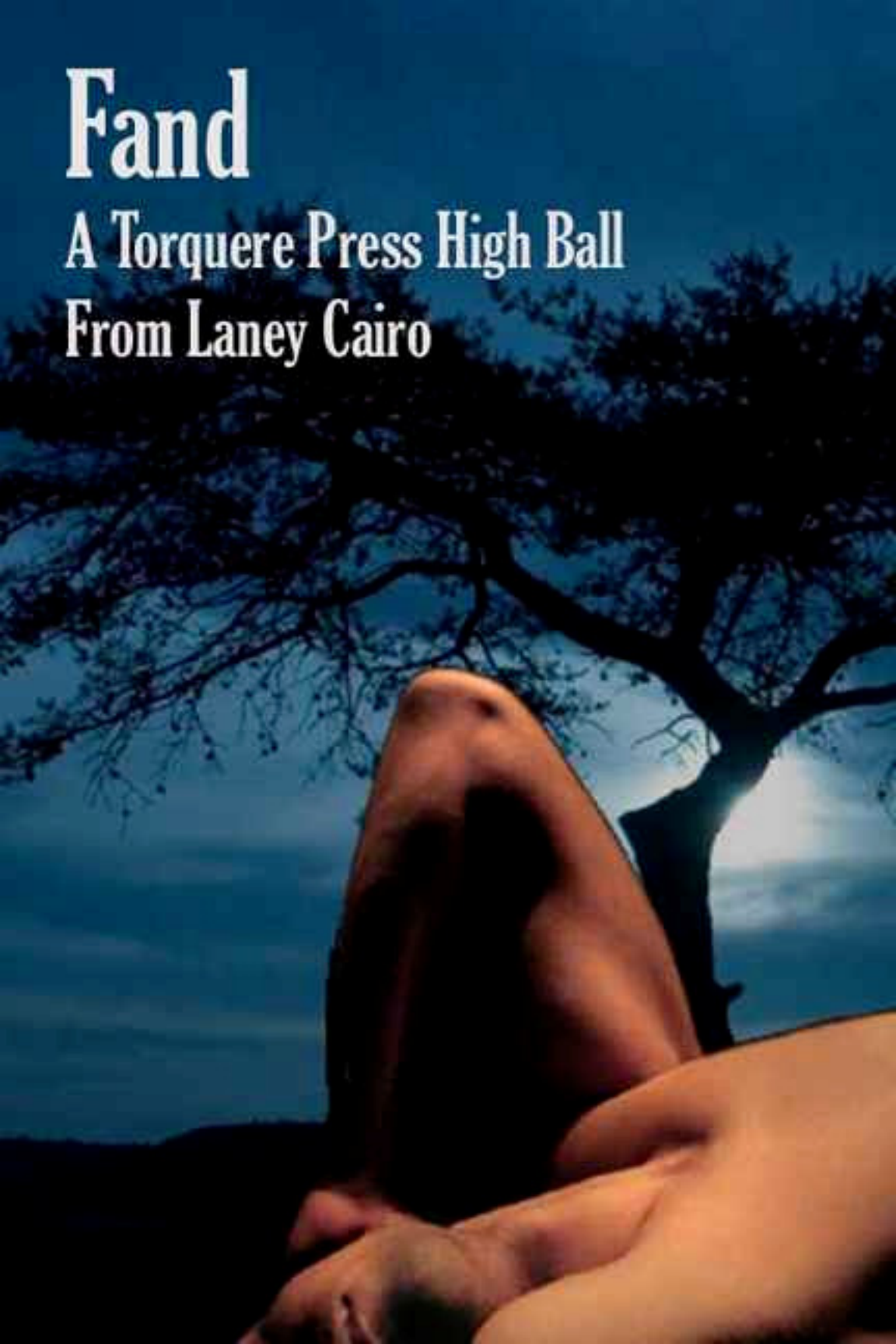


# Fand

A Torquere Press High Ball  
From Laney Cairo



Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

**Torquere Press**

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## **Chapter 1**

The scuffling in the classroom was a more accurate indicator that the bell was about to ring than the clock over the top of the whiteboard. Will stood up, stretching and cracking his neck. "Okay, people. Time's up. Make sure your name's on your work—if I can't read your name, it doesn't count."

He wrote, 'Chapter 12, for Wednesday,' on the whiteboard, and said, "Read it, expect to be asked to pass opinions on it."

The chimes that marked the end of the class came over the PA system, triggering a stampede for his desk, to drop off the classwork, and then the door.

There were always a couple of stragglers, it was one of the givens of life, kids who wanted to ask about assignments, and these were the kids he was most likely to worry about. Anyone who didn't rush out of school at the end of the day probably didn't have much of a home to go to.

It took another couple of minutes to wipe the board and pack the grading away into his backpack, then he made his way through the bedlam in the halls. "Bye, Mr. L," some of the kids chorused. It took him a few more minutes to get to the staff room, what with pausing to stop an incipient fight, and it was a relief to push the door open and walk into a different kind of bedlam.

There were empty egg cartons in his cubbyhole, presumably from someone that he kept supplied with eggs, and he added them to his bulging backpack.

Doug, who was young and single and a father, too, leaned against the cubbyholes and smiled at him. "Hey, Will. Do you want a lift home tonight?"

Will smiled back at Doug and hefted his pack experimentally. "Think it's less than 25 pounds tonight; I'll be fine to ride, but thanks for asking. Do you want some more eggs? The girls are in double lay at the moment."

Doug shook his head. "I'm still using the last dozen I had from you, so I'm fine. I think Gavin wants some, he was muttering about it this afternoon."

Will nodded. "Yeah, he found me at recess, so I know about it."

Doug was still smiling at Will, looking remarkably attractive for someone who had spent the day wrangling 13-year-olds, as he shuffled the files he was holding a little self-consciously. "Would you like to come over for dinner one night?"

Doug had gorgeous skin, dark and lustrous, like the best black coffee. Will could smell him, too, warm and sharp underneath the all-encompassing pall of under-washed adolescents that they all had at the end of the day.

"That would be great, Doug," Will said.

Doug straightened his shoulders a little, solid muscles flexing against his utilitarian shirt, and Will revised his idea as to what might actually be on the menu. Well, now. He'd always assumed Doug was straight.

"Tonight?" Doug asked.

"I can't tonight," Will said, making sure he sounded regretful. "I've already got plans. What about this weekend? My daughter will be around, so perhaps you'd like to bring

your son over to my place and we can cook together? Felicity will keep an eye on your son."

Doug's grin widened, and Will had to smile back at him.

"That would be wonderful," Doug said, and they both moved to one side so Tony could get to his cubbyhole.

"Five on Saturday?" Will said, and Doug nodded and glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Must run, I have to pick Leon up from the sitter."

Doug snatched up the grading he'd rested on top of the cubbyholes and bolted out of the staffroom.

Will rummaged around in his pack for the lengths of leather thong he tied around his ankles to stop his pants getting caught in the chain of his bike, then shouldered the bag.

His bike was the last one left in the lock up, and he unlocked the chain that kept it safe then tied the thongs around his ankles, buckled his helmet on, and pushed the bike out.

\* \* \* \*

It was a pleasant ride home, only a few miles, and once he was over I-5 the roads were residential and quiet. Griffith Park was a tree-covered oasis on his right, overshadowing the suburb.

He loved his life at times like this. There were still a few hours of daylight left, time that was his own, he had what was probably a date with Doug lined up for the weekend, and no one in an SUV tried to run him over on the way home.

He hopped off his bike on the sidewalk outside his house, picked up his mail, and waved to his neighbour, Dave, who was just getting out of his Saab. Digger threw herself at the fence, barking furiously at Dave's Malamute, Merlin, who had barreled out the house next door to greet her owner.

"Shut up, Dig," Will called out as he opened the gate to his yard.

The manic, brown mutt woofed happily and hurled herself at Will, charging her way through the potato crop to get to him.

He propped his bike up and bent down, hugging her as she squirmed with happiness at seeing him again. "Calm down, old girl," he said, tugging at her ears and patting her.

She followed him into the house as he unlocked his front door. He dropped his pack and the mail on the scrubbed pine table in the kitchen, put the kettle onto the gas to heat, and sat down to undo the leather thongs and his shoes.

Cheshire was asleep on the bed when Will went into his bedroom, sprawled across the worn blanket, and Digger hopped up, nuzzling the black and white cat affectionately.

Will stripped off, putting his shirt, socks, and boxers into the cane hamper, noting that Cheshire had been continuing his campaign to strip the woven cane from the frame of the hamper during the day. He pulled on a grubby pair of jeans and a stained T-shirt, and retied the thong that held his dark ponytail back.

The kettle began to whistle in the kitchen and Will left Digger and Cheshire molting on his bed and went and filled the teapot.

It was a bread-making evening, so he took the wedge of yeast out of his freezer, hacked a piece off, put that in a chipped china bowl and added a cup of warm water and some honey. Then he put the bowl on the bookshelves in the kitchen, up high where Cheshire hopefully couldn't climb.

He unbolted the back door and leaned against the frame, surveying his yard contentedly through the screen door while the tea steeped and the yeast fermented.

The hens were pressed expectantly up against the wire of their coop and Will made cooing noises at them. Moths fluttered over the brassicas; he was going to have to spray with garlic and soap on the weekend, before any caterpillars hatched. The sycamores at the bottom of the garden were gloriously green in the afternoon sunshine, last night's rain had left their leaves glossy.

He poured himself a mug of black tea, spooned in some honey and carried the mug out into the backyard, along with a bucket.

The bricks were hot under his feet, and when he stepped into the beds, the soil was warm and still a little damp under the mulch. He dug his toes into the soil while he picked snails off the basil and dropped them into the bucket.

His mug balanced on a convenient post, he opened the coop and walked in with the bucket.

The girls went crazy when he put the bucket down, barging against each other and clambering over Will's feet to get at the snails, and he took the opportunity to scoop up Clotilde and push her out of the coop into the garden where she quacked happily and disappeared off into the tomato bed.

Bernice was just as easy to catch, and he sent her off after Clotilde.

By then the hens had dealt with all the snails and were looking hopefully up at Will. "Later, ladies," he said, bending down to scratch Matilda's back when she crouched expectantly beside him. "I hope you girls are taking special care with your grooming, because you've got a gentleman caller coming soon."

He rummaged through their nesting boxes, collecting the eggs in the bucket, then checked their water bowl was full enough to get them through to dinnertime.

There was a faucet beside the steps to the back porch, so he washed the chicken shit off his feet and refilled Digger's bowl before tracking damp footprints back into the house and across the wooden boards. He wiped the eggs off with a damp cloth, dropped the bucket onto the back porch, then washed his hands carefully.

The yeast and water mix was looking cloudy and active, so he added two cups of flour to the bowl, mixed it together quickly, and turned the dough out onto the kitchen table.

He gave it a quick knead, put the dough back in the bowl, and returned it to the bookshelf. Cheshire had an unfortunate passion for bread in any form and, sure enough, he appeared in the kitchen, attracted by the smell, meowing and smooching around Will's ankles, the multiple bells around his neck chiming with each rub.

There was a *thud* as Digger charged through the doggy door in the back screen door. She hurtled through the house,



her claws skittering across the bare boards, and barked at the front screen door.

"Shut up, dog," Will called, wiping his floury hands on his jeans and following her.

Maz and Fitch were at the front door, Denny on Fitch's hip. When he caught sight of Will, Denny held his arms, shouting "Weee!" at him. Will opened the screen door and took Denny from Fitch, cuddling him.

"Hey, sweetie," Will said, holding the door open for Denny's moms.

Digger jumped up at Denny, and Will lifted a well-aimed knee and caught her in the chest, making her hurtle through the house and back out onto the porch.

"Puppy!" Denny shrieked, and Will put him down to pursue Digger through the doggy door.

He kissed Fitch's cheek and patted Maz's belly. "You're showing," he said, delightedly.

"I am," Maz said, rubbing her belly, too. "Eighteen weeks now."

Fitch put down two carry bags and said, "Potty in one bag, clean clothes in the other. You might want to take his jeans off when he's outside."

Will nodded. "I know the routine, done it a bit before."

Fitch said, "It's five, we need to go. Can you feed him if we're late?"

"Not a problem," Will said. "Denny and I'll be fine."

Maz kissed Will's cheek again. "Thank you so much," she said, her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Pregnancy hormones," Fitch said with a groan, and took Maz by the elbow and pulled her out of the house.

Denny was sitting on the kitchen floor, arms wrapped around a long-suffering Cheshire, and Will squatted down beside them.

"Want to go for a walk?" he asked.

\* \* \* \*

They walked out through the gate in Will's back fence, Denny's hand safely in his, Digger bouncing excitedly ahead of them. Cheshire declined the opportunity to join them and sat just inside the gate, ready to bolt up the California oak tree at the first sign of trouble.

It was a two-year-old's walk, involving long pauses to admire ants and beetles and gravel, and they only made it halfway up the ravine behind Will's house before Denny held up his arms to be picked up.

Will carried him the rest of the way up the ravine, and stood for a moment, admiring the view out to the reservoir and the LA skyline. Then he whistled for Digger and made his way back down the small slope, Denny perched on his shoulders.

Denny trailed back into the kitchen behind Will, and Will sat him up on one of the kitchen chairs. Denny chatted to Will, sometimes intelligibly, while Will gave the bread dough its long knead and set it into the loaf pan.

Will dragged the box of toys out of the spare room and onto the back porch, settling Denny there, then made himself another pot of tea. Digger stretched herself out on the top

step to maximize her chances of tripping Denny up, and Cheshire climbed into Will's lap and sat purring, sounding like there was a small motorbike in his throat, while Will drank his tea.

The shadows lengthened across the garden and everything was golden in the late afternoon sunshine. Will smiled down at the little boy on his porch and Denny looked up at Will, like a tiny cherub in wet pants.

Will hadn't lit the fire in the water heater yet, so he left Denny safely on the porch while he went and collected an armful of split wood from the woodpile.

Then he knelt down in the laundry off the back porch and lit the fire using newspaper and kindling, talking to Denny, who was crouching beside him the whole time, intrigued by the flames. "This is how we make hot water," Will said. "Feel how hot the fire is." He held Denny's hand out carefully in front of the flickering flames.

Denny pulled his hand back and said, "Naughty stove."

"That's right," Will said. "It's hot like the stove, and it's naughty to touch it. All the hot from the fire goes up here," he said, patting the tank above the fire. "And makes the water warm so you can have a bath."

There was warm water in only a few minutes, enough to run a shallow bath for Denny. Will gave him a quick wash and carried him into the kitchen wrapped in a towel and sat him on a chair while he put the bread into the oven to bake.

It was time to feed the girls, so Will put clean clothes on the top half of Denny, and the little boy trotted along behind. Will half-filled a bucket from the drum of feed on the back

porch and dragged the hose into the hen coop. Clotilde and Bernice quacked hysterically and bulldozed their way past Denny, making him shriek "Ducky, ducky!" delightedly as he tried to grab their tail feathers.

Will picked Denny up before either of the ducks decided to peck at him, and held the wriggling little boy firmly while refilling the water dispenser for the hens and the big bowl for the ducks.

After making sure that the coop was securely closed, he carried Denny to the back of the garden and checked the garden gate was closed, too. He'd lost chickens to a fox the year before and had learned his lesson well.

Digger's hysterical woofing indicated that there was someone at the front door again, so Will carried Denny inside, put him down on the boards and followed him to the front screen door.

"Not mommies," Denny announced, peering through the screen.

"Not mommies," Will agreed, and he opened the screen door to Liz from next door, carton in her arms.

"Hi, Liz," he said.

"I've got some empty jars for you, Will," Liz said, smiling beneath her artificially arched eyebrows and delicate nose.

"Thanks," Will said, taking the carton and peering into it. "Oh, you didn't need to," he said, taking out the block of cheese that was nestled amongst the washed glass jars and recycled egg cartons. It was organic cheese, too, and probably cost a fortune.

"The eggs are always so tasty," Liz said. "I just wanted to thank you for them." She squatted down beside Denny. "Is this little man Denny? He's grown so much since I last saw him; he was just a baby then."

She smiled and patted Denny's golden curls. Denny sucked his thumb and patted Liz back seriously, smudging one grubby hand across her cheek, making her laugh delightedly.

Liz stood back up and said, "Oh Will, you might like to know we've decided not to spray the yard at all this year, just in case any drifts over the fence."

"That's very thoughtful, thanks," Will said

Denny tugged on Will's jeans. "Hungry," he said, and both of the adults laughed.

"I'll let you get Denny his dinner," Liz said,

When she had gone, Will put the box on the table and unpacked it. There was a carton of organic cream in amongst the jars, too, and Will showed it to Denny.

"You and I are going to have a great dinner."

\* \* \* \*

Will cut wedges of fresh bread, topped the bread with tomatoes from his garden, basil, and cheese, and put it all in the oven to heat up. He scrambled some eggs with cream, added them to the grilled concoction, and put the plates on the table.

Denny knelt up on one of the wooden chairs, still naked from the waist down, and began to shovel the food in as fast as he could with his fingers.

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Will had to agree with him, the food was good and very welcome.

\* \* \* \*

After Maz and Fitch had collected their little boy, Will put the toys away and fed Cheshire and Digger from the large container of rice and cooked meat that he had prepared and put in the fridge the day before, cracking eggs over the top of Digger's meal to make sure she had the nutrients she needed, and adding olive oil to both bowls.

He made himself cheese and homemade pickles sandwiches for work the next day. He made an extra sandwich, too, and carried it out into the backyard. The girls were quiet in their coop, the garden was in deep shadow, and the evening was cool. Far away, the coyotes were howling in Griffith Park.

He put the sandwich on a flat stone in the middle of the garden and stood for a moment in silence, listening to an owl hooting.

Gina, his ex, had laughed at him for doing this every night, just like she had laughed at a lot of things he did, but he knew that tomorrow morning the food would be gone.

He walked back to his house, where light shone out of his kitchen window and across the trellised tomatoes, beans, and peas.

He had marking to do, of course, but before he tackled either the papers that needed grading or the mess in the kitchen, there was something else he needed to do.

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He took his old six-string down from the shelf in his bedroom, and Cheshire and Digger followed him outside.

He sat down on the ancient sofa on the back porch, the pets beside him, and played quietly. He didn't play particularly well, not like his daughter, Felicity, and he didn't write music, but this was another thing he did that brought him inexpressible joy.

It was fully dark now, and over Griffith Park the stars were out, and he sang softly. In the garden, all the tiny spirits that lived there came out, minute points of light in the shadows, flittering around. No one else saw them, he knew that, and he wasn't completely sure he believed in them himself, except at times like this when the magic hung thick in the air and the night was still and calm.

\* \* \* \*

*I sat under one of the sycamore trees, confident that the man couldn't see me, that he hadn't heard me slipping through his gate. The food was tempting, but I could wait until he went into his home before taking it, and the squirrels wouldn't touch anything with me there. The music rippled out across the night, and his voice was low and deep. Around me, the little ones who lived in the garden were rising up into the night air, singing too. They were safe; they were so small that most people were too dead to ever see or hear them.*

*I am not so small, but the music was just as compelling to me.*

\* \* \* \*

Midway through correcting the mountain of comprehensions, Will stood up from the kitchen table and yawned, stretched, and put the kettle on. While he waited for it to boil, he leaned against the window frame and gazed out over his dark garden. There was someone standing at the back of the garden, partly hidden by the shadow, and Will said, "Digger?" in a low voice.

The dog opened her eyes blearily and huffed at him, her ears pricked up. She settled back down, not moving from underneath the table, and the figure slipped away again into the darkness.

Will watched the garden for a few minutes, but the person didn't come back again, and he didn't go and investigate. If Digger said that the person wasn't invading her territory, he was willing to believe that either he had imagined the person, or they meant no harm to anyone that lived with him.



## **Chapter 2**

The next morning, before he took Digger out for her morning clamber, Will had a quick scout around the back of the garden, beneath the sycamore trees. There wasn't a crumb to be seen on the rock. The carpet of yarrow and feverfew was undisturbed as far as he could tell, and the girls were safe in their coop, clucking happily at him as he collected the morning eggs.

He patted Clotilde and Bernice and said, "You'd tell me if you'd seen someone, wouldn't you?" to them.

They pecked hopefully at his bare toes, which wasn't much of an answer.

He undid the gate, and Digger shot through the opening and up the ravine, launching herself through the undergrowth, barking excitedly at whatever had caught her doggy attention.

Will followed behind her, climbing quickly, until he reached the top of the ravine. The sky was dirty that morning, with rain threatening, and Will decided he'd take his oilskins to work, just in case it poured. He didn't really mind riding in the rain, it made the air fresher, but any number of people would try and give him a lift home, and it was easier to wave the oilskins at them.

There was a rock just in the right place for Will to sit while Digger romped. Will stretched his legs out and picked grass seeds off the legs of his work pants and contemplated life. He used to smoke, years ago, and every now and then the urge to light up would hit him, and this was one of those times.

He stood up and whistled for Digger and began to walk back down to his little house, knowing she'd burst out of the bushes at any moment.

He could see his roof through the trees, shingles so old they were silver, bits of tarpaper tacked over the top from the previous winter. Eventually, he and Gina would have to face the problem of re-roofing the place, but it could wait another year at least.

Digger shot past him, a blur of rusty brown, bouncing down the path, barking again. She wasn't a big dog, but she had the soul of a warrior, seeing challenges to her dignity and authority everywhere, especially if the challenge was small and furry and had four legs.

This was what had made her absence of interest in whoever was in the backyard the night before so strange. When the fox had broken into the coop the year before, she'd gone berserk in the kitchen, hurling herself repeatedly at the back door until Will had woken up, staggered out, and opened the door to let her out.

He closed the gate behind them both, picked up the plate the sandwich had been on and the bucket of eggs from where it hung on a hook beside the coop.

He washed his feet at the back faucet, refilled Digger's bowl from where she had just drained it, and locked the back door, dog on the outside, cat on the inside. Digger would spend the day patrolling the garden, keeping squirrels away, and Cheshire would spend the day asleep on Will's bed.

And Will would spend the day attempting to open little doors in adolescent minds and shove American Literature into

the gaps before the doors swung shut again. It wasn't a bad job, and he didn't loathe it like some of his fellow teachers did, but he'd rather spend the day at home.

\* \* \* \*

Just because it was raining, didn't mean there wasn't work still to do in the garden, and Will was weeding between the trellises when Digger's shouts announced someone was at the front door.

Rather than track even more mud through the house, Will fought his way through the overgrown ferns down the side of the house. He'd taken his shirt off before he'd started work, and the cycads and tree ferns scratched and caught on his bare skin.

He shouted, "Shut up, Digger! I can hear you!" as he rounded the corner of the old house.

There was a young man on the front porch, propping up his bicycle and shaking the rain out of his dreadies. Will said, "Hey, Devon, you made it."

He climbed the front steps onto the porch to where Devon's bike leaned against his and peered into the cardboard box on the back carrier of the bike. "Hello, Chanticleer," he said to the sleepy rooster inside.

Devon kissed his cheek and said, "Hi, Will. A little bit of rain wasn't going to stop me any more than it would stop you."

"Let's take Chanticleer through to the girls." Will opened the front screen for Devon to carry the box through the house, keeping Digger away with his foot. He walked behind

Devon, taking the opportunity to admire the guy's ass where his wet pants clung to it.

There was the smell of soup cooking, thick and wholesome, in the kitchen, and Devon sniffed appreciatively. "Thought you might want a meal," Will said, pushing Digger out the back door and holding it open for Devon.

"I'm starving," Devon said. "I want to eat whatever it is you're cooking."

"There's hot water, too," Will said, unclipping the coop door and ducking his head to walk into the coop. "If you want a bath to warm up. I lit the fire a while ago, ready."

Devon stooped into the coop to put the box down and opened the lid. Inside was a dopey and plump rooster, with a bright red comb and lustrous green and black feathers. He woke up as Devon lifted him out of the box, fluffing his feathers out and preening a little.

"Go for it, Chanty," Devon said.

They left the rooster cautiously circling the girls, who were huddled together, giggling and whispering amongst themselves.

It was raining steadily now and they were both drenched. Devon shrugged and said, "I'm so wet, a bit more won't matter. I'll give you a hand with whatever you were doing."

"Weeding," Will said. "If you want to do some more, I'll go split tomorrow's wood and put it on the porch to dry."

Devon was a good friend and Will was quite sure he wasn't offending him by suggesting that he help in the garden. He left Devon pulling out wild mustard and crabgrass and went and retrieved the block splitter from the laundry.

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There was a rhythm to chopping wood that was satisfying just in itself. Place chunk of wood on block. Pull ax back, swing forward, letting the ax accelerate through its arc, split wood cleanly. Repeat.

