



Festival of Lights

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KEIRA ANDREWS

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS: EIGHT NIGHTS

Keira Andrews

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Chapter One

As he rounded the staircase, Lucas McKenzie stopped for a moment and sighed. He could already hear the pounding bass emanating from above, and he knew without a doubt it was coming from his room.

Well, from Sam Kramer's room.

It was technically Lucas's room, too, but Sam didn't let that stop him from doing exactly what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it. As the star forward on Brookfield University's basketball team, Sam was used to getting his way, and Lucas didn't have the energy to argue most of the time.

The hallway was crowded with revelers celebrating the end of the December exam period. Everyone in the dorm except Lucas was a senior, and although he knew some of them well enough to say hi to, he hadn't really made any friends. Lucas stepped over the drunken people sitting in his doorway and was greeted by a can of cold beer that bounced off his chest and rolled to a stop under the foot of his bed.

"Buddy!" Everyone was Sam's buddy. "School's out!" Sam whooped loudly, his muscled arms thrust over his head. Dark-haired Sam was tall and gorgeous; his chiseled features and

sculpted muscles would be just as at home on a movie screen as they were on the basketball court.

Lucas gave Sam a thumbs-up. "I'm totally stoked!" He'd learned early on in the semester that the best way to deal with Sam was to smile and agree with everything he said.

"Grab a beer and party with us!"

Nodding and smiling, Lucas retrieved the beer from under his bed and popped the top after stashing his knapsack in the closet -- currently the only part of the small room that wasn't occupied by a fellow student. A girl Lucas recognized as living down the hall was sprawled on his bed, sticking her tongue down the throat of a guy who looked old enough to be in his seventh or eighth year of college.

"Holidays are here!" Sam's proclamation was met with a loud cheer from the partygoers. Lucas kept the smile on his face as he worked his way back into the hallway, holding his can of beer aloft in a toast. He headed back toward the stairwell, hoping that he wouldn't run into --

"Lucas!" Andrea Price materialized in front of him, grinning widely.

"Hey, Andrea. How's it going?"

"Great! I'm so glad exams are over. I can't wait to go home."

"Me either." Lucas found it easier to just lie. "Well, enjoy the party!"

"You're not staying?" Andrea touched his arm, her fingers light on his bicep. "I thought maybe we could hang out in my room."

Lucas groaned inwardly. Andrea was a beautiful girl -- blonde and petite with a bright smile -- but she just wasn't Lucas's type.

Not by a long shot.

He'd dated girls before, and he knew plenty of them found him attractive, but he wasn't sure why. He had no fashion sense to speak of, and although he was almost six feet, he

didn't have bulging muscles like Sam and the other athletes. Yet the other day he overheard Andrea and her friend cooing about his blond hair and green eyes.

Unfortunately, he didn't find women attractive. At least, not in the way they found him. "Andrea, I'd love to, but I've got a really bad headache. I'm just going to get some air. Alone."

Her face fell just a fraction before she smiled again. "Sure, I understand. Well, merry Christmas if I don't see you again tonight."

"You, too."

Leaving a disappointed Andrea in his wake, Lucas reached the stairwell and headed up one more flight to the roof. He would love to have her for a friend, but she seemed incapable of reading his signals, so he'd started avoiding her a few weeks earlier. He briefly considered dating her so he could meet some other people, but he swore when he left Michigan that he'd stop pretending. Start being himself.

Of course, he was too nervous to join the campus gay association, so now he didn't date women *or* men. He told himself it would be his New Year's resolution to have the balls to join the club and at least *meet* some other gay people. That would make it official -- still a bit of a scary prospect.

Frigid night air greeted him as he pushed the door open. A group of five or six people huddled together nearby, puffing away on cigarettes. Lucas nodded to them and walked to the other side of the roof, which was usually deserted. Leaning against the waist-high brick wall, Lucas peered out, his breath clouding in front of his face. He was being antisocial, which wouldn't help him fit in at Brookfield.

Thanks to his father's job in sales for Ford, they'd moved around a lot over the years, and Lucas had never made lasting friends. He hoped college would change that, but he felt utterly disconnected from his peers.

He could still feel the bass from downstairs through the soles of his sneakers, the faint thudding more bearable at least. The campus spread out before him, lights twinkling merrily on the trees that lined the drives, winding their way around the stately old buildings.

It was Friday, December 21, the last day of the fall semester. Lucas was fairly confident he'd done well on his last exam -- *organic chemistry, ugh* -- a couple of hours before, and he had hoped Sam's parents had already picked him up to take him home. Sam lived in New York City, a few hours away from the tiny town in upstate New York that was home to Brookfield. Lucas wanted nothing more than to relax in his room and have an early night after being up late studying for the last two weeks.

Clearly he'd have to wait until tomorrow, when the campus emptied, to get some peace and quiet. Yet as much as he wanted some time to himself, Lucas knew that the next two weeks would be a little *too* quiet.

Tomorrow all the students who hadn't already left for home would be taking off, leaving the campus a ghost town. He was the only one on his floor not going home for the holidays, and although he would be glad for the respite from the constant partying, it would soon give way to loneliness.

He thought of his father, and quickly took a gulp of beer to ward off the tightness in his throat. Some more smokers arrived, laughing gaily as they piled out onto the roof. Taking another swig of beer, Lucas joined the party.

* * * * *

"Uhhh."

Another sharp rap on the door echoed through the room, and Lucas forced himself to open his eyes, since it sounded like Sam wasn't yet able to form words. It felt like he'd only been sleeping for an hour, but the light streaming through the window told a different story.

"Samuel, it's your mother." Her voice was soft yet firm on the other side of the door.

“Uhhh,” Sam repeated, his head still buried under his duvet.

Lucas made his way to the door, kicking empty beer cans under the bed and trying to cover up the evidence of the previous night’s activities. When he opened the door, he smiled brightly, not without some effort. “Mrs. Kramer? I’m Lucas.”

“How nice to finally meet you.” She extended her hand and shook his firmly, the tasteful jewels on her rings sparkling.

He stood aside as she swept into the room, surveying the piles of Sam’s dirty clothes, books, and discarded pizza boxes. Mrs. Kramer looked in her early fifties, although Lucas couldn’t be sure. Sam rarely mentioned his family; most of his conversations revolved around basketball, partying, and girls. Many, many girls.

Sam’s mother was an average height, with dark brown, bobbed hair betraying no hint of gray. Her black skirt and camel-colored coat were crisply pressed.

“Samuel.”

Sam groaned again unintelligibly.

Lucas smiled at Mrs. Kramer. “He’s not really a morning person, but I guess you know that.”

“Indeed I do.” She marched the few steps over to Sam’s bed, heels clicking on the tile floor. With a brisk motion, she yanked the duvet off. “Time to get up, young man.”

Sam, clad only in his briefs, groaned again before rolling over onto his back and opening his eyes. “Mom, chill. I thought you were coming later.”

“It is later. Almost noon.”

Sam whined, “What’s the rush?”

“Hanukkah starts tonight at sundown, which I’ve mentioned to you a number of times. So get up and get moving. It’s a three-hour drive home, and I have things to do.”

Grumbling under his breath, Sam stood and shuffled off to the bathroom down the hall, leaving Lucas and Mrs. Kramer alone. Lucas smiled. “I’d offer you a seat, but...”

