

THE POWERS OF LOVE



J. M. SNYDER

THE POWERS OF LOVE

...As Matt thrust into him, his panting breath hot and heavy in Vic's ear, Vic found himself thinking about those stupid thoughts that had haunted his head throughout the day. Had he *really* been reading minds? He didn't think so, but how would a talent like that enhance a moment like this? What would it feel like to be both lovers during sex? To savor the penetration and the slick skin wrapped tight around his cock at the same time? To be the tongue that caressed his balls and the mouth that suckled them, as well? To experience the intimate act of making love as both partners at once?

To come in a fiery rush that sparked his lover's orgasm, to shudder beneath a dual wave of release, to wrap his arms around himself and stare into his own eyes and hear his own voice murmur softly against his chin, "I love you." To feel the strength and safety of his own arms as he held himself close. What would *that* be like?

Vic clung to Matt with a fierce embrace and tried to imagine himself behind those deep green eyes, but the power or whatever it had been earlier was now gone. He was alone inside his own head, and Matt's soft kisses and tender touch told him all he needed to know about how his lover felt for him...

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BY

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THE POWERS OF LOVE
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For Fuchs, who kindled in me a love affair with comic books.

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Vic Braunson met Matt at the gym downtown where he went to lift weights after work. There was something between them from the start—Vic felt a hungry gaze on his back as he worked out, and in the mirrored wall he noticed it came from a young man wearing swim trunks and nothing else. With smooth olive skin whorled with dark hair, those tight black curls hugging his scalp, Matthew diLorenzo looked like a Grecian god poised in the doorway to the weight room, watching him. Vic wanted to lick down those long legs, massage the balls of those large feet in his palms, nip at those thick ankles. He liked a man with good-sized feet—the adage was true, in his experience; Matt's looked like prehensile

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flippers and hinted at so much more crammed into those tight trunks.

Later, in the showers, Vic caught a glimpse of Matt's bare ass, the long length hanging limp between his legs, those tight thighs and thin hips. So he'd been right—the feet *were* an indication of bigger things in store.

Matt was Vic's height, just shy of six feet, but what looked tall and lean on him was bulk and muscle on Vic. His forearm was easily the size of Matt's thigh, and the thought of wrapping those long legs around his own thick waist excited him. He'd just resolved to talk to the guy, say hey and see where things went from there, when his co-worker Kyle Munley came up to him in the locker room and clapped a heavy hand on his back. "You met my new guy yet?"

Vic turned to find Matt beside Kyle. This close, his dark green eyes caught the light like chips of malachite. His shoulders were still damp from the shower, his blue-black hair plastered to his scalp and curling as it dried. The smoldering way he looked Vic over made Kyle disappear.

Why couldn't I meet him first?

Disappointment shot through Vic like a bullet. He gave Matt a curt nod before turning away, but his thoughts didn't shut off so easily. Those eyes haunted him, and for the first time in years, he woke the next morning with a fierce erection, his mind filled with dreams of being taken by this man in every way he could imagine, being loved, being *savored*. He began to linger at the gym like a lovesick schoolboy, checking out the men in the shower in the hopes of seeing Matt again,

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hanging out by the pool whenever the team had practice. The slightest glance from the guy, the briefest nod or quickest wave or, God forbid, a *smile* of any proportion, was enough to fuel Vic's desire.

He tried to play it off—a man his age, really, sliding toward forty like a base runner aiming for home plate. A big guy like him, all beef and brawn, with his shaved head and his pierced ears and the tattoos inked across his arms and back. The moustache and goatee he wore because it gave him a devilish appearance. The leather jacket he favored, with its chains and bandanas and ripped pockets held together with safety pins. Guys like him didn't crush on their buddy's hot new boyfriend like some randy teenager just discovering his own cock and balls.

Yet there it was.

* * *

Vic drove the city bus, picking up commuters mostly, circling through inner city traffic downtown from 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. Kyle drove a different route, so Vic never saw much of him outside the locker rooms at work or the gym. They weren't even friends really, but now Vic made up excuses to talk to Kyle, waiting around at the end of his shift to see if maybe they could grab a beer before heading home, "And why not invite Matt to join us?"

"Doesn't drink," was Kyle's standard reply. The clueless way he swung an arm over Vic's shoulders said he thought Vic was hitting on him. But once he learned Matt wouldn't be

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there, Vic begged off, ducking out from under Kyle's arm to head back to his locker for something he claimed he forgot. With a chuckle, Kyle would holler after him, "Maybe next time!"

Two months passed, and one day it was Kyle waiting for Vic, sneaking a smoke outside the back gate. As Vic slowed, Kyle fell into step beside him. "How 'bout that drink tonight, what do you say?" He suggestively raised one eyebrow. "I'm a single man again, Vic. Better get it while you can."

Vic's step faltered, his heart stuttering in his chest. "What do you mean?"

With a shrug, Kyle admitted, "It just wasn't working out between us, you know? Yeah he's hot as shit, and the sex was great, don't get me wrong, but that was about it. Hey, where you going? What about that drink?"

Over his shoulder, Vic said, "Not tonight. Maybe later, eh?"

Maybe never. Vic drove to the gym like one of the drivers he silently cursed during the day, weaving in and out of traffic, cutting off cars in his haste to be there already. But Matt wasn't in the locker room or the showers, and the pool was closed with no lifeguard on duty. What would Vic have said anyway? *Heard you ditched Kyle...* How bad did that sound? What if it hadn't been a clean break-up? What if Matt was laying low for a few days, nursing a broken heart?

I can help him with that. But now that he could approach the guy, Matt wasn't at the gym and Vic had no idea where else to look. He couldn't ask Kyle, of all people. He was pretty

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sure the “man law” about not dating a friend’s ex didn’t extend to co-workers, but he didn’t want to give Kyle any hold over him, however slight. Besides, hooking up with a guy through his last boyfriend was tacky, no matter how Vic tried to turn it around in his favor.

Days shuffled into weeks; weeks stretched into a month. Vic couldn’t shake the feeling that Matt was somewhere just beyond his reach—every room he entered in the gym, he felt so sure that Matt had just exited a moment before. He hovered on the edges of Vic’s vision, forever out of sight. Maybe he’d switched gyms to avoid Kyle. Maybe he’d moved and that’s why they broke up in the first place. A sobering thought began to plague Vic—those smiles Matt used to give him from a distance, those glances and nods and waves, those hot stares in the weight room or the shower...had they meant *nothing*?

Was Vic the only one who’d felt the energy arc between them the first time they’d met? The surge of power that had threatened to short out the electricity when they’d shaken hands? The dreams that left Vic aching and sore in the mornings, as if the sex had been real?

That wasn’t just him, was it?

* * *

Later that summer, Vic found himself scheduled for back-to-back shifts, covering for co-workers out on vacation. In addition to his morning route, he drove the Green line at night, looping around the outskirts of the city until the last run shortly before midnight. This new route ran from the

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community college on the East End to the YMCA on Southside. Around eight one night Vic pulled up to the stop in front of the Y, where a small crowd waited to board his bus. Normally he didn't look at the fares, didn't want to encourage conversation; he watched the anonymous hands that dropped quarters and tokens into the meter while in his mind he was already pulling away from the curb, following his route. These double shifts were killing him...

A man's hand dropped a quarter into the meter, then clamped down over the plastic box as if to ensure the coin went in. Vic watched the hand with an amused detachment, but when it didn't move, he sighed. There was always a wise guy, every trip. "C'mon man, move along," he growled, glancing up at the fare.

A pair of sunglasses rode low on the slope of a thin nose, giving Vic a peek at familiar dark-green eyes. The faint smile on Matt's lips widened when he saw Vic rendered speechless. "Long time, no see," he purred.

Vic had no response to that.

With a salacious wink, Matt nudged the shades back into place and stepped into the aisle to take a seat at the back of the bus. He rode through the route twice, long legs stretched out into the aisle, arms draped over the seat behind him like an open invitation. Each time Vic looked into the mirror above the driver's seat, he saw Matt staring back. Even through those dark shades, he felt Matt's gaze on the back of his head, boring into his shaved scalp to fester in his brain. It surprised him that no one else on the bus felt that gaze like a heat ray

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closing the distance between them, burning up everything in its path, threatening to consume them both.

The other riders dropped off singly or in pairs. At the last stop, Vic glanced at the mirror and saw Matt had moved closer—no longer content to stay at the back of the bus, he now sat just behind the driver's seat. When he saw he had Vic's attention, Matt murmured, "Hey."

Vic cleared his throat. "You go to the Y now? I ain't seen you at the gym."

"You miss me?" Matt wanted to know.

With a shrug, Vic asked, "Where's your stop?"

"End of the line." Those shades dipped low again, giving Vic a quick look at those sparkling eyes. "Back to the terminal. With you."

Outside the windows, the night rushed by them. Vic wondered what else he could say that wasn't exactly *come home with me* but left the option open. Surprisingly, it was Matt who suggested a drink after the end of his shift. "Kyle used to say you wanted him," Matt told Vic over a cup of coffee in a diner downtown. "Said you always asked him to go out after work and he felt real bad turning you down just because of me."

"He never turned me down." Vic shook his head, amused. With a gruff laugh, he explained, "I always asked if you'd join us. When he said no, I found something else to do." At Matt's faint smile, Vic added, "It wasn't *him* I wanted to hang out with. He's not my type."

"Oh?" Matt sipped his coffee and tried to sound

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unconcerned. "He told me you were a good fuck."

Vic rolled his eyes. Guys like Kyle talked too damn much. "Funny, he said the same about you."

