



Rough Draft

By Chris Owen and Jodi Payne

Chapter 1

Sent in a plain envelope and written on lined paper. Black ink and quickly written block letters at the beginning, segueing into a relaxed cursive.

Dated October 16

Dear Paul,

Hey, how's it going? Now stop panicking -- I know it's not a phone call or e-mail, but nothing is wrong. Really. Sometimes I just want to write, you know? Feel the paper and take the time to spell stuff wrong if that's how it comes out. Usually my mom gets these... but that's more because she demands letters and hates to check her e-mail.

Lucky you, this time you get to be the recipient of my latest brain dump. Hope you'll forgive me.

Now that I think about it, I don't think I know anyone else who would put up with it. Got you trained up to deal with the Wandering Mind of Gray, and frankly it's too much work to start working on someone else.

Not that there are a lot of choice around here. Oh, the joys of small town life. The college is cool, and the history department (aside from a few old skeletons clinging to their tenure) is great, but, man... small towns suck for making friends that are anything more than surface.

Did you know that there are only three kinds of bars here? There's the Straight Dance Music Meat Market, the Café/Bar Straight Meat Market, and the Roadhouse Style Meat Market. Also Straight, of course. Thank Christ for the GLBT group on campus -- I seriously hate to think that gay kids would live out their four years here without it. So I wander down to the café/bar meat market once in a while and endure the noise, and I wind up getting eyed up by some young thing. And once in a while I get to thinking, 'Hell, I'm only thirty, the age difference isn't that much...' But the two times I got even close to returning the interest by sharing a drink it turned out that the kid was in my intro course and was looking for an in about next week's class.

Damn intro courses are huge, how the hell am I supposed to remember all the freaking kids I see?

Get me, Mr. Pitiful. Oh, shut up.

Mind, it's a lot easier to pick out the diggers when they land in my office looking for help and bearing gifts like books and trinkets. I had some girl show up last week who was sending out all the signals... I swear you could track her through the halls just by pheromones. She seemed honestly baffled when I didn't throw her across my desk and tear her clothes off. Poor thing.

And then there was the lovely boy doing the same thing, but he took my disinterest better -- think he's used to it, and isn't that just freaking sad?

Anyway, point is, I've been here for -- what, five years? And it's pretty much known which way I go and that's fine -- never been one for the closet, have I? But it sure as hell makes it hard to get anywhere. The only people I know are either students or teachers, and the chances of going out to meet anyone and not winding up lying next to someone I rather wouldn't are getting kind of slim.

There's a guy who teaches in the philosophy department. Nice guy, little older than us. He says that it's a wasteland for the sexually repressed here. The small town kids are all kinky and the city kids looking for that level of fun are all too vanilla but don't know it. Me, I have no clue what he's on about, but he seems to think that as the straightest man on campus it's his duty to bend a bit.

Yeah, makes no sense to me either. Philosophy students and teachers just worry me.

Going to go see the drama club's production of 'The Tempest' tomorrow. Made me think of you.

I miss you, Paul. I feel old.

And tomorrow is another day, full of jocks trying to get their humanities credit and history majors trying to suck up. There are a few bright lights in the upper level classes, thank god; makes it fun for part of the week. But by Friday we just want to get out of here.

Maybe I should start going to the movies instead of the bars.

Take care, and don't mind the angst -- I think I'm going through my second teenagehood, now with added rent payments.

Gray

Written on paper that appears to have been torn out of a spiral notebook with the fringed edge removed. Scratchy hand-writing in blue ballpoint ink. The letter was folded creatively and stuffed into an envelope that's narrower than the paper is.

Dated October 25

Hey, Professor!

Sorry about the paper, I borrowed it from one of the students in the after-school play I'm directing. This time it's 'Arsenic and Old Lace'. I'm going to have to do one hell of a make-up job to make my 16 year old female leads look like they're 70, huh? Anyway, they're doing costume fittings tonight and I'm just hanging around answering questions so I figured it was a good time to write back.

Me? Panic? I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, I never panic. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. I was surprised by your letter, though. In this age of email, nobody picks up a real pen anymore. I think letter writing is a dying art. Of course in my case you might prefer an email; I know my handwriting leaves a lot to be desired. Can you even read this?

All the same it's good to hear from the "Wandering Mind of Gray". I wish the circumstances were a little better. The semester has barely begun and already you're lamenting the loss of your social life? It's going to be a very, very long year, huh? Jokes aside though, are you ok, Gray? It doesn't seem like you not to dig until you find a silver lining to the daily grind. [something is scratched out here] You seem sort of depressed to me. Or lonely, I guess. I'm surprised, I would have expected that a town surrounding the hallowed halls of academia would be far more diverse. So is what they say about college towns all talk? Must be.

And please don't tell me how old you feel, I am so not ready to go shopping for my mid-life crisis convertible (although I'm thinking a Porsche, how about you?). At least you're working with kids that can drink legally. I've got acne-laden, hormonally-confused teenagers on my hands. Today's crisis was that Cindy, the girl playing Martha, went nuts when I suggested that her character was overweight and we would have to pad her a bit. She freaked out about looking "fat" and ran out of the room crying. I had to coax her out of the ladies' room with dramatic and important-sounding talk about personifying and embodying a character and a story about Ian McKellen's method acting.

I told you that story right? About how he was... oh, I know I told you and now I'm repeating myself, it's my favorite fucking story after all.

Uh-oh, you think she's going to go home and tell her parents that story? That's all I need, I can hear the phone call now. "Mr. Foster, I understand you told my daughter it was all right to be drunk." (It's bad enough I'm a fag, right?)

SIGH.

Anyway, it worked. She's now being measured and fitted for her padding, and she's going to look great. One down, 12 more disagreeable teenagers to go. Don't talk to me about feeling old.

Things are ok with me otherwise. I'm getting the bills paid, and all. I'm building a million dollar home at the moment. Ever noticed how a \$300K house is a "house", but a million dollar house is a "home"? What's up with that? Anyway, this woman, the wife, has really bad taste. Tacky as hell. With any luck we'll have this "home" finished before the winter rain hits us. I'd like to be done before Christmas, I'm thinking maybe I need a vacation this year.

Oddly enough, I can drive to downtown San Francisco where there are plenty of gay meat markets to choose from, and yet so far, I don't think I'm any better off than you are. I mean sure, I've had the one-nighters here and there, pick-ups and such, but apart from one or two exceptions, I haven't wanted to look twice. And even the exceptions haven't lasted more than a couple of weeks, or a month tops.

Don't let the hype fool you, San Francisco is a lonely town. Seriously. You're all set if you want to get laid, but if you actually want to have a conversation, you'd be better off hitting the Mission or Noe Valley and looking up the lesbians.

Heh. Mentioning the lesbians made me think of that time we went to the opera with Lisa and Allison as our "dates"? Remember? And you kept calling Allison "honey" and "schnookums"... I laugh every time I think of that. Those were good times, huh?

Well, I better go check on my little method-actress. Besides, as you can see, I'm out of paper.

[written up the margin] Hang in there, and try to find something to occupy your mind, you're thinking too much again!

Paul

Written on lined loose-leaf in blue ink. The pen appears to be running out of ink.

Dated November 5

Hey Paul,

Glad you could fit me into your schedule -- I mean that, I'm not trying to be a prick. How on earth do you find time to live between working and doing plays? I mean, really, Paul. Don't stress yourself too much. And that is the lecture out of the way.

Seriously, I'm fine. I probably shouldn't have mailed that first letter, or at least waited a day or two and added more to it. Call it mid-term stress -- god, was I like that when I was in school? Shit, how morose. You know what? Mid-terms suck just as much from this side. I can hardly wait for finals.

Anyway. Better now, sorry for the brain dump and for worrying you. And hey, I can always stand to hear about Ian McKellen's method acting again. And again. And once more just for fun. You think you'll survive the play? Oh, little hint -- like you need one from me: When putting on a production of 'The Tempest' take more than three weeks to get it together. No, really. At least a month. It won't be quite so painful for the world that way. Yeah, that was a good night. I live in fear.

It takes \$300,000 to build a house? Shit, man, I'm going to be homeless forever. As it is I'm barely past the sheer need for a roommate to make the rent. Looooong way from a 'home'. (This is me skipping the part where I talk about your muscles and how hot you look working on said home. See? Skipping the whole thing. Right now.)

In the post mid-term hush around here I've been thinking about stats. Statistically, a bunch of the varsity jocks are gay, right? Off limits, what with the whole professor/student thing. But, also statistically speaking, a bunch more profs than just me gotta be queer, yeah? (Okay, with my luck they're all lesbians. Whatever.) Also? If I'm staying away from students, can't find a prof to bang, then.... I'm thinking I need to expand my horizons. Look to the public sector, so to speak. Find out who's building all these houses.

Did I just say that?

Ahem. Anyway, what's going on with you? Anyone making your nights more fun than your days? Stay away from that midlife crisis Porches, babe -- you're more a Prowler kind of guy. Oh wait, that's me. In any case, it's on hold until after finals. How are the little actresses coming along? Any of them crushing on you yet?

Take care, baby. Don't let them get you down.

Love,

Gray

Green ballpoint pen on notebook paper, the handwriting is still pretty scratchy, but it's neater than last time.

Dated November 22

Hi Gray,

Your first letter got me all concerned, and this one had me laughing my ass off. Either you're bi-polar, or I overreacted. Since we all know I never overreact (haha), you must be insane.

Funny you should ask about my little method actresses. I told you about Cindy and the fat thing, right? So now, she has to wear her padding to every rehearsal. One of the boys teased her about it the other day and she stuck her nose in the air and replied quite coolly, "You don't know the first about acting". I've created a monster! Although, maybe one day I'll be credited with discovering her, she's a natural. I can hear her now: "Thank you for my Oscar, I just want to say that I owe it all to my high school director, Mr. Foster." Everyone in the nursing home with me will be pea-green with envy.

As for crushes, I don't think there are any. I haven't actually come out to the kids, but I think they might know. Kids these days are so much more clued-in than we used to be. It's very hard to hide anything from them. Of course, Jessica's father inviting me out on a date in front of his daughter might have given them a clue, too. Oh, I said no, don't worry. No with a capital "N". Nicely, but yikes. So not going there. He is hot though, and I've got squat in the way of alternatives at the moment. What a shame.

Three weeks to do 'The Tempest'?!? Oh, I'd die of heart-failure. I would, really. I mean, all the running around and entrances and exits... the logistics of that play alone are daunting. And a shipwreck! Oh lord. I hope Antonio was at least moderately hot. That character is SO gay.

Speaking of stress, as for your mid-term depression, no, you weren't like that in college. At least not after you met me. (Note the leering grin on my lips!) Dare I say I was good for your stress level? I do. And I was. I laughed at how, in your letter, you pointedly 'skipped' talking about how I look building houses. It put me in mind of the way you used to get your nose into your textbooks and I'd come home from rehearsal late and there you'd be with one little desk lamp on, devouring details about ancient civilizations in nothing but your boxers. You were a pretty hot geek as I recall. You should send me a current picture, so I can see what I'm missing out on.

You don't have a roommate anymore? Lucky. I have two. Well, housemates actually. Straight boys with girlfriends, both of them. They're cool about me and all, and actually their girlfriends are pretty nice, too. I've even brought guys home on occasion, no problem. I'm doing OK, but I don't think I'll ever have \$300K for a house either. I'll probably be paying rent forever. Oh well. It's nice to dream though, and some of these houses are nice, man. Big kitchens and shady backyards -- a guy can dream, right?

Not much new going on with me. We're about done with the mansion, sooner than expected, and then I'll get a break which is good. We have two weeks until opening night of 'Arsenic...', and it has seven performances spread out until right before Christmas. Two weeks! Holy crap!

Whew! Lost it there for a moment, but I'm fine now.

You're definitely the Prowler. I'm more the look available and see who bites type. I met a guy about a week ago, we had dinner, talked for a bit, fucked like three nights in a row

and that was it as far as I can tell. The last time wasn't even that great and he went home after. I don't know, Gray, I think I'm just not cut out for the relationship thing. I'm far better off with the one-nighters (or the three-nighters). Nobody seems to really push my buttons, you know? So for now I'm a free spirit. I better relearn that hanky code.

Well, sorry it took me so long to write back, but as you seem to have noticed, I'm a little short on free time.

Love,

Paul.

P.S. I'm so glad you signed your letter "love, Gray". I wanted to sign my first reply to you "love, Paul" but you hadn't signed your letter to me "love" so I wasn't sure I ought to and I way over-thought the whole thing to such a stupid degree, you have no idea, and ended up just doing what you did and wrote just "Paul". I know, I'm a dork.
~P.

Black ink on unlined white paper. Starts in messy cursive and keeps going that way.

Dated December 10

Hey Paul,

I have found the cure for mid-term blues -- the insanity of finals. You know, I always had a sneaky suspicion that the profs were quietly chortling their way through Hell Week, watching the silly students go bug-nuts as they drank too much coffee, tried to cram three months of work into twenty hours a day and generally grow pale and listless as their nerves frayed. I was mostly right. We roll our eyes and feel rather superior at the beginning of the week, (if we're of the smart variety of professors who have their tests written already and copied in appropriate numbers), but by the end of the week we're more or less stunned at the hell some of these kids are putting themselves through.

And then there's the drinking. The good drinking, I mean, not the sit alone in my apartment and swill beer while I watch sitcoms. I mean the going to this tiny little club that seats maybe 75 people and watching a kick ass band and drinking rum and Coke, then switching to Baileys when it feels right. Man, you would have loved it -- or maybe not, now that I think about it. I took you to those places, but now I'm wondering if you were really into the bands and the smaller venues, or if it was just fun 'cause it was... well, you and me. We always had a good time, yeah?

Anyway, night before finals start and I'm there, just sitting at this table with a couple of friends from the Arts department -- not many students out at all, so the crowd was either teaching staff or people that have nothing to do with the college, and it was just... so cool,

man. The band was hot, the atmosphere was light and happy, and there wasn't any drunken jailbait around to take the shine off.

Except for the drummer, but he wasn't drunk, just pretty, pretty jailbait. Mmm. Alas, pretty and not my student, but not yet 21 -- he had to sign off on some stuff before he was allowed to play in the bar. Too young, and I mean that -- not that I'm feeling my years, but really actually too young. Not to mention straight, as I found out from the waiter later when he (the waiter, I mean) was blowing me in the bathroom. *beatific smile* Nothing like friendly wait staff to keep me going back to a bar. Nice guy, nice looking... but just a moment, you know? Yeah, you know.

How's the play? A student's dad asked you out right there in front of her? Man, that's just wild. How did she take that? And if he's hot, wait until the play's over and see if he's still interested. Why not?

Seriously, how's the play going? You must be in performances right about now. Break a leg! (Or does that only apply to the actors? I forget.)

I'm not sending you pictures until I get a hair cut. I mean that. You'll have to make do with memories, babe, just like me. Got plans for Christmas? I'll be here for the week of -- can't afford to get home this year. Part of the price I pay for not having a roommate. I might have to rethink that next year. Not like I really need the privacy very often. Still a lone wolf, just like you. Although if you're doing three nighters you're up on me by a couple of nights. Sucks sometimes, but I don't know if I'm cut out for the long term things, you know? At least not right now. I can see it later on -- the house, the man, the yard out back... but not yet. I think.

Take care of yourself.

Love, Gray

PS -- yes, you're a dork. I love you, stupid. Always will, you know that.

Don't you?

Chapter 2

Written on plain white paper with a fine cobalt blue felt-tip pen. Fairly neat print in the beginning, dissolves into Paul's usual scrawl toward the middle and a pretty miserable rendition of his scrawl by the end.

Not actually dated, but the letter states it's Christmas Eve.

Hey Gray,

Blowjobs in the bathroom! I remember that smile of yours. That just got laid, I dare you to ruin my day, smile. So the waiter wasn't someone you'd see again, huh? Too bad. But the club sounds like fun.

I did like those clubs you took me to! Granted, sometimes the bands weren't my taste, but the drinks were plentiful and the company was good. There's a venue out here called the Fillmore that's like that; if you ever come out I'll take you.

The play went very well, many pictures were taken and lots of parents came up to me to tell me how nice it was. One woman told me that it's nice to see the kids involved in such "wholesome" entertainment and that she was glad I didn't pick a play where the kids had to dress like Britney Spears. I guess she's right, but I just picked it because it's funny.

I got asked to direct the spring musical, too. That's a really big deal for the drama program kids and it pays me pretty well, too, so I can spend more time on it and less on houses, which is so appealing you have no idea.

Along those lines, I'm sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. Truth be told, I haven't been in much of a letter writing mood. I have this funeral to go to in two days. One of the guys I work with, Kevin, fell off a roof two days ago. I was working inside at the time and I saw him go right past the window. Three stories. They say he had a heart attack after he hit the ground and that's what actually killed him. Scary shit. He was barely 35, and he's got a wife and two little boys, too, man. So sad. I'm so stunned, even still. I can't believe it. Makes you feel pretty fucking mortal, you know? I spent yesterday calling some people and my mother and all and then I figured I had better write you back because what if tomorrow is my last day on earth? I could fall off a roof, easy. I could electrocute myself or some shit. You know? Really makes your days feel numbered.

It doesn't help that I'm already in a funk. You'll have to excuse this letter as I'm kind of buzzed, it's Christmas Eve and I've got the Dewar's out. I made a half-hearted attempt at listening to Nat King Cole but I got all emotional, so fuck that. Now I have on TVland and I'm watching ancient I Love Lucy reruns. You think it's Kevin? I don't know. Maybe I'm drunker than I thought. I don't really like the holidays anyway, as you know. I've never really been into Christmas. As long as my stepfather keeps showing up I'm not spending it with my family, that's for sure. And San Francisco is weird at Christmas.

Macy's has Santa and the elves and all, and snow painted onto their windows and carols playing out on the sidewalk, and the Salvation Army dudes are all over MUNI with their bells but it's 50-60 degrees out and no one is even wearing gloves, let alone scarves and hats and all those things you associate with Christmas. Hot cider is unheard of. It's depressing.

I just want it all over with and all the stupid decorations to go away and to get back to work. I don't know why I'm so impatient about it... so people like spending their last dime in an over-crowded department store to put shit under their tree? So what? I guess I just can't stand all this merry merry BS when I'd really rather avoid it all.

Bah Humbug, huh? I shouldn't send this letter I sound like a bitter old queen.

New Year's would be fun except that without someone to kiss while they play Auld Lang Syne I feel like a loser. But I went to some parties last year and ended up getting laid so it wasn't so bad. We'll see how this year goes. I just don't have too many friends out here, you know? Good ones? You're still the best friend I have, Gray. I guess that sort of lame to say now with you 3000 miles away on a different ocean and whatever, but it's true. Everyone pales compared to you. So serious.

Now I really shouldn't send this letter, I sound like a bitter, pathetic old queen. But then again, maybe you'll get a laugh out of it and tell me what a pathetic baby I am and remind me to get over myself and all that. Make me smile. You were always good at setting me straight. Plus, you know, I could fall off that roof.

I'll try not to, OK?

I hope you had a nice Christmas.

Love,

Paul

*Written on lined loose-leaf in blue ball point which is smeared in a couple of places.
Starts messy, gets clear, and gets back to pretty sloppy.*

Dated January 3

Ah, baby. You really shouldn't be by yourself. Tell me you're okay.

I'm really sorry about your friend. What a horrible thing for his family. Are you okay? Now I'm going to worry about you all the time. Well, more. I always worry when I think about you working outside -- not so much the inside work, but I guess I project my fear of heights.

You're my best friend, too. No one knew me better, put up with my shit better. Miss that. Miss you. Sometimes I look around and wonder what the hell I'm doing here, or you're doing there, or what the hell we were thinking when we just said 'see you later'. Now I need a drink. Shit.

Did you go out for New Year's Eve? I understand the whole avoidance of Christmas thing, but I hope the whole stupid week wasn't a total waste. I flaked on Christmas, mostly. Called home, unwrapped the gifts (woo books and music) and then went to the department chair's for dinner. She felt sorry for me all alone and invited me, couldn't really turn it down, you know? Wasn't too bad, at least it wasn't a huge family thing. Just her and her husband and their kids. It was actually pretty nice.

New Year's Eve I attempted to just stay in, but by about nine I was going nuts. I didn't want to go to a club and be surrounded by people having fun, strangers all drunk and happy and annoying. And I really didn't want to stay here and watch TV, so I finally gave up and went to a department party. Actually, it was an inter-department thing; us, anth and soc, and poly-sci. Really, it was just Thomas' friends who happened to be in those departments, but I digress. Sort of an intellectual drunken house party, you know?

So I got there at about ten, and said hi to the people I knew and nodded to those I didn't and wound up holding up a wall with my shoulder while I tried to convince myself it was better than being at home alone. My savior arrived in the form of a -- get this shit -- fifteen year old girl. She'd been grounded and therefore was there with her parents instead of out with her own friends. She was bored out of her mind and had that world weary, know-it-all air that only those in their mid teens can possess.

"So where's your girlfriend?" she said as an opener.

"Don't have one." Well, what else was I gonna say? Maybe: I'm only here 'cause I don't have a guy to fuck at midnight?

"How come?" she asked, looking around with bored eyes and pushing her tiny little pert breasts out at me.

"I do guys." Hey, it was self-defense. You spend a lot of time with girls this age, I'm sure you know what I mean.

She stared at me for a moment and then laughed, absolutely delighted. "Good for you. Tell my mom will you? She hasn't gone purple in days."

And thus we were bonded. She had the best gossip, too. That kid knew more about the private lives of the soc/anth department than their secretaries. My head was reeling by the time I got all the info sorted. I gave her part of my beer. Oh stop, only two swallows. She earned it.

Finally she was gathered up by her dad who seemed not overly pleased to find her chatting up that young history prof (that would be me, of course, cast as the child molester), and then I was alone with my wall.

Which would be when Dianna Graves showed up at ten to midnight with her beard. Do dykes have beards? What are they called? Anyway, Di is soooo in the closet, but there she was with this short little geeky guy who she introduced as Dr. Trevor Keys. They clung to each other, man, totally into the farce. Or maybe just scared to let go. Dianna... god, you'd have to see her to believe me. She's tall, almost six feet, and looks like a model, only more. Hot isn't close to the word for her. I think she was dragging this Keys guy around just to protect her chest from the drunken groping from 'friendly' colleagues. Don't let anyone tell you that academics aren't pigs.

Anyway, they floated around for a few minutes and I melted into the kitchen right at midnight so I didn't have to witness the damn kissing. I was getting another drink, planning one short one for the road, and then Keys suddenly appeared next to me. I swear, if he kissed her it was the shortest kiss in history -- they were still cheering in the New Year out in the living room.

"Drink?" I offered, waving the ice cube tray at him.

"God, yes. Thanks," he said, and I almost dropped the tray. He was short, you know? Small boned, almost delicate, and had this mop of dark hair that had never seen a styling product, and I had expected his voice to be... not deep. Deep and dark and rich and sooo not fitting the body.

So I made him a drink, not even sure what I was mixing. Asked him if his Doctor was a PhD, or if he was in medicine. He looked academic, but you can't be sure -- and the easiest way to piss off a PhD is to assume they're MD. Not sure if it works the other way, so I didn't take the chance. Turns out he's a dentist.

A dentist. The mind boggled. Not only that, but he's Di's dentist, which is me getting ahead of myself.

"So you spend all day looking at people's mouths," I said, like a twit. Okay, I admit I wasn't up to my usual level. Gimme a break here.

And the little geeky looking guy looks me up and down and finally stares at my mouth. While I stare at his. I swear I started to get hard. "Some mouths are worth looking at," he said.

I was just thinking that. I was also thinking that it was damn cold outside and I'd have to shake Di before I could get this guy home. Close your eyes, you don't want to read the next bit -- it's the level bottom of my cool. I licked my lips and asked him if he'd picked his profession 'cause he had an oral thing.

I know. I'm an idiot.

"Something like that," he said, and then he was right in front of me, one of his fingers linked through my belt loop.

Score! My brain was happy, my dick was getting happy, and then the wrath of Dianna happened.

POOF! No more geek guy, no more anything. She snatched him up, told me I'd have to find someone else to play with and took off.

Bitch. Love her to bits.

I hung out for another hour or so and then called a cab. Said my good-byes and walked out to the cab, only to find Di and Keys already out there with their coats on. To share my cab. Which Di sent to my place first.

And then she pushed Keys out with me and wished us a happy new year.

LOVE her.

So I invited him up, of course. Even managed to get all the way into the apartment before we started. Got a curve ball right at the start though -- man wanted to talk. He's as far into the closet as Di, maybe more, and he was freaking out about what he'd done at the party and what he was doing right then, with his hand down my pants and his shirt mostly off.

So I told him I wasn't after his soul and if he wanted to go that was totally cool. I wasn't looking for anything he didn't want to give up. No pressure. (Last thing I want is some guy I pick up pressuring me for a lifetime commitment, right? Not going to do it to him.)

His oral thing? Total fixation. First time he sucked me off I thought I was going to wind up brain-dead, my mind just sort of melted. And then we finally made it to the bed and he started... licking me. I mean, all of me. Every fucking inch he could get to was licked, nibbled, bitten, and kissed. Oral doesn't even come close -- and he wouldn't let me do anything. I kept trying and he eventually got fed up with me and well he tied me up. My hands, I mean, to the bed. And then he whacked off over me and I came just watching him. He licked it off my chest and got me going again and Jesus, baby. It was so fucking hot. He rimmed me and made me scream, made me beg to get fucked. Which, it turns out, he wouldn't do. He finger fucked me, and sucked me off, stroked off over me again and then we sorta crashed.

When I woke up he was gone, but he left a note and his number.

And now I'm worried about you and horny again and it's only seven days until classes get in and I want to be there when the spring musical opens.

Okay, I need to eat something. (Which really means I have to go masturbate.)

Love,

Gray

PS -- for god's sake, tell me you're okay.

On three hole punched graph paper, written in a sketchy black pen with Paul's trademark, barely legible writing which stays pretty consistent throughout.

Dated January 8

Hi Professor,

Figured I owed you a quick turn around this time. I almost called you but this letter thing seems to be... good, you know? Therapeutic or something. Feels more real than email, and less pressure than a phone call. Anyway, I'm ok! I'm good, really. Fuck, I'm such an asshole, I shouldn't have sent that letter, right? What the hell did I say? I was deep into the Dewar's, I'm sure I said something colossally stupid.

Actually what I'm sure I did do was boohoo about Christmas, and maybe a little about Kevin, right? Figures. I was over there the other night, everything is still really raw for Carolyn (Kevin's widow) and the kids are really too young to understand anything except that Dad's not coming home anymore. It's so sad, Gray, honestly. I brought a pizza over and fixed Carolyn's toilet while I was there... and she was stupidly grateful for just that little gesture. I volunteered to take the boys to the zoo this weekend just to give her some space.

Don't worry about me, ok? Seriously. I know better than to drink alone usually, it's just that everything sort of collided and I decided not to fight it this time. But trust me, I'm paranoid now and I'm all about the safety harnesses and the wires that I used to scoff at. I'd really like to live at least long enough to get you out here for the spring musical. Were you serious? Will you come?

I haven't decided what musical to propose to the teachers yet. I'd love to do Sweeney Todd or something macabre like that but I think the parents would flip out, huh? Maybe 'My Fair Lady' or 'How to Succeed in Business'... hm. Well, in any case I had better make up my mind soon because I have to give them a proposal on the 14th. Nothing like procrastination to force one into a decision.

OK, I don't know if I should tell you this, but hey, you were pretty graphic so what the hell. Your letter turned my cock to concrete, man. No lie, I had to go take care of that

little situation before I could sit down and write you back! Jesus Christ, did he seriously give you a tongue bath? Uh! What a fucking fetish. You lucky son of a bitch.

Actually I was good through most of it, but then when you were talking about how he tied you up my jeans got so tight I thought I was going to pop the fucking zipper. I was picturing you lying there, with your arms tied... maybe lashed spread eagle to the bed posts, or maybe cuffed together and clipped to a D ring over your head... showing off those pecs of yours, the ones you used to say were too white to see daylight (but I always thought you had nice skin). I can just imagine you shooting all over yourself, slick and sticky... right. I'm going to need a cold shower after this letter as well, damn you.

So did you call him back? I mean if he was that good? Are you having hot sex with him every night (well every night that Dianna doesn't need a beard)? Is he calling your name with his disembodied deep voice? Or maybe you're not bathing anymore because he's got that covered for you? I really shouldn't poke fun (did I say "poke"?) I'd love a boy with a fetish. Really.

So ok, you told me your New Year's debauchery, I'll tell you mine.

After the Christmas from hell (oh the irony of that statement), I was determined to get my miserable ass out of the apartment. Roommates are good for that sort of thing. Brad and his girlfriend had gone back to her parents' place for the holidays (ah, love), but Joe and his girlfriend Linda were headed out to see the fireworks in the city and I thought what the hell, and went along. Ever seen the fireworks in San Francisco? Well, me neither, but I'll get to that.

We went down to the wharf and played a little on Pier 39, had some beer and some fried clams, and then Linda needed to powder her nose so Joe walked her down the pier. I decided to hang out watching the sea lions and this group of guys comes up and stands next to me. They're laughing and complaining about the fog and the stink (the sea lions are cool but they reek, Gray, no lie) and I figure out that they're from New York and out here just for the week. They ask me if I know where the fireworks are going to be and I say yeah, and we get to talking. Next thing I know, I'm waving goodbye to Joe and Linda and taking these boys on a little tour of the wharf.

I know what you're thinking. Me? I'm the last person to walk off with a bunch of guys I don't know, right? I guess I was just feeling like I needed to blow off some steam, and it wasn't going to happen with Linda and Joe, if you know what I mean.

A couple of margaritas later I'm dancing on the end of a pier at an overcrowded bar with these guys. I'm going to be honest, my memory is a little thin, but they were all pretty good looking. One of them I remember was hot as fuck with the six-pack abs and buns of steel and the whole thing. The others were mostly regular guys but really good looking -- I recall a young, blue-eyed boy with messy bleached hair, and two brown haired, clean-cut types. One of the clean-cut boys was an accountant or a financial advisor or

something and the other was an investment banker with the greenest eyes I have ever seen. I'm sure they all had names, but uh... yeah.

Ok, so we're dancing when they start the music for the fireworks and the whole bar goes still and turns to face the ocean. By now, it's like 45 degrees out (that's cold for San Francisco). I'm warm from dancing but it doesn't last too long. I looked up at the sky as the first of the fireworks went off, and fuck if the damn things didn't get lost in the fog! No joke, all we could see the whole night were clouds and fog lighting up pink and purple and flashing white and green... it was so lame! By the time they broke into the 1812 Overture the boys and I were halfway down Market Street.

Oh! I've just remembered the green-eyed guy's name was Dean and the guy with the six-pack, he was named Paul, also. How to forget that?

We stopped at their hotel, ostensibly so two of the guys could get jackets, but Dean had his arm around my shoulders and I just had this feeling, you know? It was late after all, well past midnight by now, and the guys decided to order some room service and break open the mini-bar.

I'm giving you details, because you gave me your details. If you don't want know, skip over this part. Ha!

I'm not sure how Dean's tongue ended up down my throat, it was just sort of suddenly there, you know? So after my tongue got a warm up, I pushed him against the wall and went to my knees. I think that was when the blonde guy (god, I wish I could remember his name) pulled my shirt off over my head. Six-pack Paul was all over the accountant by then. I happened to glance over at the bed and they were both nude already, not wasting any time. But I didn't stop to watch because Dean was right in front of my nose and hard as fuck and I really, really, wanted a taste.

So I'm sucking him off, right? And Blondie kneels behind me, undoes my jeans, and pushes them down around my knees. He wasn't that big a guy, but man did he have big hands. I can feel him, right? Hard against my thigh and his fingers are tight around me and stroking and I've got Dean's cock in my mouth and Jesus, Gray, you know how I get, I just kind of checked out. Or checked in, more to the point, because I woke up at the hotel the next morning in bed with Blondie and Dean, kind of wedged between them. I was pretty damn sore, too. That good sore, you know? The kind that makes you blush on that walk of shame in the morning because everyone can tell by the way you're walking precisely what you were up to the night before. Dean had such a hot ass, too, pert and round, and he liked a good smack now and then. Reminds me of someone else I know.

Yes, I'm grinning at you.

So we had breakfast together and they walked me to BART and that was the last I saw of them. Pretty (hot) New York boys. Maybe I should have moved there instead of here. But Joe and Linda had a good time asking questions and teasing me when I finally got home.

I had a hickey on my collarbone that Linda had a fun making light of and Joe kept saying "ew, gross" and otherwise just laughing while Linda and I compared notes on men. So New Year's Day shaped up pretty well, too.

Classes are starting any day now, right? When's spring break? I'm serious, will you come out, Gray, if you can? I know it's expensive, but I'll spot you half the flight if you need me to. I could show you the redwoods and we could catch some local talent in one of the clubs... I miss you.

Love,

Paul

P.S. What do you think of the musical 'Secret Garden'? I'm thinking that would be fun for the kids. Hm.

Chapter 3

On one sheet of unlined loose leaf and two pieces of what appear to be cheap wallpaper cut down to a reasonable size. Written with a black Sharpie.

Dated January 13

Hey Paul,

I need a cute nickname for you -- you get to call me Professor, and all I have is 'baby' or 'Paul'.

And now Superstud, apparently. Nice to know that New Year's Eve was a good night for fags everywhere and us in particular. But geeze, man. An orgy? You got me beat by a mile and then some. Hear my jaw drop? I had to stop reading part way through (I was in my office) and save it for home. Where I read it twice. With a pause for personal time.

And yeah, I'm gonna worry about you anyway, although you using your lines and safety shit helps. I hope things settle for you real soon, even if nothing will ever be the same for Kevin's family. So fucking sad.

I vote for 'My Fair Lady', but then I've always had a thing for Professor Higgins. Or maybe the rain in Spain. Whatever -- it's a cool play. But then again -- 'How to Succeed' is forever etched in my brain with Matthew Broderick, and he's just so pretty. I'd stay away from Sweeney Todd -- you're right, the parents wouldn't be too happy, and for the love of all that's holy, promise me you'll not do 'Grease'. (shudder)

Mind you, the proposal is to be in tomorrow, so I guess my vote is a little late. Oops.

Okay, fun stuff. First off, yeah, I called him up. It's a little odd. He's a nice guy; smart, articulate... but so closeted we can't go out anywhere or do anything more than rent movies and order in. Which, I guess is fine, 'cause it's pretty much down to getting off.

Which is also of the weird. He's not creepy, don't get me wrong, but it's different. Told you he doesn't fuck, yeah? Won't pitch or catch, and this oral thing... well, I'm getting lots of action but he won't let me reciprocate. He just wants to suck me off (er... mostly when he's got me tied down, if you need to know. And from your reaction, I'm thinking that you have hidden kinks that I damn well should have known about, baby. I feel like I missed out big time.) and stroke himself off. This leads to lots of orgasms, and don't think I mind that, but I'm sort of more hands on. It's fun, but it's kind of leaving me cold. Well, post-orgasmic, but cold. Does that make any sense?

Pity me. Poor me, gets restrained and rimmed and sucked off and I'm looking for more. And no one to spank my ass, sigh. Shoot me, will you?

You like the thought of me tied down? Hands over my head, ankles spread? Why the hell didn't you say something? Or is this a more recent thing? Shee, when did I turn into bottom boy?

Let me know when the musical is slated to open. Semester here is over at the end of April, but I'll be tied up until the first week of May. Summer session starts the first week of June.

If I can be there, I will be. Promise. Though you might have to put me up, and that could be an issue with the roommates, no? Worry about it later, baby.

Okay, I have office hours, I gotta go.

Love you.

Gray

Written on blank white printer paper with a pencil.

Dated January 25

Dear Gray,

I can tell you're a professor, you know why? You are way too prompt with writing back. Have you ever procrastinated a day in your life? Do you never go home with a to-do list and wake up in the morning with it unfinished? I bet you don't. I, on the other hand, put your letter on my hall table and looked at it every day for close to two weeks thinking 'oh, gotta write him back tonight' and then got a beer, turned on the tube, and fell asleep in my chair.

But I'm having a hard time getting things done in general right now if it's not work related, so don't take it personally, OK? I wanted to write sooner, honest.

So, first off, "Superstud" is very appropriate and apt, and I will happily allow you to use it as a nickname. All the same, though, you know damn well that I smoothed over all the awkward bits in my New Year's tale to make it sound better, right? Like I left out how one of the fucking condoms broke (though not in any way that would be dangerous, honestly) and the three of us had a 'hey you're neg, right?' panic moment that greatly lacked in both heat and romance before replacing it and getting it on again... and I left out the bit where Blondie moved a little too far to the right and I twisted a little too far to the left and... OW. Yeah. You get the picture. I'm grinning over here, because exaggeration is a trait I have inherited from my mother, who always felt that a story should be entertaining. It was a story of lust, after all, so it needed to be good, right?

Anyway, Superstud sounds fine to me.

So I did finally pick the spring musical by the way. We're going to do 'Grease'! Nonono, I'm kidding! I wish I could have been there to see your face just then. Ah, well. I actually went with 'My Fair Lady' without knowing about your May/December crush on Rex Harrison, and it was well received. I hired a hunky dark-haired pianist to help me with the arrangement, and he will come shortly... I mean he is coming over shortly to score... uh, that is work on the score.

Yeah. He's probably straight. Who am I kidding?

So then we'll do casting by Valentine's Day and we'll rehearse until May. The show goes up on May 15th and it runs for ten days or so, depending on the interest. I don't know if that fits into your schedule or not, I sort of skimmed that part of your letter because it required me to think too hard. Why are you doing summer school and not traveling to far away places and meeting exotic men, anyway? You let me know if you can make it out here, Professor. And, you know, if the timing is bad and you have a free week some other time...? I'm not begging, really, I'm not that pathetic. I just miss you and I like the idea of seeing you again.

About your tie-down-man, no, "fun but leaving you cold" makes no sense. But that's ok, fucking isn't supposed to be logical is it? He sounds a little weird... maybe hot weird, but weird. No fucking? Oh, Gray, Gray, Gray... that won't do at all. Maybe he's so closeted that he's afraid you'll give him something so he won't let you touch him? I mean that's paranoid but sort of fits the profile. Anyway, I guess it's good that at least you know where you stand with him, and there are worse things than a few regular bouts of being worshipped.

I wasn't convincing at all, was I? Ok look, Gray, he's weird. Get a clue, you're hot and you don't have to be that desperate. Right. Glad we had this talk.

Anyway, if he can't be out and happy and proud of you, he's not worth it. Ok I'm done now. Really.

Along those lines... or ropes depending on where your mind goes, I was a little more vanilla when we were together, I think. Not that I'm a bondage king now or anything. I guess I just mean that just fucking guys I'm not romantically or emotionally into doesn't keep my interest as much as maybe it should. So the visuals and all, the toys and the role play, make it a little more... arousing, I guess. Anyway, yes I like the image of you tied down but I'm not trying to turn you into a bottom boy! You still swing? Or, pitch and catch as you put it? (I'm going to have to use that one, I love it.) Or have you become a raging testosterone-laden top since we last fucked?

Gotta hop, I'm writing this on the job and the guys are telling me the truck with the flooring just arrived. Ciao!

Love, Paul, aka Superstud

Sent on real paper this time, in black ink

Dated February 9th

Dear Superstud,

Oddly, that doesn't even look weird. Heh. Must be 'cause it's true. What isn't true is this delusion you have that I am prompt to reply -- what it really is, if you must know, is that your letters tend to arrive here on Friday, thus the start of the bleakness and the need for me to hold my... pen. Yeah, my pen.

Can you tell I sent oral-boy back to his dentist's chair and am not getting any anymore? Was just too weird for me, man. Sure, spank me, tie me down a little... but I'm way too interactive for that shit. Still going top or bottom, but at least let me touch back, you know? Please?

Well, I was interactive until I wound up here all on my own. Now I'm more.... self-contained. User friendly, though.

So, what's the deal with the pianist? Got fine, talented fingers playing you, hitting all the keys in the right way? Or was he straight, as feared? Doesn't matter -- if you're doing 'My Fair Lady' I gotta be there, even if I have to compete with the piano player for your attention.

Dates seem to be okay at this end, I'll poke around and see what kind of travel I can arrange. If you're serious, that is. And if you are, and I do get there, and the piano man's not all over you and shit like that, what are my chances for extended time wrapped around you on the couch?

How's casting going? Here, we're gearing up for mid-terms, and as I'm sure you remember my last midterm letter to you, check your mail in a couple of weeks and ignore whatever I'm babbling about. I'll be better a few days after that, and then it'll get weird again at term end. I have no idea what teaching summer session will do to me; lucky you.

Miss you, Paul.

Wow, there really is weird shit on the internet. Thought about sending you an e-card, but after spending a couple of hours cruising for links to send I'm much happier sitting here with paper. And my pen. Again. Hard to control this damn pen, it keeps... leaking.

God, I shouldn't drink and write and wank. It's a bad combination. Or something. Right, okay, I'm going to sign this, stick it in an envelope and walk down to the corner for coffee. Mail this on the way.

Had a dream about you last night.

Love,

Gray

Chapter 4

Written on three-hole college-ruled notebook paper with a blue ballpoint pen. The handwriting varies depending on how enthusiastic he is.

Dated February 20

Hey!

You can't end a letter with "had a dream about you last night" and not elaborate on it. Unless I was supposed to infer something from the way you mentioned you were drinking and beating off while writing... you know I'm no good at innuendo and subtlety, Gray.

So, in case you couldn't tell by the paper, I am in rehearsal. Music tonight, so I'm just hanging out listening. Alan, the musical director (and the pianist I mentioned in my last letter) is working with the chorus tonight. It's not going too badly, as far as high school kids learning new music goes. Casting went well, I got a handsome Higgins and an adorable Eliza. Very well cast, if I do say so myself. But of course, doing this sort of show with high school kids is always a bit of a stretch. They can sing, and Ted, the boy playing Higgins, is a senior, headed off to NYU next year for acting. So far he's been great to work with.

Alan, alas, is in fact straight. And married, too. But a guy can dream, right? And boy have I. So no, I'm not getting any nookie there. But! Do you remember I told you about a certain embarrassing moment where a girl named Jessica's father asked me out in front of her after a rehearsal? Well Jessica considers herself a "straight actress" (meaning that she doesn't do musicals) and so when her father heard that I was directing again and Jessica wouldn't be in the show, he called me. He was quick to point out the lack of conflict of interest and asked me out for "dinner, and...". "Dinner, and?" I asked, and he told me the blank would get filled in if I felt like going home with him.

Well. I went to dinner. He took me to this really nice seafood place, where we both had oysters and I had the seared tuna steak and he had a whole lobster in the shell. I spent the evening watching him lick his fingers. GUH. We babbled all night (when I was able to talk and not just nibble at the butter on his chin) about everything... his kids, my work, his job, my acting career, his penchant for choosing men that were unavailable, and my lack of a decent date in recent memory... and then I went home with him. Let me tell you, the "and" was fucking hot; so hot that I've crashed at his place about every other night since then. He has a great house. He's good looking and funny, and a little self conscious about all the right things. He kind of reminds me of you.

OK here are his stats: His name is Ethan, he's nearly 40, slightly salt & pepper on top, about six feet tall, medium build, and he has a quirky smile. He's a consummate top, and earns it, so I don't argue. He's a lawyer, and he lives like one, having a little money to

throw around if you know what I mean. His daughter, Jessica, is very sweet and seems to like me, but his son Matthew, who is 12 is taking a little longer to warm up to me. I kind of think it's better to date someone for a while before you involve the kids, but Ethan says that the kids are supportive of his dating.

It's been great getting to know him. We're very different actually, but so far that hasn't proven to be a bad thing. I guess we'll just see how it goes. It's nice to have someone kind of steady around.

Well, that's it for my big news I guess.

Started those mid-terms yet? I had a look at your last letter written during fall mid-terms... so I'm prepared this time. *wink* Yes, I keep your letters, one more thing to boost the geek-o-meter. I like them. I pull them out and read them when I'm feeling lonely, or you know, when I need to be reminded I'm important to someone. I'm such a sap!

Yes, I was serious. I'm so glad to hear you can make it out here. You'll get the VIP treatment as the Director's date. And yes, consider extended time with me on the couch reserved for you. And, you know, if things are still casual with Ethan? Maybe you'd rather start in the shower.

Right. On that note, I think I'll close this. Miss you, too, Gray.

Love, Paul.

Response written in blue at the start, then in black as the pen runs out in the middle. On plain white printer paper

Dated March 2

Paul, my dear heart.

For lo, I have succumbed to the lure of Wild Turkey. Turn back now, lest ye be horrified and struck blind by misspellings and poor prose.

Or maybe that sort of thing gets you going. Who knows? Aside from you, I mean. I assume you know if that sort of thing does it for you. Although, then again, I'm often surprised by how few people really know what turns them on. We all pretend to know what we like, but every once in a while someone does something just a little different or slides his fingers just so instead the usual way and then... fireworks and symphonies, you know? And whole new worlds open up and hey! You find out that your sad little vanilla kinks aren't so little and baby, vanilla really is just a flavor of ice cream.

So, you're dating the daddy, huh? Cool, man. He better treat you right, or me and his little Jessica will have a chat and then -- oh man, that sounds like I've gone around the bend. Sorry, baby. Let me try that again. So, you're dating that nice man? Good, I'm happy for you. I hope that it works out for you both, he sounds interesting. Is he good in bed? Does he let you ride him from on top? I love that. Looking up at you when I was buried in your ass, watching you work me.

Oh dear, that didn't go right either. I am so drunk.

Let me see. Mid-terms went. I have yet to replace Keys in my bed, but I have managed to find a couple of people around town for a quick grope or two. Hand jobs just aren't enough though, man. Really. You know what I want? Well, I'll tell you what I want. Because I am just that drunk.

I want to go out for dinner. I want to walk home across that damn tiny park. I want to make out on the bench and then come the rest of the way home and then sit around for an hour or so talking about books and music and what the government is doing and what Marx really meant. I want to be inspired. I want to laugh. I want to stop fucking around and make love for a change.

That's what I want.

I dreamed about you again. You were wearing red pants, which is just... no. And then you weren't. We were back in our old place and I was telling you how I cracked the ceiling, and then you were going down on me and it wasn't enough, I couldn't taste you, couldn't feel you, so I pulled and pulled on your sleeve until you twisted and my head was hanging off the edge of the bed and it was okay 'cause I had you in my arms and in my mouth and you tasted like you always do and I loved it.

Woke up and came in about three seconds with my fist around my cock.

Too drunk to get it up right now though. Tried.

Okay, I'm not sending this. I'm going to bed now. I'm sorry, baby. So sorry.

God, I miss you.

G

Postcard. Picture of the campus

Dated March 4

Uh, I can't find a letter I never meant to send, so if you got it... please ignore.

Or point and mock. Your call.

Gray

Answering machine message from Paul to Gray on March 7 in response to Gray's letter and postcard:

Hey Gray, this is Paul.

[pause]

I was hoping to catch you, I uh... I got your letter and your postcard on the same day, today and...

[he sighs]

Damn this time difference.

[another sigh]

Ok, so listen, your letter really freaked me out, you know? I don't remember that you used to drink so much, especially alone, Gray, and it makes me worry. I know you said to ignore it in your postcard, but...

[pause]

Well, anyway, I just wanted to hear your voice, maybe put my mind at ease a bit, but you're not there, so.

[he sighs again]

Don't drink. Ok? Not like that. I love you. Call me back?

Really. Love you. Bye.

[phone clicks off]

Chapter 5

Written on actual 5x8 off-white stationery with a blue pen. The handwriting is neater than usual, too, as if he actually sat down at a desk without distractions to write it. The envelope has his name and address embossed on the flap.

Dated March 15

Gray,

Look! Stationery! You know this is a serious letter when I actually sit down and pull out the good stuff that my mother gave me four years ago which I have never used until now.

So, I hope you got my message. On the one hand, I'm concerned that you didn't call me back, because maybe you're embarrassed about the last letter you wrote me and didn't mean the things you said, and maybe I should just disregard it or point and laugh like your postcard told me to because your letter was, after all, very into the Wild Turkey.

But on the other hand, Gray, your letter was written while you were very heavy into the Wild Turkey, you know? And that concerns me for a lot of real reasons that might be better addressed in person, or as close as we can get, like on the phone, but since you didn't call me back, I kind of have to address them here.

First of all, were you just drinking? Were you drinking because you were lonely? Were you drinking because of me?

Secondly, it's hard to ignore very blunt images of me riding you and sucking you off and shit. Yeah, you see what I mean? Very hard to ignore. I mean I know it was a sex dream and all, the sucking off thing I mean, and the red pants were probably traumatizing, too, so it probably means nothing, right?

Right?

See this is the problem. I really like Ethan, OK? But then you send me a letter like that and you call me "baby" and say how much you love to fuck me and I get to remembering, and I get this fucking boner and then where am I? You know? No, maybe you don't because I'm not explaining myself very well. I get to feeling guilty, that's what it is. Because I'm thinking about you in ways I probably should be thinking about him. And things happen to me, like I'm riding him and it reminds me of your letter and suddenly I'm back there and we're in your bed and those fireworks just happen and I know it's him but it feels like you. It really feels like you, man, and maybe I wish it were.

I wish I could blame that last paragraph on alcohol, but I'm dead fucking sober.

Anyway, Gray, what's happening here? Is this a friendly letter writing thing, or are we flirting? Or are we past flirting already and trying to fuck each other with pencil and paper? I'm a little freaked out, see?

But then I guess you'd have called me back if you had anything you really wanted to say, so I could be way off base and sticking my neck even further out. Maybe you won't write me back, either. I didn't mean to embarrass you with the phone call, I swear. I'm just kind of in this limbo and I'm getting a little confused by your letters... or maybe by my response to your letters... help me out here?

OK. So if I keep writing I'm just going to say the same thing over and over. This is one of those things that I should stick in my journal and not send, right? But I'll send it, because you sent yours. Maybe I'll follow it with a postcard in three days that says you should ignore it or laugh at me...

Love you,

Paul

Postcard, dated March 17

Picture of a muscular man's body in a kilt, his hand is hanging by his side and holding a huge lollipop, and the caption reads 'lick me'

Professor,

So, this is the follow-up post card I promised you, only I thought about it, and I don't actually want you to ignore my letter. K? Mean it.

Love, Paul

Written very carefully on college stationery in tidy black felt tip. Sent in plain envelope with Gray's home address on the return corner

Dated March 17

Dear Paul,

I'm sorry. So very sorry. I didn't mean to -- well, to scare you, to hurt you, to mess up your life. I didn't think, I couldn't think, and I'm more sorry than I can say.

I apologize. I don't know what I can say to make this better. I didn't mean to do this, and I'm sorry I did.

Okay, I'm going to just write here, and try to make sense of what's going on.

First, yes I was drinking, but it wasn't like it looked -- I didn't start out all depressed and set out to kill my brain cells and wallow in my own aloneness. I had actually been out with one of the guys in poli-sci -- a grad student who has a strong interest in the Irish immigration. So someone told him to talk to me, and we went out for an early dinner, talked history, had two after dinner drinks and then I came home. I had another while I read some student papers, and then I had a nice buzz so I had another when I was watching TV. And then I got lonely and had... well, more, I guess.

God, I messed up.

Anyway, point is that I'm not drinking that much, and I'm not drinking on my own as a rule. I'll watch it, though, and make a point of not doing it again, okay?

I miss you, Paul. I miss talking to you, just hanging out and laughing. But that didn't give me any right to say what I did, to tell you what I was thinking about. I can't take it back, can't tell you that I'm not thinking about you, but I can tell you this: I'm happy that you like Ethan, that you've got someone who might turn into a steady thing, a good thing. Because you deserve to be happy, you should have someone who's good to you, good for you. I didn't mean to mess that up, didn't mean to... to change things. I was feeling sorry for myself and I brought you in and. And. Well. I did, and I'm sorry.

I do miss you. I'm sorry I left you, if you want the whole truth. I don't like it here, but let's just look at things right out -- I haven't tried to like it here.

I'm messed up right now, and I'm going to make some changes. I don't know what, exactly, but I'm going to stop fucking around for one. It hurts too much.

And I don't think I'm going to come for the spring musical. I don't think that would be a good idea at this point. Maybe at the end of summer, if you want to see me.

Try with Ethan, Paul. Really try. Please. Don't think about me, don't wish for me. That way isn't a good idea for either of us -- there's a lot of time and space in between what we were then and where we are now. You have a damn good life for yourself, you're doing what you love, you're where you want to be. Going back doesn't work -- I'm a historian, I know this. Learn from the past, don't repeat it.

Nice note paper. I hope I don't see it very often, though. I'm not going to mess up like that again if I can help it.

Take care of yourself, Paul.

Gray

PS -- 3 hours later

Okay, really. Don't think about me when you're making love with him. That'll hurt us all too much. And I won't try to screw you long distance. Promise.

G

Written on more of that nice stationery with a blue ball point.

Dated April 20, more than a month after Gray sent his last letter

Professor,

Yeah, I'm particularly tardy on this one. I don't know what to tell you except that this is how long it took me to cool off after reading your last letter. I was really upset and, frankly, pretty angry at you for a while there, and I didn't want to write you back when I wasn't feeling like I could at least be diplomatic if not entirely fair.

I am glad to hear that you're not drinking as much as it seemed in your prior letters. I hope the changes you're making are working for you. I hope you're telling me the truth.

I had anticipated that a couple of different possible responses could come out my letter to you. But I wasn't at all expecting the letter I actually received.

First of all, your letter was way too apologetic, and what's more, you were apologizing for all the wrong things. Don't tell me you're sorry for being open and honest with me, Gray. I'm sure you didn't get back in touch with me after so long so that we could write each other a lot of happy fluff and nothing controversial or heartfelt that might hearken back to our college days.

Second of all, does the phrase "passive-aggressive" mean anything to you? I mean, shit, Gray, do I really need to say anything more?

I knew you were unhappy from your prior letters, but I guess I didn't realize just how difficult it is for you there. I can tell now how you must feel very isolated without like-minded people to hang out with. And not knowing where to even begin looking for a boyfriend can only make that worse. I do think that you have to make some changes, because the romance you're looking for isn't going to be found in gropes and quickies in the men's room.