The rain eased, and Devon went and emptied the bucket into the chicken coop for the second time, then walked toward Will, right in his line of sight so he would be spotted easily.

Will rested the ax on the block, and Devon said, "Chanticleer's at it already. And I'm still starving."

He wasn't cold, not after splitting a mound of wood, but Will was undeniably filthy. "Hot baths, then a meal," he said, gathering up an armful of wood.

It only took a minute or two to move the wood onto the porch beside the laundry to dry, and then Will tracked more mud inside and found Devon a clean towel. His towels were a bit thin and threadbare, but replacing them seemed so unimportant, at least until he offered them to someone who wasn't family.

"Dry clothes, too?" he asked, and Devon nodded and put the plug in the bath and turned the hot faucet on. The water was almost boiling as it came out of the faucet, and he quickly turned the cold water on, too. The bathroom was full of steam and Devon was peeling the last of his wet clothes off when Will opened the door and put a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt on the sink for him.

Devon stood and kissed him quickly on the lips and Devon's eyes were clear blue and he had freckles spattered

across his nose. "I'll leave the water in for you," he said, and Will nodded.

"I'd better go feed the poultry, they'll be working up an appetite."

\* \* \* \*

When Will came out of the bathroom, warm and mostly dry, apart from his hair and beard, Devon was cutting slabs off the previous day's bread and frying them quickly. Will slid his arms around Devon from behind and said, "Mmm, that smells great," as he buried his face against Devon's neck.

Devon smelled warm and clean and completely of himself. Will rather suspected that the only chemical that ever touched Devon's skin was soap, even his hair smelled of nothing except rain and wet hair.

Devon laughed quietly and lifted the lid off the large saucepan. "Ready to eat?" he asked.

While Devon was serving up the fried bread, Will ladled out a third bowl of soup and cut another wedge of bread.

"You feeding someone else?" Devon asked.

"I think there's a homeless person from the park who needs it," Will explained.

Most people would have scoffed at the idea of putting food in their backyards for the homeless, but Will knew Devon wasn't one of those people. He just nodded and carried the plates to the table.

Will pulled on his oilskin and headed out into the dusk. It had stopped raining, at least for the moment, though every tree and plant and wire was dripping. He put the bowl full of

vegetable, barley, and chickpea soup on the rock and balanced the slab of bread across it.

"There's some food here for you," he called out, his voice echoing up the hill. "You might want to come and get it while it's warm."

He slopped back through the wet, past the coop, pausing to check on the girls and their guest. They were in the hut, but there was a sudden frantic quacking, and Chanticleer rushed out into the run, feathers awry.

"Tried to have a go at Clotilde or Bernice, didn't you?" Will said to the bird. "That's never a good idea."

\* \* \* \*

Will hung his oilskin to dry on the back porch and came inside. The kitchen light was on, there was hot food on the table, and Devon had started in on his. Will sat down opposite him and began to eat.

After dinner, they sat out on the back porch on the couch, a damp Digger snoozing in between them, Cheshire on Devon's lap, and Will strummed quietly on his guitar.

Felicity always teased Will unmercifully about his appallingly outdated tastes in music, and when Felicity was with him, especially if she'd brought her own guitar over, he played songs that Felicity had taught him.

But tonight, there was just Devon and the garden, and Will could play whatever he liked.

It wasn't particularly warm out there; Will was wearing one of his homemade sweaters and Devon had pulled a throw from the couch around his shoulders, but Will liked it like this.

Los Angeles had weather and he liked to feel the changing seasons, the turning of the year, the spring progressing. It was bad enough working somewhere that was insulated, he didn't have to have a controlled environment at home, too.

"Play something for me?" Devon asked. Will could only see him in outline from the light that shone through the back door.

"Sure," he said. "What would you like?"

"Just whatever you'd like," Devon said, and Cheshire stood on his lap and arched his back in a long stretch, sniffed at the goatee on Devon's chin, then settled down again, curled up on his thighs.

Will didn't believe in seduction, in trying to persuade people to sleep with him. He liked the decision to be mutual, and spontaneous, so when Devon stretched an arm along the back of the couch and stroked callused fingers over Will's beard gently, he smiled back at Devon.

When Will'd finished playing, Devon lifted Cheshire off his lap and stood up. He took the guitar out of Will's arms and propped it beside the couch.

Then Devon leaned forward and kissed Will, slow and sweet, tasting of vegetable broth and the cold night air. Devon had strong hands, peasant's hands Devon called them, built for digging the soil, and one settled on Will's neck and the other one slid down his belly to find the button on the fly of his jeans.

Will spread his legs wider, and Devon knelt between them on the porch. Will draped the blanket Devon had been wrapped in over Devon's shoulders to keep him warm.



Devon eased the zip of Will's jeans undone over the ridge of his cock carefully and pulled his cock out.

"Oh my," Devon said, then his tongue was stroking over the lines of Will's tattoo, chasing the curves around the shaft. He took the head into his mouth, sucking slowly, making Will breathe hard. Will reached down and gently lifted Devon's dreadlocks out of the way to see his face, and said, "It's been a while, babe. I'm just gonna come."

Devon lifted his mouth and looked up at Will, eyes twinkling, and said, "This is just the warm-up. You can come more than once, can't you?"

"Oh yeah," Will said with conviction, then Devon slid his mouth back down Will's cock, and discussion of coming became irrelevant. Will groaned deeply, leaned his head back against the back of the couch and closed his eyes and began to thrust into Devon's mouth.

There was a moment of unbearable tension, deep inside him, then he started to come.

Devon lifted his mouth from Will's cock, sucking on his bottom lip and pressed his mouth against Will's and kissed him.

The need to breathe made Will pull back from the kiss, and he guided Devon down onto the couch and eased the borrowed sweat pants down and off. He knelt between Devon's spread legs, rubbing his beard gently over the smooth, pale skin of Devon's inner thigh, and Devon laughed, clear and bright, and it made him laugh, too.

Devon had thick, curly pubic hair, and he was hard and eager in Will's mouth, moaning when Will pressed fingertips

below his balls, making Will wonder why they'd never done this before.

Devon shivered and trembled and slid into coming, so smoothly that it took Will by surprise, then fell bonelessly back against the couch.

Will lifted his mouth off and looked up, looking for guidance. "More?" he asked.

"Fuck, I needed that," Devon said a little breathlessly. "Wanna fuck me?"

Will stood up, hanging onto his jeans with one hand and holding the other out for Devon to take.

"Let's go inside," he said.

\* \* \* \*

*I sat, belly full of the warm goodness of the gift of food, chewing on the bread, and listening to the sounds of their pleasuring across the wet garden. The sounds were familiar enough, so many humans came to the park for this purpose that I had become adjusted to these moments when people expressed their mutual desire to breed.*

*This was different, they were both so alive compared to every other person I had ever observed, this seemed real somehow, not thwarted and empty. I closed my eyes and turned my head away, avoiding the temptation to watch them, too, disturbed by the tension in my own body that the sounds brought.*

*Later, I crept around the dwelling silently and peered through the glass. They were in one of the front rooms,*

*asleep, entwined beneath layers of thick bedding, the cat and dog asleep on top of the blanket.*

*The dog lifted her muzzle and looked at me drowsily, then rested her nose down again. She and I were old friends. We spoke often.*

*I slipped back into the night and wandered through the damp trees, breathing in the scent of the wet soil, feeling the life burning through me.*

\* \* \* \*

Digger was insistent, butting Will repeatedly with her nose, so he muttered,

"Okay, okay," and disentangled himself from Devon's arms. Devon muttered in his sleep and rolled over. Will pulled on the sweater he had dropped on the floor earlier.

It was pouring with rain when he unbolted the back door and Digger charged through the doggy door. He unclasped the screen and followed her out, standing on the back porch, yawning and scratching his balls.

Digger relieved herself and then bounced up the steps to stand and shake the rain off her fur beside Will, showering him with droplets, before going back through the doggy door with a *thud*.

Will went to follow her, hopefully before she actually managed to get under the covers and into his warm patch, when something made him stop. "If you want, I'm happy for you to sleep on the porch," he said to the garden, then he went indoors again.

\* \* \* \*

Devon was snoring quietly, a gentle rasp, when Will slipped out of his bed the next morning. He pulled on jeans and a sweater and retrieved the two condoms from the nightstand.

It was first light outside. There were birds shrieking their heads off, crows and sparrows and swallows, and Digger followed Will out the back door, nosing her way around the garden just in case there was an early-morning squirrel that needed chasing.

Cheshire followed him out, too, and disappeared underneath the porch. Will bent down beside the rue plant and dug through the mulch to bury the condoms, breathing in the intensely pungent scent of the beautiful plant.

He knew people who were far more observant than he was about the sanctity of sex and never used any form of prophylaxis. He didn't have any issues with using condoms as long as they were the biodegradable ones, but he no longer jerked off, and he always returned what he could to the earth.

Digger was looking suspiciously at him from beneath the pomegranate tree, and he washed his hands before going over to her. She loathed rue, which was why it was the safest place to bury interesting things, and would have nothing to do with him until he had washed the scent off his hands.

He sat down beside her on the wet bricks and she clambered into his lap. He hummed quietly as he stroked her. It was almost time to start the day. He would put some coffee on for Devon, which was a luxury for a weekday, then make

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some toast and lunch for that day, then make sure the poultry were all okay.

When Will climbed the steps to the back porch he paused for a moment. The blanket was folded carefully on the couch, not dropped hastily on the floor as he and Devon had left it the night before. And on the blanket there was a bunch of golden poppies, pink owl's clover, and blue lupin, carefully held together by a long twist of wild grass stalks.

He took the flowers inside and found a large, glass jar in his pantry for them and put them in the middle of the table.

\* \* \* \*

New flowers arrived every morning after that, and Will began to feel he was getting the best of the arrangement. He would always share his food with anyone that asked anyway, much to the annoyance of panhandlers: they asked for money to buy food, he gave them egg sandwiches and apples.

Flowers, however, he never picked. They belonged where they were, not inside his house, but if someone else gave them to him, he enjoyed the gift.

### **Chapter 3**

The rain had cleared away by Saturday, and Will left Felicity and Lulu engaged in a serious block building venture on the back porch and went to stop Digger from barking her head off at the front screen door.

He picked up the dog and opened the front door to Doug and his son, who looked about seven. Digger wriggled and squirmed in Will's arms, but he held her tightly, at least until he was sure the child wasn't scared of her.

Doug looked lovely out of his sensible school clothes, in jeans and a casual shirt that clung to his body, and Will grinned at him and leaned forward over Digger to kiss his cheek.

Doug didn't pull away, and Will's smile broadened further.

When Will glanced down, Doug's son was studying him with huge, brown eyes.

"This is Leon," Doug said to Will, his eyes sparkling at him.

"And this is Digger," Will said, putting her back down on the boards, but holding onto her collar so Leon could pat her. She licked as much of the child as she could reach, making him giggle.

When Will let go of Digger's collar, she bounded down the hallway and through the doggy door with a resounding crash.

"Want to go see where she's gone?" Will asked Leon.

"There're some toys out there, too."

Block-building lasted all of three minutes, with two kids there now, and then Felicity said, "I'll take them up into the park, Dad."

When they'd gone, shouts echoing up the hill behind the house, Will slid his arm around Doug's shoulders and said, "Leon's a gorgeous kid."

"Felicity's lovely, too," Doug said. "Is she always this good with kids?"

"Guess so," Will said, smiling at Doug. "Want to look around the house?"

In the kitchen, Doug stood in front of the wall that was covered in pinned up photos. "Wow," he said. "Who are all these people? Friends of yours?"

Will stood behind Doug, one arm around his waist. "That's Felicity obviously, with my ex, Gina. That's Lulu, and her mom." He shifted his finger. "That's Josie, and her moms. And that's Denny, and his moms, Fitch and Maz. You'll meet them later, they were around earlier dropping off a leg of baby goat for tonight's dinner and said they'll probably call back."

Doug tipped his head to one side and said, "I'm missing something, aren't I?"

Will chuckled. "They're all my kids."

Doug stepped away from Will and looked at him skeptically. "But you've only got one child, Felicity. At least that's what I'm sure you said at work."

Will sat down on the edge of the table and grinned at Doug. "Somehow, I couldn't work out how to explain a whole slew of donor babies to the chalk brigade."

"Ah," Doug said. "I got it now. Though I thought the sperm banks never told you about any children." He looked at the photos carefully again, studying them closely.

"All of the mothers are friends of mine, or friends of friends. It's the kind of thing where once you've fathered one child, more and more people ask you," Will said.

"Why do you do it?" Doug asked curiously. "You already had Felicity."

"Felicity was the reason I agreed," Will said. "I love her so much, she is this light shining over my entire life, every moment. She is the best thing that has ever happened to me, and the biggest adventure. We're letting go of each other now, as she grows up, but for a while she was every moment for me. How could I deny a friend the opportunity to feel the same joy?"

Doug nodded slowly. "I think I understand," he said. "I guess it hadn't occurred to me to think of it that way. My sister's infertile, and she's crazy with grief at not being able to have a child, and praying desperately to be approved for adoption. If I could help her, I would."

Nodding, Will said, "Exactly. So now I have Lulu and Denny, who I see quite often. Lulu comes over most weekends to visit, like she is today. Denny is too little to stay with me for more than a few hours, he's very tightly bonded to his mommies, though I guess the new baby will change that."

"And Josie?" Doug asked. "Do you get to see her?"

"Not often," Will said. "Her mom lives in Colorado, so I usually only see her once a year."

Doug came over and stroked the petals of a poppy in the jar on the table. "What gorgeous flowers," he said, smiling gently. "So beautiful. Do they come from the park?"



"I guess so," Will said. "They're just left for me, so I'm not sure."

There was a shriek from the garden, and the littler kids came thudding in through the screen door. Leon grabbed his dad's hand and said, "Come Daddy, there're chickens and a cat and Felicity saw a rattlesnake and a a..."

Felicity came through the back door behind the children, towering over them. "We saw mountain lion prints, too," she said.

Felicity's eyes were twinkling when she ran herself a glass of water and guzzled it, and Will grinned back at her, pleased at her efforts to entertain the kids.

"Did you close the gate, Felicity?" he asked.

Felicity nodded. "Yep, and made sure it was closed properly."

"How about you all play chasey in the yard, while we do the cooking?" Will asked the grubby children.

"I wanna be 'it'," Lulu demanded, crossing her arms and tossing her corn-rowed head.

"And you shall, my little Tatar," Will said affectionately. "At least until it's time for someone else to have a go."

Lulu launched herself at Leon, and they scattered, screen door banging after them. Digger charged through the house, too, obviously called from a very important task in the front yard by the opportunity to chase small children in the back.

Cheshire didn't seem quite as happy, and hurried back in from the back porch, all of his bells jangling as he slunk off to Will's bedroom to hide under the bed.

Felicity said, "I'm going online, 'kay?"

"Sure," Will said. "Just remember to log off eventually."

Felicity slouched off, picking the phone up from the table in the hallway and pulling the cable out of the back and disappearing into her room, closing the door solidly behind herself. She'd be there, grumping silently about the speed of dial-up, until Will went and got her for dinner.

There were distant sounds of the kids crashing around the garden and Digger barking, and Will and Doug spent a peaceful hour in the kitchen, inserting garlic cloves into the leg of goat and peeling potatoes and pumpkins and apples. They talked about work, and about not-work, about their families, all while tending to scraped knees and wounded prides.

\* \* \* \*

While Doug was making the pastry for the pie, lifting the butter up between his fingers and rubbing the flour into it and letting it drop, Will stood behind him and cautiously slid an arm around Doug's waist. "I'm not misreading this, am I?" he asked.

Doug shook his head, and Will heard him swallow nervously.

"Just relax," Will said, and he kissed Doug's neck slowly and deliberately. Doug was responsive, leaning back against him and making a sighing sound, and when Will slid his other arm around Doug's waist and hugged, the man was solid and warm.

Doug turned around in his arms, holding floury hands up behind Will's head, and they kissed.

Devon had been lean and compact to touch, toned by hours working in the garden every day, skin weathered by being out in the open year round. Doug, on the other hand, was solid and smooth to touch.

Felicity stomped through the kitchen on her way to the bathroom, and Will pulled back from Doug reluctantly. "Guess we're supposed to be cooking," he said, licking his lips slowly.

Doug opened his eyes slowly. "Yeah," he said a little breathlessly, not disentangling his hands.

"You alright?" Will asked, as Doug tried to focus his dark eyes.

"Oh yeah," he whispered. "I can't remember the last time someone kissed me like that."

The back screen door thudded and Lulu hurtled into the kitchen and clung onto Will's jeans, sobbing, "It's my turn! It's my turn!"

Leon appeared a moment later, a tennis ball dripping dog slobber held over his head, Digger leaping ineffectually at the ball.

"Out of the kitchen," Will said, letting go of Doug and opening the screen door for the kids. "Sort it out yourselves, just remember that I know Lulu is spoiled and shouldn't get her own way all the time."

The two kids traipsed out again, covered in mud, scratched by the cycads, Leon still in triumphant possession of the ball, Digger still endlessly hopeful of retrieving it again. Will let the screen door bang behind them.

"My God, they're filthy," Doug said, his hands back in the pastry bowl, though he still looked a little flustered. "I can't remember the last time I saw Leon that dirty."

"They didn't actually look that bad to me, but I'll go light the hot water system anyway," Will said. "We can soak both of them before dinner."

\* \* \* \*

The smell of roasted goat filled the house, pumpkin steamed in bowls on the table, covered in melted butter; and mashed potato was ladled onto plates.

The crowd for dinner had increased to include Devon, who was there to collect Chanticleer from his procreative visit, and Maz, Fitch and Denny. Felicity dragged every chair in the house into the kitchen, and the scrubbed and still damp children were lined up down one side of the table, jostling elbows.

There was a small loaf of bread on the table, made that afternoon, and Will picked it up and broke a piece off and put the chunk on his plate, then passed the loaf to his right, to Felicity. Silence fell around the table, and Will could see Doug's puzzlement. Felicity broke her piece off the loaf and handed it to Lulu. When Lulu passed the loaf to Leon, he said, "Dad?"

Lulu took the loaf back, wrenched a piece off for him, and leaned across to hand the bread to Maz.

When the loaf had made the round of the table, back to Will, there was only a crust left, and Doug said, "Would it be an intrusion for me to say Grace?"

Will caught sight of Devon's eyebrow climbing fast, but he just nodded to Doug.

"Please do," he said.

Doug and Leon both bowed their heads and closed their eyes, and Doug said, "For what we are about to eat, may the Lord make us truly grateful."

Will kicked Felicity under the table to stop her from rolling her eyes, and regretted that Devon was too far over to kick, too. Felicity, however, he could do something about, and he made a mental note to take his oldest daughter aside and lecture her about how, even though Christianity was a cultural hegemony, she was not allowed to be rude about people who expressed their faith in a personal context. Tolerance cut both ways.

Bowls passed around the table, and Will served the kids that were within his reach. Felicity did a creditable job of dismembering the goat leg, and the kitchen was full of the smell of roast meat and garlic, fresh baked bread, and the apple pies that were cooking in the oven. The windows misted up with condensation, and it was hard to hear any individual person over the chatter of the kids, and Will thought of the homeless person, outside in the night, hopefully eating the plate of food Will had taken out before they sat down to dinner.

The flowers were on the sideboard, amidst the clutter of Will's life, their colors filling the kitchen, and when Will looked back at Doug, Doug's eyes were shining bright in the light of the bulb hanging from the cord over the table.

## **Chapter 4**

Digger was in doggy heaven, sitting on the paving where the light from the back porch spilled out onto the yard, one of the bones from the roast goat held securely between her paws as she chewed on the knuckle. Cheshire had looked disdainfully at the chunk of roast goat in his bowl, but three minutes later Will had found him ensconced on Will's bed, chewing on the meat industriously.

Maz and Fitch took a fretful Denny home to bed; Devon had left to ride the ten miles to his place with Chanticleer in a box on the back of his bike. Lulu's moms had picked her up, and the kitchen was now comparatively quiet.

Doug and Felicity washed the mountain of dishes, after Doug had recovered from his disbelief that anyone could actually wash dishes with a bar of regular soap, while Will sat on the back porch with Leon and sang kids' songs.

When he'd finished, Doug crouched down beside them and said, "I need to take Leon home now."

Leon's eyelids were starting to droop when Will looked at him. Doug looked apologetic when Will smiled back at him.

"I've got a spare bedroom here," Will said. "You're welcome to tuck Leon in if you'd like to stay a little longer."

Doug's hand was warm on Will's knee when he spread it across the denim and squeezed.

"I'd like that."

Will held the screen door open so Doug could carry the drowsy child through the house.

He turned the light on in an almost empty room with two single beds made up in it, and the toy box in the corner. Doug tucked Leon into one of the beds and Leon curled up, thumb in his mouth, his eyes closing already.

In the hall, Will slid an arm around Doug's neck, pulling him close enough to kiss. This time, with no children interrupting, Will let himself touch Doug, hand across his back, sliding down to his ass, pulling him closer. There was a delicious moment of contact, of thighs brushing, and they both moaned.

Leon called out, "Daaaad!" and Doug pulled back reluctantly.

"I'll go settle him," Doug said.

Felicity had her steel six-string out, sitting on one of the kitchen chairs on the back porch, and Will dragged another chair out and went and picked up his guitar again.

This was another part of his life that he was deeply grateful for. Felicity chose to hang around on most weekends, where there was no TV and no broadband, chose to sit on Will's back porch and jam, instead of doing whatever it was that her friends were doing.

She was picking the opening notes of *Matty Groves*, one of Will's favorite songs, while Will quickly re-tuned his strings. Doug watched wide-eyed from the couch, Will nodded, and Felicity went back to the beginning of the song and started again.

Will didn't pick particularly well, his hands were too rough from working, but Felicity had real musical ability and an

educated ear, so Will stuck to the chords when Felicity was there, leaving the agile work to her.

Doug's smile was getting wider and wider, until he was beaming.

If Will was playing by himself, he would have stopped at the last verse, but Felicity was plowing on into the instrumental portion, and Will let her go. There was no point in trying to keep up with her and it was a joy to listen to her play.

"My turn to choose," Felicity said, when she'd finished.

This was their compromise. They alternated between Will's deep-seated adoration for bad seventies music and Felicity's enthusiasm for anything from the current century that could be made playable. Felicity was far too keen on songs of misery for Will's liking.

After the next song, Felicity stood up and stretched, then retrieved three beers from the fridge. Doug sputtered at the first mouthful of Will's home brew, and both Will and Felicity laughed.

"Oh yeah," Felicity said. "Dad's beer's got attitude."

"You're not kidding," Doug said, wiping at his watering eyes. "What has it got in it?"

"Nothing special, though it is made with wheat, not hops," Will said. "You wait until the mead is ready to be cracked. The last batch was an absolute killer, made with honey from Maz and Fitch's place. We used water from their property, too, rather than LA faucet water."

Felicity took a long pull from her bottle, then set it on the ground. "It's better straight from the fridge," she said. "That



way the cold anesthetizes your taste buds." She adjusted her D string slightly and looked at Will. "Trade you?"

Will looked out across the garden and wondered if somewhere down the back of his block there was a homeless person sitting in a dark corner, hopefully with a belly full of good food. Will had so much, and so many people had so little, and he had done nothing to deserve the good fortune that given him friends and family and a place in the world.

\* \* \* \*

Will stopped playing, and Felicity repeated the last few bars, the notes silvery on her steel six-string, unbearably poignant.

Doug was silent, his eyes huge, and Felicity said, "That was the last song, I'm going to bed."

She stood up and said, "Night, Dad. Night, Doug," and the screen door thudded gently behind her.

Will put his guitar down and stood up, too, switching off the porch light. There was still light streaming through the screen door from the kitchen, and he sat down beside Doug on the couch.

"Come to bed with me?" he asked, and he lifted Doug's hand and kissed the palm.

In his room, with the door closed and the curtains drawn, Will lit a candle and turned off the overhead light. Doug's face was in shadow, but his mouth was warm and open when they kissed. Doug pulled back a little and unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off.

"It's been a long time..." Doug began, then trailed off, so tentative that Will touched his chin gently.

"I'd worked that out," Will said. "We can take it slow."

Doug was broad-chested and smooth-skinned, and Will unbuttoned his own shirt quickly and dropped it on the floor. Doug's hands slid across his chest, crinkling the hair, curling over his biceps. "You've got tattoos," Doug said.

He guided Doug's hand over his left bicep. "That's the sun." He pressed his fingertips against his right forearm. "That's a heart, for Felicity."

He took Doug's hand and slid it into the waistband of his faded jeans. "That's the earth."

