



CARBON & ASH

A TORQUERE PRESS
BIRTHSTONE
BY CHRIS OWEN

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by Chris Owen

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The evening sun is warm on his back as Myles sends his team onto the field for the final inning. He watches them go, little legs full of far less energy after almost an hour of playing, but he can see their eyes still bright with interest and enthusiasm; it's just the limits of being six and seven years old that makes them slower. He knows how they feel—the pull of the game warring with the limits of the body, the need to cram as much fun into a day as they can.

Myles makes sure that Joey stays to the right of the outfield instead of drifting off to the left where Matty Jones is. If those two get too close together they won't pay close attention to the game and will start looking for bugs again between batters. It's usually not a problem, but with exhaustion and the fleeting attention span of seven year olds, it would be far too easy for them to miss a play and descend into emotional meltdown. He knows about that, too, frustration and disappointment taking the joy out of baseball.

One of his charges, Sherry, is going even slower than the rest and Myles can see her feet kicking up little storms of dust as she crosses the diamond to second base, so he goes out after her. "Almost done, kiddo," he says, crouching down to meet her eyes. "Think you can catch that ball for me?"

She nods firmly, squinting a little as the sun shines on her upturned face. "Yes, Coach," she promises. "But I'm hungry."

"I'm sure you are," he says sympathetically. "More than an hour since supper, right? There's apples and oranges for you guys after the game."

She smiles and nods again. "Yum."

"You betcha." Myles stands up and pats her shoulder, being careful to keep the touch light and clearly a Good Touch. "You can do it," he tells her.

She looks up at him with six-year-old wisdom, her eyes clearly saying he's crazy. "Of course I can."

He grins and nods at her, then goes back to the line of coats and bags that serve as his bench to watch the other team line up for bat. It's two weeks into Kiddy League and he's pretty sure he's got a damn fine group of kids. He's having the time of his life, really. Baseball in all its forms is the stuff of summer, and sharing it with his son and more than a dozen other kids is something he's longed for since the night he found out Ian's mother was pregnant.

They aren't keeping track of the score officially; they never do. The whole point of the league, modeled on the official Little League in the States, is to teach how baseball is played and to make sure everyone has a turn at bat and at every position on the field. Of course, the only ones not keeping score in their heads are the kids, and part of that is because most of them can't count that high yet. By Myles' count, the score is 19-14, which is about right for less than an hour's play.

For another ten minutes, the two teams battle it out, struggling to hit and catch and chase after balls that dribble across the grass like feral chipmunks. There's laughing and cheering, and a few shouts of angry excitement as tension and exhaustion work through the little bodies, but the highlight of the game is one spectacular bunt that sends the ball a mere seven feet.

The little girl who hit the ball stares at it in surprise before dropping the bat and running like mad to first base. The coach for the other team is cheering her on, yelling, "Run, Sophie! That's it, run!"

Myles' player on first base is having a fit, jumping up and down and screaming at the top of his lungs, and Myles can feel himself catching the excitement. "Sophie, run! Come on, Sophie!"

"She's on the other side, Derek!" Myles' son, Ian, yells from third base. "Shut up!"

Derek shoots a dark look across the field and doubles his efforts. "Run!" he screams, and then to Ian he yells, "She's my sister! It's the first time she hit the ball! *Run!*"

Myles cheers too as Sophie launches herself into Derek's arms. The pitcher finally picks up the ball, and everyone on the field joins in, chaos taking over as excitement gets a little out of control. Derek lets go of his ecstatic sister long enough to look for their parents. "Did you see?" he yells to them, pointing at Sophie.

Myles shakes his head and laughs as the proud mom and dad make an attempt to praise both kids and get the game back on track at the same time. It's pretty much over, though, as far as Myles can tell.

"I think we're done," Peter calls, obviously agreeing as his team mingles and meanders around with Myles'.

Out on the field, Matty and Joey are chasing a grasshopper.

"Oh yeah," Myles says with a grin. When the coaches give up, it's all done. "That's it, kids! Come line up to shake hands."

It takes him only a few minutes to get his team in order, talking loudly over the chatter and squeals, and then he and Peter supervise the handshakes, which always seem to have the potential for mayhem. He's not quite sure what it is about little boys that makes them want to turn almost any form of contact into a wrestling match, but the potential is always there, ripe for disaster.

The energy of the children picks up again, perversely, and he corrals them with the promise of a snack. One by one, and occasionally in twos or threes, they yell farewells to him and each other, running to their parents. Myles' attention is divided, fractured between handing out oranges, peeling some as he goes, and the multitude of conversations he's suddenly supposed to be participating in. He talks with three children at once, somehow filtering them all so he can follow along, and then there are parents there, asking questions or offering things to him. He can't quite keep track of it all in the end, and forgets who it was that promised to bring the fruit for the next game.

He peels another orange, waves goodbye to Sherry, and starts scanning the diamond for any stray balls or equipment. He grins when he sees a lone figure near second base, bending to pick up a glove. He doesn't have an assistant coach but if there was anyone who'd qualify, it was Todd, if only because he was always willing to help out without being

asked. He watches as Joey runs out to Todd, yelling, "Daddy! Did you see the whole game?"

Todd's reply is lost, but he scoops up his son and Myles' attention is drawn to Derek and Sophie, who've passed the happy stage and launched themselves into a sibling spat. He ends up just nodding and waving as their parents urge them toward the car, and then a small hand grabs at his wrist.

"Mom's here," Ian tells him, wiggling in place. "Can I get my stuff from the truck yet?"

Myles looks up, then around the park. "Where is she?" he asks, swallowing his disappointment. He's had a few years to learn how, the taste of it differing only slightly from annoyance. It's his usual weekend with Ian, but Susan's parents are in town. He's okay with that, really, but Ian's eagerness to leave him stings a little. The older Ian gets, the more reluctant Myles is to let him go.

"Talking to Todd," Ian says, pointing. "I think he's asking about her ring."

Myles rolls his eyes at the same time Ian does, and then things are right again. They laugh, sharing amusement and affection, and Myles lets Ian go with the car keys. "Careful with the lock," he calls. He can count every time Ian's opened the car by the number of scratches on the paint.

He gathers the last of his things and watches Todd and Susan chat as they walk toward him, Joey running to play with Ian in the cab of the truck. Susan looks like she always does, a little windswept but somehow still neat and pretty in her understated way. Todd has his head tilted to the side as he listens to her and watches the boys at the same time.

"Hey," Myles says as they get near. "Tell him your good news?" He has no regrets, no need for anger or jealousy. In the very heart of him, the only thing that bothers him about the diamond ring she wears is that it's larger than the one he bought for her, years ago.