So... to be honest, you put a pretty strong stop to the flirting we were doing and now I'm not sure how to proceed. I just don't turn on a dime like that. It's kind of a blow, Gray,

having had to say goodbye to you once before and then feeling like I've lost something of you again, just when I was starting to really appreciate you again, and to enjoy letting you in.

The biggest blow of all, though, is to hear that you've decided not to come for the musical. I'm more disappointed than I think I can express in this letter. I was truly looking forward to seeing you, to talking with you and maybe straightening this out in person. You need to do what you need to do, though, and I'll try to be supportive of that.

Ethan and I are still dating. I might be a little more cautious about it than I was before because I'm feeling a little off guard lately. I think maybe he's noticed, too, but things are still fine and we're still enjoying each other. I'm just not going to tell you about our sex life anymore, I don't think you can handle it right now, hm? And as for what I'm thinking about or who I'm thinking about when I "make love" to him? Well, I'll keep that to myself now, too.

I'm sorry if this isn't the friendliest letter. I'm not trying to write you off, I want to maybe burn through this bullshit together, you know? Hopefully find a comfortable place again. I noticed that you didn't sign your last letter "love, Gray". Fuck. I feel like I'm mourning something that never made it past conception. I don't know, Gray, I liked your letters better when you were flirtatious and horny.

love, whether you like it or not,

Paul

P.S. I took the liberty of picking up a UCSF brochure and some information on their hiring practices and procedures. I'm not going to lie and say that I was in the neighborhood, because nothing is in that neighborhood but UCSF. I thought... well, I don't know what I was thinking exactly. Maybe it will interest you, maybe not.

~P

Chapter 6

Written on multiple bits of paper, in different pens, and with different dates for each. All in one envelope.

April 23

Dear Paul,

Jesus.

I have no idea what to say. Not a sweet fucking clue. I am sorry. I'm sorry I wrote the damn letter, I'm sorry I made you think, I'm sorry I pushed too far, I'm sorry I was in such a fucked up head space.

I'm sorry I ever left, I'm sorry I tried to fix it, I'm sorry I broke this.

I can't do this right now.

LOVE

Gray

Oh, and nice bombshell there at the bottom. Do you ever just say what you mean?

April 24

Dear Paul,

I didn't get drunk, I didn't get laid, and I didn't tell the truth when I showed up here and Vicky asked why my eyes were red.

LOVE

Gray

April 24, later

Dear Paul,

I still don't know what to say.

I thought I'd lose it when you didn't write back and I couldn't call. I just... I couldn't. I shook. I couldn't stand to hear you tell me to go away. And now I don't know what you want from me. You want honest? For real, baby? I mean it, Paul, my honest will not fit in well with whatever the hell you're doing.

What the hell are you doing?

Are you trying to be with Ethan or are you trying to figure out how you feel about me? Do you want me to flirt? Do you want me to get all hot and heavy again? I can't tell, and that's the truth, Paul.

I know you want me to come for 'My Fair Lady', and I want to be there. But I think we want different things from it, and frankly I think it would be a huge, painful mess. And honestly, with what I told you, can you really see me being around you and Ethan and things going well?

Class, gotta go.

LOVE < -- - getting the point, here?

Gray

April 25

Dear Paul,

Okay, I have to mail this. I was going to rip it up, start over and just try to smooth things, but fuck that. You want honest, you want to know what's going on in my head, fine.

I am happy that you've found someone you like. I wish I could. I am not drinking at all, and frankly I bore myself like this. I am spending a lot of time at the library in town, reading crap. I don't like it here. I miss you like crazy. I don't know why we split up. Do you? I don't think I can be in the same city as you and not try to get you in bed. I don't want to do that, because I don't know what you want. I want to be your friend more than I want to fuck you. Which is a lot. I want to know why you put quotes around 'make love' in reference to Ethan, because if you're not making love you're fucking and, frankly, two months of fucking should be making love by this point. I want to know why you're so freaking upset about me trying to back off and let you have your relationship with him without me sending you porn starring you and me.

Right. That's about it.

I love you,

Gray

Written on his good stationery again, only the handwriting is worse than usual.

Dated April 28

Goddamnit Gray, if you apologize to me one more time I will fly out there and make you eat it. Jesus Christ.

Ok, now I am going to be civilized.

Dear Gray,

I'm not going to apologize for forcing a real, honest, sober, emotional response out of you. Yes, I was pushing your buttons a bit, and I guess I was vaguely aware of that, but I'm not sorry I did it. I do have responses to that bout of honesty you shot at me though, so here they are:

I'm not happy that you're miserable. It actually saddens me. It makes me worry. But most of all, it makes me wonder why the fuck you went there in the first place.

You asked why we split up? You had a job at a preppie New England college, and I wanted to go to San Francisco. Seemed perfectly reasonable at the time. Because men fuck, right? They don't fall in love. And they certainly don't fall in love at what were we... 25?

I put 'make love' in quotes because Ethan and I don't make love. We fuck, Gray. You're usually very clever, I would have thought you'd have picked up on that. I think the emotion of all of this is dulling your wit. Ethan wants company, and he does want romance three or four nights a week, but he has no interest in sharing a household or in another daddy for Jessica and Matthew. Zero. He's not seeing anyone else as far as I know, but we've grown as much as we're going to. We wine, dine, dance, kiss on the beaches at sunset and walk through the park holding hands and we fuck like animals in his extended king size bed and then I go home or to work the next morning after breakfast and wait for him to call. It was great for a while, but I'm getting as much as he wants to give at this point.

So, yeah, I'm upset about you backing off because I don't want you to. There's a no-brainer. Because I miss the fuck out of you, Gray. I really like our friendship. Hell with that, I need it, like oxygen or something. I'd agree that I want to be your friend more than I want to fuck you... but I also want to fuck you. Or be fucked by you. Hard. But what does that mean? This could be a rebound thing. It could be a 'you need me and I like to be needed' thing, it could just be that you're a kindred spirit and I like the way we sort of fit

together when things are good. I don't know. It could be that I wish you'd never gone to that waspy college in East Bumblefuck New England. Then again, I'm not even sure I know what I'm talking about.

Which leads me to that UCSF stuff... oh and the Berkeley brochures I'm including in this letter, too. You'd love Berkeley, they're all about talk there and that's right up your alley. Anyway, I sent that stuff mostly because I hate to see you miserable and those are the schools that I have access to and I am trying to hint that maybe you should look around for somewhere you'll be happier before you end up tenured and the ball and chain is too heavy to bear. And, you know, as long as you'd be moving for a new job... I sort of selfishly would love to see you out here.

That should answer most of what you wanted to know I think. Probably more than I need to be telling you at this point, because I really don't like my heart out on my sleeve. Please, Gray, give it some thought before you pummel it again.

I'm glad you're not drinking. I harp on this I know, but my dad was a drunk and I'm not blind. I'm not saying you're a drunk, baby. I'm just saying be careful.

So are you actually trying to tell me that I read too much into your not signing "love" at the end of your last letter? Well fuck that, your letter was a blatant attempt to put me at arm's length in order to make things easier for you to deal with (all the while claiming it was really for me, clever) and I wasn't going to let you get away with that. And I love how you're all up in my face about how I don't say what I mean, when you dance around your own insecurities like you're walking on hot coals.

Hm. That might be a little unfair of me to say. But I'm leaving it in. Are you a Pisces? I think you're a Pisces.

Anyway. I said I wasn't going to apologize, but actually I do owe you one. I'm sorry that I freaked you out by taking so long to write that last letter. I was so frustrated by the way you were neatly removing yourself that every time I tried to write I got two paragraphs into scathing, mean spirited muck and then tore it up. I don't mind saying things that need to be said, but I don't like being mean just to upset someone. I hope you can understand that.

So now I have some questions for you:

Why can't I say boo to you without you jumping down my throat? I'm not blaming you for anything. Nothing, I swear. You have no reason to be so defensive.

Why do you stay at that college if you're so unhappy there?

Why did you write me that first time? Because I don't believe that it was about feeling the pen in your fingers and having a hankering for real paper anymore. It sounded good at the time, but now I think there was more to it.

So... I'm going to go now before I blow this with something I really shouldn't say. I think I'm leveling with you the best I know how. Oh... at this point visiting for the show is pretty much out anyway, it opens in less than two weeks and the plane tickets would be ridiculous.

Love,

Paul

Written on plain white printer paper, folded in half. Hand writing is steady, but not the neatest he's managed.

Dated May 4

Dear Paul,

Okay. I had to get through finals in the last two weeks, deal with this, try to be a normal person, and have a constant stream of students through my office, each one of them demanding my full attention and deserving it. I've had to mark exams, go to meetings, meet obligations and teach.

I'm too tired to fuck around.

I came here because that's what I was supposed to do. Go to school, get the degree, get a job. Get a job teaching, if I could, because that's what I wanted to do. Get a job teaching at a small liberal arts school would be even better. So I applied, they offered, there I go.

You and me... man, it was amazing. And it's bullshit that men fuck and don't love, even at 25. But maybe we had to be older to see that. It was a good break up, Paul. No stress, no tears, just one last mind blowing fuck in an empty apartment and then it was done. Nice. Good.

It was supposed to be that way, damn it.

It wasn't supposed to be a cold little town that hates the college that keeps it alive. It wasn't supposed to be closed off to me, insular and distant. It was supposed to be like Grad school, but with money -- talking and learning and laughing and people all over the place that like to think. It was supposed to be small parties and smart kids and wonderful.

Instead it's lonely and far from everything and hateful. It's classes full of kids who are just getting another history credit, a department chair who won't let me have a seminar, an office that is hot in summer and cold all winter and the only sex I get is with people I don't like or people who just want to take care of their own weird needs.

You never said you'd come with me. You never said you wanted me close.

So now I have what I can only take as an invitation to move west and to be... what? A better casual fuck than Ethan? Your lover? I don't know if I'm reading what I want, or what you mean. I know you're trying to be clear, and I appreciate that -- it's just that I want so much that part of me is sure you can't mean what I'm reading.

God, how I want. I want to hold you, feel your skin, taste your mouth. I want to hear you when I touch you, watch you when I stroke you, I want to be in you. I want you in me. I want to be on my hands and knees and feel you everywhere.

I want to take you to dinner and bitch about the service for longer than the meal. I want to listen to you babble about rehearsals and about the site. I want to see your work jeans on your ass and make rude comments about your tool belt. I want to know that I can pick up the phone and see you in an hour.

I love you and I think I'm in love with you. I think that's why I wrote the first letter.

I'll look over the stuff you sent.

I can take the train.

Love,

Gray

Chapter 7

Written on the back of a pink piece of paper. On the front is the flyer for My Fair Lady, with a black & white picture of Eliza and Prof. Doolittle squaring off. The flyer reads "Adapted and Directed by Paul M. Foster" along with the dates of the run, which have now passed.

Dated May 16

Professor,

Busybusy. I decided to let the run of the show go by before I wrote you back. The pressure over whether you should come or not come, how to come, when to come, or if you even wanted to come was just too much for me to sort out, and I don't want to be making decisions too quickly in that kind of pressured headspace any more than you do. (You think I could have said "come" one more time in that first paragraph?)

Plus, it sounds like this stuff between us made finals even more stressful for you than they needed to be. Leave it to me to time things for maximum stress factor. So typical. I'm sorry, baby.

So yeah, like you, I threw myself into the show for two weeks while I turned my little Eliza into a star, and I put this letter off until I could concentrate on it fully.

I'm remembering now, how you were when that college made you an offer. You were excited about it, happy, you were going to do what you love to do, and I remember being genuinely happy for you. I never said I would come with you, no, because I wanted to come out here and get into theater. I wanted to do avant-garde, empathetic, responsible theater of great social and political importance. We were both pretty naive looking back on it, eh?

You're right, it was a good break up. Particularly since it wasn't really a break up at all. It was more like thanks for the good times, good luck with your real life. Easy. But not entirely without stress.

I should have admitted that I didn't want you to go, except that the end of school was kind of a natural break for things and it felt like that was how it was supposed to go. You do your thing, I do mine. I figured I'd find plenty of boys in San Francisco, and it wasn't my place to hold you up. I really do know what you mean when you say that it was how things were supposed to work.

Then I got out here to find out that in real life I needed to eat and to pay the rent, and although there was plenty of opportunities to do exactly what I was looking to do, the experimental arts don't pay. Hell, the professional, main-stream corporate funded arts don't pay much either. So I gave up my ethereal dreams and got practical.

Don't get me wrong, I actually like building houses. I like the solid pounding of a hammer and the obvious progress as the walls go up, the roof is seated, floors put down; I enjoy it. I'm tired at the end of the day and I have something to show for it. And since I don't need to get paid much for them, the high school theatre gigs are pretty cool. They're relaxing, and kids are challenging, usually in good ways. But it's not why I came out here.

Fuck, Gray, if I had known that I was going to have to give up so much, I would never have put you on the list, too. I might even have followed you to East Bumblefuck.

I'm glad you wrote me; I didn't have the guts to do it. I'm glad we're exploring this, Gray. Though I guess in a way it feels a little like failure to tell you what I'm doing now when you know what I wanted to do with my career, what I should be doing, maybe that's part of what kept me from keeping in better touch.

You do have an invitation to come out here. But if you're asking me if I'm inviting you to move in with me and pick up where we left off, I think that might be another naive move. Honestly, I hope that's where we'd end up, Gray, but I'm not sure how wise it is to start there.

I've read your letter a million times in the last two weeks. I had it in my truck and I'd read it on the freeway in traffic, I'd read it again on my lunch break, and at rehearsal... Hell, I read it again last night before I went to bed. I want all those things that you want. To touch you, to smell you, to hear you say my name with that breathless needy voice that makes me melt. I want to see the look on your face when I make you come. I want to look over my shoulder and beg you for more.

Those are the things I thought about last night. This morning I'm thinking more about how nice it would be to have breakfast with you and tease you about your girly coffee drinking habits, or go for a run in the park and race you the last block to decide who's paying for dinner, or maybe go to a play and stay up late over-intellectualizing it. We used to be good at that shit, didn't we? You think we still could be?

So where does this leave us? I'm anxious about it, are you? What's your timing? I assume by now you've committed to summer session. I sort of think we should see each other and we should get some face time before you make a big decision like moving 3000 miles away. I could maybe come out there, take some time off. You wouldn't get to see San Francisco that way, but you'd get to see me, which might be more important. Plus, Ethan and my roommates wouldn't be hanging around.

All that and love, too.

Paul

Postcard of Calais, Maine, looking across to St Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada.

Dated May 10th, but looks very battered and has obviously been lost and rerouted, reaching Paul days after he sent his last letter.

Paul --

I took a train trip anyway. I'm moving when I get back, got a sublet for the summer so my address will change. I'll write, if I hear from you. My contract goes up for negotiation on the 24th.

Love

Gray

Large envelope with two letters, each in a separate envelope. One says "Here there be Dragons" and the other says "Joy to the World". The large envelope has a new return address, no apartment number.

Here There Be Dragons

Written on white printer paper in agitated felt tip that starts big and loud and pretty much stays that way.

Dated June 5

I give up. I have no idea what you want from me anymore. I gave you fucking everything in my last letter, was as open and laid bare as I could be, and you not only threw it back at me you mangled it and ran it through a shredder to boot.

You didn't even have the fucking decency to tell me not to come, just went all silent and then sent me a fucking flyer.

You're hiding, Paul, and you've been hiding for years. You hid from me then, you hide now. You hide from your dreams and make do. It's all about fear, don't you see that? You content yourself where you don't have to, mixing up what's necessary with what's forever, and you don't take that extra step.

You tell me you want to fuck me, want to be with me. But you run from anything more. You send me stuff from schools, indicate you want me near you, but you want to keep it casual. You even want to keep your casual fuck/boyfriend. You don't push for a deeper relationship with him, you stick to what's safe and what he wants to give you, never mind what you want in your life.

I say I love you. You say "Hey, love you back. But not that much. Don't push. Don't rush. Sorry I let you go, but I don't want that with you anymore. But I'd still like to see you, so move out here and we'll have fun, or I'll go see you and we can fuck around, but I'm still with Ethan."

Well I'm not interested. Not in that.

And hey, while I'm saying stuff that needs to be said -- sure, you like building houses, but that doesn't mean that your theatre stuff has to be limited to high school shit. Get off your ass and make your way, damn it. You're better than that, so fucking get to work. Do as much as you can and make people who can help, help. Get Ethan to help, for god's sake. If his daughter is acting and he gives a shit about what she's doing, he knows people. Move it or lose it, Paul. He's got to be good for more than a big cock stuffing your hole.

I signed my contract. I'm here for another year at least. And goddamn it I'm not going to live like this anymore. I'm just not. I'm not going to live this half-life and play these games. I told you what I feel and now I guess I know how you feel, too.

You want me to write? Sure. You want to flirt? You got it. Hell, come on out here and I'll even fuck you through the mattress. But don't look for deeper, baby, because I tried that and all I have for that particular trip to honesty is this fucking flyer.

My Fair Lady, indeed.

love,

Gray

Joy to the World

Written on paper with a sunflower border in purple ink.

Dated June 6

Dear Paul,

Man, you wouldn't believe this place! I lucked out and am subletting a house from one of the English department profs -- he and his wife have gone to Italy for the summer. It's amazing, and a fabulous deal -- I just pay utilities and for food. Because the place is so much bigger and I have to buy gas now (yeah, back to the car rather than walking) it is almost as much as my rent used to be, but still -- so much space! And it's really nice -- there's a huge garden out front which is mostly perennials thank goodness so I don't have to worry about killing anything too important. There's two bathrooms, and the office is more like a library. Out back is even better -- they've got a pool!

Best part, though, is the neighbors. It's an older area, so the trees have grown up and the hedges give lots of privacy. From the back deck I can't really see the next door neighbors on either side -- a combination of fencing and hedges -- but I can see the house directly behind pretty well. And they can see me.

So, picture it. A long day of teaching summer session, the weather just starting to get hot. I get home, grab a beer, work in the front garden for a bit and get all nice and sweaty. Inside, another beer, head to the pool and do some laps before firing up the barbeque. Grab a book, some class notes, and settle in on the deck to get some work done and eat supper.

I can hear voices and look up, across the yard. They're having supper, too, or are about to, I can see the food on the table and a man at the barbeque. Then the other guy comes out and they chat and then one of them waves to me. So I wave back and we yell a couple of hello's.

I go back to work and they have dinner. Then I hear a splash and look up. They're in their pool and naked and making out. They know I can see, but it feels weird, you know? So I try not to watch, but I'm a bastard and I can't quite make myself go inside. I'm staring at my book, not seeing anything and all I can hear is them splashing and whispering and a few moans and then they start getting louder and I swear I hear one of them come although they don't scream or anything or even get much louder -- it's tone, yeah? Can just tell.

And then it's all "Oh yeah, there. Right there, oh god, suck me, more, more, god yeah...." and I'm about to die, I have to look. So I watch them, one sitting on the side of the pool, the other sucking him off and I rub my dick through my shorts and when he looks up and sees me he comes and I come and it's just... wow.

Then they kissed for a bit, got out of the pool, waved to me and went in. I took a shower.

Classes are going okay, I have three this session and only one next, so I think I'll see if I can do some volunteer work for the summer, maybe do some archiving at the town library or something. I'm still hoping to get a seminar course next year, plus I'll have to go through the fun of finding somewhere to live in September, but it's early days yet.

Hope your summer is going well, and you can get some travel time in.

Love you,

Gray

Chapter 8

Written on his stationery, in a black sharpie. The handwriting is awful, scrawly. The bottom of the paper is slightly discolored by something that spilled on it. It smells faintly of whiskey.

Dated June 9

Dear Asshole,

Got your letters today. You're so clever, aren't you? Funny. How about you take your fucking self-righteous bullshit and shove it where you're not getting any while you watch your neighbors do something real.

Go to hell, Gray, I don't need this. I'm tired of this 'guess how Gray will react today', crap. I'm so fucking done with this.

Paul

Written on graph paper with black ballpoint, some of his worst ever handwriting, and the letter appears to have been written very quickly.

Dated June 10

Dear Mr. Graham,

Actually, I'm not done. And I'm sober this time.

I can't believe you. What the fuck was that letter meant to accomplish?

You're a fucking hypocrite is what you are. You have a lot of nerve telling me I let fear rule my life. Pot/Kettle, babe. What the fuck are you doing signing on for another year at that stuck-up, straight, white-skinned college in East Bumblefuck? I know what you're doing. You're doing what's easy. Just like when you took that damn job in the first place. It was your first offer and you took it. Easy. No muss, no fuss. God forbid you put a little effort in.

But then putting effort in would require you to take risks, right? And we can't have that can we? You think I play it safe?? You never even called anyone at those other colleges did you? I know you didn't. That would be sticking your neck out, right? Can't do that, can we?

And now you've given in to cold feet over us, too. It's very convenient to blame this on me, isn't it? To say, "Oh, I signed the contract for another year, so there", like it's

empowering. Like you're trying to prove something. Well that's crap, Gray, you're not getting that past me. It's just better to not take the risk, I know you. No matter how safe I made it for you. No matter how hard I tried to make sure you were coming out here on your own terms, that you would have your own space, that you were sure about us. I even offered to come out there so we could be sure we were doing the right thing and not being too impulsive...

Was that what got you? That I didn't jump in head first without worrying about the consequences? Damn it Gray, if you came out here because of me I'd want to know we really had a chance. I didn't want you to come out here to just fuck around, I wanted to get serious. Date again. Build something. I didn't want to leave it to chance. ~~I couldn't take losing...~~ (scratched out, but you can still make the words out with a little effort.)

You know what, never mind. You took what I honestly thought was an attempt to give you a comfort zone and spun it to suit your needs so you could stay tucked into your safe little apartment in your safe little closeted college. And now you're locked into a safe little contract so you have an excuse to be alone and miserable and safe for another year. Well done. Though I'd have thought after your graduate work you'd have known better than to let history repeat itself.

And by the way? You don't know anything about my relationship with Ethan so butt the fuck out. I ended things with him during the run of the musical if you must know. But he's been calling, bugging me to have dinner with him, he says misses me. He might not give me everything I want, but at least I know where I stand with him. I'm not on an emotional roller coaster with him. He doesn't jerk me around. And at the moment he's the next best thing to you.

Yours truly,

Paul.

Written on a piece of yellow legal pad paper with black ink. Smells like cigarette smoke.

Dated June 12

I fucked Ethan tonight. Hard. For a long time. And I enjoyed it. It's your loss, Gray, you're the one missing out. I'm worth moving 3000 miles for. I'm worth the effort it takes to get me. But you could have had me with no effort at all. You're a fucking coward is what you are.

I'm not writing anymore.

Paul

Written on the back of a fax cover sheet with his constructions company's logo on it, in red pen. Obviously sent from work by the machine stamp.

Dated June 13

Gray,

Please ignore that thing I sent last night, I'm... anyway, just ignore it. It was mean and uncalled for and I shouldn't have sent it. I wish I could call you before it gets there but you're too damn chicken to pick up the phone.

Love,

Paul.

Chapter 9

On the back of the sunflower paper, a brown paper bag, and then what appears to be the back of page three of someone's paper on either the Jacobite uprising of 1745, or a eulogy for someone named Charlie. In either case, Gray appears to take issue with a few of the more creative spelling errors, if the red ink means anything. Three sheets of paper because his penmanship is pretty lousy at the moment.

Dated June 18

Paul,

Let's see, shall we count the ways, my dear one? Let's start with... oh, I don't know. How you're worth moving 3000 miles to be near on less than a promise but you can't bring yourself to even mention that you broke up with Ethan, and go so far as to mention him within a context that indicates I'll run into him if I go visit? Or shall we start with the implication that you're worth moving 3000 miles for but I'm not worth you even dropping me a line to say "You know what? I know you just told me everything that's in you, but it's too intense, I need some time." No, you just let me eat my heart out. Because you're worth it.

And you're so worth it that you have to tell me about sleeping with Ethan again, in a clear revenge fuck. Yay you! I'm so glad I care so much.

Whatever.

I was willing to come, Paul. I was ready to jump on the train and be there. I was ready to take the steps. Don't you dare tell me I'm scared, that I'm hiding. Don't you fucking dare tell me that I'm the hypocrite, when you gave me more dance moves than Fred Astair.

You want to take it slow? Okay. We will, we have time. Open up to me, Paul. Talk to me. Tell me who you really are. And maybe by the time my contract is up we'll be in a place where we can give it a shot.

Gray

Addendum, date June 19, one big paragraph and a little sloppy.

Paul,

God, I hurt. I thought I'd sent this but here it is, and I guess not. So, let's see where was I? Oh yeah, hurting. How come there's so much talk here about hurting, baby? I made you sad, I made you mad, I made you fight with me... I hurt and I cried and through it all I kept on thinking it doesn't get worse than this, there's no new fresh pain to top this and it's okay to say goodbye, but I was so, so wrong, 'cause, baby mine, you really cut. Sharp and

deep and I know you said sorry, but it doesn't matter, 'cause it's true. Watch and watch and read and see but don't ever feel, don't let them touch your skin, and if they do don't let them get inside. Two different things, two kinds of aches and I don't know if I can really take it, you know? When it works it does and maybe it doesn't last after all, maybe saying the wrong thing at the wrong time really does break things beyond fixing and I think we've done it. Tell me we haven't. And for god's sake don't leave me hanging. If I fucking tell you I love you, I want you, I can hear you in my ears and taste you and smell you and god damn it if I tell you I can feel you in my heart don't you dare back away from me and let me sit here waiting. No. You either say it back or you say that you hear me and it's not there, but you don't give me the silence. I can't run, you can't hide, and here we are in the summer heat and the dank taste of beer and you can't run from this. It either dies or it lives, and if it lives we fix it or we walk away.

G

Different pen.

I really shouldn't read your letters when I've been drinking and fucking 'cause I get just mad enough to tell you that I don't watch for long before joining in, and so the fuck there, asshole. You do it, I do it and the world goes around and around. And I don't give a flying fuck if you said you're sorry, 'cause I'm not.

I might love you, I might want you, but they're here and they're warm and they didn't push me away. I won't be sorry for playing, for laughing, for knowing that it doesn't matter. I'm not pretending with them, not in some half-assed relationship, it's nothing more than what it was. You, though. For you I'd stop everything. If you'd only ask.

God, you should see the moon tonight. It's huge and bright and you're under it, somewhere. What are you doing, baby?

your
Gray

Gonna mail this before I get too sober to. And I would so answer the phone, asshole. I call you, you're never home. Don't you ever check for your messages with those idiot roommates?

Written on lined white paper with a blue ballpoint, very neat. Uncharacteristically neat.

Dated June 24

Dear Gray,

Oh god, I don't know where to start, baby. I really don't. This feels so far past apologies that I'm ashamed even to offer you one now. Everything I do lately is tainted by this series of hurtful letters from me to you, from you to me... even though there were times when the hurt was accidental or unintentional or we were just plain misunderstood. I've been drinking some, which you know is a slippery slope. I called it quits for good with Ethan, he was sweet and he wanted to stay friends, but he's too tempting. It's too easy for me to settle. And you're right when you say I do that too easily. You're right, Gray. You're absolutely right. So how do I stop doing it?

Maybe the best place to start this is from the beginning.

Hi, I'm Paul, and I'm a hopeless romantic. I've recently discovered that I'm also moderately insecure and I seem to lack the courage to be the man I really ought to be. I've also realized that I have a myriad of clever little devices to cover for my fears, some subtle, some not, some hurtful to others and some not, but all just smokescreens that let me square my shoulders and get a hard on.

I had this friend named Gray, I think I might have been in love with him once. I think I might still be. But he knows me better than I thought he did and he got a little too close and hit a nerve just right... or maybe wrong... and it seemed more comfortable to run like hell than to stop and admit I'm a fucking asshole with a fear of... well, life.

I'm not always maudlin like this. I can actually be a lot of fun. It's just that the higher the stakes, the higher the stress, and the more of an asshole I am capable of being. And the stakes of late have been very, very high.

So. I build houses and I direct high school plays and I enjoy both. I'm suited for much bigger projects with much more social impact, but I'm comfortable in this little niche and there are only so many things I can change about myself at once.

I can't believe I had you practically stepping on a train and then slammed the door so hard that you not only staggered backwards, but when you caught your balance you put down roots. I'm a fucking idiot. I didn't mean to do that, I had different intentions, I just... well, how about I don't make excuses and just go with the 'I'm an idiot' bit.

And you're drinking again, and, of all people, it's my fault. Fuck.

So ok, you said all I had to do is ask. So I'm asking. Stop. Stop, Gray. Stop fucking those guys. For god's sake stop drinking. Stop. Just stop everything and let's see if we can't get grounded, take a deep breath, remember how we feel about each other and slowly start the gears moving again. A builder once said to me that the foundation is the most important part of the house. The rest of the house can always be fixed with a new coat of paint, or new carpeting, but if the foundation is fucked, then the house is going to fall down for sure, or have to be torn down.

You know, it's not really fair for me to ask you not to fuck around when I'm 3000 miles away, huh? OK, so fuck them if it helps you sleep at night. But don't get too attached because come May I'm hoping you'll be in my bed. Permanently.

God, I'm an idiot.

We've done this before, sort of, but let me try again.

It's more important to me that we be friends than be in love. It's more important to me that we be in love than fuck. It's more important to me when I can get my arms around you, that you're thinking just about me then, than it is that we be monogamous while we're living on different oceans. And it's more important to me that you stop drinking than anything.

So, let's see. On the 19th, under that moon, I was sitting out on our deck with my roommates and their girlfriends, and drinking beer. We had a barbeque, pork ribs and chicken, and corn on the cob. I'd bought a new CD and we were listening to it, and deciding it sucked. I went to bed before midnight, alone. I hope I dreamt about you, but I never seem to remember my dreams.

I am worth moving 3000 miles for. And you are so worth working to win back.

All my love,

Paul

P.S. I'd had two beers and a shot of tequila. But I wasn't drunk when I wrote this. I swear.
~P.

Chapter 10

Written on light blue note paper in blue pen. Neat.

Dated June 28

Dear Paul,

I think you're right, we're almost beyond apologies, but only in the sense that if we keep saying we're sorry we're going to get stuck here, reliving everything over and over. We both know we hurt each other, we both know that a lot of it was caused by stuff we aren't even close to understanding completely, and some of it obviously by temper and envy and being stupid to each other.

So I accept your apologies without reservation and offer my own. I'm sorry I hurt you, Paul. I'm sorry I was such an idiot. I would go back and name my sins, but again I fear that we could spend the next three months doing that. You know what hurt you, and I'm sorry for every cut, every cruel remark, every slight.

I am, however, glad that you see certain things in a different light; I know I do. I know I'm hiding here, and I know I'm unhappy staying here. But I did this to myself, really, and I can change it. I can make an effort to be more friendly, I can get out of whatever apartment I wind up living in and not go to clubs. I can... I don't know, go to the parks or to the book shops, or talk to people who I'm not just looking to screw. I can be a grown up instead of some kid who happens to be a professor. I can get back to research, I can do lots of things. I don't have to be miserable.

I know it sucks to see things the way they are -- or at least how they appear from 3000 miles away. I really wish I could have told you what I saw in another way -- I'm sorry for the delivery, but, baby, I'm not sorry I told you how it seems to me. Forgive me?

Hi, I'm Gray. I'm neurotic and a coward. I look for relationships and run when they can happen, I tell myself I don't need anyone. I mess around, drink and fuck my way through endless nights and then drown in misery for weeks at a time and tell everyone I'm past that.

I have this friend, Paul, who I should never have let go, and instead of playing it easy I pushed and pushed and sabotaged whatever there was. I made him mad, I made him fight me, and I think I wanted it that way so I could justify trapping myself here.

Ah, man. I can't do this like this. I can't just write it all out without feeling like... well, I can't.

I told the guys out back that you were worth getting my life together for. They're really nice men, I swear. What happened with them was a pity fuck, I knew it and they knew it.

More pathetic than that, they knew that I knew. But I just needed a warm body, someone touching me and letting me feel something other than agony for a bit. They've been waiting for me to break, in one direction or another.

I said I'd stop if you asked, and you did. So I'm stopping. I'll stop drinking, but you gotta know that it's not your fault I started again. No one's fault but mine. In all honesty, I remain unconvinced that I have a serious problem, but it is definitely unhealthy to drink the way I was.

Christ, that sounds... not like me. Like I'm spouting lit from the Dept of Health. Whatever. Point is, I'll not get blasted on my own and not when I feel like shit, okay? And you don't get to claim responsibility for my failures. They're all mine.

I'll stop fucking them. You stay away from Ethan.

God, I'm a kid, I swear. He just... I'm sorry. I can't tell you to do that any more than you can tell me. I don't expect you to be a monk until we decide what we're doing, just... not him. Please.

Okay, changing tracks. I want you as my friend. I want to make love to you. Not fuck. I want to be with you, Paul. So let's get that foundation built good and strong, okay? I don't think I could take putting the house up and having it all fall down. I don't think I could come back again if that happened.

You are worth it, you're right. So let's build, yeah?

Love,

Gray

Postcard of a little shaggy puppy wearing big rose-colored sunglasses, handwriting is really small and the note is crammed into one fat paragraph. The card itself looks like it was folded in half at some point.

The postmark reads "Akron, OH, July 5".

Sorry about the stupid card, it's all mom had in her desk. I'm home, mom's sick -- cancer. We knew she had it but she'd been in remission. Saw the doc today, he says it's 'metastasized' or something? Fuck if I know what that means really, but basically it's everywhere. It's bad, Gray. Not sure how long she's got. Got your letter the day I left and read it on the plane. The short reply is I love you and I won't go near Ethan, I promise. The longer one might have to wait a few more days. Didn't want you to think I'd gone silent again. I'll let you know when I know more. Love, Paul

Written on plain white lined paper. Neat in a disturbing way. There is a sticker on the envelope that has Paul's mother's return address in Ohio, only he's scratched out her name and written in his.

Dated July 14

Gray,

I love you. I miss you a lot right now. I needed to start by saying that.

I'm assuming you got my post card. The doctors have given mom six weeks. Six weeks, Gray, not months. I'm not going back to the West Coast until -- I'm going to stay here and take care of her, and be with her.

This poses some very big problems, like living under the same roof with my stepfather, who you know has been an asshole to me since I was a teenager. The thing is, though? He loves my mother. It's so obvious to me now that I'm here and she's sick. He's doing everything right, calling doctors and checking her meds and keeping an eye on the nurses. He's got a hospital bed at the house now, we cleared out the dining room so she could be downstairs in the middle of things. We'll be bringing her home in a week or so, and she'll have a nurse come in a couple of times a day to check up on her. It's hard to be cold with him when he's really stepping up.

My baby sister, Joni, has been great. Weepy sure, but she seems to know just what to say and when to say it, you know? I'm so bad at that. But she's got this perfect balance of her own grief and compassion for everyone else. And she's only what? 24? I think.

I'm trying to find the good in all of this, can you tell? Mom and I had a long talk and I felt like such a child. I should have been comforting her and distracting her, and instead she was saying "Don't worry Paul, it will be all right". She told me she's not afraid, I don't know whether or not it's true but I need to believe it so I am.

So, yeah, I'm here. I'm just taking it day by day. Thankfully, there's no alcohol in the house. Mom hasn't allowed it in the house since her divorce from Dad. Not even beer. So at least you know I'm sober and as clear-headed as I get.

On a lighter note, I can't believe you latched onto that sappy analogy about building a foundation; so much so that you elaborated on it in your own letter. God, I'm so embarrassed. Schmaltz-king over here. But I do agree that I want to see us put together something unshakable. I need that right now, Gray, something solid, someone I know I can go to when... well, I'm going to need you Gray, I hope I'm not asking too much.

I'm trying to pick a fall play. Yeah, they asked me back, yeah, I'm taking it, yeah I know I should be looking for something bigger but I just can't right now. So what do you think?

I'm thinking Shakespeare. Maybe 'Romeo and Juliet' or 'Othello'. Hm. Or Chekhov, something maudlin, like 'The Cherry Orchard' or 'Uncle Vanya'. Or a comedy, like 'The Importance of Being Ernest'. Hm. I'd love your thoughts and ideas. I have about a month to decide and I'm just not feeling very creative at the moment.

I'm working out a lot while I'm here. I need to blow off some steam, you know? So I'm running, and lifting weights at the local Y. I've only been doing it for two weeks or so, but it's paying off. I mean, I am in pretty good shape from building houses, but I've been toning and doing crunches. I hope I'll have abs of steel when you see me next.

Which is when, by the way? Got any time after summer session?

Oh, mom's awake. I'm going to put this down. You can reach me at her address, it's on the envelope. Oh, and I'm OK, really. I sound pathetic probably, but I'm good. I can handle this.

Love,

Paul.

A single sheet of note paper, hastily written. There are three phone numbers scrawled across the top, labeled: Home, Direct to Office, and History Dept.

Dated July 17

Paul --

For Christ's sake, call me. I don't care when, don't care why. Just... call. I'm right here, day or night. I forgot that I didn't send the number here when I moved, and I didn't know if you had the office numbers at all.

I'm so sorry, baby. So fucking sorry. Would it help or make things worse (with your step-dad) if I came? I can find a place to stay, no problem, I just want to be there if you need me.

I don't know what to do for you, I wish could just hold onto you, you know?

Call.

Love,

Gray

Medium sized box post marked July 18. Contains three CDs of jazz and two of Baroque, a mystery novel of the cheapest variety, saltwater taffy, a gift certificate for a New England seafood restaurant, and hand dipped chocolates. A postcard of the campus.

Paul-

Vacation in a box. Use it all as needed, and bring the gift certificate when you come to visit.

Love Gray

Letter on the blue note paper

Dated July 19

Dear Paul,

I know you probably haven't gotten the other stuff yet, but I wanted to write. I want you to know I'm thinking about you and your mom. I hope to hell that she's not in pain. I wish, I wish, and I wish. You know I do.

I hope things aren't terrible living with your stepfather. God, that's the last thing you or your mom need. I'm glad he's stepped up, though, glad that he loves her. If you need to vent about him or ANYTHING you know where I am.

Be strong for now, baby. For your mom, your sister... and then find a safe place to fall later. (How's that for schmaltz? I can out sap you any day -- I have historical references to draw from.) You need me now, I'm there. Later? I'm yours.

Don't stress about picking a play -- unless, of course, it gives you something to focus on. Maybe 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'? 'Much Ado About Nothing'? Well, you're the one who brought up Shakespeare and schmaltz in the same letter. Now my brain is stuck in romantic and silly places.

I can do romantic and silly. It just takes a little more effort than 'hunt and fuck'. But I can do it. I'll get in practice while I try to woo you and work on that foundation.

Now I'm both babbling and giving away my game plan, so I better sign off. Call me. Write to me. Let me know how you're doing.

Prayers for you mom, strength to you and your family.

Love,

Gray

Chapter 11

Strange dark blue paper with darker lines, written with a pink gel pen.

Dated July 23

Hey prof.,

The paper belongs to my sister, she insisted... she also insisted I say hello, so hello from Joni.

All these letters in a row and you sent me a care package, too? You can do romantic and silly! God, it made my day, Gray, made my week even. I ate the chocolate in short order while listening to the jazz with my sister. We got to talking about her love life, and men. She's a little heart breaker, I'm telling you. I'd hate to be straight and sentimental around her. She got into the saltwater taffy despite my protests, but it was a good little bonding afternoon.

Mom's hanging in there, still about the same. She's glad to be home, she's weak, but she's still every bit mom. You're right to say that I need to stay strong and I seem to have found my groove now, because I feel much more in control than I did when I last wrote you.

Joni's been teaching me how to dance, and mom's been watching, they say I'm improving. So not only will I be buff when you see me next, but I'll be able spin you across a dance floor like I'm Fred Astair (and actually be dancing this time). You get to be Ginger. Will you wear a dress for me? (Joni just asked me what I was giggling at, I told her, she says maybe there's something in the attic that would be appropriate. Yes, we're a family of smart asses.)

Joni... maybe I should let her write the letter since she's all I seem to talk about lately... she has convinced me to do 'Midsummer...'. She says it's got innuendo that will go over the kids' heads but entertain the parents. We'll see what the board says, hm?

I'm going to call you. Evenings are difficult because mom gets a lot of visitors, but maybe I could call you at your office? Anyway, I'll probably have called by the time you get this letter, which might defeat the purpose, except that I wanted to say thank you.

Thank you for the package and the smile, and for being there.

Love,

Paul.

P.S. This is the last letter I will ever write in pink gel pen, I promise.

Plain white paper, black pen.

Dated August 2

Gray,

Hi.

So... I'm embarrassed about that phone call, I'm sure I sounded like a sniveling teenager, and I had nothing at all interesting to say even though I know I babbled on for ages... I'm sure I made you late to a class or interrupted office hours or something, right? But it was nice to hear your voice, Gray, really good. It grounded me a little and kind of recharged my batteries. You said some seriously sappy shit on the phone, is that what people do when there's death nearby? Use old clichés and time-tested adages because there's nothing else they can really do? I don't mean to sound like I didn't appreciate it. Whatever you said, it was exactly the right thing, really. I can't thank you enough just for being there, just for taking up the space at the other end of the line, just for making me able to imagine your arms around me.

Mom passed the night after I called you, Gray. It was quiet, late at night, my sister was sitting with her. She wasn't in any pain, we'd been dosing her with morphine. So much for 6 weeks, it was barely 4, but I think it's better like this.

Just took a break and went to get some Dewar's from my stepfather's secret stash. All these years he's been sneaking drinks right under mom's nose. I'd be pissed except that I need it right now.

The funeral was surreal, but really kind of good, and a small group of us went long into the evening with people laughing and just generally enjoying the company. I met a lot of people, some of whom seemed genuinely glad to meet me. There were friends of my mother's, friends of my sister's, and even a couple of my friends from high school, can you believe that? Including Sam Davies, the kid who gave me my first blowjob. I recall it being mind-blowing fucking incredible, he recalls it lasting about two minutes. He says he's got a friend that lives like two towns over from your school, Sam scribbled out the info for you and I've included it with this letter. Maybe it'll be the beginning of a new-found social life for you.

Also included is a picture that one of Joni's friends took of Joni and me after the funeral reception. Dig the suit, huh? Joni bought the tie for me. Mom would have been proud.

I'm getting on a plane tomorrow. God, I want to come see you like we talked about, but I spoke with my boss and basically if I'm not back at work by the end of the week I won't have a job. He's shorthanded as it is and I've been gone for over a month. Plus, the rent's

got to get paid. So I'll be heading back west tomorrow morning really early. I'll mail this before I go.

I'm ok. Thanks again for listening, it made all the difference.

Love,

Paul.

White printer paper with stickers of bumble bees all along the edges.

Dated August 5

Hey Paul,

I'm so sorry, baby. I called but I just got the machine. I'm glad you were there. I'm glad for your mom that her family was there.

I'm sorry I wasn't actually there for you, though. I wanted to be. I wanted for you to know that you could lean on me -- that I'd stand next to you and take it on. If you need to talk about it I'm right here. You looked so hurt in the picture -- I mean, good (love the tie) but sad. I want to hug you. Joni looks great -- sad too, but hell I'm going to stop there.

You were fine on the phone, really. It was amazing to hear your voice, to feel that close to you. You made sense -- don't stress about it. Fact is, I doubt I would have been as together as you if our positions were reversed. You were emotional, yeah, but you were still coherent.

Man, I want to hold you.

I'm sorry you have to head right back to work, but I totally understand. I guess that means you won't be able to get time off soon, either, huh? Well, that's okay -- the gift certificate won't expire, and I'll have room for you when you get here.

Which reminds me, I might have a line on a nice place for the next year -- a neat loft space right downtown. Which means a huge open space in what used to be a warehouse. I'll let you know for sure when I sign a lease somewhere. It's pretty close to a smoky little jazz place, which is good and bad -- good for music, but as I'm trying not to drink so much maybe a bad idea.

Staying on the stop-fucking-around wagon, too, but I'll admit to extended cuddling on the deck the other night -- Jerry and Tim had a blowout and I got to play mediator, which entailed a lot of not saying anything while they talked around me. Sort of a physical buffer, which was the weirdest thing ever. Then I got politely kissed goodnight and they

went home. Odd. But okay, you know? Or maybe not, I don't know. I thought it was weird, but good.

I've been working out a bit, in that I swim in the pool every day and try to bike when it makes sense -- I'll never be as ripped as you, but hell -- I'm an academic, I'm supposed to be skinny and pale.

I've also become a fixture at the library in town, sorting through their collection of papers (news and official) from about the time the place was made a township on up. It's not in too bad of shape, and thankfully someone saved everything so there's a good picture of what was going on.

I think the librarian's husband is suspicious of me, though. He seems to show up right at 5 to collect his missus, and lately he's been dressing up a bit. She's been glowing and blushing -- and hell, you have no idea what a blush on a woman of sixty looks like -- and I think he's getting laid on a regular basis for the first time in years. Amazing what a little possessiveness will do for a marriage.

Okay, I have to go weed the garden. Call if you need me, baby. Really.

Love you,

Gray

PS -- I'll call that guy sometime soon -- he's only about a half hour from here.

Chapter 12

Graph paper, blue pen with dark ink, pride rainbow sticker in the upper right-hand corner.

Dated August 14

Dear Gray,

Thanks for everything. I know you wanted to be there, but things were tenuous enough as it was with my stepfather, and as comforting as it would have been, it might have caused other problems. As it was we got along fine and remained friendly, and that was much better for all concerned. I know you were thinking about me, I know you were there for me in spirit, and it was more helpful than I can say. I'll take a rain check on the physical comfort until I can get away to use my gift certificate. I'm really very much better now, and am able to focus on other things, and I'm going to try to do so in this letter.

Lofts are all the rage right now out here, everyone is getting one. Get down with your trendy self. (snap!) This is me, snickering at the very idea of you being trendy, you nerdy professor type. Seriously though, it sounds really nice. Can you afford it?

I think being near a smoky little jazz place is fine, call it hubris, but I think your urge to drink to excess will diminish greatly now that we've stopped dancing around the subject and just confronted our feelings head on, you know? I'm hoping that holds true for me as well. In retrospect I know I wasn't honest from the get-go, I guess maybe it was because I had some unresolved feelings from when we split up.

Anyway, I've got out my hammer and am waiting for you to hold the nail for me so we can start? keep? building. Also? That way if I miss it'll be your thumb that gets squished. Now that's carrying a metaphor too far, eh?

Laugh, Gray, it's good for the soul.

I can just picture you playing mediator in that argument. There you are, sitting on stool between them and every time you try to open your mouth to say something heartfelt and useful, they just talk right over you, like they never needed you there in the first place. But I'm sure the extended cuddling did you some good, too, and you know I'm not going to get on your case about a meaningless fuck, Gray.

Just makes sure I get all the juicy details for my... reading pleasure. (wink)

You're working out? You? Swimming is a great sport for all-over body toning... or so I am told. Will you show off your lean muscles for me when I see you? I am not ripped by the way, but I'm in good shape. I have good arms, decent quads, but the rest of me suffers from lack-of-caring-itis and it's a lot more slack. Although the endless crunches that I did in Ohio to keep my stress level down have paid off somewhat. We'll see if I keep that up.

Volunteering at the library, too? Oh god, Gray, that is so... academic of you. It would bore me to tears, but somehow I can see you doing it. I might be jealous of the little librarian lady though. I'm glad you told me her husband is so possessive, at least I know he'll keep you in line. Sheesh. That story about their sex-life was maybe more than I needed to know. I keep thinking... well never mind. The sex life of 60 year olds is just... well I'm not going there. (snicker)

So let's see. Me. Well, I did have a job when I got back, a very, very busy job. I worked 65 hours the first week I was back. I made so much overtime pay that it alone paid the rent and then some. I squirreled some away for a plane ticket, I don't know when I'll get to use it but the money has visiting you written all over it. This week was slower, about 50 hours, which is more typical.

I'm still working on the darn play decision. It turns out I don't have to let them know until the end of the month so I'm mulling it over. 'Midsummer' was a really good idea though, I'm not sure I'll do better.

I came home to learn that Brad and Anna are engaged. The bastard didn't tell anyone he was saving for a ring, he just did it. I'm happy for them, they're a great couple, but Joe and I will be losing a roommate soon. I'm pushing for either a gay replacement, or a woman. I've lived in straight-man's-land for long enough now.

Carolyn, I think I told you about her, she's Kevin's widow, the guy that fell off the roof a while ago? Anyway, she stopped by with homemade chocolate chip cookies and a sweet card and flowers for me the day after I got back. She was so sweet, you would like her so much, Gray. Anyway she's invited me to dinner tonight with a bunch of her friends, so the social life is starting to get back on track, too. Better go get dressed, it only takes hours for me to decide on a shirt anymore.

You? Are much appreciated, and much missed.

Love,

Paul.

P.S. What was with the bees? Were they payback for the pink gel pen? You get a pride sticker.

~P

Dark blue paper, monogrammed with a heavy silver J. Black ink. Stickers of frogs up one side, some of them overlapping in... interesting ways.

Dated August 19

Baby,

Just a fast note this time, I promise I'll send a longer one next -- I'm in the middle of moving and have to get next semester's courses ready to fly. Plus? I got sucked into helping with frosh week, heaven help me. On the upside, I'm liaising with the GLBT student group, which this time last year sounded like hell, but now doesn't seem like a horrid idea.

You sound okay -- almost too together, though. If you need to talk, call me. Promise me. I'll be right here.

Did you pick a play? I still think 'Midsummer' will work, it's got appeal and funny and innuendo that isn't offensive, and hell -- it's Shakespeare! With Puck and stuff. Can you tell I like that one?

You'd love my new place, Paul. I'm not too sure about some of the neighbors, and I have a feeling that the sound will travel a little too well, but it's cool. Did I tell you that there's a balcony cat-walk thing? I think I'll put books up there. And yeah, I can afford it, mostly. It's a month to month lease, that helps, and I don't have cable, but that's okay.

Can I tell you I want you? Want you so bad right now, just out of nowhere. Want to see you naked on my bed and I want to suck you.

Right, better now. Had a shower.

Okay, I know you said you'd be cool with me having a meaningless fuck, and I believe that -- hell, neither one of us is really the sort to deny for what... the next nine months, if you don't manage a trip? But were you serious about hearing about it? I mean, I don't want to flaunt at you, but I do want to... Hell, I don't know. Be honest with you, I guess. If I'm fucking around I want you to know the score.

At the moment, the score would be zero, but the guys from out back are having a "Gray's moving out" barbecue, and I suspect there will be fucking of some sort with someone.

Oh, if I haven't said it before, I want to hear what you're doing, too.

Paul -- do you really think we can get to a place where we can consider getting back together? Sometimes I feel so sure, and other times I wonder if I'm crazy, thinking you'd want to try.

Oh, and to aid that, my mother called. I told her I was in touch with you, that you'd lost your mom recently. My darling mother was, of course, sympathetic to you, but took pains to remind me how far apart you and I live and how long it's been since we've seen each other. Mind you, this is also the woman who insisted I was going through a stage until she caught me in bed with Patrick Levey, and didn't know that you and I were together

until I moved out here. She thought you were just a good friend. Yeah, mom, that's why Paul was always in my bed. Naked.

Whoa, that was a babble.

Love the rainbow sticker, have some fucking frogs. Like the paper? I stole it from Jane, the librarian.

Love,

Your Gray.

Written on white printer paper with blue ink, folded around a couple of glow-in-the-dark condoms and a sample of lube.

Dated August 27

Professor-mine,

I? Am slightly buzzed. Nothing's wrong, though, I've just been having fun. Been hanging on the deck with the roomies and their women, Carolyn and her new "friend" (not sure if they're dating yet!), Carl, and this guy Joe brought home from work to meet me. Apparently he's new in town and doesn't know any other gay men in the area... yadda yadda...

Yeah, I laid him, and he left about half an hour ago. He was scrawny and short, he had a cute smile and a wicked potty mouth. I don't think I've ever heard anyone swear so much on one breath, and that's saying something knowing the way I curse. He's also from some southern state somewhere and has this accent so that everything he says, while sounding fucking hot, is completely unintelligible. The only thing I really understood were the hoots and the yee-haws which were not at all a turn on, but just entertaining enough to keep me going. He really ought to have been chewing and maybe wearing a cowboy hat and spurs. That would have been hot. He actually told me I could "buck with the best of 'em".

Save a horse, ride a cowboy? Hm. Won't be doing him again. No. My roommates are exceedingly grateful for that, too, as you might imagine.

Anyway, hi! What? You said you wanted details! Score: Paul 1, Gray 0. Catch up, baby. I even included tools of the trade. Heh.

So I took one look at the paper you wrote your last letter on and I thought, holy shit who is he fucking? Should have known it would be the cagey librarian. I bet she's kinky. Did you browse her catalog? Examine her micro-fish... I mean fiche? Did you check-in and

check-out? Did she corner you amongst the stacks? Damn, I know there's a binding joke in there somewhere. It's always the quiet ones...

Glad you like your new place. Hopefully the neighbors will warm up. No cable? Where do you get your porn?

Ugh. One track mind thinking about you. I have had many fantasies involving your mouth and my cock, I expect brought on by the offer in your letter.

Speaking of which, don't fuck the students in that GLBT group. You can fuck kinky dentists and happy couples and such all you like, but I draw the line at students. Even hot ones. A BBQ in your honor? Sounds like the perfect opportunity to get laid. Yes, I want to hear about it. I want all the gory details you can remember. I am a not-so-closeted voyeur, as you know.

Stop listening to your mother. I forgot you were such a mama's boy (Like I'm one to talk... though I'm not anymore, I guess... geez, and I was trying not to go there... anyway...). Your mother has always been in deliberate denial, baby, and you know it. Not about you being gay, just about you fucking men. She's adorable, but she's wrong. We have a lot of miles between us but enough history to span them. Do I really think we can get back together? Well, considering I haven't been within arm's reach of you in years, I can't say for sure. But I hope we can. I really, really hope we can. I want to try, believe that at least. That's got to count for something.

Not going to be easy, though, this next year, 9 months, whatever it is. Sometimes I lie in bed at night and I think about you, and I can feel you next to me. Your warm skin, your hair, your scent. I can remember it, Gray, and that's amazing to me. I can actually remember what you smell like. What you sound like -- soft moans and needy grunts and begging, I remember it all. I remember your cock and how solid it felt in my hand, your touch on me, your mouth... fuck, I can feel it now as I write this, your fingers stroking me, your whiskey-laced tongue in my mouth...