Doug's hand was warm against Will's belly and his eyes were on Will's as he slid his hand in further, finding the line where Will's fine belly hair became coarse and thick.

"There's another tattoo," Will said, and he unzipped his jeans and pushed them down.

"Where?" Doug asked, and Will kissed him and Doug's hand curled around Will's cock.

"There," he whispered against Doug's lips, and Doug looked down.

Doug's eyes widened and his mouth was round as he said, "Oh," without any sound coming out. Doug touched him, far more tentatively this time, fingers tracing the stylized ivy vine that wound around Will's cock, from the base up the shaft.

"That's amazing," he finally said.

Will trailed his fingers over the swell of Doug's chest, relishing the feel of the skin that smooth.

Doug unzipped his jeans and peeled them off, keeping his back turned to Will, then clambered onto the bed quickly, covering his body with the bedding. Will's sheets were linen, cream now with age, worn thin and soft, and Doug's skin was like chocolate against them as Will settled beside him. He licked Doug's shoulder, just to be sure he wasn't actually made of Ghirardelli intense dark chocolate.

"No hurry," Will said, and he pulled the bedding up over both of them. "Roll onto your side." Will guided Doug over, then settled behind Doug, making sure his cock didn't brush against Doug's back, no matter how tempted he was. He propped himself up on one elbow and kissed Doug's shoulder and let his fingers slowly explore Doug's back, tracing the roll of flesh above Doug's waist, sliding over the round curves of Doug's shoulder, running down the arm.

He spread his hand across the roundness of Doug's belly, so soft and ample, and his fingers traced across the skin, finding muscles that were easier to feel than to see.

His hand curled around the softness of Doug's hip and he nuzzled Doug's neck, then very cautiously pressed the head of his cock against the pillow of Doug's ass, and Doug gulped suddenly.

Will rolled Doug onto his back, and he didn't resist. "What is it?" Will whispered.

"No one's touched me for so long..."

Will kissed Doug and whispered, "Then let me..."

He slid down the bed a little and indulged himself and began to explore Doug's chest with his mouth and hand,

finally taking a nipple into his mouth and sliding his hand down Doug's belly.

Doug was hard; long, slender cock lying across his belly, and he groaned when Will's fingers curled around the length. His response matched the rest of him, full and substantial and slow, and when Will lowered his mouth to Doug's cock, using lips, tongue and beard gently, Doug let out a sigh of deep relief.

Later, when he lifted his mouth again and looked up, Doug's neck was arched, exposing the long beauty of his throat, and he was trembling on the edge of coming.

"Oh, God," Doug groaned.

There were condoms under the pillow, and lube, and Will whispered, "Hang on, just for a moment."

The latex rolled smoothly down Doug's cock, and Doug's head was turned to one side, tendons standing out in his neck, while Will smoothed lube over the latex.

Doug's hands clenched the sheet underneath him when Will clambered over and settled his weight on his hands and knees, then groped behind himself to find Doug's cock.

"Stay still," Will said, and he lowered himself backward onto Doug's cock, gritting his teeth through the burn of the slide.

Doug stayed still, tension clenching his mouth and making him arch his back a little, then Will rocked forward, making the bed creak, and found a rhythm that worked for both of them.

Doug stretched his arms above his head, clutching at the wall behind him, and Will could feel him coming, Doug's pleasure rolling through his body and through Will's, too.

There was joy in the giving, and more joy in the taking, and Will didn't try and hold back. He hadn't come for four days, and that was long enough to make him ache with need, and there was always the rest of the night.

Afterwards, when Doug was curled up beside Will, as Will stroked his back, and Digger and Cheshire had settled in their usual places, Doug said, "I have a million questions."

Will kissed his forehead. "Let me guess, you want to ask about the tattoo."

"Yeah," Doug said. "Why? And why that pattern?"

Will chuckled. "Why? Damned if I can actually remember. Probably because it seemed like a good idea at the time. I always feel like I should apologize for it now. My ex said, and I quote her: 'It's always all about the cock, isn't it?' but I think she was just goading me."

Doug nuzzled his beard and said, "Okay, that's the why."

"As to the design, I'm a bit clearer about that. I wanted a symbol of life. I thought about an ankh for a while, but aesthetically it's not as pleasing as something that wraps around the shaft. I could have gone Celtic or tribal, but I don't identify as particularly Celtic or tribal. However, I've always been a gardener. Next question?"

"How come you've got this house? I earn the same amount as you do, and it's all I can do to pay rent on my apartment. Whether you're renting or buying, it's gotta cost a fortune to live here."

"That bit is kind of complicated," Will said, kissing the tip of Doug's nose. "I was once married to this mad woman called Gina. She worked for a dot com start up company, back before the stock market crash. Made a stack of money. She could have frittered it away, but we decided the best thing we could do to provide for Felicity was to buy a piece of real estate. This place looked perfect, it is perfect."

"Didn't you have to sell it when you divorced?" Doug asked. "I had to sell my car for the settlement in my divorce."

Doug's hand was smooth and his nails were even when Will kissed a fingertip. "It wasn't an ordinary separation," Will said. "We both lived here for a year after we split, while we tried to work out what to do. I couldn't afford to buy Gina out, she didn't want to keep the house herself. We wound up deciding that we would continue to co-own the property, and that she and I would buy another house for her to live in. I pay half the mortgage there, and own half the property."

"That works?" Doug asked. "Because I don't think I could co-own a pizza with my ex, never mind two houses."

Will shrugged. "Seems to. We never have conflict over it. Later this year, when Felicity goes to college, we're going to take out a mortgage on this place, just a small one, to pay her fees."

"I can't even begin to imagine how I'll afford college for Leon. He'll have to get a scholarship, or go to a community college like I did," Doug said, draping an arm across Will's chest and yawning sleepily.

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Digger tromped across the bed, clambering over their legs to nudge Will with her nose. "Go to sleep, Digger needs a garden visit before she settles for the night."

Will got up and pulled on his jeans, just in case Leon was wandering around, and followed Digger through the house.

He sat on the couch on the porch and Digger trotted off into the darkness, making happy, wuffling noises. There was someone standing under the sycamores, bending over to pat Digger.

\* \* \* \*

*The dog was glad to see me, as always, and the man was there, beside his house. I could see him clearly, he looked sleep-rumpled and content again. I thought for a moment of trying to tell him how wonderful his music was, of how I had felt that night, listening to the love in their voices, but he might have asked who I was, and I wasn't sure I could explain to him.*

*He lifted a hand to me in greeting, and I returned the gesture.*

\* \* \* \*

It was vaguely reassuring to actually see the mystery person at last, Will had been beginning to suspect that his imagination had invented someone, fueled by too much music and happiness. He'd even wondered if the non-existent homeless person had been a message from his subconscious not to be too complacent. But no, there was a real person. He could ignore his spurious attempts at self-analysis and go

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back to the arrangement he had with his imagination: he put up with fairies in the garden without too many questions, and it let him sleep easy at night.



## **Chapter 5**

It was first light when Will opened the back door to let Digger out, and everyone else was still asleep. He'd kind of expected Leon to be up, but the small room was still silent and no one moved when he peeked around the door.

It was too early for any of the girls except Clotilde and Bernice to be awake, so he let the two ducks out of the coop. They'd spend the whole day foraging through the beds, he could leave them loose all day if he was home.

He buried the condoms and put the kettle on for himself, then set a batch of yeast to begin to multiply in warm water. The girls were all broody when he went to check on them, and he didn't take any of their eggs. Past experience had taught him that Lucille was a poor mother, so when she was distracted by the weeds he tossed into the coop, he took the opportunity to swap a couple of the eggs she had laid to Hilda's nest, where the chicks would stand a better chance.

Will crouched down and examined the kale seedlings he'd planted out the week before. They were four inches tall now, and he hadn't lost any of them. Just like the rest of the garden, they were thriving. Will wasn't sure why, but his garden was going crazy. There was new growth on everything. The basil plants were making a claim to have their status revised to 'tree.' He was going to have to spend time harvesting the tomatoes then cooking them for the freezer.

Everything was ready to be picked: peas; French, runner and broad beans; early corn. Then there were the fodder

crops. He decided it must have been the drenching rain at the beginning of the week, the ground was still moist and loamy under his toes. This was good growing weather.

But, before tackling the horticultural explosion, he needed to make some more bread; there was only half a loaf left from the day before.

Leon was the first person to wake up and he and Will sat on the back step in companionable silence eating yesterday's bread with honey. Then Will left Leon industriously feeding all the snails he could find in the garden to Bernice and Clotilde.

He gave the double batch of bread its long knead and put the loaf tins on top of the bookshelf, then checked on Leon, who was sprawled face down across some straggling chamomile, a toy truck in his hands, talking to himself. Will left him there.

Will picked a bucket of tomatoes and an armful of basil, put them both in the laundry trough, taking a moment to remove the largest of the snails before they got lost in his piles of washing. By then the bread had risen, bulging over the tops of the pans, ready for the oven.

\* \* \* \*

Leon was helping Will to move the gray water pipes when a yawning and rumpled Doug appeared at the back screen door and Leon dropped the lengths of reticulation piping and threw himself at his father, chattering at the top of his voice.

"All the water from the bath ... Ducks love snails, Daddy ... And we can take some of the beans ... Had bread and honey ... Cups of tea..."

Doug picked up Leon and put him on his hip. "Really?" Doug said, and he smiled at Will as Will walked toward him, covered in mud just like Leon.

"Like some coffee?" Will said, leaning across and kissing Doug's cheek.

"Desperately," Doug said.

In the kitchen, Will evicted Digger and her bone, now chewed mostly clean, out onto the back porch and put the coffee on the stove to drip. He pulled the loaves out of the oven and set them to cool, then made them both coffee.

Doug shooed Leon back outside and took Will's hand when Will sat at the table beside him "Last night was amazing," he said. "I haven't woken up feeling so good in years."

Will rubbed at his beard with his free hand. He hadn't bothered washing yet, not with a day's work in the garden ahead of him, and he could still smell Doug clearly. "Good," he said, smiling at Doug. "I had a wonderful time too."

Doug bit at his lip for a moment, and Will said. "What is it?"

"Um, I got the impression that you share your bed quite often."

"Never lightly, or with a stranger, or without forethought," Will said. "But, yeah, I guess I do. Is this a problem?"

Doug shook his head. "I don't think so. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'd like to do this again, and I just wanted to know how things were."

"I understand," Will said, rubbing his thumb over Doug's knuckles. "I'd like to do this again, too, but I've been married, and once was enough for this lifetime."

Doug smiled, creasing his cheeks, displaying beautiful teeth. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Will smiled, too. "Good."

\* \* \* \*

Doug left mid-morning, taking Leon home to be scrubbed, carrying a cardboard box of veggies and bread. Cheshire appeared from wherever he had been hiding and Will gave him a slice of bread as an apology.

It was blissfully quiet in the garden. Felicity was either asleep or online, or possibly both. Digger was snoozing in the shade under the pomegranate tree. Cheshire was sitting on the couch, hiccupping quietly from too much bread.

Will made himself a roast goat sandwich with cauliflower pickle and lettuce, and rolled a joint. He sat on the back porch on the couch, beside Cheshire, guitar on his lap, and lit the joint.

He hummed around the joint and he moved his left hand up the neck of the guitar, running through the chords in his mind.

"Will!" a voice called out from the fence and Will looked up to see Dave from next door leaning over the fence.

Will put his guitar down and wandered over to the fence and held the joint out for Dave.

"Thanks, pal," Dave said, and he took a long drag. "God, I smelled you light up."

"It's only leaf. It's not high grade, but I have a certain nostalgic preference for the old style joint."

"Still smelled damn fine," Dave said. "I envy you your lifestyle, you know. It's eleven on a Sunday morning, you're playing your guitar and toking."

Will took back what was left of the joint. "I earn 45 grand a year," he said. "That's a crappy twenty bucks an hour. Quit your fancy job, put in a few plants, and join me."

"Don't need to," Dave said. "I just lean over the fence and smoke yours. Liz wanted to talk to you about something deep and meaningful to do with the garden, fuck if I can remember what though."

"I'm home all day," Will said, and the sliding glass door onto Dave's deck slid open.

Liz looked out and said, "Hurry, babe, we're due at the Petersons' at eleven. And dammit, you're supposed to be driving, not smoking." She waved and called out, "Hi, Will."

Will waved back at her and she disappeared back inside. Dave shrugged and followed her in.

\* \* \* \*

Felicity appeared some time later, while Will was putting the tomatoes he had picked and washed on the stove to cook down to a pulp.

"Hey," Felicity said, lifting the lid on the coffee pot and sniffing. "How old is this?"

"Three, four hours," Will said, handing Felicity a clean mug from the drainer.

Felicity sat down at the table, coffee and a hunk of fresh bread in front of her, and opened her laptop. "Talk to me

about Hemingway and Steinbeck," she said. "And talk slowly enough I can take notes."

"What about Hemingway and Steinbeck?" Will said, sitting down at the table, too, chunk of cheese in his hand.

"Um, narrative technique, I think."

Felicity looked up expectantly at Will, who shrugged. "Third person, past tense, nothing fancy there."

Felicity's fingers clattered on the keyboard. "And?" she asked. "What about something else then?"

"Remind me to set this essay for one of my classes," Will said. "Okay, both of them were fond of autobiography, fictionalized or otherwise. That's a good place to start. You sit there and bash *Travels with Charley* against *Fiesta* for half an hour, I have to go commit laundry."

For a long time, Will had washed by hand, until Gina had bequeathed him the white goods relics of their marriage the year before, which had included an elderly and arthritic washing machine. It worked, after a fashion, with a screwdriver jammed into the dial, and sometimes it needed to be manually emptied of water, but when faced with a mountain of laundry, it looked good.

Will washed sheets: his own, the set from the kids' room, and Felicity's. He washed work clothes; five shirts, three pairs of pants. Socks and underwear and towels. Kitchen cloths, tea towels, sweaters, jeans.

The clothesline was completely full when he was done, as were the lines of twine strung across the back porch, and Will had run out of clothespins, not that he owned many of them anyway.

When he checked on the tomatoes in the vat on the stove, Felicity was pounding away at her keyboard, and Will left her to it.

\* \* \* \*

The tagasaste trees he was growing on the utility strip were thriving along with everything else, and Will hauled his wheelbarrow out onto the sidewalk and pruned them hard. He was trialing the plants for Maz and Fitch, just to see if the green manure return warranted the containment problems, and all he'd really established so far was that tagasaste grew like crazy, and that chickens loved it.

He tossed his pruning shears onto the heaped wheelbarrow and looked up as Liz walked toward him. Digger and the idiot malamute were off instantly, down the sidewalk, and Will whistled for Digger. She wouldn't come back immediately, but she would come back.

"Sorry," Liz said. "Thought I'd left Merlin shut indoors."

"They'll be back," Will said. Digger had the brains to stay off the road, though he couldn't vouch for Merlin. "Dave said you wanted to talk to me about gardening?"

Liz was ogling him, and Will wished he'd remembered to put a t-shirt on before coming out to trim the trees. "Yeah," she said, smiling with painfully white teeth. "I wanted to ask what these trees were. I thought I might put some on our utility strip, too."

"They're tagasastes," Will said. "Tree lucerne. They're grown as fodder crops usually, specifically on poor soils in dry climates. I have no idea how big they'll get on your utility

strip though, since you have reticulation. They might get beyond twelve feet."

"They're lovely," she said, stroking the first sprays of yellow flowers on the nearest tree. "Could you get us some?"

"I've got some in pots out the back," Will said. "You can have them."

"Thanks," Liz said. "I'll get Dave to put them in." She waved at the car that pulled up beside them, roll of wire mesh strapped to the top of it. "Hi Gina," she called, and she wandered off, whistling for Merlin.

Gina got out of her car and dodged the melon vines growing on the verge. "You been teasing Liz again?" she said with a grin, and Will kissed her cheek.

"Would I do that?" he said. "Felicity's inside doing her essay."

"Good," Gina said, and she handed her keys to Will. "I got everything that was on your list. You unload it all while I go harass Felicity."

The roll of chicken wire went down the side of the house, ready to make an extra run for the pullets in a few weeks. There was a large sack of ground wheat, and a smaller one of oats, for the girls. There was sunflower meal for them, too. Will put the sacks on the back porch and went inside and found his wallet. "How much was it all?" he asked Gina, who was sniffing the pan of tomatoes simmering on the stove.

\* \* \* \*

It was with great relief that Will sunk into a steaming bath. It'd been a long day, and an energetic night before it, and his



back was complaining. He took a long pull on his beer and propped his feet on the faucets and slid down further under the water. He was going to stay there a long time, until the water went cold, he went wrinkly, and the beer was gone.

Will wrapped a towel around his waist and padded across the kitchen floor, dripping water, and opened the screen door. It was a glorious dusk; dove gray, mauve, and palest blue, and it needed to be admired.

Someone dressed in rags was sitting on his couch, knees pulled up under their chin, engrossed in the permaculture book Will had been reading earlier with some derision. Digger was sitting beside the person, her head resting on their feet, and she looked up at Will and thumped her tail in greeting.

The stranger looked up at Will, too, wild, black hair, face of an angel, the sweetest smile.

"Hello," Will said. "It's good to meet you at last."

"Do you have to read this to know how to make plants grow?" the stranger asked, and his voice was male.

"No," Will said. "But I like to laugh at other people who think you do. Would you like some tea?"

The young man, and he was young, smooth-faced and supple, unfolded himself from the couch and put the book down. He stood as tall as Will, discounting the idea he was still a child. "What's tea?" he asked.

"Herbs steeped in hot water," Will said. "It tastes good. You probably want some food, too."

"I like your food," the man said. "It is the gift that nourishes me, not the substance."

"When I give, I give myself," Will said, quoting Whitman.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

"You do understand," the young man said approvingly. He lounged against the support pillar of the porch, making the structure creak alarmingly, and Will saw that even though the man's clothes hung in tatters from his thin body, he was clean underneath.

"I'm Will, what's your name?" Will asked, and he held the screen door open for the man.

"Fand," the man said, and he froze in the doorway. "Why is there rue over your door?" he asked, stepping back cautiously.

"I have a superstitious friend who believes that it keeps unwelcome spirits out," Will explained, wondering how the hell Fand could have known it was there. He must have smelled it. "Unless you're a werewolf, I don't think it's an issue. C'mon in."

Fand laughed, sudden and bright, and Will found himself intrigued. Whoever he was, wherever he had come from, he was sharp.

"There're no wolves in the park," he said, stepping into Will's kitchen. "Only the pretend one living next door."

## Chapter 6

*The water was warm! I floated in the warm water after sudsing myself thoroughly. Will's soap was completely different from the bright pink liquid in the dispensers in the park toilets. It was hard at first, then became delightfully slippery in the water. It felt like soapwort to use, and smelled like it, too.*

*There was a brush for my mouth as well, with fizzy powder to dunk it in, and a comb for my hair. And waiting, beside the sink, were new clothes for me. Will had shown me which way around the clothes went: strings at the front of the pants, picture at the front of the shirt.*

*I wanted to tell him that I didn't need any of this, that I bathed in the stream every day, that I only wore clothes because the park guardians wanted me to, but he had pressed the clothes into my hands, and I had taken the gift.*

\* \* \* \*

Will waited until Fand was splashing loudly in the bathroom, talking to himself and laughing delightedly, and then he dragged the phone into his bedroom, closed the door, and dialed Lulu's home.

Lulu answered, squealing excitedly at a phone call from Will, and it took him a couple of minutes to persuade her to go and get Dianne.

"What's up?" Dianne asked, and Will could hear her shooing Lulu away.

"Talk to me, quickly, about homelessness," Will said.

"Ah, no wonder I love you," Dianne said. "Not only did you father our child, you ask about my thesis. What did you want to know? I suspect it's not a statistical analysis of the relationship between indigence and deinstitutionalization you're after, really."

Will chuckled. "Not today. I just want to know what a homeless person needs the most urgently, and exactly how socially dysfunctional they are likely to be."

"Oh honey, just give them as much food as they can carry," Dianne said. "If you can persuade them to see a doctor or a social worker, I can give you some numbers to call."

"He actually looks quite healthy," Will said. "Kinda skinny, that's all. He, um, sometimes doesn't make as much sense as he might."

"There are multiple causes for that," Dianne said. "First up, you're pretty weird yourself, hon, so he might actually just be terminally socialized. If he grew up watching Baywatch and TV evangelists, you two might as well be from different planets."

"He knows about rue," Will said. "And I think he thinks permaculture is crap."

"Of course, if there's an anti-permaculture homeless person, they'd find you," Dianne said, laughing. "No, seriously, he almost certainly has some psychiatric problems. Disenfranchisement and alienation quite reasonably make people feel disconnected and rejected, excluded from the norms of society. If he lives a solitary life, rather than being part of a homeless pack or clan, he's probably got a

behavioral problem from the loneliness. He's probably sleep-deprived, too. Then there's past and present substance abuse. Don't expect him to make sense."

"Okay," Will said. "What can I do?"

"Feed him, worm him, delouse him," Dianne said. "And be careful, Will, for a change."

There wasn't much that Will could see he needed to be careful about. Felicity had taken her laptop home with her, there'd been a fair bit of money in Will's wallet, but that had all gone to Gina to pay for the stuff she'd brought over. Apart from that, he owned some clothes, an ancient guitar, too many books, and some food. Will couldn't see Fand wandering off with an armful of books to sell them, and if he turned up anywhere with a twenty year old fridge and chest freezer, the pawn shop would laugh at him.

Fand appeared from the bathroom eventually, dressed in Will's cast-offs, which sagged on him, his hair wet, hanging in tendrils down his back and dripping water onto his newly acquired sweater. Will put a mug of tea on table and said, "Would you like to sit down?"

Fand nodded and sat down carefully, as though he wasn't used to chairs that moved, and reached across the table to stroke the petals of the flowers in the vase. When Will put a mug and a plate of sandwiches in front of Fand, he didn't seem to notice, his attention was so firmly fixed on the flowers.

"Thank you for leaving them for me," Will said, when Fand finally looked up at him. "Do you want some honey in your tea?"

Fand didn't reply and looked confused, so Will added two teaspoons of honey to the mug on the grounds that Fand could do with the energy, then he sat down at the table, too, and took a sandwich for himself.

"Are these for me, too?" Fand asked, and Will nodded.

Fand ate as though he was starving, which he probably was, wolfing down the roast goat, tomato, and egg sandwiches as fast as he could, clearing the plate, and it reminded Will of how painfully privileged he was. Over a billion people on the planet lived on less than a dollar a day, struggling for clean water and enough calories to keep themselves alive, never mind contraception and healthcare. He was educated, employed, and ridiculously well cared for. He had several children, all of them wanted, all of them born into lives of privilege and advantage, too...

When Will looked up, Fand was lifting his mug of tea to his mouth and sipping it, eyes wide.

"Honey, of course" he said in between sips. "One of the daisy family, not one I know. Dandelions; and chicory. And I think the honey is from bees that harvest the sage bush."

Will stared at Fand; he had not suspected that a connoisseur of honey had been sleeping on his back porch. "The daisy is chamomile, *Matricaria chamomilla*, and the honey is from friends' hives, their property is surrounded by sage bushes. Are you a horticulturist? A gardener?"

"No," Fand said. "Not like you are a gardener. I just know the plants that grow in the park, and the bees and the animals and the soil. Where do you go during the day when you are not here? Do you have another garden you care for?"

"No," Will said, wondering about Fand's life yet again. "I teach in a school, literature and English and just about anything else they ask me to."

"Why?" Fand asked, and Will had a sudden flashback to Felicity at four. Will had never been certain whether Felicity was insatiably curious, or merely determined to torment her parents with her persistent demands for explanations.

"Because I want to earn money to be able to live as I wish," Will said. "And because the work is rewarding at times. Of course, that's possibly an incredibly tactless thing to say to someone who is homeless."

Fand frowned, furrowing his brow for a moment. "You think I'm homeless?" he asked. "I'm not, I live in the park the way you live here."

They stared at each other for a moment, and Will could just about hear the worldviews colliding.

"Where are you from?" Will asked.

"I'm from the park," Fand said, and he sounded like Will did when he was explaining to Denny why Denny shouldn't suck Cheshire's tail. "I already told you." It was Will's turn to frown in thought. He knew, at least at an intellectual level, that there were second generation homeless people who had never known the basics of urbanized life, but Fand was reasonably articulate if a little incoherent and Will had assumed that he was recently homeless. "Have you ever lived anywhere other than the park?" Will asked, trying again.

"How could I live anywhere else?" Fand asked, looking confused.

Crashcrunch went the worldviews again. Will let go of the subject and said, "I'll get you some more food."