Matt held his disinterested air for a second longer, then snickered into his cup, sputtering hot coffee through his nose. "Oh God, I'm going to choke," he gasped, wiping at his face. "I never slept with him. I *wouldn't*. I don't rush into things like that, but he got all mad and kicked me to the curb. Said he'd find someone else to put out for him. Good riddance."

Sadly, Vic stared into his coffee cup. There went his plans for the evening, or any night in the foreseeable future. But then Matt's hand covered his. "Hey, I didn't mean to shoot you down or anything," he said, his fingers smoothing along Vic's rough knuckles. "I'm just saying let's take it slow. One day at a time. See where things go between us, you know?"

Take it slow. *I'm not getting any younger here, kid. Neither of us are.* But at least he had this moment, this touch. He'd waited this long, right? What was another month or two, if things worked out between them? With an abrupt nod, Vic said, "Sure."

Those fingers eased around his to fold into his palm. "Remember," Matt pointed out, "I'm the one who asked you out."

"For coffee."

Matt shrugged. "It's a start."

* * *

Four months later on New Year's Eve, Vic couldn't wait

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any longer.

Matt sat beside him on the couch, a glass of sparkling clear champagne in one hand that he raised to toast the TV when the ball began to drop in Times Square. The bubbly made his eyes shimmer, his cheeks flush. His thin wrist looked as delicate as the stem of the glass he held so carefully, his skin dusky in the low light. The dark curls that clung to his head begged to be combed through, but so far, Vic had managed to keep his hands to himself.

As the rest of the east coast counted down, Matt turned to him with a wide grin. "Here's to us."

Plucking the glass from Matt's hand, Vic set it on the coffee table and eased an arm along the back of the couch behind his friend. As his fingers strummed Matt's neck just below the hairline, he murmured, "Matty."

Matt's eyes widened and his lower lip trembled ever so slightly, but his hand found Vic's knee, his touch encouraging. Cupping the back of Matt's neck, Vic leaned closer as he pulled his friend to him for their first tender kiss. After all the waiting, the *wanting*, they meshed together easily, a perfect fit. Matt opened to him, lips parting to take Vic in, his tongue already licking out to taste his friend. As Vic's other arm wrapped around Matt to hold him close, Matt clenched Vic's knee, then let his fingers explore the taut denim along his friend's inner thigh until he found the bulge throbbing at Vic's crotch. Against his mouth, Vic whispered, "I know you want to wait but, Matty, I need you. From the moment we met—"

Matt silenced him with an ardent kiss.

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Strong hands slipped beneath clothing to knead firm muscles, heated flesh. Matt let Vic lay him down on the couch, lips damp and mouths hungry, shirts tugged up and jeans uncomfortable between them, belts unbuckled, pants unzipped. "Please," Matt moaned, and "Vic," and "Yes," over and over again as if he had no other words for this moment.

Vic kissed each one away before trailing his tongue along the underside of Matt's chin, down his throat, to the hollow between his collarbones, unbuttoning Matt's shirt as he went. His lips found one hard nipple, dark and succulent like a chocolate kiss. As his tongue rimmed the tender skin, Matt rocked beneath him, thrusting his hips into Vic's.

"The hell with waiting," he sobbed, his hands rubbing over Vic's shaved head as if looking for purchase. "Oh, yes, please, yes."

Farther, easing down jeans and underwear, Vic finally traced the contours of his friend's lanky body. The belly like a flat plain between his hips, the line of dark hair that trickled into his briefs to pool in a thick patch of curls at his crotch, the red-tipped erection that rose to meet Vic's hot, damp lips. Matt bucked as Vic took him in, one hand rubbing below his friend's fuzzy balls to thumb over his tight, hidden hole.

At the last moment, Vic half-stood on the couch and shucked off his own jeans. Behind him on the end table was a half-empty tube of hand cream that he used this time of the year to keep his knuckles from cracking with the dry weather. Now, he slathered his hands with the unscented lotion, then slicked both their cocks with the oily sheen. Positioning

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himself with one knee on either side of Matt's narrow hips, Vic leaned down for another kiss, and a second, a third. A trail of tiny kisses led him along Matt's jaw, as between them, their hard cocks pressed together with a sweet ache. Into Matt's ear, Vic whispered, "You don't know how long I've wanted to feel you in me."

"Oh, I know," Matt assured him. "Seven months, thirteen days, four hours, twenty minutes, how many seconds?" At Vic's laugh, he added, "Hey, but who's counting?"

Cradling Vic's large frame with both hands, Matt rubbed down the cleft between his friend's buttocks and one finger poked into him unexpectedly. At Vic's sharp intake of breath, Matt guided him down onto the head of his dick. Above him Vic groaned, "Fuck me, Matty."

He sat back, pushed past the discomfort, and finally, *finally* took Matt in. Now he was the one gasping "Yes" and "Please" and "Oh, oh, OH." Matt filled him up inside, completing him, his hands on Vic's ass and chest and arms, his mouth clamped to Vic's earlobe as they moved together with a synchronous rhythm harder, faster, yes. Vic rode Matt's hard shaft as waves of desire crested over him. He raised up on his knees until Matt threatened to slip free and then plunged down again, taking in Matt's entire length, as far as he would go, feeling him deep within. His heart hammered in time with their hard, steady thrusts; the couch bumped against the wall with a faint knocking that matched their beat. Their breathy gasps and guttural moans of pleasure drowned out the noise in the apartment below. All that existed for Vic was

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Matt—in him, under him, holding him close.

It was over all too soon. When Matt came, Vic felt a burning rush that shot through him like a single flare on a dark night, lighting up every inch of his body, setting every nerve aflame, igniting his own orgasm. He felt *alive*, in a way he had never felt with another lover, and he held Matt in just to cling to this moment, this man. Before Matt could slip from him, Vic wrapped his arms around his friend, cuddling him into the couch as he kissed the sweat from Matt's neck. "Love you."

The admission startled them both. Vic never thought he'd say it out loud to another, ever. Once it was free he tried to play it off, sucking at a tender place behind Matt's ear to distract his friend, but he felt the cock in him thickening in response and then Matt sighed, "Me too."

So it's not just me. As he kissed the words away, Vic moved against Matt, hungry for more.

* * *

Vic's dreams of Matt had always been so damn realistic that at first he thought the warm body in his arms was nothing more than a ghostly figment following him into the morning. But then the man beside him shifted in his sleep, eliciting a soft moan, and the ass against Vic's crotch awoke his dick. Vic opened his eyes to find his face buried in a thatch of small black curls, his lips pressed against the back of Matthew's neck. So last night *had* happened—they were finally over the almost imperceptible line that separated friends from lovers.

The thought energized him. With Matt in his arms, Vic felt

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invincible, as if he could take on the world. Today was going to be awesome, he just knew it, and tomorrow, and the day after. Every night spent with this man was a precious gift Vic knew he would treasure. How long had he waited to find something like this? Seven months, sure, since he'd first seen Matt at the gym and wanted—no, *needed*—him. But it was longer than that, to be honest. Despite his tough exterior, deep inside, Vic believed in true love, happy ever after, Prince Charming, and rose petals on the bed sheets, forever cast in a perfect ring of gold. He believed in “The One” and really hoped Matt was it.

Careful not to wake his friend, Vic extracted himself from Matt's tangled limbs and slipped from the bed. *His lover*, he reminded himself as he padded, barefoot and naked, to the bathroom. A slight chill in the morning air made his flesh pimple into goose bumps and inside the bathroom, he pulled on the oversized flannel bathrobe hanging from the back of the door. To his own grizzled reflection in the mirror above the sink, he growled, “Damn, it's cold.”

He realized now how comfortable the bed had been, how warm the blankets were wrapped around the two of them, and he wondered just how fast he could be in the bathroom. With any luck, Matt would still be asleep when Vic was finished taking a piss. He could just crawl back between the sheets, snuggle up to his lover, maybe kiss him awake and see if they couldn't pick up where they left off last night. The way his dick kept trying to stand in his hand as he tried to aim it in the john betrayed its approval at *that* idea.

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Vic winced at the toilet's loud flush and turned on the hot water in the sink, eager to get back to bed. If Matt slept through *that*—

In his hand he felt a slight *snap* and the faucet handle turned around full circle. *Shit*. When he turned the handle to its original position, the water splashing into the sink slowed to a trickle but didn't cut off completely. With annoyance, he flicked the handle and it spun around three hundred sixty degrees like a child's toy. This was *just* what he needed today. "Fuck."

A faint knock on the bathroom door interrupted him as Matt called out in a sleepy voice, "Vic? You in there?"

"Sink's broke." Vic opened the door to find Matt standing in the buff, his long body an endless stretch of dusky skin. Dark hair lined his arms and legs and stomach like ink marks, coalescing into a scribble at his crotch. Even just standing here, rubbing his eyes as he tried to wake up, he looked amazing. "Hey sexy."

Stepping into the small bathroom, Matt yawned and sat down on the toilet, covering his face with his hands. "Jeez, I'm tired." With his eyes closed he reached out for Vic, his hands finding the open front of the bathrobe before pulling Vic towards him. Wrapping his arms around Vic's waist, he nuzzled against his lover's lower belly, inches from the hardening shaft that jumped when Matt brushed its tender tip. He kissed Vic's slight paunch. "Let's go back to sleep, what do you say?"

"The sink—" Vic started.

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Matt ducked his head and blew softly, his breath tickling across Vic's flesh. When Vic's cock bobbed up eagerly, Matt took a playful nip at it and missed. "Come sleep with me."

Tempting as that sounded, the rush of water in the sink reminded Vic that he couldn't just slink off to bed. "I have to fix the faucet first." At Matt's frown, Vic explained, "The washer must've snapped. It'll take ten minutes, tops."