Mmm. Drinking and writing and wanking... didn't you say that was a bad idea? I get it now. But I do feel so much more relaxed. So, yeah. Where was I? No clue. I should sign off. Starting to ramble, yeah?

Heads up! Birthday's coming! Send me something good.

Love,

Paul

P.S. I decided on 'Midsummer'. (I'll be your Oberon anytime)

Chapter 13

Written on the college letterhead, in black ink.

Dated September 4

Paul,

- 1) Thanks for the rubbers. The lube sucked ass, but the rubbers were fun.
- 2) I can't even begin to tell you how hard I laughed thinking about you doing that guy and him hooting and hollering. Hell, it still cracks me up. I don't think I could have managed to keep going, but I suppose if the body is hot and you could chalk it up to extra enthusiasm... Man, it's still funny, though.

I know I promised you a long letter, but to be honest there's not been much going on here. I moved, spent some time getting things ready for this semester, and other than that I've been keeping pretty low profile.

The "bye to Gray" barbecue was cool -- about twenty people, only half of whom I knew, and lots of food. I wound up making out with some guy, but when things got hot and heavy and I tried to take it to a bed he balked and fucked off. So Jerry (one of the guys 'out back') kindly took me in hand and sent me home nice and sleepy. I think he told Tim what happened, 'cause they fucked in their backyard that night, so I could hear. Silly men. Good guys.

Anyway, I moved into the loft, and yeah the sound sure carries in here. I need to get something on the walls, even if it's posters or wall hangings or something, just to deaden the noise. I was jerking off last night and scared myself when I came, I was so loud.

Oh right, the condoms. I was moving in and apparently there's a couple of 'dancers' in the building. Hell only knows where they dance in this town... So I get everything into the place with the help of one of the guys from philosophy -- I think I've mentioned him, ultra straight guy? -- and these two girls show up and offer to help unpack the kitchen. Wearing short shorts and halter tops, and baby, it wasn't that warm out. So I say sure, they come in and we get that done, then crash on the couches with a couple of beer cans in hand.

And I wind up with a lap full of lap dancer, her mouth trying to eat my tongue and her hand down my pants. Funniest thing EVER.

So straight guy, also with lap of girl, panics and runs for it (his lady really would kill him) while I try to explain to chicky that I'm just not going to get hard, no matter what she does.

She took it well, after she stopped pouting. Offered to set me up with some guy named Willy. Like that's gonna happen. Willy. I mean, really.

So that night I headed down to the jazz place to get some air (okay, to check out butts, shut up), and picked up a nice man named... something. Bill? Tim? Something. We danced all the way home and had several laughs over glow in the dark dicks. Ever use those things? Looks fucking weird in the dark, your cock sliding in and out of some guy's ass, the color coming and going and then.... coming.

Don't need cable for porn, baby, just make my own. Hey, that's an idea!! I'll rent a camera and make some porn for your birthday. Or you know -- you could send me some. I have a VCR.

Mmm watching you whack off for me, that'd be nice. Use toys. Want to see a dildo sink into your ass. God, reading about you wanting me, about you stroking off makes me hot. I really want you, Paul. Want to hold you, to feel you. Want to be with you and fuck you hard. Want to taste you. So video it is, watch for it.

Off to the GLBT student thing tonight. And no, I won't nail the students. Too much trouble, and really -- the idea creeps me out a bit. But there should be TAs around. Ha ha!

Score: Paul: 1 Gray: 2 if you count the blowjob

Love

Gray

PS: I am not a momma's boy! You take that back! I'll hug you now, too -- you want to talk about it, I'm here. You know that. And I'm back to feeling optimistic about us -- if nothing else we're getting something built here. Really.

G.

*Written on graph paper, blue ink. There's a sticker inside that reads "Stop the BU**SH**"*

Dated September 10

Gray,

...video?

Fuck, I'd have to be pretty drunk not to be nervous. You seriously want me to make one? Are you going to blackmail me with it? Because nobody gets to see my dildo without

like, a secrecy pact or something. You seriously want me to do this? Well, all right. You send me one for my birthday and I'll... return the favor. I think. If I can get up the nerve. Maybe if I close my eyes and if I can pretend it's you fucking me...

Ok... closed my eyes for too long there, had a nice shower, back to your letter.

You had a chick's hand down your pants! You traitor! Well, at least you didn't get it up, I'll forgive you. I noticed you didn't try to count that on your scorecard. You can't tell me those chicks were all that much help moving in, I won't believe it. They probably weigh 100 pounds soaking wet between them, right? What did they do? Carry a pot apiece? Wait, you don't cook, so they can't have been carrying pots. Maybe they carried your pillows. That much closer to your bed. What I really want is a video of that night!

I was so hoping you were going to tell me you had the straight philosophy guy. I was rooting for it the whole time I was reading. He can't be that good a professor or he'd know that all the great philosophers, of which one can only assume he aspires to be one, were gay. Too bad you had to leave the summer sublet, I was starting to like the "guys out back" saga. Maybe we can pay them a visit when I come out there.

I'm glad that the condoms went to good use. Seems like now that we're trying to get back together you're getting laid more, yeah? Unless you were holding back on me before? Anyway, if I can't have you, I'm glad somebody can. At least until I get out there to visit. After that I might decide to be jealous and possessive. You never know.

I keep talking about when I visit, but I don't have a date yet. I agreed to go on a cruise with my roommate a while ago so that's going to eat a week of vacation time. It's been booked and paid for for a while now, otherwise I'd be using the week to come see you. Don't guess you can get a week off right in the middle of September as classes are starting to join me? No, I know you can't. You're my next trip, I swear.

Work's kind of pissy about me taking more time off, but I actually think I need it. I'm feeling really fucking mortal lately and it's been hard. I've gotten skittish about ladders and heights and stuff. Like every few days I have a 'no, someone else can climb up on the roof today' day. I've never even thought about death before really, except that thing with Kevin falling off the roof and I had managed to write that off as the freak accident it was. Anyway, the guys at work have started teasing me about it so I think I need the week to take stock and relax. Life is too short for this shit.

Sorry, didn't mean to bug out there.

TA's huh? Tight asses? So did you find one at the GLBT thing? I haven't gotten laid since the last time I wrote so you're still one up on me. Cowboy kid called me and I politely turned him down. I don't think I could do that again, all I do is laugh about it. My roomies think it's hysterical, too. I don't think I could hold my head up if I willingly exposed myself to that kind of ridicule. But, by the way, did I tell you that he told me I was the best fuck he'd ever had? I'm choosing to believe him.

Speaking of which, you better get some rugs on those walls because when I do get out there to visit, we're going to keep the neighbors awake. All night long, baby.

Not much new going on here, I'm leaving for the cruise on Monday, I hope to come home tanned and well laid. Maybe I'll have tan lines for your video. Would that turn you on?

So, Gray=2, Paul=1, but maybe I'll have a few to add after the cruise!

Love you,

Paul

P.S. This letter was sort of rambling, huh? Sorry about that. And you are so a mama's boy! Ha! -P.

Chapter 14

Parcel containing a VHS tape and a letter on plain white paper written in blue ball point.

Dated September 18

Hey Superstud!

Sorry for the short delay -- it took a day or so to get the camera and then a day of taping. Then three days of panic. Anyway, here it is, happy birthday. Maybe next year we can do this in person, yeah?

You will be very, very dead if anyone ever sees this. Hear me? DEAD. I didn't even watch it, just rewound the tape and set it up to record from the 8mm to the VHS last night when I went to bed. Which means it could be a blank tape, and you'll think I'm a cheap bastard. Heh.

Enjoy! And then tell me all about it.

Oh, current score still stands at Gray 2 and Paul 1. Hope the cruise didn't suck -- or that it did and the score has changed!

Love,

Gray

PS: You don't have to do this for me, Paul. But I want to watch you do it live when you visit.

G

And I am NOT a mama's boy!

Video Tape

Black for a couple of seconds and then a wobbly view of Gray in his office. He's just over average height, standing in front of his desk wearing dark casual pants and a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the throat and with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. His hair is medium brown, artfully messy, and he's got thin framed glasses on. He looks a little nervous.

"On?"

Male voice from off camera: "Yeah, go ahead. Be a star, man."

Gray rolls his eyes as the camera zooms on his face. "Hey, Paul. Welcome to my office. Tim's kindly lending me his camera so I can show you my new apartment."

The camera wobbles wildly for a moment, then settles on a grinning face, distorted by the zoom being too close. "Hi, I'm Tim."

Off camera while Tim refocuses on him, Gray says, "Twit."

The camera settles on Gray, then pans the office, showing several bookshelves, the desk piled with books and papers, and Gray's framed degrees. "Be nice, or I'll take my camera home. And I gotta say, I hope the apartment is more exciting than this place." The camera zooms tight on the window, showing sunshine and a rather large tree through streaky glass.

Gray sighs loudly. "Thank you, Tim. Can I have the camera now?"

"Sure." Tim's face again, still grinning. "Try to stay awake."

Static.

Gray sitting behind his desk, in view from just over the top of his head down to his lap. His face is a little flushed, and the light from the window shows that some time has passed, but not really how much. Gray's biting his lip, one hand rubbing his erection through his trousers.

"This is fucking stupid, I know, but Jesus, baby. The idea of it makes me so hot -- I've been half hard all day. You try to do an intro lecture with a hard on. Not fun." He inhales sharply and his head tips back a little, his hips moving into his hand. "Got the door locked and about half an hour before office hours -- think the smell will clear out by then?" Gray undoes his pants, shoving the fabric out of the way, not wasting time.

He leans forward and there's the sound of a drawer opening, then Gray stares into the camera for a long moment, slowly pulling on his cock. "You do this to me. Make me jerk off at work. Make me so hard, baby. Watch me, Paul. Look at me. See how much I want you?"

His eyes close and his hand speeds up, tugging steadily with long strokes, his thumb circling the head of his prick every once in a while. Gray makes soft sounds, bites his lip almost rhythmically, his hips pushing up a bit. His eyes open again and he looks down at himself, his other hand forcing his boxers lower so he can cup his balls, roll them in his hand. "God. Oh fuck, baby. Want your mouth. I'm thinking about you on your knees, sucking me off right here. Your tongue licking my balls, the way you -- " He gasps and shudders, then speeds his hand suddenly, fisting himself almost violently. "Yeah. God, yeah. Watch me come, Paul. Close. Jesus, so hot."

Gray's eyes flutter closed again and his head falls back as he fucks his hand, speech gone as he starts to pant and gasp. With a grunt he suddenly lunges forward and then falls back with a tissue in his hand, presumably from the drawer he opened earlier. He pulls his shirt up and strokes himself a few more times, cursing quietly as he comes on his bare stomach, his body spasming a few times as he shoots.

For a long moment he breathes heavily, his eyes closed, then he carefully wipes himself clean before looking at the camera again. "More later."

Static

A jumpy couple of seconds as Gray obviously adjusts the camera on something. All that can be seen is a queen sized bed, covered in a dark blue duvet and a table on either side. There are several pillows on the bed, far more than necessary for sleeping. The wall behind the bed is draped with some kind of fabric, dark in color. It looks like it's a permanent thing, not just a sheet tacked to the wall. There are lit candles on both tables, and one table also holds a pump bottle of lube, prominently displayed along with two dildos, one of which is red, the other purple. The purple one is oddly shaped, with large ridges. There is utter silence for a few more seconds, and then Gray walks into view, naked except for a towel around his waist and his glasses. He ignores the camera, although there is a definite blush on his cheeks. Carefully, he takes off his glasses and sets them on the table not holding his toys. He leaves the towel on. Still without looking at the camera Gray climbs onto the bed, moving to the middle, and leans back on the pile of pillows.

"Happy birthday, Paul," he says quietly. "Wish you were here, baby."

Slowly, Gray begins to explore his own body, sliding his hands over his chest and belly, his touch light and heavy by turns. It's several minutes before he even teases his nipples, his skin starting to flush from his belly up. As his nipples harden, Gray's legs fall apart a little bit, the motion seemingly reflexive. His breath quickens and he begins to pinch and twist one nipple, moaning softly.

He's obviously becoming aroused, the towel not hiding his growing erection, but he takes his time, teasing his skin slowly. He tortures his nipples, slides his hands over his abdomen and thighs, gives quick glimpses of his inner thighs as his hips begin to stir restlessly, his now hard cock is pushing up insistently.

"Want you, Paul. Want to feel you next to me."

Gray fondles himself, using the towel to tease both himself and his audience, still hiding his erection from direct view. The cloth is sliding up, however, showing his legs and the shadow between them, one leg slipping up a bit and drawing the towel even closer to opening. Gray arches his back a little, moaning as he caresses his leg, his hand

smoothing over the soft skin until he's cupping his balls in one hand, the other still molding the towel to his shaft.

"Feels good. Got a surprise for you, baby."

Gray shifts around, looking into the camera for the first time as he gets to his knees, still holding onto his cock and balls. "Wanna see? Wanna kiss me? Touch me? Want to suck on my cock, baby? Want to fuck me?" As he talks he begins to stroke himself with the towel, still masking himself. "Want this?" he asks, finally dropping the fabric and reaching for the lube.

He's clean shaven, a change from the office scene. His erection stands proudly away from his body, jutting out and up, the skin red from arousal and the friction of the towel. Gray ignores the camera again, getting some lube and stroking himself slowly, still kneeling on the bed. His hips rock and thrust into his fist, and sounds begin to pour out of him, almost covering the slick sound of his hand on his dick. Gray is not a quiet man, sighing and moaning, occasionally saying "Oh God," or "Yeah". One hand on his erection, the other once more pulling at his nipples, and he eases himself back down onto the bed, apparently lost in his own touch, oblivious to the camera as he masturbates. His hand gets tighter and faster, his breath fast and heavy. Suddenly he groans and freezes, his face tight as he fights off an impending climax, one hand suddenly grabbing at his balls and pulling them away from his body.

"Oops. Too close," he mutters. *He's still for a few moments, then slowly strokes himself again, one hand on his balls, the other on his cock.*

He turns his head slightly, looking at the camera. His eyes are dark, almost drugged looking. "What do you want me to do, baby? Want me to stroke off again? Want to watch me like this?" Gray's legs part and he turns himself again so he's facing the camera, legs wide so he's showing everything off -- cock, balls and ass. "Want to be in me? God, I loved riding your cock. Loved the way you filled me, the way you'd sink into me real slow, until I was begging for it. Almost better than being slammed up against the bedroom wall, you pushing into me with only a bit of lube and two fingers to make me slick."

He leans over for more lube, pumping it one handed while he jacks himself, still looking at the camera. "Think sometimes that getting fucked by you -- hell, fucked, sucked, rimmed, any of it -- think sometimes it was better than doing you. Your ass, tight around me, the way you'd pant into my ear. My slut." Gray's legs open wider and he pushes two fingers into his ass. "But my ass loves your dick, Paul. My cock, your hole... any of our bits together." Gray groans and pushes his fingers deeper, then starts to fuck himself, his hips rising and falling between his two hands.

"Like this, Paul? Like to watch? What are you doing, right now? Are you hard? Is your dick leaking? Want me to suck you off? God, I can almost taste you. Want you to fuck my mouth, want your cock slamming into me. Want to swallow you, baby." *Gray's hand*

is going faster, fucking himself with three fingers now, faster and faster. "Oh Christ. No, no, no. Not yet." With obvious effort Gray once more stops himself, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath.

"Wanted to make this last, but there's just no fucking way, man. Too hot for it. Too turned on, want you too bad." He reaches out blindly, grabbing the red dildo and slicking it with quick, efficient movements, then gets unsteadily to his knees. Starting into the camera again he twists slightly, bending over. He's panting, licking his swollen lower lip, and then he smiles slightly, his eyes drifting closed. With a sharp cry he shoves the dildo into his ass, and pushes himself up onto his knees again.

"Fuck me, Paul. Fuck me long and hard, and come with me."

Gray rides the dildo, writhing on the bed and unable to maintain his balance. He falls back, pulling his legs up so the camera can see it all, capturing him as he lets go and thrusts the toy in and out of his ass, his other hand fisting his cock. He gets louder, panting Paul's name, grunting and moaning, almost yelling when he gets the angle just right. His hips buck and he slams the toy in and out rapidly, letting go of his cock to hold one leg up as he nails his prostate over and over.

"Fuck, yes, yes, yes, please baby, oh fuck, yes," Gray pants. "Fuck me hard, Paul. Jesus, yes. Oh God! Gonna come, oh yeah, now, now, now!" And he does, crying out as he comes, ribbons jetting from his cock as he growls, his teeth bared. Silence falls over the room and Gray lies still, the toy still in his ass. Slowly, languidly, he wipes come off himself with one hand and licks his fingers. "Good for you, baby?" he purrs, looking at the camera.

Static.

A large room, well lit with lamps and track lighting suspended on wire. It's a combination dining and living area, obviously the loft; the TV is on, and the camera zooms to it and then to the couch, doing a slow pan.

Female voice, off camera: "What's with the camera? You get a raise?"

Gray, also off camera. "Yeah, right. It's Tim's. Want beer or wine?" The sound of glasses being moved, and the camera turns. Gray is in the kitchen area, wearing grey pants and a college sweatshirt. "That on?"

Nameless girl: "Don't think so, I'm just playing with the zoom. Gimme a beer." She zooms in on Gray and back again. He's got his glasses on, and his hair is damp, not as pretty as it was in his office. "So how come you have the camera?"

Gray slides a beer bottle across the counter to her and she turns slightly, dipping the camera down for a moment. The kitchen has blue counters and trim, the brick on the walls a sharp contrast. She turns back to the living area and the walls are white, sparse.

"Making a tape for a friend out west. He wanted to see the loft, and I figured a tape would be better than pictures."

She shoots the windows, zooming and pulling back repeatedly. "A friend friend, or a special friend?" she teases.

"Put the camera down, Stace. And he's... it's complicated." *Gray walks past, into the living area and flops onto the couch. Stace, whoever she is, puts the camera down and leaves it showing half of the couch, Gray's arm the only part of him in the viewer.*

"Complicated how?" *she asks, joining him and sitting on the far end of the couch, beer bottle in hand.*

Gray's hand waves. "He's there. I'm here. And he's an old lover."

She laughs, and leans forward, coming into view. She has short dark hair, a curly mass that's tied up with a red ribbon. She's also dressed casually. "You should make your tape real exciting for him. Jerk off or something."

Gray chokes. "You're a sick puppy," he says with a laugh.

"That's why you hang out with me. Seriously, what's up?"

Gray's hand and arm disappear for a moment, then come back, as if he'd run it through his hair. "It's a long story. Paul... he's great -- funny, smart, talented. We were really great together, but that was a long time ago, you know? I mean, I just don't know what's going to happen. We're talking a lot -- well, writing a lot."

She nods. "Distance can be hard, the hardest. E-mail only goes so far."

"Letters, actually -- real ones, not e-mail. And a couple of phone calls. It's working, I think."

The curly head tilts to the side. "Like pen and paper? That's cool, man. But what are you doing? Friends? Flirting? What?"

Gray sighs and there's a long silence, then he sits up, his back to the camera. "We're just talking right now. We're... well, we're trying to get back together, I think. Working at it, anyway. Dealing with shit. It's good."

"Gray?" *she draws. "Talk to me."*

"It's hard," *he says again. "It was okay, and then it got bad. We had a huge fight. There were mixed messages, and I went off on him, then he went off on me. He sent me stuff that made me think he wanted me to move out there, and then he slammed me with this*

ultra casual shit that threw me bad. I got mad. It's fine now, we had it out and cleared up some things, but it hurt, you know? And he pulls shit like... like, he's off on a cruise right now, which is fine. He planned it ages ago, but he never told me."

She nods again, but doesn't say anything.

Gray takes a breath, and turns his head to look at her. "Tell you a secret? Not to leave this room?"

"Of course."

"No, not of course. It's important this doesn't get out yet," *Gray insists.*

"Yeah, okay. Not a word."

Gray smiles slightly. "I've been talking to a couple of schools out there. Not quite ready to say I have a job next year, but it looks good. And not teaching, research. Travel required, and an assistant, if I agree to take on a post-doc. It's more money than here, but not by much, and the cost of living is higher, so it's like financial suicide. And once I take off from teaching it'll be that much harder to get another position."

"But you want it. Because he's out there."

"Yeah. 'Cause he's there. And I think he'd freak if he knew I was that serious about being with him. We talk about it a lot, and we're working on... on building something strong, but I still think he's not totally sure how serious I am about this."

Stace studies Gray for a long moment and then grins. "Someone's in love." *She makes kissy noises until Gray bats her with a pillow from the couch.* "Still think you should send him porn, Gray. Make him so hot for you that you're a month out there before he clues in he's stuck with you."

"Brat. Shut up and drink your beer."

"I will if you put the movie in."

Gray gets up and vanishes from the camera. "God, who rented this crap? 'True Lies'? Seriously?"

"Seriously. Put it in," *she orders.*

Gray grumbles for a moment and then the lights dim, the sound of the movie starting filling the darkness. The tape runs like that for another hour and a half, then goes blank.

Chapter 15

Envelope which contains a Polaroid picture of Paul; tan, barefoot, in bright orange and white, knee-length swim trunks, with a lei of pink orchids around his neck. He looks about as hot as he gets. He is leaning on the railing of the cruise ship with the blue sky and a few white fluffy clouds in the background, and there's a blurred hint of an island with palm trees or something behind him a short distance. He is clean shaven, but his hair is a little longer than he normally wears it, like maybe he's growing it out or something. There is also a postcard with a picture of naked boy-butts on a sandy beach and a cheesy caption that reads "Wish you were here". His handwriting is messy, like he wrote the card in a hurry.

Not dated, but the postmark is September 15, from Hawaii

Baby, I really do wish you were here. Hawaii is fucking beautiful. I'm bringing you here one day, I so am. I've been "lei-d" as you can see in the picture, and also? The score is 3-2 now unless you've been having more fun than I have! Love, P

Letter written on notebook paper with blue ink, neat-ish handwriting for Paul

Dated September 25

Gray,

Thanks for the video. You have a very nice office and a lovely loft. The guy you borrowed the camera from is kind of cute, is he single?

I'm kidding. That was definitely a happy birthday present. Mother of god. You got me so hard it hurt and I had to strip right there in the living room and go for it with you. Fucking good thing my roomies were out. The bit in your office was such a turn on, Christ, I could have come without touching myself. And then the dildo... and you calling my name? Fuck, Gray, I can't even think about it much less write about it without getting hard.

Ever considered doing that for a living? You're fucking good at it. My god.

So, yeah. Liked it. Loved it. A lot. Thank you, very, very much.

Hawaii was a blast. I'm tan and rested and I feel more like me than I have since before mom passed. [a few words scratched out here, and unreadable] I really needed to get away, it was perfect. [something that looks like an entire sentence is scratched out here, but a careful look can make out "Got fucking well laid, too. Paul 5, Gray 2."] I'm feeling good... very optimistic.

I'm now in the middle of auditions for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. The board seemed to like the idea of Shakespeare. I don't know how thoroughly they thought through the content of this particular play, but I'll try to tone it down a bit so I don't offend grandma when she comes to see her teenage granddaughter as Tatiana. Sheesh. The play runs the first two weeks in December. [Another sentence is scratched out here] I should have it cast by the end of the week. I'm having trouble because teenagers these days have a hard time speaking English correctly let alone Shakespeare, but there are a few that have the hang of it. We'll see.

Things here are fine, otherwise, not much to report. They're glad to have me back at work, the roomie's wedding plans are coming along, I'm taking Carolyn's kids to Muir Woods over the weekend for some "guy time" and to give her a break. They're nice kids, you'd like them -- if you like kids, that is.

Have your classes started now? What are you teaching this semester? Made any new friends? Got any hot students, professor?

Paul stares at the letter for a bit. Eventually he sighs, puts his pen down and leans back in his chair. In his mind he can hear Gray's voice from the video tape saying "I still think he's not totally sure how serious I am about this." And then Gray's friend teasing him. "Someone's in love." He closes his eyes, and his unwillingness to address that last statement moves him on to wondering what the hell did Gray mean by he "pulls shit like going on a cruise"? It makes him bristle a bit, even if he wasn't wholly truthful with Gray about the trip. Which he should have been, damn him. But he's allowed to go on vacation if he wants to, isn't he?

He's gone over this letter many times in his head. It's had many incarnations in his mind before he finally penned this one. One version detailed his conquests on the cruise ship for Gray's enjoyment, another had a whole speech about how angry he was that Gray implied he was pulling something by going to Hawaii (even if...well... hopefully that would never have to be addressed). A third version confessed that he'd overheard Gray's conversation with Stace and how touched he was by Gray's very real efforts to find work and move out to be with him.

That thought brings another lump to Paul's throat. It makes him nervous, all that emotion, the reality of it, the idea that someone, especially Gray, would be willing to pick up and move, find a new job, all just to be with him. He isn't worthy of all of that is he? And he's afraid of the responsibility on his shoulders if... if things didn't work out. If he fucked it up somehow. If he hadn't already.

In the end Paul decides he should keep the letter light and friendly, and a little cooler than their last few letters. He won't mention Gray's conversation with "Stace" at all. He's back-pedaling, he knows that, and he wonders if Gray will see it, too.

Paul then goes back and rereads his letter, ultimately scratching out the sentence after his show opening in December that invited Gray out to see it before it closed if he had time off. Unfortunately, that sentence might be decipherable with a little work on Gray's part. Paul doesn't understand his sudden cold feet, but it's very real and present all the same.

He wishes he'd never seen or heard that last bit on Gray's video tape.

Finally, Paul sighs and simply signs the letter.

Love,

Paul.

Written with black ink on lined yellow paper

Dated October 4

Hey Paul,

Glad your cruise went well and that Hawaii was fun. I'll hold you to taking me there, and hey -- thanks for the pretty, pretty card. I stuck it on my fridge, 'cause every man needs to see nice asses when he's looking for lettuce. Put the picture of you there, too. Man, you look so fucking hot. I might spend a lot of time at the fridge, these days. But that's our little secret, yeah?

So you liked the tape? Cool. I was almost sick, worrying about it -- and that was without it even occurring to me that your roommates might wander in. Gah. I so don't need to think about anyone but you seeing it. And if that thought makes me queasy I think I'll pass on doing that stuff for money -- my mother might be upset if I wasted my PhD by doing porn instead. And seeing as how I'm such a mama's boy, I have to keep that in mind.

How are rehearsals going? I assume you've got your cast in place by now. Any new up and coming stars that aren't making you nuts? Bright sparkling talents? I'm sure you'll have them whipped into shape in no time. What are the dates for the show? And on that note, what are you doing over Christmas this year? I'm trying to get my plans set, and if the time works I could maybe take in a performance. Hit on the director. You know, the usual. Check him out for tan lines.

The score is, alas, unchanged since you got back from Hawaii, unless it's further in your favor. I've been busy with classes -- still have two intro classes and a British Isles overview -- which is a total waste, as far as I'm concerned. Eight hundred years of stuff crammed into ten weeks. Hardly useful, but it's a sophomore credit to people in other

departments. Other than that, I'm spending a lot time doing not much. Hanging out, watching movies, going to dinner with some people. Jerry and Tim called yesterday, though, I might go see them on the weekend.

What's with the stuff crossed out? You never do that. (You do a good job, though, can't make much out. I do see that the score is really in your favor -- and where's the details about that, man? You had sex four times when you were gone and I wanna know!! Okay, I'm not whining. But really. One guy? Four guys? HOT HOT HOT? Just okay? What happened, man?)

Wow, am I'm pathetic. Okay stopping now.

Mid terms in a couple of weeks, so things are mostly calm here. Oooo, we're due for another 'Drunken Gray has a breakdown at midterms' letter! Not. Promise not to do that to you again, baby.

Um, guess that's it from here. Everything okay?

Love,

Gray

PS -- I think it's really cool that you're spending time with Carolyn's kids. Really cool.

Written on notebook paper with a blue pen

Dated October 16

Gray,

Soon, if it doesn't stop raining, I'm going to be writing you from a raft floating down Market Street. My address will be Small Zodiac Raft, Pacific Ocean, USA. It's been raining for eleven fucking days straight. Can you believe that? My job site is closed because it's too muddy. We've been picking up work stacking sand bags against flooding rivers, no lie. Northern California is starting to look like one big mudslide. Is it in the papers out there?

God, I'm sick of rain. I actually bought a yellow slicker, a wide-brimmed oiled hat, and a pair of Wellingtons. I look like the Gorton's Fisherman. I should get a picture of that to put next to the one you stuck on your fridge.

So so sick of the rain. It's depressing, too, you know? Stuck indoors and all.

Well. I've cast 'Midsummer', and I'm fairly happy with it, although I miss last year's seniors who were far more experienced. So far we've done nothing but read it, over and over and dissect meaning and work on speech... it's a good thing this doesn't have to be a smoothly-acted piece to be funny, eh? It's been a very academic process to date, you'd enjoy it.

I did like the tape. I still like it. I bought a VCR for my bedroom so I could enjoy it more thoroughly. Chances are good it might wear out and you'll have to make me another soon. Yeah.

Since you said you liked that I was hanging with Carolyn's kids, the trip to Muir Woods was really fun. The boys were absolutely stunned by how tall the trees were. They made me hike with them up the outer trail until we reached the tops of them. And then we had to hike all the way down again and buy baseball hats and t-shirts and hot dogs. Uncle Paul fell asleep on the bus ride home. Boys are exhausting. I don't remember being exhausting, do you?

So yeah, that's it for me. Brad asked me to be in his wedding party. I'll make sure you get pictures of me in a tux, too.

I'm really a Ken doll. Dress me up in anything and take pictures. Or in nothing for that matter.

Looking forward to your midterm breakdown. (wink)

Love,

Paul

P.S. I'm not sure what my winter break plans are yet, I'll have to let you know.

White printer paper, written in blue ink, very carefully.

Dated October 25

Paul,

Okay, I think that I would be writing this one even if we lived closer, saw each other a lot... even if we were doing this building thing over the phone. I really want to make sure I say this right, and I don't think I can do that over the phone.

I called when I got your last letter -- you just seemed so closed off, a lot cooler than you had been. I just wanted to touch base, make sure that you were okay, you know?

Anyway, I phoned you, but you were out -- it was early evening your time, so I assume you were at rehearsal or something. Your roommate answered.

Paul, he thought I was Ethan. He said that you had "a few of my shirts in your luggage, and hey man, how was the cruise? Come by for your clothes!"

I told him that he'd made a mistake, I wasn't Ethan. He apologized, and I decided not to leave a message.

Paul, I really want to make sure I have the facts right here. Did you go to Hawaii with Ethan, and not your roommate?

I'm not going to say anything more until I know what's going on. I don't want to jump to conclusions.

Gray

Chapter 16

Written on the dreaded stationery his mother gave him, only now it's kind of more meaningful because his mother gave it to him.

Dated November 1.

Gray,

I don't know how to say this except to just say it, so... I did go on that cruise with Ethan. Seems a lie does have short legs after all.

I know, I should have known better. I should have told you straight out who I was going with, but I knew you'd flip out. Fuck, I'm sorry. And to hear it from my roommate like that you must have thought... you are flipping out aren't you? Gray, are you more upset that I went with Ethan or that I lied to you about it? Maybe both. Maybe it doesn't matter. God, I'm sorry.

Ethan and I booked that cruise when we were still going out. I could have sold my tickets I suppose, but honestly? I didn't want to. After my mother and everything, I needed to get away, you know? And Ethan agreed that we'd go as friends. We did have to share a stateroom, because that was how we booked the trip (that's how I ended up with some of his shirts by mistake), but that's all, I promise. Most nights I found someone else's room to sleep in. And I got my own hotel room in Hawaii. It was fucking expensive, too. There was one night that Ethan made a move, and I told him no, and he was a pretty ticked at me... we kind of had an argument... but he backed off, he didn't touch me, Gray, nothing went on between us. Nothing.

Gray, I know I fucked up here. I know. But I kept my promise to you, I didn't sleep with him. That's the truth, Gray. Believe me, baby. I'm so sorry. Tell me what you want me to do to fix this. Tell me I didn't just fuck this up for good. Tell me you forgive me?

Love you.

Paul

Written on more of the yellow lined paper in various pens

Dated November 6

Forgive you?

Not yet. Don't even ask yet.

You LIED, Paul. It wasn't even a lie of omission, a skimming of the truth. The difference between "I'm taking a cruise with my roommates, it's all paid and I can't really get out of it" and "I'm going to Hawaii with Ethan, we set it up before I broke up with him and I want to go" is so far from....

Well.

Would I have been happy about it? No. Can't tell you any different. Well, I could lie and say I would have been fine with it, but I don't lie about that kind of thing.

So you didn't sleep with him. Yay you. No, really, I mean it. Yay for you resisting the temptation of a good lay with a guy you broke up with. Not like there wasn't anyone else around willing to help you avoid sleeping in your shared room. Frankly, if I were Ethan I'd be pretty pissed, sharing a room with a guy happy enough to sleep around but not with me, the guy you planned the trip with. Did you tell him why you wouldn't tumble? He must have been so impressed.

Yeah, you could have sold your ticket. You could have gotten away from it all by coming here. But obviously that's not what you want, so I won't bother asking you to visit, or what you want to do for Christmas. It's pretty clear, between this and the last couple of letters you sent, that we're not going to be making big plans for the next while.

Fine. Just so I know where I stand.

Gray

New ink color, same paper.

Dated November 8

Fuck you. I hope you drown in the rain.

Something written here and crossed out, then colored over with black marker. The paper is torn where the ink soaked through and the pen dragged over the wet paper.

Fuck you. You don't get to know that.

I wish I had something of yours so I could send it back in a fit of melodrama. But no, all I had was a photo of you in Hawaii. Fitting.

Yeah, I'm drinking. So what? Shut up. Just shut up. I don't care what you think, I don't want to hear your stupid lectures and your worried comments. Don't care don't care.

My ass is sore. My dick is chaffed. And that should make me feel better but it doesn't.

Asshole.

If you build real houses like this there's gonna be some pissed off homeowners.

Ah damn. I wasn't going to do this. Mid term drunken letters... Fuck. But hey, I get points for not being stressed about school shit, don't I? No, my trouble this time is all my own fault. You'd think I'd learn, wouldn't you?

For a smart guy I can be pretty stupid sometimes.

G

New ink, same paper

Dated November 9

Wheee! Drinking and fucking and just not thinking. Man, I think the crash from this is going to be a bitch. In the meantime, I found my dentist and treated myself to some purely selfish sex. God, the things he can do with his tongue.

New ink, same paper

Dated November 11

I'm going to Jerry and Tim's. They're picking me up in about half an hour and taking me home. I don't know how long I'll be there -- I don't want to be here anymore. I want to curl up and cry for a year. I want to tear into you and hate you and make you hurt.

And I want to hold you and tell you that it doesn't matter. That the lie doesn't matter, that we'll be fine. I want to mean it.

Just don't know if I can believe it.

I don't want to love you, but I do.

See you later,

Gray

Chapter 17

Written on notebook paper with green ink.

Dated November 11, written and sent before Paul received Gray's letters dated November 8

Gray,

Oh yeah?

Well maybe I should have fucked him then, huh? I lied because I thought you'd freak out and I was right you did freak out, but I didn't break my promise. If I'd known that didn't mean anything to you I would have gone ahead and fucked him. I so would have. More the fool, I.

Sometimes things aren't about you, Gray. I needed a week away from everything. Everything, including you. I didn't want my first visit with you to be about your pity and me whining in your ear about how miserable I was. Fuck, I didn't even want you to know how miserable I was. I wanted our first visit to be about you and me and nothing else.

It was a cruise. I went with a friend that happens to be an ex. I knew I had to lie to you because I knew you'd go ape-shit on me about it when there was no reason to. I never promised I wouldn't stay friends with Ethan, I just promised that I wouldn't fuck him. Right? And I kept my fucking promise.

So when did the rules change? Aren't you still living 3000 miles away?

Look, I went on a cruise to a beautiful place and spent an entire week drinking and fucking around and getting a tan and seeing beautiful water and beautiful islands. I loved it. I felt great when I got back. I do feel apologetic... though I'm not sure if I'm sorry I lied to you, or if I'm just sorry you caught me at it. The lie was for your benefit anyway. I'm sorry it hurt you. But I'm not sorry I went. No way. My conscience is clear.

love,

Paul

Written on the back of a stock order form. It's a checklist of alcohol and garnishes and other things one would find behind a bar. Black ink, inconsistent handwriting.

No date, but the postmark is November 16, this one is written after Gray's letters of November 8, 9 & 11.

Gray,

This letter will be better than the last one because alcohol makes everything more clearer. The bartender gave me paper and this pen, it's weird it lights up when you write with it. Trippy.

I so deserved those letters. I am a fucking asshole for lying to you. I'm a fucking asshole for asking Ethan to go to Hawaii as friends, that did piss him off, you're right. You're always right. Why are you always so fucking right? I'm a fucking ass for being selfish, and doing exactly what I wanted to do. Fuck, I'll never do that again, honest. Sorry mom, cursing too much I know. But it's true, I'm a fucking asswipe.

You're so doing yourself a big favor, Gray. You don't want to move all the way out here just to find out later that I'm a self-centered fucking coward. That I'm not what you wanted me to be. I want to be what you want me to be but I'm not. Better you just know that now and sign another year long contract to stay away from me, right? You want someone way better than me. Smarter than me, too. More like you. I suck. Seriously, I do. It's so much better that you think I'm a lying fucking bastard. That way you can just end it like that and you can be all mad at me and blame me and meet someone else that can live up to your expectations.

Oh, I'm keeping the video tape, though. I watch it every night practically almost. Fuck, I want you so bad.

I guess yeah I should have come to see you instead of going to Hawaii, but I couldn't. I didn't want to think about mom or talk about death or be sentimental. I wanted a week out of my head. A vacation from thinking. I would've just stayed home and gotten drunk or some fucking thing, but you can see how well that's working for me right now, huh? Dad always forgot stuff when he drank, how come it just makes me think harder? Fuck me. Well, the good thing about copiousus (I can't spell when I'm drunk. But I bet you can, huh?) the good thing about lots and lots of Dewar's is I won't remember writing this in the morning. Hopefully I'll forget to send it, too, because it's whiny as shit.

That fucking tape messed with my head. Who is Stace anyway? At least I know you're not fucking her. I need another drink. Jesus, I don't want to lose you. I heard what you said, it's heavy shit, Gray, and I don't know what to say. I don't even know if I should tell you I saw it. I don't. But maybe I better because you might think I'm lying again if I don't so you should know there was more on that tape, ok? After the sex stuff. With that Stace girl and True Lies? There's this whole conversation about me not understanding and you almost having a job out here and not wanting me to know. Ok? I told you, now, so please don't think I'm lying again.

Oh my god, you were watching True Lies. It's like some kind of ironic foreshadowing or fate or some fucking thing. Like destiny. Lies, man. Oh my god.

But Gray, just please tell me you're not gone. Please? You don't want to see me for Christmas, it's cool I understand, fuck, I wouldn't want to see me either. No way. Who'd want to spend Christmas with a lying selfish sack of shit, right?

BUT! I'm not asking you to forgive me! You said not to ask, I'm not asking. I promise. This is me, not asking. Ok? It's ok I get it.

I know I'm an asshole, honest. But please don't tell me you're gone, baby. I can't take it. I lied because I wanted to go on the cruise, and I wanted to keep you, too. See? I didn't want you to be disappointed in me. I wanted to protect you from the asshole part of me that wanted out of my head. Get it? Please don't fucking hate me. Please? Please don't tell me you're gone. I can't lose you.

God I'm such a fucking loser.

love,

Paul

Phone message.

November 21

Hi Paul, it's Gray. I'm calling in the middle of the day so no-one will answer and I can just leave a message. Not to let everyone know our business -- I mean, your roommates could get this, right? -- but I just want to tell you I got your letters and I need some time to think. I'll write in a day or two... just.... god. I need to think. Take care.

Letter, written on white paper.

Not dated, but postmarked November 25

Dear Paul,

God, we don't make things easy on ourselves, do we? I'm going to assume that we've both crawled out of the bottle, at least for a day or so. I have anyway, although I pretty much plan on getting blasted as soon as I'm done with this and staying that way for the weekend. You are not a loser and I don't have expectations you have to live up to. Stop that shit right now. The only thing I expect is for you not to lie again.

If you ever flat out lie to me like that again I'm gone, Paul. There are some things that are better unsaid, and some things that can be skirted around, but I won't tolerate someone telling me something is true when it's not.

I have no idea what to say or where to start. Stace is the admin for the Dean of Arts. She's a good friend, although we don't spend much time together off campus. I had no idea the camera was taping. I have no idea why you thought I would think you'd be lying about what you now know -- there was no other way that'd you'd have found out.

I don't know if I'm pissed she left the camera on or if I'm embarrassed you heard me talking about you, or freaked that you were privy to a private conversation. I don't even remember what I said, other than telling her about the research stuff. I think I said something about it being hard to be apart. I do know that I didn't want you to know about the research job until it was down to a solid offer; I didn't want to get your hopes up, didn't want to make plans and have them fall through. Stupid me -- apparently getting your hopes up wasn't something I had to worry about.

Just so we're clear -- it takes up to a year to secure a job like that, or a teaching position. Me looking now for next year is reasonable, not psychotic stalkerish.

Right, then. Next up is... oh, let's see. Your clear conscience. Now, that told me a couple of things. One, if you wanted to go away with Ethan instead of being with me, I am obviously more invested in whatever we had planned than you are. That you knew it would upset me and you wanted to go anyway tells me that you're just not ready for a serious, full on, loving commitment to me.

That hurts, but I can get that. That's you, man, it's the way you feel and I have to respect it. It's not what I particularly wanted to know, but I get it now. Trouble is, I'm not sure I know how to step back. I have to live my emotions, too, and you and I are just not at the same place. I want more than you're willing to give, so I can't ask it of you. I want to be true to me, but I want you to live the way you have to as well.

That goes back to the job, too. I don't want to be here anymore. Therefore I have to go somewhere else. That's me and my life. But now I don't know where, and my options are somewhat limited due to time.

You are still sending me mixed messages, baby. No, I'm sorry, that's not true. I'm starting to realize things, even as I sit here and write. Your messages have always been consistent, I've just read far more into them than you meant.

You want me. You want me in your bed, you want to hang out, you want what we had. You don't want or expect a commitment, even though me moving out there implies one to me. To you it just means I'd actually be close enough that we could date. I misunderstood.

I'm sorry you're freaked by how strong I was coming on; I thought you felt things that you don't. I read into it too much.

Okay, I can't do this right now. I'm going to start on that bottle and go get laid.

Love,

Gray

Added on to same page, different pen.

Baby --

Okay, I'm drunk. I'm horny. I couldn't get laid -- fucking Ladies night at the club. Yeesh.

Looking at your sober letter. 1) The promise meant something to me. It meant something that you didn't sleep with him. But the lie was bigger than that. 2) I still live 3000 miles away because you vanished for a month last spring and I had to sign a contract or be out of a fucking job. 3) I no longer care if you're sorry you got caught or if your sorry you did it -- we both know the answer to that.

And the other one -- You're a more pathetic drunk than I am. Which is saying a lot. You are also too hard on yourself.

Why on earth would you still be jerking off to me jerking off? I honestly don't get that. I can't even look at your picture without feeling sick. But then, maybe that's just our differences again.

I'm horny and I can't get it up. Jesus.

Okay, here's me being drunk-smart. We need rules.

- 1) No lies of the "This is true and it's not" sort
- 2) No pressure from me about commitments
- 3) No talk about me moving. If I get a job we can revisit this, obviously, but in terms of me moving, not in terms of us
- 4) Not one word about Ethan -- you see him, I don't want to know. You fuck him, I better never find out.
- 5) You owe me a tape. (Drunk and horny. I said, right?)
- 6) We can date and sleep with whoever we like. I won't be dating anyone seriously -- I can't, I feel too much for you. But I won't stop you. Just a fact, not pressure.
- 7) I seem to have settled into an every four weeks land at Jerry and Tim's for a hand job. I'm keeping that.

Right. I think that's all for now.

Still can't get it up, and that's sad. Maybe it's broken. Damn.

I have no idea where to go from here, baby. Maybe it's best if we just don't. I don't know.

What do you think?

Gray

Chapter 18

Written on notebook paper with a blue pen.

Dated November 28, Thanksgiving.

Gray,

Well, I've been sober for work, and for rehearsals, but the weekends have been pretty much a wash. Do you run a tab? If you don't, don't start. I spend way too much money that way. Better to drink until the cash runs out and then cut your losses and go home.

Tonight's sobriety meter is on very buzzed, can't be considered sober, but not so drunk as to be entirely pathetic either. Did I actually say I was a loser? You know when I woke up the morning (well the afternoon actually) after I wrote that letter, all I remembered was writing it and mailing it. I stole the bartender's pen, too, it lights up when you write with it.

Sooooo... judging by your response I gather I was more than usually pathetic and probably entirely too honest. I hope I didn't lay too much on you, baby. When I wrote that letter I had just been dragged off of my optimistic high from Hawaii when I realized that I had made the worst mistake I've ever made in lying to you. That was a bit more of a mood swing than I can handle sober, and probably led to said pathetic drunken comments like telling you I was a loser. Which is not to say that I didn't feel like one. I did. But I do know that however lonely I feel or however frustrated I am with my career, I'm not a loser.

Yeah. I was pretty stunned by the level of commitment you expressed on that video tape. It's been my greatest fear all along that you would move here expecting us to embark on a life together and then something wouldn't be what you'd wanted, or I'd do something stupid and fuck it up. Maybe it's paranoia, but I don't ever want to be in the position where either of us has to think, "OK well Gray's moved 3000 miles to be with me", or "Paul's cleared out a closet for me and so we're stuck with this". You know? I want to negotiate and build and create a life together, not just move in together and expect things to work. I'm sure I'm not saying what I mean well enough. God, this is so frustrating.

Before this thought gets away from me I just want to clarify something important. It's not that I wanted to be with Ethan instead of being with you (yeah, I know, I just broke your rule about not talking about him, but I had to this one time, baby). In a perfect world I would have made Ethan give up his ticket and taken you instead. I didn't chose Ethan over you, I chose Hawaii over reality. Maybe you think that's splitting hairs, but that's what it was.

Ok, I'm done with that, I won't mention him again.

Good lord, I promise I will never ever flat out lie to you again. Look at this mess I've got us in. I'm taking full responsibility for this emotional snowball. I blew it, in a big way, and I'm sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am.

But. Maybe there's a silver lining?

Remember that foundation talk we had a while ago? That silly, and yet not so silly, metaphor about building on something solid? Well, I had a long talk with my roommate about it... and about my fuck-up and us... Anyway, he stops me at one point and he says "wait... you lied to him outright, had a fight about it, but he's still writing you, and he's still signing his letters 'love Gray' and calling you 'baby'? Sounds like that foundation is already in place, man."

I was just sober enough for that to sink in. You think he's right?

So OK, then we got to talking more about things I'm very comfortable putting into the 'things better left unsaid' (for now) category. And I asked how he knew he wanted to marry Anna. He said, "Well, I knew I wanted her, and I knew I loved her, and I knew I couldn't stand the idea of her marrying someone else" Maybe that's a little macho on his part, but I get it. And that got me to thinking about you.

I know I want you, Gray, that's for certain. I know I love you, I can't really quantify how I know it, but I do. And I sure as hell know I don't want to lose you to someone else. Take that any way you want to, but those are just three, very simple, indisputable truths.

I think it's time we spent some time in the same physical space, and talking to each other face to face where we can hear each other's voices and see each other's expressions and hold hands and just be together. At the very least, we need to break past some of this sexual tension that's been building and has us both wound up so tight it's wonder we can say anything coherent at all.

I have a crazy proposition, Gray. It's a little risky of me to even ask under the circumstances because you're more likely to say no (or fuck you) than yes, but I'm hoping you'll at least see the intention behind it before you write the idea off completely. In any case, here it is:

Spend your winter break with me, in Hawaii. It's beautiful and you will love it there... and maybe we can put some of this behind us and make that picture on your fridge something you can look at and smile at instead of feeling sick. Come share paradise with me for a couple of weeks, on my wallet, and in my bed and holding my hand and letting me make things up to you. Come make love to me and kiss me and reassure me that this isn't something to be afraid of. I need physical, tactile, real reassurance, Gray, and I think you do, too. Don't you?

We've been writing letters for over a year and have yet to be closer than four states from each other. And Christmas isn't a favorite holiday for either of us as it is, you know?

Think about it baby, if not Hawaii, then your place or my place or a fucking freezing cold cabin in Maine in front of a roaring fire. I don't care where, but we need it.

Love,

Paul

P.S. I forgot about your rules. 1, I promise. 2-4, OK. 5, if you want a tape consider it done. 6, I won't be dating anyone, fucking yes, dating no. 7, I'm glad you have them, they love you, that's clear, and I'm grateful to them for taking good care of you.

A greeting card with a sappy tropical scene on the front, palm trees and a sunset over the water.

Dated December 4

Paul --

Yes.

Love,

Gray

Written on plain white paper that is neatly folded around round-trip plane tickets, a brochure for a resort hotel on Waikiki Beach, a brochure regarding a ten day all-gay Hawaiian island cruise, and small newspaper announcement about the run of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. The tickets would land Gray at SFO in time to attend closing night, and then they leave together for Hawaii the following morning. The whole thing is sent in an overnight FedEx envelope to Gray's office.

Dated December 10

Gray,

One night at a chain hotel at the San Francisco airport, two nights on our own on Waikiki (Oahu), ten days of island hopping and nights at sea on the cruise, and then one last day and night in San Francisco before you go home.

I can't wait. I can't think about anything else. Play opens tonight, I'm trying to focus but it's tough.

Thank you for saying yes.

Thank you, baby.

love,

Paul

Chapter 19

Please, god, tell me he got on the plane.

That worry had weighed heavily on Paul's mind all day. Gray's plane took off on time, he'd checked that. The weather was good and San Francisco Airport wasn't experiencing any delays; he'd called to check on that, too. He'd changed his clothes a number of times, finally settling on soft jeans, an oxford and his leather jacket. He was very nervous, much more than he thought was necessary. It ought to have been about closing night because the auditorium was more than packed, but it wasn't. He felt sick and was fighting the urge to vomit when a red-headed teenager threw her arms around him.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Foster." She said with a smile, apparently taking his nerves for what they should have been and not what they were. He returned the hug gently. Paul peered through the small gap in the stage curtain one more time and scanned the audience, but he didn't see Gray. He did his best to convince himself that Gray was simply in the men's room -- it was a long flight from the east coast after all.

"Break a leg, Jen." Paul forced a grin and shooed her off toward the dressing rooms. He needed air. He took a deep breath and walked through the wings to the stage door and outside. He leaned back on the wall, eyes closed as he listened through the door for the time calls. He didn't have more than a couple of minutes, whether he needed more or not.

"Aren't you supposed to be inside?" a quiet voice asked.

Paul opened his eyes, startled, and there was Gray. He looked a little ruffled, not to mention nervous, but he was there. Right there, looking at him, a half smile quickly turning to a grimace.

"Sorry, I should have just gone in, shouldn't I?" And then he was turning away.

Paul stared at Gray, letting the man get a step or two before he came to his senses. "No, no." He took an enormously deep breath, greatly relieved to refill lungs that had had difficulty finding oxygen all afternoon. "You're just the man I was looking for." He smiled and tangled his fingers in the sleeve of Gray's jacket to stop him.

Turning, Gray gave him a smile that Paul had only seen a few times when they were together; somehow nervous and shy, which was completely atypical. Gray's eyes were the same though, even if the glasses were different and the lines a tiny bit deeper.

"Yeah?" Gray teased, one hand settling on Paul's hip. "Worried I wasn't going to show?" And then he laughed a bit, shaking his head. "Don't answer, I know you were. But here I am." The hand on Paul's hip squeezed gently.

"You're not supposed to know me that well." Paul said softly. "A man has to have some pride."

Under different circumstances, Paul would have spent more time admiring Gray's disheveled haircut, visually tracing the line of his jaw, soaking up those brown eyes. But some things wouldn't wait for romance. Boldly, he slid the fingers of his right hand under Gray's ear and pulled their lips together. Despite Paul's anxiety, there was nothing timid about his kiss.

Gray made a brief sound, but any thought that it might have been a protest was thoroughly dismissed when Gray's hand tightened for a second then slid around to cup Paul's ass. Gray tried to deepen the kiss even further, and in a matter of seconds Paul found himself pressed up against the wall, Gray seemingly determined to make sure this was a hello he wouldn't forget in a hurry.

"Uhn." Paul grunted as his back encountered solid concrete. He couldn't help but grin into the kiss, even as he opened his mouth for Gray and his fingers tightened on Gray's neck, because this was indisputably the Gray he remembered. Making the first move never insured you got to set the tone. Despite Paul's bold overture, he was now the one who found himself receiving. If he'd had any doubts about their compatibility after several years apart they were dispelled in that very moment.

But some moments weren't meant to last.

"Mr. Foster, Matt is... calling... places..." A young male voice interrupted them, trailing off into stunned silence. "Mr... Foster?"

Paul turned on a dime, giving Gray a gentle but decisive shove backward. "Great. I'll be right there," he said in a tone that implied the boy should go back inside. He was blushing now, he knew it. He looked over at Gray and grinned, embarrassed.

Gray grinned right back, one shoulder shrugging in a mockery of apology. "Not my fault you're hot," Gray said under his breath. "Go on, I gotta find my seat. Good luck, baby."

"We say 'break a leg' in this business." Paul winked, all smiles, and tugged open the stage door. "Enjoy it."

He blinked bit as his eyes adjusted to the darkened backstage area. He heard the whispering going around, and he didn't care particularly, except that he wanted this last performance to be a good one for the kids, and he hoped his unplanned display with Gray hadn't distracted them too much. He said a quiet word to each young actor and then took his place in the wings.

Gray was treated to mediocre technical elements and only nearly-decent costumes, but some smooth blocking and very well-crafted gags that were Paul's trademark. Paul was astounded to find that he could still pick his lover's laughter out of the crowd. *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream was not a long play by any means, but Paul felt as if an eternity had passed when the curtain finally fell again. He made his way out onto the stage to thank everyone for coming and for their support of youth theater and was then instantly accosted by appreciative parents, teachers and kids as they exited the building.