Susan smiles and waves her hand in what is probably an unconscious gesture, the novelty of her engagement ring still fresh for her. For everyone. "It's hardly a secret," she says lightly, without any sharpness.

He can't help but smile back, and then Todd is picking up one of his bags, helping out again.

"She won't tell me when the wedding is, though," Todd says with a lopsided grin. "I have to budget for these things, you know."

Susan waves again, the ring sparkling. "We don't know," she insists, the three of them walking to the truck. "Stephen's family..."

There's small talk as they load the truck, the boys running and screaming again, playing some enthusiastically energetic game until Susan calls for Ian to take his bag to her car.

Myles is looking at Todd and he sees disappointment color his friend's face, Todd's eyes losing a little light for a moment. "Thought it was your weekend," Todd says in a low voice as Susan urges Ian to go a little faster. "I was going to invite you guys for a barbeque tomorrow."

Myles shrugs one shoulder and tells Todd about Susan's parents, but he's got a warm, pleased feeling that Todd wanted to get together. "Maybe next weekend?" he offers.

Todd nods and calls for Joey. "Got plans tonight?" he asks, fishing his keys out of his jeans pocket. "Come over later, when the kid's in bed. We can watch a movie or something."

Myles nods, the warm feeling growing. "Yeah, okay," he agrees, then goes to kiss his son goodbye.

* * * *

It's well after dark when he gets to Todd's, but he knows Joey will be asleep for sure. He lets himself into the house and waves his six-pack of beer at Todd, who's lounging on the couch. "Refreshing my stash," he says, walking across the living room. Todd refuses to buy his brand of beer, calling it inferior; it's been a joke between them for years, since before Myles and Susan split up, before Todd's husband died. It's no longer funny, but it's habit, and that's just as important sometimes, Myles thinks.

They debate about watching a movie and chat for a while, gossiping about friends and Susan and how the boys did in school. They finally settle with beer and popcorn, watching TV for an hour or so and making fun of the supposed comedy they're viewing. Myles thinks he and Todd are funnier than the crap that makes it to air.

Just after eleven Todd goes to the kitchen, comes back with more popcorn and two beer bottles, settling next to Myles, so close their thighs touch. It's the signal, one they both know and are comfortable with, and it only takes Myles a moment to make his choice. Likely, he made the choice back at the ball field, but it hardly matters. His hand lands on

Todd's thigh with a gentle squeeze and that's all it takes, all that's needed.

"Stress relief?" Todd says with a smile, leaning over to put the beer on the coffee table.

"Creature comfort?" Myles suggests back, and then they're curling around each other easily, the choreography familiar. He knows how to do this, what Todd likes. Myles knows the places to touch, the order to use. Six times in a year they've done this, the first time with a conversation and rules, but now it's old hat. They kiss and move and he knows the feel of Todd's cock in his hand, takes comfort and pleasure in the heat and slide of it. They can't lie to each other, wouldn't bother taking the trouble when it's so easy to tell the truth.

Todd likes it loose and quick until the end, then he wants it tight, too tight for Myles, but that's okay. It's Todd's dick, after all, and Todd's hand has its own rhythm, suited to Myles' slow and easy pace. They're curiously out of sync with each other, together but in their own pleasure. Then the push and pull changes and they're tangled together, each with a thigh to ride and a hand to use, and Myles suddenly, desperately, wants more.

He has flashes of images in his head, seemingly hardwired to his dick, and he tries to make them go away, not wanting what his head and cock are demanding. It's imagination, he tells himself, not what he could really want, but it's too late. He has a picture in his head that fills him with unbearable and uncontrolled want, and he can feel himself about give way, pressure rising in him and battering at the edges of his skin.

Under him, Todd groans into his mouth and Myles lets the sound guide his touch, his grip. He tightens his hand and Todd grunts, starting to shake. It distracts from the beauty in his mind and Myles focuses on making Todd come first, the race something to hang onto when his body is about to betray him. "Come on," he whispers. "Show me what you've got."

Todd bucks and comes, his cock flexing in Myles' hand, and the smell of it, the feel of the sticky wet slide of Todd in his fist makes Myles think of the way it feels to orgasm, and then he's there, unexpectedly. His eyes squeeze shut and his hips jerk, the tightness in his groin letting go suddenly.

Todd is laughing quietly as he wipes his hand on Myles t-shirt. "Nice," he says, then he kisses Myles and reaches for his beer.

"Uh huh," Myles agrees, resting for a moment before he has to get up. Nice.

* * * *

The next weekend Myles and Todd sit on the back deck at Todd's house and watch their boys play in the yard. Ian and Joey are waving cardboard swords at each other, pretending to be pirates, and Myles can almost see the decking of their imaginary ship under their feet.

He slides a look at Todd and grins. "Remember being that young?"

"Remember having that much energy?" Todd grins back at him.

It's hot, the first really hot day of summer, and there isn't even a breeze to put an edge on the clinging heat. The smell

of lunch is strong around them, ketchup and mustard and all beef hot dogs, and all that's missing is the sound of ballgame on the radio. Instead, they're listening to the news, only paying it a fraction of their attention. Myles would much rather pay attention to the boys laughing and making each other walk the plank.

Todd seems a little distracted, his hands twitchy as he clears up the remains of their lunch. He smooths his t-shirt often in a curious gesture, his wrist flexing so his watch reflects the sun. Myles debates asking what's on his mind, but he lets it go; Todd will tell him, if he wants. He always has before.

Joey drops his sword and runs for a soccer ball and in a few minutes the detritus of lunch is forgotten, Todd and Myles easily convinced to kick the ball with their sons.

It's a good day, the warmth from more than the weather. Myles and Ian stay for supper as well, the boys starting to wind down as they actually sit to eat burgers and potato salad. Over the course of the afternoon, the four of them have played soccer and tag, and talked about swimming. Neither of the boys can swim well, but Myles promises that if they go camping in August he'll buy them life jackets so they can go out on boats. Todd backs him up, and goes into the house to call the YMCA and see when swimming lessons start up.

After supper Myles starts making noises about going, letting Ian know that he has about half an hour. As expected, both boys are displeased, and Myles wonders if his own regret over the day ending is colored by that as much as his own

reluctance. He checks himself, searches for what's different, and can't find anything, but he's uncomfortable with leaving. He wants to stay, wants to put the boys to sleep so he and Todd can watch TV. He shakes his head and goes to make sure the dishes are done.

Todd supervises the boys as they tidy the yard, tugging at his t-shirt again, and Myles catches his breath, almost asking Todd if there is something he wants to talk about. Todd's eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, but it doesn't matter; since supper, Todd hasn't really looked his way.

Myles gives into himself and reaches for Todd's arm, to draw attention to himself quietly so he can ask but before he can touch, Todd is looking at him.