Returning his smile, she perched on the side of Sam's bed. "This is fine." She glanced around the room one more time before focusing her attention on Lucas. "So, are your parents coming today as well?"

Lucas hated this part, and the looks of pity that inevitably followed. "No, I don't have any family." He forced a happy expression onto his face. "But it's cool. I'll get the place to myself for a couple of weeks. It'll be great."

"No family? None at all?" Mrs. Kramer regarded him with a new interest that unnerved him a little.

"Well, I have some cousins in Texas, but I've never met them."

"What happened to your parents?"

Lucas blinked in surprise. Usually people beat around the bush for a while before getting to that question. "My mom died when I was little; my dad in September. Cancer."

"I'm so sorry to hear it." Her face pinched in concern. "That must have been very difficult for you."

Difficult didn't really begin to cover it, but Lucas nodded. "Yeah."

"That's why you didn't start school until October. I remember Sam wasn't too happy to find out he'd be sharing a room after all. I told him he should have moved off campus, but he insisted on the dorm. I can only imagine that's due to the large number of girls living here." Her smile was wry.

"Yeah, Sam was *thrilled* to have me move in, but my profs were all really good about me starting late, especially since I'm only a freshman."

His father had insisted that Lucas finally enroll in university for the fall, since the doctors hadn't expected him to make it to summer. When September rolled around, Lucas and his dad fought for days, Lucas refusing to leave his bedside while his father adamant that at twenty, Lucas had already put off his future for long enough. Lucas won the battle, and he held his father's hand as he slipped away.

Now he was alone at a school where everyone in his classes already made friends at the start of the year and, thanks to a housing shortage, his roommate was a senior jock with whom he had nothing in common. He could move out -- aside from the life insurance, his dad had left him a fair amount of money -- but then he'd be even more isolated.

He cleared his throat, eager to move on to another topic. "So, Hanukkah starts tonight. That must be fun."

"Yes, it's a nice time of year. What will you do for Christmas?"

"Oh, just hang out or whatever. I'm not religious, so it's no big deal."

"Hmm." She stood and surveyed the room again. "Do you have a suitcase, or one of those duffel bags my son likes so much?"

"I'm sorry?" Lucas's duffel was somewhere at the bottom of his closet, and unless --

"Pack your bag, Lucas. You're going to spend the holidays with us."

"Oh, that's so nice of you, but I couldn't impose." Despite how lonely he might be over Christmas by himself, he was definitely looking forward to time away from Sam.

"You can, and you will. There's simply no way I'm leaving you here all alone."

"I really appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine. Really."

Sam returned, looking marginally more awake than when he left. His mother turned to him. "Samuel, Lucas will be coming to spend the holidays with us. Do you know where he keeps his overnight bag?"

Getting to his feet, Lucas was very tempted to tug on Mrs. Kramer's arm to get her to pay attention to what he was saying. "Thank you, but I'm not even Jewish. I don't want to intrude on your Hanukkah."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're more than welcome."

Yawning widely, Sam clapped him on the shoulder. "Dude, there's no point in arguing. Trust me."

Lucas opened his mouth to protest, but he couldn't think of a good reason he should stay on campus alone for the holidays. Half an hour later, he found himself in the back of the Kramer family SUV, heading toward New York City as the first snowflakes of the season drifted down.

Chapter Two

As they crossed the bridge to Staten Island, Lucas peered out the window as the city passed by. Sam snored lightly in the front seat, and Mrs. Kramer listened to a talk radio station that Lucas had tuned out near Poughkeepsie.

“Have you ever been to the city before?” Mrs. Kramer asked. Her voice jolted Lucas from his reverie.

“No, this is my first time.”

“We’ll have to show you around, then.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” Lucas already felt awkward enough.

“I insist. I’m sure Sam would be more than happy to take you into Manhattan. There’s a wonderful Degas exhibit at the Frick.”

Lucas realized the best way to deal with Mrs. Kramer was the same way he dealt with Sam: he nodded and smiled. “Thanks, that sounds great.” Of course, the idea of Sam voluntarily going anywhere that didn’t serve beer seemed highly unlikely.

They were only on the island for ten minutes before they pulled into the driveway of a large, two-story brick home. The lawn and shrubs were as neatly manicured as Mrs. Kramer, and large picture windows glowed with soft lights in the overcast afternoon.

“What a beautiful home you have.”

Sam, roused from his slumber, grunted. Mrs. Kramer smiled widely in the rearview mirror, her lipstick still somehow untouched despite the cup of coffee she’d had. “Thank you, dear.”

Inside, a man Lucas assumed to be Sam’s father shuffled into the foyer to greet them. He was tall and thin and balding, his glasses propped on his head. He looked as if he’d just woken from a nap. “Hello, son. Good drive home?” He pulled Sam into a hug.

“Hey, Dad. Yeah, sure.”

“He slept the whole way as usual, Benjamin. Just like you would have done.”

Mr. Kramer shrugged sheepishly. “Like father, like son, I suppose.” He suddenly noticed Lucas hovering just inside the door, holding his duffel bag. “And who’s this?”

Mrs. Kramer ushered Lucas forward with a gentle hand on his arm. “This is Sam’s roommate, Lucas. He’s going to spend the holidays with us.”

After blinking in surprise, Mr. Kramer smiled broadly, shaking Lucas’s hand firmly. “Welcome! It’s good to meet you.”

“Thanks, nice to meet you, too.” Lucas peered around at what he could see of the tastefully decorated home. The living room featured dark redwood, accented with rich reds and yellows. He glimpsed the kitchen at the end of the front hall and saw more redwood cupboards and stainless steel appliances.

“Sam’s room is still a disgusting mess from Thanksgiving.” Mrs. Kramer glared at Sam as he opened his mouth. “I told you I’m not your maid anymore.” Glancing at her delicate gold watch, she pressed her lips together. “I’ve got to get organized in the kitchen; everyone will be here before we know it. Nathaniel has the extra bed in his room, so Lucas can stay there.”

Lucas followed Sam up a plush staircase off to the right. “Lucky you, you get to crash with my geeky little brother.”

“Are you sure he won’t mind?” Lucas certainly wouldn’t be happy, and he had to admit the thought of rooming with a kid wasn’t his idea of a good time. Sam was bad enough.

“Who cares? What Mom says goes.” At the top of the stairs, Sam pounded on the first door on the left. “Yo, loser! Open up.” With that, he continued down the hall, which was decorated in muted tones of green and brown.

“Wait, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Dude, I’ve gotta piss.” With that, Sam disappeared into another doorway, closing it behind him.

After waiting a good twenty seconds without a response, Lucas knocked tentatively on the door. He didn’t hear any movement inside, so after another half minute, he knocked a little louder. This time he heard what sounded like a curse, followed by, “What?”

Lucas slowly poked his head in. The large bedroom had two twin beds jutting out from the left-hand wall, and Nathaniel sat at a desk straight ahead against the window side of the room. Lucas saw immediately that he wasn’t a little kid at all. From the back, he looked at least Lucas’s age, with short, wavy, chestnut hair.

“I’m reading, Sam.”

“Um, I’m sorry to bother you.” Lucas stood in the doorway awkwardly, not sure how to proceed.

Nathaniel spun in his seat. “Who are you?” He stared with big eyes through a pair of black-framed glasses, his soft features making him more pretty than handsome.