Paul was talking to an excited mother when a low voice behind him said, "Nice show, Mr. Foster. You should direct movies. Maybe short ones, for a select audience."

He turned to find Gray grinning at him, eyes glinting with mischief. Gray's hands were shoved into his pockets and he rocked back on his heels, the very picture of innocence. Almost.

Paul closed his eyes for a brief moment to avoid blushing yet again. "Ah, Mr. Graham," he replied, and excused himself before turning his full attention on Gray. "I've seen your film. Very revealing. I was most inspired." He glanced from side to side and then indicated a side door with his chin.

"The direction was lacking, I thought," Gray countered. "The props were fine, but the talent had trouble with the pacing. Perhaps we can discuss a joint project; I think we'd work well together."

"Hmm yes, though we'll have to negotiate the script." Paul laughed, holding the door for Gray. "And who gets top billing."

Gray snorted. "Doesn't matter who tops." Paul grinned as Gray suddenly blushed red, glancing around them with wide eyes. "Oops. Didn't mean to say that," Gray whispered. "Change of topic. Hungry?"

Paul nodded. "Yes. I was going to ask you the same thing. I'm sure the airplane food left a lot to be desired. How do you feel about Tapas?" His keys jangled as he pulled them from his pocket and his yellow mustang chirped at them when he unlocked the doors. He opened the passenger door for Gray. "Where's your luggage? Did you check in already?"

"Yeah, didn't think I dressed like this for the plane, did you?" Gray leaned forward and kissed Paul's mouth quickly before ducking down and sliding into the car. "Tapas would be great."

Paul closed Gray's door and then took another deep breath and got in on the driver's side. The car was quiet until they'd left the parking lot. Paul turned on the radio to break the silence for him before finally speaking up.

"So... is it just me or does this feel like a first date?" he asked, glad for the need to keep his eyes on the road.

"God, yes," Gray breathed. "Thought it was just me. I honestly thought I was going to pass out in the cab over. Oh, and I was serious, Paul. The play was wonderful; you should

be proud." Gray was looking at him, that odd shy smile back. Paul didn't remember the way Gray kept smoothing his trousers over his knee, though, or the kind of endearing way he was biting his lower lip. Those things were new.

"Thanks. It's not Broadway, but those kids' smiles during curtain call make it not matter much." Paul was genuinely touched by Gray's compliment. "Someday I'll actually make some money at it." He risked another glance at Gray then. "And you were right, by the way. I *was* afraid you wouldn't get on the plane. Irrational, maybe, but our track record has been... well, we've been a bit mercurial to say the least. When you caught me outside before the show I was trying not to hurl." He snorted, laughing at himself.

"You looked a little freaked," Gray said quietly. "So, think we can make it through a meal without doing anything stupid?"

"You mean while I worry if I'm going to knock over my water glass or drop food on my shirt?" Paul was smiling, but only half-joking. "Shit!" He stomped on the breaks suddenly and the car's wheels screeched to a halt. "And if I don't kill us running red lights." He exhaled heavily.

There was a short silence before Gray sighed. "If I thought I could go longer than ten minutes without trying to use sex just to get through the hard parts I'd say let's get a pizza and go to the room. But I don't want that, Paul. I mean, I want that, I just... oh damn. I want to be normal, you know? Talk first. Then jump you."

"I have a feeling the Sangria at this place will fix us right up." Paul smiled. "But being jumped is exactly why we're doing this, isn't it? I mean I don't think we need to deny that. It's gotten so built up that sometimes I wonder if I'll be able to... well, it's a lot of pressure." Paul angled his car neatly into a parking spot, and then he looked at Gray and smiled. "I think I can handle it, though."

The smile he got back was vintage Gray, part amusement and mostly leer. "Just so long as I get to handle it, too." Then Gray was out of the car, laughing at him and pointing to the restaurant.

Paul rolled his eyes, laughing as he locked the doors. "What? I thought the dentist cured you of that."

"You brat!" Gray looked mortally offended for a moment before he broke and started laughing. As Paul joined him at the door to the restaurant Gray pulled him close and hissed into his ear, "You want to do that, you'll have to work for it, baby. My fingers have fond memories of your body and I want to make sure I haven't forgotten a thing."

"Mmmm..." Paul pulled off an imaginary glove and mimed tossing it to the sidewalk before opening the door for Gray. "My gauntlet, sir." He grinned, feeling giddy and very much more relaxed as they entered the restaurant. It was deep and narrow, with a small

bar along one wall in the front and small tables in a dimly lit room at the back. Paul prodded Gray along with a pinch to his ass as the hostess led them to a table.

"Grabby," Gray said as they were seated across from each other. "I like that." Gray turned down the waitress's offer of something from the bar and leaned forward, staring at Paul. "I want to be dead sober for this."

Paul thought the waitress was going to choke. Gray just smiled and sat back again, even offering her his glass of water. He seemed intent on embarrassing one of them, and apparently the waitress was going to qualify.

Paul shook his head. "He's from out of town," he said to the waitress, as if that was an excuse for Gray's behavior. "We'll have the chef's dinner sampler for two and um... iced teas I suppose." He smiled at her, and she hurried off like her ass was on fire.

"You're a very, very bad man, Gray. You've already made me blush twice, and now the poor waitress. You may never be allowed to move here -- " Paul touched his tongue to his upper lip. "Oops. Breaking rules all ready, and I'm completely sober, too. Sorry, I'm not supposed to mention moving, right?"

"Hey, I wrote them drunk." Gray waved it off, but he was looking across the room and not at Paul. "That one was more for me, anyway. I'm kinda stuck on this pressure thing, you know? I don't want to push." Then Gray did look at him, his eyes a little sad. "Sorry."

"I'm not sure it's *you* that ought to be apologizing. How about we call it a draw?" Paul reached over and took Gray's hand in his own, resting their grip on the table edge. "Hope you don't mind, I just can't have you this close and not touch. Must be that reassurance thing." He sipped his water with his free hand and changed the subject. This was ground they needed to cover, but not now, not tonight, not during their first date in years. "So how did finals go? I didn't get an inebriated letter, so I'm thinking you came out unscathed?"

"Lived, yeah, and so did they." Gray seemed to leap at the change of subject. "There were one or two abysmal failures, made me wonder if they had the wrong text book. But for the most part it was typical -- too much coffee, the profs all passing around the really bad papers for laughs, and then we all sighed in relief when it was done. I think the teachers have bigger end of semester bashes than the students, to tell the truth. We're just quieter about it." Gray was smiling again and one of his fingers was stroking over the back of Paul's hand. "How about you? The play was a success -- how's the home building going? Any big projects on?"

"Oh yeah." Paul nodded. "I told you I was on the million-dollar crew right? So we're building this gated estate right now... it has 16 bathrooms." He leaned forward a bit, resting his other arm on the table. "The foreman says we'll get to piss in each and every one of them before the job is done." He laughed. "Crass, but how many million dollar homes have you taken a piss in?"

Gray leaned in as well and winked at him. "Take your thrills where you find them, baby." And then Paul felt a hand on his knee under the table.

"And just where are you trying to find them?" Paul grinned back. The hand moved higher, but Paul was fairly confident that even Gray's determination would be thwarted by the table. His arms weren't that long, after all.

"The usual places," Gray teased. "Just out of reach, but fun to get to. Excuse me a moment, I have to go to the washroom." But instead of standing, Gray slid sideways out of his chair and Paul found himself being thoroughly fondled before Gray walked away.

He literally squeaked as Gray passed his shoulder. That would be the third time he'd blushed this evening, and just as the iced tea arrived, too. He cleared his throat and sipped his water, pondering ice cubes and the stout costume director in her skivvies so as not to lose his tenuous control of his arousal. Damn that Gray, wanting to talk over dinner.

"So, you're feeling fine," Gray announced with a broad grin as he sat back down. "Damn fine. I'm beginning to think we should have gotten take out."

"Hmm... perhaps." Paul crafted his revenge. "But then part of me wants to make you sit here for hours listening to me tell you how fucking hot you look, and how you're everything I remember you being, and how much I want to sink my cock into your ass." Paul smiled, clasping his hands together on the table in front of him, his tone cool enough to be discussing the weather.

He was rewarded by Gray suddenly sucking in a deep breath. It was unfortunate that the man was sipping iced tea at the time, but sometimes competition could be a bitch. Gray had himself back under control in a moment, glaring at Paul as his eyes watered. "Evil. But I'm still ahead on points, having actually touched you. Just for that I might make you wait. Maybe make you watch me get ready -- oh I forgot, you've already seen me do that. Wear out the tape yet? I should have brought the dildo, you might like to try it."

Paul stared at Gray and swallowed hard. "The tape is definitely wearing thin in all the right places..." He licked his lips. "Damn, this is so much worse than your letters because you're sitting right fucking there."

"Better, not worse," Gray countered. "Because I'm going to do it, Paul. Every single thing. Count on it." He leaned over, his voice intent and low. "I'm going to suck your cock, ride you, kiss you and make you scream. I'm going to watch you come saying my name. I'm going to take you in the shower before we check out. I'm going to..." He sat back suddenly and took a deep breath. "I'm going to stop talking right now before I ruin my pants."

Paul snickered as Gray's words backfired on him, but nevertheless, he was speechless for a long moment. "I'll have you know that I am picturing your librarian and her possessive

husband in the shower to keep from blowing right here," he said when he was finally able to find words again.

He was much relieved when their food began to arrive. Small plates intended for tasting and moving on began to fill their table, and their chewing filled the spaces where idle conversation would normally go. He missed his Sangria, but Gray had the right of it; this one needed to be completely stone cold sober. There wasn't a moment he wanted to miss; not even these tense ones.

Gray didn't appear to be rushing -- there was no urgency to how quickly they ate -- but it wasn't long before most of the food was gone. As they surveyed the table and finished the tea, Gray suddenly leaned over and whispered, "If she gets us the check in less than two minutes I'm going to triple the tip. Want you, baby. Tell me you have your things in the car and I don't have to make nice with your roomies while you pack."

It wasn't his full stomach that made Paul groan before answering. "What, are you kidding? I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep my hands off of you. Everything is in the trunk."

"You're brilliant," Gray declared. "Now, let's go." He stood up before Paul could reply and the waitress almost ran over. Gray shoved a credit card at her and looked at Paul. "Well? Coming with me?" he asked, and then he followed the waitress to the bar where she was already swiping the card and handing him a pen.

"Oh, I'll be coming all right," Paul whispered. He rested his hands on Gray's waist and leaned his hips into Gray's ass as they waited for the receipt. He was hard and he wanted Gray to know it.

Gray wiggled slightly, and bent forward to sign the slip. Paul could feel the tension in Gray's legs, heard Gray's breath catch. And he saw the waitress rolling her eyes with a grin. "Let's go," Gray said, his voice strained. Then he slipped his hand into Paul's and proceeded to almost drag him out of the restaurant. "Naughty boy, baby."

"You wouldn't want me any other way." Paul grinned as he was tugged through the door and out onto the sidewalk. He unlocked Gray's door remotely and didn't miss a step on the way to his own side of the car. "No touching," he warned as he turned the engine over. "If you touch me before we get to the hotel we won't make it out of the car. And my backseat is really, really small. I've tried it."

"Yeah?" Not surprisingly, the idea seemed to appeal to Gray, who turned to look at the backseat. "Wow. Hope he was a little guy. How'd you do it? And drive faster."

"Damn, you do like the details." Paul grinned. "Okay, he was kind of kneeling on the back seat, and I put the driver's side seat flat and sort of sat on it. It was frustrating," Paul explained, changing lanes and downshifting. The car picked up speed as he hit the off-

ramp to the freeway. "I wouldn't put it up there as the best lay in the world, but it gets high marks for creativity."

"Huh." Gray looked at him and then turned to look in the back again. "Okay, if you say so. I think I'd prefer somewhere with fewer corners to get hurt on, but to tell you the absolute truth if we're not at the hotel in ten minutes I'm going to make you pull over and show you what creative really is."

Paul could see Gray shifting in his seat and kept his eyes on the road, getting into the flow of traffic.

"I suppose I'll get in trouble if I start without you?" Gray mused.

"You wouldn't." Paul glanced over, eyes going to Gray's crotch, not his face.

"You do know who I am, yes?" Gray's hand was suddenly right there, rubbing himself like he'd done on the tape. "So fucking hard, Paul."

"God damn it, Gray." Paul swallowed and looked back at the road, putting more pressure on the gas pedal. This was California, he could drive ninety, right? He switched lanes again, and then one more time to get around a pick-up truck. "Don't waste that on your hand, baby, it's mine. I'm so going to blow you for it."

"Better be a promise." Paul watched out of the corner of his eye as Gray deliberately moved his hands away from his body, holding onto the edges of the seat.

More silence followed as Paul concentrated on getting them to their hotel as fast as possible and Gray seemed to practically hold his breath to keep from losing it. Then, finally, Paul made one last slightly reckless lane change and he was taking the exit for the airport.

"Please don't get us killed. I'd hate to waste this." Gray said. "Oh, and avoid bumps. I'm a little close for comfort, you know? God, I feel like I'm seventeen again. Too bad it takes me longer to get it back up now."

"Oh, you're not that old yet, Graham." He touched the brakes and the car slowed significantly as they entered the airport. "We're here." Paul grinned and winked, and took a corner onto the access road for the airport hotels. "I hope it's not a dive. I hate hotel airports, but we're leaving early and I didn't want to deal with the drive and the roomies... ah, there it is." He pulled into the parking lot.

The car hadn't been stopped for a breath before Paul was reaching over to release Gray's seatbelt. He grinned and pressed his hand over Gray's cock, through the fabric of his pants. A second reach, this time across Gray's legs, and the passenger seat fell flat backwards onto the backseat.

"Oof. Smooth. Very smooth." Gray grinned up at him and reached out to grab his shoulders. "I like it." Paul didn't have time to brace himself before Gray caught him and pulled him down into an intense kiss.

"More like desperate," Paul mumbled when he was able to breathe again. God, how he ached, but he wanted this moment to be about Gray, a little daring, a little scandalous, something reckless enough to be worthy of their former life together. Gray's zipper gave way easily enough and it wasn't long before Paul was shifting his own seat for more room and bending his lips to the very hard, very tangible, very real cock that thankfully belonged to a very real Gray who was moaning to him in his very real car. He almost couldn't believe it was happening.

His fingers took hold of the base of Gray's cock securely and he circled the head with his tongue, but he knew Gray wasn't up for much torture so he followed that quickly by taking Gray directly into his mouth.

"Oh god, yes!" Gray arched, his hips jerking once in an aborted thrust and Paul felt Gray's hand on his head. Gray didn't push, didn't make him take more than he was ready for, but the touch was good, the way Gray's fingers tugged at his hair familiar. The cock in his mouth was familiar, too, the taste exactly as he'd remembered, the skin silky and hot.

Gray was moaning above him, the sounds broken by rapid breathing. Paul heard his name sighed, moaned, and then suddenly cried out as Gray started to move a little, clearly unable to keep still.

Paul was relentless, assaulting Gray's cock with hot breath and a slippery tongue. He took Gray's rolling hips in stride, lifting his head a little and changing the angle of his chin to take Gray down his throat more easily than he could the last time Gray's cock was in his mouth. He was smug about that. His free hand made its way up Gray's body and pinched a nipple through Gray's shirt.

"Christ!" Gray thrust up hard, the hand in Paul's hair tightening a little. "Baby, better move -- gonna come. Oh God!" Gray gasped.

Paul had thought about this carefully long before Gray got on the plane. He made a noise and pointedly didn't move away. He wanted to taste Gray for one thing, but more than that he wanted to offer Gray a commitment that he'd had difficulty expressing in other ways. Instead of moving away he moaned around Gray's cock and palmed Gray's balls.

Gray cursed again and tried to pull away, but when Paul followed him he seemed to just get it. Or maybe he was too far gone to care, it didn't really matter right at that second. What mattered was Gray giving in and fucking his mouth, crying out his name, and with a final thrust, coming, spilling over Paul's tongue in waves.

"Paul. Oh God, Paul." Gray was shaking a little, his cock still mostly hard, but Paul barely had time to savor the salty heat before strong hands were pulling on him, dragging him up into Gray's arms. It was awkward in the car like that, but it seemed fitting. Then Gray was kissing him, exploring his mouth completely, and hands were petting him.

"Thank you," Gray said into the kiss. "God, you've gotten even better at that."

Paul was panting as Gray released him from the kiss and all he could do was nod and search the depths of Gray's brown eyes for a moment lost in emotions he wasn't sure how to classify. "I've always loved your eyes." Was the only thing he could get his mind around in response, along with a slightly distracted smile.

Gray laughed softly and kissed him again, and one warm hand was suddenly rubbing him. "Want to go in, baby? Or you want a little relief right now?"

Paul moaned and cleared his throat. "In," he practically ordered, pushing himself up and off of Gray. He licked his lips and popped the trunk open, leaving Gray to extract himself from the car. He had two suitcases, a small carry-on size which he pulled out of the trunk, and a larger one which he left there to be checked on the plane in the morning.

When he heard the passenger door close he glanced up to see Gray doing up his trousers with a silly grin. "Ready?" Gray asked, pulling a key card from his pocket. "We can hurry."

"I am so ready." Paul grinned. "And you are so, so hot." He followed Gray into the hotel and down an interminably long hallway. "Just think," he said, "tomorrow night we'll be fucking in Waikiki." He crowded Gray into the hotel room impatiently.

"Yeah," Gray agreed, then spun him as the door closed and pushed him up against it. "But right now we're fucking here."

He dropped his bag immediately, his arms full of Gray.

"Want you," Gray growled, kissing his jaw and neck, his fingers busily undoing Paul's zipper. "Fuck me, Paul. Right now." Gray's hand pushed into his clothes, wrapping around his erection and squeezing. "Want this in me."

"Damn it, Gray, you don't know what that -- " Paul groaned and let his head fall back as Gray gripped him and it hit the door with a solid thud, causing him to end his statement with a grunt instead of words. The knock galvanized him though, and he lifted his head again and started to tug at Gray's clothing and his own, backing the slightly shorter man toward the bed. If the room was cheesy, if the place was indeed a dive, Paul didn't get a chance to notice. He only had one thing in mind. "Naked," he growled, shoving a still half-clothed Gray onto his back.

Paul turned on his heel and dug lube out of the convenient outside zipper pocket of his suitcase. Hell yes, he was prepared. He'd anticipated all of this. Paul had plans to make sure they slept well on the flight to Hawaii.

"Naked is good," Gray said, sounding dazed. "I can do that." He stripped without finesse, his shoes going one way and his pants another as he wiggled on the bed, his cock getting hard again and bouncing in a rather distracting way. He was fast though, and that was all that mattered. Gray grabbed the lube from Paul and tossed it on the bed, then pulled Paul down, tugging at his clothes. "Works best if we're both naked," Gray said, then bent his head to bite down on Paul's right nipple.

"Right... Arrh!" Paul hissed and froze as Gray's teeth short circuited his motor functions for a moment, then resumed getting tangled in and then untangled from his clothing. Once he was bare he pressed his cock into Gray's thigh with a moan and bent to kiss Gray, pushing his tongue past hard teeth.

Strong legs wrapped around him as Gray pushed up, grinding against him and sucking on his tongue in a mimic of what Gray so obviously wanted. They were barely on the bed, but it didn't seem to matter much as Gray begged with his body.

"Rubbers," Gray gasped, tearing his mouth away. "Where?"

"Oh uh..." Paul froze again, all of his blood now pooling in the wrong head, and looked around at the floor. He first remembered they were in his jeans but then he had to locate them, which was a challenge. Finally, he spotted them and pushed away from Gray to dig in the pockets, triumphantly producing a strip of four condoms. He tossed the whole lot to the very lovely, very naked man on the bed.

"Oh good. Two each." Gray spread his legs and grinned. "You first."

"Damn right, me first." Paul snorted and tore one of the wrappers open. He slid the sheath over his cock in a smooth and practiced way with his trademark condom-hiss that Gray used to tease him about. He caught the slight grin on Gray's flushed face and his mouth twitched. "Shut up," he said and moved over Gray again to retrieve the lube.

Gray laughed. "I didn't say anything, and if I was going to say something, it'd just be that it's damn cute. Now, hurry up!" Gray wiggled again and moved further up the bed, then started stroking himself, watching Paul open the lube. His skin was flushed and his eyes were dilated, fixed on Paul's fingers. He looked happy. He certainly looked horny. And he looked just like Paul remembered; all Gray, having fun.

Paul slicked his fingers and offered two to Gray, pressing them against his ass before pushing them past the tight ring and deeper into Gray. His eyes stayed glued on Gray's face, watching it change as he moved his fingers in and out, first deeper and then wider, and then adding a third before Gray could get too comfortable. He leaned down. "Talk to me, baby, tell me you want me." Paul licked his lips, and swallowed.

"You gotta ask?" Gray's breath hitched and his hips pressed down, taking Paul's fingers a little deeper. "Want you so bad. Ache for it, think about it all the time. Fuck myself with toys and picture you, baby. Need you in me, gotta feel you." Gray lunged up and kissed him hard, then fell back, panting. "Fuck me."

He hadn't needed to ask, he just liked to hear it. Often. But Paul had limits on his own control, and Gray had just pushed him too far. He removed his fingers and fumbled with the lube again, managing to get some into his palm before losing it over the edge of the bed. With a long exhale to rein himself in a bit, he lowered his cock between Gray's legs and pressed into him, firmly sliding himself home. He shivered and made a low sound, almost a whimper, as it occurred to him that this wasn't just any fuck, finally, this was Gray. It felt like him, smelled like him.

Paul hung there a moment thinking he might say something along those lines to the man beneath him but his body wouldn't wait any longer. His hips started to move, his thrusts starting off heavy and deep, and he hoped that Gray would understand without words. "Oh god... oh Gray..."

Gray seemed to cling to him, mouth and hands mapping Paul's chest and shoulders, his hips rocking up to meet every thrust. "God, yes. Paul," Gray murmured. "Just do it. Fuck me. Do it like you want to." Then his head fell back onto the bed and Gray smiled up at him. "Come on, baby. It's us." Biting his lip, and hell yeah that was a habit Gray could keep, Gray lifted his legs up, draping one over Paul's shoulder. "Deep and hard. Want you."

Paul had said it earlier and he wanted to say it again except that he couldn't speak just then. No one was supposed to know him that well. But he was thankful for it all the same because now he could relax. He let himself desire, want the way he needed to. The way Gray knew he could. They way they always had.

Paul hooked his fingers under the leg that was over his shoulder and pressed it even further away, toward Gray's ear. Using that as leverage, he started to thrust and grind and finally hammer into Gray, pushing himself further and further toward incoherent babbles and losing himself in the feel of Gray, taking everything he wanted.

Gray was right there with him, cursing a blue streak within moments, asking for more and harder, and when it was just right, as perfect as they'd ever managed it, Gray screamed for him, fucking chanted Paul's name as he came, Gray's back arching up and his fingers leaving bruises on Paul's arms.

"Jesus fucking god, Gray!" Paul shouted, feeling his cock strangled by the force of Gray's climax. His hips jerked wildly out of rhythm, his eyes popped open wide and he threw his head back with a ragged gasp as Gray forced his climax from him. Paul's release was completely beyond his control, and he panted and sobbed with it helplessly, shocked and

consumed by a heated rush that he'd become accustomed to timing as *he* pleased. Vaguely, Paul realized that Gray was giggling. Well, panting and giggling.

"Baby, that was fantastic. Holy crap." Gray panted a bit more while Paul tried to catch his own breath, and started to tease warm fingers down Paul's spine. Post-sex Gray still had a few of the old habits -- the giggling for one, though Paul had long ago learned not to mention that -- but this light touch was yet another new one on him. It was kind of like being with Gray and a new guy all at once, which was oddly disconcerting and hot at the same time.

Paul looked down at Gray, sweat making his bangs stick at odd angles to his forehead. "You... I was... really thought I had longer than that, you sneak." Paul grinned. "Fucking...wow." He hung there for just a moment and then slid free of Gray, because, as always, staying inside after he came, lingering for more than a moment, was somehow too intense for him. He made short, careful work of disposing of the condom and then stretched out along Gray's side, one hand resting on Gray's chest. Gray turned his head and Paul smiled as he was kissed on the nose.

"Hey," Grey said softly. "Thanks for inviting me."

Paul frowned a bit. Realizing with some dismay that he'd wanted Gray to say 'I love you' next. God, did they ever have shit to deal with. Paul sighed, shaking it off.

"Thank you for..." he grinned and, laughed softly. "Thank you for *coming*. Pun intended." He nuzzled the soft spot under Gray's jaw, then kissed it. "I mean that, this is so much more real now. I think I can finally believe it, you know?" He was breathing more normally and ran his fingers over the contours of Gray's chest absently.

Gray rolled slightly and curled around him, pressing closer. "Yeah. It's good." He yawned and then grinned, looking slightly embarrassed. "Sorry. Time change. Couple of orgasms. You know." He pressed a kiss to Paul's shoulder. "Forgive me if I take a nap before nailing you to the mattress?"

"This once." Paul snickered softly and kissed him. Gently, he inhaled Gray's scent, still so familiar and comforting, frankly grateful for the reprieve. It had been a difficult evening for them both. Overall, Paul thought it had gone very well, but he'd had to be so *on*, worrying over every word he said. It was nice to close his eyes and to do nothing but listen to Gray breathe.

Chapter 20

Gray's Journal. On the plane to Hawaii.

In some ways being with Paul is easier than I'd expected. Physically, we fit together better than I remembered. Just waking up next to him was easy and relaxed -- none of the usual morning after bullshit to deal with; just roll over and cuddle up. I even slept well next to him, though that could have been sheer exhaustion.

He still sounds like he always did; he makes the same noises, his voice gets deeper when he's turned on... he still laughs the same way.

It's like stepping back, right into the middle of what it was like when we were together -- better than at the start, when we didn't know each other that well. It's... comfortable. I know his sense of humor, know what turns him on, mostly. He's got some new tricks, too, so it's still different, not exactly the same. And that's good. Hot.

But I feel like I'm constantly keeping myself in check -- we almost got into it at the restaurant, but there was no way either of us was going to start talking about our serious shit right off the bat. I know we've got a lot to talk about, but god, I just want to have some fun first.

He hurt me, and I'm still kinda pissed at him. I'm trying not to be -- hell, he's trying so hard, and I know without doubt that he's sorry. I know I should just let it go, but it really shook me up, make me look at what I'd assumed, and I feel a little embarrassed about how badly I'd misjudged things. A little foolish, too, letting myself get so far ahead of where we are.

So we're here. Together. Making out, having sex -- and no, I've not let myself make love to him yet. That'll come, I hope. Right now I'm just letting the hormones lead the way. Because I let the emotions take over? Well, there's going to be lots to say.

Right now, though? Wake up my baby, get off this plane and hit the beach. I want another look at what construction work has done to his body, and this time it'll be in bright sun.

Then I'm going to suck his brains out through his dick.

After that, maybe some dinner and fancy drinks with umbrellas. Gotta love umbrella drinks.

Paul's journal. Waikiki, day two.

I carry this journal around thinking I'll have something profound to say and yet I don't write in it nearly enough. But I asked Gray what he was up to on the plane and he said that when he's working through shit he writes it down so I figured I'd give it another try. It's much more like me to just go to a bar or a club and get laid than think too hard.

Which might be part of my problem, hm? Maybe there is something to this journal stuff after all.

Thing is, I don't have to go to a bar or a club to get laid because Gray is right there. Right THERE. See him? In a geeky swimsuit that is adorable and so him. He's got on a ton of sunscreen, which is good because I think I could use him to signal Mars right now. The boy needs a tan.

Me: Isn't there any sun in New England?

Gray: Shut up.

I laughed at him, I mean playfully, but laughed. A lot. He really needs to move to California. But I can't complain that much, I got to lather the sunscreen that he brought with him all over his back and shoulders. It's ultra-water-proof-9000 or something. He's going to need a chisel to get it off.

So, yeah, we're in Waikiki! God, it's beautiful. If I could afford to live here and lie on the beach all day I could die happy. Although I swear, with Gray around the view is as good inside as it is outside. He looks great but different. He used to be this geeky skinny guy, pretty confident, with eyes full of mischief and a dick that was always up. And now he's thin but he must work out some. He's not muscular really, but he's got a really lovely line to him. Maybe he's still swimming. He's still geeky but in a more mature thoughtful way instead of a nerdy one. And I think he's gotten a little shy or something. He blushes now, which he didn't used to do, and he smiles when he's not sure what to say and he bites his lip. Oh my god, he's just... so beautiful.

Things so far have been good. Sex the first night was more desperate than anything else and I came way sooner than I should have, and so hard I saw stars. I just couldn't hold it off. That never happens to me. Fuck, that was madness. Since then we've been a little more in control. A little.

I'm trying to act as if this is normal, having him next to me, sharing meals and a bed and holding hands and stuff. Sort of less like we're dating and more like a real couple. Mostly for me, to kind of get to know what it feels like, but also I think that's what he wants. And I want to make sure that Gray gets everything he wants on this trip.

I want him to trust me again. That's really what this is all about I guess. I really fucked that up. This morning we got out of bed and we had breakfast on this little balcony we have that looks out over the ocean and I told him that I loved him and he kissed me, which was very nice, but he didn't say I love you back. I think maybe he's a little wary of

me? Gray was always very... there. And right now he feels there, but... not. I can't really explain it.

Don't get me wrong, we're hot together. I have zero complaints in that department. He's got this wicked thing he does now when he fucks, this kind of roll in his hips... it's totally new, I don't know where he learned it, but it makes me crazy. So. Hot.

Well, for someone who isn't into journals this got kind of long. And Gray is getting up off of his towel which means he's headed for the water and that sounds damn good. Aloha.

Gray's journal. On board the cruise ship.

So how weird is it that Paul's writing stuff down? Man, he's really taking this to heart, making things work, I mean. It's... I don't know. It's nice. Hell, it's what I wanted, yeah? He's here, with me. He swept me off my feet and took me to paradise. He's slathered me in so much sunscreen we barely need lube -- slippery slidey sex on the floor. Wheeee!

He keeps looking at me and smiling. And I swear his dick is totally in tune with mine. Christ, we just kind of look at each other and we're hard. I have to spend a lot of time swimming just so I don't throw him down and take him right there on the deck. There are limits, even on a gay cruise. Or so I'm told.

He said he loves me.

He said it and I smiled and kissed him, and part of me just curled up and cried because I want so badly to believe that he not only loves me but is IN LOVE with me. And I don't have the right to ask that of him. Not the way things are, not when we've only got two weeks before we're apart again.

There are certain truths that we both know, even without talking about it. Truth is, I've been acting like an idiot. Truth is, he was an idiot, but isn't acting like one now. Truth is that we love sex too much to even think of being chaste and faithful -- I wouldn't ask it of him, and I hope to god he doesn't want that from me. Not when there's 3000 miles between us. And if he loves me, honest to fuck loves me... god, I'm a selfish fuck.

I kind of see what Paul meant, about wanting me and wanting to escape to here. Even with he-whom-I-loathe. It's so confusing.

I'm not possessive. I'm not.

Ah well. We're on a gay cruise, lots of lovely bodies to look at and ogle over. Lots of rubbers and lube and, man, am I taking advantage of that.

Wish Paul wasn't trying so hard to make it all about me being happy, though. Wish he'd let loose and have some fun, his way. Maybe tonight, when we're dancing I can prod him along, see if he's ready to get real.

Or maybe I'll just let it rest. I don't want to make him mad, I just want him to... Hell, I want him to talk to me. I want to hold him for a while and hear him talk. But I don't know how to start, without upsetting the apple cart, so to speak.

God, I want a drink.

Paul's journal. On board the cruise ship, Christmas Eve.

Me again.

I've been pacing for an half an hour and that's not doing me any good so I'm going to see if I can sit and write this out.

Dinner was really nice tonight, the guys we've been seated with all week are friendly and funny and hot. These are all good things, right? So yeah, nice dinner and then we decide to go for a walk around the top deck before we hit the club because we both ate too much. The food onboard has been great.

Gray likes to window shop, I've learned. He didn't really used to be that way, but now he tends to watch other men walk by and comment, or suggest that I go ask some other guy to dance because he thinks we'd look hot together, or some damn thing. He's right, I mean the guys on this cruise, some of them are well worth turning your head to watch walk by.

But I'm not here to watch other men. I've been focusing on Gray all week, because that's what this is about, you know? And this may be the last time we are together before he moves -- IF he moves -- anyway, it might be a long time before we're like this again. So I'm not really interested in dancing with other people. And I sure as hell am not interested in fucking anyone else, as he suggested tonight.

I mean, he didn't put it that way, he kind of mentioned how hot this guy was and how he'd been seeing him walk around solo most of the week and maybe we should ask him out to the club tonight and buy him a couple of drinks. I think he was implying we could take him back to our room and fuck him. At least that's what it seemed like.

Anyway, he had his eyes on this guy, who was standing at the rail as we walked by and he said hello and the guy said hello back and I don't know, I wiggled out. I kept walking and Gray did this sort of skip to catch up and when we were out of sight I told Gray exactly what I thought of him looking at all these other men and talking about them and speculating about how they would be great in bed.

I don't think he took it very well. We had what I think might be our first ever face to face argument. I went off about how hard I'd been trying (despite the nagging little voice in the back of my head that keeps trying not to get tied down... oh I'm aware of it, very aware) to make this time all about us and he said something about how I needed to loosen up and have some fun and it spiraled into raised voices and then a long stare and then Gray mumbled something about needing a drink and took off.

I watched his back as he walked away. I'm sure he went to one of the bars but there are 17 of them or something on this ship and I wasn't about to tuck my tail between my legs and wander from bar to bar trying to hunt him down. So I came back to the stateroom, broke open the bottle of Dewar's I brought in my suitcase, filled the glass, set it on the table and I've been staring at it ever since.

That bottle is a slippery slope and I'm not sure I should try to navigate the rest of this night under its influence. So there it is, sitting there. It's not even that appealing, really. It's an easy answer but it might not be the right one, and I really have to figure out what the right one is.

Does he want to bring other guys into this? Is that what I can expect from him when (if?) he moves here? Is that what I want? I mean if that's our agreement, okay, but is that what I want to agree to? I don't know. I don't think so. I want to be enough for him.

Honestly? I thought that was what he wanted, too. I'm not sure what he meant by I should loosen up.

And, you know, OKAY, so I might have overreacted a little. It's possible. Shut up.

I don't want to argue, I just want to figure this out. Of course when he does come back he won't be sober so... maybe we won't be talking this out tonight. I don't even know how to go about this. Maybe he'll think I'm an asshole for not following him? Or maybe he's off banging that guy right now. God, I don't even want to think about that. Or maybe he just needed to cool off a little and he'll turn up here any minute and I don't need to be this worked up over it.

I don't know. I don't know how he handles this kind of thing. We've never done this before. When we were together before we didn't argue, ever, there was nothing to argue about. We'd fuck at his place, we'd fuck at mine, we fucked other people, we'd fuck the same people and then compare notes (that was fun), we did what we wanted to. No expectations, no demands, no strings. But it matters now.

I must be getting old.

I wish Gray would come back to the room.

Chapter 21

Gray's journal. On board the cruise ship, Christmas Day.

Well, last night was... not good. Although I do find it oddly reassuring that we can totally misunderstand each other in person and it's not limited to the written word.

God, I'm dumb. He's thick, too, so there's two strikes.

Okay, so last night wasn't one of my most shining moments, I admit. At least I didn't get plastered. Don't know if I'll let Paul know that the quick return to our room was spurred on mostly by some guy hitting on me when I ordered my second drink and me suddenly realizing that the only one on the ship I wanted looking at me like that had been looking at me like that for days.

I'm a little slow sometimes. Does it really matter that Paul's been making too much of an effort to make me happy? Doesn't the fact that he's been so focused on me mean that he's trying to do exactly what I want?

The only way he's going to know if he wants what I want is if I meet him halfway.

So I went back and apologized for walking away, said I was sorry I'd been acting like an ass. He was in bed already, but at least his back wasn't to the door. I hate hurting him, it makes me feel sick.

He thought I'd wanted to pick some guy up, have a party. And yeah, I totally see how he thought that. I'm not sure if he really gets that I was just trying to... I don't know. Make him see that I wasn't pressuring him. Letting him know that I'm not going to demand he be faithful. And instead I was just making him think I'm more of a slut than I am, I guess.

I made love to him last night. It was slow and long and intense, and I think he got it. I think. I hope.

I wished him a Merry Christmas, after, when I was holding him and kissing his fingers. And then this morning I did it again, made love to him and stared into his eyes, told him how beautiful he is.

And now I'm going to go find him for supper and do it again later. I can't help it if he decides he doesn't want to be with me, if when I go back east we revert. But I can make the most of this, and enjoying being with him.

I love him.

Paul's journal. On board the cruise ship, the day after Christmas.

Oh my fucking god.

If this is what happens after Gray and I argue someone needs to remind me to deliberately start an argument every once in a while. There's nothing better than making up, I swear to god.

So get this.

Surprise #1: Gray comes back to the room and he's sober.

Surprise #2: Gray says he's sorry before he asks me if I'm awake.

Surprise #3: I didn't think sex between us could get any better.

This is kind of... people don't really write this shit down do they? Well, no one's reading it and I want to remember the details so I'm writing it down.

I've kind of been all about him in the bedroom lately but this one he made all about me, starting with a kiss that was so slow and so deep it literally made my chest ache. I don't know what he did, but I was breathless before it was over, and so... into him. It's difficult to explain it in words.

After the kiss he just started exploring me. He tasted my nipples. He ran his fingers through my hair. He rubbed his thighs against mine and slid down my body touching everywhere with his tongue. He gave me goose bumps. And then he blew me so slow and so hot I thought I was going to die. It made every muscle tense and twitch. He made these sounds, kind of soft and they seemed to accentuate everything he did. He'd go slow and then he'd get more and more intense and then just when I was starting to pant and my hips would tighten up he'd do evil things like pinch off my cock so I wouldn't come. It was fucking beautiful torture and I ended up begging him for it.

And then later, after he'd made it clear that he was driving (and I so wasn't arguing about it) he sunk his cock into me and stayed there and he just looked at me. I shouldn't say 'just', I guess, because there was so much in his eyes. And then he started moving slowly, and holding my eyes with his and it felt so good and I didn't want to look away. He would kiss me now and then and we'd taste each other's mouths with our tongues and then he look at me, and all the while he just kept sliding in and out, deep and then almost all the way out to the point where I'd gasp before he'd sink back in again. Jesus fucking god.

I don't know how long that went on because I was so aroused that things from here are a little fuzzy. I tried to give it back and make Gray feel as good as he was making me feel. I don't know if it worked but he was making great noises, he didn't seem disappointed. Thinking about it now I mostly remember his eyes, god I could have just drowned in them, and I remember pulling and begging and arching and just needing so badly. Aching.

I came first just so you know, long before he did. He made this sort of strangled sound (so sexy!) and kissed me hard, and then he just kept right on going, faster and harder and his brow furrowed and his breath was thin, but still it wasn't...

It wasn't fucking, is the thing. I think it was what Gray means when he says 'making love'. Honestly? I've never had it like that. But I think everything in his eyes, all that heat and need and emotion... that's what he wanted me to see... that was all for me. It was fucking incredible. He had been holding back, I was right -- waiting to see if he could trust me again.

I stroked myself off a second time and came right after he did. It was good for him, that was obvious, he even looked like he was going to cry when he came... maybe he was, even, I couldn't tell. He lapped a big swath of come off my stomach and then kissed me hard and all I could do was groan.

And then, after things settled down, he wished me a Merry Christmas. I'd completely forgotten... usually I hate Christmas, but not this year.

SO hot. So fucking hot. And so much more, too. I really do love him. I can feel it in my chest when I think about him. It hurts to know he'll be back on the east coast in just a few days. Hurts like hell.

We did it again the next morning, just the same slow into each other thing... and again later that evening only that time I was on top. I took it slow for him, too. I think he got off on it in a big way.

I don't know if I want to fuck around anymore. That was amazing, and it will never be like that with anyone else, I know it. I mean, he and I fuck, too, that's great also, but I don't think anyone else I could be with would measure up to this.

Chapter 22

Back in San Francisco.

Gray wasn't tired. He couldn't be, wouldn't let himself be. He'd just had a vacation, thus he was rested. Okay, so the vacation was mostly sun, swim and sex, but he'd managed to get a nap on the plane back from Hawaii. He was rested.

He was also tan, which was cool. Gray hadn't had skin this color since he was an undergrad, and it was weird to look in the mirror and see a non-pasty body reflected back at him. Somehow he thought that for the amount of time he and Paul had spent in their stateroom he shouldn't be quite so dark, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

No, he'd decided to take his gifts where he found them right about the time he'd fled the bar to go back and apologize to Paul. And since then it was smooth sailing, so to speak. Paul had even loosened up enough to get a bit breathless with him, and after locating their ties and the creative use of a lamp cord... well, their last night aboard ship had been fun.

If exhausting.

But now they were in a nice place in the Castro, and they had one more night ahead of them. There was no way Gray was going to let a little thing like being tired spoil this. He looked around the room and crossed to the window, waiting for Paul to finish up in the bathroom, not turning around until he heard the door open.

"So, what now? Food? Shop?" He smiled and glanced at the bed. "Sex then shop?"

"Hm." Paul grinned, stepping close to Gray and tugging on his shirt. "How about we get food and get your shopping out of the way and then come back here and fuck... I mean, stay in the rest of the evening?" Paul was flirting; it was cute, but odd.

"We could," Gray agreed. He slipped one hand around to Paul's back and pulled him in a little, just close enough to kiss the tip of his nose. "Tired, baby?" He didn't look very tired. Coy, but not tired. And they were way past the being coy stage.

Paul shook his head. "No, not tired." He smiled and kissed Gray lightly on the lips before extracting himself neatly to find his flip-flops. He glanced back at Gray with a tight brow, then slipped the key-card for their room into his pocket along with his wallet. "I'm just... not ready for this to be over. But you know that." He swallowed and went for the door, shifting seamlessly back to his flirting smile. "What are we shopping for? Souvenirs? Gifts? Something for Mommy?" He winked and held the door open for Gray.

Gray frowned, trying to decide if he should let this slide or not. Things had been mostly sweet for the last couple of days, but maybe it was time for something a bit more serious. He walked to the door and blocked Paul from going out. "Postcards, since I forgot about that in Hawaii," he said easily. "New dildo, maybe a plug. Lube."

Without looking at Paul he gently closed the door again, tugging it away from Paul's hand with ease. He took a fast moment to run through a few options before sighing and looking at Paul's face, noting the tightness again. "What's up?" he asked quietly. "I don't want this to end either, but it's not done yet, yeah?"

"I know just the shop you want. And hell, no, it's not done yet. If you're buying a new dildo or a plug we have to break them in, right?" Paul grinned. It didn't seem like he wanted to get into anything right now. He opened the door again, undaunted, and herded Gray toward the stairwell. "How did I let you forget about postcards?"

"Paul." Gray could feel his back tensing. This wasn't good, it felt like hiding again and like being pushed away. After two weeks of unrelenting affection and openness it felt worse than strange. It felt like Paul was hurting, or angry, or just not there with him anymore. Gray stopped walking, right in the middle of the hall. "Paul. Let's wait a bit, okay? Maybe... just talk or something. Did I do something?"

Paul sighed and looked into Gray's eyes. He'd been doing a lot of that lately, and while it was certainly nice, Gray had learned to read him much better that way than Paul probably realized. There was something behind those hazel eyes that was nagging at him that was obvious.

"How about a drink, then?" Paul suggested, then sighed. "Though it might be a little early." He leaned against the wall lightly, then ran a fist full of fingers through his hair while studying the carpet. Soon, he looked back up at Gray. "I know we still have today and I want to make it a good day, Gray, but... I keep thinking about... I want to know what happens now. Where we go from here. We have to talk about that eventually, you know?"

They did, Gray knew. He didn't want to. He didn't really see the point in ruining their last night by saying it all out loud, didn't want to change the taste of everything from coconuts and rum to bitter almonds. He knew what it was coming down to, he'd made sure to keep it firmly in mind, even if he did bury it under a few blankets.

It was clear. They were good together. They had a chance, at least in Gray's mind. Gray already knew that the counter offer he'd make on the research job would be reasonable and that he'd take the job. But right now he had to face Paul and force himself to make the compromises Paul needed, and it was going to hurt.

Gray bit his lip and nodded, slowly. "Yeah. I just..." He looked back toward their room. "Let's do it, then. I'd rather not spend the next few hours trying to keep it light, knowing

this was hanging over us." But hell, it was going to be hard not to push for more. Because he knew he wanted it all.

Paul nodded. "Yeah, okay." He pushed off the wall, and took Gray's hand to lead him back to their room. He stood back and let Gray go in first and then closed the door behind them. "Any idea where to start?"

Gray flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Nope. Not a clue. I know... I know that this has been way better than I'd even hoped. I know I don't want it to end."

Paul seemed to jump on that. "Oh, definitely. So good Gray, it's been amazing."

Gray propped himself up on his elbows and looked at Paul. Okay, that was a little more enthusiasm than he'd expected. "Yeah," he said slowly, wondering if this was going to develop into a new speech pattern. "So, what now? I'm going back, you're here, and that's... well, it's what it's always been. We knew that before we went away."

There was no way he was going to pressure Paul in any way. He wasn't going to let himself mess this up. Paul was looking fidgety and adorable and like he was going to be sick from nerves. Gray suddenly sat up. "Are you going to ditch me? It's been great but it's totally done now?"

Paul eyes widened and he looked like he'd been punched in the stomach. There was a good bit of silence before Paul gasped softly and Gray realized Paul hadn't even been breathing.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Paul sat heavily on the bed next to Gray. "You actually think after a week like that... after everything we... you think I could possibly wash my hands of this? Gray, you're adorable, but you're an idiot. This is the best thing I've ever had."

"Oh." Gray felt a little dizzy. "Okay then. Um. Good?" Oh fuck, this was confusing. "So what are you trying to say, exactly? 'Cause I'm lost, baby."

Paul licked his lips and looked away, rubbed his hands together and sighed. "Are you moving here?"

Oh God. Gray looked around the room, fully aware that they were looking in opposite directions. "Yeah. Yeah, I am. I mean... it's almost a done deal. Not a hundred percent yet, but... yeah." Gray had his hands on the bed, holding onto it next to his knees, before he realized he was physically bracing himself.

Paul nodded. "In May? June? Something like that?" He glanced over at Gray.

"Probably the end of July. Might be earlier, depends on money, you know? I might have to pull a summer session." Gray's fingers tightened on the bed and he looked at the floor,

not quite able to look Paul in the eye. Paul wasn't freaking. Yet. He had no idea what that meant.

"Okay. July, maybe August, then." Paul's tone was matter of fact, his speech slow and precise, like he was adding in his head or putting puzzle pieces together. "So seven months tops. Okay." He cleared his throat. "And when you move out here... I mean, not to put the cart before the horse, but would you want to get your own place? Or move in with me?" Paul turned his head and looked right at Gray this time. "What would you *want* to do?"

Gray blinked. "Uh, didn't we..." He stood up, unable to withstand the intensity of Paul's eyes. They'd talked about this, they'd had an agreement. There wasn't going to be any pressure and he'd done his best to follow through with that. Paul didn't want a commitment, wasn't ready to make one, and Gray finally knew that. But this... this was so far out of the scope of what he'd been prepared for that Gray was at a loss. "I have no idea what the right answer is here, Paul," he finally said to the wall.

"Right, we had an agreement." Gray turned as Paul leaned back on his hands and crossed his ankles, watching him. "Or, well, you were giving in to what you thought I wanted, which was really just me doing what I thought was the best thing for you. In other words, we had crap, Gray. So if it were up to you, would you want to move in with me or get your own place?"

Gray rubbed a hand over his face and looked at Paul, meeting his eyes. Paul had to see the seriousness of this. "Honestly? Because if I give you honest I'm not backing away from it, Paul. Games stop here, even the games we don't mean to play."

Paul continued to hold Gray's eyes deliberately, if a bit unsteadily, and swallowed again. "I'm not running," he said quietly and ran his hands over his thighs nervously. He spoke slowly. "Part of me is terrified of this Gray, you should know that. Fucking sweaty palms and nausea kind of terrified." He sighed, and seemed to be forcing himself to breathe. "But the rest of me finally understands exactly what's standing in front of me right now and knows better than to blow it. I *see* it now Gray, you know? Wanting to run is going to be a hard habit for me to break, baby, but you're important. Very important, and I need to step up."

Gray took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wasn't sure if he could keep standing, so he leaned back on the dresser, only bumping the lamp slightly. Okay, this was... not expected. And huge. But Paul was serious, and Gray owed him the honesty he was looking for. "If I get my own place I'm hoping it would be a waste of money 'cause I'd be spending my time at yours. But you have roommates, so you'd be blowing your money, and frankly I'm not going to have as much as you, so that's kind of weird, but you get the point, yeah? So maybe we can talk about that." Gray clamped his jaw shut to stop the horrific flow of words, his gaze pinned on Paul, trying to judge his reaction.

Paul blinked at Gray a moment and then smiled slowly. The smile was followed by a snicker. "So... forgive me, but I'm not fluent in this new Gray-speak yet," Paul said raising an eyebrow with a bemused look on his face. "But I think you just told me that you think we'd be wasting our money to have separate apartments and that since I'd probably be making more money I should pick a place I can afford." He raised an eyebrow. "Right?"

"No! That *we* can afford. Together. Because, yeah, I let you take me to Hawaii and on a cruise and stuff, but I'm not a gold digger." Gray actually slapped a hand over his mouth for that one. "I have no idea why I'm saying this. Stop me. And what the hell does this mean, anyway?"

"If you were a gold digger you wouldn't pick me as your boyfriend," Paul quipped sarcastically, grinning. "You haven't seen my credit cards."

Gray pushed away the instant guilt that welled up. It wasn't time for that. Instead, more as a distraction than anything else, he seized on the other important thing Paul had just said. "Boyfriend?" The dresser really wasn't doing its job, and Gray sank down to sit on the floor, looking up at Paul.

Paul watched Gray for a moment and then pushed off the bed and slid onto the floor right in front of him. He seemed to grow less and less nervous the more off balance Gray became. "You wanted to know what this means? That's what this means to me."

Gray stared. He knew he was staring, but he didn't seem able to do anything else. This was what he wanted, right? So how come it felt false? He knew, just by looking at Paul how sincere the man was. There was no guile there, only hope. But it felt... like a mistake. "Baby, I love you. You know I do." God, he had to know. Gray felt like he was pulling words up out of his gut, leaving an empty place behind. "But I think... I think you need a bit of time to come down, maybe."

Paul had started to smile when Gray said he loved him, but it faded quickly into something cooler and unreadable. "Oh," Paul said and his jaw clenched in an angry way before he got up and walked away from Gray.

"Paul, don't." Gray got up and followed, not willing to let Paul pull away. "Baby, listen to me. There's nothing I want more than for us to be together." He finally had to reach out and grab Paul's arm, turning him around so Gray could see his face, see the hurt and anger there. "I've said that for months now. I love you; hell, I'm *in love* with you. I want to live with you. But I think that three weeks from now, six weeks from now... Paul, what happens when we're apart? What happens the fourth or fifth time you just want to get off with a warm body? I don't want you to resent me -- and I promised I wouldn't demand a commitment."

Paul was trembling lightly, Gray could feel it in his fingers as he gripped Paul's arm. "Gray, what the hell are you talking about? Calling you my boyfriend and agreeing to

move in with you when you get out here... you think that's impulsive of me? Is that it? I've never said these things to anyone Gray, ever. You better believe I've thought about them carefully. Don't patronize me."

"I'm not -- " Stunned, Gray let go of Paul and took a step back, then another, until he found the edge of the bed. As he sat he could feel a tension headache start up behind his eyes, all the good of their vacation draining away. "I just don't... god, Paul. I don't want to lose you, or hurt you, or make you feel rushed. I'm sorry. Tell me what exactly you mean, what you want. Please?"

Paul cupped his fingers together and touched them to his lips and looked at the carpet silently. Gray watched his posture change as if he, too, felt the weight of their reality settle onto Paul's back. He was surprised when Paul moved to sit gently beside him on the bed.

"I want you." Paul said softly. "I want you to leave here knowing at least one thing, beyond a shadow of a doubt." Paul turned to face him and put a hand on his knee. "I haven't ever felt the way I felt that night that we argued on the ship. When you came to bed and held me and... I didn't know it could be like that. You blew my mind." Paul rubbed his jaw with his free hand thoughtfully. "That night changed everything for me, Gray."

Gray swallowed and drew a shaky breath, then very carefully placed his hand over Paul's, stroking his fingers. "I didn't want to be apart from you. I don't want to be now. But I need to know you're sure, Paul. That you're not making a choice here based on two weeks of fun in the sun, some fantastic sex, and the intensity of making love. Do you see the whole picture, baby? Seven months apart first? Can you deal with that?"

"I don't know. No? Not well? I don't *want* to deal with it either, do you? But we don't have a choice." Paul replied, his voice regaining some of its confidence. "I don't know if I'm seeing the whole picture. The picture I see is this, okay? I see us getting by for seven months, putting our lives more or less on hold. I see us struggling some and having bad days and good days and hoping to god that this is strong enough so that it doesn't fall apart while we're waiting for the real world to catch up. Does that mean I'm going to handle this well all the time? No, probably not. And I don't expect you will, either."

Paul reached up and tugged on a stray lock of Gray's haphazard hair. "I'm telling you how I feel now, and how I hope to feel in seven months. That's the best I can do. I don't think you can honestly say you can do any better."

Gray nodded slowly, then started to shake his head. He was completely blown away -- by the conversation, by Paul's words, by the promise Paul was offering to make. He'd misunderstood so much the last year, his trust in his own reactions was shot. There was very little left in him that he knew for certain, but what he knew, he knew well.

"You're right, I can't," he agreed. "I can tell you my truth. I love you. I want to be with you, and I'm prepared to move here to do it." Carefully, almost expecting Paul to move away, Gray lifted his hand to stroke over Paul's cheek, then settle behind his neck. "Promise me we'll keep talking. If there are issues -- needs -- to be talked about, we'll talk? I don't want you miserable, baby. I couldn't deal, knowing you were a mess. One of us is enough."

Paul nodded. "I just need to ask you one thing, Gray, and please don't take it the wrong way I just... need to know, okay? I need to know... do you trust me?"