The glasses are pushed up and Todd's head tilts to the side. "So," he asks. "Doing anything next weekend?"

Suddenly Myles wants the glasses back down. He nods, knowing there's something, but he can't pull it to the front of his mind immediately. He's distracted and suddenly edgy, off-kilter as he tries to deal with confusion. Todd's eyes are too intent on him, his look too direct and not direct enough. It's not heat and want on Todd's face, it's something else, something Myles shies away from. He doesn't want to know, isn't ready for whatever Todd's brain is dancing around.

He looks away, watches Joey and Ian wrestle. "Careful," he calls out, and then he remembers. "Got a date," he says before he can bury the words. He knows he sounds smug and he doesn't look at Todd.

"Dog," Todd teases, and everything snaps back into place, balanced the way it should be.

Myles shakes his head, more from relief than in any denial. "Shut up," he says mildly, smiling.

"So? Who?" Todd presses, and the glasses slide back down and land on the bridge of his nose.

"Girl from work. Charlotte," Myles says and he feels his face twist into a leer. "Great ass." She's got amazing breasts too, but he doesn't say so. Todd's never really been impressed with tits.

Todd laughs and starts to say something, but just then Joey catches an elbow in his eye and the boys start yelling, tempers finally giving out. In moments Myles has Ian scooped up and Todd has Joey, everyone yelling goodbyes as Myles makes his escape.

* * * *

Susan picks Ian up from the ballgame on Friday, stopping long enough to chat with Todd as they clean up, and with a tight feeling of anticipation in his gut, Myles goes home to get ready for his date. He takes his time, pretty sure they'll wind up back at his apartment, so he does the dishes from breakfast and hides the dirty laundry and makes sure he's got condoms in the bedroom.

He wants to call Todd, but decides that he'll call in the morning, maybe see if Todd wants to watch a movie or three the next night. But then, he tells himself as he shaves, maybe Charlotte will be wanting to come over, and that could be okay, too.

Dinner with Charlotte is pleasant, talking easy. They know the same people at work, and it's almost expected that they

gossip about the office. He tells her a bit about Ian, and she seems interested, pleased that he's civil with Susan. She looks more pleased when she finds out Susan is engaged.

Charlotte asks him how long he's been divorced and how often he gets to see Ian, and he likes the way she's phrased the question. He once dated a woman who asked how often he had to take his kid, and he'd been hurt and baffled by the implication.

They talk a little more; decide to skip coffee and dessert until later, and Charlotte leans forward, touching his arm as they flirt. He smiles, both to himself and at her, and thinks his chances of getting her into bed are better than fair.

Before they leave the restaurant she excuses herself to go to the bathroom, and he stands as she leaves the table. Charlotte brushes past him, her breasts sweeping against his arm and he can feel her nipples, tight and hard through the thin fabric of her blouse. He smiles again as he watches her walk away.

They go to his place, talking and smiling at each other for the duration of the drive, and when they get there, he takes her to the kitchen to put coffee on. She stands close to him, moving into his arms when he's done with the filter and grounds. He can smell her, the light scent of flowers dancing over the headier scent of her sex. They kiss, arms wrapped loosely around each other as the coffee maker gurgles and sputters, and he finds he much prefers her taste to the promise of coffee and sugar.

Her mouth is kiss-swollen when he stops to pour the coffee, keeping up the pretense of civility, and they move into

the living room, their hands full with earthenware mugs. She goes to the long table on one wall and looks at the photos there, blowing on the steam of her mug, her lips pursed just so. Myles sets his mug down and goes to her, stands behind her and slides his hands over her waist. She has beautiful curves that fit his palms just right.

"Is this Ian?" she asks, pointing to a large framed picture.

He nods. "Yeah, about a year ago." He points to another.

"That's more recent."

She notes the one of Ian and Susan together, and he rests one hand on her belly, the other higher, just under the curve of one breast. She leans back against him and makes a soft sound.

Slowly, he eases her back against him, his erection cradled in the small of her back and his hand slipping higher to cup her breast. Her nipple hardens under his thumb and she leans her head on his chest. "Who's that?" she asks, setting down her mug, not moving away from him at all, pushing instead into his hand a little more.

He glances to where she's gestured and tugs her nipple a little, stroking it. "Friends," he says. It's a photo of Todd and Michael, wearing tuxedos. Joey is a toddler, in Michael's arms. "That's their wedding picture. They got married in Ontario just after gay marriage was legalized there."

She laughs softly and stretches against him, her body moving slowly. "Good for them, they look happy. Although I hope that baby isn't theirs."

His hands stop and he can feel his back stiffen. "What?" he asks, sure he's misunderstanding.

"Well, marriage is one thing," she says blithely, "but having and raising children is another."

He lifts his hand off her breast and can't seem to move away from her fast enough. "I see," he says, knowing his voice has gone as cold as he feels. "Actually, Todd adopted Joey as an infant, and when he and Michael were married they filed for spousal adoption as well."

She turns and looks at him, her confusion clear on her face. "Oh," she says finally. "I just ... I don't think it's right. I can tell you do, so I won't say anything more."

Myles knows it's a peace offering, but it doesn't matter. It's too late and he can't pretend he doesn't know, and he can feel himself getting angry. Sadly, he's not sure if he's angry at her for having a stupid prejudice or if he's mad that she's ruined the evening. Worse, he thinks he might just be pissed that he's not going to get to fuck her. "Michael died," he says bluntly. "And now Todd is a single father. Is that wrong, too?"

She looks at him for a long moment. "I'm sorry," she says, looking hurt and a little angry as well. Or perhaps she's defensive, he can't tell. He doesn't really care. "I better go," she says, walking to the couch where she'd dropped her coat.

"I'll call you a cab." Myles moves stiffly to the phone as she nods, and dials a number by memory.

When he's done, she has her coat on and her composure is gathered, done up like the buttons on her jacket. "Thank you for a lovely evening," she says, not meeting his eyes. "And again, I apologize."

He shrugs, hates that he's become a jerk but still too upset to care much. "It's what you think. You have every right to

say it. But it's important to me—Todd and his son are important to me—and I can't ... I'm sorry, too."

She nods and steps toward the door. "I'll wait outside. See you at work, Myles."

He dredges up a smile for her and gently closes the door after her. He watches out the window until the cab pulls up, makes sure she's safe, but he's glad she's not in his house.

He wants to call Todd, but doesn't.

* * * *

He's in the supply closet next to the break room at work when he hears them. At first, Myles is not sure who they're talking about, but he can hear Charlotte so he pays attention.

"He seems nice," the other woman says and he thinks it might be Patty, who sits two cubicles down from him.

