Be good," he bites out coldly, all pretense of civility gone. His hand tightens over Gene's neck one last time, and then he's releasing him and stepping back, turning and leaving without another word.

Gene blinks, stares blankly after him, and it's several long moments before he even remembers to breathe again. He watches as Robert strolls across the park to a sunshade a few dozen yards away, where Mary is already seated next to a soda machine. She says something as he takes a seat; he laces his fingers and stretches. It's all Gene can do not to get up and follow him because *Robert, have mercy, I am thirsty right now.*

Gene closes his eyes and lets out a shaky breath, tries to keep his voice steadier than he feels when he says aloud, "Well d—darn. I really thought we had that one. I guess I'm not the salesman I thought I was."

Joseph pats him on the arm, a touch Gene tries not to shrug off too obviously, because it's not Joseph's fault that he's not the one whose hands Gene wants on him right now.

“Don’t take it to heart,” Joseph consoles him. “Robert does what he likes. We’ll make sure these brownies find good homes.”

Gene blinks. Finds himself looking oddly at Joseph. Because yes, Robert does as he likes, and he’s often hard to predict—but he’s not hard to read, and the intensity of his dislike for Joseph, radiating off him like it would burn to touch, stands in stark, jarring counterpoint to Joseph’s nonchalance. As Gene slowly comes down from the haze of blinding arousal, he realizes that he’s waiting for an explanation; that Robert’s hostility is too strong and too obvious to pass without comment, and he’s waiting for Joseph to tell him what the hell’s going on there.

But Joseph doesn’t offer anything, just gazes off toward the soccer field, utterly unperturbed.

For a crazy moment, Gene finds himself doubting his own memory—wondering if he somehow imagined the banked rage in Robert, if that was just his mind playing tricks on him. Because Gene wasn’t even the target of that rage and it had still been deeply unsettling to watch; surely it would have been even more disturbing for Joseph, having it aimed directly at him.

Yet to look at Joseph now, there’s no sign that anything happened at all.

It feels, bizarrely, like the two of them just had entirely different experiences; like Gene briefly stepped into some alternate reality for that encounter, and now he’s back in a world where it never took place.

He frowns, absently touches his neck where Robert’s hand had been, and looks across to where Robert is sitting. His back is to Gene, but he looks at ease, stretched out in his chair to soak up the sunlight, and Gene feels himself relax.

Well. The day’s looking up, anyway, even if he and Robert are chained to opposite booths. Gene’s looking forward to some long-distance flirting over the course of the afternoon; maybe they’ll even get a

chance to duck out of their respective duties and steal some time together. It'll be fun.

It's not fun.

Robert doesn't move for the rest of the afternoon—doesn't get up, doesn't even look over his shoulder, as far as Gene can tell, not even as hour after hour goes by. Like all he was interested in doing was getting Gene worked up and then walking away again, and christ, it's just a goddamn encore of this past week.

This man runs unbelievably hot-and-cold, and Gene has no idea which set of signals is the one he should be listening to.

Not for the first time, Gene considers going over there and initiating contact himself, except Mary's still there and she has a particular talent for making him feel unwelcome. He doesn't relish the prospect of trying to force his way into that, and so he abandons the idea, yet again.

He thinks Robert might be asleep now anyway; his presence at the booth seems to be mostly decorative, since Mary's been the one doing all the real work. She's sitting in a chair that faces out toward Gene and Joseph, and although her sunglasses make it hard to tell where she's looking, a few times Gene has gotten the distinct sense that she's watching him. Them.

On a hunch, he lifts his hand and gives her a small wave.

Her mouth curls into a smirk and she waves back.

They know, he thinks. He steals a sidelong glance at Joseph, who's oblivious to the interplay as he rearranges the brownies to close the gaps on the table. *They know you're looking to stray.*

And he understands where they're coming from, the impulse to punish Joseph for it, even if he doesn't approve—thwarting Joseph's attempts to flirt with other men may work in the short-term, but ultimately it's going to be pointless unless they address the root of the problem. Mary and Joseph would do better sitting down and having

an open and honest discussion about the issues in their marriage, rather than Joseph trying to shore up his discontent with cheating and Mary countering with this passive-aggressive bullshit.

Jesus, was it ever about him at all? Or was it just to fuck with Joseph?

Robert, doing a favor for a friend and also getting the chance to needle someone he despises, two birds with one stone. A lucky coincidence Mary couldn't resist, that the man her husband was eyeing happened to be the man panting after her best friend, all too easy to send Robert in there and derail any interest Gene might have been developing in Joseph.

Lady, just leave me out of it, he thinks, I'm not trying to poach your man.

It makes him frustrated, and angry, because he doesn't *want* to hide his feelings. He's not ashamed of being sweet on Robert, he'd happily tell the whole world, and he's not interested in feigning aloofness and making Robert second-guess himself the way Gene's been. Alex always said that people miss out on more by playing hard to get than they would if they just wore their heart on their sleeve, and Alex made it *easy*, goddamn it, to be open, to be loving. He reciprocated that honesty, he *taught Gene that honesty*, and fuck, if this is what the world does to people for being open about their feelings, then no wonder everyone's gun-shy and building walls around their hearts.

Gene's struck by a sudden surge of loneliness, like a tidal wave that knocks the air from his lungs and burns at the corners of his eyes, and he can feel Alex's absence like a hole carved out of his chest.

He doesn't want to be there. He doesn't want be involved with these people and their bad decisions and the nasty games they play on each other, doesn't want his heart run through the wringer again while Robert keeps him in limbo. He just wants to go *home*. He wants to go home to find Alex cooking dinner in the kitchen and listening to his baffling nineties Europop, wants to wrap his arms around Alex's waist and put his head on Alex's shoulder and rant to him about the day's

suburban-soap-opera drama, get it off his chest and then forget about it, to be safe and warm and *loved*.

He just wants Robert to come *talk to him* again.

"So what's the story with you and Robert?" Gene asks aloud. He hadn't planned to ask—in fact, he'd been determined *not* to bring up Robert if Joseph wasn't going to—but it just slips out.

Joseph goes still. He looks at Gene sidelong, his face carefully blank. "What?"

Why he hates you, Gene thinks impatiently, *don't act like you can't see it*.

Gene shrugs, trying to be casual. "I just get the feeling he doesn't like you very much."

At that, Joseph's shoulders relax, and he ducks his head, giving a short, slightly chagrined laugh. "Ah," he says significantly. "Picked up on that, did you?"

It's hard to miss. "A little."

Joseph scrubs a hand over the back of his head and sighs, his face rueful. "I'm sorry you had to see that. You're right, though, he doesn't like me very much. It's—well, I'm sure Robert would tell it differently, but it's mostly to do with Mary. They're... close friends, as you know. And I worry sometimes about whether it's actually good for either of them, but it does mean that when Mary and I have our... disagreements... of course he takes her side. No surprise, but then he wants to pretend like everything's my fault." Joseph sighs again, rubs his forehead. "Sorry. I didn't mean to air our dirty laundry—domestic troubles aren't a good look on anyone. But... sometimes she takes it out of my hands."

"Ah," says Gene. Then, when nothing more is forthcoming from Joseph, "I see."

Except—he doesn't. It's a perfectly reasonable explanation, Robert taking Mary's side in her marital disputes. It's probably even true, but if that's supposed to be the solution to the puzzle, then Gene's got

pieces left over that don't fit. It doesn't explain the... unsettling intensity that takes hold of Robert in Joseph's presence. How *personal* that antagonism feels. It would be one thing for Robert to resent Joseph's hypocrisy, or to dislike his friend's closeted, would-be philanderer of a husband, or to throw down the gauntlet before a rival, but none of that explains the—

Fear.

It clicks into place suddenly, the note of wrongness he's been sensing between Robert and Joseph since that very first barbecue. That it's not just anger or distaste, there's something about Joseph that triggers a visceral, bone-deep panic in Robert, that puts him on the knife's edge between fight or flight, torn between the instincts to lash out like a cornered animal or turn tail and run.

That Robert didn't put himself between Joseph and Gene, he put Gene between himself and Joseph.

Trust your instincts, babe.

He can feel Joseph's eyes on him, and after a moment the man sighs and bows his head.

"Robert's..." Joseph hesitates, then at last says, "He's a deeply troubled man. I've no doubt he means well, but he... tends to see the world in black and white. He's not the most empathetic person, and he isn't always entirely rational once he's got an idea in his head."

I don't want to be hearing this, Gene thinks, and he's about to call a halt to this line of conversation when Joseph adds,

"I'm afraid he didn't handle the loss of his wife very well. He was always... volatile, but it only got worse after she died."

"Wife?" The surprise succeeds in derailing Gene's intention to change the subject, and he finds himself asking, "He was married?"

Joseph looks up, surprised. "You didn't know that?"

"No. I mean—I am new here."

Okay, Gene is *not* going to pry, he is *not* going to pump Joseph for

gossip, no matter how tempting it is to uncover Robert's mysterious past. He'll hear it from Robert, or not at all.

"When—when did she pass?" Gene asks. It's the one question he allows himself, because it's not too personal an intrusion and he needs to know how fresh the loss is for Robert.

"About four years ago."

Around the same time he lost Alex, then. And Gene doesn't believe in fate, he believes in coincidence, but it is a striking one—both of them widowed, both at about the same time. Long enough to have grown accustomed to the loss, but short enough to have not quite moved on yet. He wonders if maybe that's part of the affinity he feels for Robert—the grief that they hadn't realized they shared.

"It was after she died that he and Mary became close." Joseph pauses, his eyes distant, and Gene realizes he's looking wistfully out at where Mary's sitting with Robert. His hands subtly clench in his lap, and with difficulty he says, "And I'm... glad they have each other. They deserve to be happy."

Is he... implying what Gene thinks he is? Gene tries to wipe the disbelief off his face and just contributes a neutral, "Of course."

Because he'd be lying if he said he hadn't wondered, but that was before he found out that Mary was Joseph's wife, back when she was just a woman who shared Robert's hobbies (drinking and propositioning strangers) and who ate breakfast with him at ungodly hours of the morning. He's pretty well dismissed the idea since, but... there's no denying their comfort with each other and the depth of their affection. And maybe that would explain Mary's aggressiveness toward Gene? Annoyed that her piece on the side was angling for his own piece on the side?

But... no, that wouldn't explain why—

"He's suffered so much. I hope he finds peace," Joseph concludes.

Finds Jesus, he means, Alex's voice puts in tartly, because what better

time to take advantage? 'How else but through a broken heart can Lord Christ enter in.'

I know, love, Gene thinks tiredly. I know.

God, he misses Alex so badly.

Then, in an abrupt change of subject, Joseph says, "By the way, let me know if you see the twins running around. I want to make sure they're staying hydrated."

"Will do," Gene agrees distractedly. His thoughts are still whirling around the subject of Robert, Robert and Mary, Robert and Joseph. Robert and his mysterious wife, and the tragedy that apparently sent him into a tailspin he has yet to recover from.

Sometimes Gene thinks it's a wonder he didn't trip head-first into religion himself after Alex died, anything that could give *meaning* to that loss, that could make it something other than a brutal, pointless stroke of bad luck. He doesn't know what Alex would have done in the reverse circumstances—whether the Catholicism hammered into his bones would have been able to reassert its claim on him—but it's something Gene shies away from thinking about.

Because he *knows*, beyond a shadow of a doubt, knows it even as he feels guilty for it, that he's coping with Alex's death better than Alex would have coped with his. That for all the pain and heartbreak of being the one left to carry on alone, for all the bitter unfairness of the years that were stolen from Alex, Gene can't even in good conscience wish that it could have been him instead. For Amanda's sake, if nothing else, because she needed at least one parent who wasn't going to fall apart.

Like Robert apparently fell apart, and it's presumptuous of Gene to want to be the one to put him back together, but he can't help thinking it anyway. *I know what you're going through, I can help. Let me be someone you can lean on. Let me be good for you.*

Let them be good for each other, because Gene survived Alex's loss, but that doesn't mean he isn't lonely. Lonely even in a crowd of people,

lonely even sitting next to an attractive man making passes at him. Robert's the only person who makes Alex's absence feel like a scar instead of a gaping wound, which is why—mixed signals or not—Gene's going to be on the hook for as long as Robert decides to keep him there, even though the emotional roller-coaster leaves him exhausted.

"Hey look, we're on local news," Joseph points out brightly, drawing Gene's attention to a camera crew milling around by the fountain. He leans over, puts an arm around Gene's shoulders and gives the camera a wave and a broad smile.

Gene feels himself tense under the weight of Joseph's arm. *That's great*, he means to say, *great publicity for your Jesus-thing*, but what comes out is—

"You know what, I think I'm hungry." He abruptly pushes himself up from the chair, sliding out of Joseph's grasp. "I'm going to make a circuit and stretch my legs, see what's out there."

"Brownie?" Joseph offers, oh, because *now* he's okay with Gene sampling the merchandise, now that Gene's trying to leave.

"No, I should get real food," he says, even though he doesn't actually want food, he just wants to be alone for a bit. "Want me to bring you anything?"

Joseph doesn't, though the frustrated purse of his mouth suggests he'd like an excuse to keep Gene there. Worried that he's going to go chasing after Robert, perhaps, though there's not much chance of that, since Robert's still asleep and Mary's still sitting watchdog over him.

At least they're coming up on the end of the day—it's pushing five o' clock now, just one more hour of this and then he can go home.

Unless—*ugh*, unless Joseph comes up with more things for them to do once they're back at his house. Maybe Craig's still here, and they can engineer an emergency that requires him to leave early and take Gene with him. It'd be an ironic reversal of their usual roles, anyway.

It turns out that corndogs are the only thing available that's even remotely close to real food, which Gene regards with bemused nostal-

gia. He's never been a huge fan, but Alex, inexplicably, had loved them like a guilty pleasure and Amanda had liked them as a child, so they're indelibly associated in his memory with going to the county fair in the summertime, back when Amanda was still young enough to get excited about that. He and Alex as young parents, each holding one of Amanda's hands, taking turns carrying her on their shoulders. Stealing cotton-candy-tasting kisses under the fireworks.

Golden-hued memories that he'd never thought would cause him this much pain.

It probably isn't healthy to wallow in Alex-related nostalgia, but after the day he's had, he feels he's earned it. Today's been a fucking write-off; he'll go back to living in the real world tomorrow, right now he's going to eat a corndog and let himself think about Alex.

Pouring one out for you, sweetheart, he thinks, affection and sadness mixed as a church mom hands over a not-particularly-appetizing specimen.

He drowns it in enough ketchup to make it edible, then turns away from the condiments table—

And nearly drops the corndog on his shirt, stopping with a jolt at suddenly finding himself face-to-face with Mary.

She smiles at him, shark-like. "Hello, Gene."

"Hello, Mary," he says cautiously.

She grabs his free hand and puts a corndog in it. "Give this to Robert. I have to see a man about a horse."

"O... kay."

Mary gives him an exaggerated wink and takes herself off, leaving him with a corndog that is, apparently, meant for Robert. He doesn't know what kind of game they're playing this time, but either he delivers it or he drops it in a ditch, so.

It'll give him one more chance to try to get a read on Robert, anyway. One more chance to figure out whether he should even keep trying, or whether he should just cut his losses already.

He takes the long way around so he doesn't have to explain his errand to Joseph, and approaches Robert with trepidation. The man seems to be awake now, at least, still stretched out in the lawn chair but yawning and rubbing vaguely at his face.

He's not particularly alert though, and he doesn't realize someone's coming until Gene is right behind him, nudging his shoulder. And then it's abundantly clear, when Robert glances over his shoulder and freezes at the sight of Gene, that regardless of what Mary was up to, Robert had no idea he was coming.

"Uh... hi," Gene says awkwardly.

"Hey," Robert says on autopilot, still blinking awake.

"I, uh—ran into Mary at the corndog stand. She told me to give you this." He holds out the corndog. "Said she had to see a man about a horse."

Robert blinks behind his sunglasses, frowns at the corndog. And he's not hard to read even under normal circumstances, but befuddled with sleep he's easier than ever, and the thought in his head is as plain as if he'd said it out loud, *Why the hell did Mary get me a corndog?*

Then he looks up and his eyes land on Gene's face, and understanding dawns. "Ah," Robert says, an edge of panic in his voice. Then, "Yeah. She does that."

Understanding dawns for both of them, in fact. Because Robert's looking at him like he doesn't know what to do with Gene without a script, but not at all like he wants him to leave, and that, combined with the insight Joseph inadvertently shared, makes Gene realize that he may have misunderstood a few things.

That what he'd taken for unshakable confidence in Robert might, in fact, be nothing of the sort. He'd assumed Robert's behavior was deliberate, that he was keeping Gene off-balance on purpose, but honestly, Robert doesn't seem to be working from a game plan any more than Gene is, equally uncertain in his own way, and oh god, if neither one of them knows what they're doing, then who is even *flying this ship?*

Mary, apparently. Who just slapped a bow on him and dropped him in Robert's lap, and Gene feels like he owes her an apology and maybe a thank-you note, and he has to fight down the laugh that wants to bubble up out of him, giddy with relief and renewed hope.

Gene can't keep from grinning as he offers the corndog to Robert again, even though *the face Robert's making*, *jesus*, like Gene's handing him a dead fish. He has to bite his lip to keep from dissolving into giggles.

And he thinks he knows what Mary was angling for now, but looks up and scans for her anyway to see if she's on her way back. He spots her at the brownie booth, where she's looming over Joseph with a cat-who-got-the-canary smile; Joseph just looks pained.

Well. As if Gene needed any more incentive to linger with Robert instead of going back immediately. He sits.

"Aren't you supposed to be—" Robert jerks a thumb over his shoulder, unerringly pointing at the booth where Gene spent the day "—brownie-mongering or something? What's Joseph even paying you for?"

Like Joseph is paying him anything at all, or even lets him eat the fruits of his own labor without a guilt trip. Gene smirks. "I'm union, we get regular breaks. Nice try, mac, but I know my rights."

There it is again, that soft smile that warms him from the inside out, the smile that keeps him coming back for more. *Yours for a smile, indeed*. And he can't think of anything else to say, but this is Robert, he doesn't have to. They can just sit and enjoy the evening, the bubble of quiet around them. He eats his corndog, watches Robert forget to even pretend to eat his.

At last Robert stirs again. "You're in Mary's chair," he points out.

I know, she put me here, Gene thinks dryly.

"I'll fight her for it," he says instead. He would too, although he wouldn't give himself good odds in that match.

"You'll lose."

Gene's eyes flick back to the brownie booth, where Joseph is now sitting forlornly by himself, and then spots Mary amid a gaggle of church moms. She catches him looking, gives him double finger-guns.

"No," Gene replies, holding down a laugh. He looks back to Robert, can't keep the smile off his face. "I'm pretty sure she'd let me win."

Robert's still holding the corndog in his lap, and Gene finds that he's hungry after all. "Are you going to eat that?" he asks.

Robert blinks at the corndog like he'd forgotten he was still holding it, and then, with the gig up, he sheepishly hands it over.

"That's what I thought." Gene takes a bite, chews on it thoughtfully. Making new corndog memories, perhaps. "I know a con when I see one."

Robert doesn't deny it, just smiles, his expression soft and helplessly fond, and tips his knee to rest against Gene's.

And Gene finds that he wants to stake a claim too. He wants the whole world to know that Robert's the one he'd pick, to look at the two of them together and see what's blooming between them, he wants to stake his claim on Robert in front of God and Joseph and local news. He reaches out, offering Robert his hand.

It startles Robert, he can tell, startles him out of his smile for a moment. He looks at the outstretched hand with apprehension, and then carefully, cautiously reaches out and wraps his fingers around Gene's, rubbing his thumb along the underside of Gene's wrist. Uncertain, perhaps, but shyly pleased nonetheless. The minutes pass, and his grip loosens and becomes less self-conscious, but he doesn't let go and neither does Gene.

Gene does feel slightly guilty for ditching Joseph, but he spent six damn hours with the man and god only knows when he's going to get another moment like this with Robert, so he decides to be selfish, at least until Mary comes back to reclaim her chair.

It takes about twenty minutes before he realizes she's not going to,

that people are starting to pack up the other booths and there's still no sign of her.

Gene sighs. "I should probably go back. I need to help Joseph break down the sunshade, at least," he says, giving Robert's fingers a squeeze before reluctantly letting go. He wants to ask Robert to come with him, doesn't want to say goodbye just yet, but he doubts that Robert will voluntarily go within hollering distance of Joseph twice in one day.

Robert's taken off his sunglasses in the twilight, and Gene is struck anew by how expressive his face is, his frown as he struggles on the verge of saying something.

"Gene," he says abruptly, making an abortive motion as if to catch Gene's hand again.

There's a low, urgent note in his voice, tension in his face and none of his usual irreverence, and Gene stops, hoping for—something honest, some explanation for all this.

But Robert just avoids his eyes and says, quick and quiet, like a warning he knows he's not supposed to give, "Watch yourself around Joseph. He's not what you think he is."

And Gene doesn't know what Robert thinks he thinks Joseph is—the happily-married churchgoer he'd like everyone to believe, or the closeted, quietly lonely man Gene's been getting to know today, or—

"What do you mean?" Gene asks uneasily. "What is he?"

"Gene." Robert lifts his eyes and looks at him seriously. "He's the Zodiac killer."

Gene blinks.

Robert frowns. "Come on, it's pretty obvious. I'm embarrassed you didn't notice sooner. Embarrassed and frankly rather concerned."

He delivers it with such a deadpan that it takes a moment for the joke to catch up with Gene, surprising a short laugh out of him when it does. "*Robert*," he says with a huff of exasperation.

Robert's eyes narrow. "You think this is something I'd joke about?"

he demands, with that dangerous, stormy expression that does make it hard to tell. "Look into his eyes, he's a stone-cold serial killer. I would know. He killed me once."

Gene raises an eyebrow, unsure whether he's supposed to play along. If this is a joke, it doesn't sound like a funny one. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Robert pauses. "I got better." He cuts his eyes away and adds quietly, "Sort of."

"Robert..."

Robert's shaking his head. "Anyone else. *Anyone else,*" he swears, *and I won't fight you on it,* Gene hears. "Just—not Joseph."

And here Gene thought he'd been abundantly clear about where his interest lay; it certainly wasn't Joseph's hand he'd been holding today.

Be bold, sweetheart, Alex's voice says in his head. *You won't win anything by playing hard to get.*

"Robert," Gene says gently, putting his hands on Robert's shoulders and nudging him to look up. "Joseph never stood a chance." He holds Robert's gaze as long as he can, then ducks his head shyly, laughing a little. "I'd venture to say no one else did either."

When he steals a glance at Robert's face, Robert's expression is—not quite dumbstruck, but something close to it. Like Gene is some strange, hitherto-undiscovered creature whose behavior is inscrutable. He doesn't look unhappy with this development, exactly; more like he's too bewildered by it to even smile.

Robert blinks and looks down. "You have *terrible* taste in men," he manages after a minute.

Gene's smile broadens, and he squeezes Robert's shoulders. "Hey—all you said was anyone but Joseph."

And it's okay if Robert's not ready for any grand declarations of his own, because Gene thinks he gets it now. That Robert's not some cool and mysterious stranger in a leather jacket, or not only that, anyway. He's also a man with his own inner life, his own insecurities, working

through his own tragedies. That he's not jerking Gene around on purpose, but maybe he really doesn't know what he wants right now.

And Gene... can work with that. He can wait for Robert to figure himself out. He can enjoy the man's company and let their flirtation unfold at its own pace. He doesn't have anywhere he needs to be.

It's the first time he's felt like this since Alex, and that, he knows, is worth waiting for.

The Zara Shirt (Put A Gun In My Hand Remix)

So Mary's not a *fucking moron*, she knows right away that something's afoot when Joseph looks up from his newspaper and asks, ever-so-casually, what time she plans on heading over to the bake sale.

Why, she thinks, turning away to busy herself at the sink, *why do you need to know?*

"Oh, I don't know," she says vaguely. "I've still got some things to do first. Need to put my face on, get the car loaded up. Finish getting the kids ready to go." She glances back at him innocently. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that the new guy—you know, Gene—offered to pitch in and help." Joseph's eyes flick to her, assessing.

I know who Gene is, asshole. The cat-shirt-wearing nerd that Robert is inexplicably in love with.

Mary keeps her face neutral. "That's neighborly of him." She knows who made the *neighborly* overtures here.

"But if you're going to be here, we can do the baking at his house instead." Joseph smiles. "I wouldn't want us to be underfoot."

Mary spends a split second running the mental calculus—make a fuss, and potentially alert Joseph that she's trying to keep him away

from Gene in particular? Or make no fuss at all, and risk raising his suspicions by her very lack of a reaction?

She thinks about Robert, agonizing over his crush. Hopelessly bewildered by this crazy new experience of having emotions like a real boy, at feeling something other than 'angry' or 'sad.' And Gene may be a puppy, and kind of a pushover, but if cat-shirt nerd is the one Robert wants, then by God, cat-shirt nerd is the one Mary will help him get.

No, she thinks. Fuck you, Joseph Christiansen, you are fucking with the wrong dad. I will see you in hell before I let you take this from him too.

She smiles.

"You're in luck," she says sweetly. *I-see-you-motherfucker, you-dodged-a-bullet-this-time* sweet. "I have to be at the park by nine. Any later, and Karen's going to try to take over, and she's a fucking idiot. You saw what she did at the Christmas pageant."

"Language," Joseph says like a reflex.

"Sorry, sweetie."

Oh, just you wait for it, she thinks, turning away again. By the time she's done here, her language will be the least of his fucking concerns.

She texts Robert, *I have a mission for you*, isn't surprised when he doesn't respond immediately. She tells him to call her when he wakes up, deletes the messages and locks her phone, and goes ahead with getting ready for the bake sale.

She doesn't actually need to be at the park until ten, so nine o'clock goes by, then nine-fifteen, and Joseph's jaw is starting to twitch as she's still coming up with more things she needs to do. She's guessing he told Gene to come over at nine-thirty, figuring she'd be safely gone by then—he's already pulled out the brownie mix and started setting up his tableau in the kitchen—and at nine-twenty, when he asks if there's anything he can do to help, she's certain of it.

"See if you can find the coolers?" she asks, feigning distraction as

she tries to get Christy to hold still so she can brush her hair. “I think they’re in one of the upstairs closets.”

They’re in the shed.

Joseph grudgingly goes upstairs. Christy bounces in her chair.

“Excited about the bake sale?” Mary asks.

“No,” she says, with a child’s cheerful tactlessness. “Daddy said when our neighbor comes over I can watch the Sparkle Pony movie.”

Of-fucking-course he did. Can’t have the creepy kids around to harsh his smooth moves, and the rare treat of television guarantees that they’ll stay out of his way while he lays siege to Gene.

“Mmm, I see. Well you know, there’s going to be facepainting at the bake sale. I bet they could do a Sparkle Pony for you.”

Christy’s eyes go wide. “Can they do Moonshadow Mustang?”

“Sure,” Mary says blithely. “Come let me know when you and Daddy get there, and I’ll give you some money to get your face painted.”

She checks her phone; it’s been an hour and a half, still no response from Robert, and Jesus, she hopes he wasn’t out drinking until six in the morning. She’ll go over there and haul his ass out of bed if she has to, but she really needs him at the top of his game for this, not surly and hungover.

(Or not, she reflects—it’s possible that a cardboard cut-out of Robert would do the job. New Guy has it *bad*.)

“They’re not in any of the closets,” Joseph calls as he comes back down the stairs, sounding bitchy. She quickly pockets her phone again. “You know, if you hadn’t been *out so late* last night, you might have been ready in time this morning, and if you let Karen mess up the bake sale like she messed up the—”

“Try the garage?” Mary suggests.

Joseph gives her *the look*. “Actually, I think we might have put them in the shed.”

From her pocket, the phone starts vibrating.

“Are you sure?” she asks, carefully not looking at it. “If they’re not upstairs, then they’ve got to be in the garage. You should look in the garage.”

Joseph heads into the backyard.

She waits for the back door to slam closed behind him. “Alright sweetie, you’re done, you look great,” she says to Christy, then grabs her phone and ducks into the garage. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Good morning,” Robert says amiably, which is a promising sign. “What’s the job, boss? Wet work?”

She checks the time (nine thirty-four) and snakes her head around the Prius to check for Gene (no sign yet). “Want to be my date to the bake sale today?”

That gets the expected response, which, yeah sure, laugh it up. He stops laughing when she mentions Joseph and his designs on the new guy.

“His name is Gene,” Robert manages after a long moment.

Honey, trust me, I know his name. With how much Robert moons over him, it’d be hard not to.

“Whatever,” Mary says, because they need to cut to the chase—she’s just spotted Gene emerging from his house, blinking owlishly in the sunlight, and she’s got maybe a minute and a half before contact. “I want to crash Joseph’s date. I want to make him sweat. And I want him to watch Gene go *fucking starry-eyed* when you roll up.”

Robert waffles.

Jesus. For any normal person, ‘your crush is going to be there’ would be a *selling point*. But no, he’s still fretting over his bad behavior on their date, and she would sympathize except that it really doesn’t seem to have dampened Gene’s ardor at all.

Luckily, Craig Cahn, resplendent in his *athleisure gear*, also chooses that moment to step outside, and Gene’s approach is delayed while they stop to fist-bump and bond over college or carb-cycling or whatever. Mary knows that Robert feels like he can’t compete with Craig,

but honestly, she's not seeing any competition there—that despite all their touchy-feely bro-ness, there's a baffling lack of sexual tension between them. Maybe they worked it out of their systems back in college.

"Has he texted you since the date?" she asks.

"Yes," Robert admits, and—ugh, *you're killing me, Smalls*—she knows what his answer is going to be even before she asks,

"...Did you text him back?"

Silence.

She sighs inside. *Oh, honey. Why do you do this to yourself?*

Then she tenses, because *shit*, Craig's leaving, and Gene's resuming his trek toward their house.

"So about that bake sale," she says quickly. "Are you going to help me stage an intervention, or do you only cock-block yourself?"

More silence from Robert. Thirty seconds to contact.

"One conversation, that's all I'm asking," she promises, keeping her voice low, tracking Gene's progress through the tinted windows of the Prius. "One conversation and then we'll set up somewhere that puts you directly in Gene's line of sight. Just enough to ensure that he won't be able to think about anything else for the rest of the day, then we can share PTA gossip and overindulge in shitty boxed baked goods, and drinks this evening are on me."

Twenty seconds. *Come on, come on, come on.*

Robert takes a deep breath, and she knows she's got him. "Throw in some pot brownies and you've got yourself a—"

"Great! Take a shower, wear the white shirt I got you from Zara, I'll see you at the park in an hour." She hangs up and steps out from behind the Prius to ambush Gene with a wide smile. "Hello, Gene."

"Wah!" Gene yelps. "Oh, uh—hello, Mary. I didn't see you there."

Good lord, he's like a baby deer wandering into a wolf's den. He is *so fucking lucky* he's got Mary watching out for him.

"Joseph says you asked to help out at the bake sale, that is *so* kind of you. You're *such* a good neighbor."

"Aha, yeah, that's me," Gene agrees awkwardly. "I'm all about... community spirit, and stuff."

And he's wary, like he's expecting her to bite, but he doesn't look abashed or guilty, which is a good sign; it indicates that he's not thinking of this as an opportunity to put the moves on her husband.

"Are you going to be at the bake sale too?" Gene asks.

"Oh yes," she assures him. "I never pass up an opportunity to do the lord's work."

The look on his face is priceless; Gene is so not about the god-bothering, and he has no idea how he's supposed to respond to that.

Right then Joseph comes banging backwards through the door, dragging the coolers after him.

"They were in the shed," he calls over his shoulder, "*right where I told you they would be*. If you had just listened to me in the first place, I wouldn't be wasting my time looking all over God's green earth for the coolers that *you* put away—"

Mary schools her face out of the smile she's feeling. Because she'd just wanted him out of the garage so she could intercept Gene, to get a read on him and plant some suggestions, but if Joseph wants to demonstrate what a petty bitch he is when he thinks no one's around to see, she's not going to stop him.

"—Oh! Hello Gene!" Joseph's attitude turns on a dime, and he lets the coolers down with a huff of exertion and a great big smile, toothy and wholesome. "Sorry, you caught us in the last-minute hullabaloo. Give me just a minute to help Mary get on her way, and then I'm all yours."

"Sure thing," Gene says, with the slightly pained expression of someone who really doesn't want to bear witness to other people's domestic infighting.

Joseph turns to Mary and, ah, the role he's choosing to play is 'hen-pecked.'

"I found your coolers," he says with a long-suffering smile.

“What would I do without you, dear?” she asks, saccharine-sweet. “But it turns out we don’t need them after all, Julie’s bringing hers.”

For a fraction of a second, the mask slips and Joseph’s expression is pure, murderous rage. It’s almost a shame that Gene misses it, that he’s studiously examining Joseph’s collection of power drills instead. Although at this point in the game, it wouldn’t really make a difference—he would just convince himself that he hadn’t seen what he thought he saw.

Joseph fixes his expression again. “So you’re ready to go?” he asks. And even though Gene’s there, he can’t resist digging, “Wouldn’t want you to be any later than you already are.”

“Sure, I just need to find my purse—”

“This purse?” he asks with a smile, producing it out of *fucking nowhere*.

“—and my sunglasses—”

“Already in your purse.”

She keeps her hands at her sides and her face blank, resists the impulse to touch her pocket and make sure she still has her phone.

Okay, fine. She’s done here anyway, she can let him think he’s won this round.

She smiles. “You just think of everything, don’t you?” She takes the purse and leans in to give him an ostentatious kiss on the cheek. “Alright, then I’ll get out of your hair.” She turns away, gives Gene a wave and a breezy smile. “You boys be good—and chin up, Gene, you’re going to have a *great* day.”

Joseph’s head comes up sharply—he knows not to trust that tone, he’s just now realized that she’s up to something—but it’s too late. She’s on her way out and he’s stuck playing host to Gene.

She climbs into the Prius, takes her time fiddling with her iPod, and watches as Joseph ushers Gene into the house, one hand on the small of his back.

Her sunglasses are indeed in her purse—since the last thing Joseph

wants is to give her an excuse to come back—but her flask is missing, and *for fuck's sake, Joseph*, it's not like she was going to be swigging vodka at the fucking bake sale.

Whatever. She doesn't need it today, and she's already promised to go out with Robert that evening. *We'll drink to our victory, or not at all*, she thinks, and cranks up the music.

Mary arrives at the park at five minutes to ten—from the parking lot she can see Karen trying to take charge of the unloading, to the visible non-enthusiasm of the other church moms, and, oh look, there's Becky stepping forward to challenge her, this should be good. Mary decides to wait a few minutes and let them publicly demonstrate how inept they both are before she swoops in and takes over.

She spends the extra time googling Gene. There's no doubt that Joseph's already done it, and she wants to know what he found.

Very little, it would appear. Gene's web presence is minimal: his name on a high school graduation roster, then a college one, then on some professional publisher's association. It isn't until she finds his wedding announcement on the *Boston Globe's* website that things start to get interesting, because it nets her the dead husband's name, and when she googles *that*, it turns out that dear old Alex was far more internet-savvy than Gene ever was.

She finds Alex's homepage; she knows it's the right Alex because the last update is from four years ago, a painfully brief message informing visitors that Alex passed away in a car accident, he will be deeply missed, etc. The rest of the site seems to be untouched, a mix of the personal and professional—everything about him, laid out there for anyone to find, and *oh, honey, I wish you hadn't done that, you have no idea who might be seeing this*.

Alex appears to have been an actor of some sort—there's a page with his television credits, mostly children's cartoons—but one who dabbled in a range of other interests. She finds a gallery of his hobbyist

photography (mostly street fashion; some PG-13 nudes of a younger Gene, which she bookmarks in case she needs to bribe Robert later), a collection of essays (mostly social and political commentary; just from the titles she can tell that he's stridently ex-Catholic, and *have fun spinning that one, Joseph*), and a handful of youtube uploads (mostly song covers, no apparent rhyme or reason to his choices).

It's in the *About* section that she finally lands on a picture of him, in a casual, black-and-white self portrait of their three-person family. It was taken maybe five or six years ago; Amanda looks about twelve where she's peeking up over the bottom of the frame, baring her teeth at the camera in an unselfconscious, gap-toothed grin. Gene sits comfortably under Alex's arm, while Alex reaches around the frame to hit the shutter.

And Alex is... well, she'll give it to Gene, he does seem to have a knack for landing the hotties. Gene's cute enough, but Alex was definitely the more conventionally attractive of the two, with sharp cheekbones and large, dark eyes. He's at home in front of the camera, exuding confidence in the tilt of his jaw, mischief in his smile. Gene looks almost reserved by comparison, but there's a quiet self-possession to him nonetheless, comfortable and utterly assured of his place in Alex's affections. The love and loyalty between them, between all three of them, comes across tangibly in the photo, and Mary can see why Alex liked this one and chose it for his website.

The text of that section is blandly uninformative, sounds like it was written by a publicist, so Mary skims past it and then pulls up one of his youtube videos in the time she's got left.

In the video, Alex looks to be in his mid-twenties, wearing a tight black t-shirt and an easy grin. He adjusts the camera and then steps back, holding a violin in one hand and twirling a bow in the other.

"Hello everyone," he says through the tinny speakers of her phone. He brushes dark hair out of his eyes and gives the camera a cheeky smile as he sets the violin under his chin. "This is in no way what my

parents were hoping for when they sent me to fifteen years of violin lessons... but I have a problem with authority.”

Then he launches into a violin cover of a Rammstein song.

Mary almost bursts out laughing right there in the car, because *Jesus Christ*, Alex couldn't be more different from Joseph if she'd *planned* it. Joseph must have been grinding his teeth when he discovered that there's not a single page he can steal from Alex's book, nothing that he can use to step into the Alex-shaped hole in Gene's heart. They don't even share any physical similarities—Joseph, whitebread and clean-cut, Alex, dark and fey.

(Granted, she's not seeing much in common between Alex and Robert either, beyond the barest superficial, if-you-squint-real-hard sort of resemblance, but that's not her lookout.)

At a guess, Mary predicts that Joseph will be flashing Gene a bit of the ol' tattoo and hinting at hidden bad-boy depths. He might be able to spin something on the religion angle; she would bet money that he tries to play the *oh-I'm-so-sad-and-conflicted-about-being-gay-and-religious* card, but Alex seems to have overcome that dilemma with a vengeance, so there's a good chance that Gene won't be terribly impressed. No, Joseph is going to have to walk back his Jesus bullshit, and just hope that Gene has very broad taste in men, or is desperate enough not to be picky.

Onscreen, Alex finishes the song, sweeps a bow and blows a kiss to the camera. It ends with a brief cut of him sitting on a couch and holding a much-younger Amanda in his lap, her face furrowed with concentration as she clutches the violin and painstakingly drags a few screeching notes out of it. He mugs for the camera, a quicksilver smile followed by a theatrical wince, and then it cuts to a title screen that says TRY BACK IN A FEW YEARS?

Precious.

Alright, Mary's satisfied that Gene can hold the line on his own, at

least until phase two of the operation. She locks her phone and puts it back in her purse.

Time to take control of the bake sale.

Mary times her arrival into the fray just as the bickering is reaching a head (and maybe she should have waited just a few minutes longer to see if it would devolve into an actual slapfight). She thanks Karen and Becky for keeping an eye on things, then pointedly turns her back on them and starts issuing orders of her own. The other church moms' attitudes toward her authority range from grateful to grudging, but they fall into line, as always, which is all that matters. Karen and Becky slink off seething.

Robert shows up after a while—well before Gene and Joseph, which is all she'd wanted—having dutifully followed her instructions, re: basic hygiene and the Zara shirt. Usually she'd describe his appeal as “would hit that, take a shower, and then hit that again,” so she's pleased to see that he can still clean up nicely when he makes the effort. She can see a few of the church moms noticing too, though Robert is largely oblivious—he's distracted with worry for Gene, alone at the house with Joseph, even though they both know that Gene's perfectly safe for now. Joseph's all about the long con.

Still, given what Gene means to him—and what Joseph is—this has got to be Robert's worst nightmare. So to distract him, she puts him to work and loans him out to a few of the thirstier church moms to help with set-up. It'll do him good, will get his mind off Gene and give his self-esteem a bit of a boost.

Christy finds her just before eleven, chattering about Sparkle Ponies. Mary can't tell if she's recapping the plot of the movie or explaining a game that she's playing with her friends, so Mary just hums agreement in the right places and tries to locate Joseph. She already set up the canopy for his booth over by the water slide—but now the canopy has gone missing and there's no sign of him.

“Honey, where’s your father?” she asks. “He’s supposed to be by the water slide.”

“Said he wanted a more cen’ral location,” Christy says, distracted and uninterested. “Can I have money for face-painting now?”

Mary gives her a five-dollar bill. “Where’d they move to?”

Christy motions vaguely toward the fountain in the center of the park. “In the middle. May I go get face-painted now, please?”

Well, at least he’s unlikely to spot Robert if he’s setting up over there. She lets Christy escape and goes looking for Joseph, finds that he has indeed managed to con someone out of their prime real estate.

She stops some distance off, masked by the crowd, and considers her next move. In retrospect, she should have been expecting something like this; he knows she’s got a trick up her sleeve, even if he doesn’t know what, it figures he’d do something pointlessly contrarian to throw a wrench in the works. Now, if she wants Gene to have eyes on Robert all day then she needs to relocate too, and the park is filling up fast.

She finds the angle she wants, looks to see who’s already camped there—and hmm, this might work after all.

It’s Joan—not a church mom, an older lesbian who moved to Maple Bay some years back, who has no use for the god-bothering except to show up at church events and ask neither permission nor forgiveness to sell her hippie jewelry. She and Mary don’t run in the same circles, but they’ve always gotten along well enough.

“Hey there,” Mary says, cocking her hip against the table where Joan is just starting to lay out her displays. “Do a girl a favor?”

Joan looks up, gives her a wry smile. “I should know better than to say yes without hearing it first—but I’m a sucker for a pretty face. What do you need?”

“Can I get you to switch places with me? I’m currently over there—” she points out the soda booth a little further afield, “—and I need to be here. It’s a matter of national security.”

Joan frowns slightly as her eyes wander over the park, trying to figure out what's special about this particular spot, but her expression clears when she sees the booth with Joseph. Joseph, who has his hand on Gene's back again and is leaning in to whisper something conspiratorially.

"Ah," Joan says. She looks at Mary, one brow raised. "Need to keep an eye on your man?"

That's... interesting, and Mary files it away for later. Because despite Joseph's many indiscretions, he's somehow managed to keep even the whisper of a rumor that he's gay from hitting the town gossip mill, and this is the first time anyone's suggested that they might be wise to him. Mary wonders if it only just occurred to Joan, or if she's been nursing that suspicion for some time.

"That too," Mary admits. She pauses, then decides on full disclosure. "Actually it's for Robert. He's in love with the cat-shirt nerd, I'm playing matchmaker." Then, before Joan can say anything, she adds pointedly, "Because Robert and I are not, in fact, fucking."

Joan holds up her hands in surrender. "Hold fire, honey, I never thought you were. I know what friendship with gay men looks like."

Technically Robert's bisexual, not gay, but that seems like splitting hairs when he is being so *very, very gay* for Gene right now.

"Alright," Joan says. "Well, far be it from me to stand in the way of young gay love—if you can help me get repacked I'll trade places with you."

"Done. And sodas are on the house, and hell, I'll even venture into enemy territory and bring you back a brownie."

It takes them about fifteen minutes to make the switch, by which time Joseph and Gene have also finished setting up and the bake sale is starting to get underway. Time to deploy Robert.

She finds him roughly where she left him, on the far side of the park putting up the last of the canopies—Karen's, apparently, and Mary did not authorize this.

“—but it’s hard with Peter gone so much, you know?” she arrives in time to catch Karen saying.

“Uh huh,” Robert agrees absently, shaking out a pop-up cover. To most outside observers, the look on his face would say *brooding and mysterious*. To Mary it says, *thinking about setting Joseph on fire*, or perhaps just, *how the hell do the straps attach to this thing?*

She comes up and loops her arm around his waist, takes the cover out of his hands and drops it on the ground. “Sorry Karen, I’ve got to steal back my man.”

Karen tries to protest, but Mary’s already steering Robert away.

“Eagle One has landed,” she murmurs.

Robert perks up, adorably obvious about looking for Gene as she drags him through the crowd. “Guns are in position, admiral.”

Well *yeah*, that’s why she had him wear the Zara shirt.

“Where’s the target?” he asks.

“Booth near the water fountains. Count down from three hundred and then make your approach. When the mission is complete, rendezvous at the refreshment stand.”

“Ave, Emperor.”

“Come back with your shield, or on it.”

She leaves Robert behind the soft-serve machine and heads back to her booth. With luck, he won’t overthink it too much and lose his nerve; she knows how much of an ask it is to make him talk to Joseph, and his crush on Gene brings him as much stress as it does pleasure.

She swings past Joseph’s booth on the way, catches his eye and gives him a wink and a broad smile. He’s deep in conversation with Gene, so he can’t react too visibly, but she sees consternation dip briefly into his face, and she can feel his eyes following her as she goes and takes a seat at the soda booth.

There are still a few minutes before Robert makes his move, so she puts on her sunglasses and watches Gene and Joseph while she waits.

Gene had seemed like an open book from the very start, and Mary

knows better than to take that at face value, but after continued observation, she's concluded that he's not hiding anything—the man really does just emote like he doesn't know who's watching. She's seen the way Gene interacts with people he genuinely likes (his daughter; Craig Cahn) and people who give him a raging boner (Robert), and “guarded” isn't the word for it—but it's the word for how he's interacting with Joseph now.

He doesn't look *uncomfortable*, per se, but his body language is definitely more contained than usual and his smile is best described as “polite.” He's keeping Joseph at literal arm's length; she watches as Joseph subtly scoots his chair a couple inches closer... and then a minute later, as Gene unconsciously nudges his own chair a couple inches away.

Well, well. Perhaps the puppy has some survival instincts after all.

She wonders, darkly amused, whether Joseph is going to keep that up all day, and whether they're going to wind up halfway down the hill before Gene notices. Regardless, Joseph is clearly Not In with Gene yet—and if Mary has any say in the matter, he never will be.

Then she spots Robert winding around the back, approaching from an angle that will have Gene spotting him before Joseph does, and *oh*, this is going to be good.

Gene's reaction when he notices Robert is magnificent, everything she could have hoped for. His guarded politeness immediately falls away, his eyes go wide and his face lights up with a smile, and *hah, how do you like **them** apples, Joseph?*

Then Robert ducks under the pop-up and stops with his back to her, inadvertently blocking her view of both him and Gene.

Come on, come on, move, goddamn it, she urges him silently, *I can't see a thing.*

Well, she can see Joseph, irritation reading loud and clear even through his carefully-fixed smile, and sees him glance across at her.

Mary's smile grows and she waggles her fingers in a wave. *Oh yes, I'm seeing this.*

His eyes narrow, but he doesn't dignify that with a response, just turns away to say something to Gene and Robert instead.

Robert moves, turning to lean against the table beside Gene. He's on the far side from Joseph, a beautiful position because it forces Gene to turn his back on Joseph entirely to pay attention to Robert, which he does, and Mary applauds inside. *Well-played, Robert.*

(Jeez though, could they *be* more obvious? Robert's gazing adoringly down at Gene; Gene's gazing adoringly up at Robert, will you two just *get a room already.*)

Joseph does something to attract Gene's notice; she sees Gene duck his head away from Robert, flushed and visibly torn as he tries to divide his attention between the two of them.

Then Robert leans into Gene—*yes, good, shove your pelvis in his face, that is the correct level of subtlety for this operation*—and Gene's attention is hopelessly ensnared once more. It's like watching a particularly inequitable game of tug-of-war.

The three of them talk for a few minutes; Gene's making a valiant effort not to cut Joseph out of the loop entirely, but with Robert right there rubbing up on him, it's an effort doomed to failure. She can see Joseph sitting up straighter, hands on the arms of his chair like he's about to lunge for Robert's jugular, but Gene keeps turning away to talk to Robert and he misses it entirely.

Then Robert claps a hand on Gene's shoulder and—*and what the fuck did Robert just say to him?*

Because in the space of a heartbeat Gene goes from 'smitten' to 'holy Christ, about to come in my pants.' He's suddenly wide-eyed and open-mouthed, shocked into stillness under Robert's hand. Robert leans down to whisper something in Gene's ear and *what the fuck is he saying?* Whatever it is, Gene looks like he can picture it in perfect, graphic detail, and that he is 100% onboard for this plan.

Joseph's expression is *thunderous*. He can't keep from glancing back at Mary to see if she's still watching—which, duh—and she shrugs and smirks at him. His lips thin, and he very deliberately unclenches his fingers.

Robert steps away, and Gene lists yearningly after him. Joseph's got his mask back in place and he gives Robert a polite smile as he leaves. Robert's expression is easy and loose as he turns around, but it drops the moment he's got his back to them, and his pace is a hair too fast as he crosses the grass back to Mary.

He collapses into the chair kitty-corner to her. "Mission accomplished," he says on a hard exhale. "You're welcome."

"What the hell did you say to him?" she asks. "Joseph looks like he's about to have an aneurysm. Gene looks like he just saw the face of God."

Robert closes his eyes and clenches his hands in his lap. "I have no idea," he admits, and that's when she notices that he's shaking. "A lot of bullshit, probably, knowing me."

Ah.

Sometimes he can come away from a Joseph encounter with nothing more than mild annoyance, but sometimes it fucks him up—and with Gene in the mix, she should have realized that this was going to be one of the latter. She leans over and rubs his back.

"I'm proud of you," she tells him gently. Because she is—he's stronger than he gives himself credit for.

She doesn't know whether it's kind or cruel to shove Robert into situations where he has to deal with Joseph, but the alternative is letting Joseph terrify him into complete isolation, and she'll be damned before she lets that happen. This is Robert's town too, his neighborhood, his *home*, and *fuck you, Joseph Christiansen, you don't get to take that from him*. They haven't talked about it, so she doesn't know whether Robert appreciates her efforts or not, but it is true that he never puts up

too much of a fight when she drags him outside and makes him socialize.

There are a lot of things they don't talk about—because for all their closeness, for all their years of friendship, she doesn't, in fact, know what happened between him and Joseph. Or maybe she does by now, but if so, it's because she knows Robert, and she knows her husband, not because anyone told her.

The closest they ever came to talking about it was once, years ago, when Robert had said, almost angrily, *He didn't rape me, if that's what you're asking*. They'd left it at that, because he didn't want to elaborate and she didn't know if she could stand to hear it anyway, but sometimes she watches him around Joseph and thinks, *Are you sure?*

Maybe she should have pushed. Maybe she should have made him talk about it, because if he hasn't told her, then he's never told *anyone*, and that can't be healthy.

But... well. She'd make a shitty therapist, and anyway, what right does she have to demand those confidences? There's fucking plenty she's never told him.

There are limits to what they can be for each other. That's why she's cautiously optimistic about his crush on cat-shirt nerd, who seems sweet and stable and harmless enough, pouring his uncomplicated adoration onto Robert like rain onto parched earth, as safe an object for a crush as any. It might be just what Robert needs.

(On the other hand, if it turns out that cat-shirt nerd is only interested in the sexy-badass facade that Robert puts up, if he shatters Robert's fragile heart by bailing when he discovers that the sexy badass is actually kind of a wreck, she will *fucking end him*, she will make his adorable moppet an orphan and walk away whistling.)

She gives Robert space and silence to collect himself, and after a few minutes he's more or less back to baseline. He's still tense, but the tremors in his hands have stopped and his breathing has leveled out again.

"I think it was mostly the Zara shirt," he muses. "Best thing you ever bought me."

Well, *yeah*. "I shoplifted it, but it's the thought that counts."

He takes a deep breath. "I need a drink," he says reflexively.

No you don't, you need to stay sharp.

She waves at the soda booth. "Pick your poison."

He gives her an unimpressed look, and nods at her purse.

"Fucking Joseph took it when I wasn't looking." The best part is, it's even true. Joseph shot himself in the fucking foot with that one. And because she's 99% certain he won't take her up on it, she offers, "If you want to go to Stop n Shop and get us something, you can borrow my keys."

She read him right—he doesn't want it that badly. He puts his sunglasses on and settles back into the lawn chair with only a minimum of grumbling.

The hours tick by. Mary dispenses liquid calories by the gallon to sticky children and harried parents, while Robert dozes beside her. She catches Gene stealing hopeful glances at him a number of times, hope that gradually transmutes into doubt as the day wears on.

"Gene's looking at you again," she tells Robert at one point.

His shoulders tighten. "Yeah?"

"You should give him a wave."

He looks at her flatly. "Is Joseph still there?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'm not turning around."

She sighs inside. You'd think it'd be impossible to fuck up with someone crushing as hard as Gene is, but Robert seems determined to try. Whatever—she can keep him from sabotaging himself, and she can work around Joseph if that's what he needs.

Robert goes back to sleep and she leaves him to it. It's too bad about the location change—her original position for Joseph's booth would have put him opposite the water slide, and she'd had a vague plan to

volunteer Robert to help with that, because it would have been *hilarious* to watch Gene trying not to drool on himself with Robert parading around in front of him like a wet t-shirt contestant. A shame that didn't pan out.

At this point, she's waiting for Gene to get up to pee, so she can kick Robert awake and shove him in the direction of the toilets. She's pretty sure Gene would let Robert fuck him over the sink; she has it on good authority that park bathrooms are a classic.

But Gene doesn't get up, even as the hours go by, and *Jesus*, if she'd known he had a bladder the size of a Honda she would have made Robert take him a coffee or three. If she sees Craig again she'll give him a gallon-sized soda for Gene.

Karen stops by while Robert's asleep, ostensibly to talk about the church's plans for that year's summer camp, but in reality to make pointedly disapproving looks between her, and Robert, and Joseph.

Mary smiles and puts her hand on Robert's leg, replies to the question about camp counselor rotations and ignores the insinuations.

That's right, she thinks at the other woman serenely. *I am absolutely that bitch who's brazen enough to bring my trashy-hot boyfriend to a church event and parade him around in front of my wholesome, long-suffering husband. And you hate me as much as you envy me for it, me and my charmed-fucking-life, having my cake and eating it too.*

It's not going to last forever. She's absolutely certain that one of these days it's all going to come crashing down and people will learn exactly what Joseph's been doing, exactly what her place in all of this is. One of these days, Robert's finally going to snap (and she just hopes he doesn't land himself in jail in the process), or Joseph's going to miscalculate and fuck with someone who sees no reason to keep his secrets afterward, and then everyone will learn the truth and they'll feel shitty for having misjudged her so badly, and it'll be her turn to be the martyr.

But they wouldn't believe it coming from her, and she's not going

to humiliate herself trying. So she'll bide her time; she'll let them think the worst of her so that their chagrin will be that much more complete when they finally learn the truth. She'll look Karen in the eye and smile pleasantly while she strokes Robert's knee.

Karen leaves, as disgruntled as she was when she arrived, and Mary takes her hand off Robert again. It's kind of boring with him asleep, but he looks so peaceful that she can't bring herself to wake him. She makes do with Bejeweled and people-watching instead.

Or rather, Gene-and-Joseph watching.

Gene's looking over toward her again, a small frown on his face. Then while Joseph's standing up to rearrange the display, his back turned, Gene lifts his hand and gives her a small, experimental wave.

She waves back. *That's right, I am watching you.*

His frown deepens, and she sees him steal a sidelong glance at Joseph. She'd dearly like to know what Joseph's said to undercut Robert, but, well—either Gene believes Joseph's not-quite-lies or he doesn't.

Gene says something to Joseph, and—ah, now there's *no doubt* that they're talking about Robert. One, because Gene's suddenly more interested in what Joseph's saying than he has been all day, and two, because the glances he's stealing at Robert have taken on a troubled slant.

Goddamnit, don't fall for his bullshit, Mary thinks at him. *Your heart already knows you don't trust Joseph, even if your head hasn't gotten the memo yet, just listen to your fucking instincts.*

But whatever Joseph tells him, combined with the silent treatment he's gotten from Robert for the past four hours, leaves Gene looking conflicted and miserable, and *ugh*.

She really, really wishes she could get Robert to go talk to Gene again, or at least make eye contact—*come on, nothing could be easier, the man's gagging for it*—but it's clear that Robert's had all he can take of Joseph for the day. And Mary can't really fault him, but at the rate he's

going, he's going to manage to drive Gene off anyway, starry-eyed crush or not.

Christ, she just needs to get Joseph out of the picture for one damn minute so she can shove Robert at Gene and be like, *Now kiss*.