Fand followed him curiously into the storeroom that Will used as a pantry. It had been a bedroom originally, but he and Gina had lined one wall with open shelves. There were sacks of organic flour and corn against the other wall and boxes of empty glass jars, waiting for Will to make pickles and jams during the summer break. His home brew kit was there, too, on a table, and under the table were racks of mead, still fermenting.

Fand prowled around the room, opening jars, sniffing the contents, then dropped to his knees in front of the wooden box of envelopes that held the seed from Will's garden. There were sequoia cones in there, too, mementos of the trips he'd made to the forest with Maz and Fitch.

"Toos-pung-ish? Tall tree?" Fand asked, and Will nodded, surprised that Fand knew the Tubututul word for sequoia, even more surprised that the cone had matured since the last time Will had handled it, its cone beginning to open in preparation for releasing the seeds

Squatting down beside him, Will said, "Yes, that's a sequoia cone. Do you need it?"

When Fand turned to face Will, his eyes were huge and he was almost trembling with what looked like longing.

"You can have it," Will said, "if it's that important to you."

He handed the cone to Fand and said, "Can you see anything else you need?" He felt like his pantry was a temple to conspicuous consumption in the face of Fand's destitution,



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and he wondered what Fand would make of Liz and Dave's palace of consumerism next door.

"I can't ask for anything," Fand said, clinging onto the cone.

It sounded to Will like this was something other than a statement of Fand's self-worth, more than a refusal to accept charity. It actually sounded like a proscription.

Will nodded and went out into the kitchen again. He filled a brown paper bag with slices of bread, the last of his cheese and paper twists of sultanas and dates. He added a slab of dried apple, honey, and oats slice from the freezer then held the bag out to Fand.

"If you come back, I'll give you more, you don't have to ask," Will said. "More seeds, too."

When Will sat down on the couch on the back porch and picked up his guitar, Fand didn't leave as Will expected. Instead, the boy sat on the boards of the porch, leaning back against the pillar, his face mostly hidden in shadow, his bag of food beside him, the sequoia cone still held in his hands. Digger hopped up onto the couch, shuffling as close to Will as she could with the guitar in the way. Cheshire clambered up onto Fand's lap and Will could see his fingers were ruffling behind Chesh's ears.

Will never knew what songs people wanted to listen to, so unless the person was someone like Felicity or Gina and shouted him down, he just played whatever appealed to him. This time, however, he made himself consider his choice of songs a little closer. No songs about wanting to go home, not that night.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Fand was silent when Will finished, so still that Will couldn't even hear him breathing, so Will just moved on to the next song, smiling to himself at the tiny lights in the garden.

\* \* \* \*

Fand slipped away sometime during the early evening; Will didn't see him go, didn't actually know Fand had gone until Cheshire jumped onto the back of the couch and head-butted Will at the end of the song, making him look up.

There was a wave of phosphorescence down the brick path between the beds, leading down to the back gate, and Will just caught the click of the gate closing. "One last song, my spoiled, feline friend, before I go do some work," Will told Cheshire.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, while stacking the finished grading into his backpack, Will glanced at the flowers to check they had enough water. The water in the jar was cloudy, so Will carried the jar and flowers over to the sink to change the water.

What he found when he tipped the water out made him stare. It wasn't algae that had been clouding the water, it was a mass of fibrous roots. Each and every one of the flowers had struck, even the poppies. He carried the clump of flowers and roots out to the back yard and knelt down beside his herb bed. The shoots and roots pulled apart easily, and he set each flower into the bed, firming the soil down around it and then watering the new plants in amongst the calendula and marigolds.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

His knees were muddy when he'd finished, and he brushed at them ineffectually. It was just another Monday, he had grubby knees already, and it was going to be a good day.

## **Chapter 7**

How people behaved after you'd slept with them was an issue, but Doug was just the same as always: a little shy perhaps, but friendly. There wasn't really time before school for anything other than a quick 'hello', recess was a blur of noise and Xeroxing, it wasn't until lunch time, while Will ate a sandwich with one hand, trying not to drip on the incomplete grading he was doing with the other hand, that they actually had a chance to speak.

"I didn't get my grading done over the weekend either," Doug said, sitting opposite Will, papers and lunch bag in his hands.

Doug's eyes were twinkling as he smiled, and Will smiled back. "I didn't start mine until nine last night," Will said. "Sunday is garden day."

"Washing and cooking for me," Doug said, opening his lunch bag and taking out his sandwiches.

"I had an unexpected visitor in the evening, too," Will said, and he bit into his egg sandwich. "A homeless kid from the park dropped in. It was the weirdest thing."

Doug's eyebrows shot up. "What did you do?"

"Fed him, of course," Will said. He peered at the essay in front of him, hoping that squinting would make the spelling look better. "Looks like it's time for my Idiot's Guide to Homonyms lecture," he said, circling 'they're' and writing 'their' in pencil beside it. "I don't think I've given it so far this term."

\* \* \* \*

Digger didn't appear when Will opened the front gate, she only bounced around the side of the house, looking innocent, when he unlocked the front door. "What have you been up to?" he asked her, and she skittered through the house to look mournfully at the still-closed back door. "Alright, alright," he said, and Cheshire appeared from the bedroom.

He unlocked the back door and both of them disappeared through the doggy door, Digger wuffling happily.

When Will pushed the screen door open and looked out, Fand was sitting on the couch, knees propped up, one of Felicity's David Eddings fantasies open on his knees. He smiled up at Will.

"Hi there," Will said. "I'll go make some tea."

He put the kettle on and changed into jeans and t-shirt, then made two mugs of tea. When he returned with the mugs and what was left of the bread slathered in honey, Fand was engrossed in the book again.

"Do you like that book?" Will asked, putting the mugs and food down and sitting on the boards.

Fand nodded slowly and put the book down. "Some of it I do not understand, but that is true of everything I read."

"What sort of thing?" Will asked around a mouthful of bread and honey.

"I don't understand why people do things," Fand said, obviously perplexed. "Can you tell me?"

Will shook his head regretfully. "I mostly understand why I do things," he said. "I think I might have a little insight into the people in my family, but apart from them, I really don't

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understand people. There are some basics, people will strive for food and shelter, and to not be bored, but apart from that I'm not sure if I can offer any insight."

He held the plate with the last piece of bread and honey on it out to Fand and said, "I'm going to take Digger for a walk in the park. Want to join us?"

\* \* \* \*

Will locked his house again and walked with Digger and Fand up the ravine behind his house. The sun was low in the sky, slanting through the trees, casting elongated shadows in front of them. Fand walked quickly, jumping from rock to rock at the top of the ravine, full of quiet energy.

Digger bounced cheerfully in front of them, rushing ahead, then dashing back to make sure they weren't left behind. The park was beautiful, the gravel warm under Will's bare feet, the air full of the rustle of sparrows and swallows, and in the distance a coyote called.

Another coyote answered from the ridge ahead of them, making Digger hurry back to Will's side, quivering with excitement and trepidation.

They were climbing again, out of the valley behind Will's house. Fand didn't stick to the firebreaks and established trails, he set off confidently through the trees, passing through the thick growth of California oaks, then scrambling quickly up some rocks at the top of the ridge.

Will gave Digger a boost up the largest rock, then followed, using his toes to hang onto the boulders, pulling himself up onto the sun-warmed rocks to sit beside Fand.

Digger flopped down onto the rock beside them, her way of announcing that she was having a rest whether they wanted her to or not. Will patted her and looked out across Los Angeles, spread before them, teeming with people and cars, planes circling out across the bay, holding patterns tracing circles in the sky.

"Why?" Fand said.

"Why do we exist?" Will asked, turning to glance at Fand. Yesterday, Will had thought he was a boy, but Fand was squinting in the afternoon sunlight, shading his eyes with one hand, and there were lines at the corners of his eyes and creases around his mouth. He wasn't a child.

"No," Fand said. "That's an easy one. Why do so many people live here? Where did they all come from?"

Contemporary migration patterns seemed so much easier than existential angst and Will said, "Most of them moved here from elsewhere. I came from New York, via Texas, amongst other places. Los Angeles reached critical mass quite a while ago. So many people lived here that they generated enough industrial activity that more people moved here to work in the industry. All these people had children, and then their extended families moved here to join them."

"That's how they came here, not why." Fand turned and pointed north, across the park, to the horizon. "That's where I come from."

Will turned from facing west and pointed into the northeast. "I come from that direction. How old are you?" he asked, turning back to look at Fand.

"I don't know," Fand said. "I can't remember anymore."

"Can you remember any important events?" Will asked.  
"Anything that would help you count?"

"I was here for the earthquake," Fand said. "How long ago was that?"

"1994," Will said. "The Northridge quake was twelve years ago. Were you a child then?"

Fand looked puzzled for a moment, then said, "I was the size I am now."

"So you must have been a teenager then, and you must be in your twenties now," Will said. He felt better after his calculations. Somehow, knowing Fand was legally an adult made it a little easier to admit that the man beside him was quite possibly the most beautiful person Will had ever seen.

Fand had wrapped his arms around his knees and was resting his chin on them, gazing out over the city, the afternoon sun filtering golden and bronze across his face. He had the knack of being silent that so few people had. Will spent every work day talking to people who probably didn't want to listen, it was deeply restful to be with someone who could be still and quiet.

Will let his conscious mind slip away. He stopped thinking about migration and population, about poultry and grading and the soggy tire on his bike. He stopped wondering about Fand and just let himself sit and absorb the trees and the breeze and the ruffled silk of the reservoir down below them.

Digger snuffled at his knees and clambered into his lap and Will hugged her, breathing in her doggy smell, hearing the way she panted. Beside him, Fand was motionless and silent, the wind tangling his black hair. Time slid past, and there was



movement down the slope as a coyote trotted across the clearing, followed by another one.

Digger's hackles rose and she rumbled in her throat, making Will tighten his hold around her, wrapping one hand around her collar securely.

The coyotes sat beside each other, and Will would have sworn they were looking up the hillside at the three of them. Beside him, Fand was whistling under his breath, a slowly fluctuating note that echoed a coyote's call.

Across the ridge, out of sight, there was the familiar sound of a Chevy pickup chugging as a park ranger patrolled the firebreaks, and the coyotes in the clearing melted away into the undergrowth.

Will turned to Fand, not to speak, just to acknowledge the shared moment of beauty, and he realized that Fand's clear brown eyes looked golden for a moment, until Fand turned to smile at Will.

"Cheshire's hungry," Fand said. "Go and feed him."

Digger gave a woof of agreement, at least that was how it sounded to Will. "Cheshire is always hungry, he's a cat," Will said, but he eased Digger out of his lap anyway and stood up.

It was a quick scramble down the hillside, Digger barreling down the slope ahead of him, keen to sniff and piss where the coyotes had been, and when Will looked back, Fand was still sitting on the rocks, and it looked for a moment as though there was a coyote sitting beside him.

Cheshire was staring indignantly at the back door, waiting for Will, and he had loud and determined things to say about the inadequacy of the service. Will spooned cooked goat offal,

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rice, and chickpeas into bowls and left Digger and Cheshire trying to steal mouthfuls from each other's bowls, and went to feed the poultry.

\* \* \* \*

*I sat at the top of the ravine behind his house, on the rock Will used every morning, listening to his music drifting up the slope. The people nearby were making noise, too, the scratchy screechy noise that would normally have driven me away, but Will's music was enough to counteract it.*

*I didn't need to go down to his garden tonight to collect the gifts, I was replete with conversation and kindness already. Tonight the little ones would feast on what I hadn't taken.*

## Chapter 8

Digger was a brown blur ahead of Will, leaping maniacally through the undergrowth and bursting back out again, full of the joys of rodents and coyote scent trails and good things to roll in, and it made him laugh out loud, just to share her delight.

Will'd kind of expected Fand to be waiting on his back porch again, but he wasn't. Digger still needed to be walked, and Will needed it too. It had been one of those days at work, full of restless, supercilious children. The freshmen hadn't been too bad, just boisterous, and there was nothing like making them read dialogue aloud to keep them under control. The juniors had been bearable, even if one of the boys did keep writing heart-breaking essays about despair.

The seniors, however, had acted out in a way that had caught him unprepared. The good thing about seniors was that he could write an essay topic on the whiteboard and walk out of the room.

He had no intention of grading the essays either.

Digger yelped, her distress call, and he called out, "Hang on, Dig, I'm on my way."

She called back, and Will pushed his way through the manzanitas and found Digger gnawing away on her front paw and grizzling. "Hey, sweetie," he said gently, squatting down beside her. "Have you got a thorn in there?"

She let him take her paw into his hand and he spread the pads carefully and spotted the splinter. Digger growled, just once, as Will pulled the thorn out, and he let go of her paw

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and patted her to reassure her. "There you go," he said, stroking her ears and letting her lick his face.

When he stood up again, Digger pushed past him, back toward the path, barking her 'hello' bark.

Fand was bending down to stroke Digger and he looked up as Will pushed through the wild sage.

"Hi there," Will said, and Fand turned his attention back to Digger. "She had a splinter in her paw," Will said. "If she's complaining to you of being ill-treated."

Fand sat cross-legged on the dirt of the firebreak and Digger held out her paw for him to inspect. Fand was whispering to her, and Will couldn't catch any of Fand's words when he squatted down beside Digger, too.

He thought about cautioning Fand that Digger had been known to take the odd snap at a vet, but Digger was acting completely submissively; her ears flat against her skull, looking aside, tail tucked down, so Will didn't put a hand on her collar.

Fand examined Digger's paw carefully, then put her foot down and said, "Good girl." He stroked Digger's neck and she licked his face until he stood up again.

"She's fine," he told Will.

Digger leaped off into the sage bushes again, obviously completely recovered, and Fand said, "Would you like to see where I live?"

"I'd be honored," Will said. For the first time it occurred to Will that, no matter the differences he saw between himself and Fand, to a casual observer there wasn't much to distinguish them. They were both dressed in shabby, grubby

clothes. Will's passed-down NAACP t-shirt hung off Fand's thin shoulders, but Will was whipcord lean himself, bike-riding and gardening kept him that way. They both had dog slobber all over their faces, both were barefoot.

Sure, Will owned a big slab of property, but that was just numbers on a piece of paper. It wasn't as if he could actually demolish the house and subdivide, even if he wanted to; the place was listed as 'historical'. And Fand lived in Griffith Park, and you couldn't get any better than that in LA.

Will whistled for Digger, who bounded back out of the sage bushes, and Fand pointed up the ridge, toward Mt. Hollywood.

Will thought he knew Griffith Park well, at least the half of it closest to his house. He'd been walking through it for the past fifteen years, on an almost daily basis, the past twelve years with Digger. He knew every ridge and ravine, every firebreak and hiking trail.

Still, when Fand took his hand halfway along the firebreak up to Mt. Hollywood and led him off the track, through the sycamore trees and back down the slope, Will realized he had never been there before.

Fand's hand was warm and comfortable in his own and he was in no hurry to let it go. Fand didn't seem to be either, keeping a firm but gentle grip on him as they scrambled over tumbled down rocks and skirted California oak trees.

The voices that had carried through afternoon air from the main hiking path up Mt. Hollywood faded away, and the air was filled with bird song; hummingbirds buzzed around them, swallows swooped through the trees, teasing Digger, and Fand whistled back at them, mimicking their calls.

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There was a faint path in front of them, the kind that a barefooted person might make, and they followed it down the hillside. Will knew, at an intellectual level, that there was only one permanent brook in Griffith Park, at Ferndell, but a small stream tumbled down the hillside, little enough that it was only one long step between its rock banks.

Fand let go of Will's hand to jump across as Digger plunged happily into the narrow flow of water, emerging to shake herself all over Fand. On the other side of the stream, Fand took Will's hand again.

Some of the plants, growing more and more thickly between the trees, were familiar: mugwort, lupines, lemonadeberry, willow around the stream. Will could smell the owl clover beneath their feet and it reminded him of the flowers Fand had given him. An owl flew silently across their path, a swoop and flutter of movement, graceful and powerful.

They slowed down, and the afternoon felt heavy with magic now, shadows deepening around them, Fand's fingers curled around his hand, Digger laughed at him from up ahead on the path. Right then, he could have believed anything.

Fand pushed aside a branch of California wild grape and they stepped into a small clearing. The brook rushed through the clearing, skirting between the willows, and the rocks of the hillside tumbled into the clearing, leaving an overhanging shelter.

Under the overhang were stacks of books and newspapers and a bed of dried rushes beside a blackened stone fireplace, and it made Will wish he had given Fand a blanket at least.

Fand was waiting for him to say something, looking so vulnerable, and Will looked from the stream, where Digger splashed happily, to Fand's face. "This is beautiful," he said truthfully. "May I look at your book collection?"

Fand nodded, and Will ducked his head underneath the overhang and crouched down. The sequoia cone was there, opened fully and balanced on a pile of Jackie Collins novels. Will ran his fingers down the spines of the books and smiled.

Fand was an omnivorous reader, there were romances in a pile, and a bizarre collection of textbooks, some of them with library labels on their spines.

"Electrical engineering, breeding domestic dogs, Joseph Campbell, mass-produced fiction?" Will said. His eyebrows rose. "*Theoretical Critiques of Critical Theory*? You read post-modernist theory?"

"I read anything that anyone leaves in the park," Fand said, squatting down beside Will. "I didn't understand that book at all, but I keep it in case I ever find out how to understand it."

"I doubt if the people who wrote the articles in that collection understood it either," Will said, moving his finger down the next stack, smiling fondly at *A History of the United States*.

"Then why did they write it?" Fand asked, obviously confused, and Will shrugged, not sure himself.

"I'm not sure that books always have to be understandable," Will said. "Perhaps it is supposed to be a mystery?"

"I liked that one, I think I understood almost all of it," Fand said, pointing at *Patterns of Interaction*. "Though it made no sense until I read *The Masks of God*."

Will turned to look at Fand, a smile spreading slowly over his face. "Modern history as a mythological construct?" he said. "What a wonderful idea!"

"You didn't know that?" Fand said, and he pointed at the pile of newspapers. "I read these, the park guardians always leave anything they find for me, including these. At first they made no sense, but now I understand. They are the stories that people have to tell each other to explain the world they live in, since they cannot see the truth."

Will sat back on the edge of the pile of rushes that was obviously Fand's bed.

"You know what the truth is?" Will asked, wondering for a brief moment if this was an allegorical trip, if he'd actually just smoked too many heads.

"You do, too," Fand said, and the rushes rustled underneath Will's legs, reassuringly real. "If you didn't, I wouldn't have been able to bring you here."

"Assume for a moment that I am an ignorant fool, and tell me," Will said, taking Fand's hand again, more for his own reassurance than anything else.

Fand smiled slowly and lowered his eyelids briefly. Digger gave an appalled yelp and threw herself, wet and pungent, into Will's arms, making him let go of Fand's hand to steady himself.

It seemed to Will that deep shadows were falling across the clearing now, and two coyotes slid out of the dense



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undergrowth and into the clearing. Digger twitched in his arms and Will gripped her collar tightly. There was a rustle of branches and a black bear shuffled into the clearing, too, sniffing the air curiously.

"There're no bears in Griffith Park," he said, and then realized how stupid it sounded.

"I think that a bear can be anywhere it wants to be," Fand said, and he stood up and walked out into the clearing. The bear sniffed his hand, and a raccoon scampered across the clearing and climbed up Fand's leg.

Digger had given up trying to cope and buried her head under Will's arm. Will patted her with his free hand and found a huge grin spreading across his face. Whatever was happening, he didn't understand it, didn't know why there were owls settling in the trees around the clearing, certainly couldn't explain the bear, but it was the most enchanting thing he had ever seen.

Fand stroked the raccoon as it swung from his neck. "You asked me before if I was a gardener," Fand said, turning to look over his shoulder at Will. "I am not, I am the garden."

## **Chapter 9**

Digger whimpered in Will's arms and he murmured to her. "Shh," he said. "You're safe, I won't let them hurt you."

A moment later, Fand knelt down in front of Will and stroked Digger's fur. He made quiet reassuring sounds, like a bitch does to her pups. When Will looked up, the clearing was empty, Digger's trembling terror the only evidence that what he had seen wasn't just an hallucination.

He guessed it must be a huge shock for a city-born dog, even one that had explored Griffith Park almost every day of her life, to come face-to-face with a bear.

Fand guided Digger's face up, hands cupped on either side of her muzzle, making her sneeze once, just like she always did when Felicity lifted her snout up.

He didn't say anything, just held Digger's gaze, and she relaxed in Will's arms. Her trembling eased and she stopped sub-vocalizing her fear. Five seconds passed, then ten, and her hackles dropped and her ears pricked up then, with a tremendous squirm she was out of Will's arms and snuffling her way around the clearing, finding wildly improbable smells no doubt, squatting to mark every few seconds.

"You hypnotized my dog?" Will said, standing up and remembering not to bang his head on the overhang.

"No," Fand said. "She's just easy to talk to. I underestimated how scared she would be, I'm too used to the coyotes, who do not fear the bear."

Will had questions, big and urgent questions, but he didn't ask them. Either Fand was a delusional derelict with an

impossible talent for handling animals, or he was a ... Will's mind stumbled around for a word. Fairy? Nymph? Shaman?

Either way, asking questions would just be rude in the face of the trust Fand had shown in bringing Will to his clearing, and Will had no wish to be rude.

They walked back to the trail, away from the clearing, across the brook. Fand's hand curled around Will's, comfortably solid and alive, and Digger trotted in front of them, making occasional forays away from the track. Will could smell the raccoon on Fand. It wasn't unpleasant, but his mind was hanging onto any evidence it could find that the experience had been real. Digger's terror had been real, too, though she seemed to have forgotten it completely now.

It must be late, the sky was a mellow gold and there were no sounds of voices or vehicles from the main path or the road. A deep calm seemed to have settled on Will as his mind stopped struggling to rationalize what had happened. He didn't need to explain it, or to limit it by his own preconceptions, he could put the memory in the place inside him that just accepted things.

Like the fairies in his garden...

"They're real, aren't they?" he said out loud.

"What are real?" Fand asked, and Will almost jumped. Somehow, despite Fand's fingers still clasping his own, Will had forgotten that Fand would hear his question.

"The fairies," he said, and it was the first time he had vocalized the word. "In my garden."

"The Little Ones?" Fand said. "You should know, they're yours."

"Oh?" Will said. "How are they mine?"

"You made them," Fand said, and they came over the top of the ridge above Will's home. His roof was silvery and welcoming below, and the garden was in deep shadow now as the sun sank beneath the horizon. "By working your garden, enriching the soil, building more and more life into the ground and plants. It was that life that formed the Little Ones."

"Composting made my fairies?" Will asked.

Fand laughed, and Digger barked back at him, then charged down the slope of the ravine that led to home. "Not quite," Fand said, and he let go of Will's hand and ran down the slope behind Digger, making barking noises. The sounds merged with Digger's shouts, and Will couldn't tell them apart, and he couldn't stop laughing. Fand was crazy, that was the obvious answer, and so was Will. Barking mad.

\* \* \* \*

Fand was ensconced on the couch, blanket around him, porch light on, engrossed in *Leaves of Grass*, which Will had given him to read, while Will put a robust garbanzo stew from the freezer into a pan over a low heat, and went to do the chores.

The girls were all fussing broodily over their nests when he took their mash into the coop, dragging the hose behind him to refill their water. He closed the coop up securely after tossing them in some dandelions as a snack.

There had been a pile of lawn clippings in his empty driveway when he'd come home, so he took the wheelbarrow around and scooped up the donation from a neighbor. He was

always conflicted when people did this; the clippings might well be contaminated by pesticides or even motor oil, but on the other hand, he couldn't expect the garden to crop as heavily as it did without importing large amounts of organic material, and the lawn clippings were free, unlike straw from a clean source.

Politeness won, as it always did. His neighbors put up with a garden that smelled real, complete with chicken shit; he relied on them not making a fuss with the council. The lawn clippings were a good sign that at least one neighbor wasn't pissed off, and he would accept the gift.

They sat on the back porch to eat dinner, Digger between them, begging for garbanzos, Cheshire on the back of the couch, still pulling faces after his weekly vitamin supplement drops.

After carrying the empty plates inside, Will picked up his guitar from his bedroom and turned the porch light off, leaving the porch in darkness apart from the strip of warm light through the screen door.

He sat down and tuned his guitar, tweaking the strings to allow for the cool evening air.

Fand's eyes were faintly luminous and his teeth glistened white in the shadows. He was laughing under his breath, warm subtext to the song, and it all began to seem like a damn good idea.

The fairies, Little Ones Fand had called them, were out in force, clambering up the pyrethrum daisies planted around the porch, and Will could imagine them swaying amongst the tiny yellow and white flowers.