Gray almost laughed, but the hint of fear in Paul's eyes stopped him, brought him back to how serious the fall from grace had been. It had hurt Paul, he suddenly realized, hurt him probably as much as it had hurt Gray. "I do now. That night on the ship? That's when it all went away, I think. That's when I gave it all up, and let myself love you again. It's not just about truth, baby. I trust you to tell me if I'm messing up, okay? That's what I mean about talking. Tell me what you need, what you want. As long as we're talking, we'll be okay." He hoped.

"I'll try, man, but you always seem to know what I need better than I do. At least I know now that it won't be the end of the world if I fuck up, or if you do. I know I can come to you and say, Gray, I need help, or I'm freaked or whatever. I feel like I can do that at least." Paul swallowed hard, then exhaled heavily and his shoulders seem to relax. "This is heavy, huh?" He turned his head slightly, probably so Gray wouldn't see him get emotional at having been forgiven, and Gray wasn't about to let on that he'd seen. "So are we good then? I can call you my boyfriend and you can consider me yours and we're good?" Paul rubbed his face and wiped his eyes and stood.

Gray reached up and pulled Paul right back down, falling back on the bed and getting a lapful of boyfriend. "Only if you kiss me before you run off." He didn't bother waiting for a reply, just took Paul's mouth in a soft kiss, long and gentle. It was all he was capable of really; the entire thing was too emotionally intense to live up to anything with more force. Something would break and shatter if they pushed. He drew back slightly and smiled. "Buy me dinner? I'm broke."

Chapter 23

"Okay... step up... and one more... and walk forward... good..."

Paul had one hand covering Gray's eyes as he steered him into Guiltless Pleasures. It was his favorite sex shop; he called it his perverted playground. He was ginning widely, he couldn't help it, and had been snickering for the last several minutes as they approached the store.

"Okay, ready? On three." Paul made ready to uncover Gray's eyes. "One... two... two and a half..."

Gray protested. "Paul!"

"Okay, okay! Two and three quarters... kidding! Three!" Paul uncovered Gray's eyes and rested his hands on Gray's shoulders. The store was bright and clean, and had shelving that was very much like what you'd find in a drugstore, only instead of band-aids and aspirin there were vibrators and lube and dildos and condoms.

"Mecca!" Well, Gray sounded pleased. In fact, he seemed positively thrilled, almost quivering in either excitement or anticipation. Possibly both, Paul couldn't be sure. He didn't much care, either. They were both on an emotional high and Paul was more than inclined to indulge Gray in a little excitement; and it didn't hurt that it was sex toys that had stirred Gray up to this level. It boded well for a good night.

"Time to shop!" Gray declared, and Paul barely had time to squeak in surprise at the fast, hard kiss pressed to his mouth before Gray was gone, heading right to the toys with a huge grin on his face. Okay, maybe Gray should get out of that small town a little more often. He looked like a kid in a candy shop, all wide eyes and grabby hands. At the moment he seemed pretty intent on dildos. Scary big ones. With bumps and ridges and man, that one was not a pretty shade of green.

"If you actually plan on purchasing something that grotesque I had better get another video," Paul laughed. Some people went gaga over comic books or handbags; apparently Gray liked dildos. Hey, this was a fine hobby as far as Paul was concerned, benefits for everyone, especially if there was a video camera around.

"A new tape can be arranged, I think," Gray promised, waggling his eyebrows outrageously. "No, seriously." He peered around the shop, turning in a wide circle. "Okay, I just need some videos, a decent dildo, and oh! Oh! Look!" And he was off again, this time headed to... leather? Paul did note that the scary green dildo had been replaced in Gray's hand by something a little more sedate, in color anyway. Silver wasn't scary.

"Look, baby!" Gray was holding up a pair of wrist cuffs and length of leather. "Can we go to the hardware store?"

Paul stopped in his tracks and made a show of lifting his jaw closed with his fingers. "You are a wild man. Yes, after you move here." He grinned. "But I do like those cuffs." He tried one on, fussing with the buckles. "What do you think?" He grinned at Gray, holding up his hand to show it off. This was entirely too much fun. "They could go with something like that." He pointed over Gray's shoulder at a display of leather gear suspended over the counter.

Gray grinned and glanced back at the gear, but not before Paul saw him lick his lower lip, the tip of his tongue darting out almost as a tease. "What do you think? Light flogger?" Gray suggested with a wink, pointing to a small leather toy with lots of tails. "Or just a chest harness with lots of D-rings?" He gestured with his hand and seemed to suddenly realize he was still holding the dildo. "Here, catch."

Paul caught, having no other choice, and watched Gray's butt as he leaned over to take a look at another set of cuffs. Then he glanced at the non-threatening silver dildo, which opened at the bottom and was hollow. "Uh, Gray?"

"Hot and cold play," Gray said immediately, looking up at him with another grin. "Put warm water in it, or cold. It's fun. You'll love it."

"Cold?" Paul clenched involuntarily. "Are you nuts?" He took off the cuff and set it aside. "Ah. Here we go." He picked up a purple silicone plug and waved it at Gray. "Hours of teasing while I've got you cuffed." He grinned. "Oh, the things I have to look forward to."

He could swear he saw Gray's eyes dilate. His breathing had certainly picked up. Paul gave himself a little pat on the back; if he played this right he could get Gray hot and bothered and tease him for most of the day before taking him back to the hotel and fucking him senseless.

Gray stood a little closer and took the plug, giving it a quick once over. "Okay. This is good," he approved. "Um, videos? I'll take another look at the dildos on the way out." He picked the cuffs back up and didn't look like he was going to let go of them without a fight.

Paul pointed silently, unable to control the grin that seemed to have taken over his face. It was almost possible that watching Gray fondle and salivate over these toys was more fun than sex involving said items would be. Almost, but not quite, and Paul's cock was growing impatient already. Maybe it would have been a better idea to start this spree with buying postcards. The trouble with getting Gray wound up was that he himself wasn't immune. It was a small price to pay however, and worth every cent.

He followed Gray across the store and through the curtain into the mother of all video collections. The gay men's section was clearly marked and Gray seemed to be drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Paul was right on his heels.

"What kind of thing were you looking for? Straight up fucking? Multiples? Kink?" He'd been through this section a few too many times, he realized; he sounded like a salesman.

"Yes." Gray swallowed a little thickly and added, "All of the above, please." He grabbed Paul's hand and gave his fingers a quick squeeze before pressing the back of it against his thickening erection. "Getting hot, baby."

Paul gave Gray a quick rub before pulling his hand back. Oh, he wasn't the only one. Paul was starting to realize he'd underestimated the effect that toy shopping would have on Gray, and by extension on himself. Their evening was looking like it would be particularly active -- Gray wasn't inhibited at his calmest, this could wind up being really intense. Paul was looking forward to it.

With a small sigh Gray let go and started wandering down the row, apparently scanning titles, not looking back at Paul. He was starting to grin more and more, his expression becoming more gleeful with every title he picked up.

"I've pretty much trashed what little I have," Gray commented. "Need... well, everything. Just nothing with scat or piss, thanks. I'll stick with the usual -- rimming, little cock sucking, lots of fucking. Toys, fingers, dick -- it's all good."

"Oh yeah. Good." Paul thought he said it under his breath, but by the look Gray gave him, eyes hot and heavy lidded, and the unsubtle way he adjusted himself, he must have said it a little louder than he'd meant to.

Gray glanced around and suddenly grabbed him, kissing him deep and hard, his tongue thrusting in and out. It wasn't a long kiss, but they were both a little breathless when Gray pulled away, glancing around again almost furtively. Then his eyes lit up and he stepped back, saying, "Oh, fantasy slave stuff! Cool!" And like that Gray was gone again, reading covers, and tugging at his jeans almost absently as he added something that looked military to his stash. "How about you? What do you like for porn these days?" he asked, not looking up.

Paul swallowed to keep from moaning, still standing where Gray had left him. The man was fucking hot, and Paul had pretty much given up on the game as soon as Gray started casually touching himself through his jeans while picking out his porn collection. To hell with dinner; after this, they were going back to the room.

"I, um..." Paul cleared his throat and tried speaking again, this time without his voice cracking. "I've been kind of into the home made stuff lately. I have this one with this really hot guy jerking off in his office... only he's gotta hurry because he's got open office hours in like twenty minutes." He leaned over and licked Gray's ear. "It's fucking hot."

Gray dropped the box he was holding. "Oh shit," he whispered, the sound almost a moan. Paul didn't move as Gray leaned into him, close enough to feel the heat from his skin and the hard cock pressing into his hip. "Paul? I really gotta grab a video or two, a dildo and lube. We're done here, but I need this stuff, baby."

Then Gray licked his neck, all the way up to his jaw, stopping with a nip from his teeth that should have been painful but instead was just a promise. Gray bent and picked up the video he'd dropped and walked -- awkwardly -- back toward the front of the store. Paul could hear him muttering though, sounds that could have been, "...dark alley, five minutes. That's all I need. Just take him and kiss him and rip his fucking jeans off..." Or it could have been something else. But Paul didn't think so.

"Hey, if you can manage it, more power to you." Paul replied, in an almost conversational tone, snagging a pump-top bottle of slip-inside off a shelf as he passed it. He marveled that he and Gray still had this kind of effect on one another after so many years. It was the one thing about their relationship that hadn't changed. All the emotional and personal baggage aside, they still couldn't keep their hands off each other. "So now I'm thinking we should just go back to the room, maybe order in pizza later," he suggested, setting the lube down on the counter.

Gray didn't look at him, but Paul was pretty sure that it was because Gray *couldn't* look at him. Man was close to losing it. But Gray managed a nod, and carefully set the videos, the plug, and the cuffs down next to the lube. "Sure. That'd be great. Be right back."

It was wild how fast a man could pick out condoms and a dildo when he had the proper motivation. Paul kind of thought that a benefit to this whole 'hurry up I want to fuck right now' thing Gray had going on was that the dildo wound up being rather plain, compared to some of the others. True, it was violet, but it was basically just penis shaped and didn't do anything weird.

"Can we go now?" Gray asked, almost out of breath. He was biting his lip again, and finally looked at Paul through lowered lashes. "Want anything else? One of those?"

Paul turned to look where Gray was pointing and for the first time his jaw really did drop. If he hadn't been in a sex shop he would have thought it was a flashlight until he'd looked a little closer. The rubber mouth, instead of a light bulb and glass was a clue. That, and Gray snickering as he passed over his credit card to pay for his new toys.

"You've got to be kidding me." Paul picked the oddity up and held it in front of him as if he were about to use it. "Love the lips." He grinned and mimed fucking it a couple of times. The store clerk didn't even blink.

"Weirdo," Gray grinned at him, holding his bag of porn and tools of debauchery. "Come on, I think we have somewhere to be. Right fucking now." The clerk didn't blink at that

either, seeming to take Gray's quivering as an every day occurrence. Which it probably was, poor guy.

Paul winked at the clerk and set the novelty masturbator back on its shelf. He was going to be polite and say goodnight, but Gray was halfway out of the store already. "Still need that trip to the hardware store?" he joked, taking long strides to catch up, but he didn't get there in time to hold the door for Gray, who slipped quickly through it and out onto the busy Castro sidewalk. "Hotel? Dark alley?" Paul put an arm around Gray's shoulders as they made their way down the sidewalk.

Gray growled a little and turned them suddenly, and for a horrific moment Paul thought they were actually going to go down an alley. But his back slammed up against solid wall and Gray was pressed against him, hissing in his ear and rubbing against him.

"We are going to the hotel, baby. And you are going to put these cuffs on me, and you're going to watch me hold onto the headboard while you fuck me. And you're going to ride me hard, Paul, deep and long and when you get off we're gonna shower and do it again. When I'm at that desk next week I want to be sore, and I want to know it's your cock that did it, you hear me?"

Paul nodded and groaned, rubbing back, his cock straining impatiently against his fly. He pushed off the wall and silently but purposefully hustled Gray up the street. Oh yeah. It was going to be a long night, one to fuel months of being apart.

Chapter 24

Gray knew he was walking funny. The fact that he was smiling, too, was testament to just how well Paul had taken him the night before -- the first time, barely inside their room, and then later on the bed, complete with cuffs and screaming.

Wild, man. Just... perfect. Wildman.

And now that showers and breakfast were done he was still sore in that lovely achy way that pretty much told him all he'd need to know -- no way was he going to be able to catch for a day or two.

He finished packing his bag and zipped it up slowly, not quite ready to admit to himself that their time together was done. It wasn't just yet, they still had a little time, almost an hour and a half before they absolutely had to leave for the airport. He fully intended to make the time mean something.

Paul was lying on his belly on the bed, pretending to watch TV. Gray could tell he was trying hard to be upbeat but the set of his shoulders as he lay there flipping channels made it pretty clear that he was close to losing the battle. Gray looked at the bag in his hand and decided not to drag the leaving process out any more; there were other ways to spend the time rather than saying goodbye.

He tossed the bag toward the door and gently pried the remote from Paul's hand before stretching out on the bed next to him, one hand rubbing over Paul's back. "Hey, you." He was warm, every inch of him, and Gray wanted to be as close to that heat as possible.

Paul leaned into his body with a sigh and met his eyes. "Hi," Paul answered softly, and after clearing his throat he seemed to lighten up. "So did you wrestle all those toys into your bag? If not I could babysit them for you." His grin was more sweet than sarcastic.

Gray winked, pulling Paul a little closer and nuzzled his neck. "Didn't I tell you? The dildo's for you. So you have a nice prop for one of the tapes you're going to make me."

This time, Gray was rewarded with a far more genuine smile. "Oh, excellent! And I have such plans for... wait, *one* of the tapes?" Paul chuckled, raising an eyebrow. "*You're* the porn star, remember?"

"One tape does not a porn star make. Just 'cause you've nearly worn through the tape..." Gray paused long enough kiss a train down Paul's jaw to his neck. "I'll make you a new one."

Paul arched his neck to give Gray better access. "Yeah? And will you call me when you're horny and jerk off for me?" He teased. Gray could feel Paul's Adams apple sink and rise again as he swallowed.

"Oh god, yes," he moaned into the hollow of Paul's neck. He slid the hand he'd had on Paul's back around to Paul's hip and urged him to shift a little. Stroking Paul through his jeans, Gray whispered, "I love you."

Paul's low moan as Gray touched him was followed by something like a whimper in response to his words. Paul kissed him soundly, murmuring, "I love you, too," as his body gave way and he shifted up onto his hip.

Gray kept it slow, making the kiss linger as he tasted Paul's mouth, his hand gentle and teasing over Paul's lengthening erection. He made no move to undo Paul's jeans, just pet him and kissed him and tried to show Paul that at that moment he was the focus of Gray's entire attention. There was nothing else but them, no planes, no rush at all, just them together.

He could feel Paul's body relaxing under his fingers, sense it as Paul's mind and body tuned into his. Paul's hand slid from his jaw to his shoulder and Paul's fingers tightened there briefly before making their way lower, under the waistband of Gray's jeans.

Gray moaned and shifted back a little, making room for Paul's hand. "Love how you touch me, baby. Love the way you look at me." He kissed Paul again, tugging at Paul's shirt with his free hand. "Want to touch you."

"Please," Paul answered, assisting Gray willingly. He held Gray's eyes and unbuttoned his own jeans, then took Gray's hand, slid it under his BVDs, pressing Gray's fingers around his cock. It was stiff and warm and twitched in Gray's hand. Paul licked his lips and exhaled heavily. "I so want this Gray."

"You've got it." Gray stroked him slowly, savoring the feeling of smooth skin. "You've got me." He teased the underside of Paul's erection with his fingers and slid his palm over the head, looking down at them for a moment. "You feel so good, baby. Always, not just like this. Love how you hold me, love feeling you around me." He stroked again, this time playing his fingers around the crown of Paul's cock, making it twitch. "You're so beautiful. You know that, right?"

Paul looked a little baffled, his eyes going half-lidded and dark. "Keep talking, I'll believe anything you tell me, Gray." His fingers fumbled with Gray's jeans for a bit before he panted at Gray in frustration. "Take these off, baby," he ordered gently, giving Gray's jeans a light tug.

With a grin Gray kissed him on the nose. Standing, he peeled off his shirt and then stood with his thumbs tucked into the waistband of his jeans before pushing them down and off, taking his boxers with them. "Want you, going to make you fly, baby. I want you to remember this, you know? You and me. Me loving you."

Gray smiled at Paul's slightly dazed look and bent over him, kissing deeply as he pushed the t-shirt up Paul's chest. He didn't make too much of an effort to get it off, preferring to lick and bite at a raised nipple while Paul worked on his coordination to get it off, his back arching slightly.

Making his way down Paul's body was an adventure. Gray had spent a lot of time in the past week memorizing Paul's hot spots and he made sure to hit every one. He licked Paul's right side, just under his pec. He nuzzled the soft skin above his belly button and licked his way around Paul's left hip. By the time he started pulling Paul's jeans off the look had gone from dazed to stunned.

Paul didn't seem to have much to say, at least not in words. His body, however, had no trouble communicating. He shivered and arched to Gray's lips, his fingers tugged and tangled in the bed linens, and he bent one leg, letting it flop to the side almost wantonly. Everything from his slightly damp brow and flushed cheeks to his solid, straining erection said "want", and his eyes, glazed a bit and tracking Gray's progress, said more of his love and his need than words would have sufficiently conveyed.

Gray couldn't help but smile, warmth flooding through him. *He* did this. With his body, with the emotions he could now show, he did this to Paul. It was a powerful feeling, centered in his chest and low down in his belly. Holding Paul's gaze he knelt between the spread legs and started lightly stroking the heavy cock once more, watching Paul's skin flush a little deeper. "So beautiful," he said again, just before he lowered his head and licked the prize in his hand.

"Ah," Paul gasped. "Mmm. Gray." Fingers moved to Gray's head and tangled in his hair.

Gray grinned for a moment then licked him again, root to tip, before sucking gently at the head. He cupped Paul's balls in one hand and used the other to stroke and tease where he wasn't licking, setting an uneven rhythm to keep Paul off balance. Slowly, he made his way down Paul's cock, sometimes taking him into his mouth, sometimes merely coasting on the now wet skin.

"Jesus, Gray," Paul panted. "Give a guy a... uhh... a break." He shivered and added a second hand to Gray's head, fingers massaging his scalp and tugging on his hair.

"Sure," Gray said agreeably. Then he moved a little lower on the bed, giving his own throbbing erection a quick squeeze. Before Paul could do anything Gray pushed Paul's legs up a bit, spreading him nice and wide. "Like this?" he asked, trying for an innocent look before he bent down and mouthed Paul's balls until they were wet and slick.

Paul seemed to approve, if his moans and the way he tugged at Gray's hair were anything to go by. Carefully, Gray wrapped a hand around Paul's shaft, ready to stop him from shooting too soon if he had to. Then he went lower and licked over Paul's hole, teasing him with the tip of his tongue.

"Oh Christ!" Paul hissed and shouted breathlessly, lifting his head and letting it drop heavily back to the bed again. "Yes, yes." His hands went to his own thighs and he tugged himself open even further for Gray.

If there was one thing Gray had picked up from The Dentist, it was how to rim. He'd always kind of liked doing it, but right then with Paul it became a passion. Sounds poured over him and he feasted on Paul's body. He licked and kissed, left hard, biting kisses all over Paul's ass, and finally, when Paul was almost incoherent, settled in to give him a tongue fucking he'd never forget.

Gray played with Paul's cock almost absently, all his concentration on the smooth wet skin of Paul's ass. He thrust in shallow little stabs at first, feeling Paul open for him. When Paul began to rock slightly he went deeper, pausing to lick and kiss every now and again, until he couldn't help himself. He had to have more, had to make Paul crazy. And he wanted it. Wanted more sounds, wanted Paul writhing, wanted to make Paul come from this.

Crazy wasn't much of a leap for Paul, it seemed. He tugged on his thighs and continued to rock gently as Gray settled into a ruthless rhythm. "Gray! Fuck, I... Uh!" Paul started to tense and shake and fight for words, and Gray knew that his stream of babble meant he was close. Very close.

Right fucking there.

Gray moaned and stroked Paul's cock hard, burying his face in Paul's ass. He thrust hard and fast with his tongue, his own sounds mixing with Paul's as he practically willed Paul's orgasm from him, the fingers of his free hand digging into Paul's hip to keep Paul from moving away.

"Yes! Uhhh!" One of Paul's hands moved suddenly and urgently to his cock and squeezed around Gray's fingers, and with two urgent, bruising strokes it was all over. He arched hard, and gulped for air, bucking his hips into Gray as he shot, come slicking his hand and stomach in several lengthy bursts. "Damn, Gray, so good ohhhh... oh yeah," Paul praised Gray in a litany of moans, high on his release and panting heavily.

Gray grabbed for his own erection and squeezed hard, so close to shooting it almost hurt. "Not done yet, baby," he purred, rubbing one of Paul's thighs. "Not by a long shot."

He watched Paul start to come down a little, still twitching, and looked around for the lube. He might be all packed, but there was still a tube on the nightstand and a couple of condoms. Grinning, he reached for them, petting Paul's belly as he moved.

Paul was still splayed out, relaxed and lethargic as Gray rolled the rubber on and slicked up, stroking himself slowly. Gray thought Paul was breathtaking like that, his hair sticking to his forehead, his skin slicked with come and sweat. He looked utterly debauched.

Gray leaned over him and licked his neck, sliding a couple of fingers in to see how open he was. Relaxed really was the right word, and with a sigh Gray nudged at Paul with the head of his cock. "Ready for me, baby?"

Paul nodded and smiled and ran his fingers down Gray's sides, apparently still a little shy of actual speech.

Gray pushed in, all the way in one long thrust. Paul was tight, clinging to him and making him want to drown in the sensation. With his balls against Paul's ass, Gray stopped; if he moved at all he'd lose it and there was too much he wanted to do. He looked down at Paul's face, unable to look away. "I love you," he whispered again. "I love the way you look at me, the way you talk to me. I love that you're trying so hard. I love that you want me. I love that we're here, right now, and I love that we're going to be together."

He pulled out slowly, his eyes closing against his will as he sighed. "God. God, you feel so good." Forcing his eyes to open he watched Paul as he slid back in, going as deep as he could and grinding his hips against Paul's ass.

Paul's brow was furrowed and his breath was coming in short gasps, though whether he was breathless from Gray's movements or his words Gray couldn't be sure.

"Love you, love how you touch me, what you do to me. Love those incredible brown eyes," Paul answered in kind, his voice tight. "Hate that you're leaving, fucking hate time," Paul said, leaning up to capture Gray's mouth with his own.

Gray kissed him, taking his mouth hard, one hand holding the back of Paul's head. Gray thrust again, more urgently as the fire in his belly took hold. The need to just slam into Paul was building, taking over, but he held on and tried to make it last.

"Here. Now. Just be with me now," he panted, running his hand through Paul's hair until he had to let go and brace himself. "Feel me? Right here."

"Right... here." Paul groaned and nodded. "Right here. Oh god, Gray." His fingers tightened, digging into Gray's hips.

Gray didn't bother biting back a moan. It was too much, too fun, too hot, too fucking emotional for him to keep a grip on little things like lust and power. "Jesus. Paul -- " and then the fire raged and he thrust hard, filling Paul over and over as he laid claim to what was his, finally his. He drove into Paul, a little rougher, a little harder, and a lot faster.

Paul dropped his head back to the pillow and watched Gray intently. "Fuck me, Gray, do it baby, come on," he goaded, and Gray knew he was being played now but he couldn't stop it. "Yours Gray, take it... take me." Paul's voice was low and hot and urgent and he started to grind up into Gray's thrusts. "Harder... don't hold back!"

He didn't -- couldn't, not with Paul like that, laid out for him and asking for it, giving it up to him. Gray growled and dipped his head, biting at Paul's mouth as he plowed into Paul's ass. "Mine. God, love fucking you," he managed before his brain completely short circuited.

He leaned back, his hands tight on Paul's hips. He pulled Paul to him even as he thrust, slamming into him again and again, chasing the white light starting to flare behind his eyes. "Gonna come, baby. Close -- "

Paul was grunting with Gray's efforts. "Yes! Make it count baby. Give me everything." Paul body was as insistent as his words, wrapping his legs around Gray's ass. Then he groaned and Gray felt Paul bear down, constricting his cock and making it harder and harder to thrust. "Yes," Paul panted at him. "Everything Gray, now."

"Oh fucking hell!" Gray threw his head back and buried himself deep, his fingers clamping down on Paul's hips as he shot. His eyes were shut tight as he cried out, his ears ringing as he surged forward once more, his hips rolling without conscious thought. Panting, he fell forward over Paul's body. "Oh god," he gasped. "Oh god oh god oh god."

Paul hugged Gray against him, nuzzling his hair and stroking over his back. "So good. So hot. So beautiful, Gray," Paul murmured into his hair.

Gray made a noise which he meant to be both inarticulate and approving, as Paul's arms tightened around him for a moment. His heart was pounding -- as was Paul's under his cheek. It was comforting, it was alive and powerful. They were connected. In a few moments the beats began to slow and Gray shifted slightly, just enough to carefully pull out.

"Um. Wow." Okay, so it wasn't deep, but it was sincerely meant, and he pressed a kiss to Paul's chest before he rolled over to dispose of the condom. That done, he snuggled in again and breathed deeply. "God, I'm going to miss you."

Paul seemed to sink into the mattress. "You'd actually succeeded in forcing me to forget you were headed for the airport today," he said, turning his head away from Gray to look at the clock. "In, uh... forty minutes."

"I tried." Gray smiled, knowing it was probably a sad effort. "But we can't hide from it forever. Just hold onto me for a bit?"

"I got you." Paul nodded, tightening his hold and pressing his lips to Gray's forehead. "The next letter is mine and I'm writing it as soon as you call to tell me you're home safely."

"Okay," Gray whispered. "As soon as I'm there." A letter wasn't the same, he knew, but it was what he had. And Gray would happily take whatever pieces of Paul he could get. It

wasn't ideal, but it was them; seven months was something he could endure if being like this again was at the end of it -- loved, and in Paul's arms.

Chapter 25

Written on graph paper with a blue ballpoint pen

Dated, January 3, nine hours after Gray left San Francisco.

Baby,

My roommates are so mad they didn't get to meet you. They have just spent the last half an hour making fun of the hickey you left on my neck. It's a beauty, it's a shame it hadn't purpled quite this much before you left because you'd have gotten off on it. It's darker than the one you left on my thigh Christmas Eve.

I know I said I'd be the first to write and that I would write as soon as you called me, and I am, though I haven't got much to say. I have to admit to being relieved that I just barely got you to the plane on time because more than a kiss and "I love you" would have been too hard. I think we said everything that needed saying before we left the Castro anyway, don't you?

Which is not to say that it was easy. But I hardly need to tell you that.

Am I wrong to feel anxious? I'm fully aware of the 180 I pulled on you these last two weeks. I can see why you didn't trust it at first. But I know what I want now, and I just have to learn how not to be afraid of it. Right? I tried to be as open to you as possible about it and I know you understand. It feels like I'm throwing myself off a cliff with nothing but your reassurance that you'll catch me to hold on to, you know? And it's enough this time, it is, but it still feels a little scary.

I'm starting to realize that I'm better at explaining how I feel when I write. Odd.

Anyway, back to building houses tomorrow and a phone call to the school about the spring musical, and life goes on. We've done it for a year, we can do it for six or seven more months, right? When do classes start for you? Probably right away, huh? I hope you're not too behind on your lesson plans. Heh.

I'm going to start pricing some apartments this week just to get an idea of what we're in for. You know, I never asked you if you wanted to live in the city or not? Where is your potential job going to be? I'm very flexible. It could be fun to live in the city if we can afford it.

Did you get a picture of us on your camera? Since I don't have one, your dildo is sitting on my bedside table to remind me of you. When my ass isn't so deliciously sore I'm making you a video. Watch for it!

Miss you already. I don't know how I'm going to sleep alone tonight.

Love,

Paul

Written on yellow lined paper, blue ink.

Dated January 7

Dear Paul,

I was going to say 'Dear Boyfriend', but it looked really silly and high school, so I didn't. But I thought it.

Bunch of stuff going on here -- too much to tell you on the phone, seeing as how you growled at me when I called. Yeah, I know. We start calling all the time I'm never going to save enough money to move. Okay, letters it is, phone call once a week. Tell me again why you don't have a computer?

First, I got soundly smacked on the ass for not sending postcards. People are upset. But then they look at me and get all stupid, grinning at me and saying I must have been too busy to get to a mailbox. I'd be indignant if it wasn't true. And if I could actually sit easily the first day back -- here's a hint: Don't let your boyfriend fuck you really hard the night before you fly across the country. I wiggled so much the guy next to me thought I was coming onto him, I'm sure.

Ass is better now, though. Time to play with my toys. (wink)

So, I got off the plane and grabbed my bags, then went to call a cab. And there was Stace, which I thought was really nice. So we start walking out and meet Jerry and Tim, who took one look at me walking funny and started to high five everyone around them. So the four of us are standing there trying to figure out if we were all going back to my place (we did) and who was going to drive (Stace took me, the guys followed), and who should wander by but Keys. He wasn't there for me, thankfully, but it was weird all the same.

So, got dragged back to my loft where I promptly announced that I had a sore ass, a boyfriend, and that I'm moving west. Stace fretted, Jerry and Tim cheered, and we all got happy.

Jerry and Tim were a little grumpy that I wouldn't let them see my tan lines. They think it's going to be frightfully dull at their house with me not turning up once a month for a pity fuck. I told them I'd still come by, but the active participation was dropping off.

At school -- well, I'm at the office right now, and I was going to write a bit about the classes (four this semester) and about maybe getting a roommate in the loft for a few months so I can save enough that I won't have to teach a summer session, but the secretary just came by to tell me we're actually shutting down for the day. Wow. I knew there was snow coming, but I guess it's gotten really nasty out here.

Okay, I'm going home to fuck myself with the purple dildo and think of you. Talk soon, baby.

I love you. I want you.

Your Gray

Written on graph paper in blue ink. Enclosed in the envelope is a small stack of SF postcards, most of which are x-rated.

Dated January 16

Hey Professor-mine,

Mine. Has a nice ring to it... I think I could get used to using it.

Mmmm the purple dildo...

Snow, huh? Wow, I miss that actually, we don't really get any here. Maybe a flurry once in a blue moon, but that's it. I like snow, maybe I'll take a weekend trip up to Tahoe to see some this winter and ski or something. Hope you got home safely in it.

Let's see. Me. Um, Brad and Anna's wedding is next week. Did I tell you I'm in it? They rented me a tux and everything. I'll send pictures. After the wedding Brad moves out for good. While you and I were away Joe found us a new roommate. His girlfriend said no women and I wanted anything but a straight man so apparently he found us a homo! I'm so excited. I haven't met him yet, his name is Keith or Kevin or Kyle or something. Some K name. I'll let you know. Woo! The apartment will be more gay than straight for once. Maybe we can put up a mirror ball in the living room.

I'm kidding. Mostly.

I sent in my proposal for the spring musical. I suggested 'Little Shop of Horrors' because it's just plain fun, or 'Anything Goes', because I think we have a girl that can handle Rio and there's a big men's chorus. Very random, but I'm feeling more creative than I was last year.

Oh! I think Joni might be moving out here, too! She says Ohio is a wasteland. I've been telling her that for years but without mom there I think she's finally feeling kind of lonely. So that would be fun, she's good company.

So, I growled at you when you called because 9am your time is only 6am mine, you bastard. But you have a point about the money, I would rather you do whatever you feel you need to sock something away. But as long as we're on that subject, I can help, Gray, and you should let me, OK? I know you don't want to ask, and I'm not trying to embarrass you by offering, I just know that moving is expensive.

Geez, the little reunion at the airport sounds almost too good to be true. All those people were there to meet you? You have great friends, Gray. I almost feel badly to be taking you away from them. Almost. And those guys, Tim and Jerry? You can show off your tan lines if you want to, baby. I already told you they're OK with me.

Speaking of which, did we agree to be exclusive, Gray? I don't remember actually saying that but before I do something stupid or say something stupid maybe we should get on the same page about it. Seven months is a long time. We've managed so far to be respectful of each other and still get off now and then, I don't see why we can't continue that, do you? Is that arrangement a major violation of calling someone your boyfriend? It's not in my book, as long as we're still long distance, but if it's what you want I'm willing to talk about it. I'm thinking from what you said about the boys missing you that you were under the impression we'd gone hands-off.

Don't freak out if you were, Gray, I said I'm willing to talk about it. OK? Remember that talking thing you made me promise I'd do? I'm doing it.

Because also? Not that I want to ruin the surprise, but I had this idea for my video which included giving you an opportunity to be a fly on the wall if you know what I mean, but I'm not going to go there if that's going to upset you, so... let's talk, yeah?

You can call about it if you want to, just don't make it 6am. Miss you, baby.

Love you,

Paul

P.S. Here are some SF postcards, you can hand them out as you see fit ;-)

Written on plain white paper in a dull purple pencil crayon, so the letters are large.

Dated January 21

Hey baby,

Sorry for the pencil -- things are a little freaky here right now, as I'm sure you saw on the news. My power was out for three days, so if you called to check up on me I didn't get the message, as the machine didn't work. Bad batteries, I guess, and I wasn't there -- too cold. Jerry and Tim put me up -- ah, for a wood stove. Anyway, the loft is fine, but the pipes burst in my department at the college, and not just the water pipes for the plumbing -- the whole sprinkler system went boom, so until the clean up is done we're stuck hanging out in a few classrooms, hoping the paper salvage goes okay.

Um, I'm a little thrown by your letter (stop panicking!! It's okay!) so I'm sitting here with it right beside me so I don't forget to say anything.

First, yeah -- 'mine' is a great word. (smiley face drawn in) God, we're getting pathetic. Ha ha! I guess that's the important part, yeah? We mean something important to each other, enough that we can actually say 'mine' and 'yours' and have it mean something. It's... nice.

Wow, this is going to seem random, writing like this. The purple dildo is something else, but I gotta be in the right mood for it, and if you go skiing promise you'll be careful. Getting hurt would be a big no-no. See? Random and strange.

Send me pictures of you in your tux. Please. I mean, really. PLEASE. Yum. Hope the new roommate works out and that he's smart enough to know that just because you live there, and you're gay doesn't mean he can just move right into your bed on a permanent basis.

Yeah, I think that's what I mean to say.

Here's the thing. I did, in fact, think that we'd decided to be exclusive, but I'm flexible. I mean... I wouldn't be happy if you started sleeping with him or anyone else on a regular basis. Of course I wouldn't be. A regular thing is too close to a relationship for me to be comfortable with, and I wouldn't be happy if you're going out and getting laid with a string of guys every weekend either. But I can deal with the occasional fuck, so long as we both know that you're mine and I'm yours.

That said, here's where I get hypocritical. I don't know if I'm going to be out looking for anyone new to get off with. I might -- hell, I might just meet someone one night and do it, but I'm not going to hunt. I won't turn down offers from Jerry and Tim, though, which is where they hypocrisy comes in. It is kind of like a regular thing, I know. But they don't want me as a part of their relationship, and I wouldn't want to be there. It's just... I don't know... friendship with privileges.

BTW, I talked to them about this, and they're looking forward to the tan line inspection.

So, what do you think? Okay, not okay?

And thank you for talking to me instead of just getting annoyed and frustrated.

Back to your letter -- 'Little Shop of Horrors' would rock so hard. Great songs, fun story. I'd love to see it. Ohhh subtle hint there.

Video? Mmmm now you've got me all curious, baby. Do it. So do it. Want to watch (like that's a shock).

Love you, Paul.

Gray

Chapter 26

Small package in a priority mail box. Inside is a letter written on notebook paper with green ink, a video tape in a sleeve that says "WANT YOU" in black letters on the side, and a few pictures of Paul in his tux from the wedding. There is also a sealed envelope that says "For Jerry and Tim" on it.

[The envelope contains several glow-in-the-dark condoms in assorted colors, a sample of body glitter, and a note that reads "Have at him boys, P."]

Dated February 1

Gray,

I thought maybe you were regressing, writing me with a purple pencil. That sucks, man. So are you home yet or have you become a fixture at the boys' place? Did this pipe-bursting thing ruin anything in your office? I have seen it on the news... all the ice-encrusted power lines and stuff. Man, I could make a mint on one of those emergency crews. Does this push school later into the summer or kill your spring break or anything? I hope not.

Me? Panic? I thought I told you before that I don't panic. I suppose that you knew I was lying then, too. I did get a laugh out of your "don't panic" warning, though. My answer is 42.

Seriously, I think this is kind of amazing. I think I can actually recognize when we're not communicating and say something about it before it gets out of hand. And you can take it reasonably well and respond not only positively but sober. I'm starting not to recognize us and I think I like it.

So first of all, don't be jealous of my roommate (his name is Keith, by the way). His hot hunky boyfriend (his name is Rork, I teased him, he didn't look amused and he's bigger than I am) helped him move in yesterday. Be jealous of the boyfriend though because if they break up I am so hunting his ass down. No, I'm kidding, they're disgusting. They remind me of us only they're on the same coast. No fair.

OK, your concern #2. I have no interest in and no desire for a regular thing with anyone but you. So I'm talking about the occasional fuck because maybe I'm lonely or maybe I'm horny, or maybe I've just had too much to drink. I've never been the cruising for men every weekend type anyway, Gray. I just want to know that if I needed to... well, I wanted to know if that was a deal breaker. And it sounds like it isn't. Thank you, baby. Love you.

For whatever reason, your "regular thing" with Jerry and Tim is a non-issue with me. Maybe you'd rather I get red-faced and jealous, but I just can't about them. It's fine, enjoy

them. Maybe if I come out there we can hang out, yeah? I do have a gift certificate for dinner to spend after all. Oh, and as you see, I sent them a present, pass it on.

So I call this package "Paul in a box." Check out the pictures, huh? Not bad, if I do say so myself. You have one fucking hot boyfriend. The guy standing with me in the last one is Matt. You'll get to know him soon, he's quite a talker. The video is for your eyes only. If anyone sees this video you're more than dead. You're... double dead... or something. Yeah. A zombie. SO dead.

Love, Paul

~ Video ~

Blackness for a moment and then static, and then a black picture again, only this time there's sound.

"Who is this for again?"

"My boyfriend, Gray."

"Right, Gray. What a weird name. Oh, hang on I think I got it."

"His real name is David Graham, but he hates Dave or David in that kind of short-fuse compulsive way that makes happily married mothers snap and turn into serial killers, you know? Hey, what are you into, man?"

"I don't know, something with a good beat."

"Got it working?"

The picture pops on finally. There aren't any people in the frame, but there is part of the room, including a large bed with lots of pillows. The comforter and sheets are turned down. There is a dried lei hanging over one of the bedposts and a familiar looking violet dildo on the bedside table along with condoms and lube.

Rock music comes on in the background.

"Lens cap."

"Brilliant, Matt."

"Now, fuck me."

Paul comes into view. He's wearing a t-shirt that reads "kiss my grits" and blue jeans. He looks into the camera and grins. His cheeks are rosy and it's pretty clear that while he's not drunk really, he's not entirely sober either.

"Love you, baby. Enjoy this, I'll be thinking about you."

Paul looks over at the other man, presumably named Matt, and they both completely ignore the camera from this point forward.

Matt is in clear view of the camera and he's palming his cock through his jeans. He licks his lips. Paul takes slow steps toward him, finally claiming his mouth in a deep kiss. Paul replaces Matt's hand with his own, pressing his palm into Matt's denim-covered crotch.

Matt groans and responds in kind, sliding a thigh between Paul's legs. While they make out, Paul starts to strip Matt of his t-shirt. Matt tugs urgently at the waist of Paul's jeans and then slowly sinks to his knees to undo them. Paul is sideways to the camera and can only be seen from the knees up.

"Fuck, yeah." Paul licks his lips. Matt gets his jeans undone and tugs them down. Paul's very erect cock bounces in profile as it's freed from his BVD's. "Want your mouth." He breathes, and swallows, looking down at the man on his knees.

Matt responds without words, gripping the base of Paul's cock and taking him into his mouth. Paul groans and hooks the fingers of the upstage hand around behind Matt's head. His brow furrows and he gasps softly, his fingers tightening in Matt's hair.

"Oh yeah..." He pants, "Jesus, yes..." Paul looks down at Matt and starts to move his hips slowly, rocking them toward Matt. "Fuck, that is so hot."

Matt moans around his cock and Paul lets his head drop back and hang there, eyes closed, rocking his hips forward into Matt's mouth and counter-balancing himself with the hand behind Matt's head. His jaw drops open as Matt swallows him, taking Paul ever deeper and deeper into his throat. Paul's chest muscles twitch. His shoulders tighten and relax. His knees bend slightly and his skin takes on a slight blush.

Finally Paul starts to thrust. He raises his head and looks down at Matt. "Oh yeah. Take it. That's it, fucking feels so good. Come on... uh... yes, yes." Matt slides a hand up Paul's torso and pinches a nipple hard making Paul scream. "AH! Jesus fucking... uhh," Paul is panting now, and the muscles around his hips and ass clench several times as he fucks Matt's mouth over and over, Matt's fingers digging into his ass. Finally, Paul groans and pulls his hips further back and he audibly pops out of Matt's mouth.

Matt stands slowly, sliding his hands around Paul's waist. "Fuck me, Paul," he says. "I want you in my ass, I want you over my back, I want you fucking everywhere. I want to feel your cock stroking in me over and over." He's kissing all over Paul's neck and shoulders as he speaks.

Paul, in a husky, dark tone says, "Take your jeans off," and Matt complies. Paul slaps his ass hard enough to leave a red mark and Matt yelps and scrambles onto the bed, flattening out on his tummy, sideways to the camera. Paul climbs up between his legs and

tugs Matt's hips so his ass is up in the air. "Nice," Paul half-moans and then leans over and licks across Matt's back as he reaches for the lube. Matt grips himself and strokes, his erection and the fist pumping it in clear side-angle view, but his face is the other way, so all the camera sees is his hair.

Paul slaps Matt's ass again, hard, and Matt moans. Paul grins. If he hadn't forgotten the camera by now, it's clear he is very into this guy's raised ass now. He tears open a condom and sits back on his heels to put it on, hissing in his way. Then he squirts some lube in his hands and rubs them together to warm it before rolling his cock between them, grunting and hissing through his teeth. "Beg," he orders, his voice thick.

"Paul," Matt answers without hesitation. He can be heard panting, and is still stroking himself slowly. "Jesus, Paul, please man, I need it. Need it so bad it hurts. Slam it in, man, hit me hard. Please... fucking please fuck me." Matt voice is strained and he sounds very sincere, not at all like this is an acting job. His body echoes his words, thrusting his ass even higher in the air and spreading his legs wide.

Paul swallows and groans, wrapping long fingers around Matt's hips before pushing right in and sinking deep, very deep, all the way to the hilt.

Matt screams. "Ah! Yes, yes! God, yes!"

Paul stays put for a moment and then starts to thrust, deep and firm, but not too fast yet. Savoring it some, soaking up the luxury of Matt's fine body. Then his eyes slide closed and after a few moments he starts to talk.

"Fuck, Gray. So tight, so hot... so fucking good."

Matt answers him without a flinch. "Oh yeah, so good, do it, come on..."

"Miss you, Gray, want you... oh god." As Paul picks up his pace his voice becomes more strained. "Never better than with you, Gray, need it, need you." Paul's starts to piston into Matt and he pulls Matt's hips back to meet his thrusts.

"Uh!" Matt grunts and starts to moan. "Ohh... oh yeah... oh god..."

"Think -- think about you all the time," Paul babbles on, fucking Matt for the camera. "Fucking you, my lips -- on your skin... my body hanging over you, my cock in your ass. Oh... oh fuck, oh god." Paul leans heavily over Matt and flattens Matt to the mattress mostly with his bodyweight alone. He stretches out over Matt's back starts to pound into him.

"Oh yeah! Fuck man, gonna shoot." Matt warns, trying to lift his hips some and failing against the weight of Paul's body. "Jesusyesyesuh!" Matt's body jerks under Paul as he comes, but Paul continues hammering relentlessly into him. Matt seems to struggle under Paul a moment and then pushes himself up on his hands, arching his back hard.

Paul bites Matt's shoulder and his thrusts become erratic, urgent and uneven. "Uh!" His cries are muffled in Matt's shoulder. "Ah!" He releases Matt and gulps air while he comes heavily, Gray's name on his lips. "Gray! Oh, oh god, oh god, baby. Love you, oh god..."

They hang there for a moment, the two of them, sweaty and slick and panting. But Paul doesn't linger long inside Matt. He pulls away after just a few moments, slips off the bed, disposes of the condom carefully and then pads, panting and disheveled, over to the camera, giving a sated smile for his audience and then smacking his lips together in a kiss meant for Gray before he reaches over the camera and shuts it off.

The screen goes to static.

A slightly wiggly picture of Paul pops up next, which steadies a few frames later. He is fully dressed and fresh from a job-site; dusty, paint splattered jeans with a hole in one knee, timberland boots, black dusty t-shirt with an orange reflective vest over it, gloves, and a line on his forehead where his hard hat was seated. Behind Paul is his bed covered in pillows and a thick comforter. There's sound in the background, moaning and grunting and Paul reaches off camera and turns the sound up a bit, then grins at the camera.

"Thought about you all day at work. You hear that, baby? That's you."

"God. Oh fuck, baby." Gray's voice can be heard and off to the right there is a slight flicker of light which could only be a TV. "Want your mouth. I'm thinking about you on your knees, sucking me off right here. Your tongue licking my balls, the way you -- " The TV seems to be set up so that it can be seen from the bed but is not in view of the camera. "Yeah. God, yeah. Watch me come, Paul. Close, Jesus, so hot."

"Mm..." Paul grins, backing up from the camera and looks at the off-screen TV. "God, I want to just climb into that TV with you."

Gray can be heard moaning again and then he curses. Paul licks his lips. "More later." Gray's voice says, and then all that can be heard is static.

"So yeah, I just got back from work, and I'm fucking hard thinking about making this video. Did you like the last one? That was Matt, he's a buddy of mine. He has no shame, can you tell?"

In the background, the video has moved on, and Paul glances at it as Gray's voice says, "Happy birthday, Paul."

Paul sighs and looks back at the camera. "I thought I'd be nervous, but I want you so bad, Gray, just the idea of you watching me, of you fucking off with me, or to me, or you know, just because this gets you hot. It's a big high to me now."

Gray's moaning from his video tape can be heard in the background, Paul seems to get

distracted then, and looks back at the TV, taking off his vest and setting it down. He runs his fingers through his hair and it falls haphazardly. He then removes his gloves, eyes glued to Gray's tape. He starts to undress, sitting on the edge of the bed and removing his boots first. He licks his lips and rubs his cock through his jeans.

"Jesus Christ, baby, look at you." He half-moans, his erection now more obvious. His fingers go to his t-shirt and pull it off over his head. "You wonder why I watch this all the time?"

"Want you, Paul. Want to feel you next to me." Gray's voice sounds tight in the background.

Paul nods. "Yeah, baby." Now bare-chested, he undoes his button-fly and pushes down his jeans. He's not wearing anything underneath. He looks back at the camera and winks. He grins and kicks the jeans away, then climbs up backwards on the bed so that his cock stays toward the camera.

Gray's voice can be heard again. "Wanna see? Wanna kiss me? Touch me?"

"Oh, fuck, yes," Paul groans and turns his eyes away from the TV to look into the camera. "Damn right I want it." He grips himself and starts to stroke, listening to the disembodied voice but looking at the camera.

"Want to suck on my cock, baby?" Gray's voice goes on. "Want to fuck me? Want this?"

Paul just nods, eyes back on the video for the moment, and he reaches for the remote with his free hand to shut Gray's video off.

"Jesus, you're hot."

He's naked, tan, a little dusty still. He reaches over to the bedside table and picks up a bottle of lube. Paul slicks his fingers and runs them over his cock before sliding them around his balls and then into his ass. He groans and leans toward the camera, the fingers of one hand in his ass and the other braced in the sheets.

He rocks his hips back and forth, grimacing. "I see you in my head, naked, hard, slicking yourself with lube, looking at me like I'm the only thing on your mind, wanting me like I... ah... like I want you."

He pulls his fingers out, leans further back and comes up with the violet, dick-shaped dildo Gray gave him. He looks at the camera and runs his tongue over it, closes his mouth around it, moans, swallows it into his throat. When he's through teasing the camera with it he pulls it out, licks his lips and slicks it up with lube.

He rolls onto his tummy and then up onto his knees, facing away from the camera and steadily pushes the dildo into his ass.

"Oh... yeah." *His knees spread wider and gasps loudly.* "Oh fuck." *His body tenses.*
"Gray..."

Paul arches his ass higher and slams himself with the dildo, grunting emphatically. The camera has a view of his ass and the dildo and not much else. "Yes! Right fucking there, ohfuckyeah!" Paul babbles. He keeps it up for a while, until he suddenly his whole body goes still, and he pants on the edge of climax. He tugs the dildo free, tosses it to the floor and it makes a 'clunk' sound. Slowly, he rolls onto his back and sits up, dangling his legs over the edge of the bed. He's breathing more evenly, but he still looks very flushed.

"Went right to the edge there, damn." *He grins, then wraps his fingers around his cock and starts to stroke. "But this is what I wanted you to see." He strokes, slowly, eyes on the camera. "Want to jerk off for you, thinking about you, your eyes... uhmm... your cock." He looks down at his hand, pumping steadily. "Thinking about tying you up, holding you down." He looks back at the camera and his hand moves faster. "About you, helpless, wanting, begging for me -- love it when you beg -- ah." He swallows, but keeps his eyes on the camera. "Thinking about making love to you, slow and hot, listening to you moan. Are you hard? Are you hot? Are you gonna come, baby? My hand around your cock, your breath, your eyes, your body, your moans... you want me Gray? You miss me? Ohfuckyes..."*

Paul goes silent and his hand pumps frantically, making a slapping sound against his thighs. He looks down, his shoulders hunch, his breath catches. His hips thrust into his hand over and over and harder and harder and he grunts as he comes, shooting spunk all over his hand, soaking his thighs with it.

"Oh yeah, baby. Love..." *He's panting hard.* "Love you."

Static.

~End Video~

Chapter 27

Written in blue pen this time, on plain white paper.

Dated February 7

Holy fuck, baby. I mean... wow. Christ.

I wonder if we look like that -- you and me, I mean, together. That was freaking hot, Paul. Matt's not bad looking -- and you're stunning. God, you look amazing when you're fucking. Matt didn't mind you calling my name?

Sent shivers down my back, hearing that. Made me ache, baby, hearing you like that. God, I came so hard.... When I get there, I swear to god I'm meeting you at the door after work every single day. So sexy, Paul. Nothing like watching you play, fresh from work. I could almost taste you.

Okay, I gotta talk about something else or my wrist will get a repetitive stress injury.

Um... back home now, have been for a bit. Once the power came back on there wasn't really any reason for me to stay, aside from the company. Anyway, home now, and trying to replace things in my office. Thank god it was start of term, so I didn't have to get copies of any student work. Most them wouldn't even have copies so any papers would have had to be redone or I'd have to fix the marking system for the semester. So that was avoided. I did lose a bunch of source material for my dissertation, and the only bound copy I had of that. A few texts that I need to replace... last semesters finals.

Lots of soggy paper, babe. Yuck.

Oh, and I gave your present to the guys. Which kind of turned into a thing. Which is on tape. Man, I'm blushing, how screwed up is that?

Yeah, when you come out here we can all hang out. And they say thank you, though I'm really not sure if it's for the rubbers and glitter or the permission to play... suppose it doesn't matter, really. In any event, they were happy, I'm happy, and we all got really happy.

Damn, class... be back in a bit.

Different ink, same sheet of paper.

Oh boy.

Okay, things here just hit the fan. I might call in the next couple of days -- the department has called me in to ask about a phone call they got from California regarding "Dr. David Graham and his research history, published works and cited papers as a formality in a job placement and salary offer review."

So, I guess they know I'm looking for work somewhere else. Damn. I'd hoped to keep that quiet for a bit longer; this could fuck up summer session and I don't know what it's going to cost to actually move yet.

Also? I just want to go home and watch that tape of you again.

Love you.

Your Gray

Phone call, February 12

Gray took the portable phone up to his bed, dialing as he walked. It had been a long day, and he really wanted to hear Paul's voice before he went to sleep, more for comfort than anything else. He'd take the 'anything else' of course, but he needed to connect. He suspected that he was pathetic but he didn't really care, and when the phone rang in California he smiled, waiting for an answer.

"Hello!" Well, that was cheerful. Not Paul, though.

"Hi, is Paul around?"

"Paul? You're looking for Paul?"

Gray could hear Paul's voice in the background asking, "For me?"

"May I inquire as to whom is calling?"

"Keith, you asshole." Paul didn't sound as annoyed as his words made it seem.

"Um, yeah. It's Gray. Put him on?"

"Oh! Gray? *The* Gray?" Keith teased. "I've seen pictures, you're a hottie, Mr. Gray."

Paul sounded cheerful in the background. "Hi, Gray! Give me the phone, asshole."

"Um, thanks? You better give him the phone before he breaks you. Just so you're aware, being new to the house and all, if Paul doesn't get what Paul wants, people wind up with really gross food."

"Oh my, well we can't have that now, can we? I had better hand him over. You have a very handsome voice, Gray, can't wait to meet you. One moment please." The phone rattled a bit and Keith's voice, this time away from the receiver, said, "For you."

"Thank you." Gray heard some shuffling and then the sound of a door closing. "Hey, baby."

"Hey you. He's a nut. Don't kill him, yeah?"

"He's actually sweet, I like him. He was just messing with you."

"Yeah, but he was keeping me from you! Am I whining? I feel like I'm whining."

"Sort of, but I like it."

"Oh good. Don't know what I do if you didn't like it. So, how was your day? Work hard? Get all dirty and sweaty? Not that I'm eager for that, or anything."

Paul laughed. "Oh yeah, real sweaty, baby. How about you? Slaving over that desk of yours?"

"You mean my wet desk that I'm only going to use for a few more months? No sweat, too cold."

"Oh yeah, shit, I read your letter. Tell me you have another copy of your dissertation somewhere?"