"Ten minutes?" Matt whined.

Vic started to reply when he saw the mischievous glint in those green eyes. "That's all, I promise." Running a hand through Matt's tight curls, he asked, "Why don't you go lay back down? Get yourself ready. I'll join you shortly."

Matt kissed Vic's hairless crotch, nosing aside his erection to plant his lips flat against the smooth skin. "Ten minutes is all you get," Matt told him. "If you're not in bed with me when your time is up, I'm going to have you right here. Up against the sink if necessary. Fine time for it to break."

With a grin, Vic rubbed the top of Matt's head. "It just twisted off in my hand."

* * *

Much as Vic would have loved to linger in bed with Matt the rest of the day, he was scheduled for an evening shift at the bus depot and had to leave by three. "I'll stay here," Matt promised, snuggling into disheveled sheets as he watched Vic dress for work. "Keep the bed warm for you. Maybe you'll get off early."

"I'll try to hold it until I get home," Vic replied with a

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wink. “I’d rather get off with you.”

Tucking his shirt into his pants, he leaned over and gave Matt a rough kiss in the middle of his forehead. Before he could stand, Matt caught him by the collar and pulled him down to press his lips to Vic’s. Against his mouth, he murmured, “What you said last night. Was it true?”

Gently, Vic took Matt’s upper lip between his teeth and kissed it, then did the same with the pouty lower lip. His third kiss covered Matt’s mouth completely. “Love you, yes,” he whispered into Matt.

Beneath him, Matt relaxed and lay back against the pillows as Vic stood. Releasing his collar, Matt’s hand smoothed down the front of Vic’s shirt to fist at the buckle of his belt. With a slight tug, he said, “I’m missing you already.”

It took all the strength Vic had to leave Matt like that, naked in his bed. He still felt his lover within him, as if a part of him had burrowed deep inside Vic’s body and pulsed beneath his heart with a life of its own. Knowing he would come home to find Matt waiting for him made him giddy—the thought was a sudden rush and caught him at odd moments when he least expected it. In the bathroom, the mirror showed his usual dour expression but he could see a new light shining in his own eyes, and his lips threatened to break into a goofy grin. Him, in love. *Him*. Loved back, by a man like Matty. Vic had to keep glancing down to make sure his feet still touched the ground.

On the drive into work, Vic’s body buzzed with unspent energy. He felt invigorated after their lovemaking; he felt new

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and exciting and *alive*, in a way he'd never felt before. Matt wasn't his first, not by a long shot, but something about the man kept Vic on edge, wired almost, as if he hummed with an electric charge that built up inside him, waiting to go off. *Tonight...* the thought intoxicated him. *Tonight.*

As Vic drove downtown, the sidewalks grew crowded with shoppers looking for New Year's sales, and the buzz inside Vic's head turned into words and phrases, snippets of talk like overheard conversations. *That blue one looks nice—* He glanced to his left and saw a young mother with a child in her arms, staring in the window of a boutique at a display of cocktail dresses. One blue dress stood out from the others, backlit by the display. And the man crossing in front of his car, head high but eyes downcast as he counted the white stripes in the crosswalk, *one, two, three, four, five.* Vic heard the numbers rattled off in his head as if he were counting them himself. And to the right of his car, on the opposite sidewalk, came the insolent thought, *No fair!* This from a little girl stomping behind her parents in a huff, unhappy about something or other.

About not getting a pack of gum at the drug store, Vic thought, surprised. He wasn't usually this imaginative, inventing thoughts and lives for strangers in the street. But he wasn't making this up—he could close his eyes and *see* the candy in his mind, a short wrapper of six round sour gum balls, colored blue and white for Hanukah, imprinted with gold dreidels and marked down to a dime at the counter. Where was this coming from?

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Dazed, Vic shook his head to clear it, and the words receded to a dull roar, like distant surf. Maybe it was the champagne still in his system from last night, or hell, maybe it really *was* Matty, maybe he was drunk on the guy... Vic could think of worse things. In the movies, true love was usually accompanied by birds twittering in newly budding trees, or Celine Dion singing about how her heart will go on, or something equally as dramatic. So why not this sudden interest in the world around him? Why not these make-believe thoughts he subconsciously assigned to people he didn't know?

Cars lined both sides of the road, making driving difficult. Twice Vic stopped mere seconds before someone pulled out in front of him without looking. But his reflexes were sharp today and he avoided an accident both times. The way some people drove, really—

Oh, my God, Gregory, STOP!

The thought crashed through Vic and he slammed on the brakes, sure the words had been screamed out loud—he felt them reverberate through him like an aftershock. As his car jerked forward, a red ball bounced out into the street inches from his front tire, a small child immediately behind it. His hands shook on the steering wheel, adrenaline surging through his body. If he hadn't heard the shrieked warning, Vic would've hit the kid.

But *how* did he hear it? His windows were rolled up, the heater blowing full blast, the radio turned up high to cut out the traffic. A woman on the side of the street watched Vic

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intently—the mother, though he wasn't quite sure how he knew that. When she was certain he wouldn't roll over her son out of spite, she raced into the street and snatched the kid up. The set of her jaw told Vic she was more scared than angry, but that didn't stop her from scolding the child. Her lips moved and Vic heard the words in his mind—*don't you EVER do something like that again, do you hear me, Gregory? Santa might have to come take that ball back.*

Vic couldn't hear her. The words bubbled up in his head as if he just *knew* what she was thinking. He felt fear radiating from her like the heat of a small sun and sensed Gregory's impending, frustrated cry moments before the boy burst into tears. No one else around them seemed to notice this little scene, yet here he was, locked in his car and practically *living* the moment through this woman and her son.

What the hell?

* * *

By the time Vic reached the bus terminal, he thought he had it figured out. It all came back to Matt, of course. Now that he had someone like that in his life, Vic could be more sympathetic to others. He wanted to see the good in people, the way they felt for each other, and so what, he just started making up this shit?

Sure, why not?

The thing with the kid, that was a bit strange, but he'd been on edge from the other two near-collisions and was probably expecting something like that to happen anyway. The

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streets were filled with children today. Matt's gentle loving had awakened in Vic feelings long dormant, emotions he didn't even know he *had*, and that sort of self-discovery left him raw and tingling and overly susceptible to the outside world.

That was it. That *had* to be it.

Then why couldn't he turn it off? The constant undercurrent ran just below his conscious mind like a babbling brook, words and phrases and a myriad of emotions, snatches of thought, none of it his. With each person he saw, it was the same, as if he were inside *their* heads looking out at himself. Bothersome really, and more than a little unnerving, but he figured he'd get over it soon enough.

As Vic entered the employee lounge, he saw a co-worker named Larry by the time clock and knew the guy was ignoring him because he thought Vic was someone else to whom he owed money. Vic knew it without *knowing* how he knew. Larry's thoughts filled Vic's head as if they were being broadcast over the PA system. *Don't say anything about that twenty*, he thought as he riffled through his jacket pockets, pretending to look busy. *You'll get it when I have it.*

Vic even knew who Larry thought he might be. As he passed by, he couldn't help teasing, "I ain't 'Feno."

Larry jumped as if goosed. With a surprised look on his face, he snapped, "Tell him to lay off. He'll get his money."

At the time clock Vic punched in and nodded to his boss, Mr. Morrison, who always watched the lounge during shift changes. As he looked Vic's way, his thoughts closed the

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distance between them and Vic heard, clear as day, *Always on time, good man. Even if he's a bit hard on the eyes.*

Vic didn't bother to challenge that.

* * *

As his shift wore on, Vic learned to ignore the barrage of thought that assaulted him. He found it easy to drown out the noise if he didn't dwell on it, and it helped that he had a habit of never looking directly at the fares who boarded his bus. If he didn't look anyone in the eye, their thoughts weren't so loud, or maybe he just wasn't as tempted to make up something to go along with what he saw in their faces. He still wasn't entirely convinced his head wasn't playing tricks on him, but it wasn't something he could actually *test*. What would he do? Ask a complete stranger, "Is this what you're thinking?" Like some crazy magician flipping through card tricks at a kid's birthday party. Then stand back as distrust hardened on their features or duck when the fist came swinging. Best to just wait until he got home. He could ask Matt in some roundabout way that wouldn't make him sound stupid or silly, and Matt wouldn't lie to him, wouldn't get offended, scared, or mad. Then he'd know for sure if he could...

Could what? Read minds?

* * *

Vic ran through his last route at half past eleven. As the

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final fare exited the bus, Vic clicked off the service sign and pulled away from the curb. The streets were empty now, the city silent, and an icy chill draped the world like a cold, wet blanket. There was a hint of snow in the air, Vic felt it in his bones. The thought of curling up beside Matty warmed him from the inside out and did more to push back the night than the space heater blowing at his feet.

Down Main Street Vic let the bus open up a bit, driving faster than he normally would, but it was tempting when there were no other cars on the road. The bus terminal was less than ten minutes away—turn on the Boulevard, cross over the river, and he'd be pulling into the garage before midnight. But as he slowed for his turn, he felt a strange prickling sensation, a tingling that crawled across the back of his neck, so real he brushed a hand down his smooth scalp to make sure nothing was there. He started into the turn and felt it again. This time a feeling of dread filled his stomach, so strong that it nauseated him and he gagged. *God.*

He straightened the wheel and the emotion lessened. As the bus eased through the intersection, continuing down Main and missing his turn, the feeling dispersed completely and Vic wiped one shaky hand across his mouth. What the hell was *that*? Vaguely he thought of a story he heard once, about a guy who got so violently ill that he had to cancel his flight, and wouldn't you know it, the plane he was supposed to be on burst into flames on the runway? He'd heard other weird shit like that before, but it had never happened to *him*.