“I’m Sam’s roommate. From college. I guess I’m going to be your roommate for the holidays.” He glanced around the neat room, covered in childish wallpaper depicting sailboats and anchors. In the center of each wall was a large, framed black-and-white photograph. The stark and beautiful pictures of mountains and trees seemed out of place.

Nathaniel took this in before he smiled ruefully. “Clearly this was my mother’s doing.”

“How’d you guess?” Lucas smiled back. “Look man, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t be too happy if I were you.”

He shrugged. “It’s cool.”

“Thanks. I’m Lucas, by the way.” He dropped his bag and walked to the desk, putting his hand out.

Nathaniel stood, and Lucas could see they were about the same height. He regarded Lucas for a long moment before extending his hand. “Call me Nate.”

* * * * *

Lucas smoothed down his shirt with the palm of his hand and wished again that he’d thought to ask Mrs. Kramer for an iron. The black button-down was the only good shirt he owned, and after being squashed in his bag for a few hours, it was a little worse for wear.

He leaned against the doorframe between the living and dining rooms, watching as Sam’s relatives chatted happily. There were grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins...fourteen people in all. They’d all been very friendly when he was introduced, but Lucas couldn’t help but feel out of his element. He hadn’t been to many family gatherings.

“All right, time to light the menorah!” Mrs. Kramer clapped her hands once for attention. “Samuel, why don’t you do the honors and read the blessings.”

Sam didn’t look too excited, but he dutifully stepped up to the ornate candleholder in the front window. From the elevated candle in the center, two wings of four candles curved down gracefully to the left and right. After a moment, Sam spoke in what Lucas assumed was Hebrew.

Almost all of the guests recited the blessing along with Sam. Two more blessings followed, and Lucas wondered if he should bow his head. He glanced around the room and found Nate watching him from the other side. Lucas blushed and focused on Sam as he lit the center candle on the menorah, followed by the one farthest to the right.

“Nathaniel, come and say the *Hanerot Halalu*. Stop hiding in the back.” Mrs. Kramer extended her hand and Nate came forward.

Taking a small book from his mother, he slipped his glasses on and began reading quietly. His voice was soft and melodious in contrast, and Lucas could hardly believe Nate and loudmouth Sam were related at all, let alone brothers.

When Nate was finished, he folded his glasses back into his shirt pocket, and Mr. Kramer burst into song, everyone else following suit. Lucas couldn’t understand the lyrics, and as the verses went on, it seemed like only the older people knew all the words. After the song ended, Mrs. Kramer brought out trays filled with what looked like lightly powdered doughnuts without holes.

“Hands down, the best part of Hanukkah.” A pretty young woman with long, reddish hair smiled eagerly at Lucas, a tray in her hand. “Try one.”

Lucas returned her smile and picked up a doughnut. “Thanks for the tip. What’s your name?”

“I’m Rachel. Sam and Nate are my cousins. You’re Lucas, right?” She beamed at him.

“I am.” Lucas glanced at Nate, alone across the room, thumbing through the prayer book. “So what’s Nate like?” He hoped his tone was casual. There was something about Sam’s brother that he found intriguing.

“Nate? He’s always been quiet. He’s twenty-one now, but he’s still never had a girlfriend. Always too busy studying and taking pictures. I don’t know; he’s weird.” Shame flickered across her face. “I mean, I love him, of course! He’s a really good guy.”

“Oh, of course.” Mrs. Kramer walked by, apparently in the middle of an argument with an elderly man. Lucas raised an eyebrow at Rachel, changing the subject. “What’s up with them?”

Rachel rolled her eyes artfully. “Papa thinks we should be observing the Sabbath -- it’s every Friday. That would mean going to synagogue and not cooking anything or using cars to get home. It’s just not practical.”

“Does he follow the rules every week?”

“Yes, but he and Bubbe -- our grandmother -- are the only observant ones in the family.” Rachel leaned in and lowered her voice. “Except if there’s a Mets game on a Friday. Then all bets are off.”

Laughing, Lucas took a bite of his doughnut, and a divine sweetness filled his mouth. “Wow, you’re right. That’s delicious. I didn’t know you guys had holiday doughnuts.”

Laughing, she said, “*Sufganiyot*, but yeah, that’s basically what they are.”

“And you eat them before dinner?”

“In our family we eat them before and after. Sometimes during,” Nate said, appearing beside Lucas and reaching out to the tray.

Lucas laughed. “Beats turkey, that’s for sure.” Not that he and his father ever had a traditional Christmas. They’d made their own tradition: pizza and junk food and football on TV. His dad had loved football, and even though Lucas didn’t, he never complained.

He remembered their last Christmas, when his dad couldn’t keep anything down thanks to the never-ending chemo. He fell asleep in his armchair at halftime, but Lucas kept the game on, just in case his dad woke up.

“Rachel, I think my mom needs you in the kitchen,” Nate said.

As she scurried off, Lucas swallowed the large lump in his throat, blinking rapidly as he looked at the floor. He was going to make a fool of himself if he didn’t get it together. After a calming breath, he took another bite of his doughnut and tried to act normal. “So, you guys eat like this for eight nights in a row?”

Nate smiled softly. “No, we just have a big dinner on the first night and once again before it’s over, depending on everyone’s schedules. We light the menorah every night, but

that's about it. Hanukkah's actually not that big a deal. It's not a high holiday like Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah."

Another tray went by, and they both grabbed another sweet treat. Lucas was feeling better, his memories of his father receding. "What other Jewish delicacies await me tonight?"

"You like potatoes?"

"Does anyone *not* like potatoes?"

Nate seemed to ponder the question seriously. "No one I can think of." He added, "Tonight the potatoes will be in pancake form. *Latkes*."

"I really hope there isn't maple syrup involved."

As Nate grinned, a dimple appeared in his left cheek, and Lucas felt a flutter in the pit of his stomach. He reminded himself that the last thing he needed was to develop a crush on his roommate's brother. The brother he was sharing a room with for the next two weeks.

Mrs. Kramer dashed by, insisting that Lucas eat the last sufganiyot on her tray. He gratefully obeyed and stuffed it in his mouth.

"It's time to sit down." Nate's hand was warm on Lucas's shoulder, and a tingle ran all the way down his arm. He nodded and followed him into the dining room, hoping his cheeks weren't too bright.

* * * * *

Lucas woke to pressure on his bladder and the faint sound of running water that had permeated his consciousness. He opened his eyes reluctantly and took in the early morning gloom. According to his watch it was after eight, but evidently it would be another gray, cloudy day.

He sat up and surveyed the room. Nate's bed beside him, closest to the windows, was empty. Across the way, an extra wardrobe stood in the corner beside the bathroom, and light shone through the half-open bathroom door, the water running in the shower.

Lucas couldn't wait to pee. He got up to venture into the hall to find another toilet, but his eyes kept finding the half-open door, and he hesitated. Without really knowing what he was doing, he tiptoed toward it. A couple of feet away he stopped suddenly, breath frozen in his chest.

Through the doorway he could see the large mirror over the white sink. Reflected in it was Nate, who Lucas could see clearly through a completely transparent shower curtain. Nate's head tipped back under the water as his hands soaped his body.

A body that was more toned and defined that Lucas would ever have guessed.

Lucas forced a breath into his lungs as his pulse thrummed. With a start, he realized he was hard -- not unusual first thing in the morning -- and he clenched his fist to avoid touching himself.