She's scrolling through the contacts in her phone for inspiration—it'd be nice if she had Ernest's number, she'd cheerfully give him her last twenty to go spraypaint some more church shit so Joseph would have to deal with it—when a TV crew on the lawn catches her eye. A new variable; maybe she can sic them on Joseph, convince them to corner him for a brief interview in his role as the public face of the church, and then steal Gene away while he's occupied...

She sees Joseph notice the camera crew. He taps Gene's knee to get his attention, then wraps his arm around Gene's shoulders and pulls him in, beaming a big, bright smile for the cameras—

—and Gene practically clotheslines him. It's fucking *beautiful*. Would that Robert had seen it. Would that she'd caught it on *camera*, she'd use it for her lock screen.

She breathes out and sits back in her chair, feels her lips curve into a smile.

Game over, Joseph Christiansen. You lose.

Because that's it, they're done—regardless of how he may have damaged Gene's estimation of Robert, Joseph's failed for himself. He's played all his cards, he's had all day to work on Gene, and he hasn't managed to lay the groundwork for a seduction, hasn't even managed to make him compliant.

Gene's standing now, and he's still nodding and talking politely to Joseph but his smile has gone steely and he is politely *getting himself the hell out of there*. He motions over his shoulder toward the other booths, an obvious *I'm going to check out what's over there, I'll be right back, honest*, or maybe it only just occurred to him that he could use the bathroom as an excuse to escape.

Joseph motions to something on the table, his own smile still bland

and impeccable, but as she watches, Gene shakes his head and his mouth forms a point-blank, *No*.

Well done, cat-shirt nerd, well done.

She finds herself abruptly reminded of Craig Cahn, who also came off as too naive for his own good in the beginning, but wound up fending off Joseph with the same polite-but-unshakable resolve that keeps three dozen thirsty softball moms at bay. That he'll be nice about it, but he'll stand by his *no*. Moreover, that he can recognize attempts to force his hand, and he won't appreciate it.

In any case, Gene is finally, *finally* separated from Joseph—it's the opening she's been waiting for and she's taking it.

She sits up, slapping Robert's knee. He startles awake with an adorable little snort.

"Look alive," she says, no time to waste. "You can thank me later."

She skirts the edge of the bake sale, trying to simultaneously keep an eye on Gene and keep herself out of sight. It's not hard, since he seems singularly unaware of his surroundings, just wandering morosely through the thinning crowds. The look on his face is one she's seen before, one she knows intimately—the unhappy confusion of someone on the receiving end of the Joseph-reality-distortion field, unsettled and unable to pinpoint why.

Happens to the best of us, hon.

Becky catches her by the cotton candy booth and gets up in her face—*blah blah I don't appreciate blah, I really think that*—gesticulating with a corndog and causing Mary to briefly lose sight of Gene. She locates him again at the corndog booth (ugh, really?), but he's already at the front of the line, with an unruly quiverfull family behind him.

She runs the options. Looks at Becky, and smiles.

"You're absolutely right," Mary says with all the sincerity at her disposal.

"I—ah?" Becky begins, stumbling at the unexpected lack of resistance.

"I'll be sure to bring up your concerns at the meeting on Thursday," she continues smoothly.

There are no meetings on Thursdays.

"What—"

"Now if you'll excuse me, I need to borrow this." Mary gives her a bright smile, plucks the corndog out of her hand. "Thanks. I'll bring it right back."

She leaves Becky sputtering behind her and intercepts Gene just as he's leaving the booth, startling him so badly that he nearly drops the ketchup-covered corndog on his shirt—which would be funny, but antithetical to her mission. He's wary of her sudden appearance, visibly mistrustful as she hands him Becky's corndog and tells him to take it to Robert, but he doesn't refuse outright, which is good enough. Mary's done her part—Robert (and the Zara shirt) can handle it from here.

She watches Gene take the long way around, consciously or subconsciously avoiding Joseph, and watches him catch Robert by surprise. Robert's recovery wouldn't fool a twelve-year-old, but that's okay, because subtlety is wasted on both of them.

And maybe that's why, despite all the day's setbacks, they manage to come out okay in the end—as she watches, Gene's misgivings fall away once more and he smiles at Robert, soft and bright, as he nudges the corndog toward him.

Victory.

She looks over at Joseph and confirms that he's seeing this too, finds him watching the pair with cold, narrowed eyes. Time to throw a distraction.

"So," Mary says loudly as she comes up behind him, taking petty satisfaction in seeing him jump. "I think we both know who won this round."

Joseph turns and glares at her, his jaw tight. She smiles, licks her fingertip and mimes making a tally on an imaginary scoreboard.

Then he makes himself relax, and gives her a pleasant smile. "With how hard you try, you were bound to get lucky eventually."

"Gene didn't fall for your bullshit at all, did he?" Mary muses. "I saw him sprinting out of here the first chance he got. That must have stung."

"Mmm, yes, because apparently his type is pathetic and drunk, who knew," Joseph says dryly. "I suppose there's no accounting for taste."

"It really shouldn't come as a surprise that someone prefers Robert to you." She smiles at him pointedly.

"I'm surprised that you were willing to sacrifice your only friend just to spite me." His eyes flick out toward Robert and Gene, then back to her with a smirk. "Since he's hardly going to need *you* around now."

She keeps smiling, doesn't let him see how that one lands, and gives a shrug. "Worth it. To see you dumped here like a sad sack, all by yourself? Totally worth it."

He looks up, and for a moment the mask is gone and she's staring into the heart of darkness—an animal lack of inhibition coupled with all-too-human rage. Even now, after all these years, it still catches her off-guard, sending a cold, instinctual spike of fear through her chest. She falls back a step without thinking, her skin crawling.

But then she catches herself. Sets her jaw and steps forward. Places her hands on the table and forces herself to stare into the abyss while the abyss stares back. Helps herself to one of the abyss's brownies, and keeps her eyes locked on his as she unwraps it and bites off a corner.

That's right, she thinks at him. It was me, all me, all about you. I'm the one who fucked up your play, all to spite you. Forget the lovebirds, they're just pawns. I'm the one you're really angry with, I'm the one you want to hurt, come at me.

Then she looks at the brownie and hums thoughtfully. "These really aren't very good, are they? No wonder you have so many left."

Joseph's mask is back in place. He smiles benignly. "Booze-soaked

brownies are two booths down. Although—you might not want to hit the sweets so hard. Since it looks like you're going to be in the market for someone new to buy your drinks."

"I'll manage," she says serenely. "I always do."

"It's true. You do always manage to make a spectacle of yourself."

"Only spectacle I saw today was you," she says, stepping back. Because she's done here, she made her point, it's time for a tactical retreat. "And I had front-row seats for it."

And ohh, he wants to get in the last word, of course he does, but she's rapidly putting distance between them and he's hampered by what he can say when other people might overhear it.

"Better luck next time," she calls loudly over her shoulder, lifting her hand in a wave as she goes. If he makes a parting shot, she doesn't hear it. Doesn't care to, really.

A couple of church moms waylay her to bitch about Karen as she's leaving, when she's still coasting on jittery energy, and she listens to their complaints with half an ear. Gene's sitting in her chair now; she catches him looking and gives him double finger guns, and he smiles at her like a thank-you.

Sometimes it would be easier if she could think of her life as a horror film—that she lost her lover to the waves and when he came back, he came back wrong. That something malevolent and alien had taken up residence under his skin, not that he'd been a monster all along and she'd just been too blind and foolish to see it, didn't realize until it was too late and every door had already closed and she found herself trapped inside with him, alone.

"I agree completely," she says, interrupting one of the church moms mid-rant. "I mean, bless her heart, Karen does her best, but I wouldn't have put her in charge of anything if Joseph hadn't insisted. He's the one who really needs to hear your concerns—he's free now, if you like."

She blithely directs their attention toward the brownie booth and ducks out while they're distracted.

"Hey stranger," she announces herself in a low voice, popping up behind Joan's chair. "Mind if I claim sanctuary?"

Joan motions generously. "Have a seat, you're always welcome."

Mary takes Joan's extra folding chair, letting out a long breath as she sits down, and then digs out the brownie and drops it on the table. "Your final payment, as promised."

Joan peers at it through the cellophane. "It seems to have a bite out of it already."

"I was testing it for poison. You'll be glad to hear that the results were negative."

"Or slow-acting."

"Also possible." Mary lets herself sink in the chair a little more and closes her eyes.

"Long day?" Joan asks.

"You have no idea. But hey—" She opens her eyes, smiles and nudges Joan's attention to where Robert and Gene are sitting. "Check out my handiwork."

They're even *holding hands* now, fuckin' adorable, and she knows whose idea that must have been, but she's still proud of Robert for not letting himself panic about it.

Joan chuckles. "They'll bring honor to us all."

"One can hope." Mary takes a slow breath in and out, forces herself to relax. "So how's tricks?"

She listens as Joan recounts a few of the day's adventures, from some inept teenage would-be shoplifters, to a church mom who got Offended at the necklaces featuring Venus-of-Willendorf pendants.

It's restful, letting Joan carry the conversation and just chiming in occasionally, no pressure to do anything else. No scheming, no jockeying for status, since Joan's markedly uninvolved in church or PTA politics. No judgment, no pointed looks, no passive-aggressive remarks.

No neuroses that she needs Mary to shore up for her, that break Mary's heart to see and be helpless to fix.

She checks back on Gene and Robert periodically, finds them still sitting together—they're not talking, but their hands are clasped in the space between them, heads angled toward each other. She knows how rare moments like these are in Robert's life, and damned if she's going to be the one to cut it short. She'll give them as much time as they can steal, content to linger in Joan's undemanding company.

Eventually, though, it does come to an end. People start to pack up as evening comes on, Joan among them. Mary sees Gene sit up and reluctantly withdraw his hand, and she makes herself draw in a breath and straighten as well.

"I suppose I should be on my way," she says aloud. "Thanks for letting me cool my heels here for a bit."

"Anytime. Feel free to stop by even if you're not on the run."

She might. It never hurts to have allies. She glances over again to see if Gene's left yet—

Robert's still seated, but Gene's standing in front of him, his hands cradling Robert's face, gazing down at him with a soft expression that's half love and half wonder, patient and unutterably gentle, and—

And she finds herself looking away again just as fast, like she got caught peeping on something she had no right to see. It's accompanied by a stab of hurt that doesn't even make *sense*, because this is exactly what she wanted for Robert, it's what she fought tooth-and-nail for. She *wants* him to be happy; it's high time the universe stopped dicking him over and let him have something nice for a change. She's glad he found someone who wants him because he's a good man, with so much love and loyalty to give, not because his ass looks nice in a motorcycle jacket.

And God knows she's long past wishing for someone who'd look at her that way, but seeing Gene with Robert makes it twinge like a phantom pain.

Don't be selfish, she tells herself. This is about Robert, not about you. Just be happy for his sake.

"You know," Joan begins. "I was forty-six before I finally admitted to myself that I was a lesbian."

Mary gives a small snort. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Yeah, I am." Joan turns to look at Mary, and her voice is mild but there's a quiet conviction underlying it. "That just because you spent the first forty years of your life miserable doesn't mean you have to spend the next forty years the same way."

Mary looks away. "I'm not a lesbian, Joan." Maybe she would have dodged a bullet if she had been. Maybe not.

"No, but there's more than one way to be miserable. Can you honestly tell me that this is how you want to spend the rest of your life? That you never want even a chance at being happy?"

Mary draws in a breath. *It doesn't matter what I want.* "It's not that simple."

"It's never that simple," Joan says gently, her smile wry and sad and knowing. "Or—maybe it is. But 'simple' doesn't necessarily mean 'easy.'"

"Joan, please. Just—leave it alone."

Joan's silent for a moment, then Mary sees her nod. "Alright. And I apologize if I overstepped." She pauses, then carefully puts a hand on Mary's shoulder. "But honey—your friend's not the only one who deserves a happy ending."

Mary doesn't answer.

Joan gives her shoulder a brief squeeze and lets go. "You just take care of yourself, okay?"

Mary swallows. "Yeah," she says, and makes her escape.

When she gets back to Robert, he has finally, *finally* consented to turn his chair around, and he's watching Gene and Joseph take down the sunshade with a small smile on his face. She'd almost forgotten how rare that is, to see him looking genuinely happy. It doesn't trans-

form him—he's still tired around the eyes, still carrying the weight that never quite leaves him—but there's a light in him that she hasn't seen in a long time.

"So," Mary says, leaning her hip against Robert's shoulder and tousling his hair. "You're welcome."

He lifts his head and turns his smile on her, gives her a knowing look.

"Yeah," he says. He huffs a wry laugh and tips his head to rest against her hip. "I think I owe you one, boss."

"Good. Because I was lying when I said drinks were on me."

After the stunt she pulled today, it's gonna be a *long* time before Joseph lets her have the credit card again. Whatever—world's full of free drinks. She regrets nothing.

He chuckles. "We'll manage somehow."

She pats his head. "Alright, slacker, time to earn your keep and help me load up the car."

Gene's still talking with Joseph as they dismantle their respective booths, but Joseph has barely even a sliver of his attention—Gene's gaze keeps wandering back to Robert, making both of them smile every time. He seems to have gotten the memo about Mary too, because he's no longer wrong-footed by her presence, just sneaks a happy wave at her when Joseph's back is turned.

Robert doesn't talk to Gene again, as far as she can tell, but they keep making eyes at each other across the field and the parking lot, right up until they're done loading the Prius and Robert climbs into the front seat with Mary.

She's scrolling through her iPod looking for victory music, and he's looking out the window, presumably at Gene.

"He said—" Robert begins, apropos of nothing, starting and then cutting himself off just as abruptly. "He said Joseph never even stood a chance."

"Mmm." Mary had thought that might be the case. Her research on

Alex had suggested that Gene might not be interested in what Joseph was pushing anyway, even setting aside his ridiculous crush on Robert. Gene probably would have been fine even without all this cloak-and-dagger—but her way was more fun.

“He said no one else did either.”

Good on Gene. Robert’s not dumb, but he is incredibly insecure; he needs someone who’s not afraid to spell out their feelings for him, and apparently cat-shirt nerd is the man for the job.

“Just—*who?*” Robert bursts out. He ducks his head sharply, breathing hard. “Who the fuck walks up to *this block*, looks around at what’s on offer, and goes, ‘Him, the—the *walking tire-fire* of a human being, that’s the one I want to stick my dick in.’ *Who does that?*”

Only Robert would find something to be distressed about in the fact that his crush likes him back.

Mary shrugs, because there’s at least one obvious answer. “Gene, apparently. Congratulations.”

He sighs and lifts his head again, scrubbing a hand over his mouth. Across the way, Gene smiles and waves at him again. Robert smiles despite himself and waves back, because they really are ridiculous human beings, both of them.

Then Gene turns away to finish loading up the BMW, and Robert’s smile fades.

“I’m going to fuck it up,” he says quietly. With certainty, with resignation.

“You can try,” Mary acknowledges. “I’m not sure Gene’s going to let you.”

Since Gene hasn’t let him fuck it up yet, despite Robert doing his damndest. Twenty bucks says Gene’s going to try to put a ring on it if Robert holds still long enough, but she keeps her trap shut because saying so is a surefire way to give Robert a panic attack.

“Hey.” She puts her hand on his shoulder, grips it firmly. “Don’t

worry about the future. Today was brilliant, and now we are going to go celebrate our flawless victory. With alcohol.”

“To clarify: this is the alcohol that was supposed to be on you, right?” he asks.

“Yeah, yeah, cry about it,” she says, starting the car.

She sets the music going and rolls down the windows to let the bass notes spill out into warm evening air.

You're fucking with the wrong wolf, baby, Dorothy Martin's razors-and-whiskey voice growls from the stereo, and Mary thinks, *damned straight*.

She loops around the parking lot so they can make a pass by Joseph's beemer, leans on the horn at his tacky 'Honk if you love Jesus!' bumper sticker, then blows him a kiss and lets Robert wave to Gene one last time before they peel out.

As the park falls away behind them, she steals a glance over at Robert. He's got his arm resting in the open window, the wind ruffling his hair, city lights playing over his face, and he looks quietly content as he gazes out at the passing streets. The kind of contentment she'd like to see on him more often.

And she knows better than to think that Gene's affection can fix everything that's wrong with Robert, but it's a start. It's given him something to hope for again, the first time in a long time that anything has.

And she knows that in the endless war between her and Joseph, today's victory is hardly even a blip on the radar. That there's no stopping him in the long run, and depriving him of one piece of prey only means he'll move on to another—but a small victory is still a victory, and those are rare enough to be worth savoring.

Yeah, she thinks. All in all, it's been a good day.

Interlude: Tiki Time



“Goddamn, I wish you had better friends,” Robert mutters, well aware of the irony in that.

Mary snorts. “Pfft. Kathy isn’t my friend,” she says, taking a swig of some electric blue abomination.

“*Then why are we at her fucking bachelorette party?*”

“Because it’s got an open bar. You’re welcome.”

That it does, Robert acknowledges, though at what cost—ficus trees with coconuts glued to them, the jukebox playing ‘Margaritaville’ on repeat, and unlike Jim and Kim’s, they actually enforce the smoking ban here. Robert’s concession to the party atmosphere is drinking tequila instead of whiskey.

“Do I even want to know how you got me an invite to this?” he asks. “Aren’t these things supposed to be, uh...” *Hen parties*, he doesn’t say.

“I told her I was bringing my gay friend,” she says blithely. “Straight chicks fuckin’ love gay friends.”

Well, it’s half true, anyway. And explains why Kathy was so put out to discover that the friend was just Robert.

For all that this is supposed to be a bachelorette party, the mood

feels more like a wake, like the final farewell to a dream—the bride-to-be keeps bawling to her bridesmaids about how she came *this close* to marrying Craig Cahn, he once gave her a ride home from a PTA meeting and everything. The bridesmaids, for their part, are doing a very bad job concealing their glee over the reduced competition. In any case, it's keeping everyone distracted enough not to notice that Robert and Mary have slunk off to abuse the open bar tab in peace.

The windchime over the door jangles. Robert glances over idly and sees Brian, of all people, probably not here for the bachelorette party, followed by—oh shit.

"Oh shit," Robert hisses, and ducks behind the potted tree sitting on the bar.

"What?" Mary says, looking over her shoulder.

"No no no, keep your eyes on—"

"Oh hey!" she says gleefully. "It's the cat-shirt nerd! Jog my memory, what was his name again...?"

"Fuck you. This ficus is my new best friend now."

"GENE!" she hollers across the bar, waving her arm at him. "HI GENE! Stop hiding behind the ficus, Robert, it makes you look like a pervert."

Robert grudgingly pushes the tree aside and steels himself for having to make eye contact. Gene's giving Mary a small wave back and a polite smile, looking kind of bewildered by her enthusiasm—then his eyes land on Robert and he immediately brightens, suddenly waving at them with considerably more energy.

It's clear that Gene's there *with Brian*, trailing along after the other man like a balloon as Brian leads them to a table, but he keeps glancing back over at Robert and Mary. Robert can't tell whether it's a date or not; tells himself it doesn't fucking matter.

"Do you think they're on a *date-date*?" Mary wonders aloud.

"He can date whoever he wants," Robert mutters.

Except Joseph, he amends. If Joseph succeeds in laying hands on

Gene where Robert failed, it's going to end in a spectacular murder-suicide that will put Maple Bay on national news, in the bad way.

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd say who he wants to date is—"

Robert manages to kick her just in time to shut her up, and then Gene is there and leaning over the bar next to Mary. He makes the world's most perfunctory effort to flag down the bartender before promptly turning to them.

"Hey guys!" he says breathlessly.

"Hello, Gene," Mary says, with all the sangfroid of a Roman emperor at the games. "Having fun with Brian?"

"Yeah? We took the girls out for mini-golf—made a bet that the loser has to buy drinks afterward, and... uh. Yeah." He laughs, gives a self-deprecating shrug, like, *and here is me, buying drinks*. "How about you guys? You enjoying the, uh... Freaky Tiki?"

"Oh yes," Mary says. "You know Robert, he just loves to get his freak on, tiki-style."

Robert tries to kick her again, but she dodges this time. "We're here with the bachelorette party," he says flatly, nodding toward Kathy, who is now wailing and rending garments.

Gene looks over at the party. "Oh. Uh... congratulations?" he offers. "I never had a bachelor party. I didn't realize they involved so much... crying."

Thankfully, the bartender chooses that moment to *do his fucking job*, and Gene orders a pair of tropical monstrosities and reluctantly leaves to rejoin Brian. Robert tries not to be obvious about watching him go, probably fails.

"You know," Mary says thoughtfully, once he's out of earshot. "I may have offered my condolences too soon. I think you're still in the game."

"I already asked, he already said no."

"He couldn't take his eyes off you at the barbecue either."

"Sizing me up for his freezer? I don't fucking know."

Mary watches him for a long moment. "Maybe he wanted more than just a fuck," she says at last, uncharacteristically serious. "Some people do, you know."

Yeah, well, too bad that's all I'm good for, he thinks, but bites it back because that's an argument he doesn't want to start.

"Whatever." Robert tosses back his shot of tequila. "We gonna get our money's worth from this party, or not?"

"Yep." Mary gulps down the rest of her Blue Hawaii and signals the bartender. "We should probably hurry. I'm pretty sure they close out the tab after the bride-to-be throws herself on the funeral pyre."

The Old College Try



It happens one evening at Jim and Kim's.

Robert's in New York visiting Val, which means Mary's hanging out with Gene by herself for once, and she makes an offhand remark that it is *beyond her* how anyone could have been friends with Craig Cahn for twenty years without trying to tap that ass, *have you seen it*, and Gene freezes and goes, *Ahh...*, in that shifty way he does when you manage to catch him off-guard, because it turns out that he is actually very bad at lying when it's not premeditated, and Mary cackles gleefully and goes, *Oh, you dirty boy, you did!*

"Well, you have to understand that Craig and Smashley were high school sweethearts," Gene begins, but Mary knows a prevarication when she hears one. "And I met Alex in my first week of classes, so we were all... pretty well spoken-for throughout college. But when we were nineteen, we, ah. Might have had a foursome."



"So," Gene says to Craig one evening, as they're playing Mario Kart in their dorm room. "Alex and I were wondering if you guys want to have a foursome."

He had been trying to time it for optimum distraction, but his gambit fails, and Craig cheerfully knocks him off the rainbow road without missing a beat. Gene really feels like he ought to be better at this level, considering.

"Sure," Craig says easily. "We're down for that."

"Uh. Don't you need to clear it with Smashley first?"

Craig laughs out loud. "Nah, bro, she's been after this since forever."

Gene has the sudden suspicion that Alex already knew that.



"Bullshit, you did," Mary says instantly. "Pics or it didn't happen."

"Oh, Mary, Mary, Mary," Gene says, shaking his head. "Alex didn't take pictures; he took *video*."

"You are telling me," she says carefully, "that you have a *sex tape* of your *foursome with Craig Cahn*."

Gene shrugs. "Wasn't like any of us were planning on running for office."

"I can find you a *seven-figure buyer* for that," she says, leaning in earnestly. "You'll never have to work another day in your life."



Actually, there's some context for the proposition.

They're eating lunch in the quad; Gene's trying to review his notes before his next class (his professor believes in the Socratic method, if Socrates were a *sadist*) and Alex is mostly being a hindrance. Business as usual, in other words.

At this particular moment, Alex is pondering aloud how Gene is the only person in the world immune to the siren song of Craig Cahn's dick.

“It just seems like such a waste,” he muses, “since you get to see more of his dick than anyone save the man himself—”

That is probably true; the thing no one tells you when you’re heading off to college is that your randomly-assigned roommate has a one-in-four chance of being a nudist.

—which, now that I think about it, might be *why* you’re immune. Like Westermarck effect. All I’m saying is, it’s profoundly unfair that in roommate-roulette, you got the hot nudist you don’t even ogle, and I got the creeper.”

“Ahh...” Gene says shiftily.

Alex perks up.

Gene rolls his eyes. “Well, I don’t ogle him *now*.”

Alex throws a leg over the bench and scoots over to drape himself against Gene’s back. “Go onnnnn,” he purrs.

“Well...” Gene ducks his head and laughs, abandons any pretense of studying. “Okay, so it was our first week of class, right? And he’d already told me about the nudist thing, or like, asked permission, except the way he said it was, ‘So I like to take off my clothes when I’m just hanging out in the room, is that cool with you?’ and I was all, yeah no problem, because I thought he meant, y’know, hanging out in his *boxers*? Like a *normal person*? But no, he meant *all the clothes*.”

“All the clothes,” Alex echoes thoughtfully.

All of them. Clothes: off. Penis: liberated. So there I am, desperately trying to play it cool, to act like this is *normal*, not like he’s walking around with his junk dangling *right there*. And I’m trying not to perv on him, because I’d already met Smashley so I knew he was taken and I thought he was straight and—oh christ. He and Smashley fucked like rabbits when we first moved into the dorms. It was the first time they’d ever had real privacy, so I spent basically that entire first week in the library, and then I’d come back to the room in the evenings and it would *smell like sex* and Craig would be like—showered and fucked—

out and I couldn't stop thinking about... oh god." He puts his face in his hands. "Alex, I was the creeper-roommate. It was me."

"You couldn't be a creeper if you tried," Alex assures him, hooking his chin over Gene's shoulder and nuzzling into his neck. "So what were you thinking about, hmm?"

"I don't think about him like that *anymore*," Gene insists. "He's my best friend, and I'm with you now, and—"

Alex shushes him. "No no no, walk it back, babe, you're fine—it's the first week of school, you haven't met me yet, you got nothing to feel guilty about. Just you and your hot naked roommate, lounging around with his junk out. What kind of ideas was he putting in your head?"

Gene sighs. "I thought a lot about sucking his dick," he confesses. "Like, *a lot*."

"Damn, sweetheart, I'd pay money to see that," Alex murmurs, his lips on the nape of Gene's neck. "What a fuckin' fantasy, watching you suck off Craig Cahn."

"Yeah?" Gene shivers.

"Oh yeah." Alex's lips brush over his ear. "You want to suck Craig's dick, I'm not gonna say no. I'd love to watch you get on your knees and swallow him down, see the look on his face when he realizes what you can do with that sweet little mouth of yours."

Gene is extremely conscious of Alex's body pressed against his back, of Alex's fingertips slipping beneath the hem of his shirt. He darts a look around them, but no one's close enough to overhear, no one seems to notice anything funny going on.

"You suck cock like a fuckin' dream," Alex continues, his voice low, hands rubbing at Gene's hips. "Like a gift from a particularly filthy god, hardly seems fair to keep you all to myself. I'd let you share your sugar with Craig, let him fuck your pretty face, you are so *good* at cock-sucking, let him pump your throat full of his cum. Lick the taste of him from your mouth when I kiss you afterwards."

The situation in Gene's pants is getting somewhat urgent, because

yeah, he's thought about getting his mouth on Craig, but—"Really? You'd be okay with that?"

"Babe, I don't think there's anyone who would *not* be okay with that."

"Smashley...?"

"Thinks you're *awfully* cute," Alex supplies easily. "Said Craig does too."

This is news to Gene. "She told you that?"

"Oh we share *all* the juicy gossip about you and Craig, and believe me, Smashley would have loved to have you for the filling in that sandwich." Alex's hands slide down to tease along the inside of Gene's thighs. "Wanna ask if we can join them sometime?"

"Sure?" Honestly, there isn't much that sounds like a bad idea with Alex purring it into his ear, Alex's fingertips skating along his inseam and his cock starting to press hard and insistent against Gene's ass.

"Mmm, you've never fucked a chick before, have you?" Alex murmurs.

"You know I haven't."

"Wanna try it? It's fun. You'd enjoy it. I want to *watch* you enjoy it. Hell, Craig could fuck you while you're fucking Smashley, wouldn't that be a sight, you'd be so *goddamned hot* sandwiched between the two of them, ass stuffed full of Craig's dick while you're fucking Smashley's tight little pussy."

"You have a vision?" Gene asks breathlessly.

"Fuck yes, I have a vision. I want to watch you come in her. I want to see you lose it when you're impaled on Craig's dick and blow your load inside of her, want to see your cum oozing out of her pussy. Christ, yes. And then I want to fuck her, while she's still hot and full of your cum, she'd be so fucking wet, I want my dick drenched in it."

"Alex!" Gene hisses, because *holy mother of god*, this has abruptly gotten out of hand, he is about to *come in his pants*—

Alex nuzzles his ear. "Mmm, that's it, baby, say my name."

"Alex, we are *in the middle of the food court!*"



"Jesus." Mary takes a gulp of wine. "Your Alex was a little kinky, wasn't he."

"You have *no idea*," Gene says with feeling.



"Alex, my dude," Craig says when he emerges from exam room 1. "What did you say to the nurse?"

Alex looks up and grins, which is not a particularly reassuring sight. "Well, she seemed to think we were here as some sort of STD-testing solidarity pact, and I had to be like, no ma'am, it's because I am going to be sticking my dick in all three of those hotties out there, and godless sinners we may be, but we are *responsible* godless sinners."

Gene pats his knee benevolently. "I can't take you anywhere."

"She was proud of us. She told me so, and she gave me a lollipop." He holds up his prize, waggles his eyebrows at Gene. "You want it?"

"What? She didn't give *me* a lollipop," Craig grumbles.

Gene takes the lollipop, keeps his eyes locked with Alex's as he takes off the wrapper and twirls his tongue over it in a slow circle, then sucks it into his mouth, cheeks hollowing.

"Jesus, we can't take you guys anywhere," Smashley says cheerfully, emerging from exam room 2 and hooking Craig's arm over her shoulders. "We all done here?"

"Gene still needs to pee in a cup. Hey, do me a favor and steal us some lube while you're in there."

"Steal it yourself. I can't violate the terms of my parole."

"Babe, what do you think my pockets are *full of*? I ain't made of money—do your man a solid, get in there and get us more lube." He

shoots Gene a pointed smirk. “Unless you think we’re not going to use it?”

“...Right. Smashley, can I borrow your purse?”

She gives him a pitying look. “Gene, please—what do you think my purse is *full of*?”



Mary looks at him skeptically over her wine glass. “Did you really think that *Craig Cahn* and his high school sweetheart were going to turn out to be disease vectors?”

“Well, no,” Gene admits. “Honestly there wasn’t much danger from any of us by that point, but it seemed polite to all get tested together, and there *had* been an incident—”



“Read it and rejoice, hot stuff—clean bill of health for my dick.”

Gene peers at the screen of Alex’s phone. “Well, that’s a nice change of pace.”

“Oh no, don’t you even start, it was *one week*—”

“Alex. You had chlamydia when I met you.”

“*One week*, Gene. I have been on this earth for over a *thousand* weeks, all but *one* of them blissfully free of venereal disease, and you had to go and roll up during the *one week* that I had chlamydia.”

“Too late, I’m never going to let you live it down. It’s going on your headstone: ‘Here lies Alex, he had chlamydia.’”

“*For one week.*”

“Yes, but it was a very memorable week.”

Alex’s mood shifts, quicksilver-fast, and he grins wickedly and straddles Gene’s lap. “Oh, I’m sure it was. A week of desperate dry-humping, like teenagers with the parents downstairs. A week of my mouth glued to your dick.”

Gene cups his hands over Alex's ass, rocks his hips and smiles. "Wanna do it again, for old time's sake?"

Alex laughs. "Twist my arm, why don't you?" he asks, leaning in to kiss Gene.



"You did not."

"I did," Gene says serenely, not nearly as chagrined as he ought to be. "He was already on antibiotics for it, but yeah, he really did have chlamydia when I met him. Alex, ah—didn't always make good choices."

"So what I'm hearing is that 'hot mess' has always been your type." Although in Robert's defense, that had been rabies, not chlamydia.



"So Alex has been trying to coach me on what you like in bed," Craig says when they're back in their dorm room for the evening.

"Urgh." Gene pulls his t-shirt up to his ears. "I'm sorry. He was raised by wolves and never learned proper human socialization. Sometimes he still tries to hump my leg in public."

"S'all good, bro. I just hadn't realized that you're a little kinky, aren't you?"

"Urgh."

Craig comes up behind Gene's chair and drapes his naked self over Gene's back. "I took notes. Wanna see?"

"Depends. Are they better than your notes for bio?"

Craig laughs, which probably means no. "The pictures are more interesting," he offers.

It's funny, Gene thinks detachedly, how completely non-sexual his thoughts for Craig are these days, despite the continued nudity. Strange to recall his early, overheated fantasies back when Craig was

just a hot stranger—those thoughts feel alien to him now, like they'd been about a different person altogether. It's difficult to reconcile the guy he'd imagined then with the Craig he knows now.

He tries on the thought of kissing Craig—and his brain immediately rebels against it, sliding off the idea like trying to shove two magnets together the wrong way. Kissing feels... too intimate, or like the wrong kind of intimacy. Kissing feels like romance to Gene, or at least the potential for it, not something one does with a platonic bro, even a bro whose dick he would not mind platonically sucking.

Because *that's* an idea he finds he can still get behind. That maybe if they didn't have a chair between them right now, and Craig were pressed up against Gene in his full naked glory (and if Alex and Smashley weren't in the picture), with his cock getting hard and nestling up against Gene's ass... well, he still doesn't think he'd be in love with Craig *like that*, but he'd absolutely be down to fuck. Hot and easy, let Craig just push Gene down onto the mattress and push his cock right inside him—

He brings himself up short, still sitting in his desk chair, Craig still draped over his shoulders, naked and slightly sweaty and kind of overdue for a shower.

Gene hooks his chin over Craig's arm. "You cool with this, dude?" he asks. "For real?"

Craig shrugs. "I'm cool with everything. This is all my favorite people in one room, I'd be happy no matter what we're doing. I'd have fun, like, playing Monopoly if it was with you guys. And a foursome is going to be way more fun than Monopoly. Are you cool with it?"

"Yeah," Gene says, though he can hear the uncertainty in his own voice. "I just don't want it to make things weird. You're not worried about that?"

"No? I mean, we get each other, bro. We all get each other. I love you guys; we're as solid as, like, the four musketeers. You're my best friend in the world, and Smashley's my best girl, and Alex is your best

guy, and they're buds when we're not around. We'll have a laid-back good time, orgasms all around, and the only thing that'll be different afterwards is that you'll know what my dick tastes like." He pauses. "Alex was pretty adamant on that point."

"He has a vision," Gene admits.



"Fucking hell," Mary swears. "How is this guy even real? Craig's orgies are more wholesome than our *bake sales*."

Gene makes a seesawing gesture. "Until Alex shows up, maybe."



"So many ideas," Alex groans, with a thrust that buries him even deeper in Gene's ass. "We could do double penetration. Ahh, fuck, we could do *triple* penetration."

"*Nngh*—on who?" Gene gasps.

"On *everyone*. Seriously, we've got enough dicks to go around. We could tag-team Smashley. We could tag-team you. Shit, I wonder if Smashley has a strap-on."

"She—*ah*, doesn't."

"Well, we can fuckin' remedy that. Jesus, what a sight that would be, tiny gorgeous chick, *nngh*, with a giant plastic dick swinging between her legs, we'll get her one of those monster dongs and she can fuck you with it, we'd have to work you up to it, but *fuck*, you'd be so beautiful." A shudder runs through him as he bottoms out in Gene and holds it for a long moment. "Mmm, just think about it, sweetheart. Smashley's massive plastic cock, working you open," he punctuates that with a thrust, "bigger than anything you've ever taken before, but you'd take it so good, wouldn't you, god, I want you on your hands and knees, want you panting on my cock when she's working that giant fucking dildo into you, you'll hardly be able to move around it—"

"Alex," Gene chokes out, and he barely has to touch himself before he's coming hard, gasping into the mattress, fingers gripping the sheets for dear life as Alex picks up speed.

"Christ, yes, just like that, sweetheart, just like that," Alex is saying, *"you're so beautiful around my dick, love to feel you coming around me, so gorgeous, love you so fucking much—"*

Alex's perpetual patter runs dry, as it only ever does, when he stutters into orgasm, gripping Gene's hips, the line of his body going rigid, the spasm of his cock in Gene's ass, a shudder running through his body, then another, before he's curling forward. He braces himself against Gene's back while he rides out each small, shaking aftershock, rubs his palms up and down along Gene's ribs as his breathing gradually slows. It's lovely, feeling the shudders of Alex's pleasure inside of him, lovely to feel Alex clinging to him and trembling in the aftermath.

"Oh, Gene," Alex whispers, pressing a kiss, and then several more, up along the line of his back. *"Oh, my marvelous, beautiful boyfriend, you are so good to me, I love you so much."*

Alex holds them like that for several long minutes, as Gene's heart-beat settles, languor seeping into his limbs, as he feels Alex going soft inside him. At last Alex slides out of him, a feeling that never fails to be slightly disconcerting, and Gene rolls over onto his side to watch him sleepily.

Alex never looks debauched in the aftermath of sex. Even when he's naked and gleaming with sweat, orgasm always briefly brings out something distant and pensive in him, a rare inner stillness. Perched on the edge of the bed, he puts Gene in mind of some dark Renaissance masterwork, brooding chiaroscuro in the half light. The work of a painter in love with his subject; a painter dedicated to capturing the humanity in a fallen angel, the tragedy of the beautiful youth doomed to catch the eye of the gods.

Eventually Alex rouses and pads off to the attached bathroom to clean himself up. Gene listens to the water turn on and off, half-drows-

ing, hears Alex return to him and feels the warm slide of a washcloth between his legs. He rolls over and lets his legs fall open to give Alex better access, lets Alex wipe down his thighs and stomach, sighs and relaxes into it as Alex puts his mouth over Gene's soft cock and sucks on it for a bit, lazily and without intent.

Then Alex drops the washcloth on the floor with a wet thunk and spoons up behind him. He strokes his hand lightly over Gene's stomach for a few minutes, then says quietly,

"You know you're allowed to call this off, right? The foursome, I mean." He runs his thumb along Gene's hip. "I get that Smashley and I are the ones pushing for it, and you and Craig are along for the ride, but if you're having second thoughts, I don't want you forcing yourself into it. I mean sure, I've got some fun ideas, but this is for you, too. I'm not interested in doing any of this without you, or if you're not going to be into it."

"Alex," Gene says dryly, rolling over to face him. "Your *ideas* for this foursome have made me come like a freight train no fewer than three times now. Your *ideas* are why I haven't been able to finish my comp lit reading yet."

Alex's eyes light up. "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. The *idea* of a foursome is not the problem, I'm just..." he cuts his eyes away, "not sure about the reality of it."

"Alright." Alex rolls over on top of Gene, folds his arms on Gene's stomach and settles down to watch him with dark, liquid eyes. "So talk to me, sweetheart. What's got you worried?"

Gene draws in a breath, lets his hands settle over Alex's bare shoulders. "I'm not sure. I guess I'm worried it'll... change things? With you and me, or with me and Craig and Smashley. All of you guys are like the best things that ever happened to me, what if this messes something up?"

"Messes up how?"

"Like—I've spent so long keeping any sexual attraction to Craig on

lockdown so that it wouldn't screw up our friendship, and now I'm realizing that it is absolutely a box I could open again, but what if I can't put it *back* in the box once we're done? What if Craig and I couldn't be friends anymore because it turns out I can't stop thinking about wanting to fuck him?"

Alex considers that. "Well... I'm not going to say that it's impossible. People are weird. Brains are weird. Who knows what could happen. But it's really not all that weird to be sexually attracted to people you're not romantically attracted to. There's no reason you can't be bros with Craig *and* admit that he's fuckable. He doesn't mind; I don't." Alex pauses. "Unless you think a foursome is going to make you realize that you've actually been in love with him this whole time? In which case, I am slamming the abort button."

Gene laughs, runs his fingers through Alex's hair. "No, you don't need to worry about that. You really, really don't. I had the hots for Craig for like a week, but from the moment I laid eyes on you, you were it for me."

Alex smiles, presses a kiss to Gene's stomach. "You walked into a tree. It was fuckin' adorable."

"More like a shrub. And it was your fault, you were very distracting."

"Mmm, as were you. It's a good thing you're tone-deaf, because you made me hit a very un-sexy flat."

Gene laughs again, wraps his arms around Alex's head and hugs him close for a moment. Because put like that, he does feel more comfortable with the whole thing, more confident that he's not going to get confused about his feelings for Craig. That Craig is his best friend, and Craig is smoking hot, but even those together don't add up to the dizzying rush that he feels looking at Alex.

"I'm also... not sure how I feel about sharing you," Gene admits. "I know you get off on the thought of watching me with other people, but the idea of *you* with other people just makes me feel... I don't know."

Because the idea of Alex with other people isn't a fantasy, it's a fact—he *knows* that Alex had already been with many, many other people before they met, whereas Gene's been with almost no one but Alex. And usually it doesn't bother him—Alex is with him now, after all, is happy with him—but sometimes it's daunting to think about the long list of ex-lovers he's being measured up against.

"I get off on the thought of *you*," Alex corrects him mildly. "I like watching you enjoy yourself. I like seeing you experience new things. But I don't actually get off on sharing you, and I wouldn't want to do this with just anybody—I think I *would* get jealous if it were a stranger touching you. It's different with Craig and Smashley though, I trust them."

"I trust them too, obviously, but..." Gene sighs. "Is it weird that the thought of you with Smashley bothers me more than the thought of you with Craig?"

Alex traces slow circles on his chest. "Is this about the bi thing?"

"Maybe? I don't know. It just feels like—if that's what you're into, then I can't really compete, can I?"

"Lover," Alex whispers, moving down to slide himself between Gene's legs, pressing a kiss to his stomach. "You," a kiss on his hip, "have no," a kiss against his thigh, "competition."

Gene exhales contentedly, rests his hand on the back of Alex's head.

"You," Alex continues, "are all I want. You are all I need. You and only you, if that's how you want it. If you don't like me with other people, then I can hold the camera and never lay a finger on either one of them and enjoy myself just fine. This isn't me hinting that I'm getting bored or wanting to fuck around, because I assure you," he draws Gene's hand to his mouth and kisses the inside of his wrist, then grins and nips at it, "You have my *undivided attention*."

And that's—reassuring. Because Gene isn't *afraid*, exactly, that Alex is losing interest, or tempted to cheat on him, he knows Alex would never, but...

But when Alex gets like this, he just has so much energy, and imagination, and such a short attention span that Gene can't help worrying that someday he won't be able to keep pace. That he's too boring, too inexperienced, and sooner or later Alex is going to realize that and start wishing for someone more exciting. So it's good to know that that day isn't today.

"That's good," Gene says aloud. "I mean... you can be pretty insatiable sometimes."

"I *am* insatiable, I can't get enough of you, sweetheart," Alex growls, digging his hands into Gene's waist. "Your ass, and your thighs, your clever mouth and your clever hands, hell, you could let me hump your armpit and I'd thank you for it."

"*Alex!*" Gene says, laughing as Alex wrestles his way back up the bed, bringing them face to face.

"And Gene, you can always tap us out, anytime. If you don't like what's going on, or if you're getting jealous, for fuck's sake, don't try to, like, grit your teeth and power through. Just say 'let's do something else.' I got lots of ideas. Or if you want to pull the plug entirely, just say we're done, and we're done."

Gene nods. "Yessir."

Alex strokes a thumb along his jaw, and then looks Gene in the eye. "Do you want to call it off?" he asks seriously.

"No." Gene laughs and ducks his head. "Your ideas are, uh... rather inspiring."

"Do you want me to watch instead of participate?"

Gene considers that. "No," he decides at last. "We'll see how it goes. If I change my mind I'll let you know."

"Alright." Alex nods, then smiles and lays a kiss on the corner of Gene's mouth. "And... thank you," he says softly. "For indulging me. Not just the foursome, I mean—everything. I know I get kind of crazy sometimes, and I drag you into all kinds of trouble you wouldn't get

into without me. I just want you to know that it means a lot to me, that you... let me be me, and you come with me for it."

"I like your crazy," Gene says simply. "I wouldn't do this without you, but my life would be pretty boring for it. You make it an adventure."

"Oh, Gene," Alex breathes, bending his head to brush their lips together. "My marvelous, beautiful boyfriend, I am so lucky to have you. You know you're it for me too, right?"

At which point the door clicks open, the bright light from the hallway suddenly falling across the bunk, highlighting Alex, draped over Gene's chest, his naked ass on full display. Alex's roommate hovers in the doorway, blinking at them owlshly.

For a long moment nobody moves, and then Alex narrows his eyes and levels a finger at the guy.

"I *know* I put a sock on that door, you pervy motherfucker."



"A tree?" Mary asks.

Gene rolls his eyes. "It was a *shrub*. First week of classes, Craig and I are walking through the quad and there's this insanelly hot guy playing a violin, which is also really hot, and I'm trying to keep walking and talking to Craig and at the same time keep watching the guy, and then he catches me staring and *winks* at me, and then a branch hit me in the face." Gene laughs. "Oh god, I'd never been more embarrassed in my life, but... it might have been pretty lucky, actually. Because then we ran into him the next weekend at a frat party, and he remembered me immediately as the guy who walked into a tree for him."



"Hey babe," Alex says, dragging up a library chair and straddling it next to Gene, the gleam in his eyes slightly manic. "Guess what

you're doing on Saturday afternoon? You get three guesses, and you will need all three, because that's how many of us there are."

Gene can't suppress a smile. "We have liftoff?"

"So much liftoff. Smashley's parents canceled their trip, so she's got the weekend free. I figured we'd do it in your guys' room? That way we can push the beds together, and also if we try to do it in mine, I bet you fuckin' anything my roommate would 'forget' that he's supposed to be staying out. Swear to christ, *that guy*." Alex shakes his head darkly. "Anyway, we talked ground rules. They're cool with videotaping it—quoth Craig, 'It's already too late for any of us to run for office.' Smashley's on the pill and we're all clean, so condoms are optional. They said her ass is a no-fly zone, and neither of them are interested in anything to do with rimming—I can work with that. Anything you want to add?"

There's a pointed cough from the study corral opposite Gene's.

"Hmm," Gene says thoughtfully. "I suppose I'd appreciate it if no one peed on anything, since I'm the one who has to sleep there afterward."

An even more pointed cough.

Alex laughs. "I'll strike it from the list."

"Otherwise I'm happy to play it by ear."

"Ohh, you are the bestest boyfriend a godless degenerate could ask for," Alex croons, leaning forward to nuzzle his face into Gene's neck. "I've got so many ideas, sweetheart, you're going to be screaming my name. And Craig's. And Smashley's."

They get kicked out of the library, but really, they were on their way out anyway.



"And then, *the big day*. We weren't sure how to break the ice, so we wound up playing strip poker, which, in retrospect, was probably not the best idea."



"Guys—I think you have *seriously* lost sight of the mission objectives. Winning isn't the point of strip poker."

"Winning is *always* the point," Smashley mutters, slapping down two cards. "Ante up."

She's lost both shoes and a sock; Alex has lost his sweater and his belt. Gene and Craig have been bare-ass naked for the past ten minutes.

"Show."

"Full house," Alex says, spreading his cards grandly.

"You are *fucking cheating*, Rodriguez, I will have your badge for this."

"C'mon, take off your shirt, I wanna see your tits."

"Yeah, let's see you *earn it* first."

Gene gives the video camera a sarcastic thumbs up, then rolls over on the mattress to make eye contact with Craig. They exchange a meaningful look.

Start without them? Craig mouths, and yeah, it does seem to be the only way to get this show on the road. Between Smashley's insane competitive streak and Alex's hard-on for gambling, they could be at this for a while.

Gene feels very, very strange when he put his hands on Craig's chest and rubs them around a bit, cops a feel of that ass, and stranger still when they shuffle closer and venture to press their lips together. Because Craig is his best bro in the world, and Craig is fully hot, make no mistake, but, well... 'like kissing a brother' is the thought that Gene is doing his level best to avoid, since he's currently rubbing penises with the man.

And yet Craig's starting to get hard, which is... definitely flattering. Week one Gene, fresh out of the closet and panting after his hot roommate, would have been *thrilled* to discover that his unrequited boner

was not quite so unrequited after all. Because god knows he certainly spent enough time thinking about this—trying not to get caught staring at Craig’s perpetually-naked body, imagining what it would feel like to have that body pressed up against his, rolling him over onto his back and pinning him against the bed—

—like *that*, whoa, because apparently Craig was paying more attention during Alex’s lecture than he does during bio. They’re still kissing, but it’s less weird now that Gene’s distracted by Craig’s weight pushing him down into the mattress, now that *Craig’s hand* is reaching down to wrap around his dick and pull on it with long, firm strokes. Gene gasps into his mouth, fingers clenching over Craig’s hips, and then a thought occurs to him—



“Wait—is this over-sharing?” Gene stops suddenly to ask.

It’s very cute that he chooses now to remember his discretion—Mary’s chalking it up to the four empty shots of whiskey in front of him, which she suspects he’s drinking in sad pining for Robert, because she knows that Gene’s drink of choice is usually beer. Beer’s what she’s going to nudge him toward if he tries to get another round, anyway, because obviously he can’t hold his whiskey.

Mary raises an eyebrow, takes a long sip of wine. “Yes, Gene. Because I have never thought about Craig Cahn’s naked body before. My maiden sensibilities are scandalized by the very idea, fetch me my smelling salts.”

Gene laughs. “Okay, point. It’s just that after living with Alex for so long, my filter is kind of shot. It’s got the ‘parental controls’ setting for Amanda, but everyone else is on their own.”

Mary thinks about the nudes she found on Alex’s website—which Gene has to know are there—remembers thinking, *Huh, cat-shirt nerd has hidden depths*. Or, as it turns out, that he’s just remarkably accom-

modating of his lovers' off-the-wall ideas, which sort of explains why he took to Robert.

"Sailor, if you stop now, I'm telling Robert that *you* have chlamydia."



—And then a thought occurs to him and he accidentally interrupts the kiss by breaking down into laughter.

"What?" says Craig, his hand still on Gene's dick, looking worried that maybe he did something wrong.

"Sorry, sorry," Gene wheezes. "Just—remembering that I have watched an entire jar of marinara sauce pass between the lips that I am currently kissing."

Craig nods seriously. "It's true. When you have unprotected kissing with someone, you are kissing everything they have ever eaten."

"I once ate a pillbug," Smashley volunteers.

She and Alex have finally abandoned the poker game, and at some point wound up with Smashley sprawled across Alex's lap while he aims the camera at Gene and Craig.

"I once licked a stick of deodorant," Alex puts in from behind the viewfinder. He adds darkly, "*Not* recommended."

"I lick his dick all the time," Gene says, pointing to Alex. "His dick, which once had chlamydia, though not when I licked it—"

"Smashley, hold the camera please," Alex says, then clambers up on the bed and pushes Craig off him, making a spirited attempt to smother Gene with a pillow.

"Sir," Gene gets out between giggles. "Sir, I'm afraid this is a no-pants zone." He ducks under the pillow as Alex tackles him. "You are in violation of the dress code, we're going to have to ask you to leave."

"You are kind of overdressed, dudes," Craig agrees, moving to make room for Smashley to join them. "You gonna get with the program, or do Gene and I have to do this by ourselves?"

Alex pauses from where he's wrestling Gene into the mattress. "I bet you a dollar I can take Smashley's clothes off with my teeth," he says.

"I bet you a dollar that's less sexy than it sounds," Smashley counters.

"How about this: last person to get naked has to wash the sheets afterward," Gene announces.

Alex and Smashley strip down in record time. Craig and Gene share a fist-bump.



"Alright, let's see how much of this I can remember," Gene says, tipping his head back thoughtfully. "Because Alex and Smashley had come up with—what did they call it?—an 'eight course menu for this event.'"



"So, Craig," Alex says, once they are all good and naked. "It has come to our attention that your lovely lady-friend doesn't own a strap-on."

"Nope."

"Which strongly suggests that your hot ass has never been plundered."

"Completely un-plundered," Craig agrees.

"Are you amenable to being plundered?"

"Alex, will you please stop saying 'plundered'?" Smashley implores him. "The word we agreed on was 'despoiled.'"

Gene's having a hard time not staring at her breasts, simply for the novelty. They're not the *first* breasts he's ever seen, but considering that all his previous experience has been with porn and classical statuary, they might be his first *real* breasts, in both senses of the word.

"I'm down for getting plundered," Craig says. "Despoiled. S'all good. Don't know when I'll get another chance to try it."

Christmas, Gene thinks, knowing what Alex is already planning to buy them.

Alex turns to Gene and grins. "Do we flip a coin for it?"

Gene shakes his head vigorously and motions pushing it back to Alex. "Oh no no, that's way too much responsibility for me. I don't want to screw it up and be the one to put Craig off butt-stuff forever."

Craig rolls his eyes. "It's not like I've *never* put anything up my—"

"You're right," Alex agrees. "We should play to our strengths." He tips a wicked smile at Gene. "Care to demonstrate yours?"

Gene looks to Craig. "Bro, can I interest you in a blowjob?"

Craig grins. "Don't you mean a—"

"No, Craig!" A pillow, courtesy of Smashley, hits Craig in the face. "We've been through this before, bro-puns are *not* sexy talk. And shame on you, Gene, for enabling him."

"On your knees in penance, Gene," Alex says cheerily, slapping him lightly on the ass.

Gene's aware, as he settles onto the bed between Craig's thighs, that the Classy and Skillful™ thing to do would be to tease a bit with hands and fingers first, get Craig fully hard and panting for it before he condescends to commence with the actual blowjob, rather than diving onto his dick mouth-first.

But what he'd been too shy to admit to Alex was that that had always been part of the fantasy. Week one Gene—who'd given all of one clueless blowjob before in his life—had no concept of the artistry of oral sex, just the blinding urge to *get his mouth on that*. And what he also hadn't been able to tell Alex was how Craig would randomly get half-hard sometimes when they were hanging out in the room, at which point all of Gene's higher brain functions would shut down and he could not think about *anything* except going to his knees in front of Craig's computer chair and swallowing him down before Craig even

realized what was happening, that he had spent an awful lot of time fantasizing about the feel of that cock going from soft on his tongue to rock-hard and bulging in his mouth.

Gene took a lot of showers that first week.

Anyway, falling mouth-first onto Craig's dick is something of a dream deferred, and Jesus, he is already hard just thinking about it, difficult to believe that he's actually here, that this is happening.

He braces himself on his elbows and draws in a shaky breath as he smooths his hands over Craig's thighs. Craig's dick is half-hard, inches away from his lips, and without waiting or warning, Gene slides his mouth over it in one smooth swallow.

"Oh god," Craig gasps out.

His hips tighten reflexively, a jerk that he politely tries to rein in. His dick twitches and swells and it's almost disappointing how little time it takes to work Craig to full hardness, only a matter of moments before his cock is thick and full in Gene's mouth—slightly larger than Alex, it turns out—forcing Gene's jaw wider than he's accustomed to.

Gene feels a hand in his hair, a proprietary curl of fingers cupping his head, thinks it's Craig until the angle shifts and Alex settles onto the bed next to him and presses his lips behind Gene's ear.

"How you doing, sweetheart?" Alex murmurs, stroking his nails down the back of Gene's neck.

Gene shivers and hums an affirmation around Craig's cock, feels Alex settle over him more fully.

"You look gorgeous," Alex whispers. "Fuckin' blissed out." Alex's hand steals downward, slipping underneath Gene's hips to cup his balls, roll them in his palm, then sliding upward to wrap around the shaft of his cock.

Gene sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. It's hard to get enough oxygen, suddenly; he can feel the thick, silky head of Craig's dick pushing against the back of his throat while Alex's hand squeezes

upward around his cock, a dragging pressure that closes over the head and makes Gene choke out a small, desperate noise.

“Mm, should I do that for you too, sweetheart?” Alex rolls his thumb in slow circles over the head of Gene’s cock, rubbing at the smear of precum in the slit. “Suck you off while you’re sucking on Craig? You’re so wet and worked up for him, makes me want to get my mouth down there and taste it.”

His other hand grazes over the curve of Gene’s ass, sliding into the cleft between his cheeks, and then he presses his fingertips flat against Gene’s hole, pushes down firmly.

Gene groans and rocks back against Alex’s hand involuntarily, nerves zinging at the pressure, the tease of penetration. He’s panting around Craig’s cock now, no finesse, just the pleasure of his mouth stretched wide and wet over Craig’s dick, of Alex’s skillful hands working him back and forth.

“Oh, is *that* what you want?” Alex says, his voice low and intense. He slides a leg over Gene’s, brings his erection to grind snugly up against Gene’s hip. “*Fuck*, I should have known you’d like that idea—a cock in your mouth and a cock in your ass, taking it from both ends at once. Craig fucking your pretty mouth while I’m pounding your tight little hole, you’d go wild for it, wouldn’t you, both of us coming in you together—”

Gene nearly gets ambushed by orgasm—he feels a warning surge, suddenly dangerously close to the edge, and his hand shoots down to grab Alex’s wrist, letting go of Craig’s dick with a gasp.