Still, there was no denying he felt better now. The creepy-

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crawly feeling continued to plague the back of his neck and his stomach was more than a little nervous, but at least he didn't feel physically sick. Just my Spidey senses tingling, he thought randomly, then ran a hand around his neck to make sure it wasn't a *real* spider back there. *What a day.*

Ahead, a familiar white and blue bus stop sign loomed out of the darkness. Vic was surprised to find himself slowing down as he guided the bus to the curb. There was no one waiting for a ride, no one he'd pick up at this hour anyway. He was off duty, but his foot nudged the brake pedal instead of the gas and he pulled to a stop. Opened his doors to the night. Sat there. Waiting.

For what?

He didn't know. Twice he reached to close the doors and twice he stopped with his hand on the pull. He had to get home, he tried to tell himself. He needed to clock out in less than five minutes or he'd get bitched at for the overtime. He needed to get home to Matty. He needed—

To be here.

Though for the love of God, he surely didn't know why.

Then he heard the fast clip of heels on pavement. Vic waited at the bus stop, doors open. With the bus's interior lights on, he couldn't see far into the night, but he heard the footsteps quicken, then break into a run. Less than a minute later, a frazzled young woman clambered up the steps and onto the bus. "Thank you," she sighed as she fell into the first seat. Now that she was here, Vic found that he was able to close the doors. "Oh, God, thank you."

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“No problem,” Vic muttered, as if this had all been prearranged. A million questions swirled through his mind but he didn’t need to ask them. He knew the answers already, more clearly than if she had bothered to explain.

Her name was Heather. Her car had a flat tire outside of the Black Box Theatre, where she worked as an usher. She only lived a block or two away from this bus stop and thought nothing of walking back to her apartment from the theatre—she’d done it often enough before. But it was dark out and much later, much *colder*, than she originally thought, and a few blocks back, two guys fell in step behind her. At first they said nothing, then they started to laugh, call out to her, make rude noises and vulgar remarks. When she didn’t stop, they began walking faster. She thought she was in for trouble, and then she saw Vic’s bus pull over to wait. For her.

She honestly thought Vic stopped just for her.

I don’t know why I did it. He turned out the interior light. As the night leapt into the bus he saw the two men, shadowy figures leaning against a nearby building, just beyond the street lamp. One started for the bus but his friend held him back. *Yeah, you stay there.* Vic glared at them a moment longer, then pulled away from the curb to take Heather home.

And then me. Jesus, what a day.

* * *

When Vic’s key scraped into the lock to his apartment, Matt opened the door. The heavy scent of fresh pepperoni pizza wafted out into the hall and Vic’s stomach rumbled in

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response. “There you are,” Matt said with a grin. He looked clean and rested, and so damn sexy Vic wasn’t sure what he wanted first, him or the pizza. Maybe both.

He let Matt draw him into the apartment and into a tight embrace. Once his arms were around Matt’s waist, his face buried in his friend’s neck, Vic could let the day fall away from his shoulders and, for the first time since he’d left that afternoon, his mind was quiet.

Then Matt was fussing over him. “Off with the coat,” he said, tugging at Vic’s sleeve. “I ordered pizza, can’t you smell it? I don’t know about you but I’m *starving*. It’s been so hard sitting here waiting for you to come home when there’s a full pie begging to be eaten.”

Vic let Matt help him out of his jacket, too weary to protest. “Why didn’t you eat?”

“I waited for you.” Setting the jacket aside, Matt came up behind Vic to rub his hands along his lover’s broad shoulders. His strong fingers kneaded tight muscles. “You’re so *tense*. Rough day?”

Warm lips touched the back of his neck. Vic remembered the feeling of premonition he’d had earlier, dancing along the very nerves now excited by Matt’s kiss. As Matt’s hands massaged their way down his arms, Vic tried to reach out with his mind but there was no response. The silence was heavenly. “It’s just good to get home.”

“It’s good to have you home.” Taking Vic’s hand in his, Matt led the way to the couch and sat Vic down. A large pizza box waited on the coffee table, the white cardboard already

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beginning to turn gray with grease. Pulling his long legs up under him, Matt sat down on the couch beside Vic and draped one of his friend's arms around his own shoulders to cuddle up against his chest. His breath fluttered against the underside of Vic's chin, ticklish. When Vic glanced at him, Matt whispered, "Kiss me already, will you?"

Vic didn't have to be asked twice.

* * *

At some point during the evening, while Vic was at work, Matt had gone back to his own small apartment to get "a few things." His words. But as they got ready for bed, Vic found half the medicine cabinet above the bathroom sink filled with things that weren't his—a toothbrush and half-used tube of toothpaste in some minty flavor he didn't buy, dandruff shampoo, an electric razor much newer than his battered Gillette, and a collection of cologne that smelled spicy and foreign to him. A small section of the closet in his bedroom had also been cleared to make room for a few dress shirts and some slacks Vic could never hope to fit into. On the floor a pair of black polished shoes gleamed up at him in the lamp light. A book now sat on the bedside table, a pair of thin reading glasses propped on top of its well-worn cover. "These yours, too?" Vic asked, figuring the glasses.

Matt stretched out on the bed. "I just need them to read."

Vic held up the glasses, trying to picture his lover in the rectangular frames. "I bet these make you look smart."

"You saying I ain't?" Matt asked in a playful tone.

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With a grin, Vic said, "Put 'em on."

But when Matt took the glasses, he set them back on top of the book, then patted the bed beside him. "Not *now*. They'll steam up. Down, big guy." Vic complied, sinking to the mattress, and Matt's hand rubbed up his arm to tug at his sleeve, pulling Vic to him. "Over *here*."

"So demanding," Vic teased as he rolled across Matt to lay down on his side of the bed. "I like a man who knows what he wants."

"I want you." Matt kissed him back against the pillows, his hands smoothing down the broad expanse of Vic's chest until they found the hem of his undershirt and slipped beneath the material to strum along Vic's stomach. With his mouth against Vic's, Matt murmured, "*Only* you."

Cradling Matt's face in both hands, Vic concentrated on their kisses—heated mouths pressed together, the slide of tongues between lips, the taste of this man above him. At his waist, Matt fumbled with Vic's belt, then unzipped his work pants, unsnapped his boxers, to fondle the growing erection thickening beneath his touch. When Matt sat up long enough to undo his own jeans, Vic took advantage of the moment to raise his legs off the bed and kick away his pants and boxers. They fell in a tangled heap to the floor, and Matt's sharp intake of breath at the sight of Vic's ass in the air made the rest of the day, with its strange head games and uncanny reflexes, disappear.

"Like what you see?" Vic asked. Matt's answer was a hand between Vic's legs to cup his balls. Before Vic could lower

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his legs, Matt crawled beneath them, his quick tongue licking out to taste the hot, hidden flesh puckered in the center of his being. Vic gasped at the wet sensation, the firm softness that rimmed his hole and slathered saliva along his trembling skin. His hips rose off the bed as his legs lowered, ankles resting on Matt's back for a moment before falling to either side of his friend as he opened himself to the man before him. That tantalizing tongue slid along the crevices of Vic's groin, between his buttocks and below his balls, around his shaved sac, over his thick length to its bulbous red tip and back down again as if learning the terrain of Vic's lower body. Matt's touch was like a brand, burning him, claiming him.

Vic's hands fisted in Matt's hair, then bunched in the bed sheets as Matt spread him wider to taste the coppery musk of his anus. "Please," Vic sobbed—part of him couldn't believe he was reduced to this so easily, a man like himself, grown and *begging* to be fucked, but he ached with desire and wanted Matty to take him again and again. His knees clenched around Matt's head. "God, Matty, just..."

His voice disappeared, words unable to describe his need. After an eternity, Matt finally sat up between Vic's legs and the head of his own hard cock butted against Vic's ass cheeks. "Tell me you want me," Matt said.

"Yes."

With his hands on Vic's knees, Matt spread his legs farther apart and pushed against him slightly, just enough to get the tip of his dick against that first clenched muscle. "Tell me how badly you want me."

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In frustration, Vic growled, “Matty—”

One hard shove and Matt filled him completely, crawling over Vic to kiss away the discomfort of entry. They found a rough rhythm, fast and almost angry, each fighting against the other to get off first. This wasn’t yesterday’s gentle lovemaking but something deeper, harder, much more raw. Vic clenched his hands in Matt’s buttocks, the olive flesh whitening beneath his grip as Vic pulled him in and refused to let go. He needed this, *only* this. *Yes*.

As Matt thrust into him, his panting breath hot and heavy in Vic’s ear, Vic found himself thinking about those stupid thoughts that had haunted his head throughout the day. Had he *really* been reading minds? He didn’t think so, but how would a talent like that enhance a moment like this? What would it feel like to be both lovers during sex? To savor the penetration and the slick skin wrapped tight around his cock at the same time? To be the tongue that caressed his balls and the mouth that suckled them, as well? To experience the intimate act of making love as both partners at once?

To come in a fiery rush that sparked his lover’s orgasm, to shudder beneath a dual wave of release, to wrap his arms around himself and stare into his own eyes and hear his own voice murmur softly against his chin, “I love you.” To feel the strength and safety of his own arms as he held himself close. What would *that* be like?

Vic clung to Matt with a fierce embrace and tried to imagine himself behind those deep green eyes, but the power or whatever it had been earlier was now gone. He was alone

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inside his own head, and Matt's soft kisses and tender touch told him all he needed to know about how his lover felt for him.