Nate began stroking himself lazily as if on cue. He leaned a shoulder against the tiles; his eyes closed as he worked his hand up and down his shaft. He tugged a few times, and Lucas whimpered with need.

The water sluiced down Nate's firm, long body, steam beginning to rise as he continued working himself. Lucas moved a step closer, squinting at the image in the mirror to get a better look. With his other hand, Nate fondled his balls, and his strokes increased in tempo.

Lucas wasn't sure when it happened, but his own hand was down his pajamas, fist tight around his cock and moving like a jackhammer. The mirror in the bathroom was fogging, and Lucas knew he couldn't risk getting any closer. He heard Nate's muffled moan, and the sound was enough to put Lucas over the edge as he emptied into his hand, the rush of pleasure practically knocking him over.

There was a soft thud as he caught himself on the wall, and in the mirror he thought he saw Nate's head turn his way, eyes open. Lucas stumbled backward and dove into his bed, pulling the covers up and flipping on his side toward the door.

With his eyes jammed shut, he tried to catch his breath and keep still. A minute later, he heard Nate pad into the room. Lucas feigned sleep as Nate dressed and ignored the fact that now he really, really had to pee.

When Nate finally left the room, closing the door gently behind him, Lucas waited thirty seconds and then hurried into the bathroom to relieve himself. His pajamas were a sticky mess. He couldn't exactly hang them to dry, so he spread them out under his duvet after a quick rinse, knowing he might have to sleep in a damp bed that night.

Downstairs, Nate and his father talked quietly at the kitchen table, sipping coffee. Nate handed Lucas a steaming mug, their fingers brushing. Lucas stammered out his thanks and was soon embroiled in a discussion with Mr. Kramer about Sam's many achievements in basketball.

As Mr. Kramer waxed poetic on a game-winning layup Sam had made, Lucas wondered if Rachel was right about Nate's lack of girlfriend.

Every time Lucas glanced at Nate, his temperature rose with a rush of desire. He wanted him, and now he'd be in close quarters with him for days on end. Looking, but not touching.

It was going to be a very, very long holiday.

Chapter Three

Lucas spent the afternoon with Sam and his father in the den, watching football on a big-screen plasma TV that made Lucas practically drool. Nate had disappeared into his room after lunch, and Lucas tried not to obsess about what he was doing.

It was just after five when Mrs. Kramer told them it was time to light the menorah. Sam groaned, and Lucas could have sworn Mr. Kramer did too, but they obediently headed to the front room.

Nate was already there, the matches in his hand. As Lucas watched Nate, he couldn't help but notice how his ass looked in his faded jeans, and he mentally slapped himself with the reminder that this was a religious ceremony.

Nate seemed to only recite two blessings before lighting the candles, when Lucas thought there had been three the night before. As if he could read Lucas's mind, Nate said, "There only three blessings on the first night, and we don't bother with the prayer and song when it's just us."

"Can we get back to the game now?" Sam looked at his mother, waiting for her approval.

Her hands found her hips and she good-naturedly said, “You know this is supposed to be a time for family, not for TV.”

“Sweetheart, it’s the fourth quarter.” Mr. Kramer gave his wife a beseeching smile.

With a laugh, she shooed them out, her husband kissing her soundly on his way. “Go on, Lucas. I’ll be in with dinner in a little while.”

“Do you want any help? I don’t really care that much about football.” Nate was already at the foot of the stairs, and Lucas willed him to turn around and stay.

Nate smirked. “Don’t care about sports? That’s sacrilege in this house.” Then he was gone, his steps fading as he went back upstairs.

Sam’s voice bellowed from the den. “Dude, you’ve got to see this play! Come on, you’re missing it!”

With a smile for Mrs. Kramer, Lucas reluctantly returned to the den.

* * * * *

After a dinner of leftovers on TV trays, Lucas and the Kramers watched an action movie on DVD. Nate had come down for dinner, but disappeared back up to his room halfway through the movie. Lucas yearned to follow.

When Lucas said goodnight just before eleven, Mrs. Kramer gave him a plate of sufganiyot to take up to Nate. “Always hiding away up there. He doesn’t eat enough.”

Lucas knocked softly on Nate’s closed bedroom door before opening it. To his surprise, Nate wasn’t in the darkened room, and the bathroom appeared empty. The space around the closet door glowed with a reddish light, and after a moment of debate, Lucas approached and knocked.

“Hold on,” Nate said.

“Okay.” Lucas stood there with the plate of doughnuts, wondering what on earth could be going on inside.

Two long minutes later, Nate opened the door and Lucas felt a flush of embarrassment for not figuring out that the red light was indicative of a darkroom. The walk-in closet had been fashioned into a working space with a counter running around the perimeter holding trays of developing liquid. A clothesline ran across the back of the closet, large photographs pinned to it.

“You’re a photographer?”

Nate chuckled. “You clearly have a future as a detective.”

Flushing, Lucas shuffled his feet. “Clearly.” He suddenly remembered the plate in his hand. “Here, your mom thinks you need to eat more. I can just leave them.”

“You wanna come in? I’ve just got to develop a couple more shots.”

Lucas nodded and pulled the door shut behind him. Enclosed in the small space with Nate, his pulse raced. In the soft red glow, Nate looked better than ever, and Lucas fought the urge to reach out and touch him.

Lord, he needed to get a grip. Lucas cleared his throat and attempted to clear his mind. “I guess this explains why you keep your clothes in that wardrobe.”

“Yeah, Mom was overjoyed when I made this a darkroom, as I’m sure you can imagine.” He glanced over his shoulder as he splashed some fluid into one of the trays. “You ever develop a picture before?”

“Uh uh.” Lucas had been examining the back of Nate’s neck, and didn’t feel capable of complete sentences.

“I’ll show you.”

As Nate went through the steps, Lucas tried to pay attention. At one point, Nate handed him a pair of rubber-tipped tongs, and Lucas dutifully plucked out a developed photo and hung it on the line. They worked in companionable silence, and Lucas found he enjoyed watching the photographs come to life. They were all black-and-white cityscapes, and he felt

a frisson of excitement, knowing he'd get a chance to finally see New York for himself in the days to come.

"You took all of these?" Lucas admired the clean lines and unique angles of the photos.

Nate waved his hand dismissively. "Yeah, I'm just messing around."

"I'd like to see what you can do when you're taking it seriously because these are amazing."

"It's nice of you to say so." Nate wiped his hands on a towel and plucked a doughnut from the plate Lucas had left on the counter. "We just need to wait now before we open the door."

Nate didn't seem comfortable with praise, so Lucas stopped talking and took his own doughnut, relishing the sweet, fruity flavor. He couldn't understand why Nate trivialized his talent. Lucas was no expert, but he found the photographs beautiful.

They ate in silence, and Lucas noticed a blob of jelly filling on the corner of Nate's mouth. Before he could think, he reached out, swiping at it with his finger. Their eyes locked, and Lucas froze, his hand still at Nate's mouth.

Oh God, what was he doing?

He stayed in place, not breathing as he and Nate stared at each other in the muted red light. Before Lucas could process what was happening, Nate's tongue curled out and licked the jelly from his finger. A jolt of desire ran through Lucas, and he swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly dry.

Nate turned his head just a bit and sucked Lucas's finger into his mouth.