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It was one of the nights when the music poured out of him, the songs in his head drowning out the sounds of the city; no cars, no motorbikes, no distant hum of planes interrupted him. He didn't try and stop the flow, and there was no Felicity there to groan and throw things at him when he sang.

Fand was radiating quiet approval when Will put the guitar aside and stretched his hands. Fand took hold of one and held it in a way that was quickly becoming familiar to Will.

A gentle tug on Fand's hand slid him across the worn couch, out from underneath where Digger was snoozing with her head on his knee, making her wake with a grump. Fand was all wide-eyed curiosity in the half-light and Will leaned forward and pressed his lips against Fand's. It wasn't what he intended to do, and Fand held completely still.

Will pulled back and Fand stayed where he was, eyes half-closed, and when his lips formed an, "Oh," of surprise, Will leaned forward again.

Fand smelled of moss and soil, and tasted salty, like tears, like the sea, and Will realized Fand didn't know how to kiss. Will pressed tiny kisses against Fand's lips, until Fand began to return them, then he slid his fingers into Fand's hair to hold them both steady as he coaxed kiss after kiss out of Fand.

There was a faint sound of surrender from Fand the first time Will eased his lips apart, and he slid across the couch further, into Will's lap and arms.

Their tongues touched, gentle slip and taste, and they both moaned. Will didn't know how far this was going, presumably

not very far, and he kept his hands entwined in Fand's hair to resist the temptation to explore any of his skin.

Fand moaned, a soft, submissive sound that sent a bolt of electricity to Will's cock, and there was a wet, yielding moment, then Fand pulled back.

"Oh, oh, oh," he said, eyes wide and surprised as he clutched at the front of his sweat pants.

"Do you need to come?" Will asked, and his hand covered Fand's, squeezing gently. "Because you can touch yourself if you want to."

"I've not..." Fand began. "I've never ... I don't touch myself." He looked like he was somewhere between panic and orgasm, beguiling in his innocence.

"I don't touch myself either," Will said reassuringly, and his fingers found the knot at the waist of Fand's sweatpants. He pulled the knot loose and Fand let him slide the pants down a little, so that Fand's cock sprang free.

"Here," Will said, and he helped Fand curl his fingers around the engorged flesh.

Fand groaned and squeezed his hand, making a drop of fluid well up at the tip of his cock. "Please," he whispered.

Feeling decidedly like a lecherous old man, Will wrapped his hand around Fand's and began to guide it up and down Fand's cock. "Just relax," he whispered. "It'll feel wonderful..."

Fand stopped staring at his own cock and lifted his eyes to Will's face, and Will kissed him again, capturing Fand's quiet moans with his lips, muffling his own sounds, too, relishing every gasp, every stroke.

Abstinence was a good thing most of the time, making Will appreciate sex when he did get it, adding an edge to everything he did in his ordinary life; but right at that moment, with Fand squirming on his lap, working toward what Will suspected was Fand's first orgasm, it was a handicap. He really needed to have come recently, like ten minutes before they started, to be doing this with any degree of equanimity.

Fand came, trembling and moaning, hot liquid seeping down between Will's fingers, and he smelled of lichen and freshly-turned soil. Will longed to lift Fand's hand to his mouth and taste Fand, too, but holding him was more important.

Fand was bonelessly limp in Will's arms, his head on Will's shoulder, and Will pressed gentle kisses across his forehead, giving him a chance to recover.

His leg had gone to sleep, and his arm was aching, when Will finally realized Fand was asleep in his arms, obviously completely wiped out by what had happened. Standing up was tricky, but Fand weighed far less than he should for his height. Will managed to kick the screen door open and not fall over Digger, then carried the sleeping Fand into the spare room.

He put him down as carefully as he could and pulled the blankets off the other bed to cover Fand with.

Relaxed in sleep, Fand looked like a child again, curling up further and burrowing his head into the pillow, and Will kissed his forehead and left him to sleep.



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*by Laney Cairo*

There was grading waiting for him, and he would crack a bottle of beer and wade into the sophomores' essays. That'd take his mind off sex for sure.

## **Chapter 10**

The back door was open, just in case Fand woke at some stage during the night and didn't know how to unlatch a door, and Will turned the lights off in the kitchen. Digger was staring at the doggy door in confusion so he crouched down beside her and said, "It's just for tonight, okay? You can spend all night running in and out if you want to, but please do it quietly."

She licked his face, and he patted her and headed off to his own bed.

Fand was sound asleep when Will peeked around his door, Cheshire sprawled across the blankets. Looked like Will would be sleeping alone that night.

He dropped his jeans and t-shirt on the chair in his room and crawled in between the sheets.

\* \* \* \*

Will woke suddenly some time during the night. It wasn't anywhere near dawn, because the pre-dawn bird shrieking hadn't begun, and someone was sitting on the end of his bed.

Will sat up, struggling to wake up, and the figure moved and became instantly identifiable as Fand.

"Hey," Will said. "You okay?"

"I don't understand what happened," Fand said, and he seemed faintly luminous to Will's sleepy eyes.

Will lifted up the covers and said, "Climb on in."

Elbows and knees akimbo, Fand clambered under the covers, bumping Will solidly as he arranged his long limbs. This was a person who did not know how to share a bed.

Will rolled onto his side and stroked Fand's face gently. Fand was definitely glowing. "We can talk about it," Will said.

"I've read about sex," Fand said, and Will remembered the pile of romances in Fand's clearing. "And I've seen many animals mating. But I don't understand why you kissed me."

"There are different types of kisses," Will said. "Kisses can be about friendship and affection, that's why I kissed you at first."

Fand's fingers were stroking Will's face now in turn, smoothing his beard. "But it doesn't explain why I liked it."

"Perhaps it's enough that you liked it?" Will murmured, and he traced Fand's lips with one fingertip.

"I feel..." Fand said, and his eyes closed. "It hurts, and burns, and makes me tingle. Make it stop..."

"I feel the same way," Will said, and his voice was hoarse. "It feels so good, makes me feel alive."

Fand's eyes sprung open again. "Yes," he said. "Alive, the way the soil aches for rain, and the plants follow the sun."

"Auxins," Will said. "Plant hormones that promote cell elongation." The skin of Fand's cheek was downy soft, and blood surged to Will's cock as he slid his fingers across the flesh and down the line of Fand's jawbone. "Fand," Will whispered. "I want to kiss you again."

The first touch was a gentle intermingling of breath, then Fand's mouth was open, slick and willing beneath Will's. It somehow seemed more intimate this time, in the dark, in

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Will's bed, and Will slid a hand down Fand's back and under the hem of his sweatshirt.

There was bare skin there and Fand moaned when Will stroked his hand up Fand's ribs, solid ridges under velvet skin. He slid his hand down, over the dip of Fand's spine, under the waistband of the sweats, across bare skin, each inch taking an eternity, until his hand cupped one of Fand's buttocks.

They were both breathing hard, mouths pressed together, and just as slowly, Will pressed his hand forward, guiding Fand's body into contact with his naked one.

No disguise, no hiding behind a fortuitous fold of his jeans, his cock pressed against Fand's belly through a single layer of clothing. "Oh," Fand whispered, open-mouthed against Will now, body so pliant and welcoming that there could be no mistaking consent.

No mistaking the feel of their cocks rubbing together, abrading through cotton, mutual moisture marking the fabric. This was so pure and bright that Will had to close his eyes when Fand shuddered and groaned and clutched at Will's bare back; nails and fingers and need.

Sweet wetness spread across Will's belly, whose he did not know, and he held Fand as close as he could, burrowing his face against Fand's neck, breathing in deeply the distant smell of the ocean and the forest.

\* \* \* \*

When Will woke the next morning, Digger was sprawled across his legs, snoring muddily, and Cheshire was curled up on the other pillow. Fand was gone, the bed cold beside Will.

Cheshire purred appreciatively when Will stroked him, rearranging himself so Will stroked his belly next. "Too much or too little?" Will asked Cheshire. "I can never tell."

Cheshire bit Will's wrist. "It was a rhetorical question," Will said. "Not a reason to nip."

He treated himself to coffee that morning; if he didn't, he'd never work up the enthusiasm to start the day. Light the hot water system, discover he hadn't chopped enough wood, feed the girls, have a quick and lukewarm bath, make lunch, pack last night's grading, get dressed. He went to pick *Leaves of Grass* up off the couch, and there was a blade of grass marking a page.

"Ever the dim moment," he read aloud. "Ever the growth, the rounding of the circle ... Ever the summit and the merge at last..."

He left the book out on the couch for the day.

\* \* \* \*

Will wasn't quite sure why, but something perverse made him wrap his fingers around Doug's wrist during the lunch break. Doug followed him out into the playground and made no attempt to dislodge his hand. Will didn't care, the whole fucking staff room could talk.

Ignoring the juniors shrieking past them, Will slid his hand down to hold Doug's. "Want to come over this weekend?" he asked. "Saturday?"

Doug was warm and enticing, very very human, and Will just wanted to bury his cock inside him right then. "Sure," Doug said. "Leon will be at his mom's. Want me to bring anything?"

"Just yourself," Will said, and his voice sounded rough even to his own ears.

Doug lowered his eyelashes, one slow sweep, then extricated his fingers from Will's hand, pushed them in his mouth and gave a piercing whistle. "Mario!" he shouted. "Julio!"

Doug gave Will a brief, apologetic smile, and took off across the playground, and Will heard Doug say, "Is there any blood?" before Will turned around and went back into the staff room. He was neither a form teacher, on playground duty, nor designated first aid officer. Minor disasters he could walk away from this time.

\* \* \* \*

Will's back porch was empty when he came home, and this time he only took Digger as far as the top of the ridge behind his house before he turned back again. He was unsettled, that was the word, by what had happened the night before. First the bear and coyotes, then the kissing. If he tried to tell anyone about any of this, they'd never believe him; not even Gina, who was probably the flakiest person he knew.

Digger was disappointed at being called back so soon and she skulked along behind him, grumping to herself, dawdling after him through the gate, and he found himself making

extravagant promises to her involving day-long adventures during the impending school holidays.

He doubted she understood his words, but the conciliatory tone obviously worked, and she bounced off to terrorize squirrels.

There was work to be done; the dandelions were partying beneath the beans and there was bread to be baked if he wanted lunch the next day, but Will compromised by loading his sheets into the washing machine and putting the yeast mixture on to start before picking up his guitar.

This was what he needed, all the work could wait a little while.

\* \* \* \*

*He's singing, something melodic, and my head is so full that I have to hold onto the tree I'm sitting in.*

*I had left the night before, slipped out of his arms, warm and alive, little bits of his dreams curling around me, even though I suspected he wanted me to stay.*

*I only made it as far as the book I had been reading before ... before he kissed me. I didn't understand the words I read, or what an eidolon was, but I knew then that I had felt the rounding of the circle for the first time.*

*It made me wish there was someone, one of my own people that I could ask, but I was alone. I remembered a time when we were many, and had our own songs, before the machines had come, but everyone else was gone.*

*So, I sat in the tree, bark pressed against my cheek, and he sang.*

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

\* \* \* \*

There was a blanket on the spare room floor and Will picked it up and folded it carefully, then put it on the offering stone in his backyard, beside a plate of food.



## Chapter 11

Fand was back the next day, sitting on Will's back porch, engrossed in *Walden*, which Will had left out for him.

"Who wrote this?" Fand said, when Will put a mug of lemongrass tea beside him, along with a tomato sandwich.

"Henry Thoreau," Will said. "He lived quite a few lifetimes ago."

Fand nodded, and Will went and changed out of his work clothes and into jeans.

Fand stayed where he was, curled up on Will's couch, while Will picked the last of his early fava beans. He put the bucket of beans on the back porch and set to ripping out the vines and stacking the poles.

The poles went beside his shed, ready for the next trellised crop, and the ripped-out vines went onto the compost mountain.

Firewood next. It was a warm afternoon and Will took off his T-shirt before he even started chopping wood. Once it got really hot, he wouldn't bother lighting the hot water, but while the mornings were still cool, cold showers did not look inviting.

Digger woofed and bounced off the couch where she had been keeping Fand company, throwing herself through the doggy door. Will put his ax down and followed her through the house, calling out, "Oh, shut up, Dig, I can see there's someone at the door."

"Weee," Denny called out, and Will opened the screen door and took him out of Fitch's arms.

"Thought you weren't coming," Will said over Denny's shoulder to Fitch.

"Traffic sucked in so many ways," Fitch said. "Here're his bags." She kissed Denny on the cheek. "I'll see you later, kiddo. Thanks, Will."

Will put Denny down and Denny trotted through the house, Digger snuffling around him. "Come and meet Fand," Will said to Denny, but when he pushed the screen door open, the couch was empty and Fand was gone.

Denny trotted around Will's garden while Will weeded, the little boy burbling quietly to himself, and Will wondered what the world looked like through Denny's eyes. The thought made Will go and find Denny where he was cruising through the broccoli plants, snacking on the growing flower heads. He squatted down and held out his hand to his son. "Do you see fairies?" he asked Denny. "In my garden? In your mommies' garden?"

Denny was wide-eyed and serious, blue eyes in a dirt-smudged face. "Faiwies?" he said.

"Little, like insects," Will said. "They glow."

Denny pointed with a filthy, pudgy hand, at the soil, and he smiled. "Yes, Weee," he said. "Garden."

The bricks were warm when Will sat back cross-legged on them and pulled Denny into his arms. Denny clambered into Will's lap happily and patted Will's chest hair, then his beard.

"You're going to have hair one day," Will said. "Just like me."

"Boy," Denny said.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

"That's right, I'm your gender role model," Will said, smiling at his son. "Next week, we're going to piss standing up."

"Penis," Denny said wisely, rolling out of Will's lap and pushing himself to his feet.

"You wanna ask my ex-wife about that one?" Will said, as Denny pushed his way back into the broccoli plants again.

\* \* \* \*

It was quiet after Denny had left, nearly dark. Dave and Liz weren't doing whatever it was that made so much noise, Kevin and Joely on the other side were home, but had turned the pump off on their spa. The evening was still and quiet, and there was grading to be done, but that could wait.

Will sat cross-legged on the couch, guitar in his lap, and took a drag on his joint. This was Maz and Fitch's pot, rougher than he grew, but they lived on a homestead outside the city and could let their plants turn into small trees.

Digger rested her nose on the couch and looked up hopefully at Will, so he patted her head and said, "Okay, honey, a song for you."

There was faint click while he sang, and he looked up and smiled at Fand as he walked down the path.

Fand sat on the couch, and Digger hopped up into his lap. "Don't stop," he said when Will put his guitar aside.

\* \* \* \*

It was in the bathroom, while the tub filled, that Will kissed his way up the inside of Fand's arm.

"Please," Fand said, and Will wasn't sure whether he was saying please to the kisses, or to Will's fingers undoing the knot in his sweatpant cord. He was still leaning against the sink, looking bemused, and Will took hold of the hem of his t-shirt and lifted it carefully over his head.

Fand was tanned and lean, smooth-chested, flat-bellied, so beautiful with his downcast eyes and tousled hair that he took Will's breath away. Fand's sweatpants were sliding down around his hips, held up by his erection pushing at the fabric, and Will eased the waistband over his cock. They fell down to Fand's feet.

"Does it still hurt?" Will asked, undoing the top button of his own fly one-handed, stroking Fand's cock with his other hand.

"Yes," Fand said, and his eyes were glued on Will's groin as Will undid the next button. "But I think I know now that it will soon stop hurting and feel good."

"If you let me, I can make it feel amazing," Will murmured, and he undid the last two buttons of his fly, freeing his cock.

Fand's eyes went wide, and he said "Oh!" and his face creased in a wide smile. He curled his fingers around Will's cock, touching the tattoo, tracing it around the shaft.

Will enjoyed watching people's reactions to his tat, it made the luckily distant memory of how much it had hurt seem worthwhile.

"Were you made like this?" Fand asked, lifting his gaze to Will's face.

"No, it's a tattoo. It's like writing, only the ink is put into my skin instead," Will said, and Fand's other hand curled around his bicep, covering his sun tattoo.

"Is this one, too?" Fand asked, and he shivered as Will cupped his balls gently.

"Yeah," Will said. "Want to get into the tub?"

They settled in the hot water, both facing the same direction, Fand cradled by Will's spread thighs, and Will gently pulled Fand back against his chest. "Is that good?" Will murmured against Fand's shoulder, and he slid a soapy hand across Fand's chest, smoothing Maz's homemade rose soap across Fand's skin.

In this position Will's cock was pressed against Fand's lower back, tantalizingly close to his ass, sliding between Fand's buttocks when he pressed himself back against Will. That was an invitation, and Will slid one hand lower, through the dense hair around Fand's cock, down to cup his balls and squeeze them carefully.

Fand was squirming now, his breath loud with his head tipped back to rest on Will's shoulder. "Move up a bit," Will said, moaning when Fand pushed himself back harder against Will.

Will slid his hand lower, pressing fingers against Fand's perineum, gentle pressure in and up, and his other hand stroked Fand's cock steadily. Usually Will would be murmuring words of encouragement, trying to persuade the other person to let go and just let the pleasure happen, but Fand wasn't holding back and trying to delay his orgasm.

He was responsive beyond Will's wildest dreams, trembling and moaning, his legs splashing water over the side of the bath on an indignant Digger who had camped on Will's discarded clothes. It was deeply erotic to have someone give themselves so freely, so uninhibitedly, then Fand came, body tensing in the hot water, then shuddering with his release.

His come was milky in the water, dispersing quickly, and Will held him close while he floated, his head lolling on Will's shoulder.

"Water's getting cold," Will finally said, and Fand made a contented sound in his throat.

"Can you make it hot again?" he asked hopefully, making Will chuckle.

"Not easily," Will said. "But we can have another bath later on if you want to. Think you can manage to stand up? So we can get out of the bath and get dry?"

Fand stood dripping on the floor and Will knelt in front of him, towel in his hands, patting Fand dry carefully while Fand watched bemusedly. Crawling around behind Fand, Will dried his legs and buttocks, then knelt up and kissed Fand's lower back, nuzzling the finely-haired skin, sliding a hand between Fand's spread thighs to find the sensitive skin of his perineum.

Fand's ass was so close and tempting, but Will made himself stand up and press his damp body against Fand's dry one. "Come to bed?" he asked against Fand's shoulder.

"Are you going to make love to me?" Fand asked.

"If you want me to, yes," Will said, tucking a towel around Fand's waist, then wrapping one around himself, too.

\* \* \* \*

They kissed, and Will pulled the towel that was still between their bodies free, pressing Fand back against the pillows, running his hands over Fand's body.

"Tell me if you want me to stop, 'kay?" he murmured, and he slid down the bed a little and licked at Fand's nipple, then worked his way lower, across the planes of Fand's belly, following the promise of the hair on his lower belly.

The first time he took the head of Fand's cock into his mouth, they both moaned, the first real suck and glide had Fand scrabbling at Will's blankets. Fand was breathing hard and when Will looked up, lifting his mouth off Fand's cock as he pressed fingertips back against the perineum: Fand had his back arched, mouth open and eyes closed.

Will had to agree with Fand; he still had fond memories of his first head job, the utterly unexpected feeling of it, how hot and wet it was...

He slid Fand's cock back into his mouth, all the way down, concentrating on overriding his own gag reflex, going for that extra inch of swallow.

Fand thrust up, presumably finding some of his body's instinctual responses at last, jamming his cock further down Will's throat. There was a horrible moment of retching, then Fand was coming again, pouring poignant come into Will's mouth as fast as he could swallow.

There was a decided *thunk* as Fand flopped back on the bed, and Will wiped ineffectually at his beard and crawled back up the bed.

Fand looked completely out of it, so Will propped himself up on one elbow and waited for Fand to regain some kind of mental faculty.

Digger hopped up onto the bed and looked meaningfully at Will. She never approved of sex of any kind, and was inclined to sit and sulk outside the bedroom door, which had been endearing until the first time Felicity had teased him about getting laid, based solely on Digger's malevolent staring at the closed bedroom door.

"We haven't finished," Will warned Digger. "So don't get too cozy." Digger often surprised Will with her ability to understand him, and when she hopped off the bed and skulked out into the hallway, it was another one of those times.

"Haven't finished what?" Fand asked sleepily, making Will jump a little.

"Sex, I hope," Will said, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss against Fand's lips.

"I don't know how to..." Fand said, managing to look bashful, despite a healthy post-orgasmic flush on his cheeks.

"Why don't you touch me?" Will said. "Like I touched you in the bath?"

Fand's hand was tentative on Will's cock at first, then he tightened his grip a little, hopefully encouraged by Will's groans. This wasn't going to take long, not after all the build-up, and Will said, "Harder, quickly," and began to come, long slow pulses from deep inside himself, excruciatingly pleasurable, his come spreading across his belly as Fand stroked him hard and fast.



Will caught Fand's wrist, stilling his hand. When Will opened his eyes he found Fand staring in awe at the come on his belly.

"Do you want some?" Will asked, and he scooped up two fingers' full and pushed them into his own mouth.

Then he dipped the tip of a finger into one of the puddles and held it against Fand's lips for Fand to lick.

Which Fand did, wide-eyed and warm-lipped, making Will very relieved that he had just come. The memory of the feeling of Fand's wet, open mouth was going to be the source of much future frustration, no doubt, but it was worth it for the surprised look of delight on Fand's face.

They clambered under the bedding, Fand all elbows, kneeling Will soundly as he settled with his head on Will's chest.

Will expected him to go straight to sleep, but Fand spoke, his breath warm on Will's chest. "Do you know of anyone else like me?" he asked, and he sounded so plaintive that Will stroked his back.

"Not personally," Will said. "I think now that I might have been somewhere where people like you lived."

"Tell me," Fand said, and his hand tightened on the point of Will's hip.

"Maz, Fitch, and I went to Sequoia National Park and we hiked deep into the forest, about three years ago. We were looking for somewhere special, and there was a grove of ancient trees. It was still and dark there, at sunset, and the air felt like your clearing does, kind of thick and tingly."

"Did you meet any people like me? Did you see anyone?" Fand asked, and when he lifted his head his chin dug into Will's chest.

"We didn't see anyone," Will said. "I'm sorry, Fand. All I can tell you is that it felt magical there. Perhaps I could borrow a car and take you to that place?"

Fand shook his head vehemently. "No, I can't go in one of those vehicles, they are death machines. They kill the land."

"I understand, but it's a long way to go any other way," Will said, teasing out the tangled hair at the back of Fand's scalp.

"There are horses in the park," Fand said helpfully.

"The horses belong to people," Will said. "We can't take them without permission."

Fand looked puzzled. "The horses don't know that, they think they belong to themselves," he said. "And if I asked two of them to carry us, I think they'd agree."

"Problem is that the people who think they own the horses would follow us and take the horses back," Will said.

Fand was getting heavier against Will, his hands were still, no longer exploring Will's chest. "I used to leave the park, a long time ago," Fand said sleepily.

It was warm in the room, and quiet, apart from Digger's snuffling as she dealt with an itch, and the gentle sound of Fand sleeping. Sleep came easily to Will usually; he worked too hard to stay awake contemplating, but not that night.

Fand murmured in his sleep, rolling over and dragging the bedding with him, and Will touched his shoulder delicately, just to feel his skin.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

At work, the other staff were talking about trips to New York and Europe, and Will had smugly been planning his own break around canning and sitting on his porch, but maybe he should do something different, something that might matter.

The kitchen light cast a streak of light across the room, enough light that Will could see Fand dreaming, his eyes flickering behind closed lids, lips moving silently.

"What do you dream of?" Will murmured, reaching out in his imagination, trying on Fand's life, picturing living in the clearing, trapped in a world that didn't make sense.

What if he did take Fand to the sequoias? They could walk that far; he'd walked to San Francisco once, up the coast, back when he was in college, so it wasn't like he was scared of hiking. That had been twenty years ago, and he was older and grouchier, and his knees were wearing out, but he could still do it. Even if he did have a house, and the garden, to think about now.

Felicity would come and stay, willing to compromise on decent internet speed in exchange for adolescent privacy. She'd look after Cheshire and the girls ... The garden would be a jungle when they got back, but Will had the entire holiday to fix that...

Details were a shortcut to insomnia. Will needed to clear his head, so he slid his arm out from underneath Fand and went and brushed his teeth and turned the kitchen light off.

Back in the bedroom, he pulled the sheet over Fand's shoulder and picked up his guitar. There was a good, solid footboard on the bed, and Will leaned back against it and began to play, singing quietly to himself and Cheshire, who

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

was sitting on the headboard, being inscrutable.

## Chapter 12

At one point during the night Will woke and the other side of the bed was empty, but when he sat up, Fand was perched on the windowsill, knees drawn up in his characteristic pose, peering out into Will's front yard in the darkness.