* * *

The next morning Vic woke alone. He vaguely remembered Matt kissing him goodbye, more dream than memory—the sheets still held Matt's smell, a sporty mix of soap and deodorant and chlorine and beneath that, something all his own. As his mind and body grew more alert, Vic rolled onto Matt's side of the bed and pressed his face to his friend's pillow just to breathe him in. Vic had waited a good part of the past year for Matty to let him in and now that they were finally together, things had gone from mildly interested to hot *damn* in such a short amount of time. What had it been, two days already? Three? And Vic couldn't imagine not sharing his bed with Matt every night, or waking to anything else but this lingering scent every dawn.

Slowly, Vic stretched awake, savoring the silence that still resounded inside his head. Yesterday seemed unreal, behind him already. A fluke, nothing more. He wouldn't worry about it, wouldn't even bother to mention it to Matt.

Kicking the covers aside, Vic swung his legs over the edge of the bed and groaned as he sat up. He was no young kid any more, and a night of sex left him sore, muscles overworked and achy. It took considerable effort to stand, but once out of bed, Vic stretched awake with a leonine yawn. Goose bumps pimples along his naked flesh as his blood warmed his legs,

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his arms, his dick. As he stretched, energy swirled through him, an invigorating shot of adrenaline chasing away the last remnants of sleep. Suddenly he felt impossibly light and the weight of his aches and pains fell away. A dizzy nausea washed over him two seconds before his knuckles bumped against the stucco ceiling far above his head.

Startled, Vic glanced up at his hands, now splayed flat against the ceiling, and then looked down. His feet hovered an inch or two above the level of the bed. *What the fuck...*

Like a marionette whose strings have been snipped, Vic fell to the ground with a solid *thud* that made him stagger forward to catch himself. Pain, like a million needles, pricked his legs and feet, and as gravity reasserted itself, the aches returned to his back and ass, worse than before. Running a shaky hand across his face, Vic glanced at the ceiling—up there where it was supposed to be. And he stood on solid ground, where *he* was supposed to be. His voice trembled when he muttered, “God.” His toes curled in the short Berber carpet as if to hold him down.

That didn’t just happen, he tried to assure himself. *I was still dreaming...* But it had *seemed* real.

It wasn’t. He couldn’t fly. He couldn’t even jump very high.

Could he?

* * *

Unsettled, Vic did what he always did to relax. He went to the gym.

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The place was crowded, full of people gung-ho on sticking to their New Year's resolutions, but most of them wouldn't last the week. As Vic stepped into the overflowing lobby, he had a terrifying moment where he braced himself for an onslaught of others' thoughts, but it never came. *Proof that it wasn't real to begin with.*

But why didn't he quite believe that?

In the locker room Vic stripped off his sweats and shoved them into his gym bag, which he deposited in a rented locker. He wore his usual work-out uniform—a tight pair of black biker shorts, a white tank top, and on his feet white socks and a good pair of athletic sneakers. Despite the fact that it was early January, freezing outside, and the sky clouding up as if threatening snow, Vic knew he'd warm up after the first few weights. At least the majority of people who joined the gym after the first of the year tended to want aerobics classes and swim lessons—the weight room was mostly empty, left to die-hards like himself who enjoyed a few hours flexing muscles and lifting barbells.

With a small towel over his shoulder, Vic nodded at the attendant as he entered the weight room, then wove his way through the various machines to the bench press. As he started adding weights to the bar, a young college kid came over to him. "Hey man," he said, offering Vic his hand to shake. Wearing sweat shorts and a muscle top, the guy had a blonde buzz cut and perennially tanned skin. He also had a firm grip and a quick grin, which he flashed Vic's way. "I'm Doug. You need a spotter?"

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“Sure.” Vic added a fifty pound weight to one end of the bar, then nodded for Doug to fill the other end. “I usually start with one ten, work up from there.”

Sliding a heavy fifty pounder to his end, Doug asked, “What’s your best?”

“Two twenty.” He laughed at Doug’s impressed whistle. “If you can’t lift your own weight, why bother? We about ready?”

Doug nodded and took a few steps back as Vic sat down on the bench. Smoothing the towel out where his head would be, Vic lay down on his back, the bar and its weights directly above his head. Doug moved closer, taking up a position directly behind Vic so he could watch and help, if needed. Vic didn’t think it necessary—would this kid be able to lift the barbell off his chest if he dropped it? Sure, he had some muscle, but Vic was easily twice his weight. But hey, if he wanted to watch...

With a grunt, Vic hoisted the barbell off the supporting brackets and lowered it to his chest. It felt much lighter than usual... “You sure this is one ten?” he asked, raising the bar up and down as if it weighed next to nothing. Energy coiled through his arms and pulsed down his fingers, the feeling so vivid that Vic was almost surprised his hands didn’t glow from the sensations flooding them. Another press of the bar, and Vic tossed it back onto the supports. “Add another fifty—no, hundred. Both sides.”

“You sure?” Doug tried to heft the barbell with one hand and couldn’t. “That’s quite a jump—”

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"I'll do it myself," Vic grumbled, pushing himself up from the bench.

But Doug was already at the wall, selecting weights. "I've got it."

Vic lay back down and watched Doug add more weight to either end of the bar. A warmth filled him up inside, a fire that burned low in his belly and shot flames through the rest of his body, down his legs, up his arms. He felt powerful, *strong*, as if he could lift this heavily-laden barbell with one hand. As if he could press all the weights on the wall at once or, hell, the gym itself, and still not break a sweat. "Ready?" he asked, gripping the bar as Doug secured the last weight into place.

With little effort, Vic lifted the bar and lowered it to his chest. Something was wrong... "This isn't right," he muttered, raising the bar high with an almost negligent motion. He felt as if he could toss it across the room, it felt that flimsy and insubstantial in his hands. But the weights on each end were easy to read—a fifty, a five, and the hundred pounder Doug had just added. Three hundred ten pounds in all. Vic let the bar fall back into place. "I need more."

Doug's face paled. "More? Dude, if you drop more than this, there's no way I'll be able to get it off you."

"Another hundred." Vic tapped the fifty and five pound weights. "Lose these. Add two hundred per side."

"That's—"

Vic nodded. "Six hundred, I know. I may not look it, but I can count."

With a shake of his head, Doug complied. Three one-

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hundred pound weights were secured to each end of the barbell, but Vic still lifted it with ease. “More,” he said. Another hundred, two, three, and then there were no more heavy weights available to add. Taking a deep breath, Vic lifted over a thousand pounds as Doug stood back and watched, incredulous. That strange energy coursed through Vic’s body, giving him phenomenal strength, making him feel invincible. The bar itself bent beneath the weight, but Vic pressed it as if each hundred pounder was ten, maybe twenty, nothing more. He barely felt the bar in his hands as he lifted it above his chest; his body didn’t bother to sweat or his breath quicken.

He didn’t know whether that should scare him or not.

Reluctantly he set the barbell back in its supports. A small crowd had gathered around his bench and, as he sat up, the muscled men began to clap. Some of them came closer to inspect the bar and its weights, counting out loud so everyone would know, twelve hundred pounds. More than one tried to lift the barbell, straining against the weight—despite those rippling biceps and six-pack pecs, none of them could budge the bar. As they gathered around him, Vic swatted the guys away. “All right, get out of here. Come on, get lost.”

Half-joking, someone called out, “Aw, Superman—”

“Who said that?” Vic whirled around, anger cording the veins in his neck, but one look at his mean eyes and no one owned up. A small voice inside him whispered, *Reading minds, floating to the ceiling, super strength... maybe he’s right, you know? Maybe—*

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No. Vic wouldn't think that, *couldn't* think it. He wasn't that imaginative. There was an explanation for this, for all of it. There had to be.

The crowd dispersed as he began to remove the weights from the barbell. When Doug tried to help, Vic shooed him away. Instead of hanging the weights back on the wall where they belonged, Vic carried them one by one to the scale by the door to the locker room. He stacked them one on top of the other, all of the weights from both ends of the bar, and watched the scale climb by a hundred pounds with each weight. Six weights, six hundred pounds. Eight weights, eight hundred. Ten—

The scale stopped at 999, unwilling to go higher. Vic removed the weights and stacked the remaining four on the scale, but he already knew what it'd say. Four hundred pounds. Plus the eight hundred already weighed, and he had a full twelve. That was almost two hundred pounds *more* than the world record. *Holy shit.*

As Vic returned the weights to their places on the wall rack, he decided yes, that scared the *fuck* out of him.

* * *

Before his shift started, Vic took a walk through the fenced off lot where the buses were parked. His mind was a whirl of half-formed thoughts, each his own today, but that was little comfort to him at the moment. It would be easy to say the weights were mislabeled or the scale had been off, but he stood on it himself and weighed in at his usual two twenty so

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there went that theory. The only other explanation, then, was that somehow, incredibly, he had lifted over a thousand pounds this afternoon without effort.

And what the hell kind of explanation was *that*?

Coming up behind an off-duty bus, Vic took a quick look around the lot to make sure he was alone. There was a stiff wind that cut between the buses, discouraging anyone but the hardiest of smokers to linger outside. And with the gravel ground cover strewn around the lot, Vic would hear anyone approach. Still, he wanted to make this quick. If he tried and failed, no harm done. But if he succeeded...