As Lucas moaned low in his throat, Nate yanked him close, and they were kissing. Lucas's head swam from the explosion of sensations he felt.

He was actually kissing another man.

He opened his mouth and Nate's tongue dived in, probing and stroking as his hands ran over Lucas's back, down to his ass.

Quiet, mild-mannered Nathaniel Kramer was grabbing his ass.

His head swimming, Lucas kissed Nate back, his body alive in a way it never had been while kissing a girl. The scratch of Nate's stubble, his musky scent -- every thing about him was so *male*, and any lingering doubts Lucas had about being gay melted away as he explored Nate's mouth.

They both gasped for air, and Lucas realized that his jeans were undone as Nate sank to his knees. "What are you...?"

As Nate grinned wickedly and took Lucas in his mouth, all intelligent thought fled. Lucas leaned back against the counter, his hands searching for purchase as he moaned at the sensation of the wet heat of Nate's mouth. His right hand slid into one of the wet developing trays as Nate sucked him into his throat, and Lucas's whole body vibrated. Nate's tongue was doing things he'd never imagined possible, and it certainly hadn't felt like this when Paige Gallner had sucked him off on prom night.

Lucas felt like his cock was pulsing in time with his heart, all his nerve endings on fire. He quivered as Nate cradled his balls, and an instant later, he tipped over the edge, coming into Nate's mouth as he closed his eyes and saw red-tinged stars. Nate held Lucas up with strong hands on his hips, standing a few moments later, swiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Uh..." Lucas still couldn't seem to form a sentence, which made Nate smile as he began jerking himself off casually. Lucas watched, wide-eyed. "So, you're gay, too?"

Nate's eyebrows arched in amusement. "Detective material for sure."

Lucas tried to keep his eyes on Nate's face, which was a challenge when Nate was stroking himself. A drop of precum glistened on the end of his long, hard cock, and Lucas had the urge to lean down and taste it. He tried to focus. "You knew I was gay?"

"I hoped. I *knew* when you watched me jerk off in the shower."

Blood rushing to his cheeks, Lucas squeaked in embarrassment.

His hand still stroking his cock, Nate laughed softly. “I figured if you fell into my trap, this Hanukkah could be a lot more memorable than usual.”

“A trap? That’s...that’s...” Lucas trailed off, distracted as Nate started breathing harder, fisting his dick faster, eyes locked on Lucas’s face. Lucas watched, enraptured, as Nate came into his hand, some of it landing on Lucas’s foot.

Lucas couldn’t quite get organized enough to wipe it off, and Nate bent down and did it for him. “Sorry about that.” He smirked, and raised a sticky finger, rubbing it along Lucas’s bottom lip. “So what do you say we have some fun this holiday?”

All Lucas could do was nod, and then Nate was kissing him again.

Chapter Four

“Look at this fog -- sticking around all day! There’s a gorgeous view from this bridge, but I’m afraid the weather’s not cooperating.”

Lucas spoke up from the backseat. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Kramer. I’m sure I’ll see the view another day.”

“You simply must. Perhaps you can come back into the city on the ferry. You’ll get a good look at the Statue of Liberty, too. I’m afraid I don’t like heights, or I’d have taken you up the Empire State Building myself today.” She glanced in the rearview. “Sam, you’ll take Lucas back tomorrow?”

“I’ve got stuff to do with my friends. I already spent a whole day at a stupid museum.”

“Samuel.”

The truth was, Lucas couldn’t have cared less about seeing the city anymore. What he cared about was that Nate had been an arm’s length away from him all day and he couldn’t touch him. Nate had taken the front seat after a heated debate with Sam, and he was tantalizingly close, yet out of reach. Lucas’s leg jittered, and he noted the traffic with impatience. He just wanted to be back in Nate’s room.

Back in his bed.

Well, he hadn't slept there or anything. After they'd made out again and Nate had given Lucas another mind-bending blowjob, they'd slept in separate beds. Lucas knew it was stupid to sleep together in a tiny twin bed when Nate's parents could walk in at any time, but he still wanted to. When he woke, Nate was already downstairs.

"Mom, I've got plans!" Sam was whiny when he didn't get his way.

Lucas cleared this throat. "You know, I can just come back by myself."

"I can take him." Nate's voice was so quiet, Lucas barely heard him.

"Will you, darling? I thought you'd be busy with your little hobby. So many hours you spend locked up in that closet."

"It's not a problem." Lucas thought he could detect an edge to Nate's voice now.

"Yeah, because King Geek doesn't have any friends." Sam laughed.

"*Samuel*. Your brother has lots of friends at NYU. He's in the law society, after all."

"Just no friends I'd introduce to you, asswipe," Nate added.

Lucas turned his head to the window and smiled as Nate and Sam continued to bicker. After what seemed like an eternity, they were home. Lucas wanted nothing more than to go up to Nate's room and spend the whole night there, but he had to make more small talk and sit through another dinner.

First they gathered in the living room and lit the candles on the menorah, adding another to the right-hand side. Mr. Kramer recited the blessings beforehand, and Lucas tried to listen and not think about how he wanted to lick Nate's Adam's apple. He asked, "What's the story behind Hanukkah? Something about oil, right?"

Mr. Kramer grinned. "Well, there's an old joke; every Jewish holiday boils down to: they tried to kill us, they didn't, let's eat."

Mrs. Kramer jumped in. "After the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem from their enemies, there was only enough oil to light the eternal flame for one day. However, the oil lasted for eight nights."

“A miracle.” Mr. Kramer clapped his hands together. “Okay, let’s eat.”

At dinner, Lucas pushed the Thai takeout around on his plate, and afterwards he tried to concentrate on the game of Hearts Mr. Kramer suggested. Although Nate retreated to his room, Lucas couldn’t think of a good reason to go to bed at eight o’clock.

When he finally escaped a few hours later, he thought he might explode with pent-up desire and frustration. He practically ran up the stairs, and burst into Nate’s room without knocking. Nate, lying on his bed, looked up from the book he was reading.

“Good game?”

“I don’t know. Not really; I kept getting stuck with the queen of spades.”

“Too bad.” Nate yawned widely. “I was just about to go to sleep. So if you want to read or anything, can you use that little lamp on your side?”

Lucas was speechless for a moment. “Yeah. Sure.” That’s it? Nate was going to go to *sleep*? Lucas suddenly felt incredibly embarrassed and wished he could be anywhere else.

Standing, Nate pulled his sweater over his head, stretching his arms up high and yawning again. He unzipped his khakis and stepped out of them before carefully folding his clothes and placing them on his desk chair, clad only in his boxers. Lucas, still standing dumbly, watched.

Nate strolled back to his bed and stretched out. He glanced over at Lucas, and burst out laughing. “Oh man, I should take a picture of your face right now.”

Son of a... “This is your idea of a joke?”

Patting the mattress beside him, Nate beckoned Lucas over. Lucas didn’t know whether to kiss him or kill him, but as soon as he felt Nate’s skin under his palms, he knew it would be the former. Lucas covered Nate’s body with his own as their mouths met.

They kissed for minutes or maybe hours, until Nate propped himself up on his elbows and took a breather. “I thought you were going to jump me at the dinner table. Good thing my family’s so clueless.”

“You were playing hard to get?”

“Of course.” Nate grinned, displaying his dimple and sending another rush of blood right to Lucas’s cock.

“I thought maybe...I thought you weren’t interested anymore.” Lucas glanced away, embarrassed. Why did he say that out loud?