He turned to glance at Will, and Will held out his hand.

"I'll take you to the forest," Will said.

Fand came back to bed then.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until Will opened his front door, pack on his back, bike lock and house keys in his hand, that he saw what had happened during the night.

His front yard was a wild forest, potato plants up to his waist, melon vines rioting across the paths and driveway, grape and kiwi fruit vines exploding up the fences. The ancient briar rose that scrabbled across the porch railing had burst back into vigorous growth and was covered in pink rosebuds, twining around the porch posts and making a bid for control of the porch roof.

He sat down heavily on the front steps and stared. He'd never seen anything like it; the air was full of bees pollinating and wasps hovering, the path was crawling with ants, moss was thriving on the dark, moist soil around the porch. There was no fertilizer or mulch that could have done this. It was like magic.

He was perilously close to crying with gratitude when he wheeled his bike through the yard to the front gate.

\* \* \* \*

He rang Gina from the staff room, one finger pushed into his ear, the handset held firmly against the other one.

"Hang on," Gina said, and there was just as much background noise at her end.

Will could hear a door closing and Gina said, "That's better. I'm in the storeroom, and there's no light, so don't expect me to write anything down. What can I do for you, hon?"

"You going to be home this afternoon? You and Felicity?" Will asked.

"Can be," Gina said. "Not sure about Felicity, though. She's usually home by about seven because that's when dinner is, so come around then. Stay for dinner if you'd like."

"Food'd be good," Will said, chuckling. "Want anything from the garden?"

"What have you got?" Gina said. "Anything exciting?"

"It's all exciting," Will said. "There're fava beans, scarlet runner beans, peas, lettuce, early potatoes, and all the herbs. Carrots, radishes, new corn, too, for eating whole."

"Bring me whatever you've got too much of," Gina said. "I'll see you then, if I stay in the cupboard much longer, people will talk."

"Bye."

\* \* \* \*

Fand wasn't around when Will did his chores, raking out the chicken coop, adding the rakings to the compost pile and

watering it in, picking more of the peas, and filling a box with veggies and sprigs of herbs for Gina.

Will left the things he'd bought for Fand on the back porch, pumped his bike tires up again, and hopped back on his bike to ride over to Gina's.

Gina's dog, Hypatia—or as Felicity called her, Hypoxia—threw herself at Will as he parked his bike in Gina's garage, and he scooped up the deranged mutt and hugged her and carried her in through the back door.

"Hi honey, I'm home," he called out, ruffling the cappuccino-colored fur on Hypatia's belly as she squirmed helplessly in his arms.

Felicity was in the kitchen, poking at a steaming saucepan. "Hey, Dad," she said, hugging her father with her free arm. "Mum's in her room, if you want to break the news to her that you live here. She's got some idea you guys are divorced."

"Damn, that's right," Will said, and he bent down and put the yipping Hypatia on the tiled floor. "There's a box of veggies on the back of my bike. Want to carry them in?"

"Veggies?" Felicity said in mock dismay. "You bring the damn things over, Mom cooks them, and I have to eat them. Why don't you ever bring over a box of burgers?"

"Get over it," Will said cheerfully, and he went and knocked on Gina's study door.

"Yeah, what?" Gina called out.

"It's Will, not Felicity."

"Oh, you can come in," she called back, and Will opened the door.

Gina's study was a tangle of discarded hardware, stacked external drives and cases overflowing from her desk. Gina was sitting on the floor, where there was some space, still in her work clothes, sleek laptop in front of her.

Will sat down opposite her, and she said, "Wassup?"

"I want to go away on vacation, so I wanted to talk to you about Felicity house-sitting for me," Will said. Gina's eyebrows shot up.

"You're going to leave the garden?" she said disbelievingly. "Actually leave your precious garden? Felicity won't remember to water it or anything, you know that, don't you?"

"Garden will be fine," Will said. "We've had late rain this year. I just want Felicity to look after Cheshire and the poultry. There'll be chicks by then, so she'll have to actually do some work."

"I've got no in-principle problems with her staying at your place," Gina said. "I can supervise her, make sure she bathes occasionally, that sort of thing. Where the hell are you going? You never go away. 'Bourgeois crap,' I believe you called vacations."

"It's not really a vacation, more like a pilgrimage," Will said. "To the sequoias."

Gina screwed her mouth up for a moment, obviously thinking. "Maz is already pregnant, so it's not another baby-making trip, right?"

Will nodded. "I, um, want to tell you why I'm going, just because I think someone should know. I don't actually expect you to believe me."

"Shoot," she said, closing her laptop and putting it aside.



"There're fairies in my garden. One of them is large, person-sized. I want to take him to the sequoias so he can find other fairies like himself. He refuses to get in a car, so we're going to walk."

Gina stared at Will for a moment, then cracked up completely. "Fuck ... Will..." she managed to gasp out between shrieks of laughter. "That's a good one," she said, wiping her mouth, still giggling. "Now, why are you going? For real?"

Will sat silently while Gina sorted herself out. "No, really," he said.

"Really?" she said, her teeth gritted with the effort of not laughing.

"Yeah," Will said. "His name's Fand. I thought he was a homeless kid at first, but he glows in the dark and stuff. And you should see what he's done to my garden with magic."

"You been doing 'shrooms again?" Gina asked. "Trips?"

Will shook his head. "Nope, high on life and the occasional joint, same as usual. Any delusions are naturally induced."

"You're fucking crazy," Gina said, shaking her head. "Some homeless kid has got you persuaded he's a fairy, and you're going to walk to the sequoias? Only fairies in your garden, my love, are attractive gay men trying to get into your bed."

"This is as close to acceptance as you're going to get, isn't it?" Will said.

"Dinner's ready," Felicity's voice bellowed.

"You've always been a lunatic, babe," Gina said, pushing herself to her feet and holding a hand out to Will to pull him

up, too. "Do me a favor and don't tell Felicity exactly why you want to walk to the sequoias?"

Will let Gina pull him up. "Okay," he said.

\* \* \* \*

Felicity paused, fork midway to her mouth. "Cool," she said. "I'd love to house-sit for you, Dad. How long you going away for?"

"Three weeks, probably," Will said. "I've got some conditions. No amplifiers or full drum kits, I get on well with my neighbors. No white powder drugs. You have to actually look after Cheshire and the poultry. Okay?"

"Okay," Felicity said, and she looked unimpressed. "Are you sure I can't take a small amp over?"

"Yep, quite sure," Will said, pushing his cleared plate away. "Friends are fine, illicit teenage sex is fine, as long as you use your own room. Jam sessions are fine, at least until the first time someone complains."

"So, where're you going?" Felicity said. "You going to spend a couple of lost weeks in San Francisco?"

"No, a friend and I are walking to Sequoia National Forest to go camping."

Felicity stared disbelievingly. "Walking? But that's like hundreds of miles away."

"One hundred twenty," Will said. "I'm figuring it will take a week each way."

"You're going to look like homeless bums," Felicity said. "Bet the police pick you up all the time. Mom'll have to bail you out."

Gina said, "She's right, Will. You need to think of some way to make it look like you're not vagrants, wandering around aimlessly with your dog."

"Oh," Will said. That was something that hadn't occurred to him. He'd been busily sorting out the details of the trip, getting maps, and boots for Digger, but Felicity was right. He couldn't see Fand coping well with a trip in a police car and a night in a cell. "Damn."

"I know!" Felicity said, looking smug. "You just gotta look like you're doing a walk for charity or something. You know what I mean; people walk across the US all the time, raising money for cancer research in nuclear whales or whatever. Just be one of them."

"You're right," Will said, smiling widely. "I've got no problems with carrying a sign and a donation tin for someone like Free the Bears. The police would leave us alone. It would be really embarrassing if they hassled people doing a charity walk."

Gina shook her head. "You're fucking crazy; bet I still have to come and get you. Pass the pasta, Felicity, and the cheese."

## Chapter 13

When Will flicked the back porch light on and opened the back door, Fand was nowhere to be seen, but the map had been unfolded and the book on the sequoias moved. Will made sandwiches for Fand and put them out on the stone, then lit the hot water system.

He didn't have grading to do, it was close enough to the end of the school year that he'd stopped assessing work, so he sat on his rumpled bed with his guitar.

Cheshire hopped up and burrowed under the covers, no doubt filling his bed with grit. Digger jumped up onto the bed, too, and presented one of her newly booted paws to Will, looking worried.

"They're for your own good, hon," Will said, patting her reassuringly. "To stop you from getting sore paws. The ground's going to be hot and I don't want your paws to get rubbed raw." He'd have to get Fand some shoes, too.

She whined fretfully, and he pulled her ears fondly. "Just think, you get to eat kibble," he said. "Is that compensation enough?"

She settled down, still chewing on her new boots intermittently, and Will began to sing.

\* \* \* \*

Fand was back on the couch the next afternoon. Will leaned in and kissed him gently when Fand looked up from the book on Sequoia National Park.

Fand smiled delightedly, making Will smile back. "I'll be back in a moment," Will said.

He put the kettle on, changed into jeans and t-shirt, and picked up Digger's new boots from the sideboard.

Digger was curled up on Fand's lap, so Will knelt down in front of the couch and slid the new boots onto her feet.

"What are they for?" Fand said, picking up one boot-clad paw and examining it curiously.

"For when we walk to the forest," Will said. "To stop her from getting sore paws." When the last boot was on, he shifted his attention to Fand's feet, propped on the couch.

He took one into his hands, examining it carefully. It was grubby and the sole was thickly callused. He stroked Fand's foot, running his hands over the skin carefully, feeling the bone structure, the arch, toes.

"What are you doing?" Fand asked, and when Will glanced up, he was smiling.

"I think you'll need shoes, too," Will said. "I'm just trying to guess what size feet you have."

"They're exactly as long as they are," Fand pointed out. "You don't need to guess. And the park guardians give me shoes. It seems to worry them that I don't wear them."

"The rangers?" Will said. "Good. Bring the shoes with you next time you come here. Do you have socks too?"

"No," Fand said, shaking his head. "Will I need them? Should I ask the park guardians for them?"

"I've got plenty," Will said. "You can wear mine. I'll get you some more clothes, too."

He sat on the couch beside Fand and held out his arm and Fand settled against Will's shoulder. There was work to be done, as always, but it was good to nuzzle the side of Fand's face.

Digger squirmed between them, pushing her way into the hug, and Will said, "I saw you'd looked at the map. I wasn't sure you'd know about maps."

"There are maps of the park, great big ones," Fand said. "For people who are too silly to know where to go. I didn't understand this one, so obviously I am one of those silly people now."

Leaning forward, Will picked up the map he had bought and unfolded it. "This is where we are," he said, pointing at the green blob of Griffith Park in LA. He tracked his finger up, beside I-5, out of LA. "We'll walk up here, then turn down here, across to 58, then down this road here to Lake Isabella. That's about where the forest starts."

Fand's eyes were shining when Will glanced up from the map.

\* \* \* \*

Felicity was playing her six-string on Will's back porch while Will built the pullet run. Even Felicity's technical exercises were wonderful; cadences of sounds, chords Will couldn't name, key changes when he least expected them.

Will had built pullet runs often enough before to be efficient at it, and the lumber from the last one was carefully stored inside the shed.

He banged together the two rectangles for base and top, added the four uprights while Felicity played what Will thought might be Rachmaninoff, and wrapped the fine chicken wire around three of the sides and the top through some classic Simon and Garfunkel.

That was solid enough, the coop was only temporary, just for the eight or ten weeks it would take the chicks to get to killing size.

He dug a channel right around the bed the beans had been in, one spade depth all 'round, then called out, "Felicity! Quit picking and come and give me a hand."

It took the two of them, some shoving, and extra digging to get the frame to fit into the channels, and when Will looked up from hammering the guide poles for the door into place, Felicity was bent over inspecting the dope plants between the two rows of peas.

"Dad?" she said hopefully.

"You finished practicing?" Will asked, picking up the spade, mallet, and jar of nails. The run still needed feed sacks nailed across one end and part of the top, and the spare water and food hoppers, but it was just about ready to go...

"Yeah," Felicity said.

"Kay," Will said. "You know where my stash is, and I'll have a beer too."

Will sat down on the boards of the porch, his back against one of the support posts. The sun was hot on the bare skin of his back, the beer was icy-cold and abrasive, the joint rough. He handed the joint up to Felicity and closed his eyes. Felicity played, a wandering journey through songs that Will didn't

know, and Digger clambered onto Will's lap. He stroked Digger gently, made sure she hadn't managed to work out how to get her new boots off yet, lifted her off his lap so he could stretch her out and check her over for ticks and fleas.

"You know, that's really gross," Felicity said, her fingers paused.

"No high moral ground for you when it comes to personal habits," Will said, and Digger yipped and bounced up and threw herself through the doggy door to skitter to the front of the house.

"Booty call," Felicity said, and Will flipped the cap from his beer bottle at her as he stood up and followed Digger through the house.

Doug was there, looking gorgeous in worn jeans and faded shirt, wide smile on his face.

Will opened the screen door and Doug said, "What are you laughing at?"

"Something Felicity just said," Will said, wrapping his arms around Doug and hugging him, ignoring Digger who was trying to jump up at them. He kissed Doug, who tasted of bubblegum, of all things.

Doug's hands were spread across his back, nails scraping gently across his sun-warmed skin, and Doug pulled back and said, "It's been eight years."

"Eight years?" Will murmured, sliding hands under Doug's t-shirt and around his ribs.

"Since someone gave me a joint, and you smell of the stuff. Now fix that," Doug said, laughing, but he didn't move away from Will's hands.



Doug followed him out onto the back porch, and Will caught his surprise as a flicker of movement beside him, so he said. "Felicity's here."

"Hey, Felicity," Doug said, and Will thought about whopping Felicity with something when it took far too long for his daughter's eyes to get as far as Doug's face.

"Hi, Doug," Felicity said. "Want a toke?" She held out the joint she'd just rolled.

Doug turned his head to look at Will. "You let Felicity smoke pot? Your pot?"

Will slid his arm around Doug's shoulders and reminded himself that Doug wasn't actually used to his life. "Yeah, harm minimization is the name of the game." He looked at Felicity, who had picked her guitar back up again. "Would you smoke if I didn't give you my mull?"

"Yep," Felicity said, tweaking the tuning of her guitar.

"Where would you get the mull?" Will asked.

"From Nige's big brother, he's usually got some around," Felicity said.

"Does Nige's big brother sell other drugs, too?"

"Sure," Felicity said. "He mostly sells E, but he's usually got dexies as well. Why?"

"So, by supplying you with clean, low grade leaf, I stop you from having contact with someone who is possibly financially invested in escalating your drug use?" Will asked, glancing sideways at Doug.

"'Spouse so," Felicity said. "Can I play now?"

\* \* \* \*

It was going to be another lost weekend, Will decided. He was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs on the back porch, since Felicity hadn't relinquished control of the couch. The kid had a bladder of iron, obviously. Doug was sitting on the porch boards, basking like a cat in the late afternoon sunshine, leaning back against the couch. No bladder of iron for him, every bottle of beer he knocked back translated directly into an increasingly unsteady trip to the bathroom, each return trip involved more beer all round.

\* \* \* \*

They weren't loud that night, but it wasn't easy being quiet, not with Doug's legs wrapped around Will's waist, urging him on. This time, Doug didn't hesitate, and Will was careful and gentle. Doug was so easy and restful and certain, whimpering against Will's ear, that Will couldn't have held back if he'd tried.

\* \* \* \*

*I stood in the shadows, beside the window, watching them. The room was dark, but I could still see.*

*They were ... grappling, coupling, on Will's bed, and I knew the sounds he was making, for I had heard them before. I suppose I shouldn't have been there, humans have such strange rules about privacy and reproduction, about who owns what.*

All I knew was I wanted it to be me, underneath Will, then rolling over to be on top of him. I couldn't see how though.

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

*My body was craving something, so I loosened my clothing, freed my cock so I could stroke it. I didn't understand this ache he gave me, or why it should make me hard now, when he wasn't touching me. My own hand felt clumsy after his, but I remembered how he touched me, what he had done with his mouth...*

*I wasn't prepared for how that felt, the way my knees wobbled so I had to lean against the wall, the way the tightness built so quickly and painfully I could barely breathe, the way I was momentarily blinded as the liquid slid out of my body.*

*I felt so light as I walked back up the ravine, the trees bending towards me in greeting, that I was almost floating.*

## **Chapter 14**

The morning was still and warm, and Will sat on the steps up to his back porch, mug of coffee in his hand. Digger was rummaging around the garden beds, Bernice and Clotilde were investigating the soil that Will had just disturbed by dragging the water hoses around, gobbling up worms and wood lice. Cheshire was eyeing the two ducks speculatively, as he sometimes did, but Will knew the ducks were more than capable of standing up to the cat, even if Chesh did seem to think the ducks were large, flightless sparrows, put in the garden for his dining pleasure.

Cheshire crept forward, tinging one of the many bells around his neck, and the ducks moved on to the next patch of soil.

The salvaged baby buggy was still in reasonable shape—axle intact, rubber wheels not perished—and Will was partway through constructing the tray for it when Doug appeared.

"Hey, babe," Will said, standing up and hugging Doug, hammer still in his hand.

"Sleep well? Want some coffee?"

"Slept like a zombie," Doug said, hugging Will, and laughing as Will nuzzled his neck. "I'd love some coffee."

Will left him standing beside the buggy, hammer in his hand, looking puzzled, and went and poured coffee from the pot on the stove.

Doug swapped him the hammer for the coffee and said, "Why? What is it?"

"It's a buggy," Will said, squatting back down beside the stripped-back frame and picking up the tray he'd just built. "See?" he said, and he slid the tray onto the frame.

"What are you trying to shift?" Doug asked. "Because I could always take it in my car."

"It's to carry camping supplies. I'm going hiking with a friend during the summer break and this will be perfect for carrying all our stuff, rather than us wearing packs," Will said. "The frame is built to take 60 pounds at least, the wheels are solid rubber, so they won't get punctures, and it's designed to be pushed by hand."

He found the U bolts he'd put on the steps, where Doug was sitting now, and picked up the power drill.

"This friend you're going hiking with? Are they a friend, or something more?" Doug asked, and Will put the drill down and came and sat on the step beside Doug and put an arm around him.

"He's a lover," Will said. "I've known him a while. Is this going to be a problem? For you?"

"Guess not," Doug said, corners of his mouth lifting. "This is what it's like with guys, isn't it? Fucking whoever you want? Whenever you want?"

Will had to grin, the sparkle in Doug's eyes was so infectious. "Yeah, if that's what you want, and you can meet guys who want that, too."

\* \* \* \*

There were unfamiliar sneakers beside the back door when Will opened the porch door. Digger bounced out into the

garden, barking happily. Will followed her, and found Fand crouched down beside the hen coop, cooing to the nesting boxes.

Squatting down beside him, Will said, "How are the chickens?"

"The eggs are going to hatch soon."

"I've finished work for a couple of months," Will said. "We can leave tomorrow, if you want to."

"I like your friend," Fand said.

"Which friend?" Will asked. "Felicity? Or Denny?"

Bernice was tapping at Will's knee, making little burring noises, and Will scratched her back. Fand stroked a stray lock of Will's hair back behind his ear, and it occurred to Will that he and Bernice had a lot in common.

"Denny is lovely," Fand said. "Felicity scares me, though her music is beautiful. I do not know your friend's name, but he is a gorgeous color."

"Doug," Will said.

"He makes you laugh," Fand said. "He makes you happy."

Fand sounded so wistful that Will caught Fand's hand and kissed his knuckles. "You make me happy, too," Will said gently.

Usually this kind of situation, dealing with two lovers at the same time, gave him headaches and was something he avoided if he could. However, he doubted that Fand had a possessive urge in him, and Doug seemed about to launch out on his own adventure, so Will hoped it would work out.

There was a thick layer of straw over the bed beside the path they were sitting on, covering where Will had dug in the

latest batch of compost, ready for mid-season potatoes, and he guided Fand back onto it, lowering his body over Fand's carefully.

"You make me smile, make me love every morning, the sunshine and the moonlight..." he whispered, and he kissed Fand.

Fand made a soft noise in his throat, submissive and needy, and lust shot through Will, burning so brightly he could barely breathe. He sucked at the skin of Fand's neck, tasting skin, and Fand writhed beneath him.

The afternoon sun was warm on Will's back, through his shirt, and the soil was cool and damp where his knees dug into the thick loam. He kissed Fand again and shoved a hand between their bodies, fumbling with his own belt buckle and the fly of his only decent trousers.

It took some effort, and he had to stop kissing Fand long enough to concentrate, but then there was the blissful moment of contact when his cock rubbed against Fand's, exquisite friction that made him want to scream.

Fand was gone, clutching at Will's back, moaning loudly, head tipped back so Will could bite the skin of his neck. Fand shuddered and something hot and wet spread across Will's belly, making Will push a hand between their bodies, slipping through Fand's come, to grip his own cock tightly.

He jerked at his cock, quickly and urgently, groaning, until he came.

When he collapsed down onto Fand, breathing hard, Fand clung to him.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

It took a little while for Will to recover, with his face pressed against Fand's neck, his breathing still ragged, the smell of the straw and soil and sex filling his senses. When he lifted his head and opened his eyes, Fand looked to be dozing, eyes closed, face completely relaxed. Around him, twining through Fand's hair where it spread on the soil, tugging at the corners of his clothes, a thousand plants had broken the surface of the straw, pushing tendrils and shoots through the musty, golden layer. It was like watching a motion capture documentary, the way the plants unfurled their dicotyledonous first leaves, questing up through the mulch to find sunlight and air, and Will could almost feel their roots pushing down into the rich soil, too, searching for water and nitrogen.

\* \* \* \*

Fand sat, gloriously grubby and tousled, on the couch on the back porch while Will lit the hot water system. They'd clambered off the straw, giving the plants underneath them a chance, and when Will glanced over at the previously empty soil while getting fuel from the woodpile, the entire bed was covered in inch-tall plants. He guessed he wouldn't be growing potatoes there after all.

He didn't disturb Fand's reverie while the water warmed up. Instead he went back indoors and found the stack of clothes he had bought Fand at a Goodwill store close to the school, and chose boxers, t-shirt and jeans for him to wear. There would be time tomorrow, during the day before they left, to wash the clothes Fand was wearing.



\* \* \* \*

The three-gallon water carriers were the heaviest thing that Will carried out of the house to where the buggy was waiting in the driveway and he put them in the middle of the back of the tray, over the main axle, for stability. When Will carried out a sealed box of dog kibble, Fand fiddled with the lid of the container, trying to prise the bear-proof cap off.

Will squatted down beside him and said, "Like this." He pushed down the tab at the top, pulled the tab up again, and twisted the cap off. "It's supposed to be bear-proof, so don't go telling any bears we meet how to undo it."

"I won't," Fand said, and he reached in and picked up a piece of dog kibble and ate it just as Digger launched herself at the container, yipping in excitement. Will grabbed a handful of kibble and screwed the lid back on quickly as Digger picked up her bowl, which was also waiting to be packed, and whacked it on the ground hard at Will's feet.

The kibble rattled as Will dropped it into the bowl, and Digger wolfed it down, wagging her tail frantically. Will ate the bit that he had held onto, out of curiosity. It was kind of dry and hard to crunch, and it tasted more like desiccated chicken nuggets than anything else.

"What do you think?" Will asked around a mouthful of bits, as Fand crunched on the kibble.

"It's dry and hard," Fand said indistinctly.

"It's really for Digger," Will said. "I've got softer food for us. Digger loves this type of food, so she'll be happy."

Liz rattled on the gate and called out, "Hi, Will!"

Fand took off from a crouch, dashing around the corner of the house, past the cycads and ferns, just as Liz opened the gate.

"Sorry to disturb you," she said. "I seem to have made your friend run away."

"He's shy," Will said, wiping the kibble crumbs off his hands onto his jeans.

"How can I help you?"

"I, um, just wanted to say how wonderful it is that you're doing this walk," she said, glancing at the *Autism Society of America* sign that Will had stuck onto a sheet of plywood and lacquered, then bolted to the front of the buggy. "We're all so lazy, and here you are, doing this amazing thing."

She held out her hand, and there were folded bills in it. "Here's a donation to get you started."

"Thank you, Liz," Will said, and he rummaged around in the basket attached to the buggy handle and found a pen and receipt book. "That's very generous of you."

The Autism Society of America had been more than happy when Will had contacted them, especially when they'd found out he was a school teacher and not some itinerant hippy. The respectable street address had reassured them further, and they'd couriered him out a fundraising kit.

Quite what the courier had made of the potato plant forest in the front yard, Will wasn't sure, but it was almost at the point of needing a machete to get to the front porch.