"Love to, but no, it's gone." Gray sighed. "That's, like, the one thing that pisses me off, you know? There's only three bound copies, and the other two are in libraries somewhere. No hope of getting another -- they cost a freaking fortune."

"Shit. I'm sorry, Gray, that sucks. Oh! What did they say about your job?"

"Ah. That was fun, too. Apparently when one is looking for another job it's a good idea to give the department chair a heads up so he doesn't look like an idiot in front of the Dean."

"Oh dear," Gray could swear he heard Paul wince. "Not good."

"Not good. But, what can I do? They weren't offering me anything decent, I don't want to stay. So I'll stick it out, take a little flack in the internal politics, and deal. I might still get summer session -- they're short staffed, you know? But if I can swing it I'd rather be out west."

"And, 'if you can swing it' means?"

"If I can get things settled with the new job, save some money... Hell, you know what I want, Paul. I want to be there now, let alone May or July. If I can afford to move without doing summer session I will."

"Even if you don't have a job out here?"

"Oh! Jesus. I didn't tell you, got a call yesterday, after the meeting of doom. They met my counter offer, want me to start August first. And? I get an assistant."

There was a moment's pause on Paul's end of the line. "Wait, you didn't start this call with 'Paul I got the fucking job'!?! You really got it??"

"... Um. Paul! I got the fucking job! And your roomie is insane! Blame Keith. I do."

"Wait, wait..." Gray could hear Paul moving around and then a door open. "Keith! He got the job!"

"Woohoo!" Keith cheered loudly. Gray could hear the TV going in the background.

"That was Keith, he says woohoo. I've been stressing with him over all of this. Yes!" Paul closed his door again, Gray could tell because the sound of the TV disappeared. "Oh, thank god."

"So... you're happy, then? Cool." Gray felt a wave of relief and laughed. "You've really been stressing Keith? Man, I must owe him a blowjob or something by now."

"I'm sure he'd love that." Paul laughed. "Shit, Gray, you have no idea. I had this paranoid dream the other night, or like a nightmare really, that you tried to get a job out here and all the colleges you went to with your resume were closed. Like, chained up with padlocks. And the one you found that was open said they didn't take gay guys. Or, well, that part of the dream was probably from my own thing, but, oh I didn't tell you about that, but I will. Yeah, so I woke up at like three a.m. and went to sit in the living room and Keith was coming in late from a date and we talked all night, until I had to go to work. He's a good guy."

"Um, okay. First? Was just dreams, everything's cool. Well, I'm not gonna get rich, but it's work, and work I like. Second? I'm glad he's cool. He sounds nice, and fun, and that's... that's something you need, you know? But what's up with the not taking gay guys thing, baby?"

"Oh pffft. That. That's just... bullshit. I'll tell you in a letter or something. So I should start seriously looking for an apartment, huh?"

Gray's bullshit meter hit red and he bit his lip. "Paul? Talk. Or I'll get pissy, and you don't want to waste a phone call on pissy when it could be used for better things."

Paul sighed, blowing air into the receiver. "It's a long story, Gray... hm, you're not going to let me get away with that are you... right. Okay."

"Just tell me, okay? It'll be fine, I promise." He hoped.

"Well, I didn't get the usual letter from the school saying 'Hey Paul, send us a proposal' so I figured it got lost in the mail while we were away, right? So I send in my proposal anyway, by the usual date and all, and I don't hear anything. So the week that I'm usually doing auditions I call to see what's up."

Gray closed his eyes, a sense of dread making his head ache a little. "Ah, Jesus," he sighed. He knew where this was going, and probably where it had started. "Is this 'cause I kissed you in the alley?"

"God, it took me a whole night of Dewar's and soul-searching to figure that out. I guess that's why you're the professor, huh?"

Ah damn. How could he have been so stupid? "Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I'm sorry, Paul. Can we fix it? There's laws and shit, you know."

"Mmm no. Not fixable. I'm not even sure I want to fix it even if I could. They just sent me a letter saying thank you for the proposal but they were going with someone else. And they never did return my calls about it. It's not like it's a permanent job or anything, they can go with whoever they want, you know? But don't think I don't know what's going on."

Gray thought about that for a moment, trying to get past the guilt and worry. He hated that Paul wasn't doing what he loved, and even if it wasn't specifically his fault... well, it was, wasn't it? "Jesus, I'm sorry. God, how could I have been so stupid? I'm so sorry, Paul. I know you liked working with the kids."

"Gray, it's not your fault. Jesus. First of all, you tried to walk away, remember? Second of all it was a kiss, we weren't fucking in the parking lot."

"Only 'cause we didn't get the chance!" Gray forced himself to take a deep breath. "Okay, what now? Any theaters around? Can you get in somewhere else?"

"Well, there is this one lead I have," Paul hesitated, "but I don't think it's going to work out."

"Yeah? Why not?"

"Well it's... it's um... it's a good offer and all, but, well it's not a good idea."

"Again... why not? Or... oh man. Never mind." Ethan. Lovely. It had to be Ethan.

"Yeah, so anyway, the good news is I'll be free for your spring break."

Okay. Right. Gray took a breath. Paul loved the theater. Ethan could get him work. That wasn't so bad. Not really. "Do you want to do it? The theater thing, I mean."

"Yes and no?"

"Look, I'm not... crap. Is it a good job, Paul? And would you have to see him a lot?"

"It's a paying gig. Directing. Not a big theater but a professional one. But I don't really want to be in a position where I owe him anything... and plus I'd see him every day."

"Oh."

"Yeah, let's just drop it. So.... tell me what you're going to do to me when I get out there for your break."

Gray tried to switch tracks; Paul obviously wanted to stop talking about it, so he would try. "I'm going to chain you to my bed, of course. You will see nothing of New England, other than one restaurant, and you will go home pale. Well fucked, but pale."

"Sounds perfect."

"Yeah? I can seriously do that." He laughed, knowing that the sound was falling short of 'light' and sounding a little forced. "But really, is there anything in particular you want to do?"

Paul must have picked up on Gray's hesitation because he went back to the subject of Ethan of his own accord. "I'm not taking the job, Gray. It's tempting but... in fact I turned it down already... or, well, I tried to turn it down and he told me to think about it. But I said no. Twice."

Gray sat up. "Twice? Jesus Christ, Paul. What's up with this guy? He's not real good at taking hints."

"No." Gray couldn't quite read the emotion behind Paul's sigh. "No, he's not."

"Okay." That was... not good. Gray tried to get a grip on the urge to go out there just to smack the crap out of Ethan. "Um, can he cause trouble for you if you get theater work somewhere else? He's sounding... really possessive and creepy, baby."

"I don't know." Paul went quiet for a moment, then went on. "No, I don't think so, he's not that well-connected, he's just got a lot of money. Anyway, I'm sorry I even mentioned it, you know? I've got you all freaked now. Trust me, baby? I'm not going to do it. Where there is one offer there will be more, yeah?"

"Well, yeah. Except he's trying to fucking buy you back. And that's just... I'm not so much freaked as angry."

"Well, when you move out here you can beat him up for me. Or, better... kiss me in front of him and he'll get the idea, right? With tongue."

"Heh. Yeah, I'll so do that. Hell, I'll lay you out and rub off on you, if it'll make him go away."

Paul snickered. "It just might."

"Like to rub off on you right now..." Oh, that was a happy thought. Naked Paul, all lean and hard under him...

"Well, you've got a couple of boys at your beck and call, right? Go look them up when you get off the phone."

Gray coughed, his pleasant image suddenly replaced by two other faces. "Um. Heh. They're hardly at my beck and call."

"Which reminds me, Mr. Porn Star, you forgot to enclose a certain video tape with your letter."

"Hey, I didn't forget! I... thought better of it. Yeah, that's it. It's... well, it's not like it sounds, anyway." He shifted on the bed, slightly embarrassed. He really shouldn't even have mentioned the tape, except it had been really hot and he'd thought Paul might like it. He kinda hoped Paul would like it. Even if it was embarrassing to think about.

"A threesome video tape isn't like it sounds, Gray?"

"Well, it wasn't... ah hell." Okay. He could tell Paul about it. He could. "I was goofing with the video recorder and telling them about your last letter. And I gave them your gift. And they started kissing, so I taped them. Then Tim took the camera away and turned it off, I checked. After last time? I checked. But then he turned it back on and didn't tell me until... after."

Paul snorted. "Either you send me a tape or you tell me what went on right now, baby. Kiss and tell."

Gray sighed dramatically, in for a pound now. And getting kind of into it, really. He started to rub at himself through his jeans. "Well, they were just making out and I was watching. 'Cause I always do. And then they showed me the note you sent and said they were going to take you at your word."

"Good. They follow directions well. I like it, go on."

"So I leaned back on the couch with my hand down my pants and Jerry kinda crawled over and I thought he was going to give me a hand job -- usually, he does that and Tim kisses me at the same time. But Tim was waving those damn glow-in-the-dark rubbers around, and Jerry took a liking to the body glitter." Oh yeah. He could tell Paul this. He stretched out a bit and slipped his hand into his jeans, stroking himself, skin on skin.

"Ah, I can see I'm going to like Jerry. Go on, baby."

"So, um. So we all kind of got undressed and Tim kissed me and Jerry sort of... made us shiny. And that stuff's slippery, baby. Which lead to laughing and slipping and me and Tim getting a nice rhythm going." Gray had to clear his throat, his breathing was getting a little too fast to talk normally.

"Mmm... sounds hot, yeah? You were naked on the couch? What was Jerry doing while you two rubbed on each other?" Paul panted lightly on the other end.

"Stroking off, watching. Kissing us when he could." Gray inhaled sharply, desire and arousal snaking through him. He was remembering, the images sharper after having seen the tape, and he could picture Paul, what he was doing now, most likely. "He was giving directions, which was pretty hot, actually. Telling us what we looked like."

Paul swallowed hard enough that Gray could hear it. "So did Tim get to use the rubbers? Fuck, I'm hard, Gray."

"Yeah, me too. Jesus. And, uh... yeah. Um...God. I mean, no. I did. Jerry did." Gray wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear so he could wiggle out of his jeans. They hit the floor with a thunk, his keys and wallet banging on the hardwood.

Paul grunted. "Gotta get out of these..." Another impatient grunt and then he sighed. Gray could hear the squeak of a mattress as Paul got comfortable on the other end. "Mmmm better..." Paul breathed. "So you fucked him?"

"God, tell me you're jerking off. I want to hear it, baby." Oh god, he wanted to hear it. And he wanted lube, which thankfully was only a lunge away, in the bedside drawer. "Yeah, I fucked Tim, there on the couch. Jerry was kissing him, leaning over me, and I just... man, I just shoved my fingers up his ass and went to town until he was begging for it. He sat on my cock and I just fucked him hard, with Jerry stroking his dick right in front of my face." Gray settled back with a slick hand, jerking off in earnest now, reaching for his orgasm.

"Oh yeah. I'm totally jerking off, Gray, is that what you want to know, baby? I've been pumping my cock since you mentioned the body glitter," Paul said in a low voice. "It's hard as hell and if I tighten my fingers just..." he hissed. "God... want you. Want to be fucking you. Want to sink my cock into you Gray, wish you were here."

"God, yeah. Want to feel you, want to suck you. Want your cock in my mouth, like Jerry's was. Me and Tim, we took turns sucking him, Paul. Tim was riding me, we were licking and sucking and Tim came hard, all over me." The bed was starting to squeak under him as Gray thrust into his fist. "They licked me clean, both of them. Then... ah, god. Jesus, I'm hard. Want you, Paul."

"Shit, that's hot... and... God I love it when you tell me you want me..." Paul paused, and then let out another hiss. "And then what... this is on video, too? Fuck, umm..." Paul's breath grew suddenly quicker and lighter as Gray listened on the line.

"It's all there, baby. Want to see it? Want to watch me get fucked? Want to watch them bend me over the end of the couch? Jerry fucking nailed me -- oh god oh god, baby I'm gonna come soon. Jerry... he fucked me. First time. And Tim... god. He... oh shit! Paul!" Gray's back arched off the bed as he came, his body convulsing as he shot into his hand, onto his stomach.

Paul was groaning as Gray came. "Keep talking... almost... keep talking, baby." In the background Gray could hear the tell-tale slapping sound of skin on skin. "Oh, god."

Gray tried to catch his breath, coming down and remembering what happened next. "Tim was... was on his knees. Sucked me off. God. Jerry was in my ass, balls deep, and Tim had his mouth on me, and we were all so fucking loud and hot and I was screaming, and Jerry... he bit down on my neck and I shot, just fucking blew hard. God, I'm covered in come, just dripping here. Come on, baby. Want to hear you blow for me. Want to taste it."

"Uh! Fuck yes... gonna shoot... here it... oh yeah... yes... *Uh!*" Paul gasped and groaned as he came. Gray knew those noises well. After a moment Paul sighed heavily. "Mmm Gray... miss you."

"Miss you, too. So much." Gray took another breath, running his hand over his skin. With a grimace he said, "Damn, Paul. I'm a mess! So, you want me to send the tape?"

"Let me think about that a second -- yes." Paul was still catching his breath.

Gray laughed, feeling utterly relaxed. "Okay. I almost killed Tim when he told me it was taped. Then we watched it. Uh... we didn't tape round two, sorry." And he was -- if round one did this to Paul, round two would have had him flat.

Paul snorted laughter. "Keith is going to make fun of me when I go out there to shower, you know."

"Oh, I have so much sympathy for you. I think I'll just... no, I'm gonna have to shower, too. And change the sheets. God, what you do to me. I'm beat."

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you. So much. I miss you, Paul."

"Mmm... I love you, too. Send me the dates for your break and I'll get tickets, yeah?"

"Will do. You sure you can get time off work? That's start up season, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but given the choice you know where I want to be."

"I know. I do. And I want you here. Baby?"

"Hm?"

"I really do love you."

"You know what? I know. I really know. I'm making space for you Gray, in my life, in my schedule, in my heart, baby. I'm going apartment shopping!"

"Find something with... I don't know. Doors. Windows. I don't care, much. Just want to be there."

"Room for a big bed," Paul laughed.

"What, you don't want to be spread out on the kitchen floor?"

Paul laughed. "Go to sleep, baby, it's late out there isn't it?"

"Yeah. Don't care. But yeah, it is. Hey, how about you take my intro class tomorrow morning? You can fake it and they'd never know."

"It's kind of a long commute..."

"Well, yes. But I'm naked."

"Oh! Well in that case, let me look into tickets..."

"You do that. And I'll be naked again as soon as you get here. Hey, that's only like... three weeks away. Is that enough time?"

"Whoa, yeah? When is your break?"

"First week of March."

"Damn, that's early. New England is all fucked up. But actually, that's good I think, because the big building push out here doesn't start until April or May. Too much mud out here when the snow thaws. Let me ask at work."

"Well, we finish the semester at the end of April, and are all done by the first week of May. Summer session starts May 18. So it's funky."

"Must be what puts the 'liberal' in 'liberal arts'" Paul chuckled. "When will you know if you're doing summer session?"

"Um. I guess I should investigate the cost of moving. I have to let them know -- or they have to offer me the position -- by mid March."

"You think the new place will help with the move at all?"

"There's something called an adjustment bonus. I don't know what the hell that's for -- security for utilities, maybe? But if you have a bed, I can sell mine, and I only have... well, a lot of books. Argh. I'll sort it, baby. Don't stress."

"Not stressing. Just can't wait. Go to bed, baby, I love you."

"I love you, too. Sleep well. Write me a nasty, filthy letter."

"Yes, Professor."

"Good man. Goodnight, Paul."

"Night, Gray." Gray could hear Paul sigh as he hesitated in hanging up the phone.

"Night," he added hastily before the line finally went dead. Gray looked at the receiver in his hand and sighed, then hung up. Three weeks.

Chapter 28

Written on graph paper, which seems to be his new paper of choice, with blue ink. Enclosed is his flight itinerary for his visit over Spring Break, and a picture of Paul, completely naked in bed, lying on his side, propped up on one elbow and licking the now infamous violet dildo.

Dated February 14

Professor,

Valentine's day. Guess I should have sent a card or flowers. I'm a bad boyfriend, huh? But I'm thinking of you. I miss you.

Fun stuff enclosed. I booked my tickets as you can see, so I'll be seeing you for break! Check the eye hooks in your bed frame because I'd hate to be able to get free. Oh and I have my gift certificate for dinner, too.

Also, for your self-pleasure I have included a picture of myself. Digital photography is such a wonderful thing. I set my camera up on my dresser with the timer going and ran over to the bed. Clever me. You could even keep it in your desk at work for inspiration.

Well, you said you wanted a filthy letter, didn't you? Don't worry, I'm not done yet. But first, some non-filth.

After our phone call I was really paranoid about he-who-shall-not-be-named. So I called him. I told him I had thought about it and that I would not be taking the directing gig. I also told him that being friends wasn't really working out for me and that I didn't want him calling or stopping by anymore. He didn't take it all that well, he said that I was making a mistake and a bunch of other stuff, but I repeated myself, left it like that and I hung up the phone.

So at least that's settled, right? I'm sorry I even considered taking that job, that wasn't right of me knowing how you feel about him. It's just that I had come off that letter from the school, and it would have been a good fuck you flyer to send to them. But I want you to know, I wouldn't have accepted the position without your permission, I swear.

On the bright side, I got a very nice letter from the mother of the girl that played Titania in 'Midsummer' saying that she was very disappointed that the school didn't rehire me to direct this semester. And last night there were two messages on my machine from other parents at the school, too. So you know, it's nice to know that the school doesn't speak for everyone.

You got a glimpse of Keith the other night on the phone. He and I have become fast friends. We don't have much in common except that we seem to think alike, and he's very

perceptive and interesting. You're going to like him. I can definitely see us staying friends after I move out. And you'll be happy to know, Mr. Compulsively Jealous, that he is so Not My Type.

You know, my score is zero since we got back from the cruise, and even though I sort of wiggled about a mandatory hands-off policy, I'm ok with this. I think. For now. And I'm not really drinking either. Funny that.

Lots of things to do now. I need to get some apartment listings, I need to look into touristy things to do in Bumblefuck New England, I'm going to help Brad with some construction work on his new place with the wife. It's good. I don't have time for theater this semester anyway, right?

I have nothing else in the news department because I just talked to you on the phone, so I'll just get to the dirty part.

You made me crazy on the phone the other night, baby. You started talking about Jerry and Tim and all that slippery sparkly body paint and I just... couldn't help it. It made me so hard. I was sitting on the bed rubbing myself through my jeans and then something about your voice told me you were doing the same thing and then I just couldn't hold back anymore.

So usually all you did with them was jerk off and watch them fuck? You'd never fucked them before? I'd just assumed you had I guess, I know I wouldn't have been able to just watch. You're a little pervert, Gray, aren't you? Humming your hand while you watch them fuck off.

Is that what you're doing now, too? I bet you are. Rubbing your hand through the rough fabric of blue jeans or maybe your sensible preppie cords. Undoing the zipper because there's no one watching, it's just you, you're all alone and you can fantasize, right? Are you hard? Can you feel your ass tighten up and your balls relax with the heat? If you put your hand around your cock, what does it feel like, Gray? Can you put any words to it?

I can. Your cock feels solid like steel but your skin is smooth and warm when I stroke it, and I can feel all the veins underneath the skin. You smell musky with a little tinge of sweetness as you sweat. I love to pump your cock and listen to you sigh, and moan, watch your stomach twitch as you lick your lips and bite them and babble at me.

There's nothing like you ass, Gray, but I love to be under you, too. I love feeling your weight over me, your hot breath in my ear. I love arching up to take you, deeper and deeper until you're all I know and you get so worked up that you start pounding into me so hard I think maybe you're going to split me in two. Fucking love it.

Are you close, baby? Can you still concentrate on this? It's ok, I haven't got much more to say. Just that I love you. I want you. I need you. And I'm happy in a way I haven't been since college. Since I last had you. Come on dirty boy, my slut, my pervert. Come on.

Much Love,

Paul

P.S. Managed to write that without needing a break. I am proud. And horny. Off to shower, I think.

Rather messily scrawled on yellow lined paper in red ink. There's a VHS tape enclosed, labeled "How to fix the bathroom sink. This is not porn. Property of Paul on pain of death."

February 19

Hey baby,

Sorry for the pen -- I'm marking papers and this is what I have. Blame the penmanship on last night's blowout/stress reliever. Man, these papers are going to be the death of me. My head aches. I'm out of practice, apparently.

Love the picture. You're a sexy weirdo. I mean that in the nicest way, not like I'm the type to actually have videos made of me having sex, let alone take pictures. Cough. Speaking of, enjoy the tape. The guys were rather insistent I send it, and they want to have us over for dinner while you're here. Or maybe that was for dinner. I forget. There was beer.

Ah, Valentine's Day. I suck. I suck so bad. I'm sorry -- years of ignoring it made me sort of forget. Next year I'll make it up to you, baby. Dinner, candles, firelight. Sex in some strange place.

I stuck your flight confirmation on the fridge, right with the picture of you in Hawaii. Bring the gift certificate. Leave your clothes -- you'll only need them when we go out for dinner. You can borrow mine. Okay, they won't fit, I know. But I still say don't waste a lot of space in your luggage on silly things like pants.

I've got the better part of your letter memorized. I came before I reached the end the first time, sort of stumbled from the kitchen to the couch and just lost it. Rubbed off through my jeans and creamed them. Then I read it again in bed and came again. God, you turn me on. So filthy, you make me hard enough to ache and throb.

Want you.

Want you so much. God, I'm hard again, just thinking about it. Be back in a minute....

Okay, that's better. Now I can think.

Right, the other stuff. I don't want you to feel like you need my permission about that job, baby. I don't ever want to hold you back. EVER. If it's a good job and can lead to more I want you to do it. I swear I do.

That said... okay, this is me being honest. Ethan is freaking me out. If he's not listening to you say no, if he's pressuring you and trying to use this job as a way to keep tabs on you... that's just not good, Paul. And I mean that in an every day 'oh man, he sounds creepy' way, not 'keep that fucker away from my boyfriend' way.

Also? I know I made the rules. I know I said I didn't want to hear about him. I know that. I do.

But if he's been calling and dropping by and you feel like he's not really getting that you don't want to be back with him... well, it's pinging my radar.

God, I'm such an ass, aren't I? Over the top possessive. I'm sorry. I really am.

Okay, I think that's it for now.

I love you. I want you. I can't wait to pick you up from the airport.

In the meantime? Papers and mid-terms. Ick.

Love,

Gray

Written on white paper with green ink.

Dated February 25

Gray,

Jesus, Gray. I'm not sure what was hotter, the video or the phone call about it. Those boys have a good look about them, don't they? Sort of wholesome and yet... not. Jerry fucks like a machine, huh? Damn. Looking forward to being had for dinner, so to speak.

And the little vignette at the end? Was that the little interruption in the middle of your letter? I don't know what kind of pervert I am that I get off on you all professorly dressed and fisting your cock like your trying to bruise it, but fuck, it's such a turn on. Your face was... well, let's just say that's my favorite of your expressions, right before you come. Hot baby. Made my night. Thanks!

Hey, I wonder if this letter will get there before I do? Speaking of which, I've been pondering packing and I think you're right, pants are overrated. Keith agrees, but he reminded me that it's still cold in New England in March so I'll be bringing extra wool socks instead. Work for you? (wink)

Hm. News. Oh, Anna is pregnant, turns out she got pregnant before we went to Hawaii. I wonder if that's why Brad proposed. Oh well, it hardly matters, they're disgustingly in love, he would have married her anyway, eventually.

Keith's boyfriend is HUGE, did I tell you? Big. He picked me up last night. I mean physically, right off the floor. Damn. And Keith? He likes being tied up. Might explain his bruises, huh? Hehehe.

I don't know, I feel like we've been in touch so much I don't have much to say. Maybe that's actually a good thing?

So I hope midterms are ending soon because you sounded really hung over and stressed in your letter. Or maybe the stressed part was over Ethan, right? Look, baby, it's cool ok? I didn't take the gig, he's off doing his thing and I'm doing mine. Quit worrying about him and trust me.

K?

K.

Love and wet kisses below the belt,

Paul

Written on the back of Paul's theatrical resume, which is a strange mix of very impressive professional work and youth theater. This is the last page of Paul's letter above, written in a messy scrawl. It's not a letter in itself, it's just a jumble of paragraphs, and it's not signed at the end. One wonders if he meant to send it.

Ok, so see this is the thing. You can't stand Ethan but you can't stop talking about him? You make these rules about how I can't see him or bring him up and then you can't shut up about him. I told you I wasn't going to do the show, right? So I'm not doing the fucking show. And you know what else, I can't do the show now anyway, because it starts rehearsals the week I'm supposed to be visiting you.

So, you know, theater with an ex or a good fuck with my boyfriend. What would you pick? Don't give me all that crap about how he freaks you out. I told you I said no to the show. I told you, yeah? I said not to worry about it, didn't I?

I thought you said you trusted me? But you don't actually trust me or you'd know you have nothing to worry about with Ethan. I might be drunk, but I can still add. You're jealous. You're fucking two hot men with my permission and I haven't gotten laid since I saw you last -- except that tape which you saw -- but you are jealous.

What do I have to DO, huh? What do I have to do?

Chapter 29

New England, First week of March.

Paul shuffled along down the narrow aisle waiting impatiently for everyone in front of him to get their bags out of the overhead compartments. It never ceased to amaze him what some people thought passed for carry-on luggage. Fortunately, this hadn't been a crowded flight. In fact, he'd been thrilled at take off to find he had a bank of three seats all to himself. He'd resolved to sleep on the plane in anticipation of keeping Gray up all night, but found he was too anxious. Instead, he'd watched the in-flight movie and read the in-flight magazine cover-to-cover and had a long conversation with one of the more handsome flight attendants.

The remainder of the time he'd spent staring out the window at the clouds and fantasizing about his boyfriend. So now that he had the gangway in sight, it was all he could do not to climb over the backs of the people in front of him to get out.

Once he was finally free of the plane he made his way up the ramp at a good clip, while trying to tidy his hair and blink the airplane dryness from his eyes. He strode past two harassed families and a gaggle of elderly tourists, wondering why on earth anyone would be a tourist in New England in March. Maybe they had hot lovers, too. With a grin he put on a burst of speed, past the baggage claim. Despite Gray's insistence that he didn't need pants, he had packed a few necessities; but he didn't bring much -- thus the handy carry-on bag.

There were a lot of people waiting in the arrivals terminal, more than he'd expected. Too many to spot Gray right away, which was frustrating. But then a rather large woman moved to the left and there was Gray, leaning on a support post, dressed in jeans and a thick sweater, looking every inch the absent minded professor. Their eyes met, and Gray smiled, pushing away from the post and walking to him.

"I've never known a pair of eyes more worth flying 3000 miles to see," Paul said as soon as they got close enough for words, wanting to be romantic and hoping his statement didn't sound as practiced as it was. He went right in for a kiss, touching Gray's cheek with two fingers.

"Hey, baby." Gray's voice was low and warm, and he brushed Paul's arms with his hands as he leaned in. "Missed you," he whispered, brushing their mouths together briefly before stepping back. "Hungry?"

Paul blinked and pulled back, looking at Gray. "Uh... okay," he replied. No, he wasn't hungry, he wanted Gray to take him right home actually, but he was too thrown to answer honestly. That wasn't the hello kiss he'd been expecting after a couple of months apart.

He fell in stride alongside Gray and they made their way out of the terminal. Maybe Gray just didn't want to deal with being stared at in the airport. Didn't seem like Gray, but it was possible. He brushed Gray's hand with the back of his own as they walked. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, taking hold of Gray's fingers.

Gray grinned at him and gave his fingers a squeeze. Okay, that was something, anyway. "Don't know, really. Pizza? I skipped lunch, we can get something on the way to the loft?" Oh, that was lots better. But Gray was looking away again, and the smile was fading fast.

"Pizza is fine," Paul agreed, leaving it be for the moment. Maybe Gray was nervous. "Can't wait to see your loft." He shivered as they stepped out into the March air. "Geez, I should have brought a coat. How far is the car?"

Gray laughed at him. Honest to fuck laughed. "You seriously didn't bring a coat? Oh man, you need to get out of California more often, baby. Come on, it's just over there -- and the heater works." Gray pointed to a rather disreputable looking hatchback and hustled him in its general direction. "I said 'no pants', not 'no coat'."

Paul was laughing, too, by the time they got to the car. "Well, if I don't need pants, what do I need a coat for?" He grinned, waiting for Gray to unlock the doors.

"Too keep your arms warm, silly." Gray rolled his eyes at him and unlocked the doors with his remote, heading straight to the driver's side. "Get in, I'll get the heater on. Hey, want to pick up some movies?"

"Sure, I'd love some background noise." Paul winked and slid into the passenger seat. He closed the door and looked around inside. "This car is so you." He grinned.

Gray bit his lip in that adorable way Paul had started to love. That made Paul feel a little better because he knew that meant Gray was nervous. Gray started the car, checking the mirrors obsessively. "Worn out and old? Or reliable and practical?" he asked as he backed out of the parking spot and headed out of the lot. Both of his hands were on the wheel, all of his attention on the nearly empty road. "Or maybe somewhat cluttered?" he added with a flicker of a grin.

"Practical for sure, and somewhat cluttered. You won't be worn out until I leave." Paul reached over and rested a hand on Gray's knee, giving it a squeeze. "How did the rest of mid-terms go?"

Gray blinked once and shook his head. "Oh, not bad. The marking was quick, anyway, and the grades look okay. Higher number of passes than last semester, which is good. The failures were fucking stunning, though. Seriously, I think I'll make a point of making sure certain students have the right book before finals." He turned left and sped up as they hit the highway. "Might snow tomorrow."

"Good, we can stay in, then. I don't guess you have a fireplace?" Paul grinned.

"Fraid not. Oh! Jerry and Tim do. They've invited us for supper on Thursday. That okay with you?" Gray bit his lip again and checked the rear mirror, both hands still firmly on the wheel. And then he slipped an inch or two closer to his door.

Okay. This was more than nerves, something was up with him. "Yeah, Thursday is good with me. Any day is good with me." He watched Gray for a moment before licking his lips and sighing. Gray didn't seem to notice. Or maybe he did and didn't care. It wasn't easy to tell, considering Gray wouldn't even look at him. Paul looked him over and noted the tired look around his eyes, the deepening of the fine lines there. Maybe midterms had been harder than Gray was letting on. Maybe something was wrong. Maybe Gray was being an idiot. It was hard to tell.

Somewhat defensively, Paul took his hand off of Gray's knee as they got closer to town and Gray shifted again, back to where he'd been. "So, pizza's okay then? We can get something else, if you want." Gray gave him another quick look. "I did miss you, you know," he added softly.

Ah. So Gray had noticed after all. His words sounded almost like a consolation prize. Sorry I didn't kiss you, but I did miss you. Paul wondered briefly whether he should say something now while they were driving, or wait until they got back to the loft. He decided to wait, because if whatever was bothering Gray was big enough to get in the way of his kiss, it was big enough to warrant a drink, too, and he wasn't going to get that in the car.

"Yeah," Paul replied instead. "I missed you, too. Pizza is fine." He looked away from Gray then, and out at the road ahead of them. "Something with lots of veggies, yeah?"

"Sure. No onion, though." Gray flashed him a grin and winked. Paul contemplated the various signs of Multiple Personality Disorders that Gray might be exhibiting. At least the drive to town was short; Paul wasn't sure how long he could put up with this bi-polar thing.

Gray pulled into a pizza place a short while later and vanished inside, promising to be back in a few minutes. "Or, you could come with?" he'd asked, like it was an after thought.

Paul couldn't mask the genuinely puzzled look on his face. "You're giving me whiplash," he said out loud after Gray was gone. He opened the car door briefly to follow Gray just to be met with a blast of cold air. He closed it again. "I'll wait," he said to no one.

Okay, scenarios. Gray was losing his mind? Drunk? But no, he didn't seem drunk. Maybe he'd been worried Paul wouldn't show? Paul knew exactly how that felt but it didn't get in the way of that memorable kiss behind the theater. Maybe he'd lost his job? Maybe he'd found someone else...

No way.

Maybe he was on speed. That would account for it. Or over-caffeinated. Or sleep deprived.

Without any better answers available, Paul decided that what Gray needed a good fuck -- a nice long slow 'remember me, I love you' kind of fuck. And, apparently, pizza. He waited in the car and played with the radio.

When Gray finally got back to the car he had two pizza boxes and a big bottle of soda that he put in the backseat, filling the car with fresh pizza smell and a blast of cold air. "Okay, food," Gray declared as he started the car again. "Now, home." But he didn't pull out. "Oh, damn. I forgot movies." He looked at Paul and raised an eyebrow. "We can go back out later, if we want 'em? Maybe?"

Paul merely nodded and they were off, finally, heading through narrower town streets and dodging traffic. It was a pretty enough town, Paul supposed, even if there was snow on the sidewalks and everyone looked half frozen. It was... picturesque. Gray eventually pulled into a parking lot next to a brown brick building that looked like the warehouse it had once been.

"Home," Gray said, climbing out. "I'll grab the food, you get your stuff. Oh, and could you lock the doors? The remote only unlocks them. And stop looking at me like that, I don't know what's wrong with it."

They went in the main door and Gray led him to a huge industrial style elevator, passing the pizza boxes so he could pull the grate across. "The upper floors have the elevator right in the apartments, but I share the floor, so it's only the hall," he explained as the box rose to the sound of protesting cables. "And it's sturdier than it sounds."

Thank heaven for small favors.

The apartment itself was neater than it had been on the video Paul had seen -- Gray had obviously gone to some lengths to spruce the place up, and while there wasn't a fire, there were lots of candles around, waiting to be lit. Gray tossed the pizza boxes on the counter and reached for Paul's bag. "Want to see the bedroom?" he asked with another of those fleeting grins.

Paul snorted. "What a question," he answered, tight on Gray's heels.

"Bathroom's in there," Gray said, pointing to a door on the left. Paul couldn't have cared less. Well, he was sure he'd need it at some point, but the place wasn't huge. He'd find it. "And here's the bedroom," Gray said, sweeping his arms out as he walked into the room.

It was the same as on the tape -- tidy, big bed, wall hanging, blue comforter. And Gray was in it. All good things.

"Mmm. Like it." Paul whistled, looking around. He was determined to get that hello kiss he'd missed out on at the airport. He reached for Gray, tugging his lover backwards against his chest and snaking his arms around Gray's waist. "Are you okay?" he asked, softly in Gray's ear.

"I'm fine, baby." Gray wriggled, turning in his arms. "Glad you're here." Then Gray kissed him, deep and hard, one hand clamped to Paul's butt.

Paul was taken completely by surprise by that move, though not in a bad way. He met Gray's kiss with equal force, opening his mouth to admit Gray's insistent tongue. His cock liked the kiss, too, and he let Gray know by pressing their hips together. Whatever was on Gray's mind, maybe Gray also felt this was the way to fix it. Paul wasn't complaining.

Gray made an appreciative noise and thrust his tongue deeper, the hand on Paul's ass squeezing gently. Paul felt himself being turned and backed toward the bed, one careful step at a time until they fell back onto it, and then Gray broke the kiss, only to move onto his neck, licking and biting gently.

"Ah. Baby." Paul reached up and tugged at Gray's sweater, awkwardly pulling it off over Gray's head.

Gray grunted and let the sweater go, wiggling out of the way when Paul tried to undo his jeans. For a moment they fumbled together, Gray twisting out of the way while he stripped off, giving Paul a tantalizing flash of skin before he went back to exploring Paul's neck and shoulders. Gray maddeningly managed to evade Paul's questing hands, his fingers plucking at Paul's shirt until he could reach skin, shoving the cotton out of the way. "Love the way you taste," Gray muttered, dipping his head to lick at a tight nipple, one hand working at Paul's fly.

Paul hissed and helped with his jeans, unbuttoning the top button and lifting his ass slightly off the bed. "Missed you, Gray," he said in a husky voice, tugging on Gray's hair as he wound his fingers in it.

"Missed you, too," Gray agreed, stripping him quickly. Everything was rushed and hurried, Gray's movements almost jerky as he tore at Paul's clothes. Paul found himself naked in short order, splayed across Gray's bed in the dying light of the day, Gray hovering over him with a grin.

"You look good enough to eat," Gray said with a leer, then he dove in, nibbling at Paul's belly, one hand rolling Paul's balls.

"Then... ah... what did you need the pizza for?" Paul grinned back for a second and then moaned, the grin changing to a slight grimace. Gray's hands were warm and his touch was so perfect and so welcome. "Oh god," he managed to choke out, swallowing hard.

Gray laughed softly, the vibration tickling across Paul's skin. "Gonna eat you up," Gray said in a deep voice. "My, what a big cock you have, Granny. I mean, Baby." Then Gray laughed and licked his way around Paul's erection, leaving wet sloppy kisses everywhere he could before he sucked gently at the head.

Paul really wanted to laugh at him, but there was already too much heat and Gray was too good at this. Paul reached over his head and grabbed for the headboard with one hand, the other he slid into his own hair. "Gray..." was all his addled mind could muster in response.

Gray hummed around him, the hand on his balls stroking softly and Gray took his cock deeper. There was very little Gray didn't know about sucking cock, and he seemed to be out to prove it, his head bobbing slowly as he took Paul deeper and deeper into his mouth. He played his tongue over and around Paul's shaft, licking and sucking softly, then harder. Just when Paul felt like he had to start thrusting, Gray backed off, letting Paul slip from his mouth so he could go lower to suck at Paul's balls.

"Uh. You shit." Paul groaned with an undertone of laughter, and lifted his head to look down at Gray. God, it was hot to watch him down there, with his tousled hair and hungry tongue.

"Complaints, baby?" Gray grinned at him and wrapped a hand around Paul's prick, stroking him slowly as Gray licked his way back up. "I can stop."

Paul stuck his tongue out at Gray and dropped his head back to the bed. "You know better," he replied, licking his lips. "Christ, Gray, nobody does this better than you do."

"Damn right," Gray said smugly. "Best cocksucker around. Though maybe I shouldn't say that out loud. Where was I?" Gray's hand was still stroking him, and there was a hot tongue lapping at the head of his prick, so Paul guessed the question was rhetorical. It seemed to be, in any event, as Gray swiftly swallowed him down and set to sucking his brains out.

"Oh god, yes..." Paul sighed and felt his hips press upward into Gray's mouth. That was completely involuntary. The flush in his skin and the roar in his ears were also beyond his control as Gray sucked him down like a Hoover. He was sure that he was thrusting harder than he meant to, but he knew Gray could take it. And then suddenly there was a delicious aching and his toes curled and he lifted his hips off the bed. "Gr... uh... ummrruh," Paul mumbled incoherently.

He'd meant to warn Gray he was going to come.

Gray just sucked harder, one finger pressing back behind his balls, teasing at his entrance, his mouth insistent and perfect.

"Fuck!" Paul managed to get out clearly enough and shot into Gray's mouth. He tried to keep from bucking, but in his fog of sensation it was difficult to control anything. He did feel his hips drop heavily back to the bed and his body went still except for the almost convulsive effort of his diaphragm as he struggled to catch his breath. "Baby... god," he gasped, reaching a hand out toward Gray.

Gray crawled up over him and kissed him hard, sharing the taste of his come with every press of Gray's tongue before pulling back and grinning. "Better? Come on, I'm hungry," he said, rolling away and standing up.

Paul blinked. It had to be the hormone haze because he was sure he hadn't just heard Gray say he wanted food. "Why don't you get the lube, baby," Paul suggested, sitting up on his elbows.

"Later, promise." Gray really was walking toward the door. "Pizza's getting cold, lover."

Paul rolled off the bed. "Whoa, whoa... Let me blow you at least," he said, getting his fingers around Gray's wrist.

Gray shook his head and bent to kiss him, gently pulling away from Paul's hands. "I'm fine. Later, okay?" God, he was almost pleading and that was just wrong on so many levels.

"You're fine? Gray, what the hell is wrong with you? You just blew me halfway back to California and you're fine? Come on, baby." Paul grinned and stepped closer. He ran his fingers over Gray's abs and into his groin.

Gray took a step back, but not before Paul could feel a distinct lack of enthusiasm where there should have been a somewhat more involved with the program erection.

"Don't worry about it, Paul," Gray said evenly.

Maybe it was rude, but Paul let his eyes flick down to have a look and then raised them again to meet Gray's. Gray's voice had lost its playful tone completely. What was going on? Was he sick? Paul sighed and his brow lowered with concern. He answered Gray's dismissal quietly. "Gray, baby, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," Gray said, turning away from him. He took another step toward the door and his head dropped, his shoulders hunched up. He looked miserable, and he was walking away. "It's nothing, baby. Come eat?"

"You're breaking another one of your own rules, Gray," Paul answered. "About talking about things. Remember? But I'll let you get away with it for now if you're really hungry." He reached out and put a hand on Gray's shoulder, giving it a squeeze as they made their way into the kitchen. He wasn't sure how hard to push. In all the years he'd known Gray, he'd never once known the man to be bereft of an erection when the occasion warranted one, and very often even when it didn't.

They were both silent as Gray got plates from the cupboard and flipped open the pizza boxes. Paul waited expectantly, but Gray stood there, staring at the cooling pizza's and not moving. Finally, Gray looked at him, his eyes flicking over Paul's still naked body. "I need a drink," Gray announced, turning again and reaching into the fridge. "Beer?"

Okay, maybe Gray was going to talk about it after all. "How about a whiskey?" Paul replied evenly.

"Fine." Gray walked to the other end of the kitchen and got a bottle from a top cupboard, and a glass on his way back. "Ice? Water? A piece of paper so you can write down what you're thinking?" Gray suddenly paled and leaned back on the counter, his eyes closed. "Ah, fuck."

Paul raised an eyebrow. "What I'm thinking? How about what you're thinking? Gray, what the hell is going on? Are you okay? Are you sick? Jesus, Gray, tell me what's happening because you've got me all turned around here." He made his way over to Gray and ran a hand down his arm. "Just tell me. I'm totally lost."

"I'm sorry," Gray whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm not sick, it's nothing like that." He finally opened his eyes and looked at Paul, biting his lip again. "I tried, you know? I tried to let it go, and I tried to make it good, but I... I just..." His eyes filled and Gray gently pushed Paul away.

Oh shit. Paul felt his stomach twist. "Tried to..." Paul stepped back toward Gray again, reaching for him. "Tried to what? Let what go?"

He wanted to get close to Gray, but Gray was keeping him at arm's length. Paul didn't give up, gently but persistently trying to get around Gray's outstretched arm. He started to

panic. His mind raced. Something in a letter? Something he'd said on the phone? Jesus Christ. What the fuck did he do this time?

"Gray. Gray..."

"I do trust you, Paul. You have to know that. I do. I'm sorry if you feel like I don't." Gray was moving away, slowly, but it seemed to have a purpose as he made his way to a shelf in the living room.

"What?" Paul watched Gray get a few steps away and then followed him. "Did I say... I know you trust me, Gray..."

Gray's eyes blazed suddenly. "Don't fucking lie to me, Paul. If I have rules, that's law." His hand shot out and he pulled a stack of papers from the shelf, flicking through them rapidly.

"Don't you dare call me a liar." The subject of lies was a sore spot with Paul, and he wasn't about to let Gray get off easy for that accusation.

Gray interrupted, pulling a sheet of paper from the stack. "You don't think I trust you, you think I'm obsessed with Ethan, you think I'm a selfish fuck."

"Damn it, Gray..."

Gray waved the paper at him, his voice raising. "You didn't tell me that you'd miss this trip if you took the fucking job, and you're pissed beyond belief at me, and you didn't fucking tell me!"

The paper Gray was brandishing hit the floor and Gray strode past him. "Now, I need a drink."

Paul got hold of Gray's arm as he passed by and held it tightly in his fingers. His voice was angry but even. "How do you know I'd have missed this trip if I...?"

Gray looked hotly into Paul's eyes for a moment and then inclined his head to the paper on the floor before pulling his arm free and heading for the kitchen.

Paul let him go, and snatched the piece of paper off the floor. He went quiet for a long moment as he read and some of the anger drained from his shoulders. "Shit." He sighed, finally, dropping his hands to his sides. This drivel hadn't been meant for Gray's eyes, or for anyone's eyes.

He rubbed his jaw for a moment, then looked back up at Gray and walked slowly back to the kitchen. "Okay, first of all I was drunk when I wrote this," he started to explain, but the words sounded like excuses and he hated them as soon as they come out of his mouth.

"Yeah, we do that a lot. Want a drink?"

Paul winced at Gray's words, but gave in easily. "Yes," he nodded, then he looked up at Gray. "You know what? I don't have to apologize for this, you know it wasn't meant for you to see. I was having a bad... I was feeling sort of insecure and maybe a little resentful but... shit." He reached for the glass as soon as Gray set it on the counter and swallowed its contents down in one gulp.

"Yeah, and I don't have to apologize for being worried about you, for the lack of you getting laid, or for feeling guilty that you're not directing this season. Happy?" Gray swallowed from the bottle and grimaced. "Fuck, that's nasty." He grabbed his beer and twisted the top off. "You should have said something, Paul."

Paul set his glass down on the counter with an angry thunk. "Okay, so two things, right?" He poured himself another glass. He didn't think whiskey was nasty, it was his drug of choice in fact, but he did sip this one instead of pound it. "First of all, I don't think you're a selfish fuck. I thought about what was more important to me and I made a decision, okay? You have nothing to feel guilty about. I want to be here. I chose this. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd do the unselfish thing and tell me not to come, right? By your own definition, Gray, it was an omission meant to spare you exactly this, not a lie." He took a couple of sips of his whiskey. He needed them before going onto his second point.

"You should have told me you were pissed about it, though," Gray insisted. "And for god's sake, put some pants on. I'm feeling crappy enough about not getting it up, I don't need to continue wondering why I'm not all over you." He up-ended his bottle and swallowed rapidly, his cheeks red.

Paul shook his head. That was Gray for you. Hot and cold, on and off, angry and not. Sometimes Gray changed moods so fast it made Paul dizzy. "Gray, that was a drunken journal entry that you weren't meant to see. I was spewing nonsense, getting it out of my

system." Paul said, raising his voice a bit to be heard as he made his way to the bedroom where he picked up his jeans and Gray's as well. He pulled his on as he was talking and then carried Gray's out to him.

"Listen. I wasn't pissed at you, not about the theater thing. I was frustrated with my situation. I knew I couldn't take that show with Ethan, I know what he was doing, and it was very tempting. Very. But I knew it was a dangerous road to go down."

He handed Gray his jeans. "All right? But that brings me to my second point." He took another sip of his whiskey. "Which is Ethan." He glanced up at Gray. "Because you *are* obsessed with him, Gray. Or jealous. Or something. And we have got to clear the air about it before it gets worse."

"He's creepy. He's fucking trying to buy you, Paul, and you don't see it." Gray almost snarled as he put on his jeans. "He drops by. He calls. He doesn't listen when you say no. He's damn near stalking you. And I am not jealous. You're my boyfriend, right? Not his. Mine."

Paul stared at Gray for a moment, unsure how to react. This 'mine' thing was really very hot, actually, it made him want to grin. But at the moment it was also a little too possessive.

"Gray. I do see what he's doing. You're right, I didn't before, but I do now." Paul put his drink down and moved closer to Gray. "Let me spin this differently, okay?" He hooked a finger through one of Gray's belt loops and looked into his eyes. "I am yours. And remarkably, although he is a twenty minute drive away and you are a six hour plane ride away, I'm still yours. You know why? Because you're a fucking stud, Gray, who backs up his promises with things like love and blowjobs that make a grown man cry. And Ethan? He's a hot guy who backs up his promises, on the rare occasion that he makes one, with money -- and nothing else. I don't want him. I want you. He may not get it, but I do. I am so fucking yours, baby."

Gray blinked at him a few times, body swaying a little closer. "Then tell me when you're mad? 'Cause I can't deal with you being pissed and not letting me know. And if you don't want me to see Jerry and Tim, for god's sake, say so. And I don't care if you get laid. And I want you to do what's right for you. And I'm glad you're here. Really. Really really." Gray was nodding his head vigorously as if he couldn't emphasize the point enough. "And I haven't had that much to drink, I know, but I feel sorta like I need to sit. Now."

Paul put an arm around Gray's waist to steady him, starting to feel the effects of two glasses of whiskey on an empty stomach himself. Together they made their way over to the couch and Paul sat Gray on his butt before plopping down beside him.

"Hm. Tell you that I'm mad, like you told me you were mad about that letter?" Paul asked with a slight grin. "I didn't know how to talk to you about Ethan without you getting freaked out about him."

"I loathe him," Gray said mournfully. "I suck."

Paul laughed softly, then shifted so he was facing Gray. "I love you. I don't care if you fuck Tim and Jerry. I will get laid at home if I need to. Truth is, after all that fuss about wanting permission, I haven't really had the inclination. Maybe I will, maybe I won't."

Gray nodded, snuggling a little closer. "I get that. I don't want to be with anyone, either. What happens with them just... happens. You know?"

"You fucking had me worried you had cancer or some damn thing, you asshole." Paul kissed Gray on the temple and hooked an arm over his shoulders.

"Sorry. Just worried and impotent. Are you still mad at me?" Gray seemed honestly worried about it, looking at him with wide eyes, his teeth once more firmly in his lower lip.

"Will you stop, you idiot? I never was mad at you."

Gray frowned at him. "God, I'd hate to see you pissed then." He lowered his head once more, nuzzling into Paul's neck. "I really did miss you, baby. And I'm glad you're here. And I kinda want to make out for a bit, but I'm hungry, too. Are we okay, now? Or do we have to talk about Ethan more?"

Paul laughed to put Gray at ease but inside he was still feeling a little uneasy. Gray had actually worked himself into such a state over this thing with Ethan that he couldn't get it up, and now he was acting oddly diminutive and insecure. Maybe some of that was the alcohol, but it was a little unsettling all the same. "We're good, Gray. Really good. Why don't we get some pizza and sober up a bit?" He started to get up, pulling Gray up with him.

"Yeah, okay. Eat, sober. Uh, the pizza's probably gross by now. Want to reheat it, or go out?" Gray peered into a pizza box and pulled a face.

"You want to go out? Can I borrow a coat?" Paul smiled. "I'll tell you about the apartment I found."

Gray stared at him, suddenly beaming. "You found a place? For that you can wear my leather." He leaned over the counter and kissed Paul awkwardly. "Have I said I love you yet? I do."

"No, you hadn't yet since I got here, thank you." Paul smiled and kissed him back, quickly. "I need a sweater," he said and headed for his suitcase. "It's up for June first, I'm going to take it even if you can't move out until later in the summer."

"Um, actually that works," Gray said casually. Very casually. He darted around Paul and grabbed for his own sweater on the floor by the bed. "Really well."

"Oh?" Paul asked with a smile. "How well, exactly?" He leaned against Gray's dresser.

He got a quick grin before Gray vanished into his sweater, mumbling as he went. "Oh, you know. In the way that I can be there by mid-June." Gray's head popped out and he looked around. "Seen my glasses anywhere?"

Paul dove for them and then waved them at Gray. "These?" He grinned. He shifted them behind his back. "No summer session?"

"No summer session. Gimme." Gray lunged for him, carefully pinning him to the dresser.

Paul grinned. "Yes, professor," he said, producing them. Jesus, no wonder Gray couldn't get it up. For the last week or so he'd been worried that Paul was pissed and that could have left him without a job or anywhere to go in June.

"That's Doctor Researcher to you," Gray said, putting on his glasses and peering at him over the top of the rims. "No annoying students, an office with a window -- I hope -- and an assistant. I get to play with original sources now. If you're good, you can sharpen my pencils." This last was delivered with a leer and a rumbling sound from the vicinity of Gray's stomach.

"Oh, Doctor! We can play research in our hot tub." Paul grinned and winked, shoving Gray off of him playfully. "Now where's that coat..."

"Hot tub! For that, we're going to Bistro. And yeah, it's called that. Italian wine, baby." Gray opened a closet and threw a black leather coat at him. "Really? A hot tub?"

"Yeah, on the back deck which is kind of a roof." Paul smiled. "You're going to love it. And it's not as expensive as it sounds, I promise." He pulled on the jacket. "Oooh, I like this coat. So can I get you drunk on Italian wine and then bring you back and fix your little problem for you?" He winked. "I think I have the right touch."

Gray winced. "God, I hope you do." He shifted his weight as he pulled his shoes on, looking at the floor. "Truth? It's been over a week. Maybe I should skip the wine?" He glanced up and looked at Paul. "Although, I do like the leather on you. Keep it on, yeah?"

"You like me in leather? I'll model it for you later." God, a whole week? Poor baby. "You're going to be just fine," Paul said reassuringly. "Really. Now come on." He took Gray by the hand and tugged him out the door.

Chapter 30

Gray looked across the bed at Paul and grinned. He'd been grinning for ages, and didn't think he was going to stop any time soon.

Paul, the brat, was sleeping.

Well, he'd sort of earned it, Gray allowed. Gray had been so fucking thrilled to have an erection that he hadn't let Paul play with it for too long before taking charge. Gray'd pretty much forced Paul to his knees in the living room and fed it to him, fucking Paul's face until he was close to coming. Then he'd dragged Paul bodily to the bed room and introduced him to the purple dildo for a bit, until Paul begged.

God, Gray loved it when Paul begged.

Finally he had to do it, had to slam into Paul's ass until he thought he might die of the pleasure, and they proceeded to scream the building down.

Twice.

But now Paul was still sleeping and every time Gray moved closer, reached out a hand to Paul's ass... well, the man whimpered in his sleep. It was funny in a disturbing way. Gray frowned and rolled over, snuggling up tight to the length of boyfriend on his bed.

"Baby? Baby, wake up. Wanna play." He was not whining. Not.

Paul did whine, however. "Mmmsleep," came the muffled reply, and one hand batted weakly in the vicinity of his sensitive backside. "Horny pervert," Paul went on, more clearly this time. He shifted slightly so he could turn his head and look at Gray. "I got you up twice already, what more do you want from me?" He was grinning this time at least, if sleepily.

"Turn about," Gray said with a wiggle of his hips. "Want you awake, hard, and in my ass. Right about nowish." Okay, maybe he was a horny pervert, but he had time to make up here. A week and a half of trying every trick he knew and now that he could get hard... well, damn right he wanted to use it. And with the added bonus of Paul to play with... "Now nowish," he added hopefully.