“Too soon,” Gene says breathlessly, shuddering with the effort to hold himself off the bed, to hold Alex’s hand away from his straining cock. “Don’t want to come yet. Besides—I think there’s someone else you’re supposed to be pounding.”

“If you insist.” Alex smiles and leans in to press a kiss to his lips, then scoots up the bed alongside Craig. “Alright, my dude, on your

side," he says, giving Craig a cheerful slap on the rump. "It's butt-stuff time."

"Mmm, butt-stuff," Smashley says from her perch with the camera.

"You good, babe?" Craig asks her as the three of them shift and roll Craig onto his side. "You're not feeling left out?"

"Oh, I'll get mine, don't you worry," she says with feeling, repositioning the camera for a better shot of the action. "For now, I am *enjoying the view*."

It's not the best angle for a blowjob, and Gene's still getting used to Craig's girth, less room than he's used to working with—but he's resourceful, not to mention determined. He lets each small roll of Craig's hips nudge the head deeper into his throat, concentrates on breathing around it, on sucking the beads of moisture from the tip, while Alex sets to work on Craig's ass.

He can't see what Alex is doing from this angle, but he hears as Alex uncaps the lube, hears Craig's small grunts and hisses at the unfamiliar sensations. Craig's erection wavers a few times ("Shit, dude, that's cold!" "Fuck, sorry—Smashley, stick this somewhere to warm it up"), but Gene applies himself to distracting Craig while Alex works his magic.

They've managed to coax Craig into a rhythm—apparently he's gotten used to whatever Alex is doing back there, because now he's fallen into a steady pace, breathing like a distance-runner as he humps into Gene's mouth with short little thrusts. And Gene has spent so much time thinking about this, imagining what it would be like to pleasure Craig, to jerk himself off while Craig fucks his mouth, that now that it's reality he can barely even put a hand on himself, even the slightest graze feels like it's going to push him over the edge.

Then Alex withdraws his hand. Craig's hips strain, trying to chase that pleasure, and then slacken for a moment, a small whine of frustration escaping him.

"Almost there," Alex murmurs.

Gene hears the rip of plastic as Alex tears open a condom, his own soft sigh as he rolls it down over his cock and then presses himself flush against Craig again. Alex's hand slides around, finds Gene's head and pulls him more deeply onto Craig's cock.

"You want to show him your party trick, babe?"

Gene catches Alex's hand briefly, his fingers trailing over Alex's palm as Alex pulls back to steady Craig's hip.

Then Gene takes a deep breath and slides his lips over the head of Craig's dick again, sliding down further than before. The head of Craig's cock bumps the back of Gene's throat, but he keeps his jaw lax, keeps pushing downward even as the narrow channel of muscle fights the intrusion. Then all at once the resistance gives way and Craig's cock slides home in one smooth motion, filling Gene's mouth and burying itself deep in his throat.

"Holy fuck," Craig gasps. His hands have found Gene's head, and he's obviously trying to be polite, he's trying not to choke Gene, but he can't keep his hips from jerking forward, from holding it for a second.

Gene lets him push in as deep as he likes, his lips pressed up tight against the base of Craig's dick. He's enjoying Craig's surprise, the feel of his dick as Gene takes him deep, the twitch of muscles and the pulse of veins against his lips.

And then Craig sucks in another gasp, the tenor different, as Alex begins to push into him. Gene eases off, takes a few seconds to catch his breath, and then swallows him down again.

"Ha... fuck... fuck..." Craig pants, his body rigid, his hands clenching in Gene's hair.

"Jesus, take the wheel," Smashley murmurs from behind the camera.

Then Craig releases the tension in a long, shuddering exhale, his grip loosening and his hand moving over Gene's head in a fluttery caress. He's still rock-hard in Gene's mouth, not even a momentary soft-

ening (Alex knows what he's on about, Gene thinks), his muscles trembling where he's suspended between them.

"Holy shit, dude," Craig breathes out. "That is intense. I am like—this close to coming already."

Alex's hand dips down to play over the root of Craig's cock, fingertips sliding into Gene's mouth. "Go for it." He rocks his hips slowly into Craig's. "Smashley's been dying to see this. You gonna be good, Craig, you gonna give your girl what she wants? Let her see Gene gagging on your cock, see you taking it up the ass, getting fucked until you can't hold it back anymore and you're shooting your cum all over my boyfriend's pretty face—"

"Jesus, Alex—!"

Gene takes that moment to swallow him deep again, just in time for Craig's strangled cry, his hand tightening in Gene's hair again. A spasm passes through Craig's cock, a squeeze of muscle, and then it's pulsing in Gene's mouth, flooding the back of his throat. Gene works to swallow it down, feels the brush of Alex's fingertips over the bulge in his throat, rides it out as the pulses taper off and Craig's hips slow.

Then Gene slides Craig's dick out of his mouth, the faint taste of cum dragging along his tongue, and looks up at Alex.

"Well, I think that calls for high fives all around," Gene says brightly.



"So your Alex was the lucky bastard who got to deflower Craig Cahn," Mary says with a hum. Gene really should consider selling the rights to this story.

"Well, obviously Smashley had done most of the deflowering long before we got there. But it was a milestone, to be sure."

Mary pauses, toys with her wine glass. "And that didn't make you jealous?"

"No. But I was right there helping, so it felt like a team effort."

Yeah, that probably would make a difference.

“Did you wind up nixing anything?” she finds herself asking.

“Only once, actually.” He sounds bemused by it. “Turns out I didn’t like watching Smashley go down on Alex. It’s kind of funny, the things that make you jealous and the things that don’t. I wound up being fine with everything else, but watching her suck his dick—nope. Suddenly it was like, *Woman, that is my job, I will cut you.*”

Gene rubs the back of his head, laughs at himself a little. “Who knows? Anyway, it was fine, there was plenty else on the to-do list. Honestly, it was biology keeping Alex from reaching his true potential, not lack of imagination. Now *Craig*, on the other hand...”



“Wait, Craig is *multi-orgasmic*?” Alex sounds betrayed as he cranes his head over Craig’s shoulder to see.

“Yeah,” Craig says, breathless and cheerful. “I didn’t even realize it was weird until I got to college.”

“A dick that does not quit,” Smashley confirms.

“How come you never mentioned this before?” Alex demands of her.

“Because I wanted to catch your outrage on film. Smile.”

Said dick is still proudly tumescent—much to Alex’s vocal envy—and nudging wetly at Gene’s lips. Gene figures, *might as well*, and resumes sucking on it.

“This *is* an outrage,” Alex says to the ceiling, thrusting absently into Craig’s ass. “This is a cosmic injustice. Why don’t I get to be multi-orgasmic?”

Gene takes Craig’s dick out of his mouth. “Because then I’d *never* finish my comp lit reading?”

Alex looks back to Smashley. “How many times can he do that?”

“Two or three,” she says.

“Four, if I try really hard,” Craig adds.

Alex whistles. "Goddamn, son. I think I know who our MVP's gonna be."



"Okay, *now* you are fucking with me," Mary says, pointing sternly at Gene with her empty wine glass.

He shakes his head. "God's honest truth."

"No. I had my doubts before, but this time you've overplayed your hand, sir. There is no way that—on top of everything else that is unrealistically perfect about him—Craig can come four times a night."

Gene shrugs. "Well, this was twenty years ago, he probably can't *anymore*. He's probably down to, like, two now."

Good lord, they'd been right about him all along. Craig really *isn't* human.

And if Gene is any sort of friend, he will *keep his fucking voice down*, because if the softball moms catch wind of this, Craig is never going to know a moment's peace again.



It's when Alex goes to extricate himself that they hit a small snag.

"Craig, correct me if I'm wrong," Alex says, an odd note in his voice. "But I put a condom on before I started fucking you, right?"

Craig tries to look over his shoulder. "Yeah, I thought so. Why?"

Alex frowns at Craig's ass, lifts one buttcheek for a better view. "I may have some bad news."

"Bro, did you *lose a condom in my ass?*"

"Ohh, rookie mistake, Alex," Gene says, shaking his head.

"It'll... come out when it gets hungry?" Alex offers.

"Bro," Smashley says severely, "you are gonna go *wash that dick* if you expect it to get any more play tonight."



“...Let’s see, and then Craig wanted to try cocksucking,” Gene says, ticking them off on his fingers. “I had the honor of being that particular landmark. So it was him and me for a while, with Alex and Smashley entertaining each other—I told you I wasn’t really into that—so we traded off and I got my first sexual experience involving breasts—I will say, they’re pretty fun, I can see why straight guys get so hung up on them—and then we decided that parallel twosomes weren’t fulfilling our true potential, and attempted to get more ambitious—did you know that it’s remarkably difficult to choreograph group sex?”

“I can imagine,” Mary says dryly. Though with half-drunk Gene and his glorious lack of a filter, there’s not actually much being left to the imagination.

“You can kind of get a rhythm going with three people,” he explains—and with hand gestures like those, Mary would *love* to know what Neil thinks they’re talking about—“even though you’re spending half your time trying to keep your dick where it’s supposed to be and stay in sync. Four people though, it’s just a mess—someone’s foot in your junk, someone’s butt in your face, and always wishing you had more core strength.

“The closest we got to a proper foursome was sort of a conga line,” Gene continues, demonstrating with a row of empty shot glasses stacked in a line along the table. “Smashley, then Craig, then me, then Alex.”



“Sorry, dudes, but I’m just going to come out and say it—I don’t think this one’s working.”

“I think it could if we found a rhythm,” Gene says loyally.

“We’re like one of those desktop toys with the clicky metal balls,” Smashley puts in.

“So many balls,” Alex agrees. He makes a thrust that cascades awk-

wardly down the line. Gene gets dislodged from Craig for the second time in as many minutes.

"We just have to like, chant or something to get us all moving in unison," Gene suggests.

"Like Roman galley slaves," Alex adds helpfully.

"Name a tune, my dudes, and I'm on it."

There's a long pause while nobody manages to produce any useful suggestions.

"All I've got is dirty limericks," says Alex at last. "And 'Barbie Girl.'"

"All I've got is the Mario theme song," says Craig.

"...Anyway, here's 'Wonderwall,'" says Smashley.

The conga line experiment ends inconclusively.



"The capstone of the evening wound up being one of Alex's very first ideas, because it turned out that Smashley was, ah, very keen to be the one who despoiled *me*."



"Oh god, I should have done more squats," Gene says breathlessly.

"I should have done *less* squats. Dude, my quads have not recovered in time for this."

"Uh-huh, too bad bitching doesn't burn calories, *MUSH, BOYS!*"

"Aw *come on*, you're the one who gets to just lie there and—"

"Haah—okay, guys, seriously, we have to rearrange before I fall over and break something."

They carefully separate, a process like disassembling tinker toys, only with more squelching.

"Mm, yeah, this is sexy," Gene remarks, grimacing as Craig withdraws his dick.

“We’ll fix it in post,” Alex says placidly from where he’s lounging with the camera. “Put a pillow or two under Smashley’s butt, it’ll give you a better angle.”

With the help of Alex’s suspiciously knowledgeable stage directions, they manage to find a configuration that doesn’t cause undue muscle strain.

“Alright, Gene in first,” Alex calls.

“Roger that,” Gene mutters, on his knees between Smashley’s thighs.

Okay, so it’s not like he’s *never* topped before, because Alex has been determined to let Gene try every sexual experience imaginable (Gene thinks they’re maybe halfway down the list right now), but Alex really doesn’t like bottoming, and Gene kind of really does, so it was an experiment that got scrapped in short order.

Turns out it’s different with girls—easier, for one—and even though Gene has never been anything but *very gay*, he’s finding himself surprisingly turned-on by the sight of Smashley like this—her narrow hips propped up on the pillows, knees spread for him, pussy angled perfectly, gleaming and ready.

(It probably helps his hard-on that Smashley is almost androgynously slim—*boyish* is the word that Gene is keeping to himself, because he likes his teeth where they are, thanks.)

He runs his palm flat over her stomach, feels her muscles tighten at the touch, then closes his hand over her hip to hold her steady. Gripping his dick by the base, he rubs the head along her slick folds, watching his dick leave a smear of lube and pre-cum. Then he angles the shaft downward, seeking out her entrance and finding it, pushing inward on a long, unsteady exhale.

There’s just enough resistance to make his breath catch, her body closing tight around his cock, and Gene has to bite his lip on a groan as he bottoms out inside her. He pauses there for a moment, breathing hard, hands clenched around her hips, feeling her pulse around him,

then gives in to the urge to move. He rocks out slowly, then back in, all his senses converging on the drag of his cock, on the tight, wet heat of her.

“Goddamn, that’s hot,” Alex breathes. He’s holding the camera with one hand, the other dipping down to pull on his cock, already straining with interest. “Both of you are so fucking gorgeous. Craig, you better climb on that, or I will.”

“Yessir.”

Gene feels Craig’s hand slide up his thigh, spreading him apart, and then the slick, rubbery push of a cock sliding into the cleft of his ass, teasing over his hole and making the nerves thrill and yearn for penetration.

He’s aware of Alex still giving directions, of obediently leaning forward to brace himself over Smashley’s chest, trembling at the effort of keeping his cock inside her, of keeping still while he bends over to give Craig a better angle at his ass. He’s breathing hard, lips and chin pressed against Smashley’s sternum, Craig’s cock a steady tease as it slides back and forth over the crack of his ass, between his thighs, nudging up against his balls.

He feels Smashley’s hand come up to wrap around his hair, her fingernails stroking over his scalp.

“Hey there,” Gene pants. He closes his eyes.

God, it feels like he’s been hard for hours—so much tease-and-re-treat, and he’s starting to have trouble remembering why he should keep holding off because, christ, he wants to just *come already*, wants to take off the handbrake and just fuck into her the way every instinct is screaming at him to, chase the climax he can feel building, fuck her until he’s releasing it deep inside her.

“Howdy,” Smashley replies, and pointedly tugs on his head to press his mouth against her breast.

Gene’s happy to oblige, because he likes sucking on things and because he’s discovered that Smashley is *incredibly* responsive to having

her nipples played with. Alex enjoys it well enough, but Smashley goes fucking wild for it—at the first touch of Gene’s mouth to her nipple, she’s humming out a moan, fingers digging into his hair and pulling him tighter against her chest.

He responds by sucking her nipple in hard, his teeth closing over the peaked tip. Smashley’s body goes tight, arching against his, and she lets out a startled cry, her hips bucking up to meet him, grinding up against him desperately. It’s electrifying, he thinks he gets what Alex is on about now, watching someone lose control like that and knowing that you’re the cause of it. Watching Smashley go half out of her mind with pleasure, desperate for his mouth, his cock. He can feel her body clenching around him with each nip, another pulse of liquid heat.

Her hands are fisting in his hair, urging him down, urging him harder, and it has to be skirting the edge of painful by now, but when he obliges with more pressure it only makes her wilder, like she can’t get enough. She’s working herself onto his cock with abandon, each roll of her hips trying to push him in deeper, and *fuck*, this might have been a mistake if he wants to keep holding out, because he is inches away from coming—

He lets go and braces himself over her chest, rests for a few heartbeats to slow down and catch his breath, then transfers his mouth to her other breast, to the nipple that’s been untouched and straining for attention.

Gene’s barely aware of the shift behind him, and so he has only the briefest warning, Craig’s hand on his hip and the head of Craig’s cock nudging at his hole, and then Craig’s pushing forward with a grunt and burying his cock inside Gene with one tight slide.

Gene sucks in a shocked breath and his teeth reactively tighten over Smashley’s nipple—and she nearly screams, tipping her head back, spine arching.

It makes Craig gasp and fuck into him harder, before Gene’s gotten

used to the pressure, to the fullness. Craig's cock feels massive in his ass, holding Gene in place while Craig fucks in and out of him, each thrust pinning him between the two.

Smashley's breaths are coming quick and shallow, her hips slamming up to meet his, faster and faster, until with a catch of a breath she pushes up and holds it, tight against him. He feels her pussy spasm around him, feels a pulse of extra wetness surge around his cock, then a shudder that runs through her whole body.

Gene lifts his mouth off her, his control dangling by a thread, but she blindly finds his hands, guides them back to her breasts, pinches his fingers tight around her nipples. Each twist seems to draw another pulse from her, clenching around his dick like it's trying to milk him, and—

"Fuck," Gene whispers. "I can't—"

"Go on, sweetheart, you can let go, let me see you come like this..."

Gene lets out an explosive breath and stops trying to fight it. He braces himself between them, lets Craig fuck into him once, twice more, the force of it driving Gene hard into Smashley, and then he's coming—he feels like he's exploding inside of her, like it's flooding out of him, wave after wave pouring into her pussy, now quivering and oversensitive with the aftershocks of her orgasm. Craig's dick is still thick and sunk deep inside him, and pounding into Gene relentlessly through his climax, fast and hard like he's on the verge of his own.

Gene collapses forward onto Smashley, trying to keep his weight on his elbows so as not to crush her. He's panting, his skin prickling hot and cold in the aftermath, and the slide of Craig's dick in his ass is almost too much, scraping along oversensitive skin. He's on the verge of asking Craig to stop when Craig lets out a low, long groan, shoves up against him and holds it, followed by several more slow, tight thrusts, his body shaking and hands clenching over Gene's hips.

It's pleasure, and not, both at once, and it's fucking hot, the culmination of another fantasy that's been a long time coming. Craig fucking

him, Craig coming inside of him, a memory he's going to be revisiting, even as he grits his teeth and rides out the discomfort. It's too much, and at the same time an incredible turn-on, and Gene feels his dick twitch despite its exhaustion.

Then Craig's pulling out of Gene—always a weird feeling, the scrape and the sudden absence—and Gene's pushing himself up and trying to extricate himself from Smashley. He feels shaky, muscles trembling like he pushed them too far without realizing it, like the aftermath of a too-intense weightlifting session with Craig. Then he feels hands on his waist, arms sliding around his chest, Alex's cheek pressed against his neck.

"I got you, sweetheart," Alex murmurs, taking Gene's weight, helping guide him off Smashley and lay him down on the bed.

Gene's heart is still pounding as he sinks back into the mattress, as Alex pulls a pillow beneath his head, as Alex's mouth finds his and kisses him deeply, his fingers winding reverently through Gene's hair.

For a moment it's just a pocket of them, Alex's head haloed by the lamp, Alex's hands on Gene's face and his lips drawing back to brush over his, their breaths mingling.

"Good?" he asks quietly, smiling against Gene's mouth.

"Mmm," Gene says, giving him a vague thumbs-up.

"Are you okay with it if I fuck Smashley now?" Alex asks.

Gene opens his eyes to find Alex looking at him, clear-eyed and serious, but—honestly, double-standards, much? He lifts Alex's hand to his mouth and kisses his knuckles.

"Go for it, champ, you've earned it."

A slow smile spreads across Alex's face, and he leans in close, exhaling as he presses a kiss to Gene's temple. "Ohh, Gene, you have no idea how many times I've jerked off to the thought of my dick swimming in your cum," he whispers, then moves toward Smashley.

Gene remembers the rest of it in a series of freeze-frames—Alex

kneeling between Smashley's legs, his hands sliding up underneath her thighs and spreading them apart.

Alex's head dipping down to press his lips between her legs, his hand coming up to catch the liquid being squeezed out of her and push it back inside her pussy. Watching Smashley jerk and shudder at the feel of his mouth on her clit, at his fingers slowly working in and out of her.

Alex getting into position, guiding himself inside her, the flex of muscles in his thighs, his ass. Dark hair falling into his eyes as he fucks into her, going faster as he works up to speed. Her body jolted by each thrust; his lips parted and panting, murmuring a litany of filthy praise.

Alex shuddering into stillness and silence, gripping Smashley's hips through a stretched-long moment.

And Gene thinks that he understands now what he'd been afraid of before—that he'd been afraid he'd watch Alex with Smashley and see him enjoying sex with her more than he enjoys sex with Gene. That he'd be seeing Alex get what he *really* wants. And if he had, well—Gene knows they wouldn't have been able to come back from that, that he couldn't have handled knowing that he was always going to be second-best.

But that's not what he's seeing, not at all. Alex is just... Alex, enthusiastic about everything. Harboring perhaps the same kind of platonic boner for Smashley that Gene had been harboring for Craig, but nothing more threatening than that. And even that's less alien than it was before, since now Gene kind of knows what that feels like too.

Alex is laughing a little at the mess as he withdraws from Smashley. Gene watches her smile back, sated and lazy, watches them give each other a fistbump.

And then Alex is sliding right back into Gene's arms, like coming home at the end of the day, like that's where he wants to be and wants to stay. He nuzzles his face into Gene's neck, and above his head Gene

can see Craig and Smashley doing the same, Craig spooning up behind Smashley and draping a sleepy arm across her waist.

“Man,” Smashley says aloud. “I’d make you guys trade with us so I don’t have to lay in the wet spot, but I think the entire bed is the wet spot.”

“You’re the wet spot,” mumbles Alex.

“Your *mom’s* the—”

The pillow she flings at Alex hits Gene instead, and then Alex is laughing into his chest, and Craig is mournfully complaining that *dude*, he was using that pillow, and Gene’s stomach is rumbling and it occurs to him that they should order pizza, pizza would be *amazing* right now, the place across the street delivers, they wouldn’t even have to leave for it.

And... nothing’s changed, he realizes, with relief but also with a lack of surprise. Of course it hasn’t—they’re still Gene and Alex, and Smashley and Craig, just like they always have been. His best friends, his favorite people in the world, just more naked than usual. They’re fighting over who has to do laundry (“Alex was the last one naked!” “That is *only* because you already had your shoes off!”), and it’s ridiculous, and he loves all of them so, so much.



“...And since we all proceeded to stay lifelong friends, I think it’s safe to conclude that no one was traumatized by the experience,” Gene says.

“You never did it again?”

Gene shakes his head. “Never really felt the urge to. I mean, it was fun and all, but...” He shrugs, laughs a little. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just wired for monogamy. And Alex... well, Alex was the one for me.”



It's raining outside, a gray drizzle that muddies the light from the window, that patters against the street outside and paints streaks down the glass.

Gene comes awake to a dip in the mattress and the creak of bed-springs, to the weight of a body settling against his above the covers. There's an arm thrown across his shoulders and a face nosing at his chin, slightly damp and smelling like rain.

"Good morning, sunshine," Alex murmurs.

"Mmm." Gene smiles and burrows deeper under the blankets. "Butler's not supposed to let you in."

"He didn't." Alex plants a kiss on Gene's chin. "I actually live under your bed and sneak out while you're sleeping to raid your fridge. By the way, you're out of lunchables."

Gene tugs on the blanket. "C'mon, get under here."

There's a gust of cold air as Alex clambers under the covers and snuggles up to Gene. He's still wearing his jacket, misted with rain, and his jeans are cool where they press against the overheated skin of Gene's bare thighs.

They lay in silence and Gene half-drowzes; Craig is apparently elsewhere, and it's just them in the room as he lays in Alex's arms and listens to his lover breathe, listens to the rain dripping down the eaves.

Then Alex shifts, putting them face to face, and smiles his *up-to-no-good* smile. "I've got a surprise for you," he says.

"Mm. Is it another foursome?"

"Nah. Been there, done that."

"Is it a dick in a box?"

Alex laughs. "*Fuck*. No, but there goes your Christmas present."

"Okay, I give up."

Alex fishes something out of his pocket, then gropes around under the covers for Gene's hand, pressing something into his palm and closing his fingers around it.

Gene lifts it up and finds himself holding a key with a black plastic

handle and a battered Chevrolet key fob. He rolls over onto his back and lets it dangle, rubbing at his eyes.

“A key. My god, and such exquisite craftsmanship—the last time I saw a specimen this fine was in Cairo, after the war. Darling, you shouldn’t have, it must have cost a fortune.”

“Nope,” Alex says proudly, taking it back and tucking it into his pocket again. “I won it off a frat dude last night in a high stakes game of beer pong. It is a key that belongs to the shittiest Geo Metro in creation.”

Gene eyes him. “You don’t even drink.”

“Well, *yeah*, how do you think I won? ...Okay, it’s possible that he was trying to lose, seriously, don’t get excited, this car is *really shitty*. But it runs. And it means we’d have wheels.”

Alex pauses, and the look on his face then is open and strangely vulnerable.

“I want to take you to Niagara Falls,” he says quietly, tracing his thumb down the line of Gene’s jaw. “You said you’ve never been. I want to take you there, and see it through your eyes like I’m seeing it for the first time. I want to kiss you at the top of the falls, in front of God and a hundred gawking tourists. I want to spend the night with you, not just—fool around for a few hours and then go back to our own dorms. I want to get a hotel room so close to the falls that we can hear the water all night long, and I want to fall asleep holding you and wake up next to you.”

He brings Gene’s fingertips to his mouth, kisses them. “What do you say?”

For a moment Gene can’t answer over the tightness in his throat, can hardly even breathe, because *christ*, he loves this man so much, loves every sweet and ridiculous and unpredictable inch of him, doesn’t know how it’s possible to love someone more than this. He has words that have been on tip of his tongue for months, that he’s been afraid to say out loud because he knows it’s too soon, that he’s too in-

experienced. He *knows* how young they both are, he knows what people would say if he told them, *No really, this is it for me, he's the one for me, he's the one I want to spend the rest of my life with*, and yet...

"You have a vision?" Gene asks quietly.

Alex smiles. "I have a vision."



Jim and Kim's is quieter now, the crowd thinned down by this hour; Neil is at the bar with nothing to do but watch a game on the television, and in the background the jukebox is playing 'What's New, Pussycat?' for the fourth time in a row.

"It's strange, to think back to that time," Gene muses, sipping a beer. "We had no idea that barely a year later we'd be adopting Amanda. One minute, we're stealing lube from the student health center and having a foursome, the next, we're getting married and raising a kid."

"I can't believe anyone let you hooligans become parents," says Mary.

Gene laughs. "I know, right? We were barely more than kids ourselves." He gazes off into the middle distance. "I mean, we both stepped up to the plate, Alex especially. You would have been shocked at how much he changed after Amanda was born. But—christ, I was a parent before I was legally allowed to *drink*."

So was Robert, she reflects, though that's probably where the similarities end—it's pretty hard to accidentally adopt a kid.

"Does Amanda have any idea what a horndog her other dad was?"

"None *what-so-ever*." Gene raises his glass to her. "And since she is not the actual fruit of our actual loins, she gets to live in blissful denial and tell herself that her parents have never once had sex. Just as *I* am in blissful denial that her college experience will be anything like mine was."

"Of course not. She'll wear white at her wedding."

Gene's mouth is half-open like he's going to say something, but then he closes it and drops his eyes to his glass, bites his lip as he traces a finger around the rim.

"I don't know why I'm still hanging onto that tape," he says quietly. "It's just something I have to worry about keeping properly hidden, because I don't want Amanda stumbling across it. It's not like I could bring myself to watch it now."

Mary could, if only to lord it over the softball moms *until the end of time*.

"I never did have much use for it, even when Alex was still alive. I always just found it... really weird to watch myself like that. Maybe if there'd been more of him in it, but he was the one pointing the camera so it's mostly me. There were a couple parts where he passed the camera off to Craig or Smashley so he could join in, but... I don't think I could watch those either."

His face crumples and he drops his head abruptly, hand tightening around his glass.

"Fuck," he whispers, his chest working. "I'm sorry. I should be used to it by now." He swallows, gestures abruptly in the direction of the restrooms. "I just need to—I'll be right back."

"Take your time," says Mary. "It's dangerous in there this time of year."

He rallies enough to give her a smile, then slips off, leaving her alone at the booth.

Poor Gene, she thinks, watching him go. And Mary's not as helpless in the face of feelings as some people are (cough, *Robert*), providing comfort isn't alien to her, but there's a gap in her experience that leaves her at something of a loss when it comes to comforting Gene. That here's someone who had it all and lost it, who married the first man to take an interest in him, and wound up winning the fucking lottery, while Mary did the same thing only to find the steel jaws of a trap closing around her neck. *At least your time with him was good while*

it lasted, is all she can think, but that's a shit thing to say to a man in mourning.

A shadow passes over her briefly, and she looks up to see Robert—Robert, who's supposed to still be in New York City—sliding into the booth opposite her, the cold outside air still clinging to him. He looks relatively steady, not like he's thinking about throwing himself into traffic, so Mary assumes that his visit with Val must have gone well enough.

"Hey, doll," he says in his best Humphrey Bogart. "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Sorry, stranger, I've already got a date for the evening. Gene's in the restroom."

"Yeah?" Robert says, brightening, because they are both obvious nerds in love.

"Yeah." Then, since he could use the heads-up, she warns him, "And he's feeling low, so bring your boyfriending A-game."

Robert freezes, because for someone so good at being a friend, he's also an idiot who's somehow convinced that being a good boyfriend is a non-overlapping skillset. "What?"

Mary rolls her eyes. "Be a shoulder to lean on. Be affectionate. It's not rocket science."

"What happened?"

"We were talking about the dead husband. He started getting nostalgic-sad." Then, at the look on Robert's face, because he gets weird about Alex, "Don't you dare, Rob. You have literally *zero* competition from that quarter."

He looks like he's about to say something else, but that's when Gene returns.

"Robert!" Gene says, and it's hard to tell if he'd been crying in the bathroom because at the sight of Robert he perks up immediately. Obvious nerds in love are *so obvious*.

Gene slides into the booth, and Robert (good boy) obligingly puts

an arm around him. Gene snugs up next to him happily, and Mary is very proud of herself.

"I thought you weren't supposed to be back until tomorrow?" Gene asks, though he clearly has no complaints about the change.

"Val's work rescheduled her at the last minute. Something something, fashion emergency in London—she has to fly out at six AM tomorrow morning, so we switched to a matinee and I caught the late train back."

"And how's the next generation of Smalls doing?" Mary asks.

"Good." He always sounds slightly stunned to be able to say that and have it be the truth. "Really good. Naomi's show was fun, some rock opera thing full of twinks, though I'm going to be finding glitter in my clothes for the next six years. They took me out for a fancy dinner afterward, gave me a taste of the high life again." He shakes his head. "They're good kids—they've got their shit together a hell of a lot better than I ever did."

He's actually been doing well recently, the self-deprecation is just a reflex, so Mary refrains from giving him an uplifting kick in the shins. Instead she just sips her wine, feeling pensive. She watches Gene lean into Robert and ask something about New York, watches Robert respond with more animation than she's used to seeing in him.

She knows she's got Gene to thank for that—for believing in the best in Robert and bringing it to the surface so that Robert can believe in it too. For showing Robert that he's still worth loving, for being patient with him. For Gene's utter lack of guile, the only thing that could have worn down the walls of Robert's habitual mistrust.

And maybe she ought to be thanking Alex too—for being Gene's first and nearly only, for being a place of safety where he never learned to be afraid of love, or honesty, or openness.

And she's trying not to set herself up for disappointment, because she's seen Robert start to pick himself up before and the pendulum *always* swings back sooner or later, but it's hard not to hope that maybe

this time is different. That maybe the love of a good man really was all it took, that Robert's happy now and he'll be able to stay that way.

A good man, who is currently about to fall asleep on Robert's shoulder. The trip down memory lane, plus four shots of whiskey and half a pint of beer, appear to be catching up with him now, and Gene's started listing sideways.

"Alright, I think you're done," Robert tells him when Gene has slid nearly into his lap. "I'm taking you home and pouring you into bed."

Gene yawns agreeably. "Okay."

It's not clear whose home or whose bed Robert means by that; Mary knows he spends the night at Gene's house sometimes, but as far as she's aware, they still haven't fucked yet. She's pretty sure it's Robert holding them back, for reasons he hasn't confided to her, but it's probably one of his signature, self-sabotaging moves—that he's still afraid Gene just wants him for sex, and he's delaying because thinks that the day he puts out is the day Gene's going to lose interest, or Robert's making him prove himself or something. And she could tell Robert how wrong he is—that apparently Gene imprints like a *duckling*—but Robert's neuroses don't really take their cues from logic.

And she'd be worried for them, except... well. Except they seem to be doing alright anyway. They both *want* carnal knowledge of each other, that's clear enough, but they also both seem to be okay with waiting, Gene included.

Maybe it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise—after all, none of them are nineteen anymore.

"You heading our way, chief?" Robert asks her. He's trying to dig out his credit card one-handed—having Gene glued to his side is something of a handicap—and flag Neil over to come take it and clear out their tabs.

She should go with them. It'd be the smart thing to do, since the conversation with Gene has put her in an odd mood—something like nostalgia, Gene's grief mingling with her regrets—and there's a reason

nostalgia is a box she keeps the lid on. Drinking more is just going to pry open the doors she'd rather keep closed, but—

But if she goes home now, Joseph is going to still be awake, and she doesn't want to deal with that.

"Nah, the night's still young," she tells him. "Your boyfriend's just a lightweight."

"Cheap date," Gene corrects sleepily.

"Right, on your feet, cheap date," Robert says, hoisting him up. He hooks an arm around Gene's waist and tosses Mary a salute. "Thanks for keeping an eye on him."

"Goodnight, Mary! You're a good friend!" drunk-Gene tells her earnestly.

Or maybe he's just playing up the drunk so he's got an excuse to drape himself all over Robert, because he's suspiciously steady on his feet as they wind their way to the door. Unsubtle nerds, both of them.

She downs the rest of her glass.

Then catches Neil's eye, and signals him for another.

Ghosts in the Attic



“—Shit, I probably should have warned you that my bedroom’s a mess.”

Robert might not have said yes if he’d remembered that earlier. To date, he’s always been the one to sleep over at Gene’s house, but that’s felt more like coincidence than design, so when Gene had sleepily leaned into him on their walk back from Jim and Kim’s and murmured that he wanted to spend the night at Robert’s house for a change, there had seemed no reason to refuse. Until, of course, he gets there and remembers that he lives in squalor.

That there’s a reason why he used to leave the lights off when he brought people home to fuck.

“Mmm, like a rockstar without room service,” Gene agrees in good humor.

That’s a generous interpretation. The room is a fucking trash heap, and it’s not just the clutter of cans and bottles on every surface (jesus, that’s a lot of booze he’s drunk) and the ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts, dingy under the harsh overhead light; it’s the faint odor that hangs over the place, of stale ash and alcohol gone sour, and beneath it, the musky, organic smell of—

Sex.

Bodies, and sex. A smell that brings a curl of arousal even through his rising unease.

Robert clears his throat. “Anyway, *mi casa es su casa*. Is it everything you were hoping for?”

He’s braced, waiting for—

Waiting for Gene to *notice*, he realizes, because it feels impossible that Gene won’t take one look around this room and just *know* how many, many people Robert has fucked here. And it’s not shame, exactly, the feeling creeping up on him now—the only fuck he’s ever been truly ashamed of was Joseph—but it’s an ugly, desperate side of himself that he never wanted Gene to see.

“I admit, the yoga mat is a surprise,” Gene says easily, taking in the state of the room with his usual equanimity. He tilts his head against Robert’s shoulder. “I like the paintings.”

“Marilyn’s decorator,” Robert replies, brief and distracted.

His unease is deepening. It strikes him, suddenly, that he doesn’t want Gene here, and it’s on the tip of his tongue to ask if they can go back to Gene’s house instead. If he’d known they were coming back here he would have—tidied up, or something. He would have tried to shield Gene from the evidence of those past hookups, the reminder that what Robert’s withholding from Gene, he never used to withhold from anyone.

The reminder that Gene is so very, very far from being the first person Robert’s had in this bed, and *fuck, have I washed the sheets since—?*

The answer’s yes, of course. It’s been, what, eight months since he met Gene? When suddenly he couldn’t lie to himself anymore, couldn’t even pretend like fucking faceless bodies in the dark was something he enjoyed. Eight months since he brought anyone home—even Robert’s done laundry since then.

But it’s still there, like a chemical scent in the air, laying heavy on his tongue. Because Robert’s never brought anyone into this room *ex-*

cept to fuck, and he can feel himself responding out of long habit. That his body knows what it means to have someone else in this space—his pulse is quickening at the sound of someone else’s breath in the silence, and there’s a flush prickling over his skin at the feel of another body’s slim, solid weight pressed against his.

He finds himself turning his head to breathe in Gene’s scent, inhaling deeply, drawing it into himself and letting it fan the low burn of arousal in his gut.

Ohh *fuck*, but he *knows this*, his muscles have the memory for it—his hands are itching to travel those familiar paths, his fingertips tingling with the urge to slip beneath Gene’s collar and stroke the fine hairs on the nape of his neck, feel them rise, feel him shiver. He knows how he’d cup Gene’s head and pull him in hard and tight, the startled little gasp he’d make when Robert’s tongue rakes into his mouth, a prelude and a promise of what’s to come. He knows how he’d slide his hand beneath Gene’s jacket and wrap it around his belt, give it a slow tug—a show of control, a show of force, creating just enough friction to startle out a lovely little hitch of breath. He knows—

“Here, you can sleep in this,” Robert says abruptly, reaching blindly for the open chest of drawers and grabbing the first shirt he sees. He pushes it into Gene’s arms, takes his shoulders and steers him around toward the adjacent bathroom. “You should drink some water too.”

Gene laughs and lets himself be hustled into the bathroom. “Yessir.”

Robert catches a glimpse of the mountain of clutter on the bathroom counter—resolves not to think about what Gene might find in there—and shuts the door between them like a shield.

Then he closes his eyes, and lets out a long, silent exhale.

Christ.

This shouldn’t be happening. This shouldn’t be any different from the half-dozen times he’s slept over at Gene’s house. They’re going to

be in a bed together. They're going to *go to sleep* together. They've done this before, it shouldn't make any difference that it's Robert's house this time.

But it *does*, somehow it does. Even with Gene in the next room, Robert can still *feel* him, his presence like a heartbeat pounding through the walls, a magnetic pulse in the air. And in a few minutes, Gene's going to step out of the bathroom and lie down on Robert's bed and expect to curl up alongside Robert's body, as if that's something commonplace, not a literal fantasy come true.

Because god knows Robert's spent enough time thinking about Gene in this bed, it's where he's wanted the man since he barely even knew his name. He's imagined having Gene here in a hundred different ways, tangled up in these sheets with Robert's hands on his skin, Robert's name on his lips. Fantasies where Gene said yes instead of no, where Robert was allowed to touch, and touch, and touch.

Fantasies that for so long were tinged with despair because he thought that was all they'd ever be.

And the intervening months have taken the razor edge off that despair—getting to know Gene, to *have* Gene, even in an incomplete and precarious way, has gone a long way toward softening his memories of that first night. So it's surreal to have Gene here now, bringing both the fantasies and the memories swimming back up to the surface.

Robert remembers having noticed Gene in the bar—a face he hadn't seen around before, youthful but not young, alone but not lonely—had noticed him and mostly dismissed him. He'd been watching the Game, vaguely debating whether it was worth trying to make a pass at the man, whether fucking someone would be better than just going home and going to sleep.

Then the man cleared his throat and ventured a *Enjoying the Game?* at him, a touch too pointed, too purposeful, to be mere friendliness, and Robert knew on the spot that it was a come-on, that he was in if he wanted to be.

And in that moment, he decided that he didn't. That he didn't feel like faking a smile for however long it took to get the man out of the bar and into his bed, didn't feel like pretending not to hate both of them for however long it took to finish and kick the man *out* of his bed. That he wanted to get blackout drunk more than he wanted to get laid.

So he hadn't even looked up, just grunted and said, *I am now that we're winning*, in a tone meant to shut down further conversation.

He'd been expecting some perseverance, of course. No one ever backs off that easily. He'd been expecting a *me too*, for the man to attempt to ingratiate himself, to like what Robert likes to make Robert like him. He's seen this play out before—flirtation like a fucking mirror.

Ah, the man said instead, trying to spin a coaster on the bar top. *We must be rooting for different teams then.*

Robert had blinked, glanced over at him without thinking.

And the man immediately brightened, like he was delighted to find himself with Robert's attention, smiling happy and hopeful like he didn't even realize he'd given the wrong answer.

Sometimes Robert thinks he fell for Gene from that very first smile, bright and sweet and guileless. He can't explain it, even to himself, except that in that moment the ice cracked and something inside him went, *yes, this, him.*

It's why he let Gene keep talking, let him fumble his cheerful way through a conversation about the Game as clumsily as his team had fumbled its way through the third quarter, a team that Robert was pretty sure he'd only chosen to root for because he liked the color of their uniforms.

It shouldn't have been charming, how hopelessly terrible he was at flirting, all artless honesty and awkward-sweet compliments. How plainly unpracticed he was with the business of chatting-up, like he didn't know there was a script these interactions were supposed to follow. Like he wasn't following anything except the pull in the air be-

tween them, attraction and instinct that propelled him past uncertainty.

Sometimes Robert thinks he fell in love with Gene before he even knew his name.

It's why he bought Gene a drink as soon as the game was over, the only way he knows to make people stay, because suddenly he couldn't stand the thought of losing this already. Bought him a drink, then sat and watched him talk, watched his face and his smile in the glow of cheap neon, watched his clever, animated hands. Robert could feel himself drawing closer, like a starving thing drawn to warmth, to light.

Drawn to the energy, the vibrancy in him, like Gene had yet to realize that Jim and Kim's wasn't the place for people like him, that he belonged in the light, belonged somewhere shiny and clean and far out of Robert's reach. He shouldn't have been *here*, leaning into Robert's space and laughing at his dumb lines, darting shy smiles at him like an invitation to reach out and touch.

Robert kept buying shots, watching Gene's throat work as he swallowed them down, his pink cheeks and flushed lips as he gasped at the unfamiliar burn. The way he ducked his head when he laughed, Robert's eyes catching on the slim line of his neck, seized with the desire to kiss him, right there. For once not fantasizing about a body to fuck himself into oblivion with, but about pressing his lips to Gene's throat and relearning the feel of laughter, of holding Gene's face in his hands and drinking happiness from his mouth.

The moments when their eyes would catch, and something soft and surprised would steal over Gene's face, like Robert was the miracle, not him. Moments when everything else seemed to fall away and it was just the two of them standing on the verge of something extraordinary. Like Robert could fold Gene into his arms and breathe in his breath and for the first time in his life be whole and *happy*.

Unthinkable, utterly unthinkable, that Gene didn't feel it too, until—

Until they're standing beneath the pale streetlamp and Gene's blinking at him with wide, startled eyes, shocked-sober, all laughter fled from his face. And suddenly everything Robert thought he knew was wrong, his skin going cold and something twisting sick and sour in his gut. Between one heartbeat and the next, the glow suffusing the evening was snuffed out, plunged into darkness, leaving only an acrid curl of smoke in its wake.

Robert remembers giving him a bland goodbye. Walking the dozen yards to his house and going inside. Making it as far as the darkened kitchen before he broke down.

Curled over the countertop, chest heaving, fists clenched and biting into the tile.

*You can't, like a scream into the silence, You can't **do this** to me.*

Like glimpsing a lighthouse in the dark, and then the light moved on and left him to drown again.

You can't offer me that and then take it back again. You can't show me a glimpse of everything I'm missing and then just walk away from me.

Staggering loneliness filling his lungs, despair clawing at the walls of his heart.

*I can't **feel this way**, eyes clenched shut, dry and burning, not if you don't feel it too.*

And he wished to god he'd never met Gene.

Robert never came closer to drinking himself to death than he did that night, and afterward the memory of it lingered like a bruise he couldn't stop pressing on, couldn't stop himself from coming back to, again and again, tracing it moment by moment, trying to understand where he went wrong. But he didn't know how to make Gene stay then, and he doesn't know now, and—

Robert startles as the bathroom door opens and Gene steps out, tugging self-consciously at the neckline of Robert's shirt.

For a disorienting moment, past and present blur and it's like the past eight months never happened; like he managed to take Gene

home that first night after all, and it's the bright stranger standing uncertainly in his room. Then Robert blinks again and it's gone. It's Gene, his boyfriend of however-many months, padding over to join him.

Robert's shirt is too large on him, a long-sleeved henley with the cuffs hanging loose over the bones of his wrists, unbuttoned at his throat and flashing a glimpse of sharp collarbones. The sight of Gene in his clothes gives Robert a rush like the night's first shot of whiskey, a low, possessive thrill that whispers, *yes, mine*, and christ, if this is what Gene feels then no wonder he's always happy to loan Robert a t-shirt when he sleeps over.

Robert's bringing his hands up to touch without thinking. He straightens the neckline and smooths his palms over Gene's shoulders, feeling the heat of Gene's body through the soft cotton. Remembers having wanted to touch him like this in the bar—that after all of half an hour's acquaintance he was already imagining his hands on Gene, wanting to take his shoulders and kiss him and lay a claim on him right there, remembers having thought that Gene would probably let him.

Robert swallows, dry-mouthed. "You look cute," he says roughly.

His hands are on Gene's shoulders, thumbs rubbing small circles into the muscles, and he can hear his own breath in the space between them. His attention is caught on the hollow of Gene's throat in the vee of the collar, on the idea of pressing his open mouth there—tonguing at Gene's skin, sucking a mark, feeling Gene tip his head back and shiver beneath his lips.

He drags his gaze up to Gene's eyes, intending to say—something, but the look on Gene's face knocks it clean out of his mind. Gene's eyes are wide and slightly unfocused, his lips parted, and for a moment their gazes lock and they're frozen like that, their unsteady breathing loud in the silence.

Then Gene whispers, "*Jesus, Robert,*" his eyes fluttering closed, and he's surging upward, his arms winding around Robert's head and pulling him down hard against his lips.

Robert sucks in a startled gasp that's immediately swallowed up in Gene's mouth, he has a split second of *thank fuck, yes*, and then his hands are clenching around Gene's shoulders and he's kissing back, driving down hard.

Relief, is what he feels, overwhelming relief, like a dam breaking. That he can close his eyes and sink into Gene and *have this*, that he gets to feel Gene's mouth opening eagerly beneath his, warm and soft and tasting faintly of whiskey. Gene's tongue tangling with Robert's, hands clutching at him with an urgency that spurs Robert on to *more, more, more*.

Robert can't keep his hands still, they're roaming hungrily over Gene's shoulders, over his neck, desperate for skin, to feel Gene beneath his fingertips like he's never been allowed to feel him before. Gene's face beneath his hands, his thumbs dragging along the line of Gene's jaw, holding him tight as Robert plunges his tongue in deeper, tasting and taking.

Because Gene's never been the one to initiate before; he'd be within his rights to, but instead he's always let Robert take the lead, always been so painstakingly careful not to put any pressure on him. And Robert *knows* that Gene wants him—he's seen the heat in his eyes, the thrum of need in his body when Robert's been cruel enough to tease—but Gene keeps it so well-leashed that this is the first time Robert's ever truly *felt* it.

And oh god, he feels it now, the full force of Gene's desire breaking over him like a wave, and Robert's never wanted anything more than to let it wash over him, to let go and let it drag him under. The feel of Gene's restraint crumbling in the face of this hot new urgency; the way Gene shudders and melts into the kiss, into *him*, his fingers digging convulsively into Robert's hair. To know that Gene *wants him* this badly, to hear the soft, needy noises escaping him, noises that go straight to Robert's cock, stoking the fire in him hotter.

There's no finesse to Gene's kisses, his mouth moving restless and

ravenous, his teeth closing over Robert's lower lip, biting and sucking. It's a small shock that startles a groan from Robert's throat, a bright little flare of not-quite-pain that makes him cup the back of Gene's head and pull him in tight, his mind a litany of *god, yes, let me feel it, let me feel how much you want me.*

Gene's mouth is wandering, leaving a series of small, clinging kisses in its wake, trailing down the line of Robert's jaw, lips catching and lingering on each one like he's reluctant to let go, little points of pressure that make Robert's nerves spark and thrill.

Gene dips his head lower, lays an open-mouthed kiss over the pulse point in Robert's neck, his tongue swirling circles over the skin. Then he closes his mouth, sucking hard with lips and teeth, and Robert's entire body snaps tight, his hips giving a reflexive jerk at the blinding flare of pleasure that goes shooting through him.

He's curling tighter around Gene, his hands skating down Gene's back, over the firm curve of his ass, grabbing and *pulling*, grinding into him, letting Gene *feel* how hard Robert is for him.

Gene's breath stutters against his neck, his body deliciously compact where he clings to Robert, pressing in like every inch of him is straining for contact. Robert can feel the shudder that runs through his whole length, can hear the soft moan coming from Gene's throat, his breathless whispers of *oh please, Robert please*, as if he even needs to beg, as if those aren't the words Robert would give his soul to hear.

Gene takes a step backward, drawing Robert with him, both of them still locked in each other's arms, and then another, until they're overbalancing and toppling over onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. Robert has scarcely a moment to orient himself before Gene's hand is cupping his head and guiding their mouths together again, the taste of whiskey still hot on his breath.

Their hips are slotted together and Robert groans as he grinds down into Gene, as Gene hooks a leg around his and squeezes them closer. Even through layers of fabric it feels incredible, each drag of his

cock alongside Gene's sending waves of pleasure through him. It's more than he's ever been allowed before, and he wants, he *wants*, he doesn't want Gene to stop them.

His mouth is over Gene's, devouring him with kisses, half trying to silence the inevitable refusal and half trying to convince him. *Say yes to me*, he thinks desperately, trying to convey that in every press of their lips, in his hands clutching at Gene's face, *god please, say yes to me*.

He closes his eyes, lets himself sink into it. Into the feel of their bodies moving together, of Gene's hair soft beneath his fingertips, of that whispered *Robert, please* echoing in his mind. Pressure and pleasure building with each roll of his cock along the hollow of Gene's hip, losing himself in everything pressing at his senses, in the rhythm as he thrusts against Gene again, and again.

And then he has a flash of—something else. Something grim and sterile, the brief taste of bile in his mouth. Triggered by the smell of the bed, perhaps, of the room intruding on him, but for a split second it's not Gene in his arms at all.

His breath catches and his eyes snap open.

When he blinks, it's gone again; it's Gene again. Robert swallows and presses back down into the kiss, willing himself to stay here, to remember that it's Gene he's holding, Gene he's kissing. That he's been wanting to touch Gene like this since the night he met him, he's not going to be the one to call a halt, he's going to keep going until Gene stops them, but—

But Gene's *not* stopping them.

And Robert should be glad, *it's what you wanted, right?* but instead of the relief he expected, there's a trickle of distant alarm, that grows louder when he realizes that Gene's *not going* to stop them.

Because this isn't the kind of kissing that tapers back off into gentle touches and playful words; this is a train headed straight off a cliff, barreling toward a single destination. This is kissing that's going to end with both of them coming in their pants, and Robert doesn't think of

himself as a particularly sentimental man, but this isn't what he wants from Gene. He wants *more* than this, they haven't waited this long only for Gene to become one more—

—body moving mindlessly beneath him, pushy and demanding, breath tasting like whiskey—

And Robert's never had a problem with taking people home for sex when they're sloppy-drunk, or when he is, being drunk doesn't mean you don't know what you want, just that you're not afraid to ask for it, and god knows Robert's leaned on liquid courage before, but this—this isn't how he wants it to go.

He wanted to take his time, to put all the tricks he's learned to good use, until Gene's coming apart under his hands. He wanted to feel Gene smile when they kissed, wanted his gentle words and gentle laughter as they explored each other—not this rushed, slapdash affair that's going to be over nearly before it began. And tomorrow morning this is going to be hazy and only half-remembered, just like every other mindless, mechanical fuck he's had in this room, as if that's all they were to each other—

You're the only one who can decide when it's the right time.

Christ, he wants it to be the right time. He doesn't want to stop, he doesn't want to tell Gene *no*. He is aching, blindingly hard as he moves against Gene's hips, can feel desire coiling tighter and tighter, the urgency of it increasing by the second—

Another flash of memory whitening out the scene before his eyes, this one he can almost place, back when he was new to the whole business, before he knew to turn the lights out and let them all blur together. For a moment he remembers being braced over some hot young thing, eyes fixed on the sheets over his shoulder and fucking into him toward the inevitable conclusion, never a starker disconnect between the demands of his body and the numb despair wrapping around his heart. That he was as close to another person as it was possible to get and yet

he still *felt nothing*, he was still lonelier than he'd been in all his life, and *god, what more could he do?*

For a moment he doesn't recognize the arms around him. They're claustrophobic and alien, like a cage; Robert's heart is hammering in his chest like a bird beating itself against the bars, and there's the taste of a stranger in his mouth. And then he's sucking in a breath, blindly grabbing at Gene's shoulder and pushing it down hard against the mattress.

"Gene," he gasps out into the space between their lips. "Stop—" just before Gene's mouth closes over his again and oh god, please, *please* don't make him say it twice, he doesn't think he can do it a second time.

He's hoping, desperately hoping, that Gene won't stop, that he'll take this out of Robert's hands and push them through to the end, *just do it*, it's what they've both been dying for, and at the same time he's *terrified that Gene won't stop*, terrified that he's hurtling toward the worst mistake of his life, but the part of him that could say no is locked in the trunk and screaming.

Then Robert's words register, and Gene jerks to a halt, the kiss breaking off abruptly in a rasp of breath against Robert's lips. Gene's body stutters into stillness beneath him, and for a long moment both of them are frozen, motionless except for the rise and falls of their chests, panting in the silence.

And then Gene's breath leaves him in a rush and he sinks into the mattress, raising his arms and wrapping them around Robert's head, drawing him down against his shoulder, his hands coming up to stroke clumsily over Robert's hair.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Gene whispers urgently against Robert's temple. "I'm so sorry."

Robert lets himself sink down into Gene, closing his eyes and breathing into the curve of Gene's neck, willing his muscles to unwind.

"You're fine," he manages. He feels his hands tighten around Gene's shoulders, swallows hard. "You're fine."

He is. It is. Whatever. They're fine—because Robert said stop, and Gene stopped. Robert can still relax into the feel of Gene's hands rubbing along his spine, can still breathe in Gene's scent and feel sheltered in Gene's arms. Gene is still comfort, still safety.

Still solid and hot beneath Robert's body, the pulse in his neck pounding against Robert's lips, and *oh christ*, he very nearly opens his mouth over it again without even thinking, every instinct still clamoring to touch and keep touching—

He clamps his lips shut, breathes out hard through his nose.

"I need to go downstairs," he hears himself say. He presses a shuddering kiss against Gene's collarbone. "Just—stay here. I'll be right back."

He thinks Gene gives a murmur of assent but he doesn't stop to check. His feet are already carrying him out of the room, his heartbeat getting louder in his ears, and through the rising din he watches like a passenger as they take him down the stairs, across the living room. The next thing he knows, he's sliding open the glass doors to the backyard and stepping outside into the darkness.

There's an edge of unreality to it—the blackness and him in it, the crescent moon overhead and the riot behind his eyelids, ambushing him like a wall of noise every time he closes his eyes.

Loud and fragmentary, drowning out the quiet night, flashes of memory and imagination, memory and reality, shoving and slamming against each other like hostile strangers. Not quite pain, but pressure—a dull, overpowering violence, like there's not enough space for everything crammed inside his skull, beating at him and building into something immense and swollen and unendurable.

It's not real, it's *never* real, but knowing that isn't enough to make the noise *stop*.

He's aware that he's breathing hard, blinking rapidly as he tries to

clear it away, like pushing at waves of heavy water. He's aware of digging a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, his hands shaking so badly that the lighter's sparking two, three times against the blackness before a flame catches, and then he's sucking smoke down like medicine, letting it out in a cloud that tastes of ash.

He closes his eyes. Puts the cigarette to his lips, inhales deeply.

And then his breath escapes him with a violent shudder, because his nerves are still *singing* with the memory of Gene, echoing through every inch of his body. He can still feel Gene moving against him, Gene's breathless kisses brushing along his jaw.

"Fucking *stop*," he whispers to himself on a shaky exhale. Gene's hands are still whispering over his skin and his body is responding like wildfire, even with the poltergeists slamming around in the attic.

Closes his eyes. In, and out.

When he opens his eyes he has a curious moment of alienation, staring at his hand on the cigarette like it's something he barely recognizes. Like his body is a machine that he's vaguely surprised to find himself piloting, like his eyes are just portals he's peering out through. He stares at his hand, tries to focus on that to the exclusion of all else, knows that the noise will go away if he can just *stop thinking about it*, but that's a tall fucking order.

Breathes hot smoke in. Breathes cold smoke out.

For a moment he finds it—silence, tense as a tightrope-wire, and he's holding his breath, trying not to let his thoughts catch on anything for too long, trying to keep it all from tumbling back.