"He is." Charlotte doesn't sound anything other than normal. There's no hesitation in her voice, and Myles decides she's not talking about him, because he knows he wasn't precisely nice to her. "He's ... he's very nice," Charlotte adds, and there's suddenly a world of things not said, and he tilts his head to hear them better.

"Ah," Patty says and he can smell coffee, stronger now as it's poured. "But?"

"But nothing. He's nice. Easy to talk to, funny. Has great hands." Her voice is teasing, a bit salacious. Ask me, that tone demands. Ask me how I know. It's the same voice he uses when he's not sure if he wants someone to know details but he wants them to know he got laid.

"Does he?" Patty asks, speculation rising along with the volume as they leave the break room. "I heard he played for the major league."

"Minor," Charlotte says as they pass him by, not seeing him. "He was called up for the majors, but he moved home instead. His ex was pregnant then and wouldn't follow him."

Myles closes his eyes. That wasn't true, wasn't so nasty. He was called up, yes, but he never even got to play a game before Susan got sick. He wouldn't leave her, not that she wouldn't follow him, and he wonders how Charlotte got it so wrong.

"He's got a great ass," Patty says as they drift out of earshot.

Later, he calls Todd and they make plans for the weekend, movies on Friday after the boys play ball and then an outing on Saturday. As he leaves work, he finds himself walking alongside Patty, checking out her breasts, her hips. She's got a nicer ass than Charlotte, but Charlotte's breasts are higher, firmer. He doesn't ask her out, pretends not to see the way she looks at his hands when he unlocks his car.

Myles goes home and wishes Ian was there, that Susan's diamond ring wasn't so sparkly, and that everything had happened as it was supposed to, not fractured at some indefinable point in their relationship. He calls them, and as he listens to Susan talk to Stephen in the background, he forces himself to recapture some of the feeling that this is right, that she and Ian and even himself are doing what they have to do, what's right for them. When he talks to her, listens to her, he realizes again that while they get along,

they don't love the way they had, that they wouldn't again, and something eases in him.

* * * *

"Do you ever think about getting married again?" Myles asks Todd after the boys are asleep on Friday night. Ian and Joey are sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags, pretending to camp out. Myles himself will be camping out in Todd's guestroom, because no matter what occasionally happens on the couch, he never really stays over. Not like that, like what they do is anything real.

"Sometimes," Todd says, leaning back on the couch. "Mostly I just avoid thinking about it. Why? Is Susan's thing feeling weird to you?"

Myles shrugs. "No, not really. Sometimes. I think I'm just momentarily tired of being alone."

Todd nods. "I know what you mean," he says softly, and Myles does some quick math in his head. Three years since Michael died, and as far as Myles knows, Todd hasn't even had a date with anyone.

It makes him uncomfortable, that maybe Todd hasn't even had sex with anyone other than himself, that he's the only relief Todd takes. He ponders that for a moment, watches as Todd leans over to the table for the remote control for the DVD player, and a small part of him gets a sick thrill from it, too. He does for Todd, and Todd does for him. He's pretty sure it's unhealthy.

An hour later though, as he and Todd writhe on the couch as something explodes on the TV screen, he doesn't care.

Todd's mouth is warm and sweet on his, tasting of beer and popcorn, and under his fingertips, Todd's nipples are hard and pointed. They've just started, are working their way up to their goal, and Myles wonders if Todd would let him do more, if Todd ever thinks of doing something else with him, taking a different comfort than what his palm and fingers can offer.

Myles kisses his way up Todd's jaw, feeling the rasp and sharp prickle of a day's worth of beard growth, and his cock jerks in his jeans as he whispers, "Can I suck you?" into Todd's ear.

Everything goes still, the hand on his ass and the one in his hair like stone. Todd even stops breathing, his chest staying up instead of exhaling and lowering gently. "What?" Todd whispers to him, finally, and Myles retreats.

"Never mind," he says and he can feel his face heating as he buries it in Todd's neck.

"No, no." Todd's words are puffs of breath on him, and then Todd's moving again, like he hadn't stopped, and his chest is heaving, the gentleness gone, utterly destroyed. "Please."

Myles can hear the catch in Todd's voice, can feel the speed of Todd's heartbeat, and he nods slowly in counterpoint. "Okay."

"Are you sure?" Todd asks, but the want is plain in him, his eyes huge.

Myles doesn't say anything, just nods again and fingers Todd's nipple once more, already planning how to move, what he has to do in order to make this not physically awkward. It's been a long time, years and years since he did this, and

he's not sure if he can mange it without choking or spitting or making it embarrassing for them both. He lowers his eyes and moves back on the couch, his hands fluttering over Todd's belly as he eyes the way Todd's cock is pressing up against his zipper.

"You don't have to," Todd whispers, giving him an out. "I'll probably come as soon as you touch me anyway."

A laugh is startled out of Myles and he looks at Todd's face, grinning. "Better not."

Todd blushes and grins, his own hands undoing his pants and freeing his erection. "Been a long time. No promises." His dick is flushed, stiff and larger than it usually looks, and Myles is captivated as Todd slowly strokes himself. "We can just do this."

But Myles shakes his head, already shifting, moving back, his mouth suddenly full of saliva. He wants this, he realizes, really wants it, and he can feel the heat radiating up from Todd's groin, the earthy and unsweet warmth drawing him in, closer, until he can slide his cheek up Todd's length. Supple skin, warmer than Todd's belly, and much more inviting, and Myles wants to lose himself there in the glide and pull of Todd's body.

Above him, he can hear Todd's breath catch again and he closes his eyes, his lips parting enough that he can taste the air around them, the bare start of this. He licks carefully, slowly, and has to swallow as Todd invades his cells. His taste buds want to keep the flavor of Todd's skin, but something else, something low down and tingly in his gut wants more than that. He reaches down and adjusts himself, imagining

the feeling of Todd coming in his mouth in sharp, bright pulses, and he's suddenly there, hungry for it. Starved for it, in fact, and he takes Todd into his mouth with a grunt and demands that Todd come along for the ride.

Todd swears, moves against him, and Myles grunts again as he accepts the thrust. He's pretty sure that Todd was right, this isn't going to last long, but he doesn't care. It's going to be intense, is already intense. He can feel *everything* like this, can feel the heat from their bodies, the acute demand in their balls, and his want is Todd's want, the two mixed up and shaken together like a cocktail. He almost laughs as the word skitters through his mind, the pun almost as delicious as Todd.

He doesn't laugh though, already past the urge and swamped in sensation as his mouth takes over his higher brain functions and he's reduced to a ravenous appetite, feasting on what Todd gives him. Everything he is becomes centered on his lips and tongue and throat as he drags Todd into him, eats him. He can't get enough, doesn't know a time when he wasn't starving for this, for the feel of Todd's cock in his mouth, the coarse hair surrounding the base of Todd's dick chafing at his lips. He didn't think about it, didn't ever wonder if he could do this, take Todd this far into him, but there he is, Todd jammed down his throat and Myles gasps, tries to breathe and not let go as he rubs his own cock into the couch.