“Shit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t play games with a virgin.”

Lucas sat up with a start. “What? I’m not a virgin, okay?” He cringed inwardly at his defensive tone. “I’ve had sex.”

“With girls.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah, but it still counts.”

Nate didn’t look convinced. “How many girls?”

“Two.” He’d wanted to make sure.

“How many times?”

“Twice,” Lucas admitted, sheepish. Okay, so he wasn’t the most experienced. Clearly Nate was, considering the things he could do with his tongue. “How many people have you been with?”

“No *people*. Just guys.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t know. My fair share. I went to a gay bar during frosh week, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Wow. Nate had been with men. *Multiple* men.

“Don’t worry; I’m clean.”

Lucas had been wondering how to bring that up. “So you’ve dated a lot of guys?”

Nate laughed. “Dated? Not really. I guess I’ve kind of dated a few. Well, I had sex with them more than once.” He peered closely at Lucas. “Just so you know, I’m not looking for a boyfriend.”

“Why not?” Lucas hoped he didn’t sound needy as he felt.

“I can’t exactly bring home a nice boy to mom and dad. It’s easier this way. Besides, I’m not good at that stuff.” He smiled. “I like sex. I’m *good* at sex. Why complicate it?”

“But --”

Nate leaned up and caught Lucas’s bottom lip between his teeth. “You talk too much,” he whispered.

They kissed again, and Lucas set about exploring Nate’s body. He’d never been able to handle another man so freely, and he reveled in touching and tasting. He sucked one of Nate’s nipples into his mouth, delighting in the soft moan that escaped Nate’s lips. As he moved lower, his heart pounded in excitement.

He was really going to do it.

He’d thought about it a million times and wondered what it be like to suck a dick: how it would taste, how it would feel, what it would smell like. His nose nuzzled the trail of hair that lead down from Nate’s belly button, and Nate lifted his hips as Luke pulled his boxers off.

Nate’s cock sprang free, and Lucas rubbed it on his cheek, his chin, his lips. He wrapped his hand around Nate’s shaft, exploring and working up his nerve. It must have shown on his face, because Nate stroked his hair gently and said, “You don’t have to.”

Screw that. He *wanted* to. He swallowed the head of Nate’s cock, wrapping his lips around him as far as he could. It felt heavy and hot in his mouth, and saliva dripped down his chin. Lucas moved his head up and down, sucking and licking like he was enjoying a popsicle on a hot summer’s day.

He remembered what Nate had done, and fisted the base of Nate’s shaft as he sucked what he could into his mouth. He traced his tongue up the large vein on the back, and Nate moaned, making Lucas even harder. Still in his clothes, he began humping the mattress to get some friction on his straining dick.

Nate's fingers tangled in Lucas's hair, and he muttered under his breath. "That's it. Like that."

Lucas experienced a rush of power unlike any he'd ever felt, and sucked even harder. Ducking lower, he explored Nate's balls, licking them as his hand continued stroking Nate's cock.

When he came, Nate exhaled sharply and shuddered, spurting up onto his chest. Lucas raised his head to watch, and he drank in the sight of Nate with his head thrown back, his smooth chest and hard stomach splattered with semen.

Going up on his hands and knees, Lucas dipped his head down and impulsively licked Nate's stomach, savoring the salty taste. Nate chuckled softly and pulled Lucas up for a kiss as he reached down and rubbed Lucas through his jeans.

"You're wearing too many clothes."

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, and they froze, eyes wide. After a beat, Lucas scrambled off Nate and dived onto the other bed as Nate pulled his covers up. Nate cleared his throat. "Yeah?"

"I'm going to be out shopping tomorrow with Aunt Linda, so I've left you and Lucas some money on the counter. Have fun in the city. Be home in time to light the menorah, please."

"Okay, Mom."

They listened to her footsteps recede down the hall, both breathing heavily. They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"You need a hand over there?" Nate whispered.

"That would be nice."

Nate flicked off the light and crept over, and they giggled quietly as he jerked Lucas off, which didn't take long at all.

Chapter Five

“There you go. Statue of Liberty approaches to starboard, or possibly port. I can never keep them straight.”

Lucas nodded. “That’s her all right. Looks pretty much like she does on TV.”

“You mean you’re not filled with a burst of American patriotism at the sight of Lady Liberty?”

“Oh wait...there it is.” Lucas thrust his arms in the air. “USA! USA!”

Laughing, they ignored the stares of people nearby and found an empty bench. The wind was icy out on the water, and most passengers sat inside. Lucas pulled his scarf closer around his throat and wished he’d remembered his hat.

“Wait, stand by the railing.” Nate directed Lucas as he pulled a large camera from his messenger bag.

Lucas did as he was told and posed. It felt good to be the focus of Nate’s attention, and despite the cold air, he was effused with a warm glow. When he rejoined Nate on the bench, he leaned back against the wall and watched the city skyline get closer. The sun peeked out through the clouds, and Lucas couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so content.

The only thing that could make the moment better would be holding Nate's hand, but he was too afraid to try.

"What's your major?" Nate was watching him with the intent gaze that seemed to be his default expression.

"Chemistry. Premed."

"You want to be a doctor?"

The \$64,000 question, as his dad used to say, although Lucas was never sure why. Something about a game show. "Well, I'm really good at science."

"Not exactly a resounding 'yes.'"

"My dad always wanted me to go to med school. I don't want to disappoint him."

Nate was quiet for a moment. "Mom said he died a few months ago. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Thanks." Lucas tugged one of his gloves off, suddenly preoccupied with an itch on his palm. "You're prelaw, right?"

"Yep." Nate didn't sound thrilled about it.

"Following in your father's footsteps. Well, it's not like Sam's going to."

Nate barked out a laugh that sounded too loud coming from him. "The golden child? Not likely. He'll be too busy basking in the warm memories of his b-ball glory days and probably making a fortune as a salesman at my uncle's company."

"It occurs to me that I don't even know what his major is."

"Technically it's business, but mainly hoops and chicks."

"Okay, I don't understand why he's so special. I mean, he's not a bad guy, but Sam's just such a..."

"Stereotypical jock asshole?"

Laughing, Lucas nodded. "That about sums it up, and you're smart and studying to be a lawyer. Your folks should be putting you on the front cover of their yearly newsletter."

“My parents think Sam walks on water. The thing is, he’s always been this...miracle. Mom had a bunch of miscarriages, and they never thought they’d have a baby. When they had Sam, it was the best thing that ever happened to them. Then he turned out to be this amazing athlete, unlike anyone else in my family, and he’s been the star of the show ever since.”

“But you...”

“Have never been anything to write home about.” The sun cleared a patch of clouds and Nate pulled a pair of sunglasses from the outer pocket of his bag, slipping them on. “It’s not like my parents don’t love me. Sam just became the center of their universe when he was born, and that didn’t change when I came along.”

“I’m sorry.” Lucas couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Don’t be.” Nate stood and slung his bag over his chest. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

Lucas knew the conversation was over, and he didn’t push it. He felt the urge to grasp Nate’s hand again, but instead simply followed him into the surge of passengers downstairs.

An hour later, they stood at the top of the Empire State Building, and Lucas marveled at the view of the city. Central Park was an enormous green square holding the surrounding skyscrapers and buildings at bay.