And gradually, the din starts to recede. The sounds of the world begin to return. He becomes aware of the noise of the highway hovering along the edges of the winter sky, of a siren wailing in the distance. He can feel the cold air biting at his cheeks, the taste of ash in his mouth, the pressure of the wall at his back.

He breathes, tension draining out of him with every slow, nicotine-laced breath. The anxiety is ebbing, but into the hollowed-out space it

leaves behind comes a profound weariness, and all at once he feels cold and tired, old and very, very alone.

Because there's no escaping this, is there? Whatever *the fuck* is wrong with him, there's no getting away from it, from the darkness that never really goes away. He can hold it at bay for a while, long enough to begin to think that maybe he's finally free of it, but it's always there, just waiting to rise up and swallow him again.

Why did he let himself believe he'd be able to turn his life around now? He's too old, too deeply set in his fucked-up ways to change, the trail of regrets behind him like a body count. Even when he tries to be good, to *do* good, to do things right, even when he has something beautiful just within reach, Gene offering his effortless love and endless patience, Gene in his bed, Gene saying yes with every touch, saying *Robert, please*—

Robert exhales in a burst of smoke, clenches his teeth and breathes hard.

"Goddamn it," he whispers. "Goddamn it, what the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

Why, he thinks, desperation ebbing into exhaustion, into frustration so acute he could cry with it. Why can't he just go upstairs and take Gene into his arms and let them *have this*?

He just wants to *love, goddamn it*, is that so much to ask?

To close the careful distance they've been keeping between them, to trust himself and trust Gene and not have one or the other of them always, always holding back, and yet—

And yet here he is. Alone in the cold, breathing smoke into the midnight sky, with Gene upstairs in his bed and so far away he might as well be on the moon.

Robert breathes. The cigarette has burnt down to a stub, and he sighs and flicks it out onto the concrete patio, watches the red tip of it tumble through the darkness.

He's distantly surprised that Gene hasn't come looking for him al-

ready, to coax him back indoors as if Robert were some kind of half-wild animal—always leaving him the space to run, but somehow making him not want to. Offering love like a safe haven.

Robert wishes he could remember what that felt like, but right now all he feels is loneliness, and lust like a fire he can't stamp out.

Just go the fuck to sleep, he tells himself wearily, letting his head tip back against the house. *Things will be better tomorrow, or they won't.*

He closes his eyes briefly, then pushes away from the wall.

When he gets back upstairs, he finds that the reason Gene didn't come after him is because Gene's passed out, tucked up in a ball on top of the sheets; Robert's struck full-force by another surge of loneliness, because he desperately wants Gene to be *here*, awake and a comfort, not miles away in sleep.

But there's also a gut-punchy sense of relief, because he is suddenly very, very glad that he stopped them when he did—wants to think that he would have stopped them sooner if he'd realized how drunk Gene was (and he *should have* realized sooner). But it does ease some of the weight, the relief of knowing he did the right thing, if not for the right reasons.

He sits down on the edge of the bed and watches Gene for a moment, all innocent in sleep, lets himself rest a hand against his head, stroke his thumb along the line of his hair.

"Lightweight," Robert mutters, affection welling up in him as he leans down to press a kiss to Gene's temple. It's accompanied by a prickling physical awareness that doesn't care that Gene's not awake, it knows the feel of Gene's body, it wants to keep touching and keep taking.

Beneath his palm he can feel the softness of Gene's hair, the pulse of heat and life in his body, and Robert's fingertips itch to trace down the line of Gene's bare neck, to spread across Gene's chest and feel the beat of his heart, to slide lower and curl between Gene's legs and hear him sigh with pleasure in his sleep—

Robert shuts his eyes and takes his hand away again. He stands long enough to strip out of his jeans and kick them aside, then turns out the lights and carefully makes his way back to the bed. Gene doesn't wake up as Robert works the sheets out from under him, pulls the covers over them both and tucks the edges of the blanket gently over Gene's shoulders. It's only when Robert curls up behind him that he stirs briefly in his sleep, sighing with something like contentment as Robert brings their bodies flush together.

It's half pleasure and half torture, his aching cock pressed into the curve of Gene's ass, straining through only a thin layer of underwear as he makes himself stay still—but it's a familiar torture, a familiar denial. Robert closes his eyes and lets his lips rest on the back of Gene's neck, breathes in his scent; he can almost pretend like they're back in Gene's bed, in that tiny square of sanctuary where Robert's demons can't follow him.

But when his eyes fall open again onto the sad, tired detritus of his life, limned in cold moonlight, he finds that he can't pretend anything. And sleep is a long time coming.

Interlude: Another Morning After



Robert wakes up to the sound of the toilet flushing in the adjacent bathroom, to blue dawn just starting to peek in through the window. He glances at the bedside clock and sees—not even six AM, nope, not time to be awake yet. He sinks back into the pillow and lets his eyes close and waits for Gene to come back.

Eventually he hears the bathroom door open, but then when nothing else happens, he cracks an eye and finds Gene watching him from the doorway, apprehension written all over his face.

Robert shifts to make space for him. “C’mon, back to bed.”

“Robert, what—what happened last night?” Gene asks carefully, not moving, like he’s afraid of the answer to that. “Because I remember kissing, but... I don’t remember stopping.”

Robert blinks, then pats the bed next to him, and after a moment’s hesitation Gene relents and rejoins him.

“Nothing happened,” Robert says as Gene climbs back into bed, carefully settling into his arms. “We kissed for a while. Then we stopped, because you were about to fall asleep. And then you did fall asleep. The end.”

Robert’s feeling better now; Gene doesn’t need to know the rest.

But he's still looking dubious, so Robert leans in to press a slow, reassuring kiss to his lips. "That's all. I promise."

Gene sags into him with relief. "Oh thank christ," he says into Robert's shoulder. "I was afraid we'd had our first time and I didn't remember it. I would have never forgiven myself."

Robert's breath catches quietly, and he's suddenly very glad that Gene can't see his face because *fuck*, he wouldn't have forgiven himself either, and they came dangerously, dangerously close to exactly that.

He makes himself huff a laugh, and brushes his lips over Gene's forehead. "Well, we didn't. How much alcohol did Mary ply you with last night, anyway?"

"I would argue that I plied myself. But—ugh, too much, apparently."

"Lightweight."

"Oh god," Gene groans, covering his face with his hands. "I practically *attacked* you."

Robert gives him a benevolent pat on the ass. "Yeah, it was pretty sexy. Stop worrying about it and go back to sleep."

That's what Robert is resolutely doing, anyway.

Gene pulls back, grimacing. "My head hurts. I don't suppose you've got anything...?"

"There's a bottle of ibuprofen in the nightstand." Then, when he remembers what else is in the nightstand, he pushes himself up. "I'll get it. And I'll get you something to wash it down with too."

He finds a glass in the bathroom, rinses it out and fills it from the tap, then digs the ibuprofen out of the nightstand and shakes a couple into his palm. Gene takes them with the bleary gratitude of the hungover, and Robert reflects that it's rather odd to find himself on the nurturing side of the equation, for once.

He watches as Gene downs the pills, then drains the rest of the glass before setting it on the nightstand. "Thanks," Gene says.

Robert smirks. "Well, I hope you learned your lesson."

Gene gives him the *Robert-you-little-shit* look. "Right. From now on I'll leave the hard-drinking to the professionals."

Robert climbs over him and back into bed, then pulls the blanket over them and lets Gene curl into his chest. "What were you doing getting shitfaced, anyway?"

"I wasn't *trying* to," Gene says, adorably grumpy about it. "I miscalculated." He pauses, then admits, "And I missed you."

Robert snorts. "I was gone for all of twelve hours."

"Yeah, and I thought you were going to be gone for another twelve more."

"You're ridiculous," Robert says, laying a kiss on the top of Gene's head. And he is *not* going to cop to how much he wound up drinking in the week that Gene spent road-tripping to Chicago with Amanda.

"Mmm, probably." Gene burrows in closer. "But that's why you like me."

"I do." Robert tightens his arms around Gene, tries to dispel his lingering unease as they settle back in to sleep. "I really, really do."

Your Heart Like A Dam When It Breaks



VAL: Hey Dad, tell your trophy boyfriend we're running late, there's some weather delay with the trains.

VAL: Okay we're finally on our way, ETA 4:45.

VAL: MAPLE BAY, WE ARE IN YOU!

VAL: Hey we're at Gene's house, where are you?

VAL: Did you got lost?

VAL: Dad.

VAL: You live literally next door.

VAL: Don't make us send out a search party.

"Jesus," Robert whispers. He puts the phone face-down next to the sink and scrubs a hand over his face.

This was a mistake, he should have never agreed to it.

A week ago, it had seemed like a good idea—a joint Thanksgiving at Gene's house, with Amanda home for the week and Val and Naomi taking the train in from New York. Gene's idea, obviously, but Robert had been genuinely looking forward to it—their two little fractured half-families coming together to make something like a whole, the first holiday since Marilyn's death that he wasn't going to be spending on a barstool at Jim and Kim's.

Val had been looking forward to it. She'd been surprised when he extended the invitation, but pleased, and had readily canceled their usual plans in favor of spending the day in Maple Bay. It hadn't even occurred to Robert that he'd be interrupting anything, but Val assured him that Naomi's parents didn't mind losing them for Thanksgiving, so long as he didn't expect to steal them for Hanukkah too.

Gene had been looking forward to it. Robert had noticed something off about him in recent weeks, a strained quality to his usual good cheer, but hadn't known why until Gene let slip that it was the week before Thanksgiving that Alex had died. Having Robert around seems to make him happier though, and after everything that Gene's done for him, the least Robert can do is be there for him now. He was going to do this right. He was going to be good for Gene, the way Gene's been so, so good for him, but then—

But then.

Robert turns on the bathroom tap and splashes water on his face. It's shockingly cold, startles a short huff of breath out of him, and for a long moment he stays like that, braced over the sink, dripping water. His mind has gone blank, like even a moment's stillness is too much inertia to be overcome. He makes himself move, dries his face on his t-shirt, then straightens and looks at his reflection in the stark light over the mirror.

He looks—tired. He always looks tired, but he thinks there's perhaps an additional deadness in his eyes now, something empty in his stare. Or maybe that's just his imagination, because it feels like there ought to be some outward sign of what's happening inside him.

Like the lights going out.

It's a comparison that occurred to him once, years and years ago, that he finds himself coming back to every time he feels it happening again. That he'll be doing fine—great, even—until without warning, for no reason he can tell, the lights in his mind start going out, one by one, the room growing darker and darker. Until he's staring down an

empty corridor as it flickers into blackness, and bracing himself for the moment when the last light dies, because there's no telling how long it will be until they come back on. And even though he's been through this before, over and over again, it's still brutal, every time, to know what he's in for, to know what he's losing, when the lights start to go out.

He closes his eyes, bends his head over the sink, and breathes. Tries to remember what it felt like to want to do this, to be *able* to do this. Tries to grasp that feeling and hold onto it and ignore everything else pressing at the windows. As if *trying hard enough* is all it takes to force this back. As if that's ever worked before.

He hasn't seen Gene in five days. He's barely talked to him in three, their text correspondence tapering off like a well run dry, and Robert knows that he's only gotten away with it because Amanda flew in on Monday and Gene's been busy with her. Robert had made excuses when Gene invited him out to dinner with them, which probably didn't raise any red flags, but he hasn't responded to any of Gene's casual, off-the-cuff messages since, which undoubtedly has. The last he heard from Gene was a brief, cautious text the night before, asking if they were still on for Thanksgiving dinner, and Robert had said yes, desperately hoping it would be true.

Goddamn it. He clenches his hands around the edge of the sink, breathes in hard. *You already agreed to this. You already took a fucking shower for it. Just keep going a little longer.*

That he's supposed to go next door and insinuate himself into Gene and Amanda's perfect life as if he belongs there, as if there would be *any space for him there* if Gene had what he really wanted. Sitting in Gene's house, with Alex closer to the surface than ever, and every sullen step Robert takes further inside himself just driving it home what Gene lost, and what a piss-poor replacement Robert is. That instead of Alex's wide-open heart, he gets Robert now—old and bitter and tired, a room with the lights going out.

Robert's wondered sometimes how things might have been different if Alex hadn't died. If it had been Gene and his perfect husband and their perfect daughter who moved in next door. Would Robert still have fallen in love with Gene? Maybe—but it would have been a love that tasted like ash and despair, like guilt and black envy. Or maybe he would have never paid any attention to Gene at all, never had any idea how narrowly happiness had passed him by.

Maybe he would have fallen in love with both of them; maybe they would have taken pity on him and let him come inside sometimes.

It's occurred to Robert that Alex's death was the best thing that's ever happened to him, and it's a thought that makes him sick with himself but doesn't make it any less true. And then he can't even look at Gene without feeling like he's robbing the dead.

Thinking that Gene might just be the love of his life, and knowing that he's not the love of Gene's.

He's aware of turning off the tap, of going back into the living room and laying down on the couch, sinking into it and closing his eyes.

He's not going anywhere. He can feel it in his bones, even if he's still lying to himself and insisting that *any minute now* he's going to muster up the energy to walk over to Gene's house. But he's not, and he knows it, and it's easy to let himself drift.

The doorbell rings, jarringly loud, and Robert flinches, but doesn't even consider getting up to answer it. He just keeps his eyes closed and waits for it to stop.

There's a handful of people it could be—Val, Gene, Mary, Jehovah's Witnesses—but no one he wants to face right now.

Someone tries the doorknob, which rules out the god-botherers.

After a moment there's a knock, which rules out Mary, since she knows where the spare key is and would have just let herself in.

Another minute, and his phone buzzes against his leg. Which rules out Val, because she would have either started hollering or taken the initiative to break in through a window.

Which means it's Gene, and *oh christ*, Robert cannot deal with this.

All he wants to do is curl up in the safe, undemanding darkness of his own home and drink until the world goes gentle and leaves him alone for a while. He can't respond to Gene's easy affection right now, he can't even go through the motions. The prospect of joining the festivities at Gene's house feels excruciating, like he's some cold, deep-sea creature being dragged writhing and exposed into harsh daylight.

And he knows that Gene can read his silences. Gene knows what it means when Robert doesn't answer, when he can't bring himself to say what Gene wants to hear—but it is still *fucking rude*, as Mary has told him before, with all her ruthless pragmatism. She's managed to drill it into him over the years that even saying no is better than dragging out the suspense.

Well—better for Gene, maybe. For Robert, as long as he hasn't said the words he can keep pretending like he hasn't disappointed anyone yet.

He takes a breath, then digs out his phone and looks at Gene's texts before he can think the better of it.

GENE: Hey, Val and Naomi are here

GENE: Are you okay?

GENE: Please check in, sweetheart, I'm getting worried

Robert swallows and texts back, *I'm fine*. Which is obviously a goddamn lie, otherwise he'd be next door already and not putting them through this bullshit.

A moment later Gene asks, *Can I come in?*

Here it is, then.

I'm not good company today, Robert replies. And yeah, the thought of Gene's disappointment makes him flinch, but at least it's over with. Now he can curl up in his hole and go back to sleep with only a moderate amount of guilt instead of crippling amounts of guilt.

A message buzzes from Gene.

I thought that might be the case. But I need to talk to you.

...Well, that's a little fucking ominous.

And Robert really, really doesn't want to *talk* about anything, but it's not like he's going to be able to sleep now. Not until he finds out what Gene wanted to say, because his brain has already jumped to the worst possible conclusion—that Gene's finally realized he's not getting any return on his investment, and he's kicking Robert's worthless ass to the curb.

If you're dumping me, you can do it by text, Robert writes back. You don't have to come inside.

No response. He puts the phone down, closes his eyes and swallows hard.

Jesus, he wishes he could have tripped Gene into bed at least once. This is a regret he's going to take to his goddamned *grave*, that he drove Gene away before he ever managed to—

The phone buzzes, several times in quick succession.

GENE: I AM NOT DUMPLING YOU!!!

GENE: DUMPING

GENE: GDI AUTOCORRECT

GENE: I'm not dumping you either!!

And then:

GENE: Robert I promise, I just want to make sure you're alright.

Robert isn't sure what Gene would consider 'alright.' He's not dead, and he's not in the process of giving himself liver failure, but Gene tends to hold him to higher standards these days.

When Robert doesn't respond, Gene says, *Just give me ten minutes to check on my boyfriend and then you can kick me out if you want to.*

And something in him loosens at hearing Gene call him *boyfriend*.

It's somehow more reassuring than his protestations of not-dumping were.

He draws in a deep breath and pushes himself upright on the couch. Ten minutes—okay, he can do that. Gene keeps his word. Gene stops when Robert says stop. He's not just saying that to get his foot in the door, he'll leave if Robert wants him to.

There's a spare key under the cactus, Robert texts back.

And now Gene knows how to let himself in too.

Robert waits, thinks he can hear the pot clunking outside as Gene finds the key, then the sound of him fumbling with the lock and getting the door open. He listens to Gene's footsteps in the hall, hears him pause on the threshold to the living room and then cross the floor to Robert, carefully taking a seat on the couch next to him.

Gene doesn't speak right away, something that Robert's grateful for. They sit in silence for a few minutes while Robert slowly acclimates to his presence, slowly comes to trust that Gene's not going to bombard him with demands and questions.

He can feel the press of Gene's thigh against his, a warm, reassuring point of contact. Gene's holding a travel mug in his lap, something that smells fruity and sweet, that he eventually offers to Robert.

"Val and Naomi brought homemade spiced cider," he says. "I thought I'd save you some before it all disappeared. Val says it's an ancient recipe passed down through the Small family since the time of Christ. Naomi says they googled it. Either way, it's very good."

Robert takes the mug, makes himself take a careful sip, then another. It is good; sweeter than he usually likes, but the spices give it a bite and the warmth settles inside him like a thaw.

Eventually Gene draws in a breath. "Did something happen to set this off?" he asks quietly.

This. The elephant that's been in the room since the very start, finally too intrusive for even Gene to pretend like he doesn't notice anymore. And Robert doesn't want to talk about *this*, he wants to play

dumb, and play it off with a joke, and deny that anything's wrong, but his reserves have run dry.

Robert shakes his head. "No."

Nothing happened. Nothing's *wrong*, except that his *fucking brain* randomly decides to eat itself sometimes.

Robert sighs, sets the cider down on the coffee table and rubs his hands over his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I know how much you'd been looking forward to this. I just..."

He feels Gene's hand close over his knee and give it a comforting squeeze. "Robert, it's okay."

"It's really not," he says tiredly. He feels compelled to honesty because *why the fuck not*, Gene deserves to know what he's in for. Robert shakes his head and swallows. "I do this a lot. I just—I make promises and then flake out and break them when I don't feel like it anymore. I'll fuck off and run away and leave you hanging, and this may be the first time I've done it to you, but it sure as hell won't be the last. It's just what I fucking *do*."

"Sweetheart, I'm not going to get angry with you for feeling bad," Gene says, as if that's the most natural thing in the world. "It's not like you're doing this because you want to."

Robert shakes his head. "You say that now, but it's gonna get old fast. Just ask Val." He closes his eyes. "Christ, I thought I was doing better. Having you around—you make me happy, you really do. There's no *reason* for this—"

His throat closes and he breaks off.

At his side, Gene draws in deep breath, then reaches over and takes his hand. "Robert... there's something I need to tell you."

Here it is then, Robert thinks with a detached sort of resignation. *You knew this was coming*. His hand is heavy in Gene's and he can feel the dread welling up in him like nausea, but he's also too tired to fight it. Might as well take the blow and get it over with.

Gene keeps his eyes on their hands as he carefully laces his fingers

through Robert's. "And maybe... maybe I should have told you sooner. But I didn't want you to take it the wrong way. And—" He bites his lip. "Please don't get mad."

Opening for the ages, right there, Robert thinks distantly.

Keeping his eyes down, Gene takes a deep breath, then says, "Alex was also manic-depressive."

For a long moment, Robert finds himself thinking nothing at all, just staring blankly at their clasped hands.

Because that's... not what he'd been expecting to hear, and it takes a minute for his brain to change gears, to process both the spoken and unspoken implications. His reaction, when it finally lands, is just, *Huh*.

Because he hadn't seen that one coming, but somehow it's not a total surprise either. He'd known from the start that Gene's taste in men runs toward dumpster fires; that's not exactly news, and he doesn't see why Gene's afraid he'll get mad about it. Nor is it the first time that someone's described him as *manic-depressive*, though personally he's always just called it *kind of fucked up*.

Gene steals a glance at him, then slides his eyes away again.

"And please, *please* believe me when I say that I'm not trying to replace him. I don't want you to think that I'm—with you because I'm expecting you to be him, or looking at you as the next best thing. Or—*ugh*." He drags a hand through his hair. "That I'm some sort of creepy fetishist who's, like, hanging around psych wards trying to get laid. It's not like that. I just... I fell in love with Alex when I met him, and then when you came along, I fell in love with you." His mouth twists in something approximating a smile. "Apparently I have a type."

He seems to be waiting for a reaction, like he's still afraid that Robert's going to flip his shit for finding out that Gene has a history of bad taste in men—which, why?—so Robert offers, "Okay? So you're into damaged goods. Could be worse."

Gene rolls his eyes. "Neither of you are *damaged goods*," he says

firmly, tightening his hand over Robert's and giving his knee an exasperated shake.

But that seems to have done the trick, because it makes Gene relax slightly. He sighs, his grip gentles, and he strokes a thumb over the back of Robert's hand.

"And you don't, actually, remind me of Alex very much. You're two very different people, and I love you both for who you are. Alex's illness was different too—he ran more toward mania, and you seem to run more to depression, but they've both got their problems. And it got easier, as we learned how to deal with it, but that doesn't mean it was ever *easy*."

He turns to look at Robert then, his face somber. And Gene usually looks so much younger than his thirty-eight years (clean living, go figure), and *feels* so much younger than Robert, full of the energy that Robert so keenly feels the lack of. Usually Gene seems almost untouched by time, but in this moment Robert's abruptly reminded that he's also a man who's lived a full life. Who's raised a child, who's buried a husband. Who shouldered the weight of someone like Robert for over a decade—and apparently didn't learn his lesson the first time, because now he wants to do it all over again.

"My point is..." Gene begins. "Robert, this isn't my first rodeo. I really did know what I was signing up for when I signed on with you. And I know... I know what 'happily ever after' looks like when you're in love with someone who's manic-depressive.

"I understand that this isn't something that's going to go away, ever. There's no curing this, there's only learning to live with it. You do know that, right?" He searches Robert's face, and Robert has no idea what he sees there. "You're never going to *get better* and be done with it and never have to deal with this again. But you can still *be* better. You can still *do* better."

Gene pauses, a space for Robert to speak if he wants to, but Robert finds himself without anything to say. Because on some level, it's noth-

ing more than what he's known all along—that he's just built this way, always has been and always will be. And hearing Gene say it out loud is both a nail in the coffin and at the same time a terrible sort of relief; like he's finally allowed to stop torturing himself with regrets, with the idea that he could have been happy if he'd just *tried harder*.

"It's a part of what makes you who you are," Gene says gently. "And that's alright, because who you are is pretty amazing. You don't need fixing, exactly, you just need... a better handle on being you, maybe. It doesn't have to always be this bad.

"Alex... used to say that living with manic-depression takes equal parts willpower, insight, and lithium." That draws a faint laugh out of him, but his eyes are serious when he lifts them to Robert's again. "You've got the willpower. That's something I've always liked about you, that you don't give up. That you've never stopped trying to do better, even when it seems impossible, even when you don't have any faith in yourself, and Robert, as long as you're trying, I'll be here for you.

"And I get that sometimes you'll be okay, and sometimes you really, really won't be. You're always going to have good days and bad days, and good months and bad months, and when things get bad you're going to try to shut me out—I know the drill. And I won't lie, it hurts, every time, but the worst part is how little I can do to help. That you're in pain and there's nothing I can do to make it better. But I know not to take it personally, and I know it'll pass. And it's worth it—I am telling you that right now, you can take it to the bank. Robert, *you're* worth it."

He falls silent then, watching Robert's face, his hands a gentle pressure over Robert's.

Robert's throat works for a moment, and then he closes his eyes. "How?" he manages, choking it out barely above a whisper, feels it like a shudder passing through him.

Some distant part of him hates himself for letting that escape out loud, for putting that needy, self-deprecating shit on Gene, but the rest

of him is just *tired*, so very, very tired, too exhausted for anything but the truth anymore.

And the truth is that Robert's spent every day of the past eight months waiting for the other shoe to drop. He's been holding his breath, bracing for the moment when Gene finally runs out of patience and leaves him for someone with more to offer.

It's not so strange that Gene liked him in the beginning; Robert's used to that. People fall for him because he's good-looking, he's good in bed (not that he's ever gotten to prove that to Gene), and they seem to find his bullshit amusing.

He's used to people liking him—for a while. Until the veneer of his charm starts to wear thin, and his recklessness stops being exciting, his moodiness stops being sexy. Until they realize there's no substance to him at all, and Gene's been around long enough that he *should know that by now*, and Robert has no idea why he's still here.

"Just—what are you *getting* out of this?" Robert asks helplessly. "I'm not a good boyfriend. I'm not even a good *person*, I'm bitter, and mean, and a selfish asshole and ten kinds of fucked up—"

"Hey now," Gene interrupts mildly, squeezing Robert's hand. "Nobody gets to trash-talk my boyfriend like that."

Robert shakes his head. "Gene, stop. I mean it—you deserve so much better than what you're getting from me."

Gene sighs and lifts a hand to cradle the back of Robert's head, guiding it gently down to his shoulder, then slides his other arm around Robert's waist. Robert lets himself be drawn into Gene's embrace, though he feels stiff and clumsy, affection like a foreign language.

"Oh, Robert," Gene whispers. "I don't want 'so much better.' All I want is you, giving it your best, and you're doing just fine."

He holds Robert in silence for a moment, stroking his hair, then draws in a breath and says quietly,

"I wish you could see what I see when I look at you. That you've

been through so much, but you still have room in your heart for love, and trust, and kindness. You brought joy into my life when I'd almost forgotten what that was like. You make me feel love like I thought I was never going to love again."

Gene's fingertips are a gentle pressure against Robert's scalp, his body warm and close.

"I know you can't see it right now, but it's true. You're not a burden, Robert, you're not a disappointment. You are a gift," he whispers, drawing back to brush their lips together. "And I am so, so lucky to have you."

Gene closes his eyes and kisses him gently, a feather-light touch of his lips, and it's all Robert can do just to hang on. He feels his hands tighten over Gene's waist, so tense he's nearly trembling. There's a lump in his throat that's hard to breathe around, and the pressure in his chest is nearly painful, tight as a clenched fist.

"It's okay," Gene murmurs, drawing him in again, rubbing his hand along Robert's spine. "You're okay, sweetheart, I got you."

Robert swallows hard, then lets out a shuddering breath and wraps his arms around Gene, pulling him tightly to his chest. Gene's hair is soft against his lips and he smells like wood smoke, and Robert closes his eyes and breathes him in deep.

And it doesn't even make any *sense* why he's falling apart now, but the floodgates have been kicked open, and all the doubt and the fear that he's been keeping pent-up for months are pouring loose at once. His head feels like a river overflowing its banks, awash in a torrent of raw emotions he can't even explain, just *feels* with an unmediated intensity that chokes him. He's not quite crying, his eyes are dry, but he feels the same loss of control—gasping for breath and shaking under the onslaught, eyes clenched shut and clinging to Gene like a rock at the center of it all.

Breathe, just breathe, Gene murmurs, and Robert leans into him and does, lets the steady swell of Gene's lungs be his anchor. Breathing, fo-

cusing on the tiny point of calm in the space between them, like the eye of the storm. Breathing, until the pressure eases, the floodwaters start to recede.

They wind up curled up together on the couch, Gene held tight under Robert's arm, his head on Robert's shoulder, solid and quiet and restful.

And Robert finds himself breathing easier. The weight on his mind isn't gone completely, of course, but it's lessened, no longer immobilizing. The silence in the house is calm now instead of ringing, and his head feels clearer than it has in days.

He finds that he can tentatively prod at the things Gene's told him; he still doesn't know how he feels about any of it, but he can at least examine them with some measure of control. The revelation about Alex, and Gene's belief that it's the same thing wrong with Robert. His conviction that it can be tamed, somehow.

That Gene knows all that, and he's still not going anywhere.

Robert takes Gene's hand, resting over his stomach, and laces their fingers together. "So you really think I'm... manic-depressive?" he asks at last.

He's realized that he has only a hazy idea of what that means—something he's heard mentioned in passing but never paid attention to before, just a vague mental image of sedatives and Sylvia Plath. It's never felt like anything to do with him; *manic-depressive* is a word for people with actual problems, not a congenital case of can't-get-your-shit-together. Not for Robert, whose problems are 99% self-inflicted, bad decisions compounded with bad luck.

Gene props himself up so he can watch Robert's face, his thumb still stroking over Robert's knuckles. "I can't say for sure," he admits. "Knowing Alex doesn't make me an expert, but... yeah. A lot of this does feel very familiar."

Strange, the thought of him and Alex having anything in common. It's hard to imagine Alex, the beloved husband and beloved father,

struggling with the same isolating darkness that always seems to drive Robert away from the ones he loves—hard to reconcile that with the picture of Alex he’s built up in his head.

“You’d want to talk to a professional to get an actual diagnosis,” Gene continues. “And at some point I am going to start leaning on you to see someone about it, and consider trying medication—” He breaks off abruptly at the expression on Robert’s face and catches his hand before he can pull away. “Robert, no, please don’t look at me like that. I swear to you, I will never make you do anything you don’t want to. You are, as the kids say, a grown-ass man—you get to make these decisions for yourself. But you should know what your options are.”

Robert’s never known that he had any, other than ‘try harder.’

Gene lifts Robert’s hand to his lips and presses a kiss to his fingertips, like an apology. “That’s a conversation for another time though. For now, I just wanted you to know that I understand what you’re dealing with, and I’m here for you. You’re going to be alright, Robert. *We’re* going to be alright. We’ll get through this together, and then we’ll figure out what’s good for you, how to cope with this better. This *will* get easier to live with, I promise.”

Robert doesn’t know how that’s a promise Gene can make, but also finds that he’s not inclined to argue. Not when his options are giving up without even trying, or... trusting Gene.

Robert lifts his hand to curl around the back of Gene’s neck and draws him down for a light, lingering kiss before letting go. “I want to do better,” he admits quietly. “I want to be worth it.”

Please, let that be enough. Let wanting and trying be enough.

“You are,” Gene says, as if it were that simple, that easy. He smiles at Robert, brushes their noses together. “Every day, you are.”

Jesus, who *looks at him* and thinks that?

And then he finds himself fighting down a laugh at the absurdity of it all, because the answer is *Gene, apparently*—and here Robert’s supposed to be the crazy one.

He toys with their joined hands. “Do you still want me to come over for dinner?”

“Of course. If you’re feeling up to it.”

And Robert’s still tired, but it’s no longer the deadening paralysis of before; he doesn’t feel like a well of emptiness that’s going to leech the color out of everything he touches. And he doesn’t want to let go of Gene.

“I’m going to be shit company,” he warns.

“That’s okay, I still want you to come. We all do. No one’s expecting you to perform for us, we just love you and want you to be there.” He pauses, then offers, “If it helps, I can go back first. I’ll let the girls know you’re not feeling great, so they’ll know to give you space. Robert... everyone there understands what you’re dealing with. You don’t have to pretend like you’re doing fine.”

It’s odd to realize that Gene’s right. Val certainly knows Robert’s moods inside and out, and by this point Naomi must have heard the whole story as well. And Amanda... is Alex’s daughter. If what Gene says is true, then she’s seen all this before too. The prospect makes Robert feel raw and exposed, like peeling back his skin and letting people gawk at the ugly, cancerous thing twisted around his innards—but at the same time, it’s also strangely liberating, not having to worry about whether he’s hiding it well enough.

“All I’m asking is for you to be there,” Gene says, pressing his forehead briefly against Robert’s shoulder. “Hang out with me in the kitchen, make sure I don’t burn the house down. Or hang out with the girls, they’re playing with the firepit in the backyard, make sure they don’t burn the house down either.” He pauses. “The house may be in some peril at the moment.

“And if you decide you need some peace and quiet, you can take a break—you can go to my room and sleep, or watch Netflix, or whatever you like. They posted season nine of *Long Haul Ghost Road Para-*

normal Ice Truckers last week. But Robert, I just don't want you to be alone."

And I don't want to be alone either, Robert hears in that. Because this is the time of year when Gene feels Alex's loss most keenly—and having Robert around makes that easier. It's that, in the end, that decides him.

Robert draws in a breath. "Okay," he says, gently pushing them upright on the couch. "I mean, I did miss episode six."

Gene smiles, and it feels like watching sunlight break through a cloudy sky. "You'll like that one. Callum kisses a ghost."

Robert pinches his waist. "No spoilers."

"I didn't tell you *whose* ghost," Gene protests, but he can't keep from bouncing in his seat a little, like Robert just made his day by consenting to go brood at Gene's house instead of staying home and brooding in his own.

It's ridiculous, it should feel patronizing, that Gene's so happy just to have Robert clearing the lowest of bars, but *jesus*, if Gene wants to grade him on a curve, then Robert's the last person to complain. And it's kind of a comfort too; that he's doing his best, and for once that's enough.

He pulls Gene close again and gives him a kiss on the temple. "Alright. Go tell the kids to brace for impact, I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Are you sure you're feeling up to it?" Gene asks. "Seriously, you don't have to let me bully you into it. You can take the night off if you need to, and I'll come by and check on you tomorrow."

"I'll go," Robert says. "I want to."

Or rather—he wants to want to, and he thinks he can handle it, which is the best he can ask for sometimes.

And for all his misgivings about a big get-together, he finds that he doesn't, in fact, want to be alone. That Gene's company is a comfort—it takes him out of his own head, gives him something to focus on be-

sides his brain turning inward on itself. That as long as he doesn't have to put up a front, as long as he doesn't have to *explain* himself to anyone, then he thinks he wouldn't mind being around people. It'd be a welcome distraction.

"Alright," Gene says decisively. He climbs up from the couch, tugging on their linked hands. "Then walk me to the front door, and I'll leave you to freshen up."

Gird his loins, more like. But Robert gets up, wraps his arm around Gene's shoulders as they walk toward the front hallway together.

"By the way," Gene says from under his arm, "are you aware that your daughter refers to me as your 'trophy boyfriend'?"

Robert snorts. "Sorry. I've tried telling her you're not *that* much younger than me."

"No, no, I love it," Gene assures him brightly. "I think it's awfully flattering. I feel like some twenty-year-old ingenue being seduced by the rakish and worldly charms of an older gentleman."

If anyone did the seducing here, it was Gene, and it's on the tip of Robert's tongue to ask, *What the hell have you been reading?* but—dumb question, he knows what kind of books Gene proofreads for a living.

Robert shrugs. "We can role-play it, if that's what you're into."

"Oh?" Gene looks up at him, biting his cheek on a smile, and Robert doesn't know whether that means he's interested in the idea, or whether he, like Robert, is hearing Mary's voice in his head going, *Don't write checks your dick can't cash.*

Well. Maybe someday. Since apparently he's not out of time yet.

They stop next to the front door and Robert wraps his arms around Gene's waist, lets his head rest on Gene's shoulder. And suddenly the thought of having to come *back* here at the end of the evening, back to darkness and silence and solitude, feels intolerable. He'd rather be in Gene's house, wants to fall asleep with Gene's heartbeat close enough to touch.

"Can I stay the night?" Robert asks impulsively, then feels his jaw

tighten a second later, because he hadn't meant to put Gene on the spot like that. Usually the answer would be a yes without hesitation, but Gene's always been a stickler about maintaining propriety around Amanda—they never even had so much as a Date Night at Gene's house while she was still living at home.

But Gene just quirks a smile. "Robert, I didn't say it sooner because I didn't want to scare you off... but I would be happy to have you stay *every* night."

Which is tempting—but also sounds like the fastest way to wear out his welcome, so Robert's going to table that one for now.

"Even with Amanda there?" he asks instead, because he's surprised to find that the rules have changed so dramatically in just a few months.

"Well, I'd draw the line at doing anything inappropriate with her across the hall," Gene concedes. "But she knows you have a toothbrush in my bathroom. And she is rooting for us."

That's news to Robert, since his interactions with Amanda have been wary at best. It's his fault; he barely knows how to talk to his own daughter, much less someone else's.

"She knows how much you mean to me," Gene says gently, as if he's reading Robert's mind. "And she wants her family to be happy. That includes you, if you want it to."

Gene's watching Robert carefully, because this is the first time either of them has acknowledged aloud that what they have is serious—that it could be permanent, that they might want it to be. It's a topic they've always given a wide berth, Robert out of superstition and nerves, Gene following his lead. It's not that Robert doesn't want this to be permanent, just that it never really felt like an option before; it always felt like only a matter of time until he'd do something to lose Gene.

But Gene seems to think they can handle whatever Robert's fucked-up brain throws at them, and, well... they've made it this far. Maybe it

wouldn't hurt to let himself hope. To believe Gene when he says that Robert has a place in their family, if he wants it.

Robert draws in a breath, presses his lips on Gene's forehead. "I do."

Interlude: Twice Shy



GENE: Hey dude, sorry I missed our run this morning

GENE: Robert woke me up in the middle of the night to go cryptid hunting

CRAIG: Aww yeah, get it, bro! ;D

GENE: Bro

GENE: That is not what cryptid hunting means

GENE: ...I'm not sure what cryptid hunting means

CRAIG: ;D ;D ;D

GENE: But if it's not too late for brunch, you want to get food-truck burritos and eat them in the park?

GENE: There's something I want to talk to you about

Craig has to know that something's up, but he keeps the conversation light at first, which Gene is grateful for. As they get their burritos, Craig talks about nothing more serious than the rivalry between the Maple Bay Flapjacks and the Littleville Trojans, and whether he should be encouraging the girls in all the condom jokes that invites.

"I mean, they're thirteen, fourteen years old," Craig says as they're walking toward the park. "It's not like they don't know what condoms

are, but I'm like, come on dudes, can't you let your parents *pretend* you don't know? Just a little bit longer?"

"But you've had The Talk with the twins, right?" Gene asks, frowning. "Better too soon than too late."

"Oh, for sure. They were being squirrely and trying to dodge it, but finally Smashley trapped them in a three-hour car ride and activated the child-safety locks. Or so I've been told—the twins refuse to speak of that day." Craig munches thoughtfully on his burrito. "I forgot that I wasn't around when Amanda hit this age. How'd you and Alex handle it?"

"Hah," Gene says. "I made Alex do it. It was part of our pre-nup. I said, 'my dude, I am so glad I'm marrying you, because it means I get to delegate the birds-and-the-bees speech.'"

"Oh, *man*," Craig says with a laugh. "I remember the mouth on that guy. I bet his speech was the stuff of legends."

Gene laughs. "Well... he was more diplomatic about it at thirty-three than he would have been at nineteen. But still not nearly as embarrassed as Amanda felt he ought to be."

There's a familiar catch in his chest at the thought of Alex—because that was barely a year before he died, and right now it feels like a near-miss, that Alex almost didn't live long enough to give that talk at all. Even after four years, it still sneaks up on Gene sometimes, when he finds himself with yet another experience that Alex was supposed to *be here* for. That Amanda's about to graduate, and Gene's going to be alone in the crowd, when he'd always pictured that moment with Alex's hand in his, their love and pride shared.

For a moment, the weight of that loss threatens to overwhelm him again, and he makes himself shove it to the back of his mind, practiced but no less painful.

They reach the park, and settle onto a bench overlooking the duck pond. There's a path that curls around it with a few late-morning joggers still making the rounds, but they're distant, and at this time of

day, Gene and Craig have the park nearly to themselves. In the silence that settles over them, Gene can feel Craig waiting.

"If you ever want a change of scenery, we can go jogging around here sometime," Craig offers after a minute, when Gene doesn't speak. "It's a pretty short circuit, but it's got a nice view."

"Yeah," Gene says, trying to sound more enthusiastic than he feels. "Yeah, that'd be great."

In the corner of his eye he can see Craig watching him, and Gene sighs and sets the burrito down in his lap.

"Craig, you said—" he begins. "Remember the first day we went jogging together? When we ran into Robert and Mary. And afterward you said... that Robert reminded you of Alex." He stops, scrubs a hand over his face. "What—what was it you were seeing there?"

Craig blinks, surprised by the question. "I don't know," he says, sitting back. "He just did, I hadn't really thought about why."

"Is it because of the whole... sexy bad-boy vibe?"

"No. I mean—yeah, there's that too, but that wasn't it."

Craig takes a bite of his burrito and chews thoughtfully, frowning out at the pond while he considers it.

"I guess his sense of humor kind of reminds me of Alex," he says at last. "That you never know what's going to come out of his mouth next. When he's in a good mood, he's got Alex's scattershot-flirty thing going on—like you get the feeling that this is a guy who could show you a good time. And when he's not in a good mood... well, he's still funny, but it feels like he's the only one in the room not laughing. That was kinda familiar too."

Craig turns his head to look at Gene. "What's going on, bro?"

Gene sighs and works on scrunching up the edges of the foil wrapper. "I don't know. I'm not sure I should even be telling you this. But I know you can keep a secret, and... *fuck*, I need to talk to *someone*."

"Dude, just say the word, and my lips are sealed."

"I know," Gene says. And it's true; in all the years they've known

each other, Craig's always been very careful with confidences. "It's—I think..." He takes a deep breath, eyes on the park. "I think Robert might also be manic-depressive."

He hears Craig inhale, sees him turn to look back out at the joggers. "Damn," he says quietly. "I hadn't put that together before. But it would make a lot of sense."

"I mean—I don't know, I could be wrong," Gene hastens to say. "I've only hung out with him, what, three times now? But—I was talking with him last night, and..." He shakes his head. "Christ, some of the things he said. It was like *deja vu*. It was like I was hearing Alex's words coming out of Robert's mouth. When Alex would go on a downswing and suddenly there was nothing in the world but hopelessness and despair, and I wanted to tell him, *sweetheart, that's not true, that's the depression talking. I know what this is.*

"And that's when it clicked. Robert's mood swings, his... intensity, everything. The drinking; the way he'll up and disappear for days or weeks on end. The way he acted on our first date, when I thought he was just drunk, or high, or something—and I knew how to roll with it, because it felt like one of Alex's manic episodes. And suddenly I realized that this was someone who had Alex's illness, or something like it, but who'd never learned how to handle it. To be honest, I'm not sure Robert even knows what he's dealing with."

"I always figured he was just having a hard time after losing his wife," Craig says. "I see him around a lot, I knew he was going through a rough patch, but he doesn't really let anybody get close."

"He's starting to let me closer, but..." Gene feels his fingers tighten on the edge of the bench. "But—Craig, the more he opens up to me, the more I realize that I've barely scratched the surface. And I like Robert, I really do. I like him more than I've liked anyone since Alex's death, but he is *not in a good place*, and it's not just the manic-depression. And then I think about how long it took for Alex to finally reach something

stable, and the fact Robert's starting out even lower, and... I don't know if I can do it again."

The confession escapes him in a rush, and Gene tips his head back, sucks in a shaky breath, and forces himself to keep going.

"Because I *loved* Alex. I loved him for everything he was and I wouldn't have wanted him to be anything else, but I have *read the literature*—I know the odds were stacked against us back then, and that we got lucky. We pulled it off, we managed to stay together in the end, but it was *years* of hard work, of uncertainty, of..."

"Heartbreak," Craig fills in gently. At Gene's startled look, he gives him a sad smile. "It was, dude, you can call it that. I was there, I watched you guys figuring all this out, and it broke your heart. It was a hell of a thing to go through even once, no one would blame you for not wanting to do it again."

"No, it's not that." Gene runs a frustrated hand through his hair. "What I mean is... Craig, it's not about *me*. I would have done anything for Alex, no matter how much it broke my heart, and I want to help Robert too, but... but if there's one thing I learned from Alex, is that it's not about me. It's about him. The only reason we pulled through is because *he* was willing to fight for it. He recognized that he needed to get control of his life, and then he did what he had to. I gave him a shoulder to lean on, but I couldn't have done anything for him if he hadn't let me.

"And now suddenly here's Robert. And Robert *isn't Alex*. I have no idea if he's willing to change—if he's even capable of it. He's so much older than Alex was. He's been in this rut so much longer and he's dealing with things that Alex never had to deal with. And he doesn't know me—he has no reason to make the effort for me that Alex did."

Gene takes a deep breath, bows his head. "And I'm already halfway in love with him," he confesses. "But I'm looking at the odds, and they aren't good. I'm thinking there's probably a reason why he's stuck where he is, and it's..." he struggles for a word "...*vanity* to think that

I'm the one who can waltz in and fix everything. I'm afraid that I'm going to run myself into the ground for him, and it's not going to make any difference. That I'm just going to watch him keep spiraling, and if I get in deeper it's only going to hurt that much more when I finally have to give up. And I'm wondering if I shouldn't try to walk away right now."

Gene finishes on a hard exhale and falls silent. Because that's it, isn't it? That's what kept him up last night, long after Robert had taken him home, after it finally dawned on him what was going on with the hottie next door. That it was more than a case of mysterious brooding and a penchant for good, manly hard-drinking. That Gene knows what kind of heartache is in store for him if he keeps chasing Robert; he just doesn't know if it's going to be worth it.

Craig reaches his arm out and wraps it around Gene's shoulders, pulling him in for a companionable side-hug. And it's no more than what they used to do in college, slinging an arm around each other, but the intimacy of the gesture feels startlingly unfamiliar now. It's been years since Gene hugged anyone but Amanda, and he has to consciously will himself to relax under Craig's arm.

"That's rough," Craig says with quiet sympathy. "I don't have any answers, but I feel for you, bro. For both of you."

Gene closes his eyes and breathes out, lets himself sink against Craig a little more. Like riding a bike—creaky after all these years, but slowly coming back to him. "I know," Gene says. "And I'm not expecting an answer, really. I just needed to get it off my chest."

"Well," Craig says thoughtfully. "What do *you* want? Like, pretend it's a perfect world, and you get to decide how everything turns out. What would that look like?"

Gene tips his head back against Craig's shoulder and considers it. "I guess... I'd want to help him. I want him to be happy. I—" He breaks off with a small, self-deprecating laugh. "I want to be the one who

makes him happy,” he admits, slightly abashed. “I want to be good for him.”

Craig gives his shoulders a squeeze. “You were good for Alex.”

“I got *lucky* with Alex.”

“Or maybe you know how to pick ‘em.” Craig pauses for a moment, then lets out a sigh. “I don’t know, dude. I might be talking out of my ass here—I mean, you know Robert better than I do by this point—and maybe this doesn’t mean anything, but...”

He takes a moment to collect his thoughts, then says, “Robert’s the kind of guy who doesn’t say no to something without at least giving it a shot, y’know? Like this one time when me and Mary and Damien had to go out in the woods looking for—never mind, long story. Anyway, I didn’t think Robert was going to come, he didn’t really seem up to it, but when Mary asked him he was just like, sure, lemme grab my dog. And there’s been other times too, when he’ll surprise you with what he’s game for.

“So yeah, I believe you that he’s in a bad way, but... maybe he’s not stuck there? I think if you could... show him something different, he’d at least try. I think he’d give you a chance.”

That’s certainly what Gene *wants* to believe. That Robert, like Alex, has what it takes to get control of his demons.

“Besides,” Craig says, jostling him lightly. “I know the way you fall in love. Do you really think you could just stop caring about him?”

A huff of breath escapes Gene, both surprise and the lack of it. Because Craig’s right, of course—his heart doesn’t go for half-measures.

He’s been talking like falling out of love with Robert would be as easy as stepping into a room and then stepping back out when you realize you don’t like the company, but that’s not terribly likely, is it? Backing out of a relationship with someone like Robert might be the sensible thing to do, but common sense doesn’t hold a candle to the fluttering euphoria he feels when they’re together, to the way his heart beats faster when Robert turns one of those soft, rare smiles on him.

Not to mention that they still live next door to each other, and probably will for the rest of their lives. Even if Gene tries to nip this in the bud, he's still going to be seeing Robert all the time, always stirring the embers he's trying to smother, a constant reminder of what might have been.

And all at once, Gene has a vision of what that would be like—year after year of watching Robert at a distance, forever beautiful and alone and utterly out of reach, because Gene forfeited his right to be a part of that. And Gene, forever half in love with him, until... what? Until Gene finally falls in love with someone else, and stops caring that Robert's self-destructing in the corner of his eye? Or until Robert *does* self-destruct, and ceases to be even a reminder.

And suddenly the prospect of living that life hits him like a punch to the gut—a wave of staggering regret for a mistake he hasn't even made yet.

Which kind of gives him his answer, doesn't it? That regardless of whether or not Robert has it in him to change, Gene doesn't have it in him to give up without trying.

"No," Gene admits, and finds that he doesn't even regret it, really. He doesn't regret being the kind of person he is. "You're right, it's too late for that."

"That's not a bad thing, bro," Craig says. "People know love when they feel it. I think it'd do him a lot of good to have someone like you in his corner. I think it'd do you good to have someone to love again."

But it's not just *someone*, it's *Robert*. Because Gene's been trying for years to come to terms with the idea of loving *someone* again, and it never felt like he'd made any progress at all. Because his picture of love looked like Alex; that was all he could think of when he thought of love. The idea of the faceless, formless *someone* that he was supposed to meet and fall in love with eventually left him cold, and he'd never been able to imagine wanting anyone else in the space that Alex had left.

Not until Robert—with his hard edges and his dark humor that initially felt nothing like Alex at all, but made something come alive in Gene anyway. And that was when he suddenly, finally understood how it was possible to love someone who wasn't Alex. How it was possible that someone so different could also stir so much feeling in him, and it wasn't a replacement for Alex, it wasn't a betrayal—it was proof that Gene was finally healing. That he was capable of loving again, and that he wanted to.

"Yeah," Gene says, and there's a feeling of lightness unfolding in his chest. "Yeah, I think I'm finally ready for that." He laughs a little, leaning forward to rest against his knees, and Craig lets his arm fall away. "And I want it to be Robert. You're right—I'm all in."

Because he has to be, if he wants this to stand even a chance. Robert's so gun-shy, he guards his affections so closely, he's never going to trust Gene if he can sense that Gene's keeping one hand on the escape hatch.

"And Robert?" Craig asks. "You think he's all in too?"

"I think he's getting there."

Whether he likes it or not, Gene reflects ruefully. Because it's not as if he hasn't noticed that Robert's struggling with that attraction—that he tries to keep Gene at arm's length, even though he inevitably can't stay away. And Gene doesn't know whether it's lingering grief for his wife, or discomfort about being attracted to a man, or something else entirely, but—

"I don't know if he's ready for a relationship yet," Gene admits. "But... yeah, I'm pretty sure we're both feeling it. Honestly, I don't mind taking it slow; he's not the only one who's still figuring things out."

"If there's anyone who can make it work, it's you, bro. And..." Craig pauses, and then looks at Gene seriously. "For what it's worth, I think this is worth taking a chance on."

"So do I. Robert's..." Gene feels his cheeks go pink, laughs a little at

himself. “I can’t explain it. He’s just—he makes me *feel* again. After Alex died, I shut all that down. I threw myself into work, into taking care of Amanda, anything to keep me busy and keep me from thinking. It was like part of me had just stopped breathing these past four years, and I hadn’t even noticed until I met him. Now it’s like I’m waking up, like I’m suddenly seeing the world in color again.”

Craig grins, waggles his eyebrows at him. “Pretty sure that’s called being in love, dude.”

Gene laughs, ducks his head, though he can feel himself still smiling as he presses his hands over his face. “*Ugh*, I’m sorry, I’m going to be insufferable. Do you remember the first week I met Alex?”

“When the only station playing was ‘hey remember that hot violinist guy, I think he really likes me’?”

“Yeah, it’s going to be like that. All Robert, all the time.”

Craig folds his hands behind his head and leans back on the bench, content. “Well luckily you’ve got a bro who’s always willing to listen to you talk about your crushes.”

And Craig says it like a joke, but it’s not. Twenty years later, *half their lives* later, here they are again—Gene fussing over his crush, Craig lending a sympathetic ear.

“It’s true,” Gene agrees softly. “I really am lucky.”

That even without Alex, he still has Amanda, he still has Craig; there’s still love in his life. He has a spark with Robert, and the hope that they might someday coax it into something more.

“And Craig... thanks.”

There’s so much wrapped up in that, so much he’s thankful for—not least of which is that Craig’s known him long enough to know all that without saying.

And Craig smiles, holds out a fist for Gene to bump. “Always, bro.”

Bodies in the Lake



GENE: I love you!

GENE: I'm sorry, I should have led with that!!

GENE: I promise I'm not upset!

GENE: ...Okay I am, but only because you're upset

GENE: I promise I'm not mad

GENE: Please come back so we can talk about this

GENE: ...

GENE: Oh crap

GENE: I think that's your phone buzzing in the other room

Earlier...

The alarm clock goes off when it is still *full-fucking-dark* outside, and Robert's not even completely awake when he rolls over on top of Gene and slaps it off. This, he's found, is the only downside to spending the night at the Woods household—that Gene is one of those weak-willed degenerates who hits the snooze button three times before he drags his ass out of bed, which means that Robert also gets to listen to his alarm go off three, ear-splitting times.

...Or Robert can beat him to it, and spend the next ten minutes wak-

ing Gene up in a much more pleasant and leisurely fashion. With the alarm silenced, he pulls the covers up over his shoulders again and lets himself settle down on top of Gene, sinking into the toasty little burrow that Gene's made for himself.

In the past, Robert hasn't exactly been a fan of the ugly underbelly of noon, but since Thanksgiving this has come to be his favorite time of day—when he's still only half-awake, before his sense of *self* returns (with everything that entails), before he starts remembering and overthinking everything. When he gets to enjoy being nothing more than the sum of these creature comforts: Gene's drowsy heat curled up against him, skin and soft cotton under his hands, easy and intimate and unpressured.

"Mmm, five more minutes," Gene mutters, tucking his head and trying to curl into the blankets like a pillbug.

"Oh, no you don't," Robert says. He works his hands up under Gene's stomach. "You're the one who wanted to go jogging at ass o'clock in the morning, so go forth and jog."

Technically, Robert could kick Gene out of bed and go back to sleep. He's reasonably sure Gene would let him, but this has become their morning routine since Amanda went back to Chicago: that Robert gets up when Gene does, they have coffee together (though not breakfast, to Gene's endless, vocal dismay, because *fasted cardio*), and then Robert walks him to the gym and kills time in the overpriced juice bar while Gene and Craig get their swole on.

And it's... not bad. The day Robert goes jogging at ass o'clock in the morning is the day hell freezes over, but when he's not fighting off a hangover, it's not a hardship to wake up early and watch Gene get sweaty in tight clothes. Gene had gently encouraged it, because having a routine is supposed to be good for people like Robert—and there might actually be something to that. It's not a magic bullet, Robert isn't *cured*, but staying with Gene has managed to keep the worst of the despair at bay this time. He's kept his head above water, at least.

Robert presses his face into the side of Gene's neck, breathes in deep, and lets his hands wander. The flannel of Gene's pajamas is soft and warm, his skin hotter still when Robert slides his hands beneath Gene's shirt and spreads his palms flat over Gene's bare waist—

—Which is when Betsy notices they're awake, and starts whining and scratching at the side of the bed to be let up.

Robert has a brief, stymied moment to think, *aw come on, kid, don't cockblock your dad like this*, and then Gene's laughing and uncurling. "Alright, alright, I'm up," he says, pushing at Robert ineffectually. "Mercy."

Gene gives a jaw-cracking yawn that turns into an open-mouthed kiss planted somewhere in the vicinity of Robert's cheek. It's not even remotely sexy, because it involves unhinging his jaw enough to swallow small-to-medium-sized mammals whole, but Robert will take it.

"Mmm." Gene nuzzles into Robert's stubble. "You coming with me this morning?"

"Sure," Robert says. He sneaks a hand lower, cops a quick feel of Gene's ass. "The barista would *pine* without me, can't have that."

Gene pulls back, frowning. "Is she still giving you trouble?"

She, the morning barista of the Bro Juice, who has been visibly *not thrilled* to discover that Robert—scruffy, surly Robert, who never works out, just sits in the corner and moodily watches the gym floor like a creeper—is apparently a regular now.

"Nah, she moved past anger last week, she's onto bargaining now. Special offer, smoothies half-off if I get 'em to go."

"Cool. I love getting things half-off."

"It's not a special offer for *you*."

Gene wriggles underneath him, gives him a light pinch in the stomach. "Oh, just for customers whose name rhymes with Robert Balls?"