He can't hear Todd's voice, just a low hum of sound outside his understanding, but he knows by the tenor of it that they're almost done, that Todd's going to climax and

come and shoot and that he's going to get to feel it. He knows that the throb under his tongue is the start of it and he pulls back enough that he'll get a taste before it slides down into his belly, and then Todd's hands are in his hair and Todd curls around him, surrounds him, and it's happening.

Todd comes in Myles' mouth, jerkily and in short bursts and Myles whimpers, not quite able to stop himself from twitching with Todd, heat going from Todd's groin right to his own.

Shaking, he swallows and licks and finally kisses the wet head of Todd's penis, this beautiful part of his best friend, more than a random dick or cock, and he wants to be alone, he's not willing to look up at Todd's face.

"Lie down," Todd whispers, out of breath. "I'll do you."

Myles' eyes roll back and he comes then, untouched and utterly shamed.

* * * *

Todd is unrelentingly normal in the aftermath, so normal that Myles begins to doubt that this is even worthy of being called 'aftermath', and may instead simply be an over-reaction. He's done it before, put too much weight on the heat of the moment, and he lets what he felt, whatever it was that had possession of him, fade back into the ether.

Todd says he's too boneless to move, and doesn't even do his pants back up until Myles rolls off the couch, then he kind of sighs and puts himself away. "Cold beer?" Todd asks as he gets off the couch with a grunt so like the one Myles made as he came that Myles blushes, sure Todd's teasing.

He is, Myles can tell. There's a spark in his eye and his mouth is twisted into a crooked grin that Myles doesn't get to see unless Todd is really tickled by something. Then Todd's gone, ass swaying in an exaggerated swagger as he goes to the kitchen, snickering.

Myles goes to the bathroom and cleans himself up, then to the guestroom to change into the clothes he brought for the next day. He's still breathing a little funny and when he catches a look at himself in the mirror, he makes a face. "Very, very smooth, Myles," he says to himself. "That was a nice move back there. Tell me, have you had sex at all since you were seventeen?"

His reflection mocks him and he turns off the light.

Todd mocks him too, grinning and teasing and being Todd, and by the time they go to bed to sleep Myles is comfortable in his skin again. They make sure the house is locked up, check on their sleeping sons, and part in the hallway, just like always.

Nothing has changed and Myles wonders at that, at what it is about them that can make this possible. He falls asleep without any answers but grateful that things are the way they are, and pleased that there won't be complications. He likes the status quo.

* * * *

July is spent teaching little ones how to play ball, and by the end of the month, Myles is saturated in the joy that is summer. He plays ball with the kids twice a week for almost two months, he coaches and thrills himself with the sound of

the bat and ball. There are barbeques and movies, and a weekend spent with Ian doing whatever his son wants. He doesn't even mind spending hours playing games on the computer as much as he usually does, and when they go to the park on Saturday afternoon, it is still fun after three hours.

In his idle moments, brief flashes of time at the office, he debates asking Patty out, but he's fairly sure that her interest in him isn't a good enough reason to spend a hundred dollars on a date. It isn't like he's particularly interested in her, despite the flattering way she flirts, her eyes bright and sly when she looks at his hands, his mouth. It isn't like he isn't having a good time somewhere else, or that he's so pathetic he'll fuck a woman just because he can. He tells himself that he's better than that.

Myles has baseball. He has a satellite dish and the internet. He has people to hang out with and TV shows he likes. And once or twice a week, he ensconces himself on Todd's couch, a beer in one hand and his other hand in the popcorn bowl.

They don't make out after the blow job fiasco. Myles is hyper aware of this, keyed into the way that Todd sits on the other side of the couch, not coming closer at all, the gulf between their thighs undeniable. Relieved, Myles takes this to mean that nothing has changed, that Todd isn't going to do anything stupid like fall in love with him.

It's not until he's hanging up his coat at home after one of these visits that he's broadsided with the horrible truth that his ego has come perilously close to crushing his friendship

with Todd. He's embarrassed by his basic assumption that connecting Todd with sex would mean Todd's feelings would change, and he has no idea why he'd even thought that way.

He gets ready for bed in slow motion, turning his ideas over in his head and looking at them from new and unfamiliar angles. When he looks at himself in the mirror his face is flushed pink from this humiliating new realization that he'd been an ass. Nothing at all was changed by him taking Todd's dick into his mouth, not one thing. That he'd assumed, on some buried level, that Todd would push for a Meaningful Relationship in the wake of oral sex makes him want to hide from himself, from Todd.

Teeth brushed, he walks to his bed and sits on its edge before reaching for the phone. When Todd answers, Myles falls back on his bed and looks at his ceiling. "Why do you put up with me?" he asks, trying to make it sound rhetorical.

Todd laughs quietly. "Because you almost always get your head out of your butt and figure things out. Better now?"

"Yeah. Sorry I've been weird."

"No problem," Todd tells him. "You weren't that bad. We still on for camping?"

Myles squints one eye at a new crack in the ceiling. "Of course," he says, surprised that there had been doubt. "I wasn't that off, was I?"

"Nah," Todd assures him. "Mostly I was thinking that Susan might nix it if she and Stephen had plans or if she didn't want Ian out of day camp for the Friday and Monday."

Myles waves it off, his hand lifting off the bed and dancing in the air above him. "It's cool. We still have to buy a new cooler though, two aren't going to be enough."

"We'll get around to it. There's still two weeks before then."

Myles sits up. "Yeah, okay. See you at the field tomorrow night?"

"Yep. We'll be there. It should be a hot day, too, so I'll bring extra drinks for the kids."

"Thanks, man."

"Don't worry about it. So, you'll sleep now?"

Myles laughs this time. "Yeah. I am sorry, you know."

"I know. It's good, promise."

"Okay." Myles turns off his bedroom light and blinks into the sudden darkness. "Goodnight, Todd."

"Night. See you tomorrow."

The soft click on the line leaves Myles in utter quiet. He's not so embarrassed anymore, and he's grateful that he can reach Todd so easily, put things back to right just like magic. He likes it, and sleeps well.

* * * *

Most of the children scatter with their parents right after the game, shouting to each other and at whatever grabs their attention. They're not in the least bit wound down by the exercise in the heat, and Myles grins at them, smelling the freshly cut grass and coasting on his own post-game high.