He'd chosen the Autism Society over one of his usual organizations in the hope that people would assume any

bizarreness on Fand's part was because he was autistic. What they'd make of his own bizarreness, Will wasn't sure.

He wrote Liz a receipt for two hundred dollars and handed it to her. "Call Gina if Felicity gets too loud," Will said. "Feel free to yell at her over the fence, too."

"I'm sure I will," Liz said. "Good luck. I'll go now, and your friend can come out of hiding."

\* \* \* \*

Fand was sitting on the back steps, petting Cheshire, when Will walked around the back of the house. "She's gone," he said, and Fand looked up. "Is there anything you want to take with you?"

Fand's hand stroked Cheshire's back, making the cat purr so hard he was shaking and Fand's eyes went to Will's guitar, which was propped against the couch, with such a look of longing that Will crumbled. "I wasn't going to take it," he said, "but if you want me to, I can."

There was so much gratitude in Fand's eyes when he turned back to Will that Will asked, "Why can't you ask for things?"

Fand opened his mouth, and Digger began barking excitedly, and Felicity called out, "Hey, Dad!" over the noise Digger was making as she opened the front screen door with a bang.

Fand was gone, out of the back gate and into the park, before Will could stop him, and Will stood up and walked into the house.

Felicity hugged Will as best she could in the hallway while carrying two guitars, and then lugged them into her bedroom. Will found Gina laughing silently beside the buggy.

They hugged briefly, and Gina said, "You're a fucking lunatic, you know that, don't you?"

Felicity rolled her eyes at her mother as she walked past them on her way to get the next armload of her belongings.

Will said, "At least we're not still married, and I'm not trying to persuade you to come with me."

This seemed to amuse Gina no end and she chortled for a while, finally shaking her head as she said, "You're adorable when you're being a zealot." She rummaged around in her purse and took out an envelope. "Here's some emergency money, you're bound not to have enough. And a pre-paid phone card, so you'd better call me and Felicity every couple of days."

"You'll keep an eye on Felicity?" Will asked, slipping the envelope into his pocket.

"A close one," Gina said. "I figured I'd drop in every day. I can always have a glass of wine with Liz and Dave and hear directly from them what Felicity's been up to."

\* \* \* \*

They set out at sunset, buggy laden with twenty-five pounds of dog kibble, blankets, water, and food, with the guitar in its case strapped on top. Digger was wearing her boots and bouncing excitedly on the end of her lead. Fand had reappeared the moment Felicity had barricaded herself in

her room with the phone line, her laptop, and a carton of sodas.

Will hoped he had thought of everything: Devon's number was beside the phone for Felicity to call once the chicks started hatching. Devon could be relied upon to come over, observe the mothers and chicks, and separate out the potentially troublesome mothers, with their clutches, into the pullet run.

Digger's water and food bowls were packed, her dog license was in Will's wallet. He had driver's license, money, his ATM card, the envelope from Gina, and a collection of phone numbers.

They had food; fruit cake, bread and honey, and granola bars, enough for a couple of days, and could buy more en route. Fand had his new hat jammed down on his hair, Will had packed clean socks and warm sweaters for them both, and cargo pants in case it was too hot to wear jeans. There were raisins, nuts, and dried apples for snacks, and a collection of maps and books.

Liz waved from her front yard as they walked past. "Good luck!" she called out when Will waved back, and she smiled indulgently at Fand. Any assumptions she made about the shy young man in the baggy clothes who was hiding his face from her were her own problem, Will figured.

\* \* \* \*

It was relatively quiet, walking through the streetlight-lit suburb. Cars whizzed past them only occasionally, but each time Will felt Fand flinch beside him.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

The buggy was easy to push one-handed, at least on the well-maintained sidewalks, so Will slid one hand around Fand's elbow comfortingly. "You can hold on to me," he said. "Anytime you need to."

Fand did hold on to him, hand clasped around Will's forearm, Digger pulling happily on the lead looped around Will's other wrist. A middle-aged man jogged past them in sweats and shoes that probably cost more than Will had in his bank account, with a beautifully groomed Samoyed on a retractable lead festooned with yellow dog shit bags. Will paused so Digger could exchange ass-sniffs with the Samoyed, and the man jogged on the spot, too.

The hand on Will's arm tightened and Fand stood even closer to him, hiding behind him. The man glanced at the collection tin, bent down and unzipped the tiny pocket in his sock, and took out a note. He pushed it into the tin, and Will said "Thanks."

The dogs had finished their canine business, and the man said, "No problem. C'mon, Clea," and jogged off, the Samoyed following behind him.

When Will glanced at Fand, he was smiling and his cheeks were pink.

"You okay?" Will asked him.

Fand nodded. "Why did that man give us money?" he asked. "Do you know him?"

"He was being charitable," Will said. "Generous."

\* \* \* \*

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

The walk through the suburb was easy, good sidewalks and empty well-lit streets, but the closer they came to the I-5 and the louder the roar of the traffic, the tighter the grip of Fand's hand on Will's arm was. Fand was pressed up hard against Will, obviously terrified, when they left the side street at the traffic lights and began to walk along the sidewalk of the I-5 overpass.

\* \* \* \*

*The noise was unbearable, pounding and ringing and screaming around us, then I realized that Will wanted me to walk over the top of where the machines were roaring. I clung to him, almost sobbing, and he held me close.*

*He pushed something into my ears, something soft and firm, and the noise faded a little, and he just kept holding me.*

*I couldn't hear what he was saying, but his chest was rumbling comfortingly and his hands stroked my back and neck.*

*He turned me around and put my hands on the thing he had been pushing, and gave me Digger's handle to hold, too, then he stood behind me, right behind me so his body was pressed up against mine. His hands were beside mine, and we began to move slowly forward onto the vibrating building.*

*I closed my eyes tightly, shuffling blindly, and waited for the time to pass. The machines made a terrible poison smell that hurt me, but my Will would keep me safe; he understood.*

*We went up, then we went down again, and the vibrations began to fade again, and the noise dimmed, until I felt soil*

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

*beneath me, and the air was not poison. I opened my eyes,  
and Will guided me down onto the grass and held me.*



## **Chapter 15**

Someone came out of a house to stare at them, then caught sight of the sign on the buggy and wandered back indoors again. Digger pushed herself between them, licking Fand's face while Will stroked his arm and whispered to him.

Fand was calming down, tension slowly leaving his body, and Will found a bag of raisins and began to feed them to Fand, one at a time, until Fand took the bag to eat them himself.

"That's the worst it's going to be," Will said reassuringly. "It's going to be easier and easier from here. Okay?"

Fand nodded and Will kissed him quickly, stealing a raisin. Digger thumped Will hard with a boot-clad paw, half-clambering into his lap before being dislodged.

"Ready to walk some more?" Will asked, and helped Fand back onto his feet.

It was night time now, and the streets were relatively quiet. Will skirted around the back of the shopping district, through residential streets where Fand could walk on the grass and touch each tree as he passed it. The light industrial area was deserted, apart from ferocious-looking Alsations and Rottweilers who all bounced up to the fencing to bark happily at Fand and Digger, then bounced off again to bark equally happily at raccoons and squirrels after Fand had patted their noses.

Glenoaks Boulevard was busy during the day, but by the time they reached it there was hardly any traffic. Fand seemed to be getting used to the sounds of the passing cars,

no longer flinching at each vehicle, and despite his panic at crossing I-5, Will began to think they might actually make it out of the city.

The stores lining the boulevard were all closed, and Fand peered into the windows. When Will pressed his nose against the glass beside Fand, he wondered what sort of sense Fand made of ranks of washing machines and dish-washers, or of ceramic floor-tiling displays.

When the stores gave way to houses, Will found them a small park and Digger threw herself dramatically on the grass. Fand sat down beside her and Will poured Digger a big bowl of water from one of the carriers, and poured himself and Fand mugs of water, too.

Digger hauled herself to her feet, guzzled down the water as Fand drank deeply, then looked hopefully at Will. "Sure, you're hungry, we all are," Will said, and he leaned across and undid the kibble container and took Digger out a handful and put it in her bowl.

There were slabs of fruitcake in the food box and Will handed one to Fand and took one for himself.

Fand was quiet; he'd hardly spoken since they'd left I-5, and Will slid an arm around his shoulders and hugged him.

"Will it be like that again?" Fand asked, and his hand stroked the clipped grass beside him.

"There's one more bad place," Will said. "I've tried to time it so we get there very late at night, when there will be less traffic. Think you're ready to walk again?"

Fand nodded and stood up, and in the streetlights Will could see that where he had been sitting the grass was lush

and green and long. Digger stayed where she was, her eyes resolutely closed and tail still when Will whistled and tugged on her leash.

He bent down and picked her up and sat her on top of the bags on the buggy, in front of the guitar and food boxes, her leash looped around the buggy handle, just as a car pulled up beside the park and a floodlight shone on them.

Will shaded his eyes, saw the black and white paintwork of the car and said, "We're just moving on, officer."

He pushed the buggy, heavier now with Digger reclining in it, across the grass, Fand clinging to his side, hiding from the police.

They crossed the train line at Roxford Street late at night, and walked along the deserted shoulder of San Fernando Road, underneath the I-5 and I-210 interchange, while traffic rumbled above them, much quieter in the pre-dawn.

Will was tired, he was used to going to bed early and getting up early. Just a little bit further along San Fernando Road they crossed under I-5, underneath the roar of trucks and cars, the ground vibrating beneath their feet.

Fand seemed to cope better this time, holding on to Will's forearm tightly, his eyes fixed firmly on the ground beneath his feet. San Fernando Road became The Old Road, I-5's precursor, and ran for a couple of miles on the east side of I-5, and they were out of the city now, into canyon country.

The hills rose around them, wooded and mostly empty, and once they had crossed under I-5 again, Will was going to head off-road, into one of the ravines, and look for somewhere they could sleep for a few hours in peace.

Not far past the underpass, they found a track leading off the roadside, and in the pre-dawn light it looked like it had been made by children on mountain bikes. It was hard work dragging the buggy up the sandy slope, but every step they took away from I-5, Fand seemed to brighten up. Digger hopped off the buggy, making the load lighter, and Fand grabbed the handle, too, and Will found out for the first time how strong Fand was, hauling the buggy up the hill easily.

There was some kind of building below them on the hill, with parking lots around it, but the hillside itself seemed relatively private, so Will pushed the buggy in under the cover of the ubiquitous eucalypt.

He needed to take care of Fand first.

Will sat him down on the sandy ground and kissed him. "You were amazing," he said. "Incredibly strong."

Fand clung to Will, so Will sat down, too, and let Fand crawl into his lap.

"We're going to rest now, sleep for a few hours, then walk some more later today." Will took off Fand's hat and stroked his hair where it had been flattened. "Want to sleep for a while?"

Fand ate the bread and honey Will gave him as ravenously as Digger guzzled down her kibble. Will was hungry, too, and the bread tasted damned good. He was used to physical work, to riding his bike long distances and working outdoors every day, but walking for hours and hours on hard sidewalks was tough on his legs, and it was a great relief to take off his sneakers and socks and wrap a blanket around Fand and himself against the cool, early morning air.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Digger's lead was tied to the buggy to stop her from wandering and she was curled up beside Will. The sun was rising, the traffic on I-5 was appreciably louder, and Fand was already asleep beside him, head on Will's shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

It felt like the middle of the day when Will woke, his legs and feet shouting at him about the unaccustomed walking. He was alone, with the blanket that had been over them pushed under his head, cushioning him from the ground, and he sat up, panicked.

And almost burst out laughing at what he saw.

Fand was crouched down across the grove, Digger held firmly under one arm, coyote a few feet in front of him, sniffing curiously at Fand and Digger.

Fand made a yip noise in his throat, and Digger's hackles dropped and she sniffed back at the coyote.

Then Will realized they hadn't gone to sleep in a grove.

It *had* been a patch of sandy ground, under some eucalypts: now it was an area of thick grass, surrounded by California Buckeye trees, manzanitas, and Desert Willows, with a dense undergrowth of deerweed and red buckwheat.

Fand yipped again, and Digger slid out from under his arm and crept submissively forward, ears back and eyes down, to sniff the coyote.

He did laugh then, and the coyote melted back into the undergrowth. Digger bounded across to tell him how she had fearlessly scared away the coyote, licking his face and jumping all over him.

He stood up and hugged Fand, then went and relieved himself in the undergrowth.

They ate and then brushed their teeth before Will and Fand dragged the buggy back down the slope. It was covered in new growth of deergrass, and when they emerged onto the shoulder of The Old Road, they startled the road maintenance crew that was patching up the road.

There wasn't a lot of traffic on The Old Road, which Will had been hoping, and it ran for miles and miles alongside I-5, all the way out of LA and into the mountains. They walked through the long hot afternoon, pausing often for Digger to guzzle more water or to decide she wanted to ride for a while. They were going to have to refill the water carriers some time soon, at a truck stop or service station, and Will could do with a shower.

They were stopped twice by the highway patrol, the first time Will had to hold onto Fand's hand tightly to stop him from bolting. The dangers of running away from police officers with guns was part of urban survival that Will didn't want to have to explain in detail, so he let Fand hide behind him, trembling, while he showed the patrol officer his driver's license.

The officer was a woman who looked about Felicity's age, and she smiled broadly at Will when she spotted the sign and collection tin. "Here," she said, pushing a note into the tin as Digger snuffled around her feet, pulling on the lead.

She looked back over her shoulder at the patrol car, where her partner was yawning. "Bud!" she called out. "Get your wallet over here!"

Bud was old and fat and burned out, and he shuffled out of the car and over to Will and Fand. He didn't argue with his partner, just pushed a bill into the tin, too. "What you collecting for?" he asked gruffly, and Will could feel Fand cringing behind him.

"Autism research," Will said. "Thank you for your donation."

"My nephew's autistic," Bud said, and he took another note out of his wallet and put it into the tin. "I'll radio ahead, let the Santa Clarita patrol know you're on your way. How far you going?"

"Sequoia National Forest," Will said.

"Damned long way to walk," Bud said. "All the best. C'mon, Sam, a dodgy rig just went past, some moron pulling a trailer without lights."

The patrol car drove off, and Will could see Bud speaking into his radio.

Will hugged Fand, kissed his cheek, cuddled him for a while, and Digger took the chance to rest, tongue hanging out as she panted.

\* \* \* \*

The second time the highway patrol stopped them it was late afternoon and the shadows were lying deep across the road. The Interstate was across the other side of the ridge from The Old Road, the traffic a muted roar in the distance. Will hummed as they walked, his mind drifting, contemplating the prospect of a real meal, perhaps in Santa Clarita. At a

truck stop, they'd be able to shower and get a burger and some apple pie perhaps...

Fand said, "Will," pulling Will from his reverie, and a highway patrol car pulled up alongside them with a shower of gravel.

A burly man with a beer-gut levered himself out from behind the wheel, and Will was relieved that Fand didn't try and run from him.

"Hey there," he called out cheerfully, walking toward Will and Fand. "You'd be the folks that Bud radioed about, wouldn't you?"

Will nodded. "We met Bud and Sam a few hours ago."

The man took his wallet out and put a bill in the tin. "Mighty fine what you're doing." His eyes settled curiously on Fand, and Fand pressed his face against Will's shoulder, hiding.

"We've got a nice patrol house in Santa Clarita. You're welcome to come there and shower and have a meal, if you'd like. Reckon we could find you somewhere to sleep, too, if you don't mind sleeping rough."

"Thank you," Will said, and he wrapped an arm around Fand reassuringly. "My friend's not much good indoors, gets claustrophobic. If you've got somewhere we could shower, then camp, that would be useful."

"My name's Mikey," the officer said. "Our patrol house is about five miles from here, on this road, you can't miss it. When you get there, you tell Di on the front desk I sent you. We've got a yard out back, I'm sure you can stay there."



Mikey drove off in a cloud of dust, and Will stroked Fand's arm. Fand didn't feel scared anymore, just kind of content, and Will kissed him, the brims of their hats bumping. "You can have a hot shower there," he said gently. "I won't leave you alone with strangers, I promise."

"He gave you money, didn't he?" Fand asked, kissing Will's neck. "Mmm, you taste salty."

"He did," Will said, and someone drove past them, staring at them through the passenger window of their car. "And you can have as much of my salt as you want."

Fand didn't pull back, just stayed in Will's arms as another car drove past.

"Tonight..." Fand whispered.

"Do you want to make love tonight?" Will asked, nuzzling Fand's cheek.

"Yes," Fand said. "People are so kind, like the park guardians. You make them kind."

"They just want to help," Will said. "Just like me. Do you need to rest now? We've got to walk a bit longer yet."

"Walk," Fand said. "I'm not tired now that we're away from the noise."

They walked, into the golden late afternoon, their own shadows bobbing across the road ahead of them, Digger sitting up in the buggy, nose lifted into the evening scents.

## Chapter 16

The entrance to the Highway Patrol building was bleak, with cracked plastic chairs in a line against the wall and scuffed and worn vinyl on the floor. There was a dusty plastic palm in a corner, beside the notice board, and Will left Digger and Fand there and went over to the reception desk and rang the bell.

A woman appeared from an inner office and leaned over the counter. "What can I do for you, love?" she asked.

"We spoke to Bud earlier," Will said.

"Ah," she said, smiling for the first time. "The wanderers, of course. I'm Dianne. I'll take you around the back and let Bud know you're here."

Will went back to where Fand was fiddling with the plastic plant and slid an arm around his waist. "I'll get you some food soon," Will said, and he glanced down.

In amongst the jumble of brown plastic chips around the base of the plastic palm, seeds were sprouting, unfurling leaves, sending out tendrils, and when Will touched the palm, it was real. "Hey," he said gently, taking Fand's hand in his own. "That's beautiful."

Dianne led them back out of the entrance, and around the side of the building, through gates and past rows of parked patrol cars. There was barking, deep and loud, as Dianne undid yet another gate and she called out, "Stop it!"

Digger jerked on her lead and began barking back, and Fand made a deep cough in his throat, and all of the dogs

stopped barking at once, and Digger slunk back behind Fand's feet.

"That's good," the woman said, and the solid gate swung open to reveal a paved area with a huge table and chairs and a barbecue, clotheslines and a shed, and beyond a patch of grass and trees with kennels down one side.

There were four German Shepherds pressed up against the wire of the kennels, and Fand took Digger's lead and led her over to them. Will said, "He's good with animals," to Dianne.

She nodded, wide-eyed, and said, "They're officer protection dogs. They should be snarling and jumping at the fences, at least until I tell them not to."

The German Shepherds weren't. They were wagging their tails and pressing their heads sideways against the mesh so Fand could rub their foreheads while Digger sniffed them through the mesh, wagging her tail, too.

"Bud said to show you both to the showers and get you a meal. Apparently, you're camping out back here for the night," Dianne said.

When Will took Fand's hand to lead him and Digger indoors, Fand said, "They're special dogs," to him. "Not like Digger, who is special in a different way." He looked at Dianne and said, "Rajah has a sore leg."

"Oh," Dianne said, looking confused.

"How many officers are based here?" Will asked her quickly, hoping to distract her from questions about how Fand had known what Rajah's name was.

Asking a cop about staffing levels inevitably led to a long-winded explanation of what was wrong with promotion and

recruitment, and Diane was still going when she pushed open the door to the showers. "Towels are on that shelf," she said. "There're coveralls here, too, if you want to wear something else and wash the clothes you have on."

Fand peered into the shower cubicles and touched the soap dispenser, and Will parked the buggy beside the hand basins. "Thank you," he said to Dianne.

She nodded and smiled at Fand reading the notices stuck around the mirror. "I'll go and see if I can find you a decent meal, too."

Will sat down on the tiled floor and whistled, and Digger trotted over to him. He patted her and said, "Dinner soon, boots first." He took each of her boots off and inspected each foot carefully in turn.

Fand crouched down beside them and said, "That paw is rubbed sore."

He picked up her right hind paw and showed Will the abrasion on the side and stroked his fingers over the rub.

Knowing Fand could make plants grow was something Will had become used to, but watching raw skin heal over under Fand's touch and Digger's fur regrow wasn't easy to get his head around. "I didn't know you could do that," he whispered.

Fand smiled at Will and hugged Digger when she bounced to her feet and into his arms. "Take your shoes off," Fand said.

Will undid the laces of his sneakers and pulled them and his socks off. His feet weren't in good shape; he hadn't showered for a couple of days, and they must have walked thirty-five miles by now. His feet just plain smelled, and the

skin was wrinkled and pink, with blisters around his toes and heels.

Digger immediately snaffled one of the discarded socks and bolted into a shower cubicle with it, making both Will and Fand laugh, then Fand took one of Will's feet into his hands. Warmth spread through the foot, and Fand stroked his hand over the blisters, melting them away. He did the other foot, too, and Will stared at Fand. "How do you do that?" he asked. "What else can you heal?"

Fand slid his hand up Will's calf, under the jeans, and the muscle fatigue there eased, and Fand smiled. "I'm not a healer," he said. "Not like you mean. And I'm not much good with people, I just don't understand them."

Will kissed Fand, leaning forward, then said, "Let's have a long, hot shower."

In the shower cubicle, Will undressed Fand while the cubicle filled with steam, kissing his collarbones, sliding a hand down his side to cradle his hipbone. "So beautiful," Will whispered against Fand's ear.

They kissed under the water, and Fand was slippery and smooth under Will's hands. Will washed him carefully, soaping his skin, then eventually turned him around to face the tiled wall.

\* \* \* \*

*He touched me, and his fingers were slick, washing my buttocks, making me cling onto the wall in front of me.*

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

*I was burning, gasping as the water streamed down my back, and into my eyes and open mouth, and he pressed his fingers forward, touching me there.*

*I didn't understand why he did it, or why it made me cry out, didn't know anything except that I ached for him to touch me more.*

*He was breathing hard behind me, and I pressed my face against the wall and closed my eyes. He rubbed me over and over, whispering behind me, asking me for something I didn't understand, couldn't possibly understand when the water was filling my ears and his finger was sliding inside me.*

*I cried out as he touched my cock with his other hand, and liquid came out of my body so hard that he had to hold me to stop me from collapsing.*

*I turned around and clung to him and he wrapped one of my hands around his cock, guiding it backwards and forwards quickly, moaning against my ear.*

*His body tensed and he dug his fingers into my shoulders, and I stared down at his cock, the vine leaves wrapped around it, as his seed spurted out.*

\* \* \* \*

The food was good, and Will looked across at Fand, sitting cross-legged on the grass with a plate piled with food on his lap.

There was fried chicken, corn and peas, and a slab of homemade apple pie each, and Fand was eating his indiscriminately, biting into the pie, then following it with a mouthful of chicken.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Dianne had left them after bringing the food out, and Will was distantly aware of bustle in the patrol house, and officers appeared at the door intermittently, calling out greetings. It must be evening shift change.

Digger alternated between prancing up and down outside the kennels, tormenting the German Shepherds with her freedom, coming back to them to beg pieces of chicken, and banging her food bowl against the buggy to ask for more dinner. Will didn't try and stop her.

His feet felt incredibly good from where Fand had touched them, his whole body did, and he just wanted to curl up and sleep, but he'd promised Fand he would play some music before they slept.

They sat out under the stars on the grass, Fand with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, and Will played quietly at first, just to see Fand smile.

Patrol staff began to drift out, Dianne and Bud and other people. They sat around the table, and Fand rocked gently in time to the music.

The sky was clear here, despite Santa Clarita being so close, and the air was cooler than in LA, making Will glad of the sweater he wore over his borrowed coveralls.

Of all the places his life had taken him before, this was the first time he'd played for a bunch of highway patrol officers, wearing prison coveralls, with a fairy shining faintly in the dark beside him.

\* \* \* \*

Fand was warm in Will's arms, one blanket on the ground, the other over the top of them. Digger was curled up beside him, they were about as safe as they could be, in the backyard of a highway patrol house.

They were screened from the building by a bank of grevilleas, so Will kissed Fand and began to undo the studs down the front of his coveralls. After the shower, he was kind of obsessed with the idea of finger-fucking Fand again. He wanted, wanted Fand so badly it was almost a physical ache, but wasn't sure how to go about explaining what he wanted to do to someone as otherworldly as Fand. Will was going to have to show him.

Will eased the shoulders of Fand's coveralls down and wriggled out his own. He slid his hand under the cotton and stroked Fand's belly, then down to his thighs. The skin was blissfully smooth and soft, making Will moan against Fand's shoulder. "I'm going to touch you again," he said quietly.

Fand's eyes were huge in the ambient light, and he sighed as Will touched his ass. "Why does it feel so good?" Fand asked.