Which are *fighting words*, even though Gene's not really fighting back, just laughing and uncurling to give Robert better access when he rolls Gene over and presses him to the bed, gets a hand up under his

ribs to tickle him. And *god*, he feels good, his body moving against Robert's, lithe and playful, pinned between Robert's thighs—

—And then Betsy's whines erupt into loud, mournful howls at being left out of the excitement, and the moment is decisively over. Robert lets his head drop onto Gene's shoulder with a thunk.

"Aww, are we ignoring you, sweetheart?" Gene croons at her. He wiggles out from underneath Robert and leans halfway off the edge of the bed to scratch Betsy's head.

It has the side effect of pressing his ass right up against Robert's cock, and Robert's brain momentarily blue-screens, but before he can do anything about it—either to escalate the situation or defuse it, he's not sure what his game plan was—Gene's sliding the rest of the way out of bed and padding off toward the bathroom. Betsy, the filthy traitor, trots along after him, because Gene has been on a shameless campaign to buy her love with treats, and it's working.

Alone, Robert rolls over onto his back, taking long, slow breaths as he looks up at the ceiling. Then he reaches down into his boxers and adjusts his dick to a more comfortable angle.

His libido tends to be hit-or-miss when he's on a downswing, but this time it's been pretty insistent that it would really, *really* like to rub one off on Gene. Not too surprising, since 'sex feels good' and 'Gene feels good' are both hard-coded by this point (two foolproof ways to get himself out of his head when he's feeling shitty), of course his brain's trying to mash them together. Robert's not sure whether this means he's getting his wires crossed, or whether he's finally getting them *uncrossed*.

He grits his jaw and resists the urge to rub his cock, counts to thirty and then rolls over and grabs his phone off the nightstand.

"Jesus," Mary growls when she picks up. "I liked it better when I was the one waking *you* up at the crack of dawn."

"Rise and shine, chief—it's happy hour at the Bro Tank, and kale smoothies are on me."

"Ugh. Your boyfriend's kinks are disgusting."

"Tell me about it. Makes his ass pretty great though."

"Yeah, but what's *my* motivation?"

"It builds character?" Robert offers.

"I've got character out the ass, try again."

"You get to watch Craig Cahn in his native habitat. And his yoga pants."

"You're buying," she warns darkly before hanging up on him.

Half an hour later, he and Mary are installed at the juice bar attached to the Bro Tank, sipping overpriced smoothies and watching the morning kombucha crowd through the plate glass windows overlooking the gym floor.

"Ugh," Mary says, moodily stirring her Broberry Blast—which, Robert has pointed out, contains as much alcohol as Mat's mimosas, within a 5% margin of error. "I can't believe this is my life now. Orange juice without champagne? Tomato juice without vodka? This is *bullshit*. Remind me why we're here, again?"

"He's got dirt on me, boss. The man says jump, and I say 'how high,' or it's ten to twenty in the clink."

She rolls her eyes. "So does that mean he's finally convinced you to move in with him?"

Robert tries not to fidget under her regard. "More like he hasn't kicked me out yet."

"And how long since you've slept under your own roof?" she asks pointedly.

"Since Thanksgiving," Robert admits. "He's been letting me stay with him, 'cause—uh."

And *christ*, it's just Mary. He trusts her as much as he trusts Gene, he can *say it*.

"I wasn't in a good way last week," he mutters into his smoothie, avoiding her eyes.

There it is, out in the open, the way it's never been between them before. And it's not like Mary doesn't know how he gets sometimes, but they don't *talk* about it, any more than they talk about the shit that she has to deal with.

Mary's silent for a moment; in the corner of his eye, he can see her watching the gym floor, and then she takes a sip of her smoothie. "Doing better now?" she asks lightly.

Robert lets out a breath, relieved that she's not going to make a production of it. "Yeah. A little."

He still can't work up the motivation to do anything except ghost along after Gene, but at least he's not *feeling* quite so shitty anymore. It's progress, sort of.

She nods. "Good," she says simply, and lets them lapse into silence.

Craig and Gene emerge from the locker rooms, Gene catching Robert's eye from the far side of the glass and waving brightly as they take up position on the stair-stepping machines.

He's wearing *the pants* again, of course he is, *the pants* that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination, that cling to his ass like they were lovingly sculpted there by some gay-as-fuck renaissance master whose entire reason for being was to torture Robert.

Mary squints at the pair of them. "Are those pants new?"

"If by 'new,' you mean, he's been wearing them nonstop since Amanda went back to Chicago," Robert says grumpily. And the fact that he won't wear them in front of his daughter says that he knows *full-fucking-well* what they're about. "He says they're comfortable. Well, they're not comfortable for *me*."

Mary smirks over her non-alcoholic grass clippings, shakes her head. "Your life is such a hardship."

They lapse into silence for a while. Gene and Craig finish their warm-up on the stair-steppers and then disappear into the maze of weight machines.

They get a second round of smoothies; Mary relates a story from

the previous weekend's youth mixer, when some kid smuggled in a bottle of blue watermelon schnapps and then puked all over Joseph, and the only available change of clothes was a Vagina Monologues t-shirt from the lost and found. She proudly shows him her new lock screen, featuring Joseph covered in blue vomit.

The barista looks on with an expression of operatic despair, that there are apparently *two* of them now.

Life, Robert reflects, is somehow not so bad.

Gene swings by after his workout to flirt and get handsy, and Robert watches the barista's blood pressure jump while Gene cozies up next to him. It's Robert's fault; he knows he doesn't emote well in this state, doesn't give any indication that he's okay with the gay stuff, so she always looks low-key terrified that sweet, swishy little Gene is about to get himself stabbed.

"Hello, Gene," Mary says placidly. "Nice pants. You should wear them more often."

Sometimes Robert wonders why he's even friends with this harpy.

"Thanks!" Gene glances down at them, pleased. "Craig gave them to me, they're from his athleisure line. A 'congratulations on your twenty-minute mile' present."

He's flushed from his workout, cheeks pinking beautifully, smiling and still slightly short of breath. His hairline is just touched with sweat, and when he gulps from his water bottle, his lips come away plush and wet.

He looks like sex.

"You look like you had fun," Robert says.

Gene presses his hip into Robert's shoulder, tousles his fingers through Robert's hair. Robert's pretty sure he can see the outline of Gene's briefs through the pants; if he looked closer he'd probably be able to tell whether Gene's circumcised, but he manfully refrains, since the last thing Robert needs is to give himself an erection in the middle

of the Bro Tank. The barista already watches him like he's a public-indecency arrest waiting to happen.

"I think I may have finally achieved the 'runner's high' of legend," Gene says, oblivious. "Briefly. Transcendentally. Thirty glorious seconds in which I glimpsed the face of god—which, in retrospect, might have just been the oxygen deprivation. And then I got a stitch in my side and it went back to being terrible."

If lack of oxygen is what gets him off, Robert would recommend erotic asphyxiation instead of jogging—and *christ*, that is not even his kink, but apparently *any* sex-related thought in proximity with thoughts of Gene is enough to derail him.

When he tunes back in, the conversation has shifted to Craig's business.

"...I'm trying to convince him that the tagline for his athleisure line should be 'You Cahn Do It!', or maybe 'Yes, You Cahn!' Tell him it's great."

"It's not great," Mary assures him.

"Oh Mary, Mary," Gene says, unfazed. "Just you wait—once you become a Dad, you too will gain the fine appreciation required for dad-puns." He leans over to plant a quick, sweaty kiss on top of Robert's head. "Anyway, I need to grab my smoothie, I'll be right back. Gotta *get my BCAAs in, bro.*"

He peels himself off Robert and heads back to the counter.

"He thinks he's being ironic, but it's a slippery slope," Mary warns darkly, once Gene's out of earshot. "And if he gets you saying it too, I'm drawing the line. I don't care how good for you he's been, some things are simply beyond the pale."

Robert nods absently, watches Gene go. Ever since their near-miss on the night Robert came back from New York, he's been... *conscious* of Gene in a way he wasn't before. Lying in bed next to Gene every night, except that now Robert knows what it feels like to have Gene's body

moving beneath him, against him, to hear him whispering *Robert, please—*

He drags his eyes back to Mary, sees her smirking at him over the rim of her glass. “Pick your jaw up off the floor, tiger,” she says smugly.

“Mary, Craig gave him *four pairs* of those pants,” he hisses. “They’re all he ever wears now.”

She huffs out a breath, rolls her eyes heavenward. “Jesus, Robert, just *shag him* already, so I don’t have to hear you bitch about it.” She looks at him then, and although her expression is amused, there’s a touch of genuine concern in it too. “You’ve been seeing him since March. What are you waiting for?”

For the stars to align, apparently. Robert doesn’t have an answer to that.

“Robert...” Her gaze flicks sideways to check on Gene, finds him still at the counter with Craig, and she lowers her voice and says gently, “You know he’s not just going to fuck you once and then dump you. He’s crazy about you. *You know that.*”

Which is teetering on the edge of *shit they don’t talk about*, and yes, Robert does know that, but before he can formulate a reply, Gene and Craig are rejoining them and the conversation is over.

“—he was all, *It’s ten inches*, and I was like, uh-huh, sure, so is that standard inches, or metric inches?”

“Bro,” Craig says, laughing-but-slightly-worried, the way he does when he’s not sure how Gene got out of an encounter without getting his ass beat.

“*He didn’t get it!*” Gene heaves a sigh, plunking himself down next to Robert. “Gym bros, amirite?”

It probably makes sense in context, so Robert just grunts agreement as Gene cuddles up next to him.

And Robert’s still not feeling up to par, but that’s okay, he doesn’t have to be—the conversation flows easily between the three of them

without his input. He doesn't feel conspicuous with his silence, or like he's a weight bringing down the mood of the room, or like he's on the outside looking in. He can just lean on Gene, can smile a little when Mary gives Craig shit about his kale smoothies (*kale—the REAL devil's lettuce*), and let it all wash over him.

As they're leaving, Mary surprises him by pulling him aside for a hug. And he's getting better at this, so it's easier than he expected to let her hold on, to hug her back.

"I'm glad he's being good for you," she says softly. "I'm glad you're letting him."

Robert swallows, finds he doesn't have anything to say to that except—

"Yeah. Me too."

Back at the house, after Gene's taken his shower and changed into yet another pair of *the pants*, it's finally time for breakfast; Robert's sitting at the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee, watching Gene attempt some kind of omelet and wondering when he's allowed to stage an intervention.

"Do you want help with that?" Robert asks, as Gene cracks some eggs into a pan, and then takes twice as long to painstakingly pick out the pieces of shell.

"I got this," Gene assures him.

"You sure?"

Gene laughs. "Omelets are the *one* thing I know how to cook, Robert, don't take this from me."

Robert's not convinced of even that modest assertion, since Gene still hasn't started on the vegetables sitting on the counter, and those are going to take way longer than the eggs—but who is he kidding, Robert's not going to stop him, and he'd do way worse for this man than eat rubbery eggs.

"You know, it's funny," Gene says. "I spent most of my life with no

idea of what was *actually* healthy, just this vague idea that if you weren't suffering, you weren't doing it right. When it turns out that food doesn't have to taste bad in order to be good for you, it's all about the seasoning. Craig's been showing me some of that too—believe it or not, he's actually really good at cooking."

Robert doesn't know why Gene thinks he'd have trouble believing that, since Craig is *inhumanly good at everything*. Robert's just lucky that Gene's type is walking disasters instead of impossibly perfect specimens of manhood.

"I still hate working out though," Gene confesses. "And by this point, I'm pretty sure I always will. Craig's all like, 'oh, well, some people prefer lifting to cardio,' and I'm like, cool bro, but what if I prefer sitting on my ass on the couch?"

"You don't *have* to get up at the crack of dawn to go jogging," Robert points out. "We can stop. Any time you want. *Any time.*"

"Yes, well. I don't like exercising, but I do like the results." Gene smiles at Robert and folds his arms behind his head in a stretch that is pure peacocking. "And having someone to impress turns out to be a very good incentive."

Honestly, Robert can't see any difference—he wanted to fuck Gene the first night he met him, wants to fuck him now—but it's nice that Gene's pleased with himself, and Robert doesn't mind taking a moment to appreciate the view: Gene's thin t-shirt pulled tight across the lean planes of his stomach, the ass-pants clinging to his narrow hips.

Gene preens a bit under the attention, then turns back to cooking, picking up an onion and a knife. "When the weather warms up again, we can bring Betsy with us too. Oh! Or how do you feel about putting her in a sweater? I saw the cutest one the other day, we could dress her up like a ladybug."

Putting his dog in a ladybug costume would be, hands down, the gayest thing Robert's ever done, beating out all the gay sex by a landslide—and he is 100% onboard for this plan because fucking with peo-

ple's expectations is his favorite pastime. He's about to say so, but when he looks up, what comes out is—

"FUCKING CHRIST, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Gene pauses and looks up innocently, as if he hadn't been about to slice his thumb in half. "Hm?"

"Jesus, just—" Robert gets up from the counter with haste. "Hand over the knife. Slowly."

Because Gene may be wise beyond in his years in matters of the heart, but Robert has quickly come to learn that his boyfriend is *hopeless* in the kitchen. Like, unteachably hopeless. Like, 'how does someone who's watched that many hours of cooking shows try to cut an onion in his own damn hand?' hopeless.

Robert deftly relieves him of the knife, then brackets Gene's body between himself and the counter while he demonstrates how to chop an onion *on a fucking cutting board*.

Gene *ohhs* appreciatively, and Robert thinks there's about a 50/50 chance he'll remember this for next time.

"How did you get to be nearly forty years old without learning how to chop an onion?" Robert asks as he finishes the dicing, mostly to keep Gene from attempting it himself. "How did you *survive* to be nearly forty? By rights, there should be a Darwin award in your past by now."

Gene shrugs and settles himself complacently against Robert's chest. "Alex did the cooking, because he liked it and I'm really bad at it. I can clean a mean sink of dishes though." After a moment he adds, "I'm kind of surprised that you know how to cook."

"I saved Bobby Flay's life once—took a sharpened shallot-peeler to the back for him. He was so grateful he taught me everything he knew."

Or rather—that Marilyn took a dim view of the "make me a sandwich" school of matrimony, and when her dumb young husband couldn't pull his weight around the house, well, he learned. The real question is why *Alex* never taught Gene to fend for himself—but no

sooner does Robert wonder that than he has his answer: that Alex never thought Gene would have to.

Not a comfortable thought to linger on, so Robert pushes it aside in favor of a much better distraction close at hand: Gene resting against his chest, his hair soft and still slightly damp from the shower where it brushes against Robert's cheek. Robert finds himself turning his face inward, coasting his lips over Gene's temple, inhaling the scent of him and the smell of soap.

Robert lays the knife down on its side and settles his hands over Gene's hips, fingertips rubbing at the thin, silky material, and Jesus, Robert's felt *condoms* thicker than these ridiculous pants.

His hands coast lower, fingers sliding along the join of Gene's hip and then down his thighs. Gene's breathing has gone soft and shallow, his hands gripping the edge of the counter, holding himself very still for Robert's explorations, as if any sudden movement is going to break the spell.

Robert's already hard and he can't keep from rocking forward a fraction, pressing his cock into the cleft of Gene's ass. The sudden surge of pleasure catches him off-guard, nearly makes him groan aloud, a moment's relief followed by an immediate demand for more.

He grips Gene's thighs and pulls them together tightly, presses an open-mouthed kiss to the back of his neck, a kiss that has Gene sucking in a gasp and curling up against him. Gene's body is taut under Robert's hands, and the night of their near-miss is vivid in Robert's mind—Gene's soft, desperate little moans, his body working against him, his whispered *Robert, please*—

"Robert," Gene gasps. He's braced over the counter, open-mouthed and panting beneath Robert's body. "Unless—unless you're going to follow through, I need you to stop."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in through Robert's fog of arousal. Then he pauses, hands on Gene's thighs, lips pressed to the back of Gene's neck.

It's hard to think clearly when his downstairs brain has the wheel and wants to floor it (*and Gene said it first, follow through is an option here*). He doesn't want to stop, he *never* wants to stop, but that doesn't mean anything—Robert wants plenty of shit that's bad for him.

Gene's still counting on Robert to decide when it's the *right time*, and Robert has no idea what that 'right time' is supposed to look like, only the weary, frustrated acknowledgment that bending Gene over the kitchen counter for a quickie probably isn't it.

He exhales, presses an apologetic kiss to Gene's shoulder. Then he lets go and steps away, retreating back to the stool and his coffee.

It takes Gene a moment to recover, braced over the counter like he's mentally counting to ten. Then he lets out a deep breath and opens his eyes again, gropes around for the knife and tries to pick up where he left off with the omelets.

"Sorry," Robert feels compelled to say.

"I don't mind," Gene says amiably, his good cheer evidently recovered as he tips the onions into the pan. "It makes me feel young again. Like I'm back in high school."

Robert eyes him. "Having older men panting after your ass?"

"Hah, *if only*. When I was in high school I would have shanked someone to have an older man interested in me. I meant the constant, low-key sexual arousal—except high school wasn't nearly as fun, since I wasn't getting any action at all back then."

It should sound like a rebuke, but Robert's searching Gene's face and his tone and not finding any—Gene really does seem to be complacently amused about the whole thing. And it's hard to trust that he means it when he says things like this, that he's genuinely okay with Robert being weird and difficult, because *how*, but—

But Robert's been trying to make himself stop second-guessing Gene. That Gene's never given Robert any reason to doubt him, and there's nothing to be gained from doubting, *so just take him at his word, you dumb fucker*.

...It's a work in progress.

He becomes aware that Gene's paused in making breakfast and is just watching him, sipping coffee against the stove.

"What? Something on my face?" Robert jokes.

He's expecting banter in return, not for Gene to duck his gaze, almost guiltily. "Nothing."

And apparently the only thing more ominous than Gene *wanting to talk* is Gene *not* wanting to talk, because Robert feels his smile fading. "Gene?"

Gene bites his lip, and his eyes slide to Robert then away again. "I.. ." he begins, fiddling with his coffee. "I was just. I've been wondering if... if you'd ever actually had sex with a man before."

Robert blinks. "What?"

"I mean, I always assumed you had," Gene explains hastily. "Since you come on so strong, and you seemed perfectly comfortable with dating me. But then the other day I realized that you'd never actually *said*, and I started wondering if... if maybe that was why you've been reluctant to..." He gestures vaguely, and meets Robert's eyes with a helpless little shrug.

For a long, frozen moment, Robert can't do anything but stare at him. It's nearly as incomprehensible as if Gene had just said, *By the way, I never caught your name...?*—a fundamental reordering of everything that he'd thought was fixed in the universe, and—

"It's alright if you haven't," Gene hastens to assure him, plainly misunderstanding the look on his face. "I'm not trying to pressure you, I promise, I was just wondering—"

"How the *fuck*—" Robert manages, and Gene mercifully falls silent.

He finds himself turning away, because *how the fuck* does Gene not know that Robert spent the past four years sticking his dick in any trash-heap that gave him the green light? And yeah, he hadn't wanted to rub it in Gene's face, but it's not like he'd been trying to keep it a *secret*. Surely Gene had... heard, right?

For god's sake, *everyone* knows—how did Mary never mention it? Or Neil, or anybody, how come *Joseph* didn't see fit to drop that little gem in Gene's ear? How is Robert the one who has to break this to him? They've been dating for nearly nine months, how the *fuck* are they only having this conversation *now*?

Because he didn't ask, Robert thinks, with a brittle hilarity verging on hysteria, *and you didn't tell*.

"Gene." A short breath escapes him, almost a laugh of disbelief. "I was the goddamn town bicycle before you met me."

Now Gene's the one staring with blank incomprehension, the look on his face burning itself into Robert's mind before he has to turn away again.

And god, it is *unreal* that this is happening now—now, like this, in Gene's cheery kitchen with the onions sizzling on the stovetop, Gene in his ass-pants with a cup of coffee in hand. Like this is any other morning, not the car-crash moment when Robert gets to watch his whole life shatter in the blink of an eye.

"Jesus," Robert whispers. "How are you the last person to find out about this?"

"I... tried to avoid gossiping about you?" Gene offers in a small voice.

Of course he did. Sweet, thoughtful Gene, so considerate of Robert's privacy, so willing to let him keep his secrets, and Robert had thought that was a *blessing*, but all it means is that nobody else broke the news for him, and now Robert gets to watch every excruciating second of Gene's reaction.

"Gene." He swallows hard. "I went *off the rails* when Marilyn died." His chest has gone tight and cold, but he can't seem to stop talking because here they are, Gene's asking, and anything other than the full truth might as well be an outright lie. "There are bathhouses that have seen less man-on-man action than my bedroom. The dumpster behind Maple Bay's only gay bar has a tasteful plaque honoring my accom-

plishments. If grindr gave frequent-flyer miles, I'd have fucked my way to China and back. *Have I ever had sex with men*—Gene, my resume looks like the cast list from *300*, except longer and not as hot.”

...And he can plainly see that Gene doesn't know whether to believe him.

The look on Gene's face is one of dismay and uncertainty, one that says he's not sure what to make of this, can't tell whether Robert's pulling his leg, and *fucking hell*, that stings. That here's Robert, laying bare all the ugliest parts of his soul for judgment, and Gene doesn't even believe him, and *this is what you get for always being the boy who cried wolf*.

Gene tries on an uncomfortable smile. “I didn't realize there were that many queer men in Maple Bay.”

“Tourists,” Robert manages, though he can feel his throat starting to close up. “Lots of tourists, this area's crawling with them. Check the Lonely Planet guide for ‘Things To Do In The Bay,’ I've probably got a write-up.” He smiles tightly, spreads his hands. “Because it turns out it's really easy to get laid when you'll fuck literally anyone.”

And *that's* when Gene finally realizes that Robert's serious. Robert can see the moment it happens, the short breath Gene sucks in, eyes widening, and he feels a stab of vindictive satisfaction, *yeah, now you get it, this is what I am*, followed by a surge of nausea that threatens to choke him, because *what the fuck, Robert, what the fuck have you done*—

Gene looks away, blinking as he processes all that, then gives an uncertain nod. “Okay,” he says, a complex set of expressions shuttling over his face. “That's... okay.”

Robert can't watch this.

“I have to go.” He shoves himself upright and away from the counter.

That startles Gene back into the moment, his eyes snapping to Robert with sudden alarm, and he makes an abortive reach for him. “Robert, wait!—*shit*,” he hisses as the movement sends hot coffee

sloshing over his hand. He puts the mug down and grabs a dish towel, simultaneously trying to mop off his hand and hurry around the counter to intercept Robert before he can escape. "Robert it's fine!" Gene swears, frantic. "It's fine, I just—I wasn't expecting that, is all."

It's not fine, Robert thinks, I saw the look on your face.

Gene pauses, biting his lip, the expression that Robert's come to know as *about to mention Alex* and trying to gauge how it's going to be received.

"Alex..." he begins, and yep, there it is, "...also had a lot of partners before we met. It doesn't bother me, I promise."

Right, because Gene's type is human disasters. Except—

Except for that moment of blank shock when Gene realized that Robert wasn't kidding about having fucked half the state. It's a look that Robert hasn't seen on him before: Gene without a road map. Which makes Robert realize that Alex may have been a slut too, but—

"But I bet he wasn't fucked up about it, was he?"

Gene's face is unhappy, uncertain as he shakes his head.

Robert's jaw clenches. "Yeah. I need to go."

"Robert!" Gene starts, tries to grab his arm—

—and Robert flinches back, jerking out of Gene's reach, because *christ fuck, he cannot stand the thought of hands on him right now*, and—

Gene backs off instantly, palms raised, eyes wide and almost frightened. Like he thought Robert had been about to hit him, and Robert immediately feels like the shittiest person in creation.

He makes himself stop, squeezes his eyes shut and swallows hard. "I'm sorry. I just—I'd rather be alone right now," he manages.

Gene's visibly reluctant to let Robert leave, but after a moment he lets out a small breath and nods. "Okay."

There's a long, taut pause in which it seems like one or the other of them is going to say something more, but in the end Robert just turns and makes his escape.

He feels a little foolish the moment he's outside—because he didn't think this through, and it's cold and he's underdressed for the weather, and he's just running away again like he always does, and where does he even think he's going to go—but he also can't bring himself to turn around and go back inside either. He can't handle the thought of having to look Gene in the face and *talk* about this, of dragging those confessions out of his throat, raw and choking.

So he goes next door and lets himself into his own house for the first time in two weeks.

It's odd; nothing's changed, all the clutter in it untouched since Thanksgiving, but somehow it doesn't feel like the refuge that it used to. There's no sense of comfort here, no relief at being back in his own home. It just feels... dead, in a way he'd never noticed before; the dim, weighty silence like the inside of a tomb, and him like a ghost drifting between the dusty set pieces.

After two weeks in Gene's house, always full of warmth and light and *life*, it's hard to believe that he ever lived like this—hard to believe that he didn't go crazy in here, day after day, year after year, alone with the walls closing in. Hell, maybe he did. Maybe that's why he kept bringing people home even when he hated them, and hated himself for doing it—anything to drown out that godawful silence.

He wanders into the kitchen, finds half a pack of cigarettes abandoned on the counter and lights one up, for lack of anything better to do. The heat's been off for the past two weeks, and when he exhales, his breath blooms outward in a pale cloud.

He remembers the wide-eyed shock on Gene's face and feels his stomach twist. Remembers Gene recoiling, the split second when he looked at Robert like he didn't know him at all.

And suddenly he can't stand being here either. He feels like he's suffocating on the cold, stagnant air and the silence growing louder by the minute, the pressure in his head increasing. He pockets the ciga-

rettes, grabs another sweater to layer on beneath his jacket, and escapes again.

For lack of any real destination, he ghosts around the town on foot and methodically chain-smokes his way through the rest of the pack. Wandering is an old habit, one he hasn't felt driven to lately, not with Gene, but it comes back to him easily — walking endlessly beneath the gray winter sky, his path spiraling away from the quaint downtown until pavement turns into dirt roads and the pines overtake the houses. A form of solitude that's somehow less intolerable than being alone in his house, so long as he doesn't stop moving.

Usually he has Betsy for a companion when he does this—she's always ecstatic when Robert's demons send him roaming instead of crushing him under his own inertia—but she's back at Gene's house, and he's by himself.

(He thinks of Betsy, and Gene, *we could dress her up like a ladybug!*, a memory that feels like it happened a million years ago, and it's *so dumb* how the thought of that makes him want to cry. He wants to rewind back to that moment and stay there, stop the clock and never leave it.)

It's a weird flashback, in a way, to be walking these paths alone. A flashback to a time before he'd become friends with Mary, before she'd conned him into getting Betsy. Back when he made these walks with the knowledge that he was utterly alone in the world, that there was no one who would notice or care if he just laid down in a ditch and never got up again. Completely severed from the rest of humanity, his entire existence held within the confines of his body — such a strange apparatus of flesh and bone, fragile and finite.

But it's different now. He has Mary, he has Gene. He has Val again.

There are people who love him, even as he finds that baffling sometimes. People who *want him to be okay*, and sometimes it's easier to be okay for their sake than for his own.

Eventually he winds up at Jim and Kim's; not even a conscious decision, he just finds himself standing on the doorstep as twilight sinks into premature night. He pushes the door open and steps inside, feels the bright, dry warmth hit his face. His eyes immediately search for Gene, though he's not sure whether he's hoping to see him, or dreading it.

But Gene's not there. Neither is Mary, nor anyone else he'd be interested in talking to, just the usual suspects sprinkled around the room and Neil polishing shot glasses behind the bar. And Robert's not quite ready to go home and face the music yet, so he heads over to the bar; he'll have a drink or two, let that take the edge off first.

Neil gives him a nod. "Hey bud," he says, unusually talkative for him.

"Evenin'," Robert replies, settling himself on a bar stool. "Shot of whiskey—might as well make it a double."

Neil nods again, but then doesn't move to pour the drink, just keeps a steady eye on Robert and keeps polishing the glass. "Mary came through earlier looking for you," he says at last.

"Yeah?" Robert says warily.

"Yeah. *Three times.*"

Robert winces. Then can't keep himself from asking, "Did Gene?"

Neil shakes his head. "She left a while ago—had something to do at the church—but she said you could find her there." And then, pointedly, when Robert doesn't move: "You should go find her."

"Are you cutting me off already?" Robert asks, amused despite himself. This isn't the first time Neil's put an end to an evening, but it's the first time he's done it before Robert even got started.

Neil raises his brows. "Do I look fool enough to cross that lady?" Then he nods toward the door and says, more gently, "Go see Mary. The whiskey can wait."

And Robert thinks again: people who inexplicably care about him. Add Neil to that list, maybe.

He heads over to the church with a degree of trepidation, because the last thing he wants right now is to interact with the kind of *people* who hang out at churches, but it turns out to be empty—dark and shuttered except for one window lit up against the winter night.

He lets himself into the—chapel? Fuck if he knows what any of this shit is called—and finds Mary sitting on a central pew by herself, feet on the back of the seat in front her, playing a game on her phone.

She looks up when he enters, and he knows her well enough to recognize the flash of genuine concern on her face, sees her eyes moving over him as she takes stock of the shape he's in—then sees her tuck it all away and pull an ironic mask over her worry. Because she knows him too, knows how to tailor her support to something he can accept.

"Well, well," she says, pocketing her phone and taking her feet down. "Look what the cat dragged in."

"What are you doing here so late?" he asks, taking a seat next to her.

"It's five o'clock. And I'm waiting on the stupid truck that's supposed to come pick up the old desks from the Sunday school classroom." She eyeballs him. "What are *you* doing here so late?"

"Neil said I could find you here."

"Uh-huh. I meant, why are you skulking around like the ghost of Christmas past instead of holed up all nice and cozy with your boyfriend? He's been blowing up my phone asking after you."

Robert flicks his thumbs, watches them instead of Mary. "Did he tell you what happened?"

"No. He said it wasn't his place. Just that if I found you first, to tell you that he loves you, he's not mad, and he would feel a lot better if you would come home or at least call him," she recites, then pauses and looks at Robert. "So—whatever you did, it can't have been that bad."

Robert feels himself bite back a sigh, because of course Gene's not

mad—of course he’s just waiting for Robert to *get over himself* and come home already.

“Please tell me you confessed an embarrassing sexual fetish,” Mary says at his silence. “Spare no details, I could use the leverage.”

That startles a laugh out of Robert. “Yeah,” he says. “Turns out he’s not into the ol’ Frisky Frogman. Egg on *my* face, let me tell you.”

Mary snorts. “Bullshit. I’ve met your boyfriend, we both know he’d do way worse for you.”

She’s probably right, Robert reflects, considering how indulgent Gene is in everything else. But then the humor fades again, leaving her unspoken question still hanging in the silence.

Mary picks at her nail polish, then after a long moment says, “We don’t have to talk about it. Wait with me until the truck gets here, and then we can go break into the pet shelter and play with puppies. Help me pick one out for Gene, because I feel the time has come for him to get a dog, whether he knows it or not.”

Robert takes a deep breath. “I told Gene how many people I’d fucked before I met him.”

Mary goes silent, though he can feel her eyes on him.

“Mary, he *didn’t know*. He asked... fuck. He asked if I’d *ever had sex with a man before*. I don’t even—fucking christ, *everyone* knows. Robert Small, good for a good time! How did he manage to miss that?”

Mary leans her shoulder into his, a gentle pressure. “Believe it or not, this town does gossip about things other than you.”

“I thought for sure someone must have told him by now. That *Joseph* must have told him, when he had Gene at the bake sale. God, how did he resist? It’s low-hanging fruit—‘Yeah, that Robert guy you’re panting after? He’s just a—a cheap piece of trash that’s been passed around this town like a *fucking party platter*—’”

“Honey, that’s not true,” she interrupts firmly.

“*It feels true.*”

She says nothing for a long moment, then, “So what did Gene say?”

Robert makes himself take a deep breath and straighten in his seat. "That it was fine. That it was just a surprise." He feels his jaw tighten, shakes his head. "I don't know why I freaked out."

"Because he means a lot to you," Mary says reasonably. "Of course you were worried about how he'd take it."

"No. He was already trying to tell me it didn't bother him." The sharp edge of his anxiety has worn off, and its absence just leaves him feeling tired. "Apparently the sainted Alex was also a slut, Gene's fine with that part."

And Robert still doesn't know how he feels about the parallels between himself and Alex. Sometimes it seems like he can't do anything without finding out that Alex beat him to it, but it's also a relief to have tangible reassurance that his crazy isn't going to drive Gene away. It gives him something to cling to when his doubts start spiraling dark and toxic, to remind himself that *Alex was fucked-up too, and Gene still loved him to distraction.*

Alex is the whole reason why Gene knows how to handle Robert's shit, and honestly, Robert should just be glad that *one* of them knows what they're doing.

"He's fine with it," Robert says again. "But I... I wasn't."

He feels like he's finally reached the crux of the matter, the understanding that he's spent all day trying to outrun.

"It was like... like I hadn't just been lying to Gene all these months, I'd also been lying to myself. About what kind of person I really am."

"Robert..."

"With Gene... I got to pretend like I was someone else. Someone better. For the first time in my life, I was doing everything right. I was being a good boyfriend. I was being a good dad. I got to pretend like I'd never been... *that.*"

And it'd been easy to let himself forget, because *everything* was different with Gene, nothing at all to remind him of his life before. That now there was light instead of darkness, love instead of loneliness, that

touch had become a casual intimacy. He'd made a clean break from everything in his past, and if staying celibate was what it cost to keep those worlds separate, to keep from sliding back into those old bad habits and ruining everything precious to him, then Robert would do it, and gladly.

"I'd managed to forget about it—until suddenly I'm having to look Gene in the face and spell out for him exactly what kind of tramp he'd pulled out of the gutter. And then it all came slamming back, like nothing had changed at all, and I'd been fooling myself if I thought I could be anything else."

He remembers those lost years as something dreamlike now—a blur of endless night, of neon and alcohol, strangers' bodies and strangers' faces. The moments of terrible, staggering clarity in between the highs, when he understood the full measure of how meaningless his life had become—nothing but a past strewn with wreckage and a future as empty as staring into the sun. Every day the same cycle, wallowing in his own filth and in the vices he couldn't control, hating himself for it but helpless to change. No pleasure, no peace, except in escapism.

Was it any wonder he'd been so eager to shed that skin?

"Being reminded of that felt like a slap in the face. It'd been so long since I felt that way, I forgot what it was like. I don't *feel like that* when I'm with Gene. Gene makes me feel... like I'm someone worth having around."

"*You are,*" Mary says, quiet but fierce. "You always have been. And I'm glad he finally got you to see it too."

Robert doesn't have an answer to that. For perhaps the first time in his life, he truly doesn't know what to believe about himself. That there's the man from his past, wretched and selfish and circling the drain, and the man he is with Gene, someone worth loving, worth *being*—and he has no idea which of them is more truly him.

"I don't know," he says at last. "I don't know what I am."

"You're a good man, Robert." The same simple faith that Gene always places in him, firm and unhesitating. "You deserve someone who loves you. You deserve to be happy."

That's easier to believe when he's with Gene—hard to hold onto when he's alone, all his doubts creeping back when Gene's not there to hold them at bay.

"I shouldn't have run out on him," Robert admits. "He would have been able to talk me down, talk some sense into me. It just... caught me off-guard. I wasn't expecting to have that thrown in my face again, I wasn't ready for it."

He sighs, finds himself coming back once again to the same helpless refrain that's been playing in his head all day. "I just thought he *knew*," Robert says quietly. "I thought he had to. About Joseph, at the very least—I never told him, but he always seemed to... get it. I could have sworn he'd put the pieces together by now."

Mary's silent for a long moment, and then she says, "I'm sorry, Robert."

It's unexpected—feels almost like a non-sequitur—and he's about to ask what she's talking about, when—

"I'm sorry I let him do that to you."

The words die on Robert's lips and he feels himself freeze—because they've never, ever talked about this before, and christ, this is just a day for dredging the bodies from the lake, isn't it.

He drops his eyes to his hands, because apparently he can't look at her for this either. "Mary," he begins, halting and awkward. "It's not your fault, what he does."

"No," she acknowledges tiredly. "But I could have stopped it. I could have warned you better."

He can hear it in her voice, the age and the weight of that guilt—no longer a sharp recrimination, but something closer to exhaustion, guilt revisited so often that it's been worn smooth.

And maybe Robert's finally gotten enough distance from it, or

maybe he's just used up his supply of emotions for the day, but the panic he expects to feel—old and instinctive by now—somehow isn't coming. His lungs continue to push air in and out; his heart beats steadily in his chest.

It's a precarious calm, but a calm nonetheless.

He wets his lips. "You did warn me." There it is; they're really, finally talking about this. "I just didn't want to listen."

"No. I could have tried harder. I could have *made* you listen."

"Mary..." He shakes his head. "I was never going to believe you." *Not after the things he'd said about you.* "I wanted it too much."

She gives a bitter laugh. "You think I didn't have proof? I could have shown you the receipts. I could have made you believe it, whether you wanted to or not.

"But no—I just stood back and let it happen. Thought I'd let you *learn your lesson*," she bites out. "Let him bruise your ego a bit, that it'd be what you deserved." Her expression crumples. "But you didn't deserve what he did to you."

Yes, I did. "And yet none of it would have happened if I'd had the decency to keep my hands off a married man."

Mary looks up, her expression horrified. "Oh honey, *no*," she whispers. "You can't blame yourself. He's too good at what he does, and he took advantage of you at the most defenseless moment of your entire life." She searches his face, then softens and tells him, almost gently, "You never stood a chance."

He can feel the protest rising in his mind, immediate and instinctive—because god knows he'd like to deny responsibility for that, but it's not true. The affair with Joseph was a mistake, yes, a stupid and a selfish one, but it was still *the choice he made*. There was no gun to Robert's head, nothing to keep him from walking away—just his own weakness, his own willful blindness, and how desperate he was for the promise in what Joseph offered.

If he'd been stronger, smarter, he would have known that he wasn't

going to find redemption in a sleazy extramarital affair, he wouldn't have been so humiliatingly eager to put himself in Joseph's thrall. He would have held firm to his own convictions, to the knowledge that *this is wrong*, wouldn't have let Joseph's silver tongue rewrite his reality—

The most defenseless moment of your entire life.

It's hard to even remember the immediate aftermath of Marilyn's death, separate from Joseph's involvement. The picture in Robert's memory is of himself stumbling through the motions, scarcely able to believe that it was real, that she was *gone*; the fights with Val that he seemed to watch at a remove, an emotional tempest viewed through a long lens. Like Robert was dead too, with nothing more than detached curiosity for the antics of the living.

And when he turned around, Joseph was there, as if he always had been.

That overnight, Joseph went from being a slightly off-putting stranger to being the center of Robert's world—his anchor, his lodestone, the only person who'd ever truly understood him—

You never stood a chance.

Robert closes his eyes, breathes out.

It's a new shame, breaking over him now—the shame of having been so stupid, so *helpless*. And he knows, bone-deep, that what Mary's saying is true, but he can still feel the struggle to insist that *no, it was on me, because if it was my mistake, then I could keep it from happening again, I learned my lesson, I wouldn't do that again*—

Instead of the creeping fear that he's just as vulnerable as ever.

"And I knew that," she admits quietly. "I knew you had no idea what you were getting yourself into. I knew you were going to get hurt. I just—didn't know how badly.

"If I'd known that he would—" she breaks off, then grits her jaw and forces herself to keep going. "If I'd known he was going to be... *different* with you, I swear to you, I would have stopped him.

“But I didn’t,” she finishes. “I let it happen. And you’re the one who paid the price for it. And I’d give anything to go back in time and set things right, but I can’t, and now you have to live with it for the rest of your life. And I will never, ever be able to make that up to you, and I am so goddamned sorry, Robert.”

It’s the first time anyone’s ever acknowledged that *something happened* there, something wrong. That it wasn’t just an affair that fizzled out, tawdry and unremarkable, but something much darker and more complex, more calculated.

Because Robert’s wondered about that for a long time—when he’s watching the fallout from Joseph’s other affairs, or rather, the lack of it. Seeing everyone else just *walk it off* somehow, never anything more to show for it than a faint grimace, like a bad taste that lingers; that somehow it doesn’t *fuck them up* the way it fucked up Robert.

Robert, the outlier that he’s always been, with no understanding of *why*.

And Robert’s torn between absolute certainty, *whatever he did to them wasn’t what he did to you*, and the sliver of lingering doubt he can never quite banish, the whisper that says, *are you sure it wasn’t just you, all in your fucked-up head?*

(*are you sure he knew what he was doing, are you sure he meant to do it, are you sure—*)

Because even now, there’s no clear, single moment he can point to that was unequivocally *wrong*, that would *prove* Joseph had been doing it on purpose when he methodically pushed Robert past every breaking point. Robert can’t articulate it, even to himself, can’t wrap his mind or his words around *what happened* there. That at the time he *thought he was happy*, and yet every memory of that affair is threaded with unease, with the smell of rot lurking beneath the surface.

Different with you.

It’s almost vindicating; terrible, but at the same time, grim proof that *he wasn’t wrong*, that it wasn’t just his imagination. And it’ll still

never answer the question of *why*— why him, why do that to someone at all—but it's a relief to know that he wasn't wrong, wasn't crazy, that his senses weren't lying to him.

"It wasn't all him," Robert says at last. "I was fucked up long before he arrived on the scene."

"Not like this. You wouldn't have wound up... like this." She sighs, shakes her head. "Sometimes I think... what if Gene had been the one to catch you after Marilyn died. Instead of Joseph."

Robert sucks in a sharp, shallow breath, the image of that piercing him like a knife through the heart.

Because—*christ*. So much misery; so much heartbreak. And all of it could have been avoided if one, well-placed pebble had been there to change the course of the flood.

For a split second he can see it, in his mind's eye, the life he didn't get to live: a life where he'd had Gene to lean on in his grief, someone to shield him from Joseph's predatory attention; a life where he never sank into desperation and excess, where none of that darkness ever touched him. He wants it so much that the thought of it *hurts*, hurts like a physical pain, like a longing for something precious that was stolen from him—

And then all at once he's back in the present, sitting in the cold church with Mary at his side. Mary, who kept him alive, who kept him *sane*. His most important friend—for a long time, his only friend.

A friend he never would have had at all, if not for Joseph and the terrible chain of events that threw them into each other's orbit.

And for the first time, he wonders: if he could erase Joseph from his history, erase that pain and erase the damage that man did to him—would he do it?

If it came at the cost of his friendship with Mary, *would he do it?*

There were years when he would have taken that bargain in a heartbeat—when the despair was still cavernous and raw, unendurable, with no end in sight. When it felt like all his choices were be-

hind him, and he couldn't imagine a future that held any kind of happiness. He would have given anything to undo that one fatal mistake, the choice that had set him on a course there was no coming back from.

But... he did find his way back, in the end. And he doesn't regret where he is now, even if the path to get here was a long and brutal one.

Robert swallows over the tightness in his throat. "But then I wouldn't have you for a friend."

Mary shakes her head at him, furiously blinking back tears. "That is the *shittiest* consolation prize I've ever heard of—" Her voice breaks and she turns away, pressing the heel of her hand to her face. "You should have taken the lifetime supply of cat food."

"Betsy does love cat food," Robert reflects. "But, all things considered..." He turns, steels himself to lift his eyes and look at her. "I'm glad I wound up with you. You're... the best friend I've ever had."

The raw honesty scrapes over his throat, and he *shouldn't feel this vulnerable* saying that, because it's true, and she deserves to hear it, but at the same time, these are uncharted waters for the two of them. Theirs has never been a friendship of shared confidences; it's always been about the things they didn't have to tell each other.

Mary looks over at him, glassy-eyed and skeptical.

"You got a raw deal," she says hoarsely.

"No." He shakes his head, makes himself hold her gaze. "I didn't. You're my best friend, and I wouldn't trade that for anything."

He takes a breath, then solemnly holds out a fist for her to bump.

Mary looks at it like she can't tell whether to laugh or cry; she makes a noise that's a little of both, then knocks her knuckles against his and tips forward to lean into his shoulder. He can feel her shaking when he puts an arm around her, and pulls her against him tightly.

"I'm sorry, Robert," she whispers.

He rubs a hand over her back. "So am I."

"I wish I'd done more for you."

"It's okay." And as he says it, he realizes that it's *true*. "I'm okay now."

He is; he survived. The memory of that affair had lingered like an unhealed wound for *years*, but somewhere along the line, some time during these past months, it finally closed, and he hadn't even noticed. Pressing at it now, he feels a twinge of anger, of regret, but it doesn't overwhelm him, doesn't define him.

It's *over*, in a way it never was before.

"I'm happy now," he says quietly. "I really am."

He is happy, *he is loved*.

The spectre of Joseph doesn't choke him like it once did, doesn't make his mind seize with unreasoning panic. It's just... a thing that happened. It's not important—not like Gene is, not like Mary is.

They are what matters to him now. And somehow the acknowledgment of that makes it easier to breathe, to relax into her. To let them just lean on each other in the stillness.

Some time later, Mary's phone issues a loud, sudden chirp, making both of them jump. Robert gives a small laugh, awkward now that the moment's been broken, and untangles from her so she can dig out her phone.

"That's the truck," Mary announces. "Says they're almost here." She pockets her phone again and looks at him. "So, you still want to stick around for dogs afterward?"

Robert takes a deep breath, rubs the back of his neck. "Rain check?" he offers. "I think... I think it's time I headed home. Pretty sure I owe Gene an apology."

Mary snorts. "That's funny, because he seems to think he owes *you* an apology." She gives him a long, measuring look, and then nods. "Yeah. You kids are gonna be just fine."

"And you?"

Because Robert may have gotten his happily-ever-after—but Mary

still goes back to that house at the end of every day. She never got to escape, not like Robert did.

She summons up a tired smile, shrugs. "I'll get by. I always do."

And it hurts to see that resignation, hurts to know that there's nothing he can do for her—

"This weekend," he blurts out. "I'll give Gene the slip, we can sneak off and go look at dogs."

It's such a small, helpless gesture—so terribly inadequate to the never-ending war that rages in her life—and Robert feels it keenly that this is all he has to offer her, just a few hours away from that.

Mary's smile softens, and it touches her eyes this time.

"Deal," she says. "Though if you try to make me fistbump again, I'm giving you the cut direct."

"That's reasonable," Robert allows. It's bro-cultural appropriation anyway.

There's a honk from outside. Mary heaves a slightly irritated sigh and runs her hands over her face, over her hair, smoothing away any errant signs of emotion and replacing it with her usual mask. Then she looks over at Robert, and smirks.

"Well? What are you waiting for, nerd? Go home and kiss your boyfriend already."

And there's—so much that still feels unsaid. So much between them that they've barely scratched the surface of, and it feels like leaving things incomplete to just walk away, but... maybe that's enough for one day.

Small steps, same as with Val. That it's going to take more than one day, one conversation, to unpack years of heartbreak.

"Yeah," he says at last. He tosses her a salute, feels himself smile. "On my way, chief."

Love Like Light



When Robert lets himself into the house that evening, it's Betsy who comes skidding up to greet him, barking and jumping around his feet in a spirited attempt to trip him. Good to know he's still her favorite, despite Gene's illegal campaign contributions.

He shucks off his jacket and then crouches down to pet her.

"What's that, sweetheart?" he asks, rubbing her belly while she falls over herself with joy. "Gene's been ignoring you *all day*? He hasn't fed you in *weeks*?"

In the corner of his eye he sees Gene step into the hallway and stop some distance off.

"Don't believe her, she lies like a rug," Gene says, rocking on the balls of his feet.

And since it's gotta happen sooner or later, Robert makes himself let go of Betsy and stand up to face Gene.

Gene doesn't look angry (*and you knew he wouldn't be*), just careful, like he's not sure how to approach Robert without scaring him off again. Like he doesn't know whether to address the elephant in the room, or ignore it and pretend like nothing happened. For that matter,

neither does Robert, so there's a long moment while they just measure each other up across the room.

Then Robert sniffs the air, feels his nose wrinkle. "Smells like bacon. And... burning plastic."

"Aha, yeah." Gene laughs a bit, ducks his head in chagrin. "I, uh, decided to cook something to distract myself. But then I got distracted from the cooking and accidentally started a grease fire. Just a small one! Don't worry, Amanda showed me how to deal with those. So I put it out and started over again, but this time I turned on the wrong burner and accidentally melted a spatula on the stove. That was when I gave up and decided not to try for a third time, because clearly this was an inauspicious day for cooking, and also I'm out of spatulas."

Robert wonders what he could bribe Gene with to stay out of the kitchen, preferably forever.

"So then I tried to order Thai food," Gene continues. "I figured I'd get dinner for both of us and just put yours in the fridge until you got back. But I think they got my order mixed up with someone else's, because I realized too late that they'd brought me fifty spring rolls and nothing else." He gives a shaky laugh. "It's been... a day."

Which is when Robert realizes that Gene's not looking so hot either—like he's holding it together by his fingernails, in fact—and Gene's keeping his distance, giving Robert space, but—

Robert opens his arms, like a question, like an offer, and it's with visible relief that Gene closes the distance between them and sinks into him.

"Today sucked," Gene says into his shoulder, muffled.

"Yeah. Cancel it and call a do-over?" Robert offers roughly.

"Yes, *please*."

They're silent for a moment, and then Robert sighs. "I'm sorry I ran out on you earlier."

"I knew you'd be back eventually," Gene says, though it sounds like bravado. "I had your dog hostage."

And Gene is still way, way too quick to forgive, but it's not like Robert can exactly complain about that—all he can do is try to be worth all the second chances.

...Which is when Robert's stomach decides to break up the moment and start complaining loud enough to be heard in the next county over. It reminds Robert that nothing's passed his lips today but coffee and cigarettes, and it makes Gene draw back, laughing a little.

"Are you hungry?" Gene asks brightly. "Could I perhaps interest you in some... *spring rolls*?"

Robert presses a kiss behind Gene's ear before letting go. "Gene, I would kill a man for some spring rolls right now."

They head into the kitchen and Robert sits down at the counter while Gene gets plates for the food. He finds his phone sitting right where he left it that morning, next to a stone-cold cup of coffee and blinking the light for unread messages.

They're from Gene, of course. A cluster of frantic texts that make Robert's stomach clench around another spike of guilt.

He looks over to Gene digging around in the fridge—like everything's forgiven already, like Robert didn't just fuck off and leave him to spend all day worrying by himself.

"They came with two kinds of dipping sauce, a peanut satay and this spicy mayonnaise monstrosity that I actually kind of like..." Gene trails off when he looks up and finds Robert watching him, phone in hand, and sobers at whatever he sees on Robert's face. "Oh. Yeah. I sent those before I realized you'd forgotten your phone."

Robert doesn't have a response except another useless *sorry*, so he says nothing.

Gene sets the box of takeout on the counter and comes around to stand in front of him. Slowly, carefully, telegraphing his movements, he settles his hands on the sides of Robert's neck and then slides them upwards, his fingertips rubbing gentle circles into Robert's scalp.

Robert still can't unwind, but he tips his head forward to rest against Gene's chest, tries to breathe deep.

"I won't say it doesn't matter," Gene says quietly. "Because obviously it matters to you. But I love you, and I think the world of you, and learning this doesn't change a thing." He pauses, scratches thoughtfully at Robert's head, then adds, "Although you should probably go in for a checkup at some point."

"Jesus." Robert gives an unsteady laugh and leans more of his weight into Gene. He can feel the urge to laugh, a flutter like hysteria, because yep, that's Gene alright, that's his boyfriend, always sensible in the face of Robert's histrionics. "Is there *anything* that would be a deal-breaker for you?"

"Cruelty," Gene answers easily, running his fingers through Robert's hair. "Dishonesty." He considers it for another moment, then adds, "Apathy, I suppose. But none of those are your sins. You just... have trouble doing things in moderation sometimes."

Understatement of the fucking century, right there. But Robert's got no answer to that either, so he just lets Gene pet him.

They eventually migrate back to the living room to eat, curling up on the couch together in front of some Nature Channel special, *Cats That Can't Catch Butterflies: EPIC CATTERFLY FAILS!!!!* —rather hypnotic, even though the title's done away with any suspense. Gene doesn't try to make conversation, just tucks himself against Robert's side and lets the quiet prevail.

Robert can feel the conversation that's in the offing—the elephant in the room that still hasn't gone anywhere—and Gene would probably tell him that they don't have to talk about it now if he's not ready, but they really, really do. He knows himself, knows that if he lets this get back-burnered (which is goddamn tempting, no lie), then he's never going to work up the nerve to bring it up again later.

He draws in a breath. "It was after Marilyn died." And suddenly

it's critical that Gene knows that—"I never cheated on her. Hell, it was about the one thing I *didn't* do wrong as a husband."

Robert can feel the change in Gene's body, the slight pause as he goes alert and listening.

"But after she was gone, well. Why the fuck not, right?" He twitches a shrug. "If someone in a bar wanted to fuck, it wasn't like I had anything better on offer. Men, women, I didn't care, I just thought—I thought, anything had to be better than being alone in that house."

Gene reaches up and lays his palm flat over Robert's heart, pressing down and rubbing in slow circles. It makes Robert realize how constricted his chest had gotten, and he makes himself release the breath trapped there.

"It wasn't, though," he admits. "It just made me feel worse."

And worse still when he graduated from bar-hookups to grindr, and finished stripping the last shreds of human connection from those encounters. Not even the illusion of intimacy anymore, of getting to know someone for half an hour before taking them home—just an endless supply of bodies on call, faceless and interchangeable.

He wraps his hand around Gene's, clutches it like a lifeline. "But I *kept doing it*. Even when I knew it wasn't going to help, and I knew I was just going to feel like shit afterwards, I kept doing it, kept chasing one meaningless fuck after another. Like I couldn't make myself stop."

Like the booze—a compulsion, then a short high followed by a brutal hangover. Robert tries to avoid that sort of trite psychoanalysis, but some comparisons are too obvious to be overlooked.

Robert closes his eyes, jaw tight. "I lost count before Marilyn had even been dead a year. And then it felt like there was no point even trying to stop. Why bother, right? The damage was already done."

"Oh, sweetheart," Gene whispers.

"I stopped when I met you." And with those words, his breathing loosens; the story becomes easier to tell just for having Gene in it, the light at the end of the tunnel. "Quit cold turkey. It wasn't on purpose."

You'd already shot me down, I didn't think I was holding out for you. I just... I couldn't do it anymore."

Not when he had something to compare it to. When he couldn't get Gene out of his head, couldn't even chat up some flirty barfly without remembering Gene's summery smile, without remembering what it felt like for this to *mean something*. And suddenly he couldn't even make himself go through the motions anymore.

Grindr was even worse. The first time he'd tried using it after Gene, he'd nearly thrown up—all the disgust with himself that he'd become numb to over the years suddenly sharp like bile in his throat.

And the second time he tried was the last. He remembers sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at the phone in his hand and thinking, with terrible clarity, *If this is all you have, you might as well just hang yourself right now*.

So he'd closed out of the app and deleted it for good. At the time he hadn't even known what that would mean for him, since Gene had still seemed like an impossible fantasy back then—but nonetheless, something had changed, irrevocably, and he couldn't go on like that anymore.

Gene's silent for a minute, then says, "That does explain some things. I was thinking about it while you were out—like, I hadn't put it together before, but you've always been kind of... zero-to-sixty when things start to get steamy. Like you don't know how to go any other speed."

Robert snorts. "That's me, the Formula One of fucks."

Gene gives him a reproachful poke. "I was also thinking about what you said back in August—about how you used to lose interest in people after you'd had sex with them. That it was why you were afraid to have sex with me, because you didn't want to risk losing what we had. And I believed you, of course, but I don't think I understood quite what that meant. I thought you just wanted more time to get to know

me first—not that love and sex had somehow gotten entirely disconnected for you.”

Somehow—Robert knows how.

“It makes me glad we didn’t rush into anything,” Gene reflects. “And gives me chills, a bit, thinking about some of those near-misses.”

Robert’s silent for a long moment, then wets his lips and says, “The night you slept over at my place. When I came back early from New York.”

He feels Gene freeze, and has to force himself to keep going.

“We didn’t stop because you fell asleep. We stopped because I—” he struggles for words, and then huffs out a breath in frustration. “I don’t know. I *wanted* to—god, I wanted you so bad—but I just... I panicked. I left you there and went downstairs. By the time I got back you were passed out.”

Gene makes a pained sort of groan and mashes his forehead into Robert’s shoulder. “Shit. I *knew* I’d done something that night. Robert, I am so, so sorry.”