Ian and Joey are running around in circles, playing a complex game that seems to feature Susan as a sort of

monkey in the middle. Myles shakes his head and smiles as she laughs, obviously not minding their game. He leaves her there and starts clearing up the bags of equipment that serve as his bench, Todd and Peter taking care of the infield.

Myles is zipping his duffel up when he hears the sharp and delightful crack of a bat. He swings his body around and sees the ball sailing high over the mound, going up and out, right into the outfield.

Peter is laughing and running like mad. If he'd been out there—if anyone had been—it would have been an easy out. The arc is long and lazy, the ball floating sweetly in its predictable flight. Todd's laughing too, and Joey starts to cheer, running to his father at the plate.

Myles shakes his head and walks up to take the bat from Todd's hand. "At least you hit it," he teases, knocking the bat on his sneakers. Wrong shoes to be wearing to show off, but he wants a shot at this.

"Peter's fault, it was a crap pitch," Todd says with a grin. "Show us how it's done, Mr. Ruth."

Myles lifts a hand and points, and Todd cracks up, almost bending over he's laughing so hard. Myles grins and waves Todd away from the plate, makes sure Joey is out of the way as he takes a couple of practice swings. Peter jogs to the pitcher's mound, yelling something about Myles striking out.

"Not likely!" Myles calls back, lifting the bat.

"Wiggle your bum!" Ian yells to him, so Myles does, sending the boys into gales of giggles.

When the pitch comes it's a lot faster than the one Todd must have caught. Myles swings and it feels good, so very

good, and he knows before he even connects that it's beautiful. The bat vibrates in his hand, his arms taking the impact and pushing the ball where he wants it to go.

"That's it, baby!" Myles yells and he dashes to first base as Peter and Todd run screaming after the ball, which is still climbing. At second base Myles does a little dance before heading for third, and then he saunters his way back to home plate where Ian and Joey are jumping up and down and doing their own little victory dances, butts wiggling away like they're puppies.

He scoops Ian into his arms and they do a cheer together, Joey shaking his head sadly as Todd and Peter walk to them, laughing.

"Daddy, you should have runned faster," Joey tells his dad and Myles nods wisely.

"Yep, your daddy is getting old, kid," Myles teases.

Todd sticks his tongue out and Peter talks Myles into hitting a few more balls. Susan herds the boys toward the cars and Todd jogs to the outfield behind shortstop, Peter back to the mound.

The next three balls are all floaters and Todd makes a point of catching each ball with a dramatic flair, riding Myles about taking it easy on the soft pitches. Myles is pretty sure Peter's holding back, and when the next screamer comes at him he swings and misses, the ball flying right through the strike zone.

The boys and Susan yell and scream and stamp their feet, and Myles is sure he's never been happier, outside of holding his sleeping son in his arms.

When the gear is all put away and Ian is strapped into Susan's car, Myles kisses his boy goodbye and promises to call him the next day. Behind him, he can hear Joey begging to go with Ian and Susan, and Todd trying to talk him into heading home without anyone having a tantrum.

By the time Myles says goodnight to Ian and gets himself out of Susan's car, Joey is climbing in and Susan is assuring Todd that's it's no trouble.

"Just pick him up by eleven and it's fine, really," she insists, her hand on Todd's arm. "They'll crash in a couple of hours and it's not like I don't have room, time or patience. And when was the last time you had a Friday evening free, anyway? Go have a beer, hang out with friends."

Todd smiles and shrugs a shoulder. "More like go home and get some sleep," he says, then he hugs her quickly and says goodnight to Joey, making his son promise to be good for Susan.

Myles approves, because Susan is right. Todd needs to get out for a night, and Myles waves Peter over because if the plans are made in short order Todd won't back out.

"Go for a beer or two?" Myles asks Peter. "Todd's free and the man needs some good, old fashioned sports bar time."

Peter grins and pulls out his cell phone. "I'll let Lisa know," he says, walking away a little as he punches in numbers.

By the time Todd is standing next to him as Susan pulls away, Myles is smugly sure of their plans. "Come on," he says, slapping Todd's ass. "I'll leave my car at your place." It has better parking than his building.

Todd blinks and looks at Peter, who is already walking to his truck. "What's going on?" Todd asks, fishing his keys out of his pocket.

Peter grins. "See you there," he calls to Myles, and then he's in his truck and driving away.

Myles doesn't have to work very hard to coax Todd into calling a cab; with any luck they'll both be in no shape to drive home. He's not really looking to get staggering drunk, but more than two drinks would be nice, would cap off the warmth he's still feeling from hitting balls. Even knowing that it was a distant mockery of his glory days doesn't kill the rush of hitting a good pitch and knowing the ball is soaring high. The only better end to his day would be an orgasm or two, but he pushes that thought away and drags Todd off to a friendly bar instead.

At the bar, they find that Peter has been busy on his phone and within half an hour there's more than half a dozen people at the table, laughing and splitting pitchers of draft. These are guys he knows, for the most part, men just like him and Todd and Peter. Hard working guys with families, out for a little bit of fun for the first time in months, and the laughter flows as easily as the beer.

Todd sits next to him but talks to everyone, catching up and telling them about Myles' strikeout with far too much glee. In retaliation, Myles makes a show of talking to someone else, but then he realizes Todd is gone, away from the table for a lot longer than it would take to buy the next pitcher of beer.

"Where did he go?" he asks Peter as he looks around the room.

"Bar," Peter says, reaching for the plate of nachos they're all picking at. "Think he's hitting on some guy," he adds with a wink and an over the top leer.

Myles doesn't choke on his mouthful of beer, but it's a close thing. "Shit, you're kidding," he says, sitting up straighter and trying to find Todd at the bar.

"Well, let's see. He's been gone for twenty minutes," Peter says dryly. "And he's currently..." Peter turns his head toward the other end of the bar from where Myles is looking. "Yep, they've got their PDAs out. I bet they're beaming shit and checking out each other's peripherals."

"You're weird," Myles says, but the others are laughing, which is about what Myles expects from a table full of computer geeks. "Todd doesn't check out anyone's peripherals."

Peter and Dave and Glen all stare at him, then Peter grins. "Sure. If you say so. But if you want to make your claim you better hurry up about it; the man's got that 'I need to get laid yesterday' vibe going on."

Myles stares back and knows he's blushing. "I don't—no, I mean ... Oh, fuck off," he sighs. He'll never be able to convince them that it's not how it looks. They don't want the truth, it's much easier to tease and laugh, and he knows that. He doesn't hold it against them.

Todd finally comes back with the beer and a huge order of French fries. "Miss me?" he asks, setting the beer down in the middle of the table. Everyone digs into the fries and Peter fills

glasses, all of them giving Todd a hard time about taking so long with the beer. No one says anything about the man Todd was talking to, or what they think Myles wants.