He took a deep breath to steady himself, then bent at the knees a bit until he could place both hands under the bus's bumper, one on either side of the license plate. Beneath his breath he counted off, "One, two, *three*." On three he straightened his knees and tried to stand, arms straining with the weight of the bus. For a moment he didn't think he'd budge it, and relief flooded him. *Thank you*, he prayed silently. *God*—

A burst of energy shot through him, strengthening his legs, steadying him. Metal creaked as he stood, the bus in both hands, the wheels no longer on the ground. One inch, another—the bumper twisted in protest beneath his hands but he didn't dare let go, not yet. Another few inches, and the next strong wind set one of the bus's rear wheels spinning. A little higher—the bumper was now level with Vic's waist, his arms burned with that strange energy, his mouth pulled down into a grimace beneath the weight of the bus, but it was in his hands,

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in *his* hands, he held it up off the ground. *Jesus*. With a mingled growl of frustration and effort, he hoisted the bus up to his chest as if it were nothing more than another barbell curled in his fists. Then he took a step back and let go.

The bus fell with a heavy *crunch* that popped one of the rear tires. Vic glared at his hands, the flesh angry and red, whitening when he flexed his fingers to get the blood moving through them again. These fucking buses weighed fifteen tons, easily. *Tons*—that was almost thirty *thousand* pounds. Suddenly the familiar fingers looked foreign to him, the hands he knew so intimately now belonging to a stranger, someone he didn't know, wasn't sure he *wanted* to know. Someone different. Someone new.

Not him.

* * *

Work kept him busy—one of the other drivers called in sick, so Vic volunteered for that route in addition to his own. The extra loop forced him to pay attention to the road and traffic, and the night was over before he knew it. He didn't have time to dwell on his newfound strength until after he dropped off the last fare and turned out the bus's light. *Then* it came crashing back through his defenses, the fear and anxiety gripping him in panicky claws. He needed to talk to someone, but who? He couldn't go to a doctor—there was nothing wrong with him, as far as he knew. And he had no real friends outside of a few buddies he saw from time to time at the gym, maybe one or two co-workers he joked around with by the

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time clock, no one he could really *confide* in...

Except Matt.

His lover's face filled his mind, reining in the emotions that threatened to strangle him. Matty, of course. He'd meant to say something to Matt yesterday after work, but amid the kisses and the pizza and the sex, had promptly forgotten. But he'd call Matt first thing in the morning, wake up early and catch him before he had to be at the Y, or maybe swing by there around noon, take his lover out to lunch, tell him over a pastrami on rye from Ellie's Deli. *Listen, Matt. These past few days have been really weird for me and I don't know who else to talk to about it.* How would that sound?

*These past few days...*no, he had to say it some other way. Matt might think he meant the days since they first hooked up and—

Wait.

Vic stared out the windshield at the empty streets, not seeing the cars that lined either side of the road or the flickering lights that still decorated a few houses. The bus slowed to a crawl as he tried to think back. When did this shit first start? The super strength, today. The flying, if that was what it had been? This morning. The telepathy or empathy or whatever the hell they called it, yesterday. And the sink's faucet, breaking in his hand yesterday morning, was that part of it?

Say it was. Then this all started yesterday, right? *And the night before was when Matt and I first—no, that same day, nothing happened between us before the countdown to the new*

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year. We didn't have sex until yesterday. Even if it was two minutes after midnight, it was still yesterday.

When the powers started.

So what, now you think it's Matty's fault?

To be honest, Vic didn't know *what* to think, but he had to talk to Matt. And *now*.

* * *

He was pleasantly surprised to find Matt's black, late model Jag parked in front of his apartment building. Because they'd missed each other that morning, Vic assumed Matt would go back to his own place after work, maybe call early tomorrow or swing by later in the week. But apparently his friend had found the spare key above the door jamb—when Vic checked, it was gone—and entered Vic's apartment while he was out as easily as he had entered every other aspect of Vic's life. Even though it was after midnight, Vic almost expected to find Matt waiting for him, dinner on the table.

But not tonight. "Matt?" Vic called out softly as he shut the door behind him. The only noise came from the television in the living room, where Vic found Matt asleep in the recliner, a book open on his chest and glasses askew. Turning off the TV, Vic removed the book and set it on the coffee table, face down to keep Matt's place. Then he gently took off Matt's glasses—his lover stirred, one hand straying to rub his eyes, but didn't wake. When the glasses were safely on the table as well, Vic ran an arm behind Matt's shoulders, another under his legs, and stood.

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With Vic's new strength, he lifted the grown man in his arms as if Matt weighed no more than a child. Shifting in Vic's embrace, Matt tucked his head beneath Vic's chin, one hand coming up to tug at the collar of his work shirt. Still asleep, he muttered something unintelligible and snuggled closer to Vic's body heat. A faint burst of energy spread across Vic's lower back, where he'd normally feel Matt's weight, but there was no strain, no effort needed to carry his sleeping lover from the living room to their bed.

Laying Matt on his side of the bed, Vic turned on the bedside lamp and began to undress. His work clothes fell to a small pile that he kicked in the direction of the laundry basket, too tired to actually bother much with them now. Naked, he used the bathroom, careful about the faucet as he washed up and brushed his teeth. With water still drying on his face and chest, Vic returned to the bedroom and sat beside Matty on the bed. For a long moment he studied his sleeping lover—shadows from his thick eyelashes stood out like spikes along his cheeks and his perfect, ruddy lips were slightly pursed as if he were about to whistle. One hand fisted in the hem of his shirt; the other had come up beside his head and now lay open on the pillow.

Vic smoothed down the front of Matt's shirt. When his fingers found the waistband of Matt's jeans, he unbuttoned the pants and cupped his limp length coiled beneath the fly. Even in sleep, Matt responded to his touch—he moaned softly, hips raising off the bed to press his crotch into Vic's palm. His dick stiffened in Vic's hand.

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Tempting as it was to wake Matty up with an orgasm, Vic knew they both needed to sleep. It *was* late. So Vic eased the jeans off Matt's long legs, then pulled down his briefs, tossing them to the floor at the foot of the bed. He couldn't resist one quick kiss, his lips closing over the spongy tip of Matt's semi-interested cock, but he stopped before he went any further. The shirt was trickier—Vic thought for sure Matt would wake as he tugged the long sleeves off one at a time, then slid the whole thing over his lover's head. Once free of his clothing, Matt lay nude on the bed, a glorious stretch of dusky skin crisscrossed with dark hair that begged to be smoothed down, licked into place, every beautiful inch. Vic wouldn't mind if he never saw another person in this entire world but Matt.

A slight shiver ran through his lover's prone body, reminding Vic that they *were* naked and it *was* a bit chilly in the bedroom. Carefully he lifted Matt's sleeping form enough to fold down the covers on the bed. As Vic tucked the blankets in around Matt, the shadow of a smile flickered across Matt's face, then disappeared as he burrowed beneath the covers. Turning off the lamp, Vic navigated around the bed in the darkness to his own pillow. He crawled between cool sheets and immediately cuddled up to Matt, arms encircling his friend to guide that lean, warm body back against his. "Love you," he murmured, kissing a spot on Matt's back where the skin smoothed into a freckled valley between the wings of his shoulder blades.

Time enough to talk tomorrow, Vic thought as Matt's fingers closed over his. Spooned tightly against Matt's back,

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he fell asleep.

* * *

The next morning Vic was sitting at the dining room table sipping hot, black, tasteless coffee and shuffling through the newspaper when Matt finally woke. Vic heard him in the kitchen, yawning loudly as he poured himself a cup of coffee. A few minutes later, warm arms wrapped around Vic's neck and Matt pressed his cheek against the back of Vic's shaved head. With a contented sigh, he hugged Vic to him. "Morning, stranger."

"Bout time you got up," Vic grumbled, but he didn't bother to hide his grin. Matt leaning against him was a pleasant way to start any day.

"Oh, please." Matt untangled himself and flounced into the chair next to his. He wore Vic's flannel bathrobe, cinched at the waist, and probably little, if nothing, else. *A jockstrap*—the thought came out of nowhere, unbidden, so Vic knew it was true. Matt wore a jockstrap under the robe, and Vic knew it because *Matt* knew it. He could almost feel the straps cutting into the tops of his own thighs. Matt was thinking about how uncomfortable the damn thing was and to Vic, he might as well have been talking out loud.

So I'm reading thoughts again. Jesus.

Matt stirred sugar into his coffee, his spoon tinging in the quiet morn, then ran a hand through his disheveled curls. "You know how to get a rise out of me. If you'd wanted me up earlier..."

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He sat back in the chair and, beneath the table, lifted his feet and set them down in Vic's lap. One foot, the other, then he crossed his ankles and one heel pushed against Vic's cushiony crotch with a glorious ache. Discarding the paper, Vic eased his chair back and took one of Matt's large feet in his hands. The toes were long and tapered, each one ending in a perfectly round little pad. Matt was fastidious about his feet—he kept the nails trimmed and buffed, the skin well lotioned, the bottoms smooth and soft as if he never walked anywhere. *Such sexy feet*, Vic thought as he massaged the balls of Matt's left foot, rubbing his thumbs into the pliant skin.

With a moan, Matt slid a little lower in his chair, raising his foot and flexing his toes beneath his lover's impromptu ministrations. "Damn," he sighed, the coffee and his playful banter forgotten. "You know just where to touch a man to make him melt."

"This is nothing," Vic assured him. "Now *this*—" Raising Matt's foot, he took the three middle toes into his mouth, his tongue swirling around and between them as his thumbs continued their gentle massage. Matt gasped, and his other foot clenched in Vic's lap, eagerly digging into the growing erection it found.

Letting the toes slip from between his lips, Vic blew on them to cool the saliva that glistened on Matt's skin, then licked the arch of Matt's foot. He caught a solid image in the forefront of Matt's mind, himself crawling up Matt's legs and pushing open the bathrobe to bite at the jockstrap. Matt was

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playing out a fantasy behind those closed eyes, in which Vic peeled off that jockstrap with his teeth, his tongue rimming hidden flesh that hadn't known another's touch in years. What a delicious thought. "I could start here," Vic murmured, nipping at the tender skin on the underside of Matt's foot and making his friend squirm with sudden desire, "and eat my way up. What do you think?"