Robert rubs his hair. “It’s fine. You stopped as soon as I—asked you to. Apparently you’re a perfect gentleman even when you’re shitfaced-drunk. And I told you, I wanted it too, but...”

There’s a pause, and then Gene prompts, “But?”

He sighs. “I don’t know. It was too much like every other time I’d fucked someone in that room. I didn’t want it to be like that with you. I wanted you to be different.” He closes his eyes, lets his fingers coast over Gene’s hair. “You *are* different.”

Gene is very quiet, for a very long time, and then he says, in an oddly muted tone, “That’s kind of the problem, isn’t it.”

Robert feels a sudden frisson of unease. “What?”

Gene sighs, then pushes himself out of Robert’s arms, sitting up and putting his feet on the floor. “You put me on a pedestal,” he admits reluctantly. “And that’s partly my fault, because I let you do it, but—Robert, at the end of the day, I’m only human too. You treat me like I’m

this—" he gropes for words, "—pure and perfect, untouchable idol, like I can do no wrong. And it's very flattering, which is why I didn't try to stop you, but then it's like you're afraid I'm going to break if you handle me too roughly. You're so terrified of screwing up that you can't just relax and treat me like a *person*. I'm really not that special—no different from the people you hooked up with before. I saw you in a bar, and chatted you up because you were hot. *You* were the one who needed me to be different," he says, agitation rising. "You—"

He cuts himself off short, then lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry," he says, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'm not mad, I'm just... still wrapping my head around this."

"Like—I thought I'd figured it out. That you didn't want to have sex with me because you'd never had gay sex before, or because you were attracted to men romantically, but not sexually, or—something. And I'd told myself I was okay with that—if that was who you were, if that was what you wanted, then I could work with that, because being with you was worth it." He tips his head back, breathing unevenly, and Robert realizes with sudden horror that Gene's been blinking back tears. "But now I find out that you'll fuck loads of men. Just... not me. And that's not a good feeling."

"Gene—" Robert sits up rapidly, heart hammering in his chest, because *no no no, you said it was fine*, and this is exactly why he hadn't wanted to have this conversation, because he still can't explain why he could fall into bed with any random asshole, but can't figure out how to fuck Gene when he's dying of a hard-on. "It's not like that—" he manages. "It's not because... it's..."

"It's not because you like me *less* than your three-hundred, I know," Gene fills in tiredly when Robert runs out of words. "*I know*. You worship me, you adore me—but you don't want to have sex with me. And I am *trying* not to take that personally, because it's clear that you didn't even really enjoy all that sex, and I shouldn't be jealous of those other people, but—"

"I do!" Robert insists desperately. "Christ, I do, how have you not noticed that? Gene..."

He's scooted forward, pressing himself against Gene's back, one hand curled desperately around Gene's waist, pressing his face into the curve of Gene's neck. Because Robert's never been good with words, not when it matters, but surely Gene can *feel* the truth in this, can feel how much Robert wants him—

"Robert, just stop," Gene says tightly, and Robert freezes. "Stop trying to push yourself into this. You don't have to do this to make me stay. I told you—I can deal with a celibate relationship. What I can't deal with is you just saying what you think I want to hear."

"I'm not—" A flicker of anger beneath the frustration, and he takes his hands off Gene, sitting back. "Do you seriously think I'm *lying* to you about this?"

"And what am I supposed to think?" Gene demands, finally rounding on him with heat of his own. "You just got through telling me that you spent *years* having sex and all it did was make you miserable. And now with me, you're always making the first move, but then you always, *always* back down before you have to go through with it."

"I didn't back down, I stopped because you told me to, *every time!* You're the one who always says no, christ, if you'd ever just said *yes*—"

"How can I!" Gene bursts out. "How can I say yes to you, when you can't say no to me?" There's a beat of breathless silence, as if he startled himself with that outburst, and then he relents slightly. "You can't, Robert. You never have. You'd do anything to make me happy, and I love you for it, but I have *watched* you force yourself into things you're not comfortable with, because you knew it was what I wanted, and I am not going to let you force yourself through sex the same way."

"I'm not some fucking child, that you have to protect me from myself!" Robert says hotly. "And I can goddamn well say no! I told you, I did, the night you slept over at my place—"

“—When we started to get hot-and-heavy and it gave you a *panic attack*?” Gene interrupts. “*That time?*”

Gene forcibly bites back whatever he might have said next, then closes his eyes, fists clenched at his knees. He lets out a breath. “Look,” he says, striving for calm. “It’s been a long day. Let’s just—go to bed. We can talk about this tomorrow, after we’ve both had a chance to calm down.”

He pushes himself up off the couch and heads toward the bedroom, but Robert’s blood is up, unwilling to let it go, and he vaults to his feet after Gene, catching him in just a few strides. “Hey! Gene! *Gene!*”

In his desperation to make Gene just stop and goddamn *listen*, he catches him by the arm and pushes him up against the side of the hallway. As soon as he does it, he has a split second of panic, because *shit-fuck* he forgets sometimes how much stronger he is than Gene, and he’s never wanted to use that to intimidate him, but—

Gene goes lax under his hands almost immediately, eyes wide and startled but unafraid, his body pliant in Robert’s grip. It’s a surrender that gives off a whole different set of signals to Robert’s hindbrain and he’s momentarily distracted, feels his hands flex over Gene’s shoulders with unconscious intent.

“You don’t—” He’s breathing hard, struggling to organize his thoughts when his blood is racing and his body is exquisitely conscious of Gene. “*Yes*, I’ve made some mistakes, but I’m not so *fucking crazy* that I don’t know what I want. And I’ve wanted you—” His voice breaks and he bows his head over Gene’s shoulder, his breath shuddering in the air trapped between them. “I’ve been wanting you since the first night I met you.”

Gene doesn’t speak, though after a moment he lifts a hand and brings it to rest gently on Robert’s waist, like an apology.

“You were so bright,” Robert whispers. He closes his eyes and leans in, feeling the crush of Gene’s hair against his lips, the slim solidity of him cradled against Robert’s chest. In his memory he can see Gene in

the bar again, haloed in neon lights. “So beautiful. The way you smiled at me, like I was the most amazing thing you’d ever seen. I wanted to kiss you right there in that bar, wanted it so badly it was all I could think about.” Robert drags his thumb down the line of Gene’s neck, watches it trace that curve and come to rest in the hollow of his throat. “I wanted to take you home with me. I wanted to see you in my bed, and touch you, and—”

Then a breath escapes him, and he feels his shoulders sink.

“But you said no,” he finishes helplessly. “You’ve *always* said no. Christ, Gene, what do I have to do to make you say *yes*—”

Gene’s breath hitches, and Robert can’t tell which of them moves first, but in the next moment his mouth is on Gene and they’re kissing, desperate and devouring, clinging to each other as if they’re about to be ripped apart.

There are sparks going off behind his eyelids, and it feels like the first time all over again—like nothing’s changed since that first time he finally, finally got to kiss Gene, when for one brief, shining moment he had *Gene* in his arms, light exploding against the darkness of his life—

—Until Gene put a gentle hand to his chest, put that distance between them, and said, *Robert, I want this as badly as you do, but I need to know that you’re okay.*

And god, he wasn’t, he wasn’t at all, and it’s like they never really recovered from that first false start, never figured out how to close that gap again. Nine months of missteps, missed connections, when all Robert ever wanted was this: Gene pulling him closer instead of pulling away, not letting go and not holding back.

Robert can’t keep his hands from trying to touch every inch of Gene, hungry for *more, closer, everything*. He groans when he drags his fingers up the back of Gene’s thigh, the thin, silky material more of a tease than any sort of barrier, and feels the muscles tighten as Gene surges up into him eagerly.

Robert lets his palms drop to cup the globes of Gene’s ass, gives

them a hard squeeze and pulls Gene tight against him. God, that glorious ass that's been a constant tease for weeks—it's magnificent under his hands, he wants to keep working it like this forever, wants to *bury* himself in it. Gene's back is flat against the wall, head tilted up to let Robert mouth along the line of his throat, and he can feel the vibration of Gene's soft, desperate little moans against his lips.

Robert grinds his hips into Gene, pressure and pleasure that briefly sate him; he can feel Gene's cock against his thigh, hard and utterly unimpeded by the pants, and he breaks off so he can look down and drink in the sight of it—the pants clinging around it so tightly that his eyes can trace the length of the shaft, the bulge of the head.

His hand is hovering just a few inches off, dying to touch, but touching with intent is a line they still haven't quite crossed yet. He finds himself touching Gene's thighs instead, running his hand between them up and down the inseam, each time stopping just short, while his brain tries to find the words to ask, *Is this alright, can I touch, can I, I want to—*

"I want to suck your cock," he rumbles against Gene's neck, feels Gene give a jolt when the words land.

"Erk—" Gene chokes out. "Ah?"

"Please," Robert breathes into his skin. "Let me do it."

"I am," Gene pants. "Uh. Not—equipped to be—the voice of reason right now..." His hands are fisted tight in Robert's shirt and there's a quality in his voice that sounds close to breaking, and *oh*, but Robert wants to hear that control break.

"You don't have to be, just." Robert closes his teeth over the skin of Gene's neck, then laves it with his tongue, reveling in the clean, salty scent of him. "Let me, please. I want to taste you. I want my mouth on you, I want to lick you and suck you and swallow you down—"

"Jesus, *yes*," Gene gasps out.

Robert's dropping to his knees before the word is barely out of Gene's mouth, fingers hooked around the waistband of the pants and

yanking them down like he's tearing open a present. Gene's cock springs free, gorgeous, and Robert's planting his hands on Gene's hips and sinking down on it in a single exhale.

"*Ohh,*" Gene breathes shakily above him, his hand fluttering lightly over Robert's head. "Oh, Robert."

It's the culmination of months of pent-up desire, everything he'd been wanting—Gene's voice in his ears, plaintive with need, breathy with pleasure, while Robert gorges himself on the taste of him, the feel of his body, drinks in the rich scent of him. Robert could lose himself in the ecstasy of pleasuring Gene. His own cock is tight and thick between his legs, an exquisite torture to leave untouched while he works Gene.

Gene's breaths are already starting to come sharp and fast, coupled with small jerks of his hips as he instinctively tries to chase the pleasure just a little further each time. His cock is full to bursting, the skin gone tight under Robert's lips. He's so close to the edge, Robert can feel it, wants to draw him right up to the precipice.

Gene's hand clenches spasmodically on Robert's shoulder. "Robert, I'm—so close," he gasps out, can't help picking up the pace with desperate, shallow little thrusts—

Robert pulls off, letting Gene's cock fall slick and glistening from his mouth. It tears a whine from Gene's throat and he tries to follow, to chase after him, but Robert pins his hips firmly back against the wall, watches his cock strain at the empty air. Gene is shaking with need, gasping and wordless for the long moment that it takes for him to stagger back from the brink.

"You," he gasps out at last, all he can manage. Like a plea, or an accusation.

Robert closes his eyes, rests his forehead in the join of Gene's thigh and breathes him in. "I want to be inside you when you come," he hears himself say, voice rough.

“Fffk—” Gene gurgles, fingers clenching convulsively over Robert’s shoulders again. “I...”

Gene gives up, lets himself sag against the wall, panting. After a moment his hand moves, fingers coming to touch the underside of Robert’s chin, nudging him to look up.

Gene looks lost, uncertainty clouded with wanting as he gazes down at Robert, searches his face for—something. “Are you...” he starts, still breathing hard, then breaks off. He struggles for a moment before asking helplessly, “Are you sure?”

Robert tucks Gene back into his pants and pushes himself to his feet, because he needs to say this to Gene’s face, not his dick. Gene’s looking at him with desperate, fragile hope, with longing, with every emotion beating in Robert’s chest. He settles his hands on Gene’s face, thumb tracing over his cheek, a touch that Gene leans into willingly.

And he wants to say *yes, I’m sure*, he wants *Gene* to say yes, but—

“I don’t know,” he admits. “But I think this is as sure as I’m ever going to get.”

He lets his eyes sink closed, presses his lips to Gene’s forehead.

“I want this. I want *you*.”

Gene’s silent beneath him, motionless except for the rise and fall of his chest.

“This is me asking,” Robert whispers at last. “Say yes.” He bends his head, presses a kiss to Gene’s lips. “Please, *please*. Say yes.”

Gene’s mouth moves against his. “Yes.”

It’s like vertigo, the possibilities suddenly swinging wide open before him. He wraps his arms around Gene, clinging to him tightly, and for a long moment all he can do is hold on, his mind gone white and wordless.

“I’ve, uhm,” Gene says after a minute. He pats Robert’s shoulder. “I have condoms. In the nightstand.”

Roberts exhales on a shaky laugh. “Expecting this, were we?”

Gene’s shaking a bit too, and he squeezes his arms around Robert.

"Hoping, certainly," he admits. "I, uh. Bought them back in May. Which, in retrospect, turned out to have been jumping the gun. You should check to make sure they're not expired."

How short do you think the shelf life of condoms is? Robert wants to ask, torn between laughter and exasperation at Gene's naivete, and just finds himself hopelessly charmed by it, as always.

Gene tips his head back to look at Robert, the rest of him still wrapped firmly in Robert's embrace. He's smiling and his eyes are clear, no longer clouded with lust, but there's a thrum of anticipation in his gaze as it roams over Robert's face. Then, slow and precise, Gene leans in and presses his lips against Robert's jaw.

"Take me to bed," he murmurs, dark and husky.

And there's no way Robert can refuse that.

It's only a few steps to the bedroom, impossible to tell who's pulling who with them tangled up in each other, and then Robert is pushing Gene down onto the bed, crawling on top of him as Gene's legs tumble open for him. He's got Gene's face in his hands again, kissing him deeply, bodies moving together.

"Off," Gene breaks the kiss long enough to say, tugging impatiently on the back of Robert's sweater. "Off with this."

Robert complies, sitting back on his heels where he straddles Gene and stripping the sweater off over his head. And then he's about to dive back into kissing, but the look on Gene's face makes him stop—something stunned and almost reverent as his eyes drink in the sight of Robert's body. His fingers twitch against the sheets but he doesn't lift them, and it reminds Robert sharply of the first time they were in this room together, the first time Gene saw him like this and let himself look his fill, all the longing that he didn't let himself act on.

That moment must be on Gene's mind too, because he lifts his eyes to Robert's and gives him a small, private smile. "I do like what I see."

Robert swallows, feeling suddenly dry-mouthed. "This ain't the Louvre, you know," he says roughly. "You can touch the art."

Gene's smile widens, impish. "Yes, but can I *lick* it?"

It's a joke, but it goes through Robert like a shiver—the nerves in his skin already sparking and fizzing as Gene's gaze rakes over him like a physical touch. He finds himself crawling forward, moving to straddle Gene's chest and then lowering himself until Gene's featherlight breath is ghosting over his skin.

Gene's hands come up to rest on Robert's waist, his mouth opening against his stomach and licking a slow curl around one of the tattoos.

There's a surge in his groin as Robert is suddenly, blindingly hard, his eyes clenched shut and his body a taut line as he holds himself rigid for Gene's ministrations. Gene's hands are coasting up and down his flanks, Gene's mouth wandering dreamily across his abdomen. He wants—god, he can barely even think—he wants Gene's tongue six inches lower, wants his jeans magicked away so he can plunge himself directly into the warm, wet ecstasy of Gene's mouth.

He props himself up on one elbow, his other hand snaking downward to twine in Gene's hair, to push Gene's face where he wants it.

Gene goes with a soft, contented noise and nuzzles eagerly over Robert's denim-covered bulge. His cock is straining so hard against his pants it nearly hurts, spurred on by Gene's lips moving against it through the muffling layers of fabric, the needy little moans coming from him as he mouths at Robert.

"Fuck," Robert gasps out, clutching Gene's head, unable to keep from rolling his hips into it. "Can you—*please*—"

Gene makes a muffled noise of assent, maybe nods, and then his hands are moving, deftly unbuckling his belt and working his fly open. When he gets Robert's cock free it's a relief like being able to breathe again, and then Gene's mouth is back, nuzzling and nosing along the shaft, and oh, *oh*—

Robert comes down hard on his elbows, all he can do to keep his full weight from landing on Gene as the man suckles at his cock, moaning in the back of his throat as Gene luxuriates on it with lips and

tongue. It's painting red on the back of his eyelids, and Robert would be embarrassed at how close to the edge he is already, but fuck it, it's been *months* of foreplay leading up to this, no surprise that he's ready to explode the moment Gene finally gets his mouth on him.

Robert feels a shudder of pleasure that passes dangerously close to the point of no return and makes himself stop, lifting his hips out of reach and guiding Gene's face away when he tries to follow.

He rolls over so he's not going to crush Gene and then collapses heavily on the mattress next to him. Gene follows, rolling to drape himself over Robert's chest and pressing kisses to his neck, which Robert is all too willing to lay back and let him do. Robert's pants are half-down around his thighs, cock still standing proudly at attention, and it feels slightly presumptuous to strip completely naked, but after a moment's muzzy consideration he does the undignified shimmy to work them down the rest of the way off and kick them aside.

"You said there are condoms?" Robert manages after a moment.

"Assuming they're still good," Gene says, sounding chagrined, then stretches out across the bed so he can reach the bedside table, opening the drawer and rummaging around in it.

It puts his ass on high display and Robert's hands are moving before he's even thinking about it, cupping the curves that the pants so helpfully outline for him, squeezing firm and sure, proprietary in the thrill of knowledge that this is *his*, that he isn't going to be refused this time, that he gets to touch and keep touching...

"Robert..." Gene groans, a tone that's a warning even though he's rocking back into Robert's hand where it rubs between his thighs. He's found the condoms, and a bottle of lube, now clutched in his hand. "You do this for much longer and I'm going to come in my pants."

"Then take 'em off," Robert says roughly, already working to peel Gene out of them, tugging them down and away. His shirt follows a moment later and then—

Robert's upright on his knees, with Gene laid out before him—both

of them, for the first time, fully naked together. The butterflies are back in Robert's stomach, Gene's too perhaps, from the way he's fidgeting under Robert's gaze.

He's slim, and soft, which he complains about when he's jealous-bitching about Craig, but Robert privately cherishes. He likes the contrast between them, of feeling solid and strong next to Gene's eager, yielding sweetness.

It reminds Robert, abruptly, of Marilyn, of an old, old memory that he hasn't thought about in years—the first time they were alone in her bedroom, afternoon sunlight streaming through her windows, the silence of the empty house. The trembling anticipation, electric in the air between them, Marilyn's eyes on him as she lay back on the bed, wordlessly asking if he would follow.

Gene catches his hand and tugs him down, and Robert goes, reveling in the full-body press of skin against skin. His mouth finds Gene's again and he sighs into the kiss, lets himself linger in this quiet moment, a chance to catch his breath amid the storm of desire that's hurtling him back and forth.

Then he turns slightly, breath still coasting over Gene's cheek, and reaches down to pluck the bottle of lube out of his hand. "How do you want to do this?"

Gene's breath leaves him in a shuddery exhale. "Just like this," he whispers, rocking up into Robert and kissing him again. "I want—I want to feel your weight on me. Want you holding me down when you're inside me."

Robert feels his cock, tucked against Gene's hip, give a twitch at that, and hopes Gene can feel it too. He licks his lips. "Alright."

He gets lube on his hands, Gene's legs tumbling open eagerly to give him access, and then Gene is sighing with pleasure as Robert slicks him up, fingers sliding up the tight crevice of his ass, lingering at his hole to press and circle it. For a moment he has another flash of disbelief that this is real, not just some unbelievably detailed daydream,

that Gene is naked under him, that Robert is touching him like this, *right here*, that he's about to put his cock right here and *push*—

Gene squirms impatiently when Robert starts to slide a finger inside, bats his hand away.

"I'm not an *amateur*, Robert, you don't have to do all that," he grouses.

On impulse, Robert puts a forearm across Gene's chest to hold him down, with his other hand he presses his fingertips flat against Gene's hole, slow and firm. "Yeah? And what if I want to?"

Gene's response is beautiful, a soft, shuddering *ohh* into the open air as his eyes go wide and dark and his body goes liquid under Robert's hands. "Then I'm at your disposal."

His instant, melting acquiescence hits Robert like a punch of desire to the gut, groin tightening, cock thickening with the urge to just *throw* himself on Gene.

"Condoms," he manages to grit out. "Now."

It's a miracle he gets it on right the first try—his mind is on fire, so aroused he's fumbling with it, nearly going off in his own hands as he slicks himself up.

And then he's bracing over Gene again, settling between Gene's spread legs and gripping the base of his cock to guide himself home. Gene's body is tight beneath him, his breaths fluttery but deep, hands gripping Robert's shoulders as Robert's cock slides between his thighs, between the tight cleft of his ass. Then he's pushing inside Gene so slowly, inch by meticulous inch, letting Gene's body set the pace as it gives way for Robert.

Finally Robert's sunk in as deep as he can go, buried in Gene up to the hilt. He has to pause there for a moment, almost dizzy with it, so many sensations threatening to overwhelm him: the feel of Gene clenched tight and hot around his cock, his body pinned under Robert's weight, Gene's hands clinging to him.

It still doesn't feel quite real, that he's really here, that it's really

Gene. He can feel his mind on the brink of separation, the habit so entrenched to just let go and let his body take it from here. He's shaking with the effort to hold himself there, to stay in the moment and not start mindlessly thrusting.

"Robert?"

He closes his eyes, lets his face rest in *Gene's* hair, breathes him in. *Gene*, and no one else.

He feels *Gene* take a lock of his hair and give it a gentle tug, turning Robert to look at him. "You doing okay, sweetheart?"

Seeing *Gene's* face helps. He can feel the pounding in his chest start to settle as he takes a moment to ground himself in *Gene's* features, familiar and comforting. And beautiful—his skin is flushed, a fine sweat breaking out over his forehead, his eyes soft as he gazes at Robert.

"Talk to me," Robert hears himself say, his voice rough.

That startles a laugh out of *Gene*, then he looks chagrined when Robert frowns at him. "Sorry, I'm not laughing at you, I promise. It's just—" he waves a hand at some private amusement "—talking has never been my job. But for you, though—" He smiles, strokes his knuckles over Robert's cheek. "I'll do my best. What do you want to hear me say?"

Robert doesn't know. Not the standard patter of desire, of performative enthusiasm, cliched and interchangeable. Robert has the sudden conviction that that would send him hurtling into space even faster than silence would. He wants—just—*Gene*, somehow.

He swallows. "How long have you wanted me?"

Gene gives a startled, delighted laugh, and arches up into Robert. "Oh *sweetheart*, I have wanted you since you were a dark and handsome stranger glowering at me in a dive bar. I just couldn't tell if *you* wanted... oh! Oh, I've got one: the first time I noticed your tattoos. I don't know if you remember this, but—"

Robert breathes out. "The bake sale."

"Yes," Gene says, sounding aggrieved. "What were you even *doing* there? I know you don't go in for that church stuff. It was like you showed up in that slinky little shirt just so you could drive me crazy—*ah!*"

Robert cuts him off with a slow, deep thrust. "I did."

Gene's breath catches in his throat, halfway between a gasp and a moan. "You—"

"Blame Mary," Robert murmurs. He props himself up so that he can watch the join of their bodies as he moves in and out of Gene, the strokes languid and deliberate. They've found a rhythm together and he can feel the pleasure starting to take hold, each thrust sending a wave of feeling spiraling upward through him. "She told me you were going to be there. Certainly didn't come for the fucking brownies."

The memory comes back to him pleasantly, easy enough to cut Joseph out altogether and remember the way Gene's eyes fluttered wide at his touch, his startled little gasp, and the desperate, formless longing in his gaze when he looked up at Robert.

"Ohh, you should have said something," Gene breathes. "You just—took hold of me, like you were staking a claim on me—"

Robert feels his hand move to the back of Gene's neck in an unconscious echo.

"—and all I could think about was how good it would feel to just lie back and let you. Let you put your hands all over me, do whatever you wanted with me. Oh god, I would have been yours for the asking, I wish you'd asked."

Robert would have been decidedly *not ready* for that kind of blanket consent back then, but the idea of it runs through him hot and delightful now. If he'd given Gene the word, or the nod, and Gene, so thoroughly under his spell, had followed him like he was the pied piper off to some private corner, going willingly into Robert's arms.

Robert grips the back of Gene's neck, firm and rhythmic, relishes the feel of Gene arching into it. His other hand is firm on Gene's ass,

controlling each roll of his hips as Robert fucks into him. “Like that?” he murmurs huskily.

“Yes,” Gene breathes. “And—and every time we’re wrestling—god, it’s hot how strong you are. When you’ve got me pinned down between your thighs and I can feel your cock pressing up against me, hot and hard and *right there*—fuck, I just want to spread my legs and let you take me—”

“Gene—” Robert gets out, a choked-off warning. He’s teetering on the edge, his arousal at the feel of Gene’s body rolling frantically beneath him tangled up with all those memories of *wanting*, of the times he felt he was going to lose his mind if he didn’t get to touch Gene, desire sharpening to a razor’s edge.

He fumbles a hand to Gene’s cock, wraps his fingers around the hot, solid meat of it and pumps roughly. Gene gasps, a moan that catches in the back of his throat, and he curls around Robert tighter, arches up into each thrust harder.

“Yes, yes, *please*,” he’s chanting breathlessly into Robert’s ear, “I’m so close, *so close*, I want to feel you, I—”

He breaks off with a small cry, digs a hand into Robert’s hair and drags him down for a kiss, his mouth urgent against Robert’s, hard and hungry, as he thrusts desperately up into Robert’s hand. There’s a shudder that runs through his muscles and their rhythm stutters out. Robert feels Gene’s warm, wet surge against his stomach, gushing over his knuckles.

Robert couldn’t hold back now even if he wanted to and it’s a relief to finally let go, to close his eyes and let himself slam into Gene hard and fast, in single-minded pursuit of his own pleasure. It doesn’t take long—between one instant and the next the pleasure builds, peaks, and then he’s tumbling over and crashing, Gene’s name on his lips as he comes, caught up in the kisses between them.

The moment stretches long, seemingly endless, until the pleasure finally starts to ebb, rational thought starts to return. Robert’s muscles

are on the verge of giving out as he braces himself over Gene, all his nerves still sparking madly. His hands are clumsy as he carefully pulls out of Gene and rolls over onto his back, pulling Gene with him to sprawl across his chest. He can feel both their heartbeats pounding, and Gene trembling too as he slowly regains control.

"This day," Gene declares after he finally catches his breath, "has been one hell of a ride."

Robert snorts a soft laugh, drowsy now, his eyes closed as he strokes Gene's hair. "Tell me about it."

He needs to get up and clean himself off, but his muscles are practically liquid—even sitting up feels like an impossible effort, so he lets himself take a few more minutes to recover. His cock, shrinking inside the condom, lies limp and exhausted against his thigh, almost ticklish.

Gene shifts, props himself up on Robert's chest so he can smile down at him. "But I'm pretty okay with how it turned out."

"Yeah," Robert says. His throat is tight with emotions he can't put words to. "Yeah, me too."

"And we get to do it again?" Gene asks hopefully.

Robert takes his face and lays a kiss on his forehead. "And again, and again. *And again.* And sometimes a quickie in the afternoons. We've got a lot of time to make up for."

"Mmm," Gene hums in agreement, and nuzzles into him for a moment.

And then Gene tries to pull away and finds that the cum on their stomachs is in the process of gluing them together, so he boots Robert out of bed to go fetch a wet washcloth. Robert's pretty sure he's establishing a bad precedent, letting himself be bossed around like this, but he's also pretty sure he's going to cave every time regardless.

Gene's looking more alert by the time Robert gets back with the washcloth, almost punchy. He squirms and stretches with pleasure as Robert wipes him off, and then watches in unabashed interest as Robert cleans himself up too.

"I'm not jealous of your three-hundred anymore," Gene announces, apropos of nothing.

Robert snorts. "Well, you did just get rogered better than any of them ever did."

Gene snickers to himself, something that sounds like, *got robered*.

Robert finishes wiping away the last bits of stickiness, and tosses the washcloth into Gene's laundry hamper before letting himself sink heavily back down into the bed.

Gene immediately tucks himself up against Robert's side again, but he's thrumming with fidgety energy and is only silent for a minute or so before he says, "You know what I think about the people you hooked up with before me?"

Robert's not sure he *wants* to know, but steels himself to hear it anyway. "What?"

"I feel sorry for them," Gene says simply. He props himself up on his elbow so he can look at Robert. "Because that's all they ever got. That out of all those people, I'm the only one who got to know the real you. I'm the only one who was lucky enough to get to keep you."

"Gene..." How to tell him this? "You're the only one who wanted to."

Inexplicably, that makes Gene break into a smile. "Now *that*, I don't believe for a moment," he says, tugging playfully on a lock of Robert's hair. "You are charming, and clever, and very, *very* good-looking, and there's no way I'm the only one who noticed."

It's like hearing Gene describe someone else entirely, because Robert never felt like any of that. He was what people found when they were scraping the bottom of the barrel—the best bad option, maybe, but not anybody's first choice. Not someone they'd consider themselves *lucky* to have.

Gene's smile fades a bit, softening into something fond and almost sad. "Robert, I was half in love with you before I'd even known you for

an hour," he says like a confession. "It would have broken my heart if one night was all I ever got with you."

Robert swallows. "Then why'd you say no?"

Gene blinks, frowns slightly. "To what?"

"The night we first met. I invited you home with me, but you said no."

Understanding dawns in Gene's expression. "Oh!" A short, startled laugh escapes him and he presses his hands over his face. "Oh, *that*. Oh my god. I was *so* embarrassed about that afterward." He steals a peek at Robert. "You know I would have said yes, right, if I'd been ready for it? But I didn't realize that's where the evening had been heading, so when you asked, it caught me totally off-guard and I just froze up, like a *loser*."

"How did you—" Robert begins in disbelief. "Where did you *think* it was going? You were the one who hit on me first!"

"Well, *yeah*, because I thought you were... very handsome." Gene blushes a little, as if that's something to be shy about. At the look on Robert's face, he rolls his eyes and says pointedly, "I was hoping to get your *number*."

Robert finds himself just staring at Gene dumbly, because—that's it? After all this time, *that's* what it was?

"Believe me, I was kicking myself for it afterwards," Gene continues, matter-of-fact. "When it looked like I'd missed my only chance. I kept hoping you'd ask again, because I would have been ready this time. I would have said yes."

Robert's spent *months* torturing himself over that, trying to figure out where he'd lost Gene that first night. Desperate to know how he'd fucked up so he could do his damndest to *never do it again*—and then it turns out that the answer all along was just that Gene was too clueless to hook up.

Then again, maybe he should have known; it had been obvious from the start that Gene had no idea what he was doing in that bar.

Robert starts laughing, can't help himself. There's a swell of affection in his chest, and also an odd, bubbling sense of relief—relief that he hadn't misread Gene. He hadn't been wrong about the connection between them, hadn't fucked anything up. He hadn't even realized that worry was still weighing on him until it's finally lifting.

He laughs, and wraps his arms around Gene, pulling him back down onto his chest.

"I've never done the... picking up in bars thing," Gene says. He sounds aggrieved, as though he thinks Robert's laughing *at* him, but he lets himself be pulled and tucks up easily under Robert's chin. "I've never just *gone to bed* with a stranger, I—oh wait." He breaks off with a laugh. "Never mind, that's a lie. I was in bed with Alex less than an hour after I met him."

Robert blinks. "You were?" He's surprised; his mental picture of that relationship has always been... more wholesome, less hookup.

Gene laughs, shrugs. "What can I say? I was eager and he was easy. But that was twenty years ago and I don't... I haven't..." He twirls his hand in a helpless little gesture and trails off.

And Robert feels the pieces snap into place, something that he should have realized much sooner.

"You haven't been with anyone else since Alex died," he says aloud, and it's not even a question. A short breath escapes him. "What the hell were you *waiting* for?"

Gene props himself on his elbow and smiles at Robert, easy and bright. "You, apparently."

Jesus. It's not like he needed to keep himself chaste, not for the sake of a bottom-feeder like Robert—but Robert feels a sharp, sudden pang of wishing he'd done the same. That he'd waited for this, instead of filling his bed with strangers that he could scarcely bring himself to look at afterwards.

Except after Marilyn died, there had been Joseph; and after Joseph, it wasn't like he could sink any lower.

But god, what a thought—the useless wish that he could have been like Gene, only ever touched in love.

Gene touches his chin, gently, like he can sense the change in Robert's mood. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Thank you," he murmurs. He reaches out, clumsily grasping Gene's hand and squeezing. "For... waiting for me. I know I'm—" *a pain in the ass* "—difficult sometimes. But I'm glad you stuck with me anyway. I'm... just, thank you."

Gene smiles, easy as anything, and lifts his hand to kiss his knuckles. "Robert, nothing makes me happier than sticking with you. I plan on sticking with you for a long, long time to come. In fact, it is *you* who are stuck with *me*."

"Mmm," Robert agrees, letting his eyes drift closed contentedly. He can feel sleep tugging at his consciousness, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up with him. He hears Gene say something teasing about falling asleep right after sex, then Gene gives him a kiss on the cheek and draws back, the lights going off a moment later.

Gene's curled up beside him again, tucked up under Robert's chin before he says, "I think we left the TV on."

Robert grunts. "Sorry. I told Betsy she could stay up and watch the Late Show, and I am a man of my word."

"Oh, well alright then," Gene says, sleepy and agreeable.

If he says anything more after that, Robert doesn't hear it.

When he wakes the next morning, it's a gentle drift to consciousness—to soft blue light filtering in through the blinds, to Gene still fast asleep beside him, making his cute little not-quite-snoring noises.

And Robert's... good.

It's something like wonder, the feeling that wraps around his heart as he looks at Gene now. A feeling of newness, even though they've been together for months, even though he's woken up next to Gene

before. It feels like a beginning—like the start of something incredible, the last of his own invisible walls fallen away and he’s finally free.

He wants to touch, and finds himself, for the first time, with nothing holding him back. So he slides down under the covers, drawing Gene’s body to his chest, feeling the brush of Gene’s thighs along his as their legs intertwine, the luxurious press of skin against naked skin.

And he can feel Gene waking up, a few little hitching snorts followed by a change in his body as he comes alive again, awareness and intent coming back into his limbs. His hands settle over Robert’s waist and he lazily tips his head back to invite more kisses, sighing in a pleased exhale.

“Good morning,” Gene murmurs, sleepy and amused.

Robert cards his hand through Gene’s hair and kisses him deeply, eyes closed and senses sinking into the feel of him, the pliancy in his body, the softness of his mouth beneath Robert’s. He can feel life beating through the other man’s body, his warmth and the thrum of animation in him. The wellspring of love like something bubbling up rich and warm between them, overflowing in his hands—his to reach for, his to express without fear or restraint.

Gene’s looking at him with fondness, with love, with a hint of mischief. It’s not a new look on him, he’s been looking at Robert that way for as long as Robert can remember, but there’s a greater depth to it now, it seems, or maybe Robert’s only just now able to see it.

“You good?” Gene asks softly, his smile wry.

Robert feels himself smile back, leans in to steal another small kiss. “I’m good.” Then another, because it’s hard to stop himself once he’s started, and now he doesn’t have to. “Maybe better than ever.”

Then he draws back, letting his hands come to rest on Gene’s shoulders, though he can’t keep from stealing a caress of his thumb over Gene’s throat. They’re still close enough that he can feel the heat of Gene’s body, close enough for their breaths to mingle.

“Gene.”

He can feel his heart in his chest, each beat thudding hard but steady. He squeezes Gene's shoulders. Takes a deep breath, and meets his eyes.

"I want to tell you about Joseph."

Interlude: Under the Skin



They go for a drive afterward.

Robert's still tense and jittery, can feel it fizzing under his skin and looking for some kind of release, so they wind up in his truck, no real destination, just driving north on route one.

It's quiet—a thoughtful, companionable sort of silence. Robert's the one driving because Gene had turned on him with wide eyes, bit his lip and squirmed suggestively and hinted at being *sore*, and Robert knows he's being played but he's still a sucker for the puppy-dog eyes. He doesn't mind; his truck is comfortable, familiar, and it's soothing to let himself fall into the rhythm of the road, the rumble of the engine and the barren winter woods passing by on either side of them.

He's aware of Gene watching him from the passenger seat, coat bunched up like a pillow where he rests his head against the window.

"You know, I used to like that tattoo," Gene says last, quietly. "I thought it was sexy. Now I can't even look at it without getting angry all over again."

Robert's hand flexes over the steering wheel. "You stop noticing it after a while. Mostly."

“Have you ever thought about—getting it removed, or covered up, or...?”

Robert draws in a breath. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it. Decided not to. Decided I could stand to live with the reminder.”

He can feel Gene’s eyes on him, and after a minute Gene says carefully, “If you want to keep it, then yes, of course, you should keep it. But if you don’t... Robert, you don’t have to punish yourself.”

And Robert’s self-aware enough to know that Gene’s not far off the mark—Robert can recognize that impulse in himself—but it’s *also* a reminder, even though he doesn’t know how to explain that to Gene. He knows what Gene would say if Robert told him, *yes, I know who deserves most of the blame, but I could have drawn a line, I **should have** drawn a line.*

“It’s not that. It’s...” He struggles for a moment. “It happened. Whether I’m proud of it or not, it still happened, and it’s bullshit to try to—erase all the evidence and pretend like it didn’t.”

Gene sighs again, but doesn’t argue. Eventually he leans back in his seat, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Then I suppose we’re just lucky he didn’t tattoo his name on your ass,” he says philosophically.

Robert snorts. “Amen.”

Lucky that he didn’t try—because Robert knows himself, knows he probably wouldn’t have put a stop to that either. Although *that*, at least, he likes to think he would have gotten removed by now, even if he had to take a knife to it himself.

Robert swallows. “I think it was the tattoo for Marilyn that gave him the idea. It was after he saw the one for her that he suggested it.”

And *why* he’d wanted his own mark on Robert, what he was making Robert prove by getting it, by getting it *there*, where everyone would see it, what was going through his mind back then—it’s a can of worms that Robert doesn’t want to touch.

Gene’s silent for a moment, then in a deliberate lightening of the mood, he says, “Well, you know you don’t need to get a tattoo for me, right? I mean, I think the one for Marilyn is really sweet—”

Robert laughs, feels the weight lift a little. "In a trashy sort of way. It's alright, you can say it."

"—but I promise, I have complete faith in your devotion even without one."

Honestly, it hadn't occurred to Robert before—it's been a long time since he got any new ink—but he finds that he kind of likes the idea. Besides, it's not as if any tattoo he got for Gene could possibly take home the gold for worst decision he's ever made.

"Too late, I already know what I'm going to get for you," Robert says. "Something deeply personal, something close to my heart, that's always going to remind me of you—"

"Oh dear..."

"—cats in a conga line, like that one awful shirt you've got—"

Gene's laughing now. "Robert!"

"—tattooed on my dick," he finishes.

Gene giggles helplessly into his hands, shaking his head. "I am *ninety-nine* percent certain that you're kidding, but that one percent is causing me a great deal of concern right now."

"There's plenty of space for it." Robert shoots him a wink and a leer. "I could get the cats on one side and your name misspelled on the other, like the classy gentleman I am. G-E-E-N, Gene."

"Robert, I have nothing but respect for your bodily autonomy and your right to self-determination, but *don't you dare*. If you draw cats on your penis I am never touching it again."

"That's the emptiest threat I've heard in all my life, and that includes the time you said you were going to learn how to fight."

"Well then, I suppose I can't stop you," Gene says. "Hey, we could go together! I've always wanted to get one of those 'Live, Laugh, Love' tattoos. They're so inspiring."

"Uh—" Robert says.

"Ooh! Or a minion! *Adorable*. I could get one wearing your leather jacket, right on my ass."

And that's not a risk worth taking. "Okay, okay, I surrender," Robert says, laughing. "Bluff called."

Gene looks smug in his victory, settling back into his chair.

A few more miles pass in silence, with Gene's hand a light pressure on his knee. Robert's stomach rumbles a bit, since they never did get around to eating breakfast that morning.

"Want to stop and get an early lunch?" he asks. "There's a Turkish diner a little ways up the road."

"Turkish... diner?" Gene asks dubiously.

"Think Denny's with a hookah."

Gene's mouth quirks. "Does this mean you're taking me out for a Bro Brunch?"

"Sure. And maybe if you're good, you'll get a bro-job for dessert."

That makes Gene groan and bury his face in his hands, muttering something that sounds like "oh god not you too," but really, if he didn't want Robert to take the shot, he shouldn't have lined it up.

(And sucking Gene off in his truck, hmm, now *there's* a spicy thought. He's putting a pin in that one.)

It's not until they're pulling to a halt by the roadside restaurant, tires crunching against gravel, that Gene speaks again.

"I agree with you though," Gene says abruptly. "That you shouldn't try to erase your past, or forget about it.

"Even if it's painful, even if you're not proud of it, it's part of what shaped you into who you are. But that doesn't mean you can't... move on. You're allowed to let go. You're allowed to build over it." He sighs. "I don't know, I'm out of my depth here. I just want you to be happy. I want you to forgive yourself."

It's easier said than done—acceptance, forgiveness—but for perhaps the first time, it feels like something that's *possible*. Talking with Mary. Talking with Gene. Unwrapping those old wounds and letting them breathe, letting them finally, finally start to heal. He's not quite

there yet, but he can see the path to it now; he has a grasp, however tenuous, on the understanding that's eluded him for so long.

He reaches over and takes Gene's hand, squeezes it tightly. "I am," he says.

I'm getting there.

Interlude: Once Bitten



It was at the end of our first year. Alex was in the first major depressive episode he'd had since we started dating, but I didn't know that at the time. I didn't understand what was happening, I just thought we were in a fight. I thought he was breaking up with me, since it seemed like he didn't want to see me anymore.

So Alex was doing very badly, and I had no idea. I'd hardly seen him at all for about two weeks, and eventually his roommate offered to give him something for it, said it was a Xanax. We never did find out exactly what it was, and *yeah*, Alex should have known better than to take it, but... people don't always make good decisions when they're feeling that miserable. So he took it, and passed out, and woke up to find his hand down his roommate's pants, and the guy jerking himself off.

We... think that's all that happened? Alex's clothes were still on, anyway. But we'll never know for sure, and that sometimes that's the worst part.

Anyway, Alex broke the guy's jaw.

He was never entirely clear on what happened, except that there was a scuffle and he wound up slamming the guy's face into the cin-

derblock wall. And on one hand, I feel like I shouldn't be cheering about that? Like, since his roommate wasn't being *violent* with him, then Alex shouldn't have escalated it, or something? But honestly, *fuck that guy*—I'm glad Alex did it, and if I saw him now I'd want to break his jaw all over again.

And then Alex walked barefoot halfway across campus to my dorm. He didn't have his student ID, so they wouldn't let him go up to my room. He didn't even have his cellphone, he had to borrow a quarter off someone to call me from the phone in the lobby.

So there he is—he shows up in the middle of the night, high as a kite, no idea what he's on, telling me that he 'broke his roommate's face' and trying to explain what happened. Craig and I desperately wanted to take him to a doctor, but the student health center was closed—because god knows emergencies only happen during business hours—and Alex couldn't afford to go to the ER, so we just stayed up with him to make sure he didn't take a turn for the worse.

I made him report it the next day. It probably would have come to light anyway, what with the guy's face and all, but I got Alex to file a sexual assault charge, and it went to the university tribunal.

...This was twenty years ago, and it still makes me so angry I could scream.

The guy admitted he'd given Alex the drug, but then he claimed that Alex had come onto him while he was high. That it had been Alex's idea, that he'd been all into it until he suddenly just flipped his shit and attacked him for no reason. And—christ, *everyone knew* that Alex was a horndog, right? And that he was kind of bipolar?

And it didn't *fuckin' matter* that Alex didn't cheat on me, that he'd never wanted anything to do that guy's dick, that that wasn't how bipolar disorder *worked*—it was still enough to get the guy off the hook. We couldn't prove what Alex had been drugged with, and it was true that he'd taken it willingly, and Alex really wasn't helping, he was spitting mad and kept interrupting, saying that how he'd broken the

guy's *fucking jaw* should show just how *fucking little* he'd wanted to wake up with his hand down the guy's pants.

Anyway. They both got suspended, which was *bullshit*—although, ironically, it wound up being the only thing that saved Alex's scholarship. He hadn't been able to keep on top of his schoolwork during that depressive episode and if he hadn't gotten suspended he would have failed half his classes.

So I changed my plans and signed up to take classes over the summer semester so that I could stay with him, and that summer was the first time we got to live together, which was... really nice.

But what gets me—what I'll never get over—is that the guy got away with it. That he'd done that to someone I loved and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't protect Alex in the first place, and I couldn't even help him get justice for it afterward. The guy just *got away with it*, no consequences and nothing to stop him from going on and doing it again to someone else.

So seriously, fuck that guy.

And fuck Joseph.

And sweetheart, if you want to break his jaw, I'll be your alibi.

The Elemental Salt



“Alright, that’s the last of them,” Gene announces as they carefully set down a large pot of... something or other. The plant thwaps Robert in the face one last time as he lets go and steps back.

“You look like you’re farming pot on the down-low,” Robert remarks, looking over the forest of greenery crowded into Gene’s garage. It has a certain murder-in-the-conservatory charm.

“Could do, I suppose,” Gene says agreeably. “I wonder what the profit margin is on home-grown marijuana, now that it’s legal.”

Robert wouldn’t know; it’s not his drug.

“Anyway, I appreciate the help. Although you know that now you’ve volunteered to help me take them out again on walkies between frosts, right?”

They’ve moved the entire portable cohort of Gene’s garden indoors to protect it from the upcoming deep-freeze, which is apparently a thing that gardeners do—news to Robert, since he’s never even tried to raise plants, and Marilyn had what could charitably be described as a ‘yellow thumb.’

“I’ll take it out of your hide later,” Robert promises, wrapping his

arms around Gene from behind and sliding his slightly-numb hands into the pockets of Gene's coat.

Gene chuckles and wraps his hands, clad in mittens, around Robert's, then walks them back out into the front yard. "I still need to cut back the hedges," he says thoughtfully. "That's a one-man job, but you're welcome to supervise if you like."

"Hmm, I don't know. There's an infomercial marathon on TV today that I'd hate to miss."

"It'll turn up on Netflix eventually," Gene assures him. "And if it sweetens the pot, I made another batch of the Secret Small Family Recipe Spiced Cider. Just like Great-Aunt Google used to make."

"You drive a hard bargain." Robert squeezes his arms around Gene, and pushes his face into the warm crevice between Gene's neck and the collar of his coat.

Robert's feeling... stable. Not the brittle euphoria of his highs, but not like he's one misstep away from tumbling into the abyss either. Stable enough that he can bring himself to ask the question that's been on his mind, that he thinks he'll be able to handle Gene's answer, whatever that answer is.

"You said Alex was on lithium," Robert says aloud. In his arms, he feels Gene tense. "How'd he like it?"

Gene's silent for a moment, then he draws in a breath and disentangles Robert's hands from his pockets. He keeps Robert's arm slung over his shoulder, but turns so he can look at Robert sidelong. His expression is apprehensive, because he knows that Robert's not comfortable talking about Alex, or his own issues, or—double your fun—the intersection between the two.

"He didn't," Gene admits quietly. "To be perfectly honest with you. But... Alex's illness wasn't the same as yours."

He tugs on Robert's waist, leads him up the front steps to the porch swing, and they take a seat, Gene fitted snugly under his arm.

"Alex's manic episodes were... more pronounced," Gene begins

slowly, rubbing a fuzzy hand over Robert's knee. "They were..." He struggles for a moment, then says, "Sorry, I've never really talked about this with anyone but Craig, and he already knew Alex, so I didn't have as much to explain."

Gene tips his head back onto Robert's arm and says carefully, "Alex was also manic-depressive, but he enjoyed it more than you do. He got the depressive episodes too, of course, but for him, the manic episodes more than made up for it. They were these... intense swells of creativity. When he was overflowing with ideas and had all the energy in the world to make good on them. He loved what he could accomplish on a manic swing—the insights that came to him, the euphoria. How it made him just *feel* everything more powerfully, more profoundly—ten feet tall and bulletproof, listening to the music of the spheres." Gene gives a short, sad sigh of a laugh. "Hearing him describe it, I almost envied him sometimes.

"And it was fine, when we were younger. It was just how he was—that sometimes he was passionate and creative, and sometimes he was quiet and withdrawn, and we'd gotten the hang of both sets of his moods. I didn't—" Gene breaks off, biting his lip while he pauses for a moment to arrange his thoughts. "A lot of people fell in love with Alex when he was on his upswings. He was just so much larger than life, handsome and talented and charismatic. But it was hard for people to stick around through his downswings, because he'd get... distant. And yeah, there were some rocky times when I was still coming to understand his depression, but once I understood that it wasn't about me, and I learned there were ways I could help him through it, I *wanted* to help him through it. I didn't just love Alex when he was feeling good, and I didn't stop loving him when he stopped being fun."

Gene turns to look Robert in the face. "I'm not just here for the good times, Robert, I'm here for *you*. All of you."

Robert is quiet, then turns his head to press his lips against Gene's hair because he can't hold his gaze. Robert *wants* to believe him—and

he's getting there—but that's still a hell of a thing to promise. The only person who ever stuck it out with him was Marilyn, and by the end that was just because they were both too afraid of being alone.

Gene sighs and leans into him. "The problem was that as he got older, both sides started getting more extreme—that his depressive episodes were getting worse, lasting longer, and his manic episodes were... wilder. Losing touch with reality. It'd gotten to the point where he was having trouble holding down a job through either one, but he still *enjoyed* his manic episodes—they still made him *feel* good, like he could do and be anything. He didn't want to be medicated out of them, and so for a long time he resisted getting treatment."

Gene lapses into silence then, until finally Robert asks, "What made him change his mind?"

Gene shifts. "Me. And Amanda. I—" He stops, leans forward on his knees and draws in a shaky breath. "I don't suppose you have any cigarettes on you?"

"You want one?" Robert's mildly surprised; he's seen old pictures of Gene with a cigarette in hand (in *drag*, which was also a trip), but he's never known him to smoke in the here-and-now.

"Please."

Robert digs a pack and a lighter out of his jacket. Gene takes off his mittens to light one, then takes a shallow drag and settles back against Robert's arm.

"There was... an incident," he begins with difficulty. "When Amanda was very young. That she doesn't remember, *thank fuck*, and I'd rather not go into detail about it, because it doesn't show Alex in a good light, at all. But it—drove home that he couldn't afford to be that unstable, not if he was raising a child."

Gene's eyes are distant where they're fixed on the glowing tip of the cigarette. He swallows. "I almost left him," he says quietly, like a confession. "I guess I did, briefly. It was the last thing in the world I

wanted to do, but I couldn't take care of him and Amanda both, and god, she was just a *baby*, she needed me more.

"I told him to go stay with his parents while he got himself sorted out, and I took Amanda and left to spend the night at a motel, because I couldn't stand to be in that house." He closes his eyes briefly, seems to forget about the cigarette as it slowly burns down. "Didn't get a wink of sleep that night. Amanda kept waking up and crying, because she could tell that I was upset, and she was scared of being away from home, and missing her Dad. And I spent the whole night trying to come to terms with what my life was going to be like without him. That I'd been watching the man I loved slowly lose his mind, helpless to do anything about it, and now I was facing the prospect of being alone, of raising our daughter alone, and terrified of what would happen to him without me." He lowers his eyes and taps off the ash. "I was twenty-two years old."

Gene draws in a breath, takes a slightly steadier drag off the cigarette. "Fortunately it didn't come to that. I went home the next morning, and Alex hadn't gone back to his parents, and I was so glad to see him that I wasn't even angry. We both cried and apologized and hugged a lot, and after that he was willing to... well, neither of us actually knew what he needed at that point, but after that he was willing to try." Gene shakes his head distantly. "It scared the hell out of both of us. Put a lot of things in perspective."

Well, there's a cautionary tale if Robert ever heard one—push Gene too far and he *will* leave your ass.

"Mind you, it didn't fix things overnight. Alex agreed to go to therapy after that, but... it was slow going. He was *incredibly* hostile to the whole idea of psychiatry, didn't trust it at all, and I couldn't even blame him, because—" Gene tips his head back, breathes out a hard sigh. "Oh, christ. I've never told anyone about this. Not Craig, not even Amanda."

Gene closes his eyes, swallows hard. "Alex's parents had him insti-

tutionalized a handful of times when he was a teenager. Because he wasn't the son they wanted him to be. Because he wasn't *obedient*," he bites out, with more venom than Robert's ever heard from him. "And of course they sent him to Christian psychotherapists, who were so *goddamn*ed hung up on him being bisexual that they couldn't be fucked to notice what was actually wrong. That went on for *years*, until he finally got away to college, and so by the time I met him, he wanted absolutely nothing to do with any of it ever again. That was why he refused to get help for as long as he did—not until he didn't have any other choice."

"Did it work?" Robert hears himself ask.

"Eventually, yes. It took a long time, and there was a lot of trial and error before we found an approach that worked for Alex. Because therapy isn't perfect, therapists aren't infallible. They're people too, at the mercy of their own prejudices just like everyone else—as Alex learned the hard way. But there *are* good people out there, people who understand what you're going through and have the insight to help you get a handle on it."

Gene pauses, then sighs and then stubs out the cigarette on the bottom of his boot. "But that's not what you asked. You asked how Alex liked lithium, and the short answer is: he didn't.

"It leveled him out—made his lows less low, but it also made his highs less high, and he missed that a lot. Never stopped missing it, in fact, ever. He went off his meds a few times trying to chase that high, but he always came back to them in the end because he understood that he needed them. He knew that if he'd kept going down that road, he would have lost Amanda, he would have lost me, and sooner or later it probably would have killed him. So he didn't like it, but he understood the necessity."

Gene finishes, and lets Robert process that in silence for a few minutes.

Robert isn't sure how he feels. He'd been half expecting (hoping?)

to hear that his predecessor had given the psych drugs a rousing endorsement, that they were the magic bullet and Robert could just follow in the footsteps of someone who'd figured out their shit better than he had. But Gene's right about Alex's experience being different from his, and Alex's ambivalence doesn't give Robert any easy answers.

"Do you want to talk to someone about it?" Gene asks quietly.

Robert draws in a breath. "I don't know. Do you think I should?"

"I think it needs to be your decision." He squeezes Robert's hand. "Sweetheart, this isn't a choice you can let someone else make for you."

Yes, but—"Gene, I trust you more than I trust myself. Seriously, which of us has a track record for good decisions, and which of us doesn't?"

Gene gives a small, slightly exasperated laugh. "Maybe," he acknowledges. "But you need to be able to make those good decisions for yourself, and have faith in your own judgment. What if it's not always me? What if you find yourself with another Joseph?"

Robert feels himself suck in a breath, feels his arm tighten around Gene. "Don't even joke about that."

"It's not a joke. And I'm not planning on going anywhere, but I'd rest easier knowing that you could keep yourself safe and healthy even without me."

Robert doesn't have an answer to that. The thought of anything happening to Gene is something his mind flinches away from, but... it's also not a possibility that either of them can discount. They both know that loss can come quick and premature and unexpected.

To be honest, Robert doesn't even know why he's resisting the idea of medication. He doesn't get the same blissful highs that Alex apparently got, or not enough to be worth the crushing depressions that follow. Most of the time Robert just feels like he's spent his entire life being unhappy—that even on his brightest days he's never lived without the threat of darkness lurking around the edges, just waiting for

the sun to set so that it can close in again. One would think he'd be glad to be medicated out of that. Eager, even, but—

But that's him. That's what he is, that's *who* he is, as fundamentally a part of him as the blood vessels rooted in his body. If this, all of this, is just an illness, then what would even be left of him if they managed to cure it? Where the hell does the illness leave off and Robert begins?

It's frightening—terrifying, even—to think that a simple pill could medicate him out of existence. And maybe he'd be happier that way, but maybe he wouldn't be *him* anymore—like erasing the person he is now to make room for a cleaner, shinier Robert who just wouldn't care about these things anymore, a Robert who takes his pills and sees his shrink and doesn't have to be so goddamned *difficult* all the time. That this Robert would cease to exist, and no one would even miss him.

Gene squeezes his hand again. "You don't have to rush into anything. It's just something to think about."

"I'm thinking about it," Robert admits.

It helps to know that Gene's not going to push him. That he likes Robert even as he is now, black moods and all, and presumably he doesn't want Robert turning into a different person either. That whatever lithium did to Alex, it didn't make him unrecognizable, it just... leveled him out, Gene said. Robert thinks maybe that wouldn't be so bad, being a little more level.