Todd doesn't say anything about it either, and when they finally leave at midnight, the two of them piling into a cab outside the bar, Myles asks. He can't help himself, the need to know is burning in him, threatening his calm and contentment. He waits until they're halfway to Todd's place to say anything, waits until he sees Todd relaxing into the backseat of this far from private car.

"Who was that guy you were talking to earlier?" he asks, and he thinks it's the right question in the right tone of voice. Curious without being prying. It's not like he's asked if Todd wants to suck that guy's cock or take him to a movie or something.

"Which guy?" Todd asks, a slight smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"The one that delayed the beer delivery," Myles clarifies, holding back a sigh of exasperation. Asking at all suddenly seems like a bad idea, because he really doesn't want to know.

"Friend of a friend," Todd says vaguely, but the smile is more there, growing larger. "We might hang out next week. Want to come with?"

Myles is horrified and embarrassed and deeply unhappy. "No, no," he says hastily, looking away. "I was just wondering."

Todd nods and looks out the window on his side of the car. "You staying over tonight or taking the cab to your place?"

"Be another fare," the cab driver warns them from the front seat where his act of pointedly not paying attention to their conversation has just failed.

Myles shrugs. "Just have to come back for my car in the morning," he points out, though he doesn't really want to stay now. It would far too weird not to stay, however, and there's been too much that's strange between them lately. "You don't mind?"

"Nope," Todd says and that seems to end the debate.

They pay the driver at Todd's house and Todd's still smiling as he unlocks the door and almost stumbles in.

"Careful," Myles says, grabbing Todd's arm by instinct. He didn't think Todd had had that much to drink.

"I'm always careful," Todd laughs, and then he's in Myles arms, kissing him, and Myles goes with it unthinkingly, following Todd's lead until they're pressed against the wall between the door and the closet, kissing deeper and deeper and Todd's arching and rubbing against him.

Todd tastes more like beer than usual, and he's more aggressive than normal, too, and Myles doesn't know precisely the best way to handle this. "You're drunk," he says into Todd's mouth, the words tangled and garbled by the way Todd's sucking on his tongue.

"No 'm not," Todd says and proves it by undoing Myles pants with a dexterity no one could manage drunk.

"Okay," Myles gasps as his dick is surrounded by Todd's fist. "You're not."

"You're not either," Todd says, dropping to his knees.

"No. I'm not." He can admit that, accept that they're in their right minds there in Todd's hall as Todd licks him, nuzzles him. He can be completely sane, standing with his pants down around his knees as Todd starts to suck him. He can be sober and completely real, his best friend at his feet giving him expert head by the coat closet.

But not for long. It really is expert head, Todd's mouth freewheeling over his cock and balls, making Myles' knees weak. He leans against the wall, one hand buried in Todd's hair, and groans.

Todd sucks him hard and pulls away. "Do it," he demands. "I want you to." Then he opens his mouth wider, his lips bruised already and slightly swollen, and takes Myles in again.

Myles groans once more and his hips flex, pushing gently. It's not enough for Todd apparently, for his hands are on Myles' hips, guiding him, and then they're in a rhythm, a nasty, fast and dirty fuck. Myles can't breathe, doesn't even want to, in point of fact. All he wants to do is watch his cock vanish into Todd's mouth, coming out slick and dark and wet. He thrusts and Todd takes it, pulls him in, and Myles knows that this is going to be as embarrassing as the last time, but at least he'll get to come in Todd's mouth and not in his pants.

Myles closes his eyes, hopes that not watching will stave off the rush to the end, but Todd makes a sound, deep in his chest, and Myles' eyes fly open again. He knows that sound, the depth and breadth of it, can feel the intensity of it in his mind, his heart, his cock. The vibration tingles the head of his dick, almost as seductive of the sound itself. That sound, the

needy, greedy desperate feeling behind it, has lodged itself in Myles and he can hear it over and over, Todd's want filling him until he breaks, coming in long volleys that thunder out of him and are lost in the sound of his cries.

It's the best blow job he's ever had, bar none, and he's almost in tears before Todd leans back, away from him, leaving him cold and damp.

"Come on," Todd whispers, pulling at Myles' hand. "Come to bed."

Myles nods, tries to get his pants up so he can walk, but mostly it's an excuse to stay where he is for a moment. Long enough that Todd won't see the shine in his eyes or the way Myles' world has just shifted again.

When he can move, when he can face the new nirvana of Todd's bedroom, Myles goes. He walks slowly, wondering if perhaps Todd has changed his mind in the short walk down the hall and up the stairs, but when he gets there Todd is turning down the covers, his chest bare.

"You okay?" Todd asks. His smile is a little smug as he fingers the button on his jeans.

Myles steps over the threshold of the doorway, into Todd's bedroom and wonders why it's such a big deal. "Yeah," he says. "You're ... damn, you're good at that." He means it honestly, admiringly, and knows his brain is still mostly in his dick. Or shot out of it, which is pretty much the same thing at this point.

Todd grins and undoes his jeans. Myles watches, fascinated by the line of Todd's erection against the denim. "It's strange being in here," he says, almost absently.

"Want to go to the couch?" Todd offers, pushing his jeans and underwear down.

"No." Myles shakes his head, moves closer to Todd, close enough to feel the heat from his body. "What do you feel like?" he asks.

Todd kicks his clothes away. "Feel like being skin on skin for once. Feel like losing myself in it, not grabbing a quick grope in the living room. Feel like ... feeling you. Not clothes shoved aside."

Myles nods slowly, almost hypnotized by Todd's voice, by his nakedness. Todd's got such smooth skin, not a mark on him to mar the lines of his body. Dazed and dazzled, Myles takes off his own clothes, not paying any attention at all to where they go when he sheds them. Todd's eyes are tracking his movements, every flex of his arms and back as he shifts to bare himself.

They move to the bed, never more than a few inches apart, and falling onto the sheets is like falling through water, slow and languid. Myles hopes he comes out of this feeling, that he wakes up enough to live in the moment, and he suddenly realizes he's getting hard again, that he's yearning to be like Todd, erect and stiff and then he is.

He breathes out and loses track of his breath against Todd's skin, breathes in through his nose and inhales Todd's scent, the clean smell of the sheets. "Oh," he says. "Oh."

Todd nods and shifts and then they're moving, legs tangled and mouths trading more kisses. Todd's hands are warm on Myles back, his ass, and Myles starts to shake.

"Easy," Todd whispers. "Easy, baby."

It is easy. It's good and fine and Myles calms under Todd's ministrations. They rock, rubbing together slowly for a long minute, and Myles watches Todd's eyes grow darker. They speed up, Todd setting the pace again with the way his hands begin to clutch at him rather than stroke and pet, and Myles rolls onto his back, Todd following until he's lying on top, grinding down on Myles with his head thrown back.