Paul groaned. "Right now?" Gray thought maybe he was protesting, but the grin on Paul's lips after he licked them persuaded him otherwise. Paul turned up on his side to face Gray and took hold of Gray's cock. "Hard again so soon? I think you must have been faking that impotence thing."

Gray groaned and thrust a little into Paul's hand. "Me fake it? Not a chance. The only fake thing was that dildo up your ass while I tried to hold off. By the way -- " he paused and gasped when Paul tightened his grip slightly. "You looked fucking hot, you know."

"Thank you. Told you I was yours," Paul said softly. He leaned forward and licked across Gray's bottom lip, keeping a firm grip on Gray's erection.

"Mine," Gray agreed, his hips picking up a bit of speed. "God, you're good at this. Ever give a hand job in public?" He opened his eyes as wide as he could, hoping to look innocent.

Paul snorted and grinned. "In public? Hmm, have I?" He sucked on Gray's lip and then kissed him lightly. "Yes, yes I have. On the dance floor at a club in fact." He was stroking slowly in contrast to Gray's moving hips.

"Yeah?" Gray rolled onto his back and planted his feet. He tried to slow his hips, but Paul's strokes stirred him up and he found himself trying to hurry the pace a bit more. "Anyone see? I gave a blowjob behind a bar once -- the barback. He didn't want to wait for his break."

Paul moved his mouth to Gray's earlobe. "That's my slut," he breathed into Gray's ear, an amused tone mixed with his husky whisper. "Nobody saw us that I know of, and we didn't care if they did anyway. Ever been fucked in public, baby?" He released Gray's cock and slid his hand under his balls to pet the sensitive skin there.

Gray's legs parted automatically, his knees falling apart and his hips raising, baring himself. He was pretty sure he looked wanton; that was fine, he felt it. "Fucked?" he whimpered. "No, not in public. Well, the back hall of my department, but it was like three in the morning and no one was around." He canted his hips, aching to feel Paul in him. "You?"

"That's not really fucking in public. Maybe we'll do it this week. Would that turn you on?" Paul cupped Gray's balls and rolled them in his fingers. "Want me, baby? You look like you want me." Paul moved over Gray and kissed him again, deeper this time, settling his knees between Gray's legs. Gray could feel the weight of Paul's cock on his belly.

"God, yes. Want you." Gray ran a hand over Paul's shoulder and down to tug at one nipple, his other hand going to his own erection. "Everything about you turns me on, baby. Do me wherever you want -- just please, fuck me now!" For added emphasis he rocked his hips, rubbing on Paul.

He moaned and closed his eyes, surprised to find himself assaulted by an image of himself on his hands and knees, Paul behind him... and people watching. "Oh god," he groaned.

Gray's tugging was rewarded by a hiss and a low growl and then Paul claimed his mouth in a deep, heavy kiss. Gray had little choice but to half swallow Paul's tongue. He could feel Paul patting around the bedside table for the rubbers. He considered helping, but figured he'd just be in the way, so he settled for tugging on Paul's nipple again, adding a pinch and a twist.

"Ah! Jesus fuck," Paul hissed again. He'd hiss and swear like he was complaining but Gray knew Paul loved it. It was that hot kind of pain, and Gray was well aware of its effects on Paul; it made Paul's dick harder, made him want it more, made him more aggressive.

Gray wondered vaguely if Paul would let him try nipple clamps, and then dismissed the idea in favor of wrapping his legs around Paul's waist and humping him. Maybe that would help with the condom hunt. When Paul finally came up with what he was looking for, he tore open the package with his teeth and handing the condom to Gray. "You put it on me," Paul panted at him.

Gray grinned and lifted his eyebrows. "Sure. Come on up here." And then he popped the rubber into his mouth, shifting it around to get it in just the right spot. It had taken him ages to perfect this -- in fact, he'd actually bought his second dildo to learn this trick -- but he'd never done it to Paul.

"No way, are you serious?" Paul went still for a moment, then he crawled slowly up Gray's body.

Gray ran his hands over Paul's hips and ass, rolling his eyes when Paul winced again. The big baby. Wasn't like Gray had been really rough -- he'd just been... well, there. For a long time. But Paul was being cute and wincing for effect, so Gray held onto his hips and teased at the head of Paul's cock for a moment with his tongue. The rubber tasted foul, but that was easy enough to take care of; all it took was getting the reservoir seated, the tip just so, and... Gray swooped down on Paul's cock, the condom smoothed on as nice as could be. Gray came up beaming. "Fuck me. Now."

"Fuck, yeah. Holy shit, that was hot, who taught you that? Tim and Jerry?" Paul teased, slipping between Gray's legs again and pumping lube into his palm. He pushed two slippery fingers into Gray and worked them in and out purposefully. "I need to remember to thank them properly."

Gray groaned and tried to spread his legs wider. "Nah, saw it in a movie. Taught -- oh fuck, there. Again! Taught myself. Jesus, Paul. Harder. Let me feel your fingers." Gray tipped his head back and closed his eyes, lost in the feeling of Paul opening him, a tight heat already starting in his gut. No one else got him this hot. Ever.

"To hell with fingers," Paul growled, going for the lube again. He took hold of one of Gray's knees and hooked it over his shoulder before slamming himself home. "Ah fuck,

you feel good," he told Gray, panting a bit as he used his whole length to stroke Gray from the inside. "Tell me where..."

Gray's eyes flew open and his hands grabbed for any part of Paul that he could reach. "Oh god! Anywhere, Christ!" He was on fire, full and desperate, every nerve in his body wired to his cock and his ass. Paul was everything, hard in him, hard above him, and all he wanted. He couldn't help moving, didn't even try to stop, just rocked his hips and rode Paul as best he could. "Anywhere. Everywhere. Good. Oh fuck, so good."

Paul moved steadily, long and deep and heavy strokes. The pace picked up a bit and Gray could feel Paul starting to get heated, too. He had one arm wrapped around Gray's thigh and the other was braced up by Gray's ear as Paul pinned him over and over. "God, Gray, god yes," he stammered and turned his head. Gray felt Paul's teeth grab a gentle hold of the soft flesh inside his thigh.

The touch was electric, and Gray bucked up into the next stroke. "Yes," he hissed. "Rough. Come on, do it. Bite me!" The thought of the pain nearly made him come, and he jerked again, the head of Paul's cock skating over his prostate. "Jesus. Close." Too soon, part of him screamed, but he wasn't sure he could stop it.

Paul grinned and gave Gray exactly what he was looking for. He softly licked the spot he planned on assaulting first, making Gray's flesh pimple, then closed his teeth around the tender skin and bit. Hard. With a grunt. And his cock powered into Gray ruthlessly, too. Paul couldn't hold back his grunts, but they were muffled into Gray's thigh.

Gray lost it, the pain lancing through him and mingling with his already frantic need. He wasn't even sure if he was yelling or crying or grunting, all he knew was that white light and heat were pooling him and his body was tight, ready to explode into orgasm. He arched off the bed, trying to ram himself down on Paul's cock, and his own throbbing prick swelled between them, lifting off his belly. When he began to come, the convulsions would have thrown Paul if he wasn't holding on with his hands and teeth.

And hold on Paul did, riding out Gray's spasms without even needing to thrust. He finally had to let go of Gray's thigh to gasp for air and with two sharp jabs into Gray he was gone, spasming and grinding into him, dropping Gray's leg to the bed, gulping air and groaning. It seemed forever before he finally came down.

Gray wrapped himself around Paul and held on. He knew Paul was staying -- there in bed with him, there in the loft -- but he wasn't ready to allow Paul to leave his body yet. It was too intense, too fantastic to let it end yet. "Love you," he whispered, scattering kisses on Paul's face. "God, you're amazing."

Paul nodded. "Love you, too." He put a hand on Gray's hip and leaned back to pull out.

Gray grabbed Paul's ass, keeping him where he was. "No, don't. Please. You always -- you always pull away." He tried to catch Paul's eye. "Stay?"

Gray could feel Paul's body tense, and his breath get thin again. Paul's expression was hard to read but he looked troubled by the suggestion. Nevertheless, he did what Gray asked of him and sunk deep again, though he broke the stare and dropped his forehead to Gray's shoulder. He sighed and shivered, moaning softly.

Gray raised his hand and stroked Paul's hair. "Baby? What is it?" he asked softly. He'd never seen Paul like this, and he wasn't exactly sure what it meant. Paul almost seemed distressed, like he wanted to back away as fast as he could.

Paul shook his head in answer to Gray's question and all he said was, "Later." The longer he stayed there, though, the more comfortable he seemed to become, until finally Paul was able to breathe evenly again.

Gray listened to Paul breathe and felt it as they both relaxed, the warmth of the bed and their bodies lulling him back toward sleep. Now that he had Paul in his arms, still in his body, he felt safe. Secure. Like he was right where he was supposed to be. "Don't leave me," he whispered, knowing it was foolish and childish. But he couldn't seem to stop himself. "Don't let me go."

Paul lifted his head and looked at Gray then. His eyes were red and his expression seemed pained, but he was trying to smile anyway. "Can't you..." his voice was hoarse, "Haven't you figured out by now that... I never have, Gray?" he said softly, tentatively. "Never. Not when you left for the east coast, not in all that time before you wrote me that first letter, and certainly not for a moment since then. I never could." His voice was even, but hoarse. "Don't you see that yet?"

Gray couldn't breathe for a long moment, couldn't do anything but stare into Paul's eyes, lost in the love he saw there. Everything was laid bare for him, every hope, every chance taken... and every reason Paul had hidden from him and shied away. Paul loved him. Wasn't only in love with him, but was utterly his, heart and soul, and always had been. Right from the start, years ago. "Oh god," Gray managed. "Paul."

Paul looked into Gray's eyes, his smiling fading a bit. "Don't talk. Just... it's all good now, right? Don't say anything." Paul swallowed and then kissed Gray soundly, forcing Gray to comply.

Gray wanted to talk. He needed to, and it was only an inability to form the sentences that kept him quiet. That, and Paul so obviously needed him to just let this lie for a while. But his mind raced, everything becoming clear and flowing together. How Paul had never stopped caring, how Paul had loved him years ago and never said. Which made sense, because Gray certainly wasn't looking for anything more than a comfortable regular fuck at the time. Hell, maybe Paul hadn't even known then, hadn't known until Gray left. And then with him out on the coast and Gray here... god, it was no wonder the man had bolted when Gray pressed for more; he must have been shit scared of getting hurt again. Gray

tightened his hold on Paul and nuzzled him. "I love you so much, Paul," he whispered. "We'll make this work. I promise. Not ever going to hurt you like that again."

It was a promise he'd keep, a vow to himself as much as to Paul. He'd do everything he had to, do whatever Paul needed. The price for failing was too high.

Chapter 31

Gray didn't have the faintest idea what to do. Well, even less of an idea than usual.

Paul wasn't any help at all and was, in fact, pretending that nothing had happened. Gray found it insanely frustrating. Every time he looked at Paul, trying to gauge Paul's mood or get a hint about what he was supposed to say, he was shut down.

Not that Paul was ignoring him; not at all. They were cuddly, affectionate, physical. It was the situation Paul was ignoring. To the point that when Gray said anything about it, or tried to steer the conversation to any point in the past more distant than the last five minutes Paul pretended he didn't hear him.

He'd turn on the TV. He'd ask a question back. He'd initiate sex -- which was so not fair, because Gray was easy. He'd talk about dinner plans. Anything but let Gray talk about it.

But no longer. Gray had a plan.

Okay, so mostly the plan was to sit on Paul until he agreed to talk, but it was a plan.

"Paul?" Gray called from the kitchen. He had seen Paul heading into the bedroom a few minutes before, and as they were relatively newly laid, he was fairly sure that Paul hadn't gone to get any toys. Not positive though; Paul was just as easy as he was. "Want a drink?"

"Love one." Paul called from the bedroom. Gray could hear him shuffling around in his suitcase.

"Beer or whiskey?" He grabbed a couple beer bottles, two glasses and the mostly full bottle of Wild Turkey and headed to the couch. The sun was just down, and the sky looked especially forbidding, the clouds heavy and full, so he moved to close the curtains. "What are you doing, anyway?"

"I have something for you," Paul answered, joining Gray in the living room. "Oh, I'll start with a beer, thanks." He sat on the couch next to Gray and set a heavy object wrapped in birthday paper on Gray's knees. "No, a five year old did not wrap that. Embarrassingly enough, I did. Happy Birthday a week early." He smiled and took his beer from Gray's fingers.

Gray stared at the parcel. "Baby, you didn't have to do this. Just you being here -- I mean, I thought that was the present." But man, his fingers itched to tear the paper off. He leaned over and kissed Paul quickly, knowing he was grinning madly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And don't get too excited, it's not porn." Paul grinned back, and took a swig of his beer. There was something mischievous in his eyes.

"Like I need more porn," Gray said, his eyes drifting over the package. It was heavy. It was most certainly a book, going by the size and shape. "Shakespeare?" he guessed.

Paul laughed, grinning at Gray. "Oh, god no. That's about as far from Shakespeare as you can get. This writer... I mean don't get me wrong, he's a brilliant guy, but he's dead dry boring as fuck." Paul winked at Gray and laughed again. "It's right up your alley."

"Jesus, just what I like. Boring writers. You're too kind." Gray rolled his eyes and started to pick at the tape, hoping that by being slow he'd irritate Paul right back. He was curious, though; the book was large, hardcover... and heavy. Like, not a bestseller more like something he'd find at a rare and used store; dense.

"Ah, yeah, you see?" he said to Paul as he peered at the binding. "Black cloth binding. Never buy writers who come out in black cloth. Too wordy," he continued to advise. He held up the book and grinned at Paul. "Very wordy, going by the weight of it." Which was when the wrapping fell off the side and Gray saw the front cover. "Oh my god."

"Very. Am I right?" Paul bumped shoulders with him. "Let me see if I remember correctly -- 'wordy, lacking somewhat in style though not in originality; a solid hypothesis'. Isn't that what the committee said about it?" He grinned and tapped the cover with his fingers.

Gray nodded, stunned. "Um, yeah. And the second to last chapter was refreshingly concise and insightful." He ran his hand over the cover, wanting to trace his name with his finger. "Jesus fuck, Paul. I can't believe you did this." It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was... "How? There's only two left, and I didn't think they'd give them up." He dragged his eyes off his thesis and looked at Paul, vaguely aware that he was clutching the book to his chest.

"It's just a copy, best I could do." Paul rested a hand on Gray's knee. "I took the opportunity to actually read the second to last chapter this time because I never could finish it back then." He grinned and leaned in to kiss Gray lightly.

Gray blinked quickly, trying not to cry. It was stupid, getting worked up over a book like this, but it was his *thesis*. His work. And he thought he'd seen the last of it after the sprinkler system flooded his office. "Thank you, Paul," he whispered, brushing his mouth over Paul's again. "Thank you so much." Ah damn. Blinking didn't always work, and now he was trying to catch his breath before he had to sob. He held onto his book a little tighter. "So, did you like the chapter?" he managed to say, his voice cracking only a little.

"Well, I'm not sure where they got concise from." Paul pressed his palm into Gray's cheek. "Baby," Paul said softly, then curled his other arm around Gray and tugged him close. Gray must not have been hiding his emotions very well because Paul seemed well aware that he was on the verge of tears. "You downplayed it on the phone, but I knew you were upset about losing it. I remember all those awful hours you worked on it, I

know how proud of it you were."

"Oh god," Gray moaned, and then he gave into it because he couldn't fight it, not anymore, not with Paul holding him. Not with his thesis in his hand, bound and with silver letters. He shook, he knew he was sniffing like a girl, but he couldn't help it as the tears leaked out and wet Paul's shirt. "Thank you," he whispered between one gasp and the next.

Paul sat quietly and let Gray be for a while, eventually taking a deep breath and exhaling heavily. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat, and although Gray wasn't looking at him he was pretty sure Paul was a bit choked up himself. Paul leaned over awkwardly and picked up his beer, taking a long swig. After another deep breath Paul managed, "I love you," and the rough edge to his voice confirmed Gray's suspicions.

"You always did," Gray said softly, still pressed against Paul. "Back then, when I was working on this... you loved me then."

Paul shifted, gently nudging Gray off his shoulder. "That hardly matters anymore, baby," he said softly and took another sip of his beer.

"Of course it matters," Gray countered. He sat up, still hugging his book, and twisted on the couch so he could face Paul. "It matters to me, Paul." He wiped at his damp eyes with one hand, wishing he had a third to hold onto a beer bottle. "I love you, you know? So much, baby. And I'm so fucking sorry I hurt you."

"I wasn't hurt. That was what guys did, right? It was what I expected." Paul was sitting with his back into the couch and wasn't looking at Gray, but instead at his near-empty beer bottle.

Gray sighed. "Honestly, it's what I had to give at the time. All I'm saying is, I didn't know, and I'm sorry. And I guess I'm saying I get why this past year or so has been so hard." Carefully, he set the thesis on the coffee table and sat back. He wanted to hold Paul, wanted to touch him, but the air was thick with 'back off' vibes. "I wish I had known, though," he admitted. "I might have grown up a bit faster, certainly would have treated you better."

Paul shook his head and snorted. "Right." He leaned forward, pushing himself up off the couch. "What's for dinner tonight? Are we going out, or did you want to cook maybe?"

"Paul, sit," Gray snapped. "Now. Please. I want to talk about this."

Paul turned hot eyes on Gray. "Why?"

Gray did not roll his eyes. It cost him about a million calories in sheer force of will, but he didn't do it. "Because it's important. *You* are important. The past year is important."

"I agree. This past year has been very important. We got a new start, right? Can't we just leave it at that?" Paul set his beer down and went for the whiskey.

"Why won't you talk about this?" Gray asked carefully. "And pour me one, too, will you? If it's all done and over in your head, how come you can't talk to me about it?"

Paul poured two glasses and slid one to Gray before picking his up and swallowing it back in one gulp. Gray had noticed that was how Paul started any serious evening of drinking -- heavy on the first dose. Paul poured himself another glass before joining Gray again on the couch. He sat heavily and looked Gray squarely in the eyes. "What is it you want to know, Gray? Are you going to ask me why I didn't stop you? Because my answer to that question is why didn't you ever look back? Okay?"

Ow. That cut deep with its truth, but Gray took it and nodded. "I see that. I do. And like I said, I gave you what I had, back then. Which is why I'm sorry, baby. You were hurting and I didn't even see that, and it kills me. I mean... Fuck." He threw back his own drink and reached for the bottle.

"I said I wasn't hurt."

Gray ignored that. "I thought we were having a great time, you know? We worked, it was fun. And it's not that I didn't care about you, 'cause I did. I just... I wasn't capable of more. If I'd have known, if you'd have talked to me..." He looked at his glass and poured carefully. "I don't know. I'm just really sorry. And I'm sorry I've been such a prick, I just didn't get why you were being so... stubborn." He swallowed from his glass again, almost choking. Nasty stuff, whiskey. Odd that he drank so much of it.

"I knew very well what you were capable of back then, Gray. I did. And Gray, come on. If we're being honest here, then how about a dose of honesty yourself? If I had talked to you, not that we ever talked about anything of course, but if I had, you'd have run even harder."

Gray felt his back stiffen. "I wouldn't have!" he protested. "I would have listened, I would have..." He suddenly had an image of them, sprawled on a bed in some stupid motel somewhere. Paul, younger and wilder, laughing. And then he saw Paul rolling over, long and lean and naked and whispering 'I love you' to his younger self. "I would have freaked the fuck out," Gray sighed. He leaned back and closed his eyes. "I would have left and I probably wouldn't have written to you and I wouldn't have fallen in love with you." His chest ached at the thought, so he finished his drink, eyes still closed.

"Right. So then, you see, I get this letter out of the blue saying you miss me and I didn't dare believe it. I wanted to, I tried to, but the Gray that moved out east back then would never have said that to me." Paul finished off his second glass and poured himself a third.

Gray took another drink and closed his eyes, aching to reverse time and give them back the years they'd missed while he grew up. He looked at Paul again, a little thrilled that he

was there at all, and a little stunned at how quickly his body was reacting to that fact. Even in mid serious discussion Paul turned him on.

Paul sighed. "You see why I didn't want to talk about this? What good does it do us really, to hash it all out now? To apologize and be forgiven -- forgiven for what? Being twenty-five? You have nothing to apologize for, Gray, you and I are just not the same people anymore." Paul tasted his whiskey and looked back at Gray. "I mean that in a good way. Those kids wouldn't have known a good romance if you stuck it in a vibrator and shoved it up their asses."

Gray tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Or tied them to a bed frame and spanked them stupid." He drained his glass and set it on the floor, then swung his leg over Paul's lap and got in his face. See if Paul could ignore that. It was possible that he was getting a little drunk, he supposed. "You do know that I love you like crazy right? And that I'm not gonna bail, I'm not in this for a steady fuck? I'm not going to move across the fucking country -- well, I am, but in the right direction this time -- and we're gonna be together and we're fucking fantastic, right? No more bullshit games? No more hiding and being worried and you're mine and I'm yours? I love you, you're, like, part of me, baby. Need you like I need air, like I need paper and ink and another drink."

Paul handed Gray what was left in his glass and then tucked his hands around Gray's ass. "Have at," he said, smiling. "Yes. I know. I'm not worried. I am madly in love with you myself, just to restate the obvious. And also need you, want you, and am completely and totally yours. Does that cover all the bases? Are we done with that conversation then?" He flicked his tongue at Gray's chin.

"Well, now, I don't know." Gray polished off Paul's drink and studied the glass carefully. Then he wiggled his butt a little so he could rub himself nicely on Paul. "You got any secrets you want to share? Confessions to make? Demands you need met? Things you wanna do? Fantasies you wanna tell me about? Where did the bottle go? This stuff gets better the more you drink."

"You've become a much more entertaining drunk than you used to be." Paul snickered. Gray didn't understand why his words weren't slurring, too, but he didn't have much time to think about it because he was suddenly on his back on the couch and Paul's hand had somehow found its way into his jeans and that was hard to ignore. Paul's voice cut through the fog. "What I want to do is jerk you off, and then sober you up with some dinner. How does that sound?"

Gray looked down the length of his body to where Paul's hand was shoved into his jeans. "Sounds just fine to me. Can I help?"

"With jerking off, or dinner?" Paul licked his lips and tugged on Gray's cock.

"Um..." Gray's eyes rolled back and he tried to remember what he'd meant. "Oh! You want me to take my jeans off? I don't think I should cook right now, baby," he added

seriously. "Got all my brains in my cock." And oh, how happy they were, down there with Paul's hand and the tight squeeze of his fist. "God, that's good."

Paul leaned over him and licked up his jaw. "Good to see you're not *too* drunk after all," he breathed in Gray's ear as his fingers slid up and down the shaft of Gray's growing erection. "Which also means you're not too drunk to remember this," he shifted so he could look Gray straight in the face. "No one has ever made me feel like you do. In bed, or out. No one's made me feel as hot, as happy, as angry, as worried..." Paul's grip tightened as he spoke and his hand stroked Gray more quickly, "as whole... as you do. Ever, baby. That's my only confession, my only secret."

Gray stared at Paul, a sudden lump in his throat. "I love you," he said carefully. Then he wrapped a hand around the back of Paul's neck and pulled him down, kissing him deeply. His other hand clutched at Paul's shoulder, keeping Paul close. Of their own volition, however, his hips began to twist and thrust, quite happy to be under Paul's hand. "Want you," Gray mumbled into the kiss. "Can't get enough of you."

"That's good, too." If Paul was as horny as Gray he didn't show it; he was all about Gray's cock and getting him off. Paul's fingers pumped him hard, working with the needy thrust of his hips. "Hot baby, look at you."

Gray looked -- wrinkled shirt pushed halfway up his stomach, jeans shoved down just enough, and the head of his cock sliding through Paul's hand. Legs splayed over the couch, hips twitching... "Oh my," he said mildly. "I'd do me."

"Only a fool wouldn't." Paul laughed. "Come on now, I want to see you shoot all over those abs. Extra points if you soak your shirt," he teased, putting extra pressure on the underside of Gray's erection and stroking purposefully.

"Meep." Gray didn't know he could squeak like that. "God, I love it when you talk dirty," he told Paul with a grin. His dick liked it, too, aching pleasantly as Paul stroked him. His breath sped up along with his hips, and he finally let go of Paul long enough to shove his jeans down a little more, freeing his balls. He could feel a light sweat break out all over him as he watched Paul's hand. "God," he moaned, watching fluid begin to pool and drip from his cock. "Little faster?"

"Anything you want, baby." Paul grinned and started to pump Gray ruthlessly, his fist making a satisfying slapping sound against Gray's newly-freed balls. "Nice." he said with a sigh, and stole Gray's breath with a hard kiss.

Gray arched his back off the couch and panted into the kiss. No one ever did this to him like Paul did -- no one got him so hot, so fast, no one touched him exactly right like Paul did. No one loved him like Paul did, and Gray could feel everything -- the talking, the love, the playing, the honesty, the sheer intensity of the day behind them -- building up. His balls were hot and tight, his legs were trembling, Paul's tongue was in his mouth, and Gray felt like he was climbing so high he'd shatter when he stepped off the cliff.

He wrenched his mouth from Paul's and gulped in air. "Oh God, Paul. Oh god, oh god -- "

It started before he'd expected, come shooting between Paul's fingers, arcing high. He came hard enough that he couldn't see it all, his eyes screwed shut and his mouth open as he panted and gasped out words he only vaguely heard. The only thing he knew for sure was that he'd soaked his shirt and he was screaming Paul's name.

"Mmm. Yes, baby." Paul said, nodding his approval as Gray got his hearing back. He'd released Gray's spent cock and was spreading his fingers in the slippery stuff on Gray's stomach. "Fucking hot baby, you shot buckets." Paul laughed and kissed him lightly. "I think I need to change, too."

Gray tried to focus on Paul, on his face or even on his crotch, but he was utterly boneless and it took more concentration than he had. "Sorry, baby. Would have sucked you, if you wanted. Next time? After dinner? Hungry? Think I still need a little sobering. Although sleep sounds good, too."

Paul sat up, scooting so Gray's legs were across his lap. "I'm happy to sit here until you can think, but you're not getting a nap. I'm starving."

"Mmm food." Gray closed his eyes and tried to think, which wasn't really all that easy, what with the Wild Turkey in his stomach and the smell of sex all over him. "Want to order in Chinese? Weather looks like crap, might snow. We could go for a walk later, if you want. Pretty when it snows."

"Any excuse to wear leather for you." Paul winked. "Seriously, yeah, I haven't been out in the snow in... god, ages. Years, maybe." He slid out from under Gray. "Come on, let's get cleaned up and order something spicy." He held his hand out for Gray to take.

Gray smiled at Paul and took his hand, tangling their fingers together as Paul pulled him up. "Shower. Food. Walk. Leather. Sounds wonderful." With a jerk of his arm he pulled Paul close to him and touched his jaw lightly before dropping a kiss on his mouth. "I love you, Paul. Thanks for waiting for me to wake up."

Chapter 32

Paul wasn't sure he was ready for this. He sat still and silent for a moment after Gray turned off the engine, trying to relax. He couldn't help but notice that this seemed like a really nice neighborhood. "Jesus, what do these guys do for a living?" he said, more as a comment on the pricey location than anything else.

He was nervous; he'd admitted that to himself before they'd even gotten in the car. He'd realized it when he was changing in and out of half of Gray's closet looking for something that said "respectable, yet cool." He should have known better than to try to find "cool" in Gray's closet. Paul knew Gray had been talking to Jerry and Tim about him for almost a year now, and he knew it couldn't have been all good, what with the arguments and misunderstandings he and Gray had had. They knew him pretty well he supposed, and all he knew about Jerry and Tim was that they knew Gray as just about as intimately as he did. Tough odds.

"I feel like I'm going to meet your parents or something," Paul said in a joking tone, though he really wasn't kidding. He tugged Gray's comfy leather jacket tighter around his shoulders and looked out at the snow.

Gray laughed, the sound warm and comforting. "Relax. Just a couple of guys I know. Nothing dangerous here, baby. And Jerry's an architect, Tim's an engineer. Nice, boring jobs. Now come on, if we sit here for too long they'll come out after us, and that would just be... weird." Paul looked over at Gray and Gray grinned suddenly and winked. "They have a fireplace..." he bribed.

"Do they have alcohol?" Paul sighed, opening his car door. "Jesusfuck it's cold out here. How can it be this cold in March? It's spring!" He got out of the car and hopped around. He felt like he might freeze solid at any moment.

"Of course they have alcohol. Man, you need to spend more time in Oregon or something, you're getting cold blooded." Gray led the way up the front stairs and knocked quickly before opening the door and walking right in. "I smell garlic!" he yelled into what appeared to be an empty living area. "I thought you guys liked kissing?"

Despite his nerves, Paul had to grin at Gray's comment, it was cute. He glanced around the neat room, taking in the tasteful furniture and pleasant art. There was indeed a fireplace, and in front of it was the couch he'd last seen in a video. It looked bigger in person.

Gray kicked off his shoes and Paul was just pulling his jacket off when Tim appeared from the kitchen, waving a wooden spoon. "Jerry isn't getting anymore kisses. Ever. Unless he agrees with me, anyway. You, on the other hand can have whatever you want."

Paul raised an eyebrow but Gray just laughed, shaking his head. "Tim, this is Paul. He's cold and he needs a drink."

Paul had rehearsed a confident, friendly hello, but the leather jacket had other ideas. He got his arm stuck and spent a few seconds wrestling with it before finally turning the thing inside-out to get it off. "Hel... hello..." He gave Tim an embarrassed smile. "I'm Paul. Oh, but you know that already." He said with a roll of his eyes and hung the coat up just as he'd removed it, still inside-out. Bad enough he was nervous, he didn't need to look like a fucking geek, too. Tim must be getting a terrible impression. He shook his head and grinned sheepishly at his host "And I seriously do need a drink."

Beside him he could feel Gray's shoulders shake for a moment. "God, you're adorable," Gray whispered, and then in a normal tone to Tim he said, "Got wine open in the kitchen?"

Tim grinned and nodded. "Not yet, but can be. Come on through, both of you. You can keep me company while I pound the hell out of the chicken breasts." He paused long enough to shake Paul's hand before heading into the kitchen, talking over his shoulder. "Sorry we're behind -- not my fault. Jerry got stuck at the office, had my keys, forgot to shop... you know. The stuff that happens."

Thankfully, Paul's boots gave him less trouble than the coat and he was able to ditch them and hurry along without getting too far behind. The kitchen was bright, track lighting shining down on the work area and over the large wooden table. Gray pointed to the stools by the work area and headed to a cupboard for wine glasses, obviously sure of his way around and comfortable getting for himself in someone else's home.

"So, where's Jerry, anyway?"

"Shower," Tim said, picking up a meat cleaver. "Getting the mud off. How's the trip so far, Paul?" He neatly chopped a chicken breast in half.

Paul was busy admiring the imported tile when Tim spoke to him. "Oh, couldn't be better." He smiled and took Gray's hand in his as they moved to the stools. "Well, okay, it could be warmer... uh, outside anyway, but otherwise, it's been perfect." He pulled out a stool for Gray to sit on and then moved one for himself. "This is a great place you have here. I could go nuts in this kitchen."

"Great, would you help his majesty cook then, because he's given me nothing but grief since I got home. Hello, love." Paul supposed this was Jerry breezing in and giving Gray a big smack on the lips. "Is this him? Oh, he's much cuter in person. I'm Jerry."

"Hello." Paul said, shaking Jerry's hand with a smile, but the kiss made him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"You see, Tim, they're perfectly happy to sip their wine and enjoy the company while we get things together." Jerry gave Tim the same smack on the lips, only that was followed by an affectionate squeeze of his ass. "What can I do, hon?"

"Pour the wine, wash the lettuce and find the freaking avocado," Tim ordered crisply. Jerry nodded and started hunting through drawers.

"Oh, a good day then," Gray observed with a grin. "What happened?"

Tim rolled his eyes and aimed a swat at Jerry's backside as he passed by. "The corkscrew is back in the drawer, babe." He tossed a grin at Paul. "Man would lose his dick if it wasn't right where he could see it."

"Watch your language around the guests, will you?" Jerry pulled out the corkscrew and set about opening the wine. "Gray, love, grab me the wine coaster? Thank you."

Without missing a beat, Tim turned his attention back to Gray. "Not a great day, no. Car trouble in the morning, *he* took my keys..."

"I didn't take your keys, you left them in my car!" Jerry interrupted with a sarcastic grin.

"He *took* my keys, I needed my keys, he worked late... blah blah blah." Tim went on. Another chicken breast got sliced. "I think I need a drink, too. Oh! And I'm under orders to find the battery for the video camera." This last was delivered with a wicked grin at Paul. Gray made a choking sound.

Paul snickered and looked at him. "Was that your idea, baby?" he teased. Paul couldn't help but smile, now. He could see why Gray liked these two, at the very least they were entertaining. "Oh hey, is that the avocado?" Paul asked, pointing toward a fruit bowl on the far counter.

"Ah, there it is, the icky thing." Tim leaned over, almost close enough to touch him. "I hate them. They're slimy and yucky and so help me god if Jerry foists a piece into my salad I will not only add more garlic to the chicken, I'll toss in some chili peppers, too."

"What do you need it for then?" Gray asked as he set down more wine glasses for Jerry.

"Guacamole for you. This is how much I love you, even if you are running off to California and leaving me here with the man who steals my keys." Tim struck a dramatic pose and Gray snorted.

"Man, you two are wired tonight." He turned to Paul, sliding a hand down his spine. "They're usually a little less... uh... flamboyant. I suspect recent orgasms."

"Ah!" Jerry gasped. "I most certainly did NOT give him a masterful blowjob just before I got in the shower and then bend him roughly over that stool you're sitting on, Gray, I swear! How *dare* you even insinuate such a thing." He grinned and winked at Gray, and then started pouring the wine, casually. He set one in front of Paul first, and then Gray. "You two should argue more, angry sex is the best. Well, that, and making up sex, but I

suppose you'll learn all that in California."

Paul just laughed. "I think we have some idea what you're talking about." He looked at Gray and gave his hand a squeeze.

"Mm, yes. I suppose you have." Jerry turned his back and set a glass down near where Tim was working. "Lettuce you say?" Jerry headed for the fridge.

"Lettuce. The Romaine is in the crisper." Tim lined up the chicken breasts on his cutting board and glanced up at Paul through his eyelashes quickly before slicing again. "So, guys. Much making up this trip?" he asked casually.

Paul was in mid sip, but managed not to choke on his wine. He swallowed, set his glass down and looked at Gray. As he'd expected, it appeared that Gray had indeed confided in them about his shortcomings. Probably quite recently. He wondered how much they knew, how open Gray had been about it, and how much of Gray's replies to him came from their advice. He felt awkward and a little vulnerable to be laid out through Gray's eyes in front of people he didn't even know. Somewhere inside he knew all along this was probably happening, but it didn't bother him until now, when he was sitting in their kitchen being asked when they last argued. He deliberately left it to Gray to answer.

"Things are good," Gray said easily, his hand once more on Paul's back. "Stop worrying."

"Not worried," Tim said with a quick grin. "Just nosy. Hell, you know what things are like around here when Jerry and I get into it, and we live in the same house. You two have a bunch of miles between you, bound to be a bit of stress, yeah?" He reached for a bowl of something that looked like melted butter with herbs and spices in it and began to baste the chicken breasts.

"We know it," Gray told him. "But things are cool." He picked up his wine and swallowed, a little more than a sip, Paul noticed. By Paul's estimation things were better than cool, but these were Gray's friends so Paul let it go. Jerry looked over at Gray like he was going ask something but changed his mind and went back to spinning lettuce like it was his life's calling.

Paul sipped his wine and looked over at the range. "So what are you making over there, it smells great," he asked, figuring a change of subject was in order. Tim beamed at him, and Gray rolled his eyes and sat back down on his stool, looking like he was bracing himself.

"Recipe from my grandmother," Tim said happily. Gray mouthed the words along with him, earning himself a swat with a tea towel. "Stop that, or you won't get a spanking."

Gray choked on a mouthful of wine and Tim's eyes went wide as his cheeks flushed. "Oops. Let's forget I said that, shall we? Moving on... It's just chicken breasts baked with a special combination of herbs. Add in a nice salad, some veggies and dip, and you have

comfort food."

Paul snickered. "Sounds delicious. And it's okay, you know? I watched the video." He took a sip of his wine.

Jerry grinned. "Oh yes, thank you for the glittery stuff. What fun. And Gray looked so sexy all sparkly, didn't he, hon?"

Tim glanced at Gray and then back to Paul, his cheeks still a little pink. "Very. And yes, thank you for that, Paul. It was... memorable. To say the least."

Next to him Gray shifted on his stool. "Uh, not to be all coy, but I can I just mention that the glitter was a bitch to get off? I'm still finding sparkles in my boxers." But he was smiling, that little shy smile that Paul was learning meant that Gray was feeling self-conscious. Paul had to drive the image of scrubbing Gray clean of the sparkly body paint out of his mind. "What's the deal with the missing battery, anyway?"

Tim snorted. "Mr. Must Have All Batteries Charged At All Times over there lost it when he got all distracted. Do you have any idea how many power outlets there are in this house? One every five feet. Nine rooms. And not one of them has the battery."

"That one I'm afraid really is my fault," Jerry admitted. "I can't figure out what I did with the damn thing. I'm hoping extra sets of eyes might turn it up later."

Paul grinned. "I do that all the time. I have a set of cordless drills and I have to have everything charged all the time. You never know when you might need it, right? And then I go looking for them and they're plugged in all over the apartment and the roommates move them to who knows where... it's a bitch."

"Just so, a battery does no one any good uncharged." Jerry stuck his tongue out at Tim and then hugged him around he waist. "Your lettuce is dizzy, doll, what next?"

"Kisses. Then dressing mixing, veggie chopping, and salad tossing." Tim pushed Jerry slightly, up against the back counter, and laid a kiss on him, complete with groping. It was so intense Paul almost felt it himself.

"Some things never change," Gray whispered to him, grinning.

Paul turned to look right at Gray, meeting his eyes. "I could go for one of those," he said, slipping off his stool and standing between Gray's knees. "What do you think?" he asked, but he didn't wait for a response, tangling his fingers in Gray's hair and tightening them possessively, then pushing his tongue past Gray's lips.

Gray made a surprised noise and stiffened for a split second but joined in happily enough, one hand solid on Paul's hip and his body swaying slightly closer to Paul's. Behind him, Paul could hear the other's breaking apart, and one whispering to the other. Good, let

them watch, Paul thought absurdly, as if either of these two was actually a threat to him. Still, it felt good to let them see. He knew in his heart that Gray only melted like this for him.

Paul slid his hand down Gray's back and squeezed his ass before breaking the kiss and grinning at him. "Yummy," Paul said, acting as if he were oblivious to the men he knew were watching.

Gray raised an eyebrow at him. "Ya think? How about this, then?" And Paul found himself with Gray's mouth on his again, this time accompanied by a full body press of horny academic. It seemed that possessive behavior was the theme for this evening.

"Good God. We might never make it to dinner at this rate. And the battery is still missing." Tim sounded more amused than anything else.

"Okay, they're hot for each other, that much is clear," Jerry whispered to Tim, but Paul overheard him anyway. "But hot by itself doesn't make him Mr. Right, does it?"

"Umm..." Paul moaned into Gray's mouth, leaning back against the counter. He lingered in the kiss as long as Gray wanted him to, and then leaned his forehead against Gray's and whispered, "I love you," because he felt like it needed to be said right then.

"How about I set the table?" Jerry announced and slipped past Tim and out of the kitchen.

Gray was looking at Paul and smiling; maybe he hadn't heard the whispers. "Love you, too," he said softly as he pulled away. "Come with me for a minute? If we go out on the deck I can show you where I lived last summer."

"Oh, good idea," Tim chimed in, putting the chicken into a large baking dish. "Point out the balcony you did your spying from."

"Fuck off, I didn't spy," Gray protested with a laugh. "You two put on a show. I watched. Your fault, not mine."

"Whatever," Tim grinned. "It's cold out, I recommend shoes. And coats. And wine, don't forget the wine. And don't be gone long, we get lonely."

Paul nodded and took Gray's hand. "Shoes and coats sound prudent." He smiled at Gray and then looked over at Tim. "Excuse us," he said, before tugging Gray from the kitchen and back into the foyer for their shoes. They got ready to go out quickly, and he noticed Gray try to hide a smile as Paul pulled the sleeve of his coat right side out. Well, at least he could make a better entrance this time.

"Come on, we'll walk around the house," Gray said, leading the way out. There was a path shoveled all the way around, the snow heaped away from the house. Paul couldn't see much of the landscaping, what with it being all white, but Gray assured him that it

was lovely. The house was longer than it was wide, and had a low fence around the backyard, just high enough to keep the pool safe from intruders. Gray stood next to him and held his hand, pointing to the house directly behind. "That's it. It's higher on the hill, so I could see down here really easy. In the summer those hedges on the sides and the trees keep out everyone else."

Paul nodded, but before he could say anything Gray turned to face him, his eyes serious. "They're just worried about me. They don't mean anything by it."

Paul searched Gray's eyes intensely for a moment. "How worried, exactly? I mean, have you told them anything good about me?" He didn't really mean that they way it sounded, but damn, they were watching him like hawks and Paul really felt it. Jerry's comment about 'Mr. Right' didn't boost his confidence any, that was for sure.

"Of course I have," Gray insisted, a hurt edge to his voice. "They tell me I practically glow on the days I get your letters, and after Hawaii I babbled non-stop about how great you are. But they were there to catch me when... when I found out you went away with Ethan, and I think it's hard to forget the mess I was. Baby, I haven't talked to them about this week, they don't know just how fantastic things are." Gray tilted his head, his lower lip caught in between his teeth. "But I know. And I can show them."

Yeah, but do they know about the last letter he sent with that *thing* in it? Is that the last word they heard about him? Paul started to worry that thought in his mind, but was quickly distracted by Gray's lip-biting thing. God, he just loved it. "That's a new Gray Thing," he said. "The lip thing. Do you even know you do it? Do you have any idea what it does to me?" He leaned in and kissed Gray softly. "I just feel a little defensive. I'll try not to be, okay?"

Gray looked confused for a moment. "Just be you," he said finally. "I love you. You be you, I'll be me, and if they get to be too much, we tell them to back off. What lip thing?"

"Oh, nothing, forget it." Paul smiled. "I'm fucking freezing can we go back in now?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure." Gray took his hand and they quickly went back to the front of the house. "No, seriously. What lip thing? Do I lick it?" He swiped at his lip with the tip of his tongue. "No, that feels weird," he said as he opened the door.

"Yeah, that's it, you lick it," Paul teased, letting Gray go in first. He kicked off his wet boots as soon as he got in the door and took his time with the jacket which didn't give him any trouble this time.

Jerry poked his head out of the kitchen. "There you are! Come on now, dinner's on the table, boys," he said and then disappeared again.

Paul grinned at Gray. "I do see what you like about them, though."

"Yeah, they cook. And they have a fireplace and a pool. Let that be a lesson -- pick friends with the most stuff."

Dinner was indeed on the table when they got to the kitchen, and Paul watched as Gray carefully studied the chicken. "You're grandmother would have your hide for doing this in the microwave and not the oven," he said to Tim.

"Shut up!" Tim cried, suddenly lunging for Gray and wrapping his arms around Gray's waist. "Don't say that out loud, she'll haunt me."

"She's not dead."

Tim rolled his eyes and kissed Gray soundly. "Brat. Sit. Eat. Tell us all about your week, and don't be shy with the details."

"Well, it started with my plane being delayed," Paul offered, thinking small-talk might be the best solution for their problems, at least temporarily. He took a seat after Jerry pulled out his chair for him.

"Weather?" Jerry asked, pouring everyone more wine.

"No, just an SFO thing; they're referring to more than just the time difference when they say 'California time'." He grinned.

"Got here mostly on time, though," Gray put in, passing the salad. "Brought home pizza, but it was cold before we could eat it, so we went out that night." He smiled at Paul. "Haven't gone out much since."

Tim snorted. "Like that's a huge surprise. Really, Gray. There's more to life than getting off."

Jerry snorted. "Couldn't prove it by you, hon." He winked at Paul, who laughed and looked at Tim.

"I haven't even seen his school yet," Paul added, with a grin.

Jerry interrupted, "Speaking of school, Gray, when does that wrap up for you?"

"End of April. Well, first week of May, 'cause of grading. Then I have three weeks to pack everything up, clean out the loft and hit the road."

Tim tilted his head, looking back and forth between Gray and Paul. "So, you're going right away, then?"

Gray blinked. "Well, yeah. I mean, if you call three weeks and a long ass drive across the country 'right away'."

Tim nodded slowly. "Sure. Makes sense, I guess." But he sounded cautious at best, and disapproving at worst.

Gray seemed to pick up on it. "What?" he asked, looking at Tim, and then to Jerry. "Why on earth would I put it off? This is what I've wanted for a year or more. I want Paul; you know that. Why would I kick around here for an extra month when I could be there, with him?"

Jerry chimed in. "It's just a big move is all, Gray, and we thought you were going to do summer session and kind of wind down gradually, take it slow... what happened to that idea?"

"It's been a year, that's pretty slow," Paul answered him.

"Well technically I suppose, but a rough year, right?" Jerry's response was directed at Gray, not at him. "I mean you don't want to... California is a long way away, Gray."

"Damn right it is," Gray said, pushing back his chair. "It doesn't matter -- it's where Paul is, and if he lived two towns over that's where I'd be going. Look, you and Tim are the only good things here for me, and I hate to leave you, but I'm going. I'm going because I love Paul, because he's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Great, that's good," Tim said quickly, picking up his wine glass. "I'm glad you guys are happy, really. But don't you think -- "

Gray stood up. "No. Don't go there, Tim. Jesus, you two -- I know you've helped me through the shit, and yeah, it's been a rough year, but how can you do this? Paul's right here, at your table. I'm here, I'm telling you I love him. Where the hell do you get off?"

Jerry looked up at Gray. "Where do we get off? Now, wait a minute." His voice was tight but he wasn't as angry as Gray sounded. "Excuse me, love, but aren't you the one that came here and asked us time and again if you were making a mistake? Wasn't it you that got yourself falling down drunk on more than one occasion over this guy... excuse me, over *Paul* going hot and cold, sending love in one letter and backpedaling in the next?" Jerry looked over at Paul. "Look, with all due respect, Paul, Gray is a great catch, and all we want is to know that he'll be happy. What kind of friends would we be if we let him get 3000 miles away without making sure he was doing the right thing? Surely you can understand that."

Paul stared at Jerry. It *was* like exactly meeting someone's parents. He was still feeling defensive, but hadn't he said all along that he was glad Gray had someone to look out for him out here? He looked away from Jerry, reached up and put a hand on Gray's arm. He tugged on it gently, asking Gray without words to sit down. When that didn't work he spoke up. "Gray," he said and tugged with more insistence until Gray sat heavily. "It's okay, baby." He looked at Gray meaningfully.

Gray looked at him, and Paul could see the struggle going on behind his eyes, the need to speak out, to defend himself and his lover, and the warring need to assure his friends that he was going to be all right. Whatever Gray needed to see on Paul's face he apparently found, and he smiled suddenly, his eyes brightening. "Yeah, it is," he said softly. "You're here."

Paul smiled back at Gray and kissed him lightly, then picked up his wine in one hand and draped his other arm over Gray's shoulders. He looked at Jerry and Tim in turn. "Okay, so. Mr. and Mrs. Graham, let me tell you why I'm good enough for your daughter." He grinned, hoping to lighten things a bit with a joke. Jerry laughed softly and leaned back in his chair.

Paul went on. "As I'm sure Gray has told you, I work mostly in construction, and it's a damn good living, so I'm not going to have any trouble supporting him in his research endeavors. In the evenings I usually direct high school theater, so yeah, there might be weeks when I'm not home much if a show is opening, but I know Gray, and there are going to be nights when I wouldn't see him anyway because he's discovered something and gotten lost in it, or forgotten what time it is reading in the library. I have a busy life and lots of friends, so it's not like Gray won't have a good social life, or other people to meet, you know? So, in a purely physical sense, Gray's going to be fine."

He took a sip of his wine and glanced at Gray. "As for the emotional stuff, I've apologized for my erratic behavior, and Gray has apologized for his neurotic paranoia and we're good with each other on that score." Then he turned and looked at Tim directly. "I love Gray. He knows I love him." He sighed, sipped his wine again and smiled. "There's no doubt in my mind that this is right, that we're meant to be, and I have every intention of keeping him happy."

Tim nodded, looking at one face after another. "Good. No more roller coasters? Not that we object to Gray turning up at odd hours or anything, but the drunken fits were added distractions. We'll always take him, you know. But we're friends, not lovers -- he needs someone to be there just for him, Paul."

"Still here, you know," Gray said crossly. "You don't need to talk about me like I'm not."

"Sure we do. Otherwise, you don't pay attention." Tim grinned at Paul. "He's a little clueless."

Paul laughed. "Well, I'm not going to promise eternal sunshine and daisies -- that would be unrealistic, yeah? I know we'll have a whole new set of issues to work out in California. But I'm going to be there for him. I *am* there for him now. I found us a place, I want him to move, he has a great job lined up and wants to be with me and I think all of that should be good enough for you two. Yes?" Paul winked at Gray. "Now. I'd really like to try some of this chicken before Tim's grandmother has fits and smites him for serving it cold."

"You haven't met her. She just might." Jerry grinned and gave Tim's hands a squeeze. "Eat, hon."

Tim gave Paul another long, searching look and suddenly smiled. "There's chocolate mousse for desert."

Gray's eyes widened. "Real stuff?"

"Oh yeah."

"Pass the salad."

Dinner itself passed fairly quickly; Tim and Gray seemed to be in a race to get to the mousse, and Jerry merely ate and teased Tim about the chicken, hinting that he'd used too much thyme. It was a horrid pun, and Gray rolled his eyes, but Tim laughed so hard that he couldn't eat and Gray bounded to the fridge as soon as he'd cleaned his plate, returning with the mousse.

"Sexiest dessert ever," Gray stated, placing the dish on the table. "Hurry up, or I'll eat it all."

"If it's that sexy, I think you should feed it to me," Paul grinned, licking his lips. Gray looked so good tonight. He looked happy and relaxed, and Paul felt a little sorry for taking him away from his friends, even if they were nosy and over-protective. Gray was so at ease in this house, he could only hope Gray would settle in as well on the other coast.

Tim leaned back in his chair, laughing as Gray grabbed a spoon. "Be nice to the dessert, Graham," he said with a wink.

But Gray ignored him, or at the very least centered his concentration on Paul. It was kind of wild being under that intensity with an audience; maybe it showed how comfortable Gray was, or maybe just how much he loved Paul -- Paul didn't really care which. It was hard to care, what with Gray scooping out a spoonful of mousse with a delicate touch and then moving really close.

So close that Paul had to push his chair back a little. So close that the creamy texture of the mousse could be seen, and so close that Gray merely had to lower himself to be straddling Paul's lap, lifting the spoon to Paul's mouth without saying a word.

The stuff was sweet and rich and combined with Gray's proximity it made him lightheaded faster than the wine had. He licked his lips and swallowed, and then took the spoon from Gray's fingers. "My turn," he said, making sure his grin was more of a leer.

"Oh, a show!" Tim sounded pleased, anyway, tugging Jerry closer to him. "We never get

to watch Gray, this is like... an experience."

Gray colored a little, then shrugged. "Feed me, then," he challenged. And then he wiggled a little, showing Paul that he was not unaffected.

Paul glanced over at Tim as he scooped up some mousse on his spoon. "This stuff is really good," he winked and looked back at Gray. "Oh baby, open wide..."

Jerry was licking his spoon. "Like I said, hot together. Gray, are you going to share him or take him home?"

Gray opened his mouth for the mousse, his eyes on Paul's as he sucked the fluffy dessert off the spoon. He seemed to be looking for direction, but when he finished the mouthful he said, "He'll always be mine; nothing can change that. Doesn't matter if he plays or not -- he'll always come home."

"Damn right." Paul agreed, watching Gray. "You want to stay and play, baby, I'm up for it." Paul helped himself this time, taking a taste and then kissing Gray, sharing chocolaty tasting tongues. "Mmm..."

By the way Gray was beginning to rock against him and the thickening erection Gray was sporting, it was actually becoming unlikely that they'd make it all the way back to the loft before something happened anyway.

"You sure?" Gray whispered between kisses.

"I'm sure. Why not have some fun?" He tugged Gray's ass in tighter and ground his hips upwards to show off his own impressive arousal.

Paul caught Jerry looking at Tim out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not planning on being a fly on the wall for this one, are you?" Paul heard Jerry say to his lover and he laughed softly against Gray's lips.

"Nope. Also not planning on fucking in the kitchen again today -- I want something softer than a chair pad, baby, and seeing as how it's your turn..."

"Living room," Gray muttered from where he'd buried his face in Paul's neck. "Wanna be in front of the fire."

"Mmmm, fire." Paul nodded and helped Gray slide off his lap and get to his feet.

"My turn?" Paul heard Jerry protest and then a lot of urgent whispers following them out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Paul was impressed by the room, the fireplace and the thick rug, but was dismayed to find himself further aroused by the couch. "I recognize that couch," he said quietly to Gray.

Gray whimpered and pressed closer, moving them toward it. "Yeah? You were noticing the couch when I was getting laid? When I was all shiny and sparkly and had my dick up Tim's ass? Remind me to do a better job next time."

This time there was a round of whimpers and Tim moaned. "Oh yeah, Jerry. Your turn."

Paul was a little distracted for a bit as Gray pushed up against him so he wasn't sure at first if it was Jerry or Tim that kissed him. He knew it wasn't Gray because Gray had slid under his shirt a moment ago and was circling a nipple with a wicked tongue while fumbling with his fly. It seemed rather forward to just outright kiss someone like that but Paul wasn't complaining, whoever it was had a way with his teeth that made Paul's dick ache.

It wasn't long before there was clothing flying this way and that, Paul undressing the body that was kissing him. As it turned out it was Jerry -- Paul got to see Jerry's face as he tugged Jerry's sweater over his head. He had a great body for a stuffy, New England architect, brainy type.

Jerry might have been kissing him, making him feel welcome in a weird 'welcome to our sex life' kind of way, but that was nothing compared to what Gray and Tim were doing. There were hands everywhere, as scattered as their clothes, and Paul knew that there were far more hands on his skin, his ass, his cock, than just Gray's. Tim might have been kissing Gray, but his hand was doing pretty amazing things to Paul's balls.