"I'll go with you, if you like," Gene offers. "You don't have to do this alone if you don't want to."

Robert draws in a deep breath. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I might take you up on that." He tightens his arm around Gene one more time, then releases him. "Anyway. I'll supervise your hedge-trimming, but only if we go inside and warm up first. I'm freezing my fucking balls off out here."

Gene raises a speculative eyebrow at him. "Warm up, you say? I have some ideas."

"Mm hmm." Robert nuzzles into his neck. "I'm sure you're talking about the cider."

"That would be phase two of the operation, yes," Gene agrees.

"And phase one?"

He feels Gene laugh and wrap an arm around him. "Come inside and find out."

World Without End



December

AMANDA: I AM ARRIVE!!

POPS: !!!!!

POPS: We'll meet you by the baggage claim!!

That text is followed by several emojis that probably don't mean what Pops thinks they mean, but the 'we' gives Amanda the heads up, so she's not surprised when she emerges from the terminal and finds Robert loitering there too.

"Hail, the conquering hero!" Pops announces when he spots her, beaming with arms outstretched, and a moment later she's swept up into a hug.

She's surprised to find herself almost tearing up, and lets Pops hold on a little longer than she usually would. When he finally lets go of her, she looks over at Robert.

He's hanging back, a little sheepishly, hands in his pockets. He looks better than the last time she saw him though, and he gives her a game smile. "Hey, kid."

And she still doesn't know how to talk to her dad's dumb

boyfriend, but at least now it feels like there's a bit of solidarity in it—a wry smile from Robert when their eyes meet, like, *yep, this is hella awkward, but we're both trying.*

Because ever since Pops pulled her aside on Thanksgiving to quietly give her the lowdown on Robert, she's found herself reassessing him—realizing that maybe he hadn't *wanted* to be a weird alcoholic loner, he just didn't have anything else to be. And then it had occurred to her, with a painful flash of empathy, that maybe Dad would have wound up the same way, if not for Pops.

She still can't decide if it's weird that Pops wound up with *another* bipolar guy—like, how does he pre-screen for that?—but she's leaning towards 'not.' Pops just likes taking care of people.

Robert mostly fades into the background while they wait for her luggage, and Pops peppers her with questions about how her first semester of final exams went. (3.3 GPA, even managed to squeeze a B+ in college algebra—yeah, Amanda's pleased with herself.) When they're piling into the car, Robert unobtrusively takes the backseat by himself so she can sit up front with Pops.

And she'd been expecting that when they got home, Robert would wander back to his own house, or silently disappear into Pops' bedroom again, the way he'd spent most of Thanksgiving—except apparently there's been some kind of game-changer in the past month and he *lives* here now. He and Pops give each other a shifty look and deny it when she asks, but it's kind of obvious.

Robert's no longer tiptoeing around like he's not sure if he's allowed on the furniture—his coats are hanging in the hall closet, he helps himself to the fridge, and his dog has food and water bowls in the kitchen.

He's also taken over the cooking, and apparently he's *really good at it?* As soon as they get home, Robert's pulling out a tray that had been keeping warm in the oven, some slow-cooked beef thing that smells

amazing and tastes even better, rich and falling-apart-in-your-mouth tender.

Which—awesome, that makes Amanda like 300% less worried that Pops is going to die of scurvy, but *what the heck happened* while she was gone? How, in less than a month, did Robert go from being some weird feral dude that Pops found in the woods to being practically a domestic partner? How is this the same dude she caught making like a cryptid at 3 AM in the kitchen after Thanksgiving, eating expired salami and drinking whiskey-and-capri-suns??

Robert does seem to be doing better though. And Pops is *over the moon* to have all of them together for Christmas.

So if it still gives her an unpleasant jolt sometimes to turn the corner and find Robert kissing her dad, well.

That's for her to work through on her own.

It's the day before Christmas, and Pops is on his third trip to the grocery store, because he's out of cream-of-mushroom soup but by god, *he will make this casserole if it kills them all*. Amanda figures she's got at least a half-hour window before he gets back, and decides that this is a good time to have a Talk with Robert.

"So," she says, plopping herself down in the armchair. "If you're going to be sticking around, there's some things you should know."

Robert, who had been sitting on the couch and idly flipping through her dad's book of word jumbles, immediately freezes, looking hunted. "Yeah?"

And he always acts like she's about to call the cops on him (guilty conscience, much?) but he needs to chill, because that's not what this is about.

"You've probably noticed by now that Pops is really dumb about some things," she says. "Like, *really* dumb. But other things he's just pretending to be dumb at, because he's lazy, and he's hoping that if he

acts cute and helpless you'll do it for him. So listen up! Because this is your guide to not getting conned.

"Number one: cooking—REALLY DUMB. Like, he is so bad you think he has to be faking it, but no, somehow he really is just that bad. He's so bad he doesn't even know how bad he is. He has set *boxed cake mix* on fire before. He somehow gave us salmonella poisoning from *mashed potatoes*. The one time he tried to make curry, he landed himself in the ER with second-degree burns. Do *not* leave him in the kitchen unattended, it'll end in tears, and like, looking for a new house."

"If you know how to make him stop, I'm open to suggestions," Robert says, with the haunted eyes of a man who has seen war.

"Uh... yeah, I'm still working on that," Amanda admits. "Anyway, number two, computers: faking it. He doesn't *like* computer stuff, but he can totally figure it out if he has to. So like, make him do it himself, it builds character."

Robert looks pained. "You realize I'm very bad at saying no to him, right?"

"Well, time to cowboy up," she says ruthlessly. "Number three: phones—very dumb. I don't know why they're different from computers, but he's legitimately hopeless at phone stuff. Keep him away from apps that involve microtransactions, or you're going to wake up to find that he's blown your entire life savings on pokeballs."

Robert's face says that he has no idea what pokeballs are, but he dutifully nods anyway.

"Assembling Ikea furniture—*faking it*. He just hates the fiddly little wrenches that come in the flat packs.

"Math—*faking it*. He just doesn't want the responsibility of deciding how much to tip.

"Scrabble—*FAKING IT*. He'll be like, 'Oh gosh, Scrabble? I haven't played that in years, haha, I'm sure I'll be so out of practice, but if you insist—' and then he'll *demolish* you. He's a shark, don't trust him."

Robert cracks a small smile. "Alright."

"Let's see, what else, uhm. Killing large bugs." Amanda hesitates. "He *can* do it. I mean, he stepped up after Dad died so I wouldn't have to, but he really hates them and it stresses him out, so... if you could take care of that, I know he'd be grateful."

Robert nods solemnly. "I can take most bugs in a knife fight."

"Good. And last: feelings." She pauses. "He's actually really smart about feelings. Like, he always insists on *talking* about them and stuff, and he has no idea how terrifying it sounds to normal people when he's like 'hey, we need to *TALK*,' but... he really does know what he's on about. So if he's got feelings-related ideas, maybe, y'know, listen to him."

"Yeah," Robert says. His eyes have drifted to the front window, where Pops' car is pulling into the driveway, and there's a soft smile on his face. "Yeah, I've kinda gotten that."

"Anyway. That's all I wanted to say. So yeah—Merry Christmas. And welcome to the family."

On impulse she sticks out her hand, and they shake on it.

And then it's Christmas morning—Amanda had been worried about how she was supposed to wake Pops up, what with Robert there (they'd make sure they were decent, right? she wasn't going to walk in on anything that would *scar her for life, right?*), but luckily they beat her to it. She wakes to the smell of ginger cookies, and comes into the kitchen to find cookies on the counter and Robert at the stove, making some kind of potato-egg-and-onion thing for breakfast.

("Tortilla espagnole," he says, which—sure, whatever dude, just keep up the good work. Seriously, the cooking thing alone is like a million points in Robert's favor—she thinks she'd let him stick around just for that, if it means she never has to catch Pops trying to make oatmeal with coffee again.)

(Pops has been relegated to the coffeemaker where he can do the least damage.)

They move to the living room to eat and open presents—Pops gives Amanda some books that she'd asked for, and gives Robert and Betsy a set of matching terrible Christmas sweaters. It's obvious that Betsy isn't used to wearing clothes, and can't make up her mind whether she hates the sweater, or loves the attention it gets her.

Amanda gives Pops a new cat shirt—a Christmas tradition in the Woods household—a hideous thing that she's been holding onto since March, with cat faces blooming out of sunflowers.

Pops is thrilled, and immediately puts it on over his pajamas; Robert looks somewhere between horrified and fascinated. ("So *that's* where they all come from," he says, like he's unearthed some ancient mystery.)

Pops is also sticking discarded bows onto himself and anyone else within arm's reach—which is cute when he's bedazzling Betsy, but it gives Amanda a weird pang to watch him stealthily sticking them on Robert, and Robert trying to fend him off. That was a thing he used to do with Dad.

Pops unwraps a present from Robert—a book entitled *HOW TO COOK WITHOUT KILLING URSELF AND EVERYONE IN THE VICINITY: A 12-WEEK COURSE FOR PEOPLE WHO SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO HANDLE FIRE OR SHARP OBJECTS*. It's apparently the companion text to a class that Robert's signed him up for, "...since you won't stop trying," and Pops spends the rest of the morning flipping through it and marveling aloud at various factoids.

Like,

"Did you know that you have to *salt* eggplant before you cook it, to get rid of the bitterness?"

"Er—yes?" Robert says, looking pained. (Though to be fair, that was news to Amanda too.)

Or,

"Did you know that you leave the shells on to boil eggs? So that's what I've been doing wrong!"

Robert shoots a helpless look to Amanda, like, *Please help me, he cannot possibly be serious.*

Or,

“So *that’s* what a whisk is for!” Pops says with satisfaction. “I always thought it was for fishing stuff out of the garbage disposal.”

Robert looks at Amanda in despair. Behind him, Pops gives her a wink.

It isn’t until Pops goes, “Did you know that potatoes and tomatoes are two separate vegetables?”, with all the wide-eyed sincerity at his disposal, that Robert finally cottons on and puts Pops in a retaliatory headlock. They spend a minute scuffling on the living room floor, until Betsy jumps in too and they have to stop or risk squishing her. When they sit back up, Robert has a bow stuck to the back of his head, which kinda means Pops won this round.

Amanda also finds, surprisingly, a present for her from Robert. It’s a small box that fits easily in one hand, heavy for its size, and she’s expecting a coffee mug or something, when—

“Holy shit!” Amanda says, the swear tumbling out before she can stop herself. “It’s a *Zeiss portrait lens.*”

Pops leans over to look at it. “Is that good?” he inquires.

“It’s...”

It’s a *seven-hundred-dollar lens*, is what it is, but Robert’s looking at her like it just occurred to him that Pops might not be okay with him dropping that kind of money on her, and is making urgent throat-slashing motions behind her dad’s back. And she hadn’t realized that Pops had gone and gotten himself a *sugar daddy* (and Val’s trophy-boyfriend cracks suddenly make a lot more sense), but if Robert doesn’t want her to make a big deal out of it, then she’ll graciously let it slide.

(Also: a *Zeiss*, holy cow.)

“Yeah, Pops, it’s great,” she says truthfully. “I’m gonna make some Good Art with this.”

Pops beams at her, then turns to beam at Robert—who immediately goes all soft and sappy-looking, like it was a Christmas present to himself to have Pops smile at him like that, and yeah okay, Amanda will let him have this one.

(Also: how much money does her dad’s sugar daddy *have*? And how soon is too soon to start hinting that she could really use a macro lens too?)

After they’re done opening presents, Robert says he’s got one more thing for Pops back at his house, so there’s a lull in the festivities while he goes next door to fetch it. Pops is tidying up the strewn wrapping paper and humming along out of sync with the Eiffel 65 cover of ‘Choir of the Bells’ coming from the stereo; the house is soft and bright from the Christmas tree, warm and smelling like spice cookies.

So Amanda can’t explain it when, instead of hanging out in the living room with Pops, or playing with her new lens, she finds herself inexplicably slinking out onto the back patio alone.

It’s not quite a white Christmas—the snow’s too slushy for that—but it’s still a cold one, and Amanda starts shivering almost immediately. She wraps her arms around herself in a futile effort to stay warm, but she also doesn’t want to go back inside yet either, it’s just—

The patio door slides open behind her, and she turns to see Pops carefully stepping outside. He closes it behind him, then picks his way across the damp concrete in his slippers to join her.

For a long moment he doesn’t speak—not like he’s waiting on her to go first, but just letting them have a quiet moment together in the murky winter day.

At last he says, “How you doing, Manda-Panda?”

She could give him the brush-off; he’d probably even let her, since it’s Christmas and he’s not going to insist on *talking* if she doesn’t want to.

And maybe it’s reverse psychology in how he’s not forcing the is-

sue, but it's working—as they stand shoulder-to-shoulder together, looking out across the yard, they feel almost like equals. It's a change she's not sure she's ready for, like too much is moving too fast.

"I'm fine," she says, because she is. "It's been... a good Christmas. It's good, having Robert here."

Pops nods, but doesn't say anything, just waits for her.

"It's just—ever since Dad died, there was a *hole*," she blurts out. "Holidays aren't supposed to be for just two people."

She's never put it quite so starkly before, but it's what she's been feeling every holiday since they lost him—that Dad's absence was never more painful than on the days when there were *supposed to be three of them*.

"I never even thought about it when I was little. You and Dad were just—a team." Her breath catches on a huff, and she realizes her eyes are wet. "And I thought you always would be. Until suddenly you were having to do it all by yourself, and you always worked so hard to make sure my Christmases would be great, but who was making sure *your* Christmases were great?"

Because she is never, ever going to complain about the job he did, but sometimes the pressure almost made it hard to enjoy herself—like if she didn't *love* the Christmas that Pops put on for her, then he'd be all sad and disappointed, but if Christmas wasn't going to be for both of them, then they might as well just skip it, y'know?

She'd meant it when she said it was good to have Robert there. It isn't the *same*—Robert's not her dad, and she doubts she'll ever think of him that way. They're still awkward around each other, and they mostly keep Pops between them like a buffer, but... it's as if having Robert there has somehow put them in balance again. It feels natural, the way he and Pops work together, play together, silly and comfortable. Robert fills the void that Dad's death left behind—fills it so seamlessly that there are moments when she finds herself forgetting to notice Dad's absence, and she's not sure how she feels about that.

"It's... the best Christmas since Dad died," she makes herself admit.

But Pops seems to get what she's really trying to say, because he puts an arm around her and says quietly, "No one's ever going to replace your dad. Not for you, and not for me either. You can be glad that Robert's here, and still miss Alex—I do. Those feelings can exist side by side."

There's so much crowding up in Amanda's mind, questions like, *how did you get over Dad's death*, and *when*? How did he go from grief to acceptance, to being able to put Dad in the past and take an interest in someone new? It's been five years, but sometimes it still feels as raw as if they lost him yesterday.

"So you think Robert's going to be around for the long haul?" she asks instead.

Pops laughs softly, squeezes her shoulders. "I do," he says. "I think we're good for each other."

She would have had a hard time believing that back in April, when Robert was still making like Boo Radley in the woods and *seriously*, Pops, *you sure you don't want to find a prison penpal to romance instead?*

Weird to think of that Robert as the same guy who was baking cookies in their kitchen this morning—the guy Pops was trolling with his new cookbook, who'd apparently been paying enough attention to know the perfect Christmas gift for his boyfriend's daughter. The guy who's still got problems, maybe, but who's there, making the effort. Like he's committed to being part of their family; like he really is there for the long haul.

And, she realizes, she's okay with that. Robert may not have been her first choice (or her second, or even her third, or—) but apparently Pops hadn't been deluding himself when he said that Robert had promise. When she tries on the thought of Robert sticking around—that he'll be here every time she comes home, that this is going to be his home too—she finds that she's alright with that.

"Yeah," she says. "I think so too. I'm glad you have him."

Distantly, she hears the front door open, followed by Betsy erupting into excited barking, which probably means that Robert's back.

Pops gives her shoulders one last squeeze, and then lets go. "Alright, well I'm going to go back inside and see what this mysterious present is," he says. "You can stay out here as long as you need, okay?"

"Okay."

He leaves her alone, but she was about at her limit for the cold anyway, and then from inside comes an *inhuman pterodactyl shriek* that has Amanda tearing back into the living room—

—only to find Pops holding a box with a squirming bundle of black fur in it, a bundle that is enthusiastically trying to lick his chin.

Pops looks up at her wide-eyed, practically vibrating with excitement. "Amanda! It's a puppy!"

It's a puppy.

"Oh my *gosh*," Pops gushes at the puppy. "You are the cutest thing ever! You're so *fuzzy*! And look at your cute little *nose*!"

"Uhm, so this is all Mary's fault, by the way," Robert says, hands shoved in his pockets and shuffling his feet nervously even though Pops is going into absolute raptures over the puppy. "I know you're not supposed to give people pets without, y'know, asking them first, so if you don't want to keep her, it's cool, I can—"

"No," Pops says decisively, taking himself and his box of puppy to the couch. "This is *my* puppy now, no take-backs."

The puppy is having the best day of her life, too many exciting things happening at once for her to hold still, new friends plus petting plus Betsy trying to clamber up onto Pops' lap and say hi.

"What kind of dog is she?" Pops asks Robert.

Robert shrugs. "A black one? I dunno, Betsy picked her. Looks like she might have some schipperke in her though."

"Well, Betsy has excellent taste in puppies, because you are *beautiful*, aren't you?" he croons, nuzzling noses with the puppy. "Manda, come look at my puppy!"

Amanda joins him on the couch, giving the puppy a path to tumble uncoordinatedly into her lap, and ohh it's love at first sight, she can feel herself just *melting* into those big black eyes.

Robert takes pity on Betsy, still unsuccessfully trying to climb onto the couch, and picks her up and puts her on his lap as he takes a seat on Pops' other side.

"Amanda Woods, would you like the honor of naming this puppy?" Pops asks.

"Catherine," she says promptly.

She sees him pause, then blink at her quizzically.

"But that's very formal," Amanda continues, "so most of the time we'll call her by her nickname."

That's when the penny drops. "Kitty," Pops says. "You want to name her Kitty."

"She is *named*," Amanda says with great dignity, "after Catherine of Aragon, Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine the Great, Catherine Leroy, Catherine, uhm..."

She's running out of Catherines.

"Catherine Deneuve," Robert suggests helpfully. "Catherine Zeta-Jones."

Pops rolls his eyes at them. "You just like the irony of having a dog named Kitty."

"I'm a Youth, Pops, irony is all we do."

"Well, what do you think, sweetheart?" he asks, picking up the puppy and raising her to his face. "Are you a Kitty?" The puppy licks his nose, and he breaks into a smile. "I think she approves. Alright then—welcome to the family, Kitty."

"Yeah," Amanda says, feeling her voice catch. "Welcome aboard."

Her eyes briefly meet Robert's, and she gives a small nod.

Family.



JANUARY

In the time since Robert started sleeping at the Woods household full-time, he's learned it's no coincidence that Gene has aged well. Gene had managed to keep it a secret when Robert was only there for the occasional night or two, but on prolonged exposure, it turns out that the man spends more time in the bathroom than Marilyn and Val combined (even counting Val's goth phase), and has enough different skincare products to start his own youtube channel.

("Yes, well, not all of us can be ready for our close-up when we roll out of bed with a hangover," Gene had said peevishly when Robert ribbed him about it.

Gene's good for the ego sometimes.)

At first it had made Gene self-conscious for Robert to watch him in his *toilette*, like he thought Robert was getting impatient, or going to make fun of him, but he's since eased up and has come to enjoy turning it into a tease. Robert's watching him now, lounging in the bathroom doorway, eyes idly following Gene's hands as he rubs lotion into his neck.

"So I'm going to Jim and Kim's for the Game today," Robert says. "You want to come?"

Gene lights up. "Ooh, yes! I love the Game!"

"Of course you do. Pop quiz: do you know what game it is?"

"My... favorite one?" Gene hazards.

"Hint: it's the biggest one."

"Is it... the *Super Game*?"

"Yes it is, well done."

"Then I would love to go."

"Even though you're just going to make ball jokes with Mary the whole time?" Robert asks, but he lets Gene sidle up to him and start toying with his waistband in a way that's probably going to make them late.

"...No?" Gene tries unconvincingly. "I mean. Not the *whole* time." He pauses. "There's also the halftime show."

Robert leans in and noses at his hair, enjoying the feel of Gene against him, and the fresh smell of his soap. "You don't have to come if you don't want to," Robert teases. "Would hate for you to be *bored*."

That's a lie; bored-and-looking-for-trouble Gene is his favorite Gene. If he plays his cards right, he can probably get a blowjob in the gents.

"No, no, I *love* the Game!" Gene insists. "I'll have you know that the Game holds a very special place in my heart." He bites his lip and gives Robert a coy smile. "After all, that's how I met you."

And Robert knows when he's being played, but, well. They can miss the kickoff.

It takes approximately three minutes after Mary joins them for the ball jokes to start.

"They sure are eager to get their hands on those balls," Mary observes.

Gene nods vigorously. "Well would you *look* at those balls? Who wouldn't be?"

"Balls like those sure don't come along every day."

"These men have spent their entire lives striving for this moment, for the impossible dream that someday they, too, might be able to touch the super balls."

"Their hard work's paying off, because those are some top-notch ball-handling skills," Mary agrees. "I can see why they get paid the big bucks."

Actually this game has been an embarrassment from the start, which is why Robert doesn't begrudge them their mockery—frankly, both teams deserve to get roasted.

"I mean, I consider myself a pretty talented amateur," Gene says

modestly, “but I’ll be the first to admit that I cannot handle balls the way those men handle balls.”

“You’re selling yourself short, kid,” Mary insists. “You’ve talent, you’ve got passion—don’t let anyone ever tell you that you can’t play in the big leagues.”

“No, no, I know my limits,” Gene demurs. “I like to think I could have gone pro if I hadn’t gotten a late start, but I didn’t get a chance to really start honing my ball-handling skills until college. I don’t mind—I can still enjoy playing with balls recreationally.”

Robert accidentally meets Neil’s eye, who just shrugs at him, like, *You signed up for this.*

Craig, of all people, shows up at Jim and Kim’s a while later too—it’s unclear whether Gene invited him or whether it’s a coincidence, but he gamely purchases one bottle of zero-calorie-zero-carb beer and joins them at their table. And Craig, bless his heart, is actually there to watch the Game, which he does for about three minutes, his expression growing increasingly pained.

“This is, uh—” he says, looking to Robert, as the only other person at their table who’s been paying attention.

“More like a blooper reel than a Super Game?” Robert offers.

“...Yeah.” Craig ventures one more glance up at the TV screen, winces, then turns to Mary and Gene and says, “Did you know that when sportsball was first invented, their balls were even *bigger?*”

By the third quarter, the ball jokes have run dry and they’ve moved on to other forms of entertainment.

“Never have I ever...” Mary begins with great and terrible foreboding, and then looks pointedly between Gene and Craig, “...had a four-some.”

Craig looks like a deer in the headlights.

Gene looks *busted*.

Behind the bar, Neil cheerfully raises a glass to Robert and drinks.

"Uh... bro?" Craig says nervously.

Gene grabs that opportunity chug his beer, gesturing to Craig like, *sorry-can't-talk-my-mouth-is-full*. Craig turns beet red and tries to be nonchalant about taking a too-casual sip from the bottle he's been nursing all afternoon, but Robert is absolutely getting that story out of Gene later.

"Well? Robert?" Mary prompts, nodding toward the whiskey he's toying with instead of drinking.

And then he's got three pairs of eyes on him. (Four, if he counts Neil's amused curiosity.)

He clears his throat. "Does a foursome mean at least four people, or exactly four people? Asking for a friend."

Mary cackles. Gene perks up, looking intrigued.

"It was New York City in the eighties!" Robert says in his defense. "*Everyone* was going to swingers parties! I don't remember whether there were ever *exactly* four people involved"—because he also did a fair amount of coke at those parties—"but there were plenty of times when—"

"Just take the damn drink, Small," Mary says.

He does.

"So," Gene says when the front door closes behind them. He turns and slides his arms around Robert's waist, a familiar gleam in his eye. "Swingers parties, you say?"

"Mm-hmm. And what's this about a foursome with Craig Cahn?"

Gene laughs. "Nope, I asked you first. Spill."

They don't often talk about Marilyn—even less than they talk about Alex, in fact—but in this moment, the thought of her doesn't feel like the minefield it usually does. Robert's pleasantly buzzed, and it's casting a fond glow over those memories, the thrill of being young and adventurous together.

“What do you want to hear?” he asks indulgently. He flops onto the couch, pulling Gene down on top of him. “That it was at one of those parties where I got fucked by a man for the first time?”

“Ah?” Gene says, caught off guard, but there’s definite interest there. “Really?”

Gene knows by now that Robert’s bottomed in the past—never anything regular, just that he’s tried it a handful of times—but Robert’s never given him much in the way of specifics. Gene looks very keen to hear them now.

“Yeah. He was a guy Marilyn found at one of the clubs.” Robert relaxes back into the memory. “Think, ah—like a young Jean-Claude Van Damme. Super fuckin’ ripped, kind of a tool, but whatever. Most of the guys at those parties are straight, but he was down to fuck both of us—actually I was the one he was more interested in. He had a thing for ‘converting’ straight guys.”

Which is kinda skeevey, in retrospect, but the man had certainly known how to show rookies a good time.

Robert waves dismissively. “And I mean, I *wasn’t* straight—I’d known since I was fourteen that I wanted to fuck dudes—but let the man have his fantasy, right?”

“Mmm,” Gene hums, nuzzling into Robert’s neck. “So he got to think he was seducing sexy straight young Robert?”

Robert laughs. “There wasn’t much seduction involved. I was pretty eager to try out that dick.”

“And Marilyn was there for it?”

“It was her idea. She thought it was hot.”

The man had also been upfront about the fact that he was a *bring-your-own-aftercare* kind of top. He wanted to watch straight dudes squirming on his dick when they shot their load; he wasn’t interested in petting their hair afterward. One of his requirements was that Robert had someone else on hand for that part—which was responsible of him, Robert supposes, as these things go.

“And was it everything you’d been hoping for?” Gene asks.

“Yeah. It was... a lot.” Robert shifts at the memory, putting Gene between his upright knees. “I’d never... been the one done *to* before.”

He remembers the heart-pattering anticipation of lying back on the edge of the mattress and letting the man spread his legs apart and step between them, Robert’s cock already straining with excitement at that powerful body standing over him. To be the one getting stroked and cosseted, eased into letting someone else inside of him. He doesn’t think he could do it now, not for a stranger, but he can remember how it felt to be young and fearless, without the baggage he picked up later, and what a thrill that turnabout was.

“He was good at it, I’ll give him that.” Robert runs his hands up Gene’s flanks, over the curve of his ass. The jeans aren’t as much fun as the yoga pants, but between the memory of that party, and Gene between his legs, Robert’s cock is firming up anyway. “Like I said, that was his whole thing—he wanted to blow these guys’ minds when they found out how much they liked taking cock. He knew how to take his time, how to tease until you were begging for it.”

He can remember how the man’s dick had been rock-hard but untouched the whole time he was working on Robert—impossible to ignore, but his entire focus had been on Robert’s reactions, on making Robert *want* it. How it had felt to be pinned under that hot, anticipatory gaze, knowing that each startled gasp he made was fanning that flame.

Robert lazily undoes the top few buttons of Gene’s shirt, enjoying the comfortable fizz of arousal under his skin. “How about you?” he asked. “You ever switched it up before?”

“Ah—a few times,” Gene says, breathless and distracted. “We tried it, but it was never Alex’s thing.”

“You wanna fuck me?”

Gene’s eyes snap up to his face, startled but definitely interested. “Yes?” he says, like a question. He wets his lips. “Though, uh. I probably won’t be as good at it as your destroyer-of-virgins was.”

“Nah.” Robert hooks a leg over Gene’s and pulls him down for a kiss. “You’re gonna blow him out of the water.”



FEBRUARY

Gene’s dragged out of a dead sleep by a series of persistent vibrations from the nightstand. It’s a nuisance, he wants it to shut up, until he wakes up enough to connect the annoying noise with the buzz of incoming texts, and—

And then he *remembers*, and he’s bolting upright in bed, heart in his throat, already bracing for the worst as he grabs the phone off the nightstand and sees—

ROBERT: Hey

ROBERT: Hey gene

ROBERT: Hey wake up

ROBERT: It’s low tide

ROBERT: Let’s go down to the beach and look for cool shit

Relief hits him like a punch to the chest, and he collapses flat onto the bed. For a moment all he can do is squeeze his eyes shut while he catches his breath, waiting for his racing heartbeat to slow again. Then he lifts the phone and types out a response.

GENE: So you’re back?

ROBERT: Yeah

ROBERT: ...on your front porch, actually

Of course he is. Gene glances at the bedside clock—four-thirty in the morning—and heaves a sigh that’s as much exasperated as it is fond, *you knew what you were signing up for*. And anyway, he’s too relieved to be annoyed.

Kitty, curled up next to Gene and blissfully unaware of the human drama that's been going on, just whuffles and kicks in her sleep.

GENE: Hang tight, I'll be out in a second

ROBERT: Bring ur cat

ROBERT: And bundle up

ROBERT: It's fucking cold out here

The sky is pitch black when Gene pushes open the front door and steps outside; sunrise is still hours away, and the frigid air immediately bites at his cheeks. He gets a brief glimpse of the tableau on his porch—Robert sitting on his front steps, staring out at the street with his hand resting on Betsy's head—before Kitty realizes that her *best friend* is here, and goes barreling out the door past Gene. The two dogs are immediately distracted with each other, taking off across the yard, and Gene gets a better look at Robert.

Robert looks... not great. Alive and in one piece, but he's drawn and hollow-eyed, the lines in his face set deeper than usual. He doesn't look like he's been drinking, small mercies, more like he spent the past week living off coffee and cigarettes, and Gene will always be grateful that his vices don't run harder than that.

There's a jittery energy in him—his feet tapping on the step, fingertips dancing restlessly against his knee. His eyes dart to Gene and then away again, and he gives Gene a hollow twitch of his lips that's nothing more than a reflex.

"Hey," Robert says, low, not meeting his eyes.

He's afraid you're angry with him.

"Hey, yourself," Gene says lightly, stepping forward to tousle Robert's hair. "Welcome back."

He holds out his hand, and Robert takes it, lets himself be pulled to his feet. And Robert doesn't pull away when Gene puts his hands on his waist, but he also doesn't respond to the touch either. He hardly

seems to register it at all, in fact, and Gene feels his heart sink a little, tries to keep the hurt off his face.

It's not your fault, and it's not his, this just happens sometimes. You knew what you were signing up for when you chose to be with him.

Gene takes his hands back and puts them in his pockets, then gives Robert a companionable nudge with his shoulder. "C'mon. You promised me a moonlit walk on the beach."

They walk in silence for a few minutes, making their way out of the neighborhood, with Robert a tightly-wound presence at his side. The moon overhead is full or close to it, casting bright, clear highlights and stark shadows over the ground. The dogs romp ahead of them, and Gene can feel himself wince every time one of Betsy's high-pitched yips pierces the predawn air.

(It's occurred to Gene that if they ever do break up, they should still arrange play-dates for the dogs. He doesn't like to entertain those thoughts—planning for that possibility feels like inviting it—but at times like these he can't help it. When there's a gulf between them that he has no idea how to bridge, doesn't know if Robert even wants to.)

He needs to call Val, as soon as the hour is a bit more sociable, to let her know that Robert turned up again. And Mary, too—she'll be glad to hear that he's okay, even though she's been telling Gene from the start that he never stays gone longer than a week.

Gene clears his throat. "So, when you text people and say, 'going off the grid for a while, don't worry about me'... you know that we're still going to worry, right?"

Robert flinches and his shoulders hunch. "Sorry."

Gene bites back a sigh, because, *goddamn it*, he hadn't meant for that to be a guilt trip. Sometimes Robert can take that kind of light admonishment in the spirit it was intended, but sometimes everything just falls wrong, and Gene really should have a better sense for it by now.

He presses his shoulder against Robert's briefly. "Robert, I'm not mad. I'm glad you gave me the heads-up. I'm always going to fret, but

if you'd disappeared without a word I would have been terrified. So, thank you."

Robert gives a contemptuous snort. "Behold, Robert Small, heroically clearing the lowest of bars."

And there's nothing Gene can say to that, except more reassurances that Robert's in no state of mind to believe, so he lets it go, and they walk in silence.

They're almost to the ocean now—he hears it before he sees it, the endless, overlapping roar of the surf—and then they're cresting the rise of the dunes. The water stretches out before them from horizon to horizon, vast and dark and unfathomable, sea spray whipping on the cold salt wind.

The ocean feels bigger at night—more menacing, like something hungry and alive, waiting to leap out and swallow them whole. Gene has a moment's irrational fear that he's about to watch Robert walk into that dark water and disappear.

But Robert changes course before they get close to the waterline, leads them further up the beach. The dogs are still frolicking ahead, clearly wanting to play in the surf, but getting no more than their paws wet before yelping at the icy water and dancing back again.

"So," Gene says at last, breaking the silence. "What'd you do on your, uh, impromptu vacation?"

Robert twitches a shrug. "Drove to Georgia."

Gene feels himself recoil in astonishment, the split second of trying to figure out whether that's a joke. "But—that's like—"

"A fifteen-hour drive, yeah." Robert sounds exhausted. "Don't worry, Betsy and I took turns at the wheel."

"Okay..." Gene says slowly. He still can't tell if Robert's kidding. "So... how was Georgia?"

"Green," Robert says dully, and Gene decides that he's not.

And there's so much clamoring for attention in Gene's head—the heart-stopping terror of realizing how very, very far away Robert had

been, the fact that he could get in his truck and just *drive off* like that, like he wanted to leave his whole life behind him, the thought of him being *on the road* in this state, for dozens of hours, but—

But giving Robert grief about it now would just alienate him further. Gene has to swallow down the words, and silently remind himself that it's fine—that Robert came back, that he survived. (Although *christ*, Gene's suddenly glad he didn't know what Robert was up to this past week, or he wouldn't have been able to sleep at all.)

Another thought occurs to him—a dark, insidious whisper that he wishes he could ignore—and he badly wants to know if Robert wound up in bed with anyone else during his absence. But there's no way he can ask, because just the question would *gut* Robert if the answer is no. And he knows that Robert doesn't *want* to cheat on him, would never do it when he's in his right mind, but...

But this side of Robert is still alien to him sometimes—a restless, untouchable stranger, the clockwork of his mind like a closed box. Gene has no idea what this Robert is liable to do, only that he has a history of trying to annihilate himself in strangers' bodies.

(He reminds himself of Robert saying, *I never cheated on her, it was about the one thing I didn't do wrong*. And his conviction that if Robert ever did, he'd confess to it, and then they'd deal with it, together.)

And Gene *wants to help*, he wants to do something, anything, to ease the despair that's still pouring off Robert in waves. Anything besides helplessly standing by—but sometimes it seems like all he ever knows is what *not* to do.

"Are you feeling any better now?" he ventures.

Robert struggles with the question for a moment, then his expression crumbles and he shakes his head helplessly. "No," he admits, scarcely above a whisper. "But I missed you. So I turned around and drove back."

And *that* makes the vise around Gene's chest finally loosen—the reassurance that Robert does still care, that he still wants Gene in his life.

Because the worst part of Alex's depressions, always, was when he withdrew so completely that he didn't even want the comfort Gene was trying to offer. And Gene never said it to Alex, will never say it to Robert, but he can't help thinking, *You don't love me when you get like this. You look at me like I'm a stranger, and I'm terrified that you're never coming back to me.*

Gene finds himself stepping forward and putting an arm around Robert's waist, and this time Robert leans into the touch, wrapping himself around Gene, letting Gene hold him.

"Are you going to tell me again that I should try therapy?" Robert asks tiredly.

God, it's tempting—tempting to think that he knows what's best for Robert, and to try to straighten him out with no input from Robert himself. The worst part is that if Gene told him to, *Robert would do it.* The amount of control that Robert's willing to cede so easily is terrifying sometimes, and therapy might help him, but taking the choice out of his hands would not.

Gene swallows, shakes his head. "No. It's still your decision. If you don't like the idea of therapy, you don't have to. You're not at rock bottom, you've still got space to keep trying other things."

Gene's felt Robert out before, delicately, to see if he ever gets suicidal on his downswings, and the answer had been both reassuring and rage-making—that the only time he'd ever come close was after Joseph. And Gene feels the same visceral, shakingly helpless fury toward Joseph that he'd always felt toward Alex's parents, thinking, *You nearly killed the man I love, you nearly destroyed him before I ever even met him, and you're not even sorry for it—*

It's chilling, to think about those near-misses.

And all he can do is take a deep breath, and remind himself that those darker futures didn't come to pass. Robert's here now; he survived Joseph, and he's survived worse downswings than this, even when he had nothing and no one to come back to. He survived thirty-

some-odd hours on the road to Georgia and back. Robert is, against all odds, a survivor, and Gene has to put his faith in that when he finds everything out of his hands.

He takes a breath, pulls Robert in tighter. "I love you," he says. "I'm glad you came back to me."

Because sometimes even the obvious things still need to be said out loud.

Robert presses his lips to Gene's forehead, though his body is still thrumming with that unbearable tension. "I love you too. I'm glad you're here."

Gene gives him one more squeeze before he steps back, holding Robert's hand as he steers them back toward the road and gives a whistle for the dogs to follow. "Come on, let's go home. We'll get some food in you, maybe go back to bed. When's the last time you slept?"

Robert's silent for a beat, then says, "I don't know, what day is it? What year is it? Has The Calamity happened yet?"

Which is Robert-speak for, *Do you really want to know the answer to that?*, and Gene lets it go.

Robert's *here*, and that's what matters. He's alive, he came home, he's holding Gene's hand tightly in his. He's letting Gene take care of him, instead of crawling off like a wounded animal to die alone. He's here, and he's trying.

It's not perfect—but it's enough to work with.



MARCH

When Robert wanders over to Gene's house that evening, he finds the garage door open and Gene bent beneath the hood of his car, finishing up an oil change in the bright halo of a shop light.

Gene startles a bit when Robert suddenly materializes out of the gloom, and then smiles brightly. "Hey!"

"Howdy," Robert says, then eyes him up and down. "You're looking butch this evening."

He's used to seeing Gene a lot dressier, usually in slacks and jackets, so it's oddly sexy to find him in a stained, faded t-shirt and tight jeans, arms bare above his oil-smeared rubber gloves.

Gene laughs. "Like that, do you? Legacy of having once been very poor, we learned how to change our own oil."

He starts pouring oil into the engine, so Robert's careful not to jostle him, but can't resist coming up behind him and putting his hands on Gene's hips, nuzzling his face into Gene's neck.

Gene finishes with the oil, then puts the empty bottle aside and turns around, keeping his greasy hands at bay but giving Robert tacit encouragement to keep feeling him up. The fact that they're standing in a spotlight and visible from the street keeps Robert from getting too frisky, but he does take the invitation to kiss Gene, slow and deep.

When they break off, Gene takes stock of Robert's black t-shirt, leather jacket and leather driving gloves, then quirks an interested smile. "And you're looking... rakish."

Robert snorts. "I look like I've been disposing of a body. And on that note—you wanna go for a drive?"

"Sure. I can't tell if I'm helping with the body, or if I am the body, but I see no way this could end badly."

Gene recognizes their destination about halfway there.

"Are we masturbating, then?" he asks cheekily as Robert's truck climbs the hill toward the overlook.

"Not yet. But you can start without me if you like."

"Mmm, I think I want you to keep your eyes on the road."

Fair enough.

Robert parks them at the top of the cliff, and then climbs out of the

cab and lets down the tailgate. They hoist themselves up onto the truck bed, with Gene tucking himself up against Robert's side and the silence falling over them as they gaze out across the city lights.

"You know what day it is?" Robert asks after a long moment.

Gene frowns in thought. "The ides of March?"

"That too." Oddly appropriate. "Also, on this date, one year ago, I attempted to trip you into bed for the first time."

He sees enlightenment dawn. "It's our anniversary!" Gene says, delighted.

"One of them, anyway."

Robert's not sure where to pin the start of their relationship. And honestly, this makes it sound like he's a lot better at remembering anniversaries than he actually is—it was just a coincidence, but one that has pleasing symmetry.

"And I know you told me not to get a tattoo for you," Robert says, unsnapping the glove at his wrist. "So before you say a word—I didn't do this for you, I did it for me."

He works the glove off, then holds out his hand to Gene.

Robert can feel himself holding his breath as Gene takes his hand and tilts it toward the glow of the city lights. Gene peers at the design on the back of his hand, then blinks and cocks his head curiously, a small furrow in his brow as he half-recognizes it.

"Is that...?"

"The picture in your room."

It's a memory that's stayed with him—when he was standing in Gene's bedroom for the first time, looking at the photographs on his wall. The one that had caught his eye was a spiral of leaves, the precision of nature somehow soothing; like the promise that there was an order, a purpose to the universe. He remembers how the painful tightness in his chest had finally started to unwind, as he looked at the spiral of leaves and breathed in Gene's calming presence. *The first time in a long time that I'd felt safe.*

Robert swallows and shrugs. "It covered up the janky lines of the old one pretty well."

Gene smiles, then lifts Robert's hand to his lips and presses a kiss to the tattoo. "I like it," he says simply. "Amanda's going to be terribly flattered; she took that picture, you know."

"I figured."

The other possibility was that Alex had taken it, which would have been a little weird for everyone, but frankly, he'd rather have Alex's legacy on him than Joseph's.

Gene looks very pleased with it now, smiling as he traces the spiral, his finger light on Robert's skin. "You were right," he says thoughtfully. "I had stopped noticing it—mostly. But this is better."

And Gene's giving him the look that Robert's starting to become familiar with, the hot and meaningful one that says he doesn't give a fuck about public indecency now that his daughter is six hundred miles away. A moment later he's pushing Robert flat on his back against the bed of the truck, climbing up to straddle his waist and then leaning down to kiss him.

Robert relaxes into the kiss, closes his eyes. He can feel Gene's weight rubbing against him, his cock already starting to swell in anticipation.

"By the way," Robert says, breaking the kiss. "I'm still getting my dick tattooed. I'm just saving it for a special occasion—your birthday, maybe."

"Mm-hmm. And I think *you* need a reminder why you don't want to do that," Gene murmurs against his jaw. He nips at Robert's neck, and then slides downward, past Robert's rucked-up shirt to lay an open-mouthed kiss on his stomach, making his skin shiver as the wetness catches the cool evening breeze.

"Not worried about the Dover ghost?" Robert asks as Gene starts unbuttoning his jeans.

Gene chuckles, leans down to coast his breath against the bulge in his underwear. "We'll give 'em a show."



APRIL

"So Gene's been hinting that I should leave Joseph," Mary says, apropos of nothing.

Robert looks up, startled, and finds her carefully watching him from behind her sunglasses, gauging his reaction.

"Did you put him up to that?" she asks.

Robert shakes his head.

"I didn't think so." She looks away again, gazing out across the softball field. "Your cat-shirt nerd is a busybody."

"He really is," Robert agrees. Considering Gene's slow but relentless campaign to right all of the wrongs in Robert's life, it's not surprising that he can't bring himself to leave Mary to suffer either.

"He wants me to talk to his lawyer," she continues. "Says she does pro-bono work sometimes, or that she can put me in touch with someone who does. He says I have options, if I want to take them."

Yeah, that sounds like Gene's M.O.

They watch *The Game* in silence for a few minutes—silence, because Mary keeps the ball jokes to herself when the players are twelve-year-old girls. It's just as well; Gene would probably be unimpressed to come back and find that they'd gotten themselves kicked out of Craig's daughters' softball game.

"Are you going to do it?" Robert asks at last.

There's a long beat in which Mary doesn't reply, just watches the field, looking troubled. Then she drops her eyes and swishes the ice around in her soda.

"I took the baby on a playdate a couple weeks ago," she says in-

stead. "With some of the other toddlers from the church. It made me realize how quiet he is compared to the other kids. I'd thought he was still too young to notice..." She makes a gesture that Robert fills in with, *how fucked up everything is*. "But it's starting already. Just like it did with the others. It's happening all over again, and I'm just going to sit there and watch as another of my children—"

She breaks off, clenching her hand around her soda while she struggles to get control off herself again.

"He'll fight me for the kids," she says at last. "To punish me, if nothing else. And... Robert, I don't know if I'd win. I know what this town thinks of me, and what it thinks of him. And if he wins, then *I can't leave*. Not if it means leaving them alone with him."

This is usually the point where Robert would pass her the flask, because hell if he knows what to say to that.

"If you needed me to—" He looks away, swallows. "—testify. Against him. You know, like a character witness. I would." The thought of it makes him want to *scream*, laying his deepest humiliations bare in front of a hundred hostile faces, but— "I would. I'll tell them what he's like. What he does. I don't know—how much good it would do, but—"

He can feel his fingernails digging into his wrist, because who's going to believe him, who's going to believe *either* of them, the town's drunk sluts hurling mud at the upstanding youth minister, any lawyer worth their salt is going to *drag him*, is going to dredge up every degrading mistake he's ever made, is going to rip his character and credibility to shreds in front of everyone, but—

"But if you need me to, I'll do it."

Mary's staring at him, then she turns away. "I couldn't ask that of you."

"If it would help, I'd do it whether you ask me to or not."

Because it doesn't matter what the rest of the town thinks of him, he reminds himself, and that helps him breathe again. He has Mary, he

has Gene—they know the truth, and they're on his side. He doesn't give a fuck what anyone else thinks.

He takes a breath and says quietly, "I told Gene—about Joseph. A while back."

Mary eyes him sidelong. "What did he say?"

"He wanted to charge across the street and burn Joseph's house down right then and there. I had to remind him that it was your house too."

Mary snorts. "Thanks."

"But that's probably why he wants you out. So he can commit arson with a clear conscience."

Mary has her mouth open to reply, but she doesn't get the chance, because suddenly Gene's back, appearing out of nowhere as he slings an arm over Robert's shoulder and lands halfway in his lap.

"Hey guys!" he says breathlessly. "If anyone asks, I was here the whole time."

"Of course," Mary agrees. "Where else would you have been?"

Somewhere in the background, Robert hears one of the softball moms call out over the crowd,

"HAS ANYONE SEEN MY MINIVAN?"



MAY

Robert is chopping vegetables for an omelet when his phone lights up on the countertop with an incoming call. Val, not spam—he reaches across the stove to turn off the burner that had been preheating and abandons the knife in favor of swiping to accept the call.

"Hey, kiddo, what's going on?"

Gene, who had been sitting at the breakfast bar with a cup of coffee and the most recent issue of some obscure publishers' journal that he

subscribes to, looks up at that, and then moves into the kitchen with an implicit offer to take over the omelet-making.

Which. Okay, Gene has come along by leaps and bounds thanks to the cooking class Robert bought him at Christmas, but Robert still has no intention of letting him attempt this unsupervised.

“Hey Dad. We’re throwing a party,” Val says. “I need to know if you’ll be able to attend, and if I should put Gene down as your plus-one.”

“Uh, sure,” Robert says distractedly, watching Gene come perilously close to slicing the tips of his own fingers off. He repositions Gene’s hands over the onion, but continues watching him like a hawk. “Yeah, we can probably come. When is it?”

“December 10th.”

“Uhm—” He has to double-check the calendar over the sink to confirm that it is indeed *still May*. “Getting a head-start on it, huh?”

“Better too soon than too late,” Val agrees gaily. If there’s a manic edge to her good cheer, Robert figures she came by it honestly.

“So is this a... Hanukkah party?” Robert ventures. He has no idea when Hanukkah is.

“Nope! Though I guess it will be pretty Jewish. Or, Jew-ish, on account of how Naomi’s family is doing most of the planning. Oh! And I should probably warn you that Mom’s parents are going to be there.”

“Fuck,” Robert says before he can check himself. “I mean. Okay.” Not something he’s looking forward to, but he and the in-laws have gone thirty years without killing each other, they can probably keep that streak going for one more evening. “So what’s this party for?”

“Oh. Y’know,” Val says vaguely. “Just an excuse to bring family and friends together. A small, intimate gathering. Black tie. No more than a hundred and fifty people, tops. Oh, and before I forget—do you want the steak or the chicken? I assume you don’t want the vegan option.”

“I—steak, what kind of question is that?” Who the fuck would

choose chicken over steak, besides Craig Cahn? "And what the hell kind of catered party are you planning this far in advance—"

The penny drops.

"Val." He sinks against the edge of the counter. "Is this your way of inviting me to your wedding?"

Gene's head swings up, eyes going wide with delight. Robert deftly relieves him of the knife that he is no longer paying attention to.

"Ding ding ding ding!" Val says gaily. He can hear the giddy smile stretching her face. "I proposed! She said yes! And then she said, 'You couldn't possibly have waited a week?' Because she'd been planning to propose to me during her solo recital a week later, so we didn't tell anyone and then I got to pretend like it was a surprise."

"I—wow. Congratulations," Robert manages. He's not sure why this is hitting him so hard. Val and Naomi have been together for at least five or six years now; it shouldn't come as a surprise that they're finally tying the knot. "That's great. December 10th, you said?"

"Yep! It'll be here in the city, we've booked one of the hotels downtown."

Gene has stepped forward into his space, taking Robert's free hand and giving it a silent squeeze. Robert squeezes back. "Alright, then we'll—save the date."

"I also wanted to ask if you..." Her confidence falters then, and she asks, much more hesitantly, "If you'd be willing to walk me down the aisle."

That also comes as more of a shock than it should, because somehow it hadn't occurred to him that she would want that from him. After his half-assed failure at fatherhood, he'd expected to have lost that privilege.

"Don't you always complain about how that sort of thing is patriarchal and sexist?" he deflects.

"Well, yeah, it is." He can practically hear her rolling her eyes.

“But... Naomi’s dad is doing it for her. And that’s like... a big deal to dads, right?”

Robert can feel himself blinking faster to clear his eyes. “Yeah, kiddo. It is.” He swallows, then says roughly, “I’d be honored.”

They talk for a few more minutes, about the wedding registry and when they’re planning to have the rehearsal, with Gene’s presence a silent comfort, his hand an anchor for Robert to hold onto. Val eventually excuses herself on account of having many more phone calls to make, and Robert ends the call, then lets himself sag against the counter.

Gene gives him a wide smile and settles his hands on Robert’s waist. “So am I to understand that congratulations are in order?”

“Yeah,” Robert says, still feeling kind of shell-shocked as he returns the embrace. “I—yeah.”

And why is it that he suddenly finds himself flashing to a memory of Val in middle school? Remembering her full of *righteous outrage* at some teacher that had given mortal offense, and there she was, tiny and fierce, a little terror ready to fight the whole world. A person he’d created but also entirely her own person, in that moment, and it was staggering, and humbling, to witness this small creature that he’d set in motion suddenly asserting a mind and a will that was all her own. And it was terrifying too, to realize that she was taking her first steps down a path of her own making, a path that he couldn’t predict for her, that he wouldn’t be able to keep her safe on.

“Robert?” Gene prompts at his silence.

Robert lets out an unsteady laugh. “Yeah, let’s see how chill *you* are when Amanda’s the one getting married.”

“Touche,” Gene concedes wryly. “But this is a good thing, right?”

“Oh absolutely. I’m happy for her—for them. I like Naomi, she’s a good kid, and they’re... real good together.”

Gene waits, doesn’t interrupt while Robert struggles to get his thoughts together.

"I guess... shit," he says, running a hand through his hair. "I guess this is just driving it home that Val's not a kid anymore. And that I'm not a young man anymore either, and... and it's not like that's news, but it's like I'm just now realizing that there's no going back."

"Would you *want* to be a young man again?" Gene asks mildly.

At first blush, the question feels almost asinine, because who wouldn't, right? But—

But Robert can remember the man he was at twenty, at thirty; he remembers how it felt to be so uncertain of himself and his place in the world. He remembers faking so many things he didn't feel, wearing so many personas that never fit him quite right, while behind the facade he was lost. When he thinks back on the years of his youth, all he can remember is the brittle unhappiness that hounded him, that he could never quite outrun no matter how he tried. He remembers having *wanted* to be happy, but never knowing how to achieve that.

And sure, it'd be nice to bounce back from a hangover the way he used to, and he wouldn't say no to being able to get it up twice a night, but... he finds that he doesn't actually *want* to be young again. It took him a long, long time to become comfortable in himself, and he wouldn't trade that for tighter abs.

"No," he says at last. "I'm alright with where I am now. And besides, I don't think you're into younger men."

"I'm really not," Gene agrees. "I can't abide anyone younger and twinkier than me. It makes me want to shank them."

"Mm, then it's a good thing I'm so old and grizzled," Robert says, rubbing his lips against Gene's hair.

He takes a deep breath, anchoring himself with Gene's scent, and then makes himself draw back.

"You said—" Robert begins with difficulty.

Gene waits for him.

Robert wets his lips. "You said that it can—take a while. To get the mental health stuff worked out."

"There's often some trial and error," Gene agrees carefully.

"I want to try," Robert forces out. "I don't want to—fuck up Val's wedding with my bullshit. I want to know that I'm going to be good when it happens. I want to be able to be there and do it right. And the wedding's in December, so I guess... better get started on it now, huh?"

For a moment he can't interpret the look on Gene's face, a swell of emotions that doesn't settle on anything identifiable. Then Gene reaches up, takes Robert's face between his hands, and pulls him down for a kiss.

"I am so proud of you," Gene says when the kiss breaks, and there's a shine to his eyes. "I really, truly am. I love you, and I'm proud of you. I know how scary this is, and how much courage it takes to make this leap. And I promise, it's going to be okay. You and me together—we can handle anything that comes our way."

And Robert is... still not convinced of that. It feels like three quarters of him has gone into an uproar, screaming absolute *mutiny* over what he just promised Gene, but—

If he can be there on Val's wedding day—

If this means he'll have his shit together for her—

"So are you allowed to pick your, uh, shrink?" he asks.

Gene smiles. "I think they prefer to be called 'therapists.' But yes—you can absolutely pick your therapist. And if you decide you don't like them, then you can give 'em the boot and pick a new one."

"I want a lesbian," Robert says immediately. Then, to prevent any confusion, "An *old* lesbian. Like, old-enough-to-be-my-mother lesbian."

"Sure," Gene agrees without so much as a blink. "That shouldn't be hard—plenty of therapists specialize in LGBT issues."

That hadn't even occurred to Robert, since the gay stuff is about the one thing in his life that *isn't* a problem, but it's good to know that he won't get ambushed with any homophobic bullshit. Not that he

couldn't take some freudian motherfucker in a fistfight, but his insurance policy probably wouldn't cover that.

"Any other requests?" Gene asks.

Robert shrugs. "I don't know. Just—you'll come with me, right?"

"Of course." Gene goes up on tiptoe and kisses his nose. "Whatever you need, sweetheart. We're in this together."

It's still scary—a leap, as Gene said—but it's the choice he's making, of his own volition, and he'll have Gene at his side. And honestly, getting advice from a sensible old lesbian would probably be one of the smarter things that Robert's done in his life.

Then Gene's phone rings and he disengages just enough to dig it out of his pocket. He glances at the display and then flashes it to show Robert the incoming call—Amanda—before answering.

"Hey Panda, what's up?"

Through the phone's thin speakers Robert hears,

"OMIGAWD, POPS, YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHO JUST ASKED ME TO BE HER BRIDESMAID!!!"



JUNE

"Right, so what is it you really want?" Val asks after Robert's been beating around the bush for a few minutes.

"What, I'm not allowed to call my favorite daughter without an ulterior motive?"

"Uh-huh. And I'm still waiting for you to get to the point."

Robert sighs. "Gene wants to go camping. In the woods. In a tent."

Val turns away from the phone to cackle, and Robert patiently waits for her to come back.

"Oh, that's amazing," she says a minute later, still wheezing with

laughter. “*Camping*. He does know you’re a born-and-bred New Yorker, right?”

“Yes! And he’s from Boston! Which is why he’s under the mistaken impression that camping is *fun*, because the last time he went was ten years ago and he got to borrow his rich in-laws’ RV. I’m not sure he’s ever even *seen* a tent in the wild before.”

“Well, what do you want me to tell you, Dad? That you should go, it’ll be good for you, or that you’re allowed to say no?”

Robert’s silent for a moment. “I don’t want to say no,” he admits. “Gene’s really excited about it.”

She makes a whip-cracking noise. “Well, there you have it then. New experience, stepping outside your comfort zone, builds character, yadda yadda yadda. Maybe you’ll even surprise yourself and have fun.”

And there’s the opening Robert’s been waiting for. “I’m so glad you feel that way about new experiences, Val,” he says, feeling the grin starting across his face. “Because you and Naomi are invited too.”