With his camera, Nate seemed to have tunnel vision as he snapped shots of the city below. Lucas divided his time between watching him and peering out at the view, and eventually Nate garnered the majority of his attention.

Nate noticed Lucas’s stare after taking about twenty shots of the Flatiron Building. “What?” Lucas swore he saw a blush tint Nate’s cheeks.

“You look so happy.”

“Yeah. I love photography. I wish...” He shook his head and nodded over his shoulder. “We should check out the other side.”

Lucas reached for Nate’s arm. “You wish what?”

Nate looked out over the city. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "I wish I could do this all the time."

"Why can't you?"

"Oh, sure. Drop out of prelaw and transfer to Tisch for photography? The 'rents would love that."

"Tisch...is that in New York?"

"Yeah, it's part of NYU."

Suddenly it made sense to Lucas why Nate hadn't gone away to college. "That's exactly what you want to do. That's why you went to NYU in the first place."

Nate looked at him sharply and yanked his arm away. "You don't know anything about it."

"You're in third year, right? What are you waiting for?"

"Look, I just can't." Nate jammed the cap back on his camera and zipped it into its case. "It's freezing up here. Let's get some lunch."

"Nate, I don't understand --"

"What was that you were saying about medicine? I think your exact words were that your *father* wanted you to be a doctor."

"That's different." How could Nate even compare their situations? Crossing his arms, Lucas shivered. "You're right, let's go inside. It's too cold."

They descended in the elevator in silence, listening to the chatter of a group of German tourists, and the black cloud hanging over them didn't dissipate as they headed up West Thirty-fourth Street. Instead of suffering through an awkward lunch, Lucas faked a headache. Nate felt like a stranger on the ferry back to Staten Island, and Lucas happily accepted an invitation from Sam for pizza and poker with him and his friends that night.

Before they left, they dutifully participated in lighting the menorah. It was the fourth night, and after lighting the middle candle, Mrs. Kramer lit the four candles to the right.

Nate disappeared as soon as they were done, and Lucas tried to brush it aside. He actually had a good time with Sam's friends, and almost forgot about the tension with Nate.

Almost.

They came home late, smelling of smoke and the can of beer that had been shaken and sprayed on everyone in attendance. Lucas pushed open the door to Nate's darkened room as quietly as he could, tiptoeing inside. Nate slept, curled toward the windows.

After weighing his options -- go to bed reeking or risk waking Nate by having a shower -- Lucas crept into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Stripping his clothes off, he jumped into the shower, enjoying the hot water.

He was on his second shampoo when he realized he wasn't alone. Through the transparent curtain, he saw Nate closing the bathroom door behind him. Leaning against it, he watched Lucas.

"Sorry. Did I wake you?" Lucas shifted uneasily. He felt like he was on display in the bright light of the bathroom and resisted the urge to cover himself with a towel.

Nate took his boxers off, sliding back the shower curtain. The shampoo trickled down Lucas's forehead, and Nate washed it away with his palm. Stepping back, Lucas silently invited him into the shower. They kissed, tongues winding together as their hands explored. Lucas wasn't sure when Nate had picked up the soap, but he leaned into his touch as Nate lathered him.

His cock was at full attention, and Lucas could feel Nate's hardness against his ass as Nate turned him around to face away from the spray of water. His hands still roamed over Lucas, and then one of his fingers slipped just inside Lucas's hole. Lucas tensed, his eyes popping open.

"Relax." Nate whispered in his ear before sucking the lobe gently.

Lucas tried to do as he was told, and Nate's finger probed a little deeper. It felt...God, it felt good. *Really* good. He must have said it out loud, because Nate chuckled. "Just wait. It gets better."

"What are you --" Lucas's heart hammered wildly. He knew he was entering uncharted territory.

"I'm going to eat your ass."

The words sounded so dirty as they dripped from Nate's tongue. Lucas had read about rimming, but reading and experiencing were two very different things. He took a deep shuddering breath, excitement thrumming through his veins as Nate knelt behind him, spreading open his cheeks.

At the first touch of Nate's tongue against his hole, Lucas thought he might come right then and there. He leaned forward, bracing his hands wide on the slick tiles as Nate licked and nibbled at his ass, thrusting his tongue inside. If Nate hadn't held him up, Lucas was sure his legs would collapse as flashes of pleasure shot through his whole body, all the way to the tips of his fingers.

He moaned, breathing heavily as Nate worked magic with his mouth and tongue. When Nate's hand snuck around to stroke Lucas's cock, Lucas felt a shower of sparks, and his balls tightened. His orgasm shook his body, and he cried out as the pleasure overtook him, centered on his cock and his hole, where Nate had his head buried.

Propped up by the wall, Lucas tried to catch his breath. Nate's tongue traveled all the way up his spine until Nate nuzzled at the back of his neck.

"Like that?" Nate whispered, nipping at Lucas's shoulder.

Lucas tried to respond, and could only nod. He felt Nate's erection against his ass and thought about what it would be like to bend over and let Nate fuck him, to feel his hot cock pressing inside. Before he could do anything, Nate turned him around and put Lucas's hand

on his rigid cock, urging Lucas to stroke him. He did, and Nate leaned into his touch, his eyes drifting shut.

Nate didn't take long to come, and when he was done, they cleaned up under the hot spray of water, neither in a rush to go anywhere. Lucas was just finishing rinsing the conditioner out of his hair when Nate said, "Sorry about today. I was a jerk. I can get like that sometimes."

"It's okay. I didn't mean to push or whatever."

Nate turned off the water and stepped out onto the bathmat, wrapping a towel around his lean hips. "It wasn't your fault. It's just..." He stopped, his hand on the doorknob.

"What?"

Nate met his eyes. "No one's ever read me that easily before." Then he was gone, leaving Lucas alone in the steam.

Chapter Six

When the phone rang in the kitchen, Nate snapped it up off the cradle. “Hello?” He was silent for a moment. “Mom, you know we’ve got tickets for *Wicked*. In fact, it was you who bought them and insisted I take Lucas to this stupid musical in the first place.”

Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his chair at the kitchen table. He hated witnessing fights, even if they were one-sided. They’d been waiting for over half an hour for Mrs. Kramer to return home, since she’d requested they light the menorah with her before going into the city.

“Okay, Mom. I know.” After a beat he added, “I love you, too.” Nate hung up and turned to Lucas. “Come on, we’ve got to light this thing and hit the road.”

Lucas followed as Nate went to the living room, pausing to stick his head down the hall toward the den. “Dad! Mom says we should just light it without her tonight.”

“Oh.” There was a pause, and Lucas could hear the familiar sounds of football on the TV. If his dad was still around, they’d be watching together... He quickly shook off the memories of his father, not allowing himself to dwell. “You boys go ahead without me. And take my car into the city if you want.”

Nate's eyebrows raised. "Yeah? Okay, Dad." At the front window, he whispered to Lucas. "He usually doesn't let us within a hundred yards of his Audi."

He struck a match, and Lucas blinked in surprise. "Don't you have to say those things first? The blessings?"

Nate sighed, smiling. "You're worse than my mom." He closed his eyes and spoke the two blessings quickly, and Lucas told himself he shouldn't find it hot. Nate opened his eyes. "Okay, now you can light the candles."

"Me? I'm really not qualified."