Watching him, something connects in Myles' brain, something slides into a new slot and he realizes that there's far more going on than mere sex. His body is certainly having sex, all his nerve endings are saying so, but his mind is doing something else, seeing things it didn't see before as his perception skids to the side and shows him a new angle.

Without pausing to examine what he's thinking, choosing to leave it for the moment and do his body's bidding because it's easier, he spreads his thighs, holds Todd between his legs. "Do it," Myles whispers. "I want you to."

Todd shakes his head. "You're drunk."

"No. I'm not. Neither are you." Which means that Todd doesn't want to and the thought crushes Myles.

But Todd nods and leans over him to the nightstand and Myles can breathe again. Too fast, however, his lungs not working quite right, and he wonders if he's got the right of it, if this is for the best. He doesn't want to get lost. His brain is racing along with his heartbeat and the new perception is getting heavier, harder to ignore.

Todd's hands are careful, slow and gentle, and Myles isn't a stranger to this, not entirely. It feels better than ever before though, and when Todd slides into him finally, at long

last, Myles doesn't want to know why it's better. He only wants to feel it.

He spreads his legs a little more, works a bit harder, and Todd grunts, swears at him. "Stop that. Be over too soon."

That Todd wants it to last is the final, perfect thing, and Myles surges up to kiss him, hands and legs and ass all trying to keep Todd exactly where he is, for as long as they can both stand it.

Todd looks vaguely startled, but he grins slowly and rolls his hips in a leisurely circle that makes Myles fall back on the bed. "Grab the headboard," Todd tells him and winks.

Myles stares at him for a moment and when Todd rolls his hips again, Myles' hands are inexplicably anchored just where the mattress meets the headboard. He doesn't remember reaching above his head, following Todd's orders, but there he is. When Todd grins and blows him a kiss, he's glad, elated that he did it right. When Todd thrusts deep into him, he's ecstatically pleased with himself, with Todd, with Susan for taking the boys so they don't hear him yelling.

He stares up at Todd's face, then down to where his erection is caught between their bodies, and he begs Todd to do it again. He says please, which seems to delight Todd, earning him a kiss before Todd leans back and rearranges Myles' legs. He can see now, and feel, and Todd's watching too. Watching his cock the way Myles had watched Todd going down on him in the hall, and Myles groans as his dick starts to swell harder, starts to throb.

"Not yet," Todd mumbles, watching himself fucking Myles. Watching the action and not Myles' face, something which Myles finds incredibly sexy.

"Hurry up then," Myles says, bearing down.

Todd hisses and the tempo picks up, fast and hard and Myles is just along for the ride now, watching Todd in motion, watching Todd in the revealing act of fucking someone. That it's his ass is important, of course, but it's Todd that's his focus.

His vision snaps in and out and Myles has a passing thought that he's blinking, that his eyes are wide in awe and then shut in something else that is almost awe, and then Todd is everywhere, everything, riding him harder and faster and the end is in sight.

Myles doesn't want it to stop, doesn't want this particular release, and he says, "Don't go out with him," the new and scary perception finally finding his voice.

"Jesus!" Todd swears. "Fucking Christ." Another three thrusts and Todd's coming, Myles can feel it, and he's insanely grateful for the condom because he thinks Todd's shock and maybe anger would have come out of him too, right into Myles' body.

Todd pants against Myles' chest for a moment and then works a hand between them to Myles' erection, still hard. "Why not?" he says, the tone conversational except for the shortness of his breath.

"I don't know?" Myles offers, knowing it's pathetic and a lie.

"Then I can't say either way," Todd says, disappointment in his eyes, his voice.

"Because..." Myles can feel his erection fading away in Todd's hand. "Because." He's not ready to admit that he was wrong, the worry was never about Todd falling in love. And he knows that it wasn't making out on the couch that brought him to this point, but maybe it was the fumbling and groping and hand jobs that kept him from seeing this. They were a mask, something for him to hide behind.

He thinks Todd won't let him hide anymore and he's not sure where to go from here.

Todd sighs and pulls out of him, one hand keeping the rubber in place. "Be right back," he says, rolling off the bed and leaving the room.

Myles can hear the toilet flushing and water running as Todd washes his hands, and when Todd comes back to bed Myles sits up. "How long have we been dating?" he asks, not sure if he's brave enough for this conversation. He knows very well that he's not brave enough to have it any other way than this, though, when they've literally bared themselves down to nothing.

Todd smiles at him sadly. "We're not. It takes two to date, not one."

Myles thinks about that for a moment. "How long have you been waiting for me to wake up, then?" he asks, guilt threatening to crash down on him like a building. He hates that he's caused Todd pain, that he's added to everything else. No one should lose their husband and then fall in love with a man who doesn't deserve it, is willingly blind to it.

"Don't make me sound pathetic," Todd tells him. "I told you. You almost always get your head out of your butt. Besides, this is something you had to realize for yourself."

Myles looks at Todd, watches as Todd stretches out next to him in the bed. He looks the same, confident and self-assured and not in the least bit self-conscious about the way their evening has ended up. But he's not moving any closer, not touching. Not looking at Myles directly and it's then that Myles can see the way Todd protects himself. It's not the run and hide approach he himself takes, it's more inward; a wall-building method.

"I'm awake," Myles offers. "Head out and everything."

Todd nods, the motion jerky and not as smooth as usual. "And?"

"And," Myles takes a breath, lets it out and steps onto the field. "And I would prefer you not go out with that guy because I think we have something special. I think it would hurt me a lot if you dated someone else."

Todd turns his head and looks at him, finally. "And you? Charlotte? Patty?"

Myles knows a pitch when he sees one. "Done and gone and I don't think that's my team anyway."

Todd smiles. "Camping?"

"Share a tent? Put the boys in their own." Myles thinks that such a thing would have potential. He thinks he's not fucking up quite so badly anymore.

Todd's smile turns speculative and he calls Myles on his shit, just like always. "You seem to be all right with this, suddenly. What happens tomorrow when the beer is gone and

you're in your apartment and this is a memory that doesn't feel quite real?"

Myles thinks about that for a moment, studies Todd's face and eyes and knows he's done, that the game is over. "I'll call you and tell you I miss you and I want to see you when Joey's in bed."

"You're sure?" Todd asks quietly, almost whispering. "Because I don't want to go back, Myles. Not now. Not after you know how I feel. How it can be."

"I love you, I'm pretty sure," Myles whispers.

There aren't cheering crowds when Todd kisses him, but that's okay. It's better than baseball, more precious than the diamond rings he sees on fingers, and Myles knows that it's the end. He's retired himself from the games—all of them—and he knows he's won.

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