“Oh, no no no...”

“Amanda’s in town for the summer, he wants to make it a *Small-wood family adventure*.”

“He does know that *all three* of us are born-and-bred New Yorkers, right?”

In the background he hears Naomi ask something.

“My dad’s boyfriend wants us to go *camping* with them,” Val scoffs, away from the mouthpiece. “Outside. *Where the dirt lives*.”

Naomi says something indistinct, and Val’s tone turns abruptly defensive.

“Oh no—no, babe, you are *wrong*, it does not sound like fun. Camping is bad food and bug spray and spiders watching you pee, it is not ‘fun.’”

“Don’t listen to her, Naomi, it’ll be great!” Robert calls. “Gene as-

sures me that he read a book on camping once, there's no way this can go wrong."

Naomi's talking again, her words indistinct but her tone distinctly *reasonable*, and Val's trying to protest, but Robert could tell her it's a lost cause. Smalls never can say no to the puppy-dog eyes.

"I am going to *murder you in your sleep*," Val says when she gets back on the line with him. "Because when we go camping I will *know where you sleep*."

"Great, I'll tell Gene you're looking forward to it."

"Whatever. Tell your trophy boyfriend to bring s'mores."



JULY

Robert's coffee has long since gone cold by the time he hears Gene up and moving around inside the house. A few minutes later, the patio door slides open, followed by the sound of Gene stepping out onto the deck.

Robert knows he ought to... turn around. Say hi, apologize, do *something* to show willing, but—

But he can't find it in him to do even that much, just keeps his eyes on the dawn-streaked sky as Gene pulls up a chair at the patio table next to him.

He feels hollowed out from the night before—that achy, fragile feeling of a hangover, all without the benefit of having been allowed to get *actually goddamned drunk*.

Gene doesn't say anything, just tucks his hands into the pockets of his robe even though the morning is already getting muggy.

Robert nudges his coffee mug towards Gene like a peace offering; Gene accepts it, though he gives it a discreet sniff for fortifying agents

before taking a sip. Robert wishes he had the moral high ground to take offense at that.

"I'm glad you stayed," Gene says at last, his voice carefully mild. "When I woke up and you weren't there... I thought maybe you'd left."

Right, because that's what Robert had threatened last night, hadn't he? Threatened to throw up his hands and say *fuck it* to all of this—fuck therapy, fuck meds, fuck *Gene*, he'd rather crawl back into a bottle and drink himself to death. If he's going to be feeling shitty anyway, he might as well be able to get drunk, and *be able to get it up*.

(Followed by, not even ten minutes later, clinging to Gene and bawling his fucking eyes out, gripped with the sudden, mindless terror of realizing what it would be like to *lose* Gene, and the bone-deep certainty that *you will, you're never going to get your shit together, and he's going to get tired of putting up with all this crap*.)

Convinced that it was only a matter of time before Gene realized that Robert was nothing but a drain, and fuck, Robert loves him *so much*, he'd do anything to make him stay, so *why can't you be better for him*—)

Robert shakes his head. "There's no coffee at my house."

Gene lets out a small huff, like he could hear the subtext in that.

And hell, maybe he could. *Not my first rodeo*, Gene's been trying to tell him from the start.

Robert's hand twitches toward Gene, more instinct than invitation, but Gene seems to understand. He reaches across the table, taking Robert's hand and lacing their fingers together. Robert feels something in him unwind a turn, soothed by the tangible reassurance that Gene still wants this, still wants *him*.

"I'm sorry you're having a hard time of it," Gene says quietly. "Truly—I wish there was something I could do to make this easier for you. I wish you weren't having to deal with this all on your own."

Robert shrugs tiredly. "We always knew there was going to be some trial-and-error."

Gene squeezes his hand. "Yes, but... I couldn't keep from hoping that maybe you'd luck out and it wouldn't be so bad."

Robert has never in his life gotten lucky, and he wasn't expecting that to change now. Gene's the one who still expects the world to be fair.

"Do you think you can stick it out a little longer?" Gene asks.

There's a note of—uncertainty, in his voice. Hope, but trying to keep a leash on it, trying not to put pressure on Robert.

"Yes," Robert says curtly.

In the corner of his eye he sees Gene's head come up, clearly surprised by his immediate, unqualified acquiescence.

But really—if not now, then when?

Because Robert knows himself—he knows that if he gives up now, he'll never muster up the willpower to attempt it again. And then he'll always, *always* wonder whether the meds might have worked if he'd just sucked it up and powered through a little longer. Whether he could have gotten a handle on this if he'd been able to just *stick something out* for once in his goddamn life.

Everyone had warned him to expect this: warned him that things would likely get worse before they got better, that the meds would be, quote-unquote, *rough*, for a while—but everyone had also sworn up and down that this would pass. And Robert has spent so long dealing with so much worse, without even a glimmer of hope on the horizon—what's a few more months, really?

He squeezes Gene's fingers in return.

His instinct is to apologize, again, because he's still cringing at how he acted last night, but he checks himself. His therapist has told him that it's better to say *thank you* than *I'm sorry*, and even though Robert isn't convinced it makes any real difference, he figures he might as well follow the advice he's paying her for.

"Thank you," he says. The words feel rough in his throat. "For..."

sticking with me through this." *When I'm being a shit*, he manages not to say aloud.

"We're in it together, sweetheart," Gene says simply.

Robert swallows. "I don't think I could do this without you," he admits.

He *knows* he couldn't. Without accountability, without someone *expecting* him to do this right, he would have thrown in the towel already and gone back to dealing with it the old-fashioned way.

Gene squeezes his hand again. "You don't have to."

They lapse back into silence again, but it's a silence that breathes easier this time. Gene's hand stays laced with his in the warm birdsong summer morning.

At length, Gene opens his mouth and draws in a small breath. "How would you feel about a... vacation, of sorts? A change of scenery?"

Robert shrugs. "Sure."

A change of scenery has never helped his moods before, but it's never hurt either, and he'll do it if that's what Gene wants.

"I didn't mention it before, because I didn't want you to feel pressured into it when you weren't feeling well," Gene begins carefully. "But... one of the authors I know is coming out with a new book, and the publishing house is throwing a launch party for it next Saturday. Near Boston, so it's a bit of a drive, but they're holding it at a bed-and-breakfast, and then springing for rooms so that guests can spend the night afterward."

That's not what Robert had been expecting, and it stirs a distant feeling of curiosity. "Swanky," he says, eyebrows raised. "And you got us an invite? I didn't realize you were such a VIP in the publishing world."

Gene laughs. "I'm really not. I'm a friend of the author—I was the editor for his first book, and he credits me with his rise to fame and fortune. Or he would, if he had a gracious bone in his body. Anyway,

he works with a different publishing house now, but he still invites me to the parties they throw for his book launches. It's been a few years since I've gone to any—"

Not since Alex died, Robert hears in that.

"—but I thought I'd see if you were interested. It'd be a nice excuse to get out of the house for a weekend... though I'll understand if you're not feeling up to it. The timing of this one is pretty bad."

It's odd—and somewhat daunting—to realize that he'll be meeting people who knew Gene when Alex, not Robert, was his plus-one.

"Also, I want to show you off," Gene admits, sheepishly pleased. "I might have told my friend that I was finally seeing someone again, and then gone on for a while about how smart and funny and sexy and all-around dreamy you are, until he got tired of listening and hung up on me."

Well, that's flattering. Robert doesn't think of himself as the kind of guy that people brag to their friends about—he's usually the bad idea they don't want to be seen with in public.

He tries on the idea, and finds that he's willing to give it a shot. It helps that he trusts Gene to let him back out, if he needs to.

"Sure," he decides. "I'll be your arm candy."

Gene's smile widens. "I should warn you," he says, and there's a twinkle of mischief now in his eyes as he tips his head toward Robert. "It is a themed party."

"I'll do matching costumes. Full-frontal is acceptable, but I draw the line at clown suits."

"My friend writes paranormal romance novels—or as an uncharitable colleague once described them, horny ghost books—"

Robert thinks he might have read those, actually.

"—and so they're holding the launch party at what is allegedly *the* most haunted bed-and-breakfast in the state. The original structure apparently dates back to the 1630s."

Robert blinks. "What, for real?"

"Yep." Gene beams at him. "You still think you want to go?"

Robert considers this. "Can we sneak out of the party and go make out in a haunted boiler room?"

Gene lifts Robert's hand to his lips, and drops a kiss onto his knuckles. "I'd be disappointed if we didn't."



AUGUST

"Alright!" Gene says, with entirely false enthusiasm. "So that's three tons of leaves down, only three more to go!"

Robert finishes raking the last of the leaves into the pile, and then stops for a rest. "You know I usually just pay a neighborhood kid to do this for me, right? They work for *way* below minimum wage, it's great."

(That's a lie; Damien's kid is a hell of a hustler, and last year Robert got talked into throwing a hundred dollars at him, *christ, just make the leaves go away, alright?*)

Damien's kid then turned around and paid Hugo's kid twenty bucks to do all the actual work. Robert thinks he might be watching the world burn before his eyes.)

"You know," Gene says, too-casually. "If we had only one house between us, we would have only *half* as many leaves to rake. What a *bargain*."

Robert eyes him, then plants his weight on the rake. "Is that a subtle hint that you want to move in together?"

Gene tips a sunny smile at him. "I didn't think I was being particularly subtle."

Honestly, the only surprise is that Gene's managed to refrain from asking sooner. For the past six months, Robert's been living nearly full-time at Gene's house, though they have both scrupulously avoided ac-

knowledging that fact. All of Robert's stuff that he uses regularly has long since migrated over to Gene's house, and these days he only goes back to his own place about once a month to check his mail or grab a DVD, and make sure raccoons haven't moved in during his absence, but...

But the thought of letting it go brings him up short. That house was his home for nearly a decade—even if most of the memories in it aren't happy ones, it's still part of him. It was the house he and Marilyn bought when they were trying to turn over a new leaf—the promised land that they never quite reached. He had always dreamed that one day he'd be happy in that house, and now he feels a stab of guilt, of *grief*, at the prospect of abandoning it. It feels an admission that they failed, that *he* failed.

And even though he likes living with Gene, it's been reassuring to know that he still has a place of his own—that if he ever did need to get away, the option would be there.

Letting go of that house means both giving up on a dream and giving up an escape route, and he can't tell which of those is harder.

Robert aimlessly rakes up a few stray leaves before answering. "So in this hypothetical cohabitation, whose house would we be keeping?"

"Well, I didn't spend all summer putting in a new deck so that *someone else* could enjoy it," Gene says airily, but then he soberes. "Seriously, though—it doesn't have to be my house. We could find a new place together, if you'd rather have us on an equal footing. But..."

He pauses, then lifts his face to the deep, cloudless blue sky above them, and when he speaks again, it's quiet. "After Alex died... it was a long time before I was ready to move on. But moving to the new house, that was part of it. That was what this move meant to me: it was part of finally letting go, and making a fresh start. And this house has been good to me—it's seen a lot of good memories. It saw the last months of Amanda's childhood; it's where you and I have started building a life together. I've rekindled old friendships here, and made new ones." He

looks at Robert. "This house really has been my fresh start, and it could be yours too. If you want it to be. I'd like that."

For all the time that Robert's spent at Gene's house, it's always felt like just that: *Gene's* house. He knows he's welcome here (and certainly prefers it to his own house most of the time), but somehow the idea of making it *his* home too wasn't one he'd let himself consider before. Of making that commitment, emptying out his house and letting it go, watching it become someone else's home instead. It wrenches painfully at some deep-rooted, sentimental part of him.

But... if there's one thing he's learned since meeting Gene, it's that change can be scary and still be a good thing.

"We'll be living in each other's pockets," Robert says at last. "Your house is tiny."

As if that's not how they've been living for the better part of a year. Gene smiles. "Cozy, one might say."

"We need to make room for my DVD collection."

"I'm sure we can manage that," Gene agrees eagerly, starting to bounce a little.

And rearrange Gene's closet to make space for the rest of Robert's clothes, which will probably mean having to clean out the hall closet to hold the overflow. And if they're only keeping one set of couches, then Robert would prefer his, though Gene will probably want them deep-cleaned first to get rid of the cigarette smell...

"You can be honest with me though," Gene says seriously. "If you think we need a bigger place...?"

Robert's already shaking his head. "Nah, I like your house." He leans over to give Gene a kiss on the temple. "It's got good memories for me too."



SEPTEMBER

"No, Rob, I'm not taking any fucking charity from you!"

"It's not *charity*, it's—"

"—The equivalent of three thousand bucks a month," Mary cuts him off. "If that's not charity then I don't know what is."

"I'm not going to be living there! *Nobody's* going to be living there—"

"Yeah, and so you either sell it or rent it. You don't piss a bunch of money down the drain letting your drinking buddy mooch around in it for free."

"I don't need the money!" Robert bursts out. "Fucking christ, what would I even *do* with more money, blow it on booze and cigarettes? I'd *give* you the house if I thought you'd take it."

"So I can go from being dependent on Joseph to being dependent on *you*?" she spits furiously.

"Yes! For fuck's sake, *yes!* That would be an improvement!"

When Robert had gotten the bright idea that Mary could stay in his old house after they finished moving him out, Gene had been all in favor; when he pitched the idea to Mary, however, she'd been startlingly opposed to it.

Any other time, Robert would have just let it drop, because their friendship has always been predicated on avoiding touchy subjects—but this time he pushed, and that's how they've found themselves here, in the first screaming argument they've ever had. Robert's just glad they're having it at his house (because he'd been *intending* to give her a tour of the place afterward) instead of at Jim and Kim's.

Robert takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair. "Mary," he begins again, striving for calm. "Look. I can't even *try* to sell the house until spring anyway. Nobody buys houses in the middle of winter, and the longer it sits on the market, the more the value is going to drop."

Praise be to Gene for pointing that out, and giving Robert an argument that is solid, reasonable, and completely irrelevant.

"Honestly, you'd be doing me a favor..." he tries, but trails off as the look on her face says that she sees right through him.

"Robert, I appreciate the thought," Mary says tightly. "Really, I do. But *giving me your house* isn't the answer."

He has to fight the urge to tear at his hair. "Why not? It solves everything—you can't get out of Joseph's house unless you have someplace else to go, you can't *afford* someplace else unless you're getting alimony from him, but you can't get alimony until a divorce has been finalized. And you know what he's like—if you stay there, he's going to drag his feet on it forever, and make sure nothing ever changes—"

"I do **not** need you to tell me what he's like!" Mary bites out savagely. "You knew him for all of three months—I've been married to him for *fifteen fucking years*."

"All the more reason for you to *get out!* You need someplace to go—I *have* someplace for you to go, please just fucking *take it*."

Mary's jaw is tight and unyielding, and in that moment Robert feels his helplessness peak—that he could have *fixed this*, but he fucked up his sales pitch somehow and now it's too late, there's nothing he can say to convince her. That he's going to have to watch her keep dragging herself through a life that grinds down a little more of her every day, knowing that he could have helped if he'd just known the right words to say.

"You'd do it for me," he says quietly. "If it were the other way around. You'd do it for me in a heartbeat. We both know you would."

She doesn't say anything, but she doesn't disagree either.

"Mary..." he says, struggling for words. "I got away from him. And yeah, it fucked me up for a while, but... ultimately, the best thing he ever did for me was cut me loose. I *got away*. And it kills me that you never did."

He can hear her breathing in the silence, tight but measured.

Robert closes his eyes, leans his forehead against the doorframe. "You saved my life, you know. After Joseph. I don't think I'd still be here if not for you."

"I know," she says quietly.

That's not something they've ever talked about either, but he's not surprised that she'd known how close he was to the edge.

"You've done so much for me." He swallows over the tightness in his throat. "And there's never been anything I could do for you in return, until now. I finally have a way to help, and I am *begging* you to take it. Mary, *please*—let me do the one thing I can for you."

The silence feels like it lasts forever, glass-edged, liable to grind and splinter when it cracks. Then he hears Mary draw in a deep breath.

"When do you think you'll be done moving out?" she asks. Her voice is as neutral as he's ever heard it, but the question makes hope leap in his chest.

"A month, maybe a little longer," he says cautiously. He's trying not to sound too eager, since she hasn't agreed yet. "Gene's house is smaller, so we're having to do a lot of sorting to decide what we're keeping."

She mulls over that. "If I go, I have to be able to take the kids with me."

"It's got three bedrooms," Robert points out. He's already taken that into account, and while it's not ideal for a mother and four children, at least they won't be packed ten-to-a-room like some Dickensian poorhouse.

He waits on tenterhooks in the silence.

At last, she lets out a heavy exhale. "I'll need some time to get my affairs in order," she says. Then she huffs a humorless laugh. "Guess I should probably talk to Gene's lawyer, huh?"

"So you'll do it?" Robert asks. He lifts his head to look at her, scarcely daring to believe.

Mary's expression is halfway to lost, and she just gives a slightly helpless shrug. "I—maybe? Robert, I don't know if I *can*."

"You were strong enough to survive him for fifteen years," he says quietly. "I think you're strong enough to leave him."

She rubs at her eyes. "It's not like I haven't tried, you know. I did. More than once."

He hadn't known that. By the time they became friends, she must have already given up. The thought of it hurts—that he hadn't been a good enough friend to help her out of that mire, all he'd done was wallow in it with her.

She sighs. "I've tried to leave him before. I've just never managed to make it stick."

"But this time you've got a house," Robert says. "And maybe a lawyer too. And, y'know, if you need someone whacked..."

At that, her mouth twitches with a hint of a smile. "You know a guy who knows a guy?"

"I'm just saying, Gene's already volunteered to be my alibi."

Gene's also the one who's been slowly showing him that he doesn't have to do everything on his own. Robert spent decades convinced that it was all on him, that he just needed to *try harder*. Gene was the one who taught him that it's okay to need help, that it's okay to lean on other people.

"Maybe—" Robert begins. He swallows. "Maybe the real difference is that this time, you don't have to do it alone."



OCTOBER

"Can I still go to Caleigh's birthday party after Mommy moves out?" Christy asks suddenly.

Mary looks up from cutting up pancakes for the baby. "Sweetie,

you're coming with me—" she starts, but Joseph is already talking over her.

"Don't worry, Mommy isn't *really* going to break up our family," he tells her patronizingly. Sitting at the head of the breakfast table, with a benevolent smile for the kids on either side, he looks as if he's posing for a portrait of Jesus-lecturing-the-apostles. "Sometimes people have disagreements, but part of being a grown-up is being able to work through them."

Mary's jaw tightens, but she knows better than to let herself be provoked, and just turns back to feeding the baby.

Six weeks since she said yes to Robert's half-baked idea, and since then things have progressed with dizzying speed.

She'd initially been leery of meeting Gene's lawyer—expecting the same kind of useless hand-wringing that was all she'd ever gotten when trying to tell people about Joseph, and that she was ready to flip a table if she ever had to hear again—but let herself be talked into it, and found it not as bad as she'd been braced for.

Gene's lawyer was a no-nonsense woman in her sixties, who had apparently known the Woods family for nearly twenty years and been instrumental in helping Alex extricate himself from his own asshole family. She didn't bat an eye while Mary attempted to explain the situation, only took notes and asked clarifying questions. When Mary finally ran out of words, the lawyer had briskly advised her to start documenting Joseph's behavior, and referred her to a therapist who specialized in domestic abuse.

And Mary would have rather given *that* a miss, considering how much utter *bullshit* she'd gotten from the couple's counselors that Joseph had taken them to in the past—but the lawyer had impressed on her that having a therapist would strengthen her case immensely, and... well. God knows she's going to need every edge she can get.

"We're not moving far," Mary says, giving Christy a reassuring

smile and ignoring Joseph. "You'll still be able to go to school and see your friends."

Two weeks since she announced over dinner that she would be leaving and taking the kids with her, and handed Joseph the divorce papers that have been sitting untouched on top of the microwave ever since.

Longest two weeks of her goddamned *life*, as she alternates between vertigo-inducing terror and grating annoyance. Because here she is, so close to the end, and suddenly all the little aggravations that she'd long ago learned to live with have become intolerable again. She's put up with Joseph and all his bullshit for so long that she thought she'd become inured to it, but now every word out of his mouth feels like nails on a fucking chalkboard.

"We're going to work this out, you aren't going to have to move anywhere," Joseph says benignly, ostensibly talking to Christy, but his voice is angled at Mary. "We're going to take the time to talk through this *properly*, and not rush into any hasty decisions. Because we both love you all very much, and Mommy doesn't *really* want to break up our family." He looks Mary straight in the eye, and smiles. "And she knows how harmful it is for children to grow up with divorced parents."

Mary feels a muscle in her jaw twitch. Because he's been leaving *that* literature out for her to find too.

The boys exchange wary looks with each other, but say nothing. Christy's the only one who's been openly fretful about the prospect of a move; the boys hadn't reacted when Mary announced the divorce, and haven't brought it up again since—trying to avoid being forced to choose sides, when they don't yet know which parent is going to win this one.

Joseph hasn't shown any signs of taking it seriously. When Mary had informed him that she was leaving, the mask had barely flickered, just the slightest sharpening of interest, as if she'd done something

mildly intriguing. Like he thinks this is just the latest move in their game, but nothing that will actually affect the status quo—because she’s tried and failed to leave him before, and he’s confident that she won’t succeed this time either.

Which, on one hand—good. If he’s not taking her seriously, then he won’t bother making any serious moves to counter her. It’s why she hasn’t let on that she has a lawyer, or a therapist, or Robert willing to testify, or a house being cleared out for her. Let him think that she expects to throw herself and four kids on the mercy of social services again; let him think that she’ll be forced to come crawling back all on her own, and he doesn’t even need to lift a finger.

But on the other hand, his utter complacency shakes her to her core, because she’s *not certain that he’s wrong*. There are so many ways this could fail—all he needs is one piece of leverage to keep her from getting the kids, and then it’s over, and she’s trapped here all over again.

Gene’s lawyer is convinced that Mary has an airtight custody case—because she’s already the primary caregiver, and she can show that she’s working on her drinking. Because she has evidence of Joseph’s abuse and a therapist to back her up; because she has Robert and *his* therapist ready to trot out as a trump card if needed.

And yet all Mary can think about is how many times Joseph has managed to cheat his way to impossible victories before. No matter what her lawyer and her therapist say, there’s a cold knot of fear in her that can’t keep from despairing, *You don’t know him, you don’t know what he’s like, he always, always gets people on his side somehow*.

Fuck, she wishes Robert could just tell her when the house is going to be ready for her to move in. Because until he does, she’s spinning her wheels—can’t keep from compulsively trying to make plans, to come up with contingencies for contingencies, but stymied because she can’t do anything *now*.

Joseph has been pulling the same trick he did the last time she tried

to get out, and keeping at least one kid on him at all times. *Daddy's going to the grocery store, who wants to get ice cream on the way home! Or, Oh don't worry about the baby, honey, I can take him for the day.*

Joke's on him, since she's only moving three doors down. It's not like last time, when she had to leave with all the kids at once, or not at all—but it's still a demoralizing reminder that she's failed at this before.

Before announcing her intention to leave, she'd quietly taken her birth certificate and those of the kids and given them to Gene for safe-keeping, but beyond that she hasn't bothered trying to pack. There's too much risk that Joseph would fuck with it, and she'd get to the new place only to find something precious missing.

Nonetheless, she's found herself almost obsessively cataloging the contents of the house—trying to decide what she could reasonably take; what she'd like to take; what she *has* to take. When Robert gives the word, and she's suddenly waiting for her window of opportunity, what is she going to take? If Joseph's going out and she has an hour, thirty minutes, *ten minutes* to grab whatever she can and accept that she might never see the rest again, what does she take?

It's been a strange few weeks, as she finds herself looking at everything in the house with unfamiliar eyes, everything now being measured by one ruthless rubric, *How much would it hurt you to lose this?* What material objects from this life are truly irreplaceable? What's tethering her here, that she can't just get up and walk out right now?

The doorbell rings.

Odd, since they're not expecting anyone.

Both boys immediately leap from their chairs and scramble for it, eager for an excuse to escape the table. Mary hears the front door open, followed by muffled conversation with several voices overlapping, and a dog barking behind them.

She's turning in her chair, about to get up and go see who it is—when Robert, of all people, walks into the kitchen. He's got a sheepish

smile on his face, hands shoved into his pockets and Betsy and Kitty bounding in behind him.

Mary gapes at him. "Robert?"

Because Robert has never been in this house except on yacht nights. He *does not trespass* on Joseph's territory except when he knows the man is going to be absent, and he has certainly never shown up at 10 AM on a Saturday morning to bring dogs to their Good Christian Family Breakfast.

"Hey," Robert says, rocking on his heels. "Surprise?"

"Excuse me," Joseph breaks in through gritted teeth, glaring at Kitty as she brazenly puts her paws on the edge of the table to sniff at his food. "But would you mind taking your *dogs*—"

"We came to help you move out!" Gene interrupts brightly, stepping up to join Robert. He brandishes a pair of unopened cardboard boxes like a semaphore. "And we brought friends!"

Joseph is pushing himself to his feet, irritation leaking out from behind his pleasant mask. "That's *very generous* of you," he says with thin patience. "But it won't be necessary, because Mary isn't going to—"

"Hey, Mary," Craig puts in cheerfully, stepping up behind to Gene. "Gene said you needed help moving some stuff?"

Gene pats Craig's chest. "He's the muscle."

"I thought we were the muscle," comes a husky female voice, as a stocky woman in a studded leather biker vest nudges Gene aside and steps into the kitchen.

Mary has never seen this woman before in her life, and is briefly, hysterically baffled, as she's joined by an equally unfamiliar man in a matching vest, and then by—Neil, right, that's where Mary's seen that vest before. Neil hooks his thumbs into his belt and gives Mary a steady nod.

Gene takes the liberty of making introductions. "Mary, this is Jim, Neil's favorite boyfriend, and Kim, Neil's favorite girlfriend. And they brought some of their friends too."

There are now half a dozen burly bikers crowding into the kitchen. Also Damien, who sweeps a bow to Mary when he catches her eye. And also Joan, accompanied by what seems to be every lesbian in Maple Bay, too many for the kitchen to contain, with those stuck in the living room craning their heads to see the action.

“What...” Mary starts to say, but finds herself just looking to Robert, at a loss.

His mouth tugs in a small, quiet smile. “I told you that you wouldn’t have to do this alone.”

Joseph’s chair makes a shrill scrape across the tile. “Look, this is all very—”

“You know what, buddy, I think you and me should take a walk,” Jim cuts in, throwing a jovial arm over his shoulder and giving him a squeeze that makes Joseph wince even through his fixed smile.

The muscle in Joseph’s jaw is twitching, but his face and voice are still dangerously pleasant as he says, “I beg your pardon, but this is *my house*, and I rather think—”

“Nah, they’ve got this covered.” Kim, on Joseph’s other side, slings a matching arm over his shoulders, her smile just menacing. “Come with us, get some fresh air. Give us all a chance get to know each other better.” To Mary, she says, “Ma’am? You had something you wanted him to sign?”

“On top of the microwave,” Mary says faintly.

Joseph is still trying to protest, but he’s now boxed in by bikers on all sides, and physically incapable of resisting as they frog-march him out of the kitchen, several more falling into step behind them like an honor guard bringing up the rear. Mary hears Joseph try to raise his voice, but then all at once he’s being drowned out by a blare of angry-woman country music coming from the living room speakers.

The kids haven’t said a word through all of this, their wide-eyed expressions almost comical, and even the baby has been stunned into silence by the influx of strangers.

Gene claps his hands together and looks to the kids with a bracing smile. "So!" he says. "You guys ready to pack up your stuff and come see your new home?"

They glance to Mary for permission, and she manages a nod. "Go on," she says. "Go and gather up your toys, Mommy will be along to help you in a bit."

They don't need telling twice, already scrambling up out of their chairs and thundering out of the kitchen.

Robert has taken Joseph's empty seat and is helping himself to the abandoned plate of steak and eggs. When he sees Mary looking, he waves a fork toward the toddler in his high chair. "I can watch the baby," he offers.

Mary can't tell whether she's about to laugh or cry, or maybe both, but then Gene's taking her elbow and gently steering her around toward the hubbub in the living room.

And she finds it... transformed.

The house is full of music like it's never been before, the living room crowded with people talking and laughing. The kids got distracted en route; the boys are now dancing with a couple of bikers, stomping gracelessly along with the music. Christy is looking *entranced* by one of Joan's lesbian friends who has a flawless ombre dye job that shades from turquoise to indigo, that she is very indulgently bending down to let Christy touch.

"Mommy! Mommy! Did you see her hair? She looks like a *mermaid*," Christy says in awe.

"She does, it's very nice," Mary agrees. "Be careful not to pull on it, sweetie."

"When we go to the new house, can I get hair like that?"

"Sure thing." Mary feels a slightly hysterical laugh bubble out of her. "You know what? We'll get it done together, we can match."

"You should probably specify what you want coming with you,"

Joan says in a low voice, coming up on her other side. "Or else the girls are going to take everything that isn't nailed down."

"Isn't that, uhm. Theft?" Craig asks nervously, since he is probably the most law-abiding person on the premises right now. "Wouldn't Mary get in trouble for that?"

"Nah. If he goes to the cops, they'll just tell him to take it to civil court." Joan slips Mary a wink. "Not our first asshole-ex rodeo."

It hits Mary like a small punch to the chest, knocks a short huff of breath from her—to hear Joseph referred to so casually as her *ex*.

Fifteen years in which she hasn't been able to escape, hasn't been able to break the shackles keeping her in this marriage—all at once snapped by the easy confidence in Joan's voice, by Joan's faith that Mary will be able to stand her ground this time.

Mary takes a deep, steady breath. "No," she says out loud. Then, stronger: "No, I don't want to give him any excuse to contact me. Just my stuff and the kids'."

"Will do." Gene tosses her a salute and then turns to start issuing orders over the melee, and the bikers reluctantly put down the couch they'd been carrying toward the door.

"Have you already packed?" Joan asks.

"No, but—it's all upstairs."

She hadn't packed, but she had consolidated; everything on her shortlist had been discreetly moved into the bedroom closet so it could be thrown together in a hurry. It's startling to realize that she's not going to *have* to hurry, not going to have to make sacrifices about what she leaves behind.

The furor falls away as she and Joan climb the stairs to the second floor, and Mary walks to her bedroom for what will, she realizes with a floating sense of unreality, probably be the last time. Inside, she finds herself looking around the room and seeing it like a stranger, seeing all the details and saying goodbye to them.

"Everything in that closet is mine," she hears herself saying to Joan.

She crosses the room like her legs are carrying her of their own accord, and sits down heavily on the edge of the bed, feeling far away from everything.

A moment later the bed sags slightly as Joan sits down next to her, and then Joan's hand is rubbing steady, rhythmic circles on her back.

"You okay, hon?" Joan asks quietly. "I know it's a big leap, even without the circus downstairs."

Mary takes a deep breath, feeling a little more anchored by the touch. "I will be."

"Alright. You ready to do this?"

That knocks a sharp, startled laugh of her. "Fucking Christ, *yes*," she says without thinking, and with that, the situation snaps back into clarity. That even with all the uncertainty in her future, there is not a sliver of doubt that *this is what she wants*. She tips her head back, breathes out. "I'm past ready. Let's grab my shit and get out of here."

The next couple hours pass in a blur. Mary feels like she's operating on autopilot, a conductor trying to direct the dizzying flow of traffic through the house, and to keep the lesbians from robbing Joseph blind. ("No, put that back, I don't want his fucking humidior.")

Damien's keeping the kids occupied, alternately teaching them lines from classic horror movies and leading Betsy and Kitty through various tricks. Gene brought an endless supply of cardboard boxes, and there's a rotating crew of bikers on hand to carry them off to the new house as soon as they fill up.

Robert strapped the baby to his chest and has been wandering around the house being an agent of chaos—pouring Joseph's cologne into his mouthwash, flushing the keys to his yacht down the toilet, stealing the batteries from the remote control, and also something that involves a screwdriver, though Mary didn't ask about that one.

And then all at once she finds herself coming up short, nothing left

to take. The house still looks largely the same, but everything that matters, everything that's *hers*, is gone from it.

"We done here?" Gene asks. He is carrying every roll of toilet paper in the house. Robert is carrying the plate from the microwave.

The crowd has all but cleared out—the only people left now are Gene and Robert and Joan, and the house feels almost bereft in the sudden absence of noise.

Looking around the living room for the last time—at this house that was a prison, but was also her home for fifteen years—Mary's not sure what to call the feeling that grips her now. Strange, to have such strong roots in a place, while at the same time knowing that there's nothing here she's going to miss.

So she gives the nod, and they troop out, not bothering to lock the front door behind them.

She's made the short walk to Robert's house hundreds of times in the past, and this feels like just one more. Until Gene's sprinting ahead to get the door for her, and she doesn't know what she's expecting, but—

"Surprise!" comes a chorus from a dozen voices.

Everyone who'd helped her move is now crowded into Robert's living room, below a homemade banner that says *WELCOME HOME!* and there are a dozen boxes of pizza on the coffee table.

Except it isn't *Robert's* house anymore—she barely even recognizes it. The furniture is different—a mix of Robert's and Gene's, presumably what they decided not to keep—and arranged to create more open space. The stale-cigarette cloud that had always hung in the house is gone; it's been scrubbed clean and aired out and repainted. Gone too is the modish décor, all the artifacts of Marilyn that Robert had lived in the ruins of. It feels like an entirely new house, a blank slate, ready and waiting for Mary.

Jim and Kim are there; Kim catches Mary's eye and wordlessly holds the divorce papers aloft with a victorious smile. The twins are

sitting on the couch, sandwiched between bikers and nibbling wide-eyed on their pizza as if they can't believe they're allowed to have junk food. Chris is on the floor with Kitty on his lap, still petting her and looking happier than he ever has before, and it occurs to Mary that they could actually *get a dog now*, without Joseph to veto it. She doesn't have to play those games anymore, where fucking *everything* gets turned into a battlefield. She'll never have to walk through this house on eggshells, or feel her stomach lurch at the sound of his key in the front door—

It's over.

It's over, and she's really, finally *free*.

She'd spent so long believing that escape was nothing but an impossible daydream—or that even if she were desperate enough to take that plunge, certain that she would be doing it alone. Throwing herself into the abyss without a safety net, without any assurance that what she found there wouldn't be worse than staying.

She never would have imagined that so many people—some of them people she doesn't even *know*—would come together like this, for her.

Her eyes are stinging, and she can feel her composure threatening to crumple under the emotion welling up in her. She tries to blink it back, dashing the dampness from her eyes with an impatient hand.

"You doing okay there, boss?" Robert asks in an undertone.

Mary lets out a watery laugh and waves him off. "Shut up and go get me some pizza. And none of your godless pineapple shit."

There's still a long road ahead, but she has friends, and she has allies. For the first time, she doesn't have to walk it alone.

The future is opening up before her, and Mary's story is just beginning.



NOVEMBER

By rights, Robert had known this was coming, but it still manages to catch him off-guard when Gene looks up from the coffeemaker one morning and says cautiously, "So, ah... today is the anniversary of Alex's death."

A beat passes while Robert processes that, flips though, *shit, did he already tell me that, and was there something I was supposed to do?*

"Okay," he says after a moment. "Do you want me to...?" *Give you space, keep you company, ply you with alcohol, anything, just give me a sign.*

Gene looks as uncertain about this as Robert feels. "Uhm. So Amanda and I sort of have a tradition, we watch Alex's movie together. This year since she's in Chicago we're going to skype it. You..." He swallows. "You're welcome to watch it with us. Or if that's going to be weird, you don't have to. It's fine."

Looking at him, Robert is completely unable to read whether Gene wants him there or whether he'd rather keep this to the people who actually knew Alex.

"Do you want me to stay?" Robert asks.

Gene bites his lip. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

That's a yes. "Then count me in. I'm sure I've seen worse."

"Probably," Gene admits with a laugh, and there's a touch of relief in it. "I hope you like cartoons, though."

Robert already knew that Alex had been a voice actor. It had come up in passing a few times, and then when he and Gene had been merging their bookshelves back in September he'd found the cache of Alex's work—children's television and pop-thriller audiobooks that didn't seem to be to Gene's tastes, that didn't make any sense as something he'd bother keeping, until Gene pointed to the byline, *Read by Alexander Woods*.

Souvenirs, but not something he's ever known Gene to watch or listen to.

'Alex's movie' is apparently the one feature film that he had a leading role in—a fairytale of sorts, judging from the back cover of the DVD case, with enthusiastic critical blurbs that make heavy use of the words "charming" and "heartfelt."

Gene sets up his laptop on the coffee table in the living room and points the camera at them on the couch. Amanda's eyes are puffy and red when they get the video to connect, but she rallies a brave face to greet them and doesn't seem surprised to see Robert there. He discreetly excuses himself for another cup of coffee so that she and Gene can talk privately for a few minutes, and then they're settling in, syncing up their DVD players, and pushing play on the count of three.

Robert doesn't consider himself a connoisseur of animated films, but as far as he can tell this is a good one, with engaging visuals and legitimately clever writing. The protagonist turns out to be a plucky young farm girl, and for the first twenty minutes Robert forgets that Alex is supposed to be in it at some point. Instead he gets drawn into the girl's story as she stumbles across a prophecy of doom, and then goes off in search of the mysterious wizard who can help her thwart it. It's not until she rescues a handsome young man from eldritch monsters in the woods, and they're bantering and having obvious chemistry-at-first-sight, that Gene draws in a soft breath and says, "That's Alex."

And after he's said that, it's hard to forget. Robert feels like he's watching the movie on two levels—the surface story on one, as the handsome young man turns out to be a handsome prince-in-exile and becomes the farm girl's sort-of sidekick, and on the other, acutely conscious of every word that Alex speaks.

It's strange, getting Alex's voice without his face, like the ghost that he is. It's simultaneously both more intimate and less alive; a murmur

in his ear, yet nothing more than a recording. A snapshot, a frozen moment, unchanging while the rest of time moves on.

Gene and Amanda don't talk during the movie, and Robert follows their lead, though he's very aware of Gene's presence curled up tightly against his side. Of the infinitesimal twitches he makes sometimes when Alex speaks, of his hand when it tightens over Robert's.

Robert hadn't known what to expect coming into this. A test of resolve, perhaps, setting his jaw and facing his jealousy head-on. But now that he's here, he finds it's not like that, not at all—it just makes him sad.

He knows that he's listening to the man Gene loved first—would have loved forever if he'd been allowed to—and that part of Gene's heart is always going to belong to Alex. That *fifteen years* of Gene's life belonged to Alex.

But... that's a number that's never going to grow any larger. Those years are locked behind glass now, immutable, nothing for them to do but slowly grow distant and clouded with age.

Here, now, *Robert* is the one with him. Gene loves him no less than he loved Alex, and for perhaps the first time Robert feels the truth of that.

He's not second-best, he's not the consolation prize—it's more like he's taking up the torch that Alex isn't here to carry anymore. That Gene is listening to Alex but curling into Robert, and when Robert strokes his hair, the tension in Gene eases.

And even though Robert's watching a character in a story, listening to lines from a script and not Alex's own words, he knows he's never going to be able to separate the two in his mind—that this is who Alex is always going to be to him now. He never met Gene's husband, but here's a handsome young man filled with warmth and wit and loyalty, speaking with Alex's voice, and it's impossible not to think, *Oh, so that's Alex.*

And at the end of the movie, when the prince is telling the girl that

he loves her, it gives Robert a jolt to realize that Gene's *heard those words*, from that voice, spoken just for him. That this is the closest thing Gene has to a keepsake from those private moments.

When the movie ends, Amanda says that her friends are taking her out for ice cream, and she says her goodbyes and signs off. Gene closes the laptop, then sinks back against Robert in silence. It's not exactly a comfortable silence, but it's not clamoring for something to fill it either. It's enough for Robert just to be there.

"Thank you," Gene says at last. "For... doing this with me. I'm sorry, I know it must have been weird for you."

Robert gives a small shrug, tightening his arm around Gene. "I've done weirder."

Gene sighs, and rests against Robert in silence for a long minute.

"Sometimes I don't know what to think," he says at last, quietly. "I got fifteen years with him—that's a long time. That's a good run. Plenty of marriages just... end, you know, long before that. People grow apart, they get divorced. Sometimes I try to think of it like that, that we had a good run and there's nothing to regret. To appreciate everything we got to have together, and not dwell on what it might have been." Then his breath hitches and he shudders, abruptly curling inward on himself and pressing the heel of his hand over his eyes. "And then I think about all the time we could have had, the time we *should have had*, and I can't help feeling that we got robbed."

Robert pulls Gene closer to his chest, wraps his arms around him and rocks him slowly, feels Gene's body shaking.

"It's not *fair!*" Gene bursts out like a sob. "We didn't choose to get divorced, we didn't choose to leave each other, I just—lost him. Overnight. One day he was there and the next he was gone—just a hole in my life where he used to be. And I hadn't known it was coming, I wasn't *ready* for it. And I can't even remember the last time I kissed him, because I hadn't *known* it was going to be our last..."

Gene's fist is bunched in Robert's shirt, his cheek pressed against

Robert's shoulder, shoulders heaving under his arm. Robert just holds him, rubs his back while Gene takes deep breaths.

"When I... started trying to date again," Gene says with difficulty. "Everyone told me that I didn't need to feel guilty for it. That moving on was part of recovery. But that wasn't it at all. I didn't feel guilty, I just... didn't *want* to be with anyone else. I couldn't imagine being in love with anyone but him. And it was the loneliest feeling in the world."

He lifts his head to look at Robert then, and his eyes are damp but his gaze is clear. "Until I met you. You were the one who finally made me understand how I could love someone who wasn't him. And sometimes I don't know what to think of that either. Because we wouldn't be here if Alex hadn't died, but at the same time, *I'm glad to be with you*. You bring me so much joy, and I don't even want to imagine a life that never had you in it.

"And I'm still angry, of course, and heartbroken, that Alex had to die so young—but if he hadn't, then you and I never would have met. You'd still be hurting and alone, and the thought of that breaks my heart too."

Gene sighs, settles against Robert's shoulder again. "I don't know," he says softly. "I just don't know."

They're the same kind of what-ifs that Robert's spun out in his head before too—hard to keep from wondering about when they wouldn't be here, either of them, if not for those tragedies. What if Alex hadn't died; what if Marilyn hadn't.

Robert knows that he's happier with Gene than he was with Marilyn, though he never would have wished for it at the expense of her life. He thinks that Gene was probably happier with Alex—but then, the Alex of Gene's memory has a fifteen-year head start, and is also inextricably entwined with Amanda, so the comparison is meaningless.

That kind of happiness, that kind of love, it takes time—and maybe

Robert's finally made his peace with that. He's come to trust that he'll get to have those years with Gene too, that what they have together will grow into something equal to what Gene shared with Alex.

Gene tips his head back to look at Robert again; his eyes are still red but there's a smile touching his face now. "He would have liked you, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You two would have gotten along like a house on fire."

It's a nice sentiment, though Robert has his doubts. Being blatantly in love with Alex's husband would have probably put a strain on any attempt at a friendship.

Gene leans back on Robert's shoulder and lifts a hand to trace careful fingertips along the curve of Robert's face. "I wish you could have known him. I know, it's impossible on any number of levels, but... I wish you could have had him for a friend.

"He lived with the same things that you do, he knew firsthand what that's like. He would have been someone you could talk to—someone who'd understand." Gene takes a quiet breath and says, like a confession, "I love you, but I'm never really going to understand what it's like inside your head. There's always going to be a part of you that's just... unknowable to me. Alex would have understood you, in a way that I never will."

Robert squeezes his shoulders. "You understand just fine."

"I try, but..." Gene trails off with a shrug. "Anyway. He'd be glad I have you. It would have broken his heart to think that his death would leave me alone for the rest of my life. He would have liked you—he'd be glad I have someone like you to love me."

Robert swallows. "Marilyn would have thought you were a nerd."

That makes Gene smile, his eyes crinkling. "Well. She wouldn't be wrong."

"But... I think she'd also be glad I have someone looking out for me."

And maybe a little heartbroken too. Because Robert knows how he would have felt, if they'd separated and she'd gone on to find a Gene of her own—someone who was better for her than Robert ever was, someone who made her happier than he ever had. He would have been glad for her—and it would have broken his heart, because *I wanted it to be me, god, I tried so hard. I wanted to be the one who made you happy.*

Old regrets, and what-ifs that are pointless to dwell on.

"Does he have a grave that you visit?" Robert asks instead.

He feels Gene shake his head. "No. He was cremated. We'd never... made actual plans for it, he'd just mentioned—in passing, you know, the way people do—that he thought being buried was creepy. It was all I had to go on when he died. So he was cremated, and we... scattered his ashes at Niagara Falls."

Robert strokes Gene's hair for a quiet moment. "Do you want to go to Niagara Falls?"

It takes a beat for the question to land, and then Gene tips his head to blink at Robert, looking momentarily startled out of his grief. "Like—right now?"

"Sure."

Gene frowns. "It's an eight-hour drive."

"I don't have anything better on the agenda."

"It'll be midnight before we get there," Gene points out, sounding baffled.

"Right, I forgot they turn the water off at nine," Robert says, on smart-ass autopilot, before it occurs to him that maybe this isn't the time to be dumb and impulsive. "Never mind. You're right, it's—"

"No, no, it's perfect," Gene interrupts him. He laughs a little as he pushes himself up on the couch. "Spur-of-the-moment road trip—I can't think of a more appropriate way to honor Alex's memory." He puts his hands in his lap and looks at Robert, and there's a spark of

purpose in his eyes that pushes the grief back another degree. "I'm down for it. If you were serious?"

"I'm always serious."

"Alright then." Gene leans forward and kisses Robert on the forehead. "Round up the dogs, and let's hit the road."



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Robert finishes adjusting his tie and gives himself a final once-over in the mirror.

It's funny—he used to wear a suit to work every day, but that was many, many years ago, and it looks startlingly different on him now. Like he's matured into it, maybe. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he doesn't see the cocky young hotshot he used to be—his heavier frame and the gray at his temples have given him a new gravitas. More Connery than Brosnan, perhaps, but he's not displeased with the figure he cuts.

(He hasn't shaved; he'd tried that once, since it seemed like an expected part of the whole 'self care' thing, only for Gene to take one look at his face and go, *You put that BACK.*)

When he leaves the bathroom and returns to the hotel room proper, he finds Gene sitting on the edge of the bed, tapping out a text on Robert's phone.

"Forty minutes til go-time," Gene says without looking up. "Val's having some kind of crisis. She was spamming your phone, so I told her you were in the shower. I don't *think* it's anything she actually needs help with, I think she just wanted to vent, but I... *oh.*"

Because that's when he looks up and sees Robert, and his words trail off into a wide-eyed, dumbstruck expression, like he just got hit with a two-by-four of sex.

"You look, uhm." Gene wets his lips. "Very good."

He's watching Robert approach like he's hypnotized, and Robert can feel himself responding to the frank appreciation in Gene's eyes.

"Yeah?" Robert says, knocking Gene's knees apart and stepping between them. "You saying I clean up nice?"

"It's just... different," Gene manages loyally, as Robert takes the phone from his lax fingers and tosses it aside onto the bedspread. "You know I like your leather jacket too—"

"I *know* you like me in leather," Robert rumbles, planting a hand on Gene's shoulder and pushing him flat against the bedspread as Robert crawls on top of him.

Gene looks as if a dozen of his deepest fantasies are simultaneously coming true, and if Robert's firstborn child weren't getting married in forty minutes, he would be comprehensively debauching Gene on the spot.

"Oh god," Gene moans as Robert dips his head to kiss along the line of his jaw, and rubs his thigh against Gene's erection, already straining and obvious in his trousers. "Oh fuck. I know we don't have time to iron everything again, but can I suck you off? *Please?*"

"I don't know," Robert murmurs, teasing. "We've only got forty minutes to make it upstairs. We might run into traffic on the elevator—"

"*Please*, I'll be quick," Gene begs fervently, grinding up against him. "You don't have to take anything off and I'll be super careful, I promise I'll swallow everything and not spill a drop—"

And self-control has never been Robert's strong suit.

"...Yeah alright let's do it," he says, already reaching for his belt buckle.

Five minutes later, Gene is in the bathroom brushing his teeth again and Robert heads over to Val's room to see what the trouble is. He finds Val on her cellphone, dressed and styled and pacing back and

forth, as she rages and makes dire threats at the person on the other end. The moment she hangs up, she rounds on him.

“Oh my god,” she says. “Oh my *god*. Dad. I am the Bridezilla; the Bridezilla is me. And on one hand, I hate myself for it, but on the other, I wouldn’t *HAVE TO BE* if these people could just *do their FUCKING jobs*. Which part of ‘one of the brides is Jewish’ says *candied-bacon-and-apple canapes to these motherfuckers?* They had *six months* to get this right, and now a third of the fucking wedding party can’t—”

An older woman who bears a passing resemblance to Naomi deftly plucks the phone out of Val’s hand and gives her a kiss on the temple. “Deep breaths, dear, we’ll handle the caterers. Everyone will get fed, don’t you worry.”

“Was *your* wedding this much of a disaster?” Val asks him, visibly fighting the urge to pull her exquisitely-coiffed hair.

Robert shrugs. “I accidentally set myself on fire twenty minutes before the ceremony,” he offers.

“Well, we’ve still got half an hour to go!” Val points out with slightly hysterical gaiety. “Plenty of time for that!”

“We had to kick one of the groomsmen out of the party so I could borrow his jacket. I got married in tweed.”

Val chokes out a laugh, then tips her head back, blinking mascaraed eyes at the ceiling. “Oh my *god*. Why did any of my friends ever think you were cool?”

“Hey,” Robert says, catching her shoulders. “Val. Valerie. Eval Knieval Small.”

She takes a deep, shaky breath. “I am, like, 65% certain that’s not my real name.”

“Listen, you’re—you’re gonna kill it out there.” His grip on her shoulders softens, and he feels that lump rising in his throat again. “And if you decide you’d rather elope, just say the word—I’ll set myself on fire again, and you can escape in the chaos,” Robert offers.

Val gives a watery chuckle and dabs delicately at her eyes. “Stand

down, soldier, I'm not leaving before I get some cake." She takes a deep breath. "Alright. I got this."

He checks his phone on the elevator ride up to the ballroom. Mary has sent her daily proof-of-life picture of the dogs, featuring her eldest crouched on the floor with a dog treat in each hand, solemnly offering them to Betsy and Kitty.

(The kid doesn't know it yet, but all the times that Mary has 'let' him go with her to the animal shelter have been covert reconnaissance for his Christmas present. It took Mary two months to settle on the perfect puppy—which is funny, since Robert's pretty sure she picked Betsy at random, just grabbed the nearest dog and shoved it at him. But hey, it worked out for the best.)

The ballroom is already starting to fill up; he finds Gene tucked up in a corner with a stack of candied-bacon-and-apple canapes that he's apparently been entrusted with disposing of.

"Fuck, this is giving me flashbacks," Robert mutters as he slips in next to Gene. "I keep expecting Marilyn's fucking dad to corner me for another extremely condescending shovel talk."

Gene laughs, and offers Robert a slightly-squished canape. "I never had a big wedding, so this is all new to me."

"You didn't?" Robert says, taking it from him.

"Nope. Two broke college kids at the courthouse. Four, if you count Craig and Smashley there to cheer us on."

Robert grunts around a mouthful of appetizer, and swallows. "Wish Marilyn and I could have done that. Would've been nicer than standing there with her parents glaring at me the whole time."

"Maybe," Gene allows. But then his face turns pensive, and he says, "That was how I felt about it too, at the time. If they didn't want us getting married, then why would I want them at our wedding, right? But..." He trails off, his gaze drifting over the knots of people chatting in the foyer. "It's the sort of thing you don't ever really forgive,

y'know? Even if they came around later, you'd always remember that it was one of the most important moments of your life, and they didn't care enough to be there for it. Just showing up, says a lot."

Robert will never know if he would have made it to Val's wedding without these months of uphill effort, without the therapy and the trial-and-error with meds.

He might have. He's been feeling good lately — there's every chance that he would have been on an upswing when the big day came, and would have done just fine.

But it's also entirely possible that today would have found Robert turning off his phone and locking himself in the bathroom for the duration, had he still been rolling the dice on his mood swings.

Even now, it's not always easy, but there's... a measure of control, that he's never had before. He's no longer so terrifyingly, cripplingly *at the mercy* of whatever his brain decides to do. He can trust that even on a bad day, he'll be able to put one foot in front of the other and do what needs to be done. He'll be able to *be there* for the moments that matter — for Val, for Gene, for Mary and her kids — both now and in the future.

He wraps an arm around Gene's shoulders and pulls him in for a brief kiss to his hair. "Thank you," he says quietly. "For making sure I could be here today."

Gene hums a denial, shaking his head as he leans into him. "You're the one who did all the heavy lifting, sweetheart. This was your hard work, not mine."

Maybe. And maybe Robert could have done it without someone to believe in him — but he's glad that he didn't have to.

Robert cries during the ceremony — of course he does.

He manages to keep it together when he's walking Val down the aisle, to where Naomi is waiting for her under the canopy, and then retaking his seat with Gene in the front row, through the rabbi reciting

blessings for the marriage—until they're exchanging vows, and Val and Naomi are gazing at each other as if they're the only people in the room, and Val's voice breaks with emotion when she says, *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

Robert's hand tightens over Gene's, feeling tears hot on his cheeks, and he thinks, not for the first time in recent weeks, of Marilyn.

In all the years since her death, he's never been able to look at the memories of her straight-on, always overshadowed as they were with the sharp, self-loathing pain of his own guilt and regrets, pain that he'd flinched away from rather than faced.

But now, watching their daughter on the cusp of her new life, he finds himself remembering Marilyn—not the specter from his own self-absorbed grief, but the woman she was, the woman he'd loved for two decades. When they'd been the ones standing at the altar, and she slipped him a wink during the officiant's long-winded prelude, and they'd been in it together, co-conspirators embarking on a new adventure.

And he realizes that in trying to escape his guilt, he'd also let himself lose the memories that mattered most—the memories of her life, not her death, the memories of what he'd loved in her, why they'd chosen each other, had *kept* choosing each other every day for twenty years. He's suddenly feeling all the things he'd let himself forget, the love without the guilt, and finds himself simply, uncomplicatedly, *missing* her.

It feels like a wound closing at long last—like a broken bone that's finally been set straight, like washing away the sickness so the healing can begin.

I wish you could have been here, he thinks, and it feels like speaking to a ghost that's been present all this time, but he'd refused to acknowledge until now. *I wish you could have seen this.*

Seen Val grown to womanhood, healthy and happy and exchanging vows with the woman she loves.

Seen Robert finally becoming the better man that she'd always believed he could be. *You always had more faith in me than I did, but you were right, you were **right**.*

For the first time, he feels those two fractured sides of his life in balance—the paradox that Gene had been trying to articulate, of holding grief and gratitude in equal measure, feeling both, letting them breathe side by side. It's a fragile, elusive understanding, one that threatens to slip away from him again, but for one brief moment he understands that there's no contradiction between them at all, they're both just *love*.

The ceremony finishes, to breaking glass and loud cheers, and the guests rise to clap for the happy couple. Robert takes advantage of the noise and the ruckus to discreetly wipe his eyes, still holding tightly to Gene's hand.

When he looks up again, Gene gives him a smile, small and warm and hopeful, and it feels like the first time all over again, falling in love with that smile. He wants to fall in love with that smile for the rest of his life.

Around them, the seats are beginning to empty as people follow the newlyweds to the dance floor, but Robert takes a moment to just pull Gene in for a hug—holding him tightly, feeling Gene hold him in return.

"How're you feeling, love?" Gene asks in a murmur.

Robert swallows down the knot in his throat, presses his cheek to Gene's hair. "Good," he manages, the only word he has in the face of how much it all is. "Really good."

Amidst the swirl of color and noise and celebratory joy, he feels all of the moments of his life like the pieces of a kaleidoscope—all the people he's known and the choices he's made, every step he took, every butterfly-flap of wings that lead him here, something too vast and complex for his mind to fully encompass, culminating in this moment.

And there's a part of Robert that still finds it hard to believe that this is real—that after everything he's been through, all the years he

spent believing that his life was over, he's found his way to this second chance.

It feels like nothing short of a miracle that he's *here*, that he's allowed to be part of Val's life again.

He has a *future* again, one he's not afraid of anymore.

He has a life filled with love, and finally, the faith in himself that he can make this last.

He presses a kiss to Gene's forehead before releasing him, and then hand-in-hand they step forward to join the others.