Laughing, Nate struck another match, lighting the middle candle. "This is the *Shamash*, which means guard or servant. So we take this" -- Nate picked up Lucas's hand and put it on the candle, his palm warm as he covered Lucas's hand with his own -- "and then light the other candles with it."

Lucas let Nate's hand guide his as they lit five other candles, ending with the one on the far right. Standing so close to Nate, Lucas felt the warmth of his body and yearned to touch him. They placed the Shamash back in its place, but still held it as their eyes met. In the soft, flickering light, Nate had never looked so gorgeous, and Lucas wanted to kiss him more than ever.

"You should get going. Traffic's always bad getting to the theatre district." Mr. Kramer's voice boomed out from the hallway, and Lucas and Nate sprang apart.

Mr. Kramer rounded the corner. "Ah, candles lit. Very good." He pulled his wallet out. "Here's some money for gas, and to have a bite after the show if you want." He handed Nate a wad of bills. "It's very nice of you to entertain Sam's friend." He turned to Lucas before going back to the den. "Merry Christmas."

Lucas tried to smile. "Thanks." Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself once more. He'd almost gotten through the day; he just needed to keep occupied.

In the car, they were quiet as Nate headed to the Verrazano Bridge. Finally Lucas said, “If only your dad knew just how *nice* you’re being.” They laughed, and drove toward the lights of the city.

When the play let out a few hours later, Lucas and Nate walked into the crisp, clear night. Cabs zoomed in and out of traffic, and the city was alive with light and sound. Lucas had never seen anything quite like it. After a minute, he realized Nate was chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

“You look like Dorothy arriving in Oz.”

“Don’t make me start singing.” Lucas put on a mock serious expression.

“Start? You’ve been humming and skipping since we left the theater!”

Lucas shoved Nate’s arm playfully. “So I like musicals, okay? Besides, don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it. You know you got *verklemt* at the end.”

“Ohhhh, busting out the Yiddish! Impressive. Very impressive.”

“Your Bubbe taught me a thing or two the other night.”

Nate’s cell rang, and while he talked, Lucas gazed around as they continued walking. Manhattan at night was as vibrant and intoxicating as he always imagined. He thought fleetingly of the sleepy little college town to which he’d soon be returning, and lost a bit of the spring in his step.

Snapping his cell shut, Nate turned to Lucas and eyed him critically, unzipping Lucas’s light jacket. “You’ve gotta lose the plaid.”

“What?” Lucas glanced down at his outfit of jeans, black tee, and open plaid shirt. “You said this was fine.”

“I believe my exact words were that you’d fit in with the other tourists,” Nate teased.

“Okay, so where are we going now?”

“To a flannel-free zone.” Nate grinned slyly. “Don’t worry, you’ll like it.”

* * * * *

Lucas shivered, rubbing his arms as he tried to restore circulation. The line for the club was long, but Nate had insisted Lucas take off his shirt and jacket and hold them, even though the night was only growing colder. Nate had peeled off his sweater and jacket and was clearly trying not to shiver in his white wifebeater undershirt.

The neon sign on the building screamed *Gomorra* in scarlet. Lucas was amazed how many people were clubbing on Christmas. Leaning in close, Lucas whispered, “Have I mentioned I’m not twenty-one?”

“Shhh. Just look cute. I’ll handle the rest.”

Their turn came at the front of the line, and Nate handed two pieces of ID to the bouncer, who looked them over carefully before giving them back and miraculously waving them inside. In line for coat check, Lucas tried to play it cool, but couldn’t.

“What did you give him?”

The thumping bass was muted in the vestibule, but still loud. Nate put his lips right up to Lucas’s ear, sending a shiver down Lucas’s spine. “My driver’s license and my library card, plus fifty bucks from my dad.”

Lucas didn’t stop laughing until they pushed open the doors to the interior of the club, and he gazed around, speechless. The cavernous, multilevel circular space was full of men. Young, hot men. Strobe lights pulsed in time to the deafening beat, and Lucas could barely hear himself think.

A few women were here and there, but by and large it was the most male place Lucas had ever been. The most *gay*. It was like heaven. Granted, a very loud, crowded, and sexed-up heaven.

Nate must have spotted his friends, because the next thing Lucas knew, Nate was pulling him along as they weaved through the crowd surrounding the dance floor. Lucas didn’t mind; as long as Nate was holding his hand, he’d go anywhere.

“Hey!” A very good-looking guy with light brown skin and the clearest eyes Lucas had ever seen waved to them. Those eyes raked over Lucas, taking him in from head to toe. The man winked at Nate before dropping a quick kiss on his lips. He then turned to Lucas, extending his hand and speaking loudly over the din. “I’m Yaman.”

Four cute young men sidled up, all also kissing Nate on the mouth in greeting, which surprised Lucas. It also made him ridiculously jealous. Nate had dropped his hand when they’d found their little space in the crowd, and Lucas fought the urge to sling his arm over Nate’s shoulders possessively.

After Lucas was introduced to Jamie, Ryan, Gord, and Dave, he tried to pay attention as they all chattered about people he didn’t know. It was strange to see Nate with his friends, talking and laughing and being so much more outgoing and confident than he was with his family. Lucas had glimpsed this side of him, but it was startling to see him so relaxed.

He tried valiantly not to obsess about whether or not Nate had slept with any of his friends. He knew it was none of his business, but his mind kept returning to thoughts of Nate with other men. He wanted him all to himself.

When everyone else ran to the dance floor for a hot new song, Nate shouted to him, “I don’t dance, but go ahead!”

Shaking his head, Lucas drew Nate near. “I just want to watch.”

With a nod of his head, Nate led Lucas upstairs to the second floor. A railing ran all the way around, and they looked out over the dance floor. Nate stood behind Lucas, his arms around Lucas’s stomach. Lucas tingled at Nate’s touch.

A mass of male bodies writhed as one below them, bare skin glistening with sweat and glitter that rained down at regular intervals. Some men simply danced, but others rubbed against each other, limbs tangled, kissing desperately. Lucas realized he was half hard, and he wiped sweat from his brow. “It’s hot in here,” he shouted.

“How’s that song go? I think you’re supposed to take your clothes off now.” Nate nipped Lucas’s earlobe.

On impulse, Lucas peeled off his T-shirt, hooking it through one of his belt loops. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Nate’s expression suddenly grow serious, his eyes dark with desire as he descended on Lucas’s mouth, kissing him thoroughly.

Catching his breath, Lucas turned back to the dance floor as Nate moved in even closer, his hands drifting upward, caressing Lucas’s chest. Nate raked his short nails through the sprinkling of chest hair before teasing Lucas’s nipples, one and then the other. As he sucked at the juncture of Lucas’s neck and shoulder, Lucas felt adrenalin sing in his veins.

When Nate’s hand deftly unzipped Lucas’s jeans and slipped inside, Lucas glanced around furtively. Eyes were on them from all sides, and he found to his shock that being watched sent a bolt of excitement straight to his cock.

As Nate stroked Lucas, he whispered in his ear. “You like that? Like being the center of attention?”

Lucas nodded, licking his lips. He watched the dancers below, arms and legs and torsos slithering through a sea of smoke and glitter. Nate pinched Lucas’s nipple as he tightened his fist around his cock. Then his free hand slid around and down, his finger touching Lucas’s hole. Lucas shivered and gasped, his eyes closing. Nate stroked him faster, the tip of his finger dancing around Lucas’s pucker. In the deafening surroundings, he