Gray was looking blissed-out, one hand on his own dick, the other on Tim's ass, but when he broke away from Tim's mouth for air, it was Paul that he went for, sinking down to his knees and lapping at the head of Paul's erection.

"Give him to me," Gray said hoarsely. "Hold him, stroke him, just let me suck him, yeah?"

"Yeah..." Paul panted. Sure, sounded like a damn good idea to him. In return, Paul reached out and wrapped his fingers around an impressively stiff cock... Tim's apparently, as Jerry moved easily around to his back and started nibbling and nipping at his shoulders. He stroked gently but firmly, not knowing Tim's tastes yet, but his strokes became more erratic anyway as he felt Gray's mouth on him.

"Oh Jesus, Gray..." he moaned, leaning forward a bit into Tim for support.

"So pretty," Tim murmured, leaning over Paul to kiss Jerry quickly. "Gray's mouth wrapped around a gorgeous cock... Kind of see why he gets off on watching. Paul, be a dear and go a little faster? Oh god, yes, like that. Jesus."

Gray moaned, looking up to meet Paul's eyes for a moment before fixing his gaze on Paul's hand and Tim's dick. Then he moaned again and reached a hand to his own

neglected cock, pulling once before letting go and starting to suck with determination.

"Fuck!" Paul shouted as Gray devoured him. His knees went weak and fortunately Jerry was right there behind him and lowered his bare ass neatly onto the couch. He'd let go of Tim's erection accidentally, and as he sat, he thought to apologize but Jerry seemed fine with picking up where he'd left off. Paul dove his fingers into Gray's hair and tugged, lifting one leg and bracing his heel on the edge of the couch. "Oh god, oh fuck, Gray..." He'd said it before, and he bloody well meant it, nobody sucked dick like Gray did.

Jerry and Tim collapsed on the couch beside him moments later, in a tangle of limbs that Paul couldn't quite make out, mostly because he just couldn't focus on them well enough. Somehow Gray had already forced him close to coming and it took a deep breath and no small amount of willpower to warn him.

"Gray. Fuck, I'm gonna shoot, baby... you're too... too good..." which was followed by a moan as Paul dropped his head back against the couch.

"No, no, no, no!" Tim rolled free of Jerry, his head bobbing up near Paul's chest. "Not yet, California-boy."

Gray, damn him, stopped. Just... fucking stopped cold, one hand squeezing the base of Paul's erection, the other tugging gently at his balls. Gray was panting and breathless, and his lips were swollen. He was sexy as hell. "What do you want, guys?" Gray asked softly. "Want to watch me fuck him? Want me to ride him? Want to touch?"

Jerry laughed. "Well, we better do something he looks pissed off."

Paul whined. "Gray!" Yeah, that was a really was a whine, wasn't it? Damn Gray.

"I say fuck him, what do you think, Tim?"

"Hello? Don't I get a say?" The answer Paul got was a unanimous, resounding "*No!*" He flopped back on the couch again and groaning pitifully.

"Right then," Tim said, standing up. He was suddenly all business, crossing to a small writing desk and pulling open drawers. He came back with a fist full of condoms and a tube of lube. "Jerry, take care of Gray, will you?"

Gray made a sound that was more or less a squeak and rolled over. Rolled over, right in front of the fire, and stretched out on his back. "C'mere, Jerry. Sixty-nine real fast, and then we can watch."

Paul admired how Gray's body looked bathed in firelight. It brought out some of the leftover bronze from Hawaii in his skin and flickered off the dampness of his skin. His eyes were glued on them as Jerry leaned over and kissed Gray.

"Hey, baby," Paul smiled. "You look so good."

"Not s'good as you." Gray's eyes were hot on him, even if his hands were skimming over Jerry. "Love you, Paul."

"Oh, so sweet," Tim chimed in, sotto voce. "God, are we like this, love?"

Gray snorted. "You two are filthy in a sexy way. We're adorable."

Tim snorted right back. "Yeah, well, if your dearest love here would kindly drape himself over the chaise you can watch me drill his adorable ass."

"You like that idea, baby?" Paul winked. He watched Jerry climb over Gray and straddle his shoulders. Briefly Paul turned his attention to Tim. "You want me where, now?" he asked, breathing in the scent under Tim's jaw and gripping him tightly.

"Yeah, now." There was laughter in Tim's voice, and if a man could be casual about feeling up another guy... well, Tim had that down. "Figure you're going to want to watch Gray as much as he wants to see you, so we can all get a treat." The hand Tim had on Paul's hip shoved lightly and Tim guided him to lean over a plump footstool. With biting kisses and roaming hands Tim steered him expertly until Paul could watch Gray swallow Jerry down.

They were side on, really, but if Paul turned his head just so, he could watch Gray's hips flex, see the shadow of his balls as Jerry licked at him. He didn't know if he made a sound or if Gray was just looking for him, but brown eyes met his and Gray winked. Heat surrounded him as Tim settled over his back, one hand sliding over his hip, and hot breath breathing on his neck.

"Pretty Gray. Your Gray. Such a lovely cock..." The hand on Paul's hip slipped around and circled his dick. "And this one is beautiful."

Paul moaned for Tim, for Gray, for anyone who was listening. Tim was larger than Gray, taller for sure. His hand felt warm, and his breath was hot in Paul's ear and this was so much better than a fucking video.

"Oh yeah." He reached back over his shoulder and touched the back of Tim's neck lightly, his other arm braced on the sturdy footstool, and pressed his ass into Tim's hips.

Jerry was lapping hungrily at Gray's balls and Paul was torn between watching Gray's face, and taking in the whole grunting puzzle of men silhouetted against the fire.

"You know," Tim said almost conversationally into Paul's ear, "we were never like this with him until you said we could. We took care of him like this -- " Tim's hand stroked Paul leisurely, his touch gentle. "But he never really pushed for more. So we didn't." Tim kissed Paul's shoulder quickly, a flash of teeth on skin. "But the boy sure likes to watch

us fuck."

From the floor Gray groaned, the sound deep and unmistakable.

"He... uhn... he likes to watch, it's a kink." Paul licked his lips and sighed, relaxing into Tim's slow touch, savoring it, his eyes on his lover. "I had just assumed he was fucking you guys; I didn't realize until he told me." He glanced over his shoulder at Tim. "That's why I sent that note. Gray so needed to get laid."

Jerry had started mouthing Gray's shaft and licking around the head, and Paul soaked in all the lovely sounds Gray was making in response. Jerry himself was almost silent.

"I told him you guys were okay with me... I told him that lots of times." He let go of Tim's neck and braced both hands on the footstool.

"He couldn't be sure, now could he?" Tim softened the question with a long, tight stroke and a moan against Paul's back. "God, you feel good. Oddly, it was Gray willing to fuck that made me think you two were finally going to get it to work."

A loud slurping nose from the floor was followed by an indignant growl. "Excuse me, I'm trying to work here," Gray said acidly.

"You're doing a great job, baby, don't stop now," Paul countered. "You look so hot in that firelight Gray, your bare ass on the rug and you're skin's all shiny... mmm." Paul ducked his head and swallowed and then glanced at Tim again. "Thank you for looking out for him," Paul said quietly and then ground his ass against Tim's cock.

"Oh, it was rough, I tell ya." Tim pushed back, rolling his hips and sliding between Paul's cheeks. "All that kissing and watching him come all over Jerry's hand..."

Gray groaned again, this time the sound muffled by Jerry's dick, and his hips jerked.

Tim laughed softly and pulled away, reaching for the lube. "And he likes to hear about it. Likes to know he's lovely and hot and that we're watching. Really, Paul. Take him out, get him hot -- fuck him somewhere people can see. Bet he'd -- "

Gray's arm wrapped around Jerry's ass and hips, his cheeks hallowed out as he sucked hard. His hips were jerking harder, Jerry holding him down with one large hand, the other going to play with Gray's balls.

"We were just talking about that. You'd like that, baby, wouldn't you? Like me to take you out, maybe to a movie theater or the park? Or even just the sweaty backroom of some club. Let people watch you get off," Paul continued where Tim left off. Jesus, Gray looked like he was trying to suck Jerry's liver out through his prick. Jerry was clearly enjoying Gray's efforts, but was far quieter about it as he swallowed Gray down his throat. "He's never been fucked in public." He pictured Gray bent over the edge of a park

fountain... men all around them... the very idea made Paul groan.

"Whoa, wait for me!" Tim laughed. Broad fingers slick with lube slide between Paul's legs, probing him slowly. "You like that, too, huh? Get off on being watched? Do you like to watch like he does, or is it just watching him that gets you going?"

"Just watching him," Paul answered a bit breathless. "With anyone... or alone... fuck, you should have seen the video he sent me." Paul moaned and pressed back against Tim's fingers. He knew he'd better not think about Gray whacking off behind the desk or he'd come.

"Yeah?" Tim slid his fingers deeper, moving a little faster. "Hot, huh? Watch him, Paul. Watch him suck Jerry off, watch the way he's begging for it -- every inch of him screaming with wanting to shoot. Jerry won't let him -- not yet. Watch." The fingers slid away. "Ready for me?"

"Yes... god, yes." Paul nodded, and then gasped as Tim's fingers dove in again and slid smoothly over his sweet spot. "Ah! Fuck..." They were indeed Tim's fingers and it might have been Tim's body hanging over him, but he only had eyes for Gray. Gray, who was trying to buck under Jerry's mouth; Gray, who was flushed and tense and starting to sweat; his Gray.

"Watch him," Tim whispered. "Feel me." One more press to his gland and Paul was empty, aching. Gray was straining, chasing his orgasm, wild under Jerry's mouth. Gray's eyes had closed at some point, but Paul could see his lids fluttering, could see his chest heaving. Gray's legs were flexing and Jerry seemed more intent somehow, though he was still silent.

"Watch him come -- soon, I think. He's lovely when he shoots." And Tim's breath caught, a soft sigh filling Paul's ears as Tim's cock pushed into him. "God, you've got a great ass, Paul."

"Uhhnn... " The sound was more or less forced from Paul as Tim slid deep. He didn't feel like Gray, but he felt good. Paul spread his knees a bit wider and arched his back a bit, getting the angle just perfect. "Oh god..."

Jerry finally made a grunting sound deep in his chest and his hips started to push downward into Gray's mouth. They were both close and Paul couldn't keep himself from encouraging them. "Let him come... let him..." Paul panted. "So fucking hot, baby, watching you. Come on baby, shoot. Shoot for me, Gray!" he was nearly begging, and Jerry reacted, releasing the base of Gray's cock and swallowing him down.

Gray bucked up, Tim slammed in, and Jerry thrust deep, the four of them suddenly in concert. Tim was almost panting behind him, the fingers of one hand tight on his hip, the other around Paul's chest, teasing one nipple. "God, yeah. Fuck his mouth, lover, give it up."

Gray groaned, the sound desperate and strangled as he writhed, and suddenly he had both feet planted on the floor, his ass off the carpet. And his fingers were sinking dry into Jerry's ass.

"Jesus," Tim whimpered, jerking hard into Paul.

"Yes, baby, fuck yes!" Paul gasped at Gray, and started to roll back to meet Tim's thrusts. Jerry humped against Gray's chin a couple more times and had to pull off Gray's cock to gulp air and groan. It was a low deep, guttural sound and then his body jerked and Paul watched his face as he came, almost pained looking in his pleasure.

Tim was starting to hammer behind him and he figured he wasn't the only one that got off on watching his lover get off.

Gray keened, the sound needy and as clear as if he'd spoken to beg, but Jerry was still panting through his orgasm. He tried, one hand stroking Gray's cock as he gulped air for a long moment before flashing Paul and Tim a grin and taking Gray in again.

"Baby, do it," Tim said hoarsely. "Finish him." Tim's hands fell away, both of them, sliding down Paul's body to grab his cock. "Jesus, Paul. So fucking hot. See why Gray talks about your ass."

Jerry didn't need much encouragement, it seemed, as he devoured Gray with a vengeance. Paul's eyes went right to Gray's face to watch him, caught up in this strange show that was accompanied by audience participation. He grinned at that thought, but it quickly faded as Tim slammed his prostate several times in a row. "Oh fuck...fuck..." Paul almost protested. It felt so good but it was so damn hard to focus his eyes with that going on.

Jerry wasn't letting up, not to breathe, not for anything. Paul knew his lover well and watched as closely as he could manage with Tim drilling over and over into his ass.

Gray finally let Jerry's cock go, his head tipping back as his back arched. "Oh god! Jesus fucking -- God!"

Tim groaned, his teeth biting into Paul's shoulder, hard. "Jerry -- "

Gray's eyes flew open and he stared right at Paul, though Paul wasn't sure what he was seeing, they were so unfocused. "Paul, gonna come. Right the fuck now -- " The world trailed off into silence as Gray froze in an arch, his stomach muscles spasming.

Teeth. Fucking teeth in his shoulder sending lightening right to his balls. He reached between his legs and tugged his shaft, eyes on Gray, but his mind on his need. "Harder Tim, more!" It was practically an order and he was surprised at the tone in his voice. Dimly, he heard Jerry saying something to Gray, but it was so soft that he couldn't make it out. He did watch as Jerry shifted off of his lover, though. They sat together with their

backs to the fire, Gray propped against Jerry's chest and cradled in his arms, and now it seemed that Paul was being watched.

Paul heard Jerry's comments clearly this time. "No mercy, baby."

He got none. Tim's hand pushed his own away and Paul found it just as well -- he needed both hands to stay upright under the frenzied pace Tim set. Braced on the footstool, Paul could only hang on as Tim rammed into him again and again, each stroke nailing his gland and setting off sparks. He wanted a hand on his cock, wanted something to rub on, but Tim denied him every time he tried to move. Teeth bit in, cock filled him, fingers on his hips held him up as he was fucked deep and hard.

"Soon," Tim grunted. "Let you come soon."

But it wasn't soon. Or maybe it was, Paul didn't know. All he knew was Gray's eyes watching, the heat and love in them, and the way Tim was taking him. He could hear his own heartbeat, hear his own voice and breath, but there wasn't anything else until Tim's hand wrapped around his cock and pulled. And then he could hear Gray, saying his name.

"Gray!" Paul answered and tried to shove his cock through Tim's fingers even as Tim was pounding his ass. He didn't say much more, couldn't really as the heat and the rush of his climax clogged his ears and blackened his vision. He fought for air as came, the waves of damp heat rushing through his body. He felt himself collapse against the footstool as he struggled his way back to the surface, unsure if Tim had come with him or not.

He found out quickly. The fingers on his hips tightened and Tim followed him down, but not for long. Paul hadn't even started to catch his breath before Tim hauled him back fiercely, pushing deep once more and grinding into him. Tim didn't say anything, seemed to have no words left as he came, but it didn't matter. Paul could feel him, could feel his dick, his hands, his sweat, and he knew.

Together, they settled forward again, panting until Tim began to soften. Hands touched them, and kisses were scattered over his face... Gray. Gray wanted him to move, wanted to hold him.

He could do that.

Chapter 33

Written on letterhead from the Department of History

Dated March 9

Baby,

Okay, so you're in the air somewhere. I kind of just came to the office after I saw you leave -- and yeah, I stayed to watch the plane take off. Had to, didn't want to let you go.

But you're right, it's only a few weeks and we're so much better off than we were when I left you in San Francisco. We're solid. That foundation is tight and dry and the walls are all up. All that's left is the decorating.

And the christening of rooms, of course.

But still. Hard to go home to the loft and not be sad. You're not there anymore, and it'll just be empty. But maybe the sheets will still smell like you and I can wrap myself up in the fantasy that you're holding me. I loved that, Paul, sleeping next to you, feeling your skin, knowing that the arm around my waist was yours...

So, a few weeks. I have to make a list of everything I need to do, both here and at the loft. Gotta start packing up the office soon, get my books and records out of here. The sooner I can get all of my things in the loft the sooner I can sort things out. Oh, and I meant to ask you what I should bring for sure -- no use in bringing the coffee grinder if you already have one, right? I'm going to have to sell a bunch of stuff, have a garage sale...

I have no art, which is a plus. I'm bringing a hell of a lot of paper. I'll sell the furniture unless there's anything we'll need. But really, it would be cheaper to buy a new couch than ship one, you know?

Not going to stress on it now. Not.

Okay, I have to get lesson plans ready for next week and proofread this test for Tuesday. I'd really rather just go home and sit in the dark and remember you, though. The sound of your voice, the way you smell, the way you say my name. The way you looked with Tim's dick up your ass.

I should get them something before I leave, sort of a thank you for the last year... any suggestions?

God I love you, Paul.

Your Gray.

Written on the back of a computer print-out of the apartment listing for the place Paul wants to rent, it has a few pictures of the place in the ad.

Dated March 18

Dear Gray,

And I mean that. First thing I wanted to do was call when I got home, but I'm being a good boy and saving my pennies for the new place.

I had today off. It was a gorgeous day here today, sunny, cool, blue skies. Keith decided that I should get out and play and he dragged me out for coffee and a jog, after which we took showers and then drove down the coast, sat on a cliff for a while and got stoned.

Hm. It wasn't as dangerous as that just sounded. Promise.

Anyway, it was nice, and Keith agreed to help me move my stuff into the new place in June, and then we walked on the beach and sobered up, drove home and had entirely too much seafood for dinner.

It was a nice day, a fun day, and I missed you. I missed you waking up alone in bed, I missed you on the cliff, watching the waves slam into the rocks below, I missed you for that walk on the beach. Keith is a good friend, and it was fun, but it would have been so much better with you.

Right, sleepy-ramblings. I'm even sober.

Check the back of this letter for the apartment details! If you're flying out, don't bring anything but you and your thesis. Well, ok, you can bring clothes. ...okok and those damned books and files of paper you move around with you everywhere you go. You can ship those.

You are flying right? I mean driving would be insane in that rattletrap car of yours. It's not like you can tow anything with it, can you?

Oh, you know what? Bring that tapestry in your bedroom. It oozes 'fuck me', don't you think?

Tim and Jerry... hmm, what to get them? Champagne and bubble bath? A waterproof vibe for the pool? A coffee table book of San Francisco? Plane tickets to visit us? They're really good guys.

Overprotective, obsessive freaks, sure, but good guys.

I had my yearly physical early in the week, got tested, and I'm healthy and clean. Just thought you might like to know that. Seems like it's something I shouldn't worry too much about since I'm always safe when I play, but it's still good to know, yeah?

I took Carolyn's kids out last night for ice cream and a movie so she could go on a date. I'm not cut out for watching Disney movies with children. The ice cream part was fun, though. I hope her date went well, she didn't want to talk about it in front of the boys, but she was smiling when I dropped them off.

Boring letter I know. Newsy babble. And I have nothing else to say, really, except that I miss you and I love you, and June can't come fast enough.

lovelovelove you, lover,

Paul

Written on the back of a photocopy of Gray's employment forms for his new job.

Dated March 26

Dear Paul,

Was sooo good to talk to you last night. I know we didn't have time to do much more than say hi before I begged you, but I was really needing it, baby. All the time now, it's like an ache, need you so much. Thanks for indulging me, and sorry I had to hang up before we could talk about anything other than your cock up my ass -- I wasn't expecting company, I swear.

It was Stace -- she and her man had a huge fight and I had to do the whole 'he's an asshole and you are always right' thing while I stank of come. I think she was kind of embarrassed when she got downwind of me, and she was totally cool with me taking a shower after she'd stopped crying.

The things I get myself into....

Anyway. I miss you like crazy. I wish I was there now, and as much as I'm glad you have Keith as a friend I wish it had been me with you that day. And can I just say I had no idea you still smoked on occasion. God, I can't remember the last time I got high. Remember that night you and I thought we could sleep outside with only blankets and got so high we just stared at the sky and said "wow" a lot? Weirdo. We should have been having hot, slow sex. But then, I don't think I'd even have been able to move... which is probably why we were staring at the sky.

You're beautiful. Just thought I'd say it again.

I have most of my stuff out of my office, so the sorting has started. Stace says she'll buy my TV and stereo, so that's one less thing to haul. The boxes of books I can start mailing ground mail anytime, if you have room to store them.

Um, the car thing. I was kind of planning to drive, yeah. It's a solid car, under the noise, but you could be right. If I sell it for even a thousand dollars that'll pay for my ticket out... and I don't really need a car in San Francisco, do I? I mean, it's been years since I lived anywhere with a good transit system, so I didn't really think about it. But if I drive, I wouldn't have to pay to ship all these boxes.

The tapestry I'll bring, the box of sex toys, the porn... clothes, the one set of dishes I have -- I wouldn't bring those except they're deco from the forties, and I got them for a song. Complete set for four, and the twit selling them had no clue what he had. Plus, I like 'em.

I will carry my thesis in my luggage. It will be with me.

I can't tell you how much that meant to me, Paul. Means to me. Even now it kind of makes me act like a girl. Oh, I told Jerry and Tim about it and they were blown away -- at least they said they were, but I don't think they were surprised. Pleased though, for me and you both.

They say they had a great time with you. No kidding. But more importantly they said that they can see how much I love you and they can tell that we've worked things out. I didn't tell them about the history, or what we talked about before dinner with them -- it means too much, is too close to my heart. I can give them most of me, let them in most of the way... but you're my heart, Paul. You're so deep in me I think we're bound.

Bindings. Mmm. Hardware store. Want rings above the bed, baby. Want you to tie me up and make me beg. Want to go nuts under you.

Right, on that note I'd best go before the ink smears and my hand writing gets shaky. You and I both know how hard it is to write and jack off at the same time.

Love you.

Your Gray

Written on graph paper, blue ink.

Dated April 15

My dear horny lover-boy,

Do you have any idea what a high it is to pick up the phone and have you on the other end panting about how fucking hard you are? Jesus, Gray, it's such a high, whispering dirty words in your ear and listing to you moan and beg. Coming before you did, I didn't expect, but then you caught me by surprise.

Sorry about Stace, that was seriously bad timing, but I understand. Did you offer to beat the asshole up for her?

Oh god. Speaking of beatings...

Guess who stopped by over the weekend? Yep. Ethan. He just knocked on the damn door and Keith let him in not knowing who he was. I'd just gotten home from work, hadn't even showered yet, and I was having a beer on the back deck. He came strolling out there like he was welcome, you know? Keith followed him out and offered him a beer, and I said no, he's not staying and Keith looked at me and took off. I guess he got the picture quickly.

So Ethan started talking about another directing position and I turned him down flat. Didn't even let him finish. So then he mentioned Jessica and how she's doing, and said she missed me. That was a low blow you know? Using Jessica. I told him I wasn't a fool that it was time for him to go.

So then he said he got wind that I'm moving and that you're coming out here and he wasted a lot of hot air telling me how you have nothing to give me and how much better he thinks he is, with his big house and money and an established life and connections...

He seriously doesn't get it, Gray. And the more he talked, the more I realized that I didn't really see it, not everything. I thought I did, but I didn't see the whole picture. I so do now.

Anyway, so somehow while he was talking he got me cornered against the deck railing and he told me that he had been wrong, that he should have given me the commitment that I wanted ages ago, and not only did he try to kiss me, but he fucking shoved his hand into my rig and gave it a squeeze.

Don't ask me what possessed me. I saw red. I shoved him off of me and without blinking I hauled back and punched him square in the jaw. I fucking decked him, sent him stumbling backwards and I guess I caught him by surprise because he sat on his ass on the deck holding his chin and stared at me. Part of me felt badly, I almost never let my temper get the better of me like that. I can't remember the last time I hit anyone. But the part of me that was more in control of the moment told him to get the fuck out and never to call me or come by ever again.

And he got up and left without another word. Not one. He walked right out.

And then Keith came out, asked me if I was ok and told me that I'd totally split Ethan's lip. I was stunned. And then I realized I'd bruised my hand and we both started laughing our heads off and Keith went for his bong. You're right, I haven't smoked up much since college until Keith moved in, he buys the stuff so it's always around, and if he's willing to share, who am I to argue about it?

Well, that's my big news. I think I've seen the last of Ethan, figured you'd get some kind of smug satisfaction out of that story.

Miss your ass, miss your cock, miss you.

Love

Paul

Postcard of campus, scrawled writing

No date, postmarked April 18

He shows up again I swear to god I'll rip out his spleen.

-- G

Letter on white printer paper

Dated April 24

Dear Paul,

Okay, okay, I'll be a good boy. Since you ordered me to. Jesus, my phone bill is scary. Sorry about the postcard, I know I already said sorry on the phone, but I read your letter and just sent it, you know? I was so fucking angry with him and worried about you and so damn happy you hit him.... It was intense, which is why I didn't make much sense on the phone that night. Sorry for that, too, you shouldn't have had to tell me the whole story with descriptions three times.

Was neat to hear about it from Keith's point of view, though. Tell him I say hi, yeah? He's fun to talk to on the phone. Not that I'll be spending money to call him, but soon enough we'll live in the same city, and he's promised to act out the best bits of Paul Hits The Jerk On The Jaw And Makes Him Bleed. I think it'll be my most favorite play ever.

I'm a bloodthirsty bastard, but you knew that.

Speaking of bloodthirsty, I'm having The Sale of My Stuff on May 10. Everything must go! Well, aside from the stuff already packed and the stuff in my room. And some other stuff. Okay, so I'll shove everything into the living room and let people buy what they want.

Stace is not back with the boyfriend, I guess she'd finally just had enough of his attitude. She's going to help me price stuff, the silly thing. Oh, and she says I should just burn my clothes and get all new. I'm not sure why.

My clothes don't all suck, do they?

Do they?

Gotta sell the car. Hard to know when though, because I'll actually need it for a while. Oh, and the landlord took my notice but thought that I'd be out mid month, so he rented it. I have to find somewhere to live for the last two weeks of May.

I suspect I'll wind up crashing at Jerry and Tim's. Like that's a shock. And I took your advice and went shopping online for a waterproof vibe for them, it should be here soon. Got you some presents, too.

And something for Keith.

And something for me.

Okay, so I spent too much. Oops?

Finals this week, and the department's in an uproar. The student's know I'm not coming back next year, and therefore aren't trying to suck up in hopes for pleasant classes next year. This sucks. Worse, some meddling bimbo assumed that I'd been let go, not merely declined to negotiate a new contract, and she got it in her head that it was because I'm gay. Thank fuck I got that straightened out before she said anything to anyone -- the college doesn't need or deserve that kind of press. I never made an issue about being gay, never hid it -- and it never had any effect. It would kill me to see people upset over something that never happened.

Dianna (remember her? Closet lesbian?) and I had lunch and I told her about you and about moving. She was happy and pleased, which was nice. Also? Keys has a steady. Nice for him, I guess. Nice for the guy, too.

Office hours soon, and I love you and I promise not to call so often just to hear your voice. You can call me, though.

Love you, want you, miss you.

Love,

Gray

Written on graph paper, blue ink

Dated May 2

Gray,

1. Stop spending money on dildos or else you might start feeling depressed because my dick isn't purple. Or cone shaped. And doesn't vibrate.
2. Stop spending money on phone calls. I love you. I want you. You love me and you're a horny pervert. We know this.
3. Do spend some money on your wardrobe, and take Stace shopping with you. Tell her I love her. Your clothes don't all suck. But they do mostly say 'anal-retentive geeky college professor', which can be somewhat limiting. I say go with Stace's instinct!

You don't need a car in San Francisco. Plus, I will still have mine, and the apartment only has one parking space, so sell the car. Oh, but quick! Save the coffee grinder, mine burned out yesterday.

Keith keeps telling me that I better watch my back because he might steal you away from me. He said he's more charismatic. I said maybe but I'm sure I'm better in bed. He said I should let him do you and then you can be the judge. I? Said no. But it was funny all the same. Maybe you had to be there. Or be stoned.

I might have a summer theater gig lined up with an SF theater in the park group. It could be fun, won't pay much, but then I'm not in it for the money, so that's OK. They do classical stuff, Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, that kind of thing. They'll do three plays over the summer, and we're talking about me directing two of them.

They're kicking you out of your place mid-May? What idiots! Well, living with Tim and Jerry will be a great hardship for you I know, but you can do it, baby, I have faith. I move into the new place on June 1, I'm in the process of cleaning out my closets and drawers and crap right now. Send your boxes to my place before you move in with the boys, I'll get them to the new place.

Glad you dealt with that nosy bimbo at school. What a mess that could have been.

I've said this 20 times, I know, but if you need any financial help with this move, will you please tell me? I can help. I'd like to, even. K?

I stroked off thinking about you last night. Hell, I stroke of thinking about you every night. And most mornings. And occasionally in the shower, too. I can't even think about fucking anyone else anymore. At least you have Tim and Jerry to get you off, eh? I'm impatient, even if it is only a month away. One month, Gray, and we'll be starting something totally new together. It can't get here fast enough. Overtime is going to kick my ass this month though, so it should pass quickly.

All my love, and kisses for the boys and Stace.

Paul

Letter taped to top of one of six boxes, arriving at Paul's on May 19th

Baby,

So, by the time these get to you I'll be out of the loft and at Jerry and Tim's. You have the phone number, right?

Everything is ready to sell. The bed's been taken apart, the mattress chucked, the sheets handed off to be used as drop cloths. I have two blankets and my pillow, and I'm sleeping on the couch. Which I hope will be sold.

Okay, so these are the first six boxes -- you did get six, I hope to god. I'll be sending probably four more in the next few days, and I'm bringing two suitcases with me. I'm sending the dishes in this box, please open it up and make sure they're not broken? And if they are, don't tell me. Ever.

I miss you.

Don't wanna sleep with Keith. Don't wanna sleep with Jerry and Tim. Well, I don't want to have sex with them. I might want to cuddle. Just wanna be with you.

Soon.

June 3rd.

Man, how can that be so soon and so far away?

The summer theater gig sound fantastic, baby! That seriously rocks -- I'm so glad there's something cool going on that way. You're going to love it, and I can't wait to see the productions.

Had a dinner with the faculty after the last of the marks were in. It was nice, I guess -- I got to finally talk a lot about the new job and we had a wonderfully academic discussion. Then we got drunk and I talked about you until people finally made that "Aw, he's so cute when he's in love" face that drives me nuts. Although one of the ladies who shall remain nameless told me as she left that the thought of me doing a guy made her want to fuck her husband. He turned purple. It was funny.

Stace is here --

HI PAUL!

Eh. She's cute. Got a haircut.

OH MAN!!! She's taking my clothes, stop her!!!

I can't believe she did that. Gone. All gone. I have two pairs of jeans, one Henley, and a bunch of socks. I think we're going shopping. Oh, she left the leather coat, too, she made sure of that.

She took my boxers! Apparently, I have unsexy underwear.

So, when I see you I'll look like someone else. That'll be fun. Not.

Love you, baby.

See you soon. I'll call.

Love,

Gray

Written on graph paper, with green ink. Enclosed is a tiny manila envelope, on which is written an address and a phone number, and inside is a key.

Dated May 21

Gray,

Your boxes arrived Wednesday. All six of them, and I got a notice that four more will be delivered tomorrow, so I think you're all set. It's unbelievable torture to have all ten of your boxes here, your things, and not YOU.

I opened up the one with the dishes. Sorry I didn't open them the day they arrived, but I have been working massive amounts of overtime and I just was too tired until tonight.

Actually, I'm too tired tonight, too, but I can sleep late tomorrow, it's Saturday. The dishes all arrived safely, you'll be happy to know. I was nicely embarrassed by the purple dildo sitting on top of them. You are a cruel jokester. Keith was amused, and I think I even blushed. I hope you're happy.

I have enclosed an envelope for you. On it is our new address and phone number! The phone will be active as of the 1st. Inside is the key to our place, which I know doesn't do you a damn bit of good where you are, and it's not like I couldn't have given to you when I picked you up at the airport, but I thought you might like to have the first concrete evidence of our future together in the palm of your hand, now.

I fondle mine frequently and think of you. Is that perverted or what?

Keith was in a minor car accident. He's ok, but he's not going to be able to help with the boxes so I hired movers. He was driving with Rork in the fog and got caught in a bit of a pile-up. They're both a little bruised and whip lashed but that's it. Rork's sexy BMW Z-series is another matter. God, what a beautiful car that was. He actually cried over it, and I'm not sure I blame him. For a visual, imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger sobbing like a baby on my couch. It was positively surreal.

Are you enjoying your stay with the boys? I called the other day to get their address so I could write you (you forgot that detail). I talked with Tim, he says your new look is 'astoundingly hot'. Thank Stace for me. He also admonished me that they were going to miss you and I had better be good to you. But it was all in the name of friendship and I appreciated it.

Get your ass out here.

I love you. I know I said not to, but call me anyway.

Paul

Chapter 34

What a long day. But all the boxes were moved along with what little furniture he had, which was mostly just a bed, some side tables and a big TV that Paul set up almost immediately. At the moment he was watching the TV, sitting on the hardwood floor in the living room munching on a pizza, and wishing he knew which box had the porn in it.

The phone rang.

The phone. Oh shit, where was it?

He got to his feet and followed the ringing sound hoping it wouldn't stop before he got to it. He knew who it was. It could only be one of two people and he'd said goodnight to Keith an hour ago.

"Don't hang up, baby, don't hang up..." he said, scrambling over boxes and lunged for the receiver.

"Hel...ow!" He fumbled with the phone. "Hello? Hang on... hold on..." He pulled himself up with a grunt and slipped off the box he was sitting on. "Hello? Gray?"

There was a brief silence and then warm laughter came to him. "Baby? You okay?"

Paul sighed, grinning. "Couldn't find the phone, dove over a box, crushed some important bits. You'd have gotten a kick out of it." He settled back on the floor and turned the sound off on the TV. "Hi."

"Hi." He could almost see Gray smiling at him. "So, everything got there okay? The movers weren't jerks? Keith okay?"

"Keith's good, he was here for a while supervising, which really means he was making margaritas for the movers. It rained all day and we need a couch. Other than that, things are good. Better now that your voice is in the room." He laughed softly. "Oh, the movers were hot, you're so sorry you missed it. Straight as arrows I'm sure, but hot. This place is huge without furniture in it."

"Shopping for furniture I can do. Well, I can tell you what sucks. Hot tub working?" Paul could hear Gray moving around, the sound of things shifting, like he was walking or moving something heavy. Scraping noises.

"I don't know, there's no water in it; they drained it and cleaned it for us. I'll have to read about how it works; I'm sure my back will want to check that out tomorrow." Paul smiled. "What are you up to over there?"

"Uh, sorting some stuff out. I kinda forgot about the trunk of the car when I was packing,

so when the guy took it today I wound up with another box of crap to go through. Nothing here worth keeping, though -- jumper cables I won't need, the guys already claimed the rope... Oh, and guess what?"

"What?" Paul asked, grinning about the rope. "Found something?"

"No, nothing like that. Well, I found a couple of books, but that's not the thing. I kinda sorta forgot to let my mom know I'm moving until yesterday. She might hate me now. God, I suck. You on the other hand, deserve a medal for putting up with me, she says."

"What? Mama's boy didn't fess up to moving in with his lover right away?" Paul laughed. He really couldn't believe it. Forgetting about his mother was not like Gray at all. Maybe he ought to be smug about that.

"I am not a mama's boy!" But Gray was laughing, too. "I just... damn. Paper cut. I've just been so busy, you know? So when I got the mail yesterday and her name was on the thing I thought 'Oh fuck!' and called her. Had to spend ages convincing her you're not a roommate, that we're together and lovers, but she got it. I hope. We might have to make out in front of her, or something."

"I really think she's going to have to walk in on us fucking before she really gets it, baby." Paul snickered. "Ew. Let's hope she doesn't, though."

"Ew is right." There was a brief pause and then Gray grunted softly, like he'd picked up something heavy and the sound of footsteps. "So really, the apartment's okay, if a little empty? I can't wait to get there." He sounded breathless.

"It's great. They cleaned it pretty well, although I really have to get into the shower with something and do the grout; it needs some TLC. The key works, the water runs, the phone works, the view isn't bad, the kitchen has a garbage disposal which I didn't realize... oh! And our bathroom has a massager shower head. How about that?" Paul imagined hours of wet fun. "Am I echoing, though? Because the living room really is empty."

"Nah, no echo. But then, I'm under a bed, so I could be muffled. How big is the bedroom? And I think we can get... attachments for the shower head."

Attachments. That was his Gray, the kinky fuck. "It's a good size. My queen fits, and we could probably get a king if we want one. You're under the bed?"

"Yeah, dropped my cock ring and I can't reach it. Fuck. I like that one... oh, got some news for you, too. Damn, can't breathe under here, hang on." Paul could hear Gray struggling to get out and then a series of rapid sneezes, muted by a hand over the phone. Then Gray sniffled at him and said, "Okay, back. Where was I?"

"News?" Paul asked, shaking his head at Gray. He was such a geek. God, he wanted Gray

out here. He could almost feel him in the room.

"News? Oh right, sorry. Man, I want that cock ring. Anyway, yeah. Got my results back, baby."

"Get a coat hanger. Results?" Paul took a bite of his pizza.

"A coat hanger? You're sick. Seriously, that's just wrong."

Paul almost choked on his pizza. "To get the cock ring out from under your bed, you sick fuck!" He swallowed and then laughed. "Jesus, Gray."

"Oh!" If blushes could be seen across a country, Paul was pretty sure the red glow in the sky was Gray. "Right. Okay. Fuck off." And then Gray was laughing also, almost screaming with it, all breathless and squeaky.

Paul chuckled and listened to Gray's breathless laughter, missing him more. "Results for what, you pervert, and did you have Jerry email me your flight info?"

Gray gasped a few times and finally calmed down. "Yeah, yeah I did. Set up your computer, baby. And the results from the clinic, of course. Clean and healthy and willing to nail you minus latex."

"Oh!" Paul was relieved. "I knew they would be. I mean, I worry because... I don't know, I do, but I knew they would be." He was grinning broadly, probably looked like an idiot. "Excellent. A condom-free household!"

"Uh huh. Just think of how much spare cash we're going to have now, too." Paul could hear a door open and close on Gray's end, and then the sound of springs compressing.

"Maybe I'll actually pay Keith for his weed now." Paul snickered.

"Let's not be hasty -- free pot is always a good thing. Let's let him use the hot tub instead. Unless he's gonna fuck his boyfriend in it -- ew. Ah, you are a brilliant man, Paul."

Paul grinned. "Am I? How brilliant? Tell me how brilliant I am. Are you alone?"

"You are so brilliant you know how to retrieve cock rings that get tossed off in the middle of the night. When I'm tossing off. And you're so brilliant, I bet you know what I'm going to do in about thirty seconds. Seeing as how I'm alone and all. And talking to you. And holding my favorite cock ring."

"Dust it off first, at least," Paul snorted. "Are you gonna wear it for me, lover?" Paul teased, and rubbed himself through his jeans. "God, I wish you were here right now."

"It's not dusty -- Tim's a neat freak," Gray said happily. "Want me to wear it? I can hold

off pretty long if I've got it on, baby. I'll show you -- soon as I get there." Paul could hear Gray's zipper going down, and then another one before he heard fabric sliding off skin. "Hard for you already. I get hard every time I'm on the phone with you, you know? Even if we don't get off together, I always have to come when we're done."

"Me too, me too." Paul nodded, working his jeans open and sliding them down his hips. He was thankful this room had windows that looked at sky because he didn't have shades yet. "When you get here I'm going to bend you over your box of china and fuck you raw. I think I'm obsessed. I need you here Gray, it can't happen soon enough. Two of the longest fucking... ah... god... days of my life." Paul had his cock free and was stroking it slowly, growing hard, and sadly without a cock ring himself. It was in one of these damn boxes.

"Oh, please," Gray sighed. "Been so damn long... the guys are a little stunned at me, I think. I just want you, Paul. Need you in me. Toys aren't the same, need to taste your skin. Want to kiss you until you gasp." Squeaking noises suggested Gray was getting comfortable, and Paul could hear a drawer open.

Paul wasn't particularly comfortable, but he didn't care. His bare ass was on the hardwood floor, his jeans pushed down to his knees, and he was leaning up against a stack of boxes. Lube, toys, and the like were all packed. It was just him and his fist, and his beautiful boy on the line. "I took a few days off so I'll be home after you get here." He felt a little breathless already, he wondered if Gray could tell.

"Yeah?" He could hear the slick sound of a lubed hand on skin and Gray moaned softly. "Good to know. Gonna ride you hard, wear you out. Bedroom, kitchen, hot tub. Man, I'm gonna blow you in the airport washroom. Ah, god that's good."

"Works for me... uhhh." Paul closed his eyes. "Anything you want, baby, just imagine that's my hand on you, giving you a squeeze, stroking you off like I did that night on your couch. That was a good night. One of the best." Paul breathed out a sigh into the receiver. "This isn't gonna... last long over here, baby."

"Wait for me, Paul. God, just... hang on." There was a bang and a thump, the sound of zippers again, and the drawer. "Okay, got it. Gonna... oh fuck. Gonna ride this thing. Your hand on me, watching me fuck myself. Oh oh oh. Oh hell -- big." Gray was panting, the sound of him shifting on the bed interspersed with moans and a long groan. "Paul."

"Oh, Jesus." Paul let go of his erection and dropped his head back against the boxes. "Yes, yes ride it, Gray... fucking hit that spot you love, that spot that makes your jaw drop and your eyes squeeze shut, feels good, yeah? Burns a little, stings a little... is this your new one? Is it big, baby?" Paul listened to Gray pant at him. He didn't dare touch his cock and his fingers dug into his thighs with the effort of restraining himself.

"Jesus Christ," Gray gasped, his voice strained. "Can you... ah. Can you hear it? Hear me move? God, Paul, it's big and thick and nowhere near as good as you." He gave a

strangled moan. "There. Oh god, there." Paul could hear him gasping, panting for air in a strict rhythm, sucking in oxygen as he fucked himself.

"Yeah... yes I hear it... can hear the bed shift, too. Hear you fucking your ass with it. I swear to god if I touch myself again I'm gonna blow, Gray, listening to you." Paul swallowed. He ached, his fingers twitched and threatened to move without his leave. "Right there, yeah? That's the spot, Gray? Over and over baby. Just like that. Harder... I know how you like it. You sound like you can barely breathe... so hot."

Gray moaned loudly, the sound turning to a cry at the end. "Paul. Fuck me. God, yes, harder. Want you in me, want to feel you. Yeahyeahyeah, like that, baby, oh god, don't stop!" The sound of the bed sped up, the springs louder in Paul's ear. "Christ!"

"Oh baby, want you, want you so bad. So hard..." Paul's hand slid to his insistent erection. "Can't wait anymore, baby, so hard it hurts, need it, need you. Ah!" He gasped into the phone and looked down at his cock, pulling the phone from where he'd had it pinched between his ear and his shoulder with his other hand. "Come... come on... fuck, yes... Gray!" His hips rolled into his fist and he came hard. "Shit! Ohgodohgod..." He panted into the phone, breathless and trembling.

The panting in his ear suddenly stopped, the squeaking stopped, everything was completely silent. He had a dazed moment to wonder if the phone had disconnected and then he heard a long groan. "Oh god," Gray whispered. "Oh, Jesus fucking hell, Paul, I shot all over the wall."

Paul panted. "You... on the wall?"

"I lost my cock ring again, too."

Paul started to snicker, thought he was still catching his breath. "God, I love you. You're a total geek and I love you." He got to his feet and kicked off his jeans before snaking the phone cord around the boxes and heading for the kitchen to clean up because the phone cord wouldn't reach the bathroom.

"Oh man," Gray drawled. Paul could imagine him stretched out on the bed, spent and cuddly. "Tim's gonna have my balls. Well, I'll tell him they're yours and he'll take something else. Think if I wiped it off with a dry cloth it'll be okay until I get some cleaner? Like ten minutes or so?"

"Soap and water. Don't put any chemicals on it, didn't your mother teach you that? Or was I the only kid who squirted the walls in his sleep?" Paul grinned, cleaning himself up with warm water and a paper towel in the kitchen.

"My mother pretends I don't have semen, you know that. I'm asexual to her... good thing she doesn't know what a slut I am for you." Gray groaned again and Paul could hear him moving. "So I should do that right now, I suppose?"

"Yeah, as soon as possible, that shit stains." Paul was still laughing, he could just picture Tim's disapproving look. 'Really, Gray, at least keep it in the sheets, sweetheart.' "Yeah, you better go. I love you. Oh my god, two days. Don't call me tomorrow -- I'll be a wreck. God, the boxes. Okay... I'm not nervous, I swear."

"You know what?" Gray asked softly. "I'm not. At all. This is right, baby. I'll see you in two days. I love you."

"So right. I'll be at the airport. Keith might come with. I'll see you then. Have a safe flight, love."

"I will. I love you, Paul. See you soon."

And before Paul could say anything more, the line went dead with a click. He hung up the phone reluctantly and stared at it. Two days. Two more days and then his whole life would be new. Better. Perfect.

Chapter 35

Gray looked out the car window and caught his own reflection staring back at him, teeth flashing in a wide grin. He was there, really there. Finally.

On the plane he'd seen this same reflection and had laughed at himself. He'd caught it again in the glass walls of the baggage claim as he grabbed his two suitcases and one box from the carousel, and put it down to being eager to find Paul. The third time? Well, the third time he'd seen that grin had been in the mirror of the washroom after he'd sucked Paul off in a stall. Thank fuck they'd been alone so no one was waiting to arrest them, but really he'd have done it anyway. He couldn't really be blamed, could he? What with Paul being all... Paul. And there.

There. He was right there, and Gray could reach out and touch him and know he wasn't going to have to say goodbye in a week. He turned away from the window, from the sky that was mostly blue and the buildings that were flashing by and put his hand on Paul's.

"Love you," he said, his grin not fading at all.

Paul leaned over as they were stopped at a red light and kissed him. "Look around, baby, this is your new neighborhood." It seemed like that same grin was stuck on Paul's lips, too. "Yummy bakery... oh, no wait, that's a bookstore, the bakery is here." Paul pointed with one finger as he drove down what appeared to be a main street of sorts. "Dry cleaner, not that you have anything that needs it... although I must say, Mr. Graham, that you look great. I love that shirt."

"What, this old thing? I've had it for ages -- it was one of the first things Stace made me get. I've had it two hours longer than the pants." Gray tried to look put out about the loss of his clothes, but if forced -- maybe at gun point -- he'd admit to liking his new wardrobe. He vehemently disagreed with Jerry's assessment of 'adorable' however. "Are we almost there?" God, he wanted to see the new apartment. He wanted to see *their* new home.

"We are." Paul glanced over at Gray. "Um, I just have one confession to make about the neighborhood."

Gray looked out the window by reflex. "Um... too trendy? Too cute? Too... arty?" God, was that another bookstore? Gray thought he'd like the neighborhood just fine.

"Too lesbian." Paul grinned. "The boys live over the hill in the Castro and pay much higher rent." Paul was giggling. "But I figure you're crunchy enough to fit in."

Gray glared. "So long as I'm not girly enough. And hey! Less boys means we can make friends with girls -- ones who can actually tell me stuff I want to know, not how big their dicks are."

"God, I love you." Paul grinned. "Okay! That's our building. We're on the top floor, see the big square window? That's our living room." Paul pulled into a narrow driveway that went around behind the building and parked in a space labeled "4". "And this is our parking space, and those are our back steps." Paul winked and got out of the car.

"Are you going to do this all the way in?" Gray teased. He loved Paul like this, showing his delight. He climbed out of the car and looked around, making a show of it. "And those are our neighbor's windows, and that's our stray cat -- "

"Yes, yes I am. But the cat isn't stray, that's Pussy. She belongs to the girls below us." Paul snickered, opening the trunk. "We have an elevator if we go in the side door."

"We might need it, these bags are heavy. Our lesbians named their cat 'Pussy'? I think I like them already. Can we keep them? Or can we get a bird and name him 'Cock'? And then when the cat eats our bird we'll have brought a little het to the 'hood, what with Cock in Pussy and all."

"Give me that suitcase." Paul wheezed. He was laughing so hard Gray wondered if he'd actually be able to carry it. When Paul could breathe again he added, "They're nice women. They've offered to cook for us in exchange for hot tub time." He loaded himself down with suitcases and headed in the side door that led to the elevator. "Um... Toto and... damn. Oh, Mandy. Toto's real name is Dorothy. I got the whole story last night."

"Good lord, they're not friends of Dorothy, they're the real thing! And she named herself for the dog? No, don't tell me, it's a bitch joke." Gray pushed Paul closer to the door, dragging his other suitcase and carrying the box. "Come on, I wanna see our place!"

It took them longer than Gray had patience for to get everything off the elevator again, but Paul opened the front door as soon as they'd moved Gray's things into the hall. "Go on in!" he said but then grabbed Gray by the arm suddenly. "Oh no, wait a minute." He held out his arms open parallel to the ground. "Come on," he teased. "Up!"

"You're strange," Gray said seriously. Then he hopped up and let Paul carry him across the threshold, hoping to hell he wasn't about to get dropped.

He was surprised to find Paul carried him in easily. Construction work had its advantages. Paul set Gray down and kissed him again. "Welcome home, baby." He smiled and took Gray's hand. "There are your boxes and stuff." They were the only thing in the living room.

Gray squeezed Paul's fingers and looked at the stack of boxes. "I know what's in there. Show me the rest, baby. Show me our room. Our kitchen. Our hot tub!"

Paul pulled Gray through a narrow hall and into the bedroom. "This is our room... and my bed. Well, ours now. You haven't seen my four poster have you? If you think it's too

small we can get a king... um... bathroom is through there and there's another half bath in the hall... " Gray looked around, still smiling. It didn't seem like the smile was going anywhere any time soon.

"Okay. Study-slash-guestroom in here? I figured you could have this room for an office, unless you'd rather have the breakfast nook, which is cool, too, it has a lot of light and we don't need an eat-in necessarily -- whatever you decide. Moving along..." Paul tugged him out of that room, too, and into the kitchen.

Gray loved the apartment. It was warm and sunny and the wood floors shone and it was just so much better than the loft. It was better than a lonely town in New England, and it was shiny and new and it had Paul. "It's wonderful," he said softly, not meaning the kitchen -- which was nice, too. He pulled Paul to him and kissed his lover softly. "You picked a great place, baby. Thank you."

Paul pulled out of the kiss and hugged Gray tightly to his chest. "Oh god, I'm so glad you're here. And you like the place? I was worried. Too many stairs, too quiet a neighborhood, too small, too something, I don't know, I was worried. Fuck. I love you so much."

"It's perfect," Gray said again, letting Paul cling. He suspected that both of them had some clinging to do in the next few weeks and he intended to let it happen as it had to. He whispered to Paul and waited for him to relax, just rubbing his back and feeling his heart beat. "I love you. I love this place. Don't worry, baby. And if it gets nasty smells, we'll just move. Doesn't matter, not at all."

Paul chuckled. "Nasty smells. You're a nut," Paul said, letting Gray go at last. "Come see the tub." He went to the backdoor and unlocked it, stepping out onto a sturdy deck, half of which was really the roof, which is where the hot tub sat. The other half was probably big enough for a grill and a table.

Paul tugged the cover off and then reached down and opened a panel in the side of the tub and it started to hum. "It takes a few minutes to get going." He smiled.

"Oh, whatever shall we do with our time?" Gray teased, trying to insinuate himself back into Paul's arms. "This is really nice," he said a moment later, looking around. "I mean it. This is great."

"Mmm... Oh, hang on, I have a homecoming gift for you." Paul ducked back into the kitchen and reemerged with a stack of paper. "Here," he said, handing the stack over to Gray. It was wrapped in a thick red ribbon. "You might recognize those."

Gray blinked and took the papers, confused until he really looked at the first sheet, half buried under ribbon. His handwriting, his words. "My letters?" He untied the ribbon and let it drop, flipping through the stack. "You saved my letters." And for the second time in a few months he felt a pricking in his eyes as Paul gave him the most wonderful gift. "All

of them," he whispered. "Even the ones where I'm an asshole." He blinked quickly and looked up at Paul, not sure how to say thank you. "I... um. I have yours. The rest of them... a matched set."

"Even the ones where I'm an asshole, too?" Paul grinned. "We can show them to our grandchildren," he teased, kissing Gray's cheek. "See... I remember when you were writing your thesis, you used to write in that spiral notebook for hours on end and I was so mad because all I wanted to do was get into your pants, but I had to pretend like I had studying to do." Paul grinned and cleared his throat. "And when you didn't like how something was going you'd tear pages out and crumple them up and swear and you'd look so hot, all pissed off."

Paul was smiling still, only it had changed a little, softened as he grew sentimental. "Yeah so, I sort of look at those letters as a rough draft, you know? That was the version that had all the stupid mistakes and bad hypotheses and poor phrasing... and this," he stepped close again, resting his hands on Gray's hips. "Starting right here on the roof, *this* is the final edit."

Gray wasn't sure he could breathe. He knew that the blinking had failed him again and there was at least one or two tears in his eyes. And he knew he was finally where he belonged, where he was supposed to be, and it didn't have anything to do with the apartment or California. Blindly, he set the letters, the mad, passionate evidence of his soul, down on a chair and pulled Paul to him. "God, I love you," he whispered fiercely. "More than anything in the whole world. More than anything ever."

Paul sniffled, Gray was sure it was a sniffle, and then wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. He had a bemused look on his face. "Look what you do to me. I love you, too. And better than that, I really believe you when you say it and that's just... it's wild, Gray, it's better than anything." After another moment, Paul stepped away from Gray. Maybe he was feeling a little overwhelmed, which Gray could relate to, or maybe he just didn't know what to do next. He perched himself on the edge of the hot tub and leaned over a bit testing the water temperature.

He looked amazing, Gray thought. Emotional and handsome and happy, and just a little flustered. Gray tilted his head and took a step forward, not really sure what he was supposed to do next. He felt like he could fly, or dance, everything rushing up in him and making him want to do something wild and crazy and fun. He started to laugh, and Paul looked up at him, his eyes suddenly wide.

"Paul? Love me?"

"Gray!"

Paul was too late, and frankly Gray was pretty sure he wasn't seriously trying to get away. He was certainly laughing hard enough when Gray gave him a shove into the hot tub. The man was fast, though -- faster than Gray had counted on, and as Gray heard the

splash, felt the hard tug on his arm and knew he was going in too, he laughed with Paul, letting the world know how happy he was to be exactly where Paul was, no matter how wet he got on the way there.

End