The hand not holding the coffee mug drifted down to Matt's waist and squeezed the bulge already there. "I think we need to take this back into the bedroom, muscle man."

Vic frowned. "Why do you say that?"

Matt wiggled his toes, prompting Vic to kiss them still. "I fell out in front of the TV so how'd I wake up in bed, Hercules?" Raising an eyebrow suggestively, he teased, "Naked, I must add. Tell me, did we have fun? I'm sorry I slept through it."

Absently Vic rubbed the bottom of Matt's foot as he debated what he wanted to say. *How* he could say it, really, without sounding like a fool or madman.

"Vic?" Matt wiggled his toes again to get his lover's attention, but Vic covered them with one hand so they wouldn't distract him. "Hey, babe, you alright?"

That's as good an opening as any. Taking a deep breath, Vic shook his head. "I think there's something I have to tell you."

"What's that?" At his sudden shift in mood, Matt's playfulness disappeared. Instead he leaned forward, the foot in Vic's lap falling to the floor. Vic clung to the other one,

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needing some touch to get through this conversation. Matt scooted his chair forward to close the distance between them. “Vic, talk to me here. You’re scaring me.”

“I scare myself.” He ran a hand along Matt’s lower leg, smoothing down hair that fluffed at his touch. Before Matt could ask what he meant, Vic frowned at his lover. “Something’s happening to me.”

Matt lowered his voice to match Vic’s. “What do you mean? Happening how?”

Vic took a deep breath and started at the beginning. “Yesterday—no, the day before, when the sink broke? There was nothing wrong with it. I broke the faucet off just by turning on the water.”

With a quick nod, Matt said, “I remember.”

“I didn’t think anything of it at the time.” Vic sighed. “But yesterday, at the gym? I benched more than I usually do—”

Matt’s eyes narrowed. “How much more?”

Meeting his troubled gaze, Vic said softly, “One thousand pounds.” Matt’s mouth dropped open and Vic nodded. “*More*, Matty. A thousand pounds *more* than the two hundred I usually bench. And in the yard at work? Just to make sure I wasn’t completely losing my mind? I picked up the back of a bus. Just about waist high, but I lifted it. I swear to you I did.”

Matt whistled, impressed. “And here I thought you were just another pretty face,” he joked. “You got some muscles, boy. Have you been working out?”

“That’s just it,” Vic told him. “I haven’t changed my routine at *all*. With the holidays and now you, I haven’t really

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been able to hit the weights much, but suddenly it's like I'm..."

"Superman."

There was a gleam in Matt's eyes that told Vic his lover was kidding, but there was nothing funny about what was happening to him, nothing at all. "Can Superman read minds?" Vic countered.

Shrugging, Matt frowned. "I know he can fly."

"So can I."

That met with incredulous silence. When Matt didn't speak, Vic started, "At least I think I can. I sort of floated without realizing it. Maybe I can show you—"

"How, jump out a window?" Matt asked, sudden anger bright in his voice. "Hope you figure it out before you hit the ground? Jesus, Vic, don't joke like that."

"I'm not joking." Vic shook his head and rubbed Matt's foot, still caught between his hands, as if that simple gesture would calm his lover. "Listen to me, Matty. I'm a hundred times stronger than I was just a few days ago. I don't know why. Yesterday I stretched as I got out of bed and found myself bumping against the ceiling. The day before, I heard the thoughts of people around me, and my reflexes were spot on. This kid runs out into the street? And I knew he was coming, I stopped before he even appeared. This girl was walking home, some guys following her? I didn't even *see* her but I pulled the bus over and waited. It's like I just *knew*."

For a long moment, Matt didn't answer. He just studied Vic's face, his tortured gaze flickering over Vic's features as if

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trying to burn them into his memory. An eternity later, he said, “What you’re saying is you think you have super powers.”

Vic sighed. “I’m saying something’s not right. Believe me—”

“I do.”

“I don’t know where this is coming from...” He trailed off and gave Matt a quizzical look. “Hold on.”

Yes, Matt believed him—Vic sensed that much. But there was something else in his friend’s mind, something troubling, that made Vic catch his breath. “You’re not surprised,” he murmured. At Matt’s frown, Vic petted his lover’s foot as if it were a forgotten lapdog. “You knew—”

“I didn’t,” Matt said quickly. “Vic, I didn’t—”

Vic’s voice raised dangerously. “Here I’ve been tearing myself up over this shit and you *knew* all *along*.”

Suddenly Matt pulled his foot free from Vic’s hands and stood. His chair screeched along the tiled floor like nails on a chalkboard. “I didn’t know until you told me. I’m not the one who can read minds.”

Setting his coffee mug down on the table, he stormed past Vic before his lover could think to stop him. What had happened to the tenderness they’d shared not moments ago? Where did these swirling emotions come from, this anger and distrust that filled the air between them? *It’s all my fault, me and these damn comic book powers.* If only one of his newfound abilities would let him turn back time, just a few minutes or so, just enough to keep this all inside and get back to where they’d been... “Matt, wait—”

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Down the hall the bedroom door slammed shut, cutting him off. One thought pierced Vic's mind, loud and clear in Matt's voice. *Stay OUT of my head!*

The connection between them snapped. Vic had never felt so alone.

* * *

Vic could count on one hand the number of serious relationships he'd had in the past twenty years, and still have fingers left over. So he wasn't exactly sure what to do when Matt took off, but he knew things couldn't end this way. He wouldn't let them. He had waited too long for that man to let him into his life, and Vic wasn't going to stand by and watch their budding relationship just fall apart now.

Finishing the rest of his coffee, he followed Matt to the bedroom, but at the sight of the closed door, his courage wavered. The door was unlocked—Vic wasn't sure how he knew, but he sensed it. His hand hovered above the door knob as he debated his choices. Rush in there, demand an explanation, alienate Matt further? Or...

Raising one fist, Vic took a deep breath and forced himself to knock lightly, despite the emotions warring inside him. When there was no reply, he called out, "Matty?" From the other side of the door, he heard his lover snuffle. "Can I come in?"

At first he didn't think Matt would answer. One long minute passed—Vic felt as if his skin were shrinking, getting tighter and tighter, itching and bothering him no matter how

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still he stood. If Matt didn't answer, fuck decorum, Vic would rush in there anyway. He wouldn't let something as flimsy as this damn *door* stand between them.

Shifting from one foot to the other, impatient, he started, "Matt—"

"It's open."

Vic resisted the urge to crush the door knob in his hand. Instead he turned it, gently. Gave the door a slight push—again, gently. Matt stood by the bed, a small pile of clothes on the covers in front of him, as if he were packing. He didn't turn around as Vic entered the bedroom. With a lonely sigh that seemed to well up from the depths of his being, Matt folded a pair of his jeans on top of the clothes and muttered, "You're right, I knew. But when you didn't say anything yesterday I guess I hoped maybe it passed you by somehow. I'm sorry."

Without a word, Vic crossed the room to stand beside Matt. One hand reached out to take his elbow, and at that small touch, his lover's chin crumpled as he struggled not to cry. His voice broke into a higher octave like shattered glass. "God, Vic. I'm so sorry."

Pulling Matt to him, Vic quieted him with a tender kiss. Matt sighed and relaxed as Vic's arms came around his shoulders. "Shh," Vic murmured, kissing him again.

The soft crush of their lips grew demanding, hungry, and Matt hugged Vic close, his mouth opening beneath the eager tongue that licked into him, claiming him. This was what Vic wanted, this man in his arms, these lips on his, this body

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pressed so tightly against his own. Anything else that came with this love, he would learn to live with. Every relationship had its problems; each man carried his own emotional or physical baggage. Vic wouldn't let anything come between them, least of all something he couldn't yet begin to comprehend. "I love you," he whispered into Matt, and he tasted the salt of his lover's tears as he kissed them away. "Be honest with me—"

"I will," Matt promised. "I have been, just not about this."

"What *is* this?" Vic broke away long enough to gaze into those deep green eyes, now faceted with tears. When Matt couldn't quite look at him, Vic lifted his chin to make him. "Talk to me. I'm not going to hate you or throw you out or turn you away. But don't you turn *me* away, either. Got that? Don't shut me out."

For a moment longer Matt studied him, as if weighing whatever it was he saw behind Vic's eyes, judging it. When he deemed Vic worthy of his trust, he nodded. The silence that had dawned in Vic's mind the moment Matt stormed off lifted like a window opening, and Matty's thoughts riffled through him like the faint breeze that brought with it birdsong and rustling leaves and distant sounds on a bright spring day. *I'm sorry*, Matt said again, his voice resonating in Vic's mind despite the fact that his lips didn't move.

With a frown, Vic asked, "How do you do that?"

"I don't know," Matt admitted out loud. "It's the only thing I *can* do, I think, and it's only with someone who can hear me."

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But that only created more questions Vic wanted answered. “*How* can I hear you? It wasn’t like this before...”

He trailed off, unsure if he should voice his theory, but Matt said it for him. “Before we made love.” Vic nodded. Matt sighed and hugged him tight. Resting his head against Vic’s shoulder, he said again, “I don’t know.”

Vic sank to the edge of the bed. With Matt’s hands in his, he guided his lover down beside him. “Tell me what you *do* know, then. Talk to me, Matty.”

Dropping his gaze to their hands, still clenched together, Matt watched his thumb trace a circular pattern over Vic’s skin. When he spoke, his voice was low between them, and Vic had to lean closer to hear it. “I was fifteen,” Matt told him, “when I first had sex. It was this guy I’d known forever—his parents and my parents were into swing dancing, or something like that, and about once a month they had some get-together they went to, couples only. It ran all night, and they didn’t want either of us staying alone. We were too old for them to hire a sitter, but too young to be trusted alone, so they made us stay together while they were out, you know?”

Vic nodded, encouraging Matt to continue. “His name was Jordan. My age, maybe a few months younger. We’d fool around, more curious than anything, but one night things went too far and we did it. I couldn’t even look at him the next day, I felt so bad about it. I thought it was my fault, like maybe I’d made him do it, since I... hell, I was young. I thought he hated me.”

“Did he?” Vic asked.

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Matt shrugged. "The next day at school we had to run the mile in gym class and Jordan came in first at just under two minutes." He paused, waiting for that to sink in, but at the look of confusion on Vic's face, he clarified, "Guys in the class had to run it in under eight minutes to get a passing grade. Someone athletic could do it in a little over five, but that's cutting it close. Two minutes is unheard of."

Vic wasn't sure he followed what Matt was trying to say. "How'd you figure out it was from having sex?"

"I didn't," Matt said, "not at first. The teacher thought Jordan had cheated somehow and made him run it again. And again. Every day for a full three weeks, he made Jordan run the mile during our class. Every day, it took him a little longer to get around the track, like whatever had caused him to run so fast the first day was wearing off. Like *I* was wearing off."

"Okay," Vic said, cautious. "But how—"

Matt interrupted him. "The next time our parents went out and left us alone, Jordan wanted me to fuck him again. He said it just like that, and damned if I couldn't say no. I was fifteen—"

"I understand," Vic assured his lover. He rubbed a hand up Matt's arm, the dark hairs standing beneath his palm. Smoothing them down again, he teased, "You know what you're doing in bed too well for me to think that I'm your first."

A faint smile flickered across Matt's face and was gone. "The next day, in gym?" he whispered. "Jordan ran the mile in a minute and a half. Only a cheetah runs faster than that."

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Vic whistled, impressed. With a nod, Matt said, “Somehow he put two and two together and figured out what happened. I didn’t want to believe it at first. I *couldn’t*—I don’t have any special powers, you know? How could I possibly give them to someone else? But we... um, *experimented*, I guess you could say...”

“Spare me the details.” Vic didn’t need to hear them anyway—now that Matt had opened to him, the memories played through his mind like a movie of Matt’s life. Jordan insistent about having sex every single time they got together, just to keep the power. Joining the school’s track team to show off, laughing when people complimented him on his speed, his ego taking over until he honestly started to believe the power was his own all along, and sex was just a favor he bestowed on Matt. But after each hook-up, Matt grew more withdrawn, more hesitant, and the night before a big track meet, he refused to put out altogether. Jordan took what he needed anyway, bullying Matt into the act with punches and threats. He’d tell the school Matt was queer; he’d tell Matt’s parents. He’d claim Matt raped him.

That was the last time they had sex. When Matt’s mother asked about the scratches and bruises on his shoulders, he blamed them on Jordan. The next time his parents left for their dance night, he was allowed to stay at home only if he promised to keep the doors locked and not answer the phone. Jordan called, of course, but Matt let the machine get it. And when his former friend came over, Matt let him bang on the door and rattle the windows for a good half hour before he

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called the police to complain about a prowler. At school he avoided Jordan, and once track was over for the season, Jordan finally stopped pestering him and moved on.

No wonder Vic's sudden power terrified Matt. Gripping his lover's hands in both of his, Vic promised, "I'm not like that, Matty. You know me."

"I thought I knew him," Matt muttered.

Vic squeezed his hands to make him look up. "I swear to you this changes nothing between us."

Matt tried to smile, but the sad twist of his mouth belied his trepidation and uncertainty. "This is why I don't rush into relationships. From the moment we met, Vic, I wanted to be with you. But I told myself I couldn't burden you with... with *this*. I couldn't ruin your life."

"Please," Vic said. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me and you know it. You've filled my thoughts since the first moment I saw you."

That sadness didn't disperse from Matt's face. "You don't understand," he said softly. "It's like a drug. I've seen what it can do to men. Guys I thought liked me for *me*, guys I let in and trusted. But give them a little power, make them feel invincible, and they get hooked. They want more. They beg or plead, they worship me, berate me. Anything they need to do to feel that rush. They stop caring—"

"I won't," Vic assured him.

But Matt wasn't easily convinced. "You say that now, but what if I told you I didn't want to have sex again? Like ever? Could you live without the powers, Vic? The super strength,

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the telepathy, the flying?”

Though he knew the answer was *yes*, Vic paused to think how best to explain it to Matt. Carefully, he told his lover, “I don’t need those things. To tell you the truth, they scare the shit out of me. I can live without breaking off the faucet every time I turn on the sink, or lifting a city bus. I want to keep my feet on the ground and I don’t want anyone else’s thoughts in my head but my own, and maybe yours. If I wake up tomorrow and all that’s gone, thank God.”

Matt’s gaze softened, and with a tender touch, Vic traced the curve of his lover’s cheek. “I’m not ready to give you up. If you never wanted to make love again, I’d live with it, I’d have to. But I want to hold you every night as we fall asleep, and I still want to kiss you, touch you. Love you. If you’ll let me.”

One crystalline tear spilled down Matt’s cheek. Vic wiped it away with his thumb, which Matt kissed when it brushed across his lips. “Trust me,” Vic murmured. “Please.”

Matt’s face crumbled like tissue, fresh tears squeezing from his closed eyelids. Gently Vic kissed him, a soft press of lips that made his lover’s breath hitch as he reined in his emotions. Then he nodded, ever so slightly, but it was enough for Vic.

* * *

At some point, the tears dried up and Vic eased Matt down on the bed. Sniffling, Matt wiped his eyes and nose on the blankets and took a deep, steadying breath. As Vic rubbed

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Matt's back, warm through the absorbent bathrobe, he watched the calm that settled over his lover's features and knew the storm had passed. He could feel the clearing in his mind, could hear Matt's thoughts turn from the past to this moment, the two of them together, his hand between Matt's shoulder blades like a welcome weight.

As his hand strummed along his lover's back, Vic's touch licked along the edges of Matt's thoughts like a match struggling to catch flame. When his fingers glanced over Matt's lower back to toy with the band of his jockstrap, those thoughts ignited and Vic laughed. A sudden bevy of images filled Vic's mind, none his own—his hand smoothing over Matt's taut ass, flicking the bathrobe up out of the way as his thumb traced along the strap that fit neatly between his lover's buttocks. His mouth on Matt's trembling hole, his tongue tasting the musky skin as he licked down to Matt's heavy balls. Peeling that jockstrap away to release Matt's hard cock from its sheath and taking it into his mouth, suckling until Matt came. Vic trailed his hand down Matt's back along the curve of his spine and grabbed a fist full of Matt's ass. At his lover's sharp gasp, Vic teased, "What happened to never having sex again?"

Matt arched into his palm. "It was really just a hypothetical question. Are you reading my mind?"

Pulling the back of the bathrobe up to expose Matt's tight butt, Vic thumbed down the strap between the cheeks to finger sensitive skin that puckered beneath his touch. "If you want me to stop..."

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“No,” Matt said, a little too quickly. Spreading his legs wider, he opened beneath Vic’s ministrations. His eyes slipped shut as Vic cupped one ass cheek in his hand, fingers fondling the satiny skin between Matt’s legs. Raising his hips off the bed, Matt pressed into Vic and moaned. His own hands clenched in the bed sheets, kneading the covers like a satisfied kitten. “Don’t stop, whatever you do. Just—”

Vic leaned down and covered Matt’s mouth with his own, silencing him. He saw what Matt wanted him to do, the thoughts standing foremost in his lover’s mind—the jockstrap tugged off, the bathrobe opened and pushed aside, the jeans he wore discarded as he mounted Matt, Vic’s hard cock jutting out as he guided his lover into him. Fuck whatever consequences came from their coupling, whatever powers it gave him. Vic didn’t want them, didn’t *need* them, as long as his had this man, here, in his arms, beneath him, in him, forever.

Rolling his lover over, Vic pulled down the jockstrap as Matt fumbled with the zipper of his jeans.

J. M. SNYDER

An author of gay erotic/romantic fiction, J. M. Snyder began self-publishing gay erotic fiction in 2002. Since then, Snyder has released several books in trade paperback format and has begun exploring the world of e-publishing, working with both Aspen Mountain Press and Amber Quill Press. Snyder's highly erotic short gay fiction has been published online at *Ruthie's Club*, *Tit-Elation*, *Sticky Pen*, and Amazon Shorts, as well as in anthologies by Aspen Mountain Press and Cleis Press. A full bibliography, as well as free fiction, book excerpts, purchasing information, and exclusive contests, can be found at:

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* * *

***Don't miss Persistence Of Memory, by J. M. Snyder,
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Five years ago, Joah was culled—kidnapped by the government to be trained as a soldier. In the process, they erased his memory, destroying his past, his dreams, everything but his name. Armed with that alone, Joah escapes from the

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That person is Tobin, Joah's husband, who never gave up hope of finding him again. He refuses to believe that the strength of his love alone won't be enough to bring back Joah's memories of their shared lives, and he's determined to bring back the man beneath the soldier, the man he knows has to love him.

But an alarm in the chip blocking Joah's memories was triggered at his escape, and if the chip isn't removed soon, it will shriek his life away. Removing it won't bring back his past, and may destroy the present that Tobin has tried so hard to build between them. Can the love they once shared possibly survive?

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