"It just does," Will said, and he lifted his hand to his mouth and spat on his fingers, then pressed them wetly back against Fand's ass. "Don't try and think about what I'm doing, just let yourself feel it."

Fand nodded and closed his eyes and spread his legs wider.

Will spent time just circling Fand's ass, gently at first, then more firmly, until Fand was squirming, his cock lying thick and hard against his belly.



Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Digger was sitting mournfully at Will's feet when he looked up, looking like Will had betrayed her, and it made Will smile in amusement. "He's mine," Will said to Digger. "Go and cozy up to Rajah."

Digger lay down again, her muzzle on her front paws, radiating disapproval, and Will looked back at Fand.

He was trembling on the edge of coming, clutching at the blanket beneath him, glowing brightly now, and Will took his hand away reluctantly. "Touch me like that," he said, when Fand opened his eyes again, bewildered.

There was an awkward moment, then Fand's fingers were touching Will's ass carefully, and Will hissed between gritted teeth. It felt damn good and he never wanted it to stop.

Fand was good, briefly pressing his mouth over Will's to silence him, spitting on his fingers just like Will had, then easing one fingertip in.

"Will?" he whispered.

"Wanna fuck me?" Will whispered back, and Fand's gulp was audible.

"How?" he asked, then looked down at where the blanket covered his hand, and his mouth dropped open. "In there?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah," Will said. "I'll do the work, you don't have to worry about that bit."

Fand kissed Will hard, so hard that their teeth clicked together, then went to climb over Will.

"Wait," Will said, and he reached out and rummaged around in his bag of clothes and found a condom and some lube.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Fand was shaking when Will rolled the condom onto his cock and guided him onto his back. Will smeared lube liberally over the latex and said, "Shh."

The coveralls were still caught around one of Will's legs, the blanket was rough on his buttocks, and he had to use one hand to hold Fand's cock steady, then there was the blinding moment of pain.

Fand thrashed on the blanket beneath him, and Will rocked his weight back, pushing Fand's cock inside himself.

Will didn't hear the noise Fand make so much as feel it, and it made Digger lift her nose to the sky and howl, and in the distance a coyote called back. Will groaned and began to rock carefully, trying to give Fand a chance to feel how good it could be, how good they could make each other feel.

Watching Fand come this time was like watching the tide come in; inexorable, irresistible, inevitable; and Will felt like he was on fire, too, stroking his own cock frantically, grinding down onto Fand, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming.

Fand was limp and content in Will's arms afterwards, and Will pulled Fand's coveralls up, then hummed under his breath and stroked Fand's hair and wondered exactly how they were going to explain the trees that were springing up around them, the sound of their growth a steady creaking that filled the night, covering the distant hum of traffic.

## **Chapter 17**

They left early, at first light, slipping out of the side gates, heading out into the rosy dawn. Will hadn't slept much and he should have been exhausted, but he wasn't. Deep happiness possessed him, blissful contentment, and Fand looked like he felt the same way. He was flushed and lovely in the first sunlight, and Will found himself singing quietly as they walked along the footpaths of Santa Clarita.

The sun slipped over the mountains and Santa Clarita fell away behind them as they made their way slowly along the gravel shoulder of the road.

There was traffic on the road, rushing past them, but Fand didn't flinch and pull away like he had the day before. Instead, he walked through the drying long grass on the very edge of the shoulder, right beside the fences of the farms, his hand trailing through the grasses, beatific smile on his face.

Digger was happy to be on the move, pulling cheerfully on her leash, urging them on, her boots leaving little, round imprints in the dust.

When Will glanced behind them, back up the hill they'd just walked down, to check for their footprints, he could make out his and Digger's, but Fand seemed to be walking without touching the ground, leaving no trace apart from the band of poppies nodding and swaying in the air rippling behind the cars and trucks.

Fand stopped when Will did, and he let Will tip his hat back and look closely at his face. His eyes were huge pools of darkness, his skin looked fragile in the sunlight, but his hand

was gentle on Will's face, touching with wonder in his fingertips.

Something had happened, sometime during the night, and when a truck carrying a container whooshed past and Fand didn't seem to notice, Will wondered if Fand had left in some way.

Then Fand smiled, secretive and knowing. He kissed Will, and he was most definitely still there.

Mid-morning they turned off I-5, to head deeper into the farmlands between them and the forest. The trees beside the road were taller, and even in the middle of the day the shade was deep and welcome.

They stopped on a quiet stretch of road and Digger drained two bowls of water and gorged herself on kibble then flopped down beside Will. Will handed granola bars to Fand and mixed powdered juice with water in their mugs. They rested like that, with only the occasional car passing them, for an hour, during the heat of the day. Fand lay down and rested his head on Will's lap and Will stroked his hair gently, and the grass around them grew deep and lush.

They walked on, further into the rising hills, to where the roads twisted and turned and didn't match any of Will's maps, but increasingly Fand seemed to know where they were going, steering them on toward where the hills in the distance were dark with trees.

Mid-afternoon they walked into a small town, just a few houses, a gas station, and a convenience store. There was a patch of grass in front of the store, and Will left Fand and Digger sprawled out on the grass in the shade of a California

oak tree and called Gina from the phone booth in front of the store.

She cackled with glee at his description of camping behind the police station and promised to remind Felicity to feed the chickens, and Will was still smiling to himself when he walked into the store.

He bought beer and bread, a bag of oranges, bars of chocolate and a bag of peanuts, all things he thought would please Fand.

The woman behind the counter peered through the dusty blinds at Fand and Digger sharing a granola bar. "Where you folks headed?" she asked.

"To the sequoia trees," Will said. "My friend wants to see them."

"Walking?" she asked. "From LA?"

Will nodded. "My friend's scared of cars, so we're walking there."

"Looking for somewhere to camp tonight?" she asked.

"Yes," Will said. "Figured we'd walk for another couple of hours, then camp beside the road, but if you've got any suggestions it would be appreciated."

"There're mountain lions in the hills," the woman said, scratching idly at her belly. "And bears. My sister's got a hunting shack, up on Bodfish Road, and I'm sure she won't mind you staying there."

"I was heading for Bodfish Road," Will said.

"I'll give her a call," the woman said, and she reached under the counter for her phone.

\* \* \* \*

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

It was dusk, a mauve and dove gray end to the day, when Will put down the map he'd been peering at in the fading light and pointed up a rough gravel track to a wooden shack so old that it was silver to match the sky.

The door opened easily when Will tugged on the cord dangling through a hole in the wood, and he pushed it open slowly.

It was too dark to see clearly inside, but there was a kerosene lamp and a box of matches beside the door on a ledge, and the lamp filled the cabin with a liquid yellow light.

It was plain, just a table and two chairs, a sink and a bed, but Will appreciated minimalism, and Fand lived under an outcrop of rock, so neither of them were going to mind.

Will ran the water and filled Digger's bowl up, and she drank almost the whole bowl and wolfed down all the kibble, then joined Fand where he was sprawled on the bed.

There was a lean-to beside the shack that housed a chemical toilet and a shower stand consisting of a bucket with holes punched in the bottom over a small gravel pit, and Will decided that washing in the sink inside would be good enough.

They sat on the porch of the cabin and watched the moon rise slowly, like a disc of gold above the tree-clad hills. They'd eaten bread and peanut butter, and oranges, and Fand was experimenting with his beer, shaking the bottle and sucking the foam off the top as it frothed up. Digger lifted her head when a coyote howled, not far away, and shifted herself a little nervously so she was further under Will's chair.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

The dogwood trees around the cabin had dropped their flowers, leaving the ground faintly luminescent, like Fand was in the moonlight, and when Fand's beer-and-peanut-butter kisses had left Will breathless, he let Fand lower him down onto the spent flowers.

The moment was so beautiful, so true and honest, that Will didn't stop Fand from pushing into him without a condom on. They lay like that, Fand deep inside him, the nearly full moon hanging above the trees, and there were little points of light dancing around them in the crowded undergrowth that pressed around the clearing.

Feelings welled inside Will, love and desire and wonder, and Fand gently said, "Don't cry," and he began to move inside Will slowly.

\* \* \* \*

Will woke some time before dawn, when the air was hanging silent and still in the clearing, and Digger looked up from where she was guarding the open door. Fand wasn't beside Will, and for a moment Will wondered if he'd gone, slipped away during the night, but then Digger snuffled a greeting and Fand pushed the door open and stepped over Digger.

His skin was cool when he slid back under the blanket beside Will, though he still tasted of sweat from the night before, and Will kissed him. It was easy to curl up beside Fand, belly to back, his arm draped possessively over Fand, and doze, just for a little longer.

\* \* \* \*

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Fand was quiet again, drifting along beside Will, one hand hooked around Will's elbow, even though the day was growing hot and the road was precipitously hilly. Some of his peace seemed to have spread to Will, because the morning slipped away from them, unrolling over the hills, disappearing off into the deep shade of the trees beside the narrow road, and Will suspected he now knew what eternity felt like.

\* \* \* \*

Miracle Springs was easy to find, and Will paid the entry fee for both of them while Fand stared in open-mouthed wonder at the rapids spilling down the valley.

"Just wait," Will said.

Fand's exuberant joy at discovering that the water in the rock pools was hot had Will laughing out loud while Fand jumped up and down in one of the rock tubs, shouting and splashing.

His exhilaration warmed Will more than the hot water, and later, when Fand had calmed down a little, Will held him and they floated together in the hot water while Digger looked mournfully at them from the cool shade underneath a sycamore tree.



## Chapter 18

It was dusk—cool and damp and shadowed under the trees—when Will followed Fand off the track. The forest had been rising up around them steadily through the day, and they'd climbed higher and higher. Without the sun on their backs it was almost cold.

Fand looked ... pensive perhaps, like he was increasingly moving away from Will, going somewhere Will couldn't follow, and yet, when they paused to catch their breaths, and Will kissed Fand, he was responsive and affectionate.

The park had rules about where camping was allowed, but Will had no issues with ignoring them, and he was certain Fand would have laughed if Will had told him.

They halted in the middle of a grove of sequoias, and Fand's mouth was open when he craned his neck to look up at the trees.

Digger bumbled around once Will had taken her boots off, and Fand wandered the grove, touching each tree, pressing his face against the bark. Will spread one of the blankets out amongst the bracken and put out food for Digger and them, and water. There was beer left from two days before, but it was too warm to drink, so he nestled the bottles into the damp soil to cool down.

Fand sat down beside Will, t-shirt covered in bark and bracken fronds, and Will handed him granola bars and oranges. There was an unearthly silence in the grove, as though sound was swallowed by the trees, and when Will began to play his guitar, he felt very insignificant.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Will was aware of movement in the grove, but neither Fand nor Digger seemed concerned, so he strummed and sang softly until darkness had filled the spaces between the trees and Digger was asleep.

When Will put his guitar aside, Fand took his hand and led him to the center of the grove and they kissed slowly.

At home there had been times, especially since Fand had arrived, when Will had been acutely aware of the earth turning, circling the sun, of the trees growing and the air currents stirring. Up high in the mountains, the feeling came upon him again.

The soil was damp and mossy under Will's knees and the air was cold on his back, and when Fand guided him over him, Will didn't need to ask him if that was what he really wanted.

He knew about the analogies between gardening and sex, the plowing and the planting of seed, but with his hands pushed into the leaf litter and a fairy writhing and gasping beneath him it was no longer merely an analogy. He glanced up, acutely aware they were being watched, but the person crouching down amongst the bracken wasn't human, no human had leaves instead of skin. Fand moved, suddenly and sharply, and Will concentrated on what he was doing.

Deep inside Fand, for the first time, the earth spinning and the feeling of forever flowing through his veins, Will could feel Fand's mind.

He was quicksilver, whirling like the planet, hands pulling at Will's shoulders, urging him on, and Will couldn't have held back, couldn't have stopped, had to make them both come,

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

over and over, plowing the forest floor, even when one of the fairies watching him stroked his back gently.

He was going to lose Fand, he knew that.

\* \* \* \*

Will went to sleep, naked and wrapped in one of the blankets, Digger beside him, the leaf fairy stroking his forehead while Fand flew and danced and cried and sang, not alone any longer.

\* \* \* \*

*I'm on fire, burning up with happiness, not sure which is best: to have found other beings like me, or for Will to have done what he'd done the night before.*

\* \* \* \*

Late in the afternoon, when Will's fingers were sore from playing his guitar, Digger flopped down at Will's feet and looked at him with wise eyes.

"He's gone, hasn't he?" Will asked Digger. When Will put aside his guitar, Digger clambered into his lap, and Will hugged her, his face buried in Digger's fur.

He stayed for one last night, just in case Fand come back.

\* \* \* \*

*It's too hard to believe what the others are saying; that a human will kill me, chain me to him, then leave. They show me what I must once have known, that I can soar over the*

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

*trees, where the air is clean, up to the stars, and I follow them, just for a few days, to taste the sky.*

\* \* \* \*

The walk back to Lake Isabella was easy, once Will had found the firebreak they'd walked in on. Part of him wanted to walk all the way back to Los Angeles, retrace their steps, but he was tired and lonely, and there was a truck hire depot in Lake Isabella.

The buggy was strapped down to the flat bed truck; Digger was cheerful, bouncing happily around the cab of the truck. If there was anything Digger liked more than long walks, it was to ride in a car, head hanging out of the window. Her mood didn't touch Will through his overwhelming grief and regret.

It wasn't far to Los Angeles, only a couple of hours drive to the city outskirts, but Will couldn't face driving back the way they'd walked, down I-5, so he snaked around, taking the long way home. The radio in the truck was tuned to a country and western station, and Will left it there.

\* \* \* \*

*He's gone, when I go looking for him, and I don't know why. Did he not understand that I would be back?*

\* \* \* \*

The potato plant forest in the front yard was up to Will's shoulders, a painful reminder of Fand's magic. Digger managed a small bounce of excitement at being home again before she yawned.

Devon's bike was on the porch, beside Will's. There must have been problems with the chickens for him to be staying over.

Will unlocked the front door and turned the hall light on. Digger sniffed past him, and then dropped mournfully to her haunches and gazed at Felicity's door. A faintly alarming idea occurred to Will.

He found bread in the bread box, a homemade loaf that felt fresh to the touch, so Will turned the hot water faucet on to establish if there was warm water, and cut himself a slab of bread.

The water ran warm, so he turned it off for the moment. Felicity's bedroom door opened just as Will was biting into his bread and honey.

Felicity tied her bathrobe around her waist and said, "Um, hi, Dad. Didn't think you'd be home for ages."

Will nodded. "Wound up hiring a truck and driving home. Any problems while I was away?"

"Guess not," Felicity said, scratching at her chin, and Devon appeared behind her, wearing jeans and nothing else.

"Hey, Will," he said, pushing past Felicity and hugging Will briefly, and he smelled of sex.

"Hi, Devon," Will said. "Sorry to wake you both up."

Felicity disappeared back to her bedroom, her face deep red, and Devon shrugged expressively, and they both burst out laughing.

"Hope I haven't made trouble," he said, and Will shook his head.

"Just don't break her, that's all," Will said.

Devon laughed again and thumped Will hard in the arm.  
"Promise I won't," he said.

\* \* \* \*

Will took a plate piled high with bread slabs smeared with honey, and a beer, into the bathroom. He was going to have a long, hot bath and scrub himself clean because he'd been grubby so long that the dirt was ingrained now.

The water was blissfully warm to sink back into, and he reached for the soap.

The marks were still there, the silver lines tracing leaf-veins across the ink on his cock, ringing each leaf, too. He'd spotted them at the truck stop at Tehachapi while using the bathroom, but had had no time to even think about them. The lines were faintly raised, like a new tattoo, and when he rubbed at them gently with a soapy washcloth, they didn't disappear.

He liked them.

\* \* \* \*

Doug was familiar and warm, but there was a lump in Will's throat and he had to pull away from him.

"Sorry," he said, and Doug looked puzzled.

"What's happened?"

Will looked across his garden, to where the tree covered ridges of Griffith Park rose up to the pewter sky. There'd be a storm before morning.

What had happened?

"I have to leave," Will said. Far off thunder rumbled over the sounds of the suburb. Hopefully there wouldn't be lightning strikes, Griffith Park was drying out fast, the undergrowth dense from the late spring rains.

"Forever?" Doug asked, and Will turned to look at him.

"Perhaps," he said.

\* \* \* \*

Felicity opened the back door of Gina's house and hugged Will.

"Hi, Dad," she said, as Digger pushed between their legs, wagging her tail so hard the back half of her body shook, too.

Hypatia shot down the hallway, barking and yipping, and Felicity scooped the ball of fur up efficiently and held the squirming dog until Will had a firm grip on Digger's collar.

"Mom's home," Felicity said.

The door to Gina's study opened, and she shouted, "Shut that dog up!"

"Dad's here," Felicity called back, handing Hypatia to Will, then disappearing off to the kitchen.

Digger bounced excitedly up at Will, so Will pushed the back door open again, dropped Hypatia outside, and slammed the door shut as Digger scooted out after the mutt.

"Got some time?" Will asked Gina.

They sat on the front steps of Gina's house, and Will waited until a kid on roller blades had slid past.

"I have to go away again."

Gina stared at him incredulously. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

Will shook his head, not certain if he could even make himself speak. How he felt must have shown because Gina slid an arm around his shoulders and hugged him.

"It's that man, isn't it?" Gina asked gently. "The one you went on holiday with. Felicity said you came back without him."

"I have to go back there," Will said. "I have to look for him."

"Go," Gina said.

\* \* \* \*

Gina's car was air-conditioned, and the June day was warm enough that she'd insisted on it being switched on, meaning Will and Digger were stuck inside a glass and plastic box, listening to commercial radio, for the duration of the drive to Lake Isabella.

Will knew he should have been grateful, he would never have been able to take Digger on a bus, but Gina's good-natured chatter and consoling glances were spears through his heart. He'd loved her enough to have a child with her, and if the pair of them hadn't been able to hold onto that relationship, then what hope did he have with Fand?

Assuming he could even find Fand.

\* \* \* \*

The park ranger stared at Will blankly and shook his head. "There're no homeless people in the park. Have you tried the Tule River reservation? Your friend might have been taken in there, especially if he was Amerindian."



"What about at Miracle Springs?" Will asked. "Has a homeless man wandered in there?"

The ranger looked disinterested and disinclined to help, but some of Will's desperation must have transferred across, because the ranger took out his short wave radio and flicked it on.

A minute or two of exchanged static and mumbles and the ranger put his radio away and shrugged at Will. "There was a homeless man there yesterday. Clive said he gave the guy some food, and he headed back this way."

Back this way. Will had been worried that Fand would try and walk back to LA, always a few miles ahead of Will, but if he had come back to the trees, then there was a chance.

"Thanks," Will said, and he slung his guitar over his shoulder and adjusted his pack while Digger fidgeted happily on her lead.

\* \* \* \*

The trees were familiar this time, conifers rising above Will, up the mountainside, and Digger pulled on the lead. It took Will a while to work out Digger was trying to guide him, dragging him away from the firebreak and through the undergrowth, plunging deeper into the forest, begrudging him the occasional rest and having to be placated with kibble.

The sun had disappeared behind the range, though the sky was a translucent blue and the tops of the trees shone golden in the remains of the sunlight, when Digger wuffed and dove through the bracken and dragged Will into a sequoia grove.

Fand  
*by Laney Cairo*

There were thirty-eight sequoia groves either in the park, or adjacent to and covered by the Giant Sequoia National Monument. Each sequoia grove was named and mapped, each tree numbered and measured, and Will had pored over maps every night for the past week, since he'd come home from losing Fand. This grove was not on the map that Will had committed to memory, this grove did not exist.

The sequoias were young trees, trunks smooth and healthy, and the bracken beneath them crunched under Will's feet. He found a clear place, under a cycad taller than himself, and slid his pack and guitar off his back

In the early evening gloom, the air seemed to shine, and it felt like the trees were listening when he called out, "Fand!"

There was no answer, apart from a breeze rattling the treetops.

A stream coursed down the mountainside, close to the grove, and Will drank his fill, Digger beside him.

They walked back to the grove in the end of the light, as the cool of the night replaced the last of the sunshine, the sky deep violet overhead, between the trees.

He hadn't brought much with him, just kibble for Digger and granola bars and raisins for himself. If he ate all of his own food, he could always share Digger's kibble.

It was dark when he took out his guitar and began to play. His throat was too tight to sing, so he just strummed chords, and the tiny points of light began to appear, twinkling as they moved amongst the bracken.

\* \* \* \*

It was Digger's woof that woke Will, making him struggle upright, blanket slipping from his shoulders.

Fand was crouched in front of Will and Digger, shining brightly enough to cast a pool of light in the inky grove, and Fand didn't pull away when Will reached out a hand to touch the light, just took his hand.

"You came back?" Fand asked, and Will nodded, too close to crying to speak.

There were leaves in Fand's hair, entwined with strands of black hair, but when Will brushed a careful hand over them, they didn't dislodge.

They kissed, and Digger sighed mournfully and flopped down on the leaf litter again. Will's face was wet, tears of relief streaking his skin, and Fand touched his face, then licked his fingertips.

Any fears that Will had that he was dreaming were allayed when Fand lay back on Will's blanket and pulled Will over on top of him, winding his arms around Will's neck.

Fand's mouth was open and eager, and it was with great reluctance that Will lifted his mouth off Fand's. "What happened?" Will asked.

"The others said to leave you," Fand said. "That I couldn't be with you, that you were dead and that I'd die, too, that I'd never be able to fly with them. They were wrong, you make me fly when you touch me."

Fand was porcelain fragile when Will slid a hand under his t-shirt, ribs beneath parchment skin, but Fand's hands were urgent, dragging Will's clothes aside, clawing at Will's skin.

Fand didn't ask for anything, but he didn't need to.

\* \* \* \*

The land had been cleared once, though now the forest was reclaiming it, taking back the sunlight and soil, but there was enough tillable ground left that Will could support them both.

"Nice," Fitch said, as she switched off the hired truck's ignition. "Very nice."

The block had a hunting shack on it, with a rain water tank behind it, up at the top of the hill. The fences were crumbling, the ground pocked with cottontail holes, and when Digger bounced out of the truck cab, the dog launched herself down the hill, barking ecstatically.

Gina's sedan pulled down the gravel access lane and bounced across the dirt, pulling up beside the hire truck.

"Let's get unloaded," Will said, and he pulled at one of the ropes that had secured his worldly possessions to the truck.

"What's first?" Fitch asked, hauling on a rope beside him.

"Let's get the seedlings off the truck, then build chicken coops," Will said. "Before Gina kills me for leaving twenty chickens in her car for a moment longer than necessary."

\* \* \* \*

The shack was stacked with boxes of books and sacks of grain; with a fire in the woodstove, keeping the autumn chill away. The door was propped open and Digger hurtled in and out, still trembling with excitement at the coyote howls in the distance.

Maz had sent a giant tub of soup, thick with barley and lentils, which was warming on the stove.

Clouds rolled in from the coast, hanging dark in the evening sky, making Will pull on a sagging sweater before he picked up his old guitar.

The couch from his back porch had made the move, too, and now occupied most of the front porch of the shack. He sat down on the couch and Cheshire clambered out from one of the boxes and hopped up beside him.

The chickens were cooing in their pens, inside the fence that ringed the shack as well, hastily put together by Fitch and himself that afternoon. There was work to be done, urgent work. He needed to cut in beds for potatoes and brassicas, ready for the winter. He needed to patch up the boundary fence enough that Fitch could bring him a couple of goats. The roof of the shack needed tar paper, the windows needed sealing, and the guttering was crumbling.

The shack had no electricity, only rudimentary plumbing, and Cheshire had better do something about the mice in a hurry.

He started teaching the following week at the regional high school, thirty miles by bike from the shack. It was only part-time work—that was all he'd been able to get—but it was enough.

He played while the night drew in, and once the stars had come out, the forest was faintly luminescent, stretching on over the mountains into the distance. Digger hopped up onto the couch beside Cheshire, tongue hanging out, and Will patted Digger's head and tugged on her ears gently.

Fand  
by Laney Cairo

The little ones were there, clustering in the conifers that had started to take back the farm land, waves of phosphorescence that rippled as Fand made his way across the weed-logged land toward Will.

\* \* \* \*

Tiny leaves caught in Will's hair that he couldn't dislodge, and the silver tendrils traced across his thighs and belly, but none of that mattered when Fand was wrapped around him, open-mouthed and eager, making his old bed creak like a tall tree in a storm.

\* \* \* \*

*Will's gone, to teach children, and I'm learning to be a gardener. There are toos-pung-ish, tall tree seedlings, lined up beside the house, and I take each one and plant it out, beside the forest. They'll be happy here, with sunshine and rain, and when they've grown, I'll have a grove of my own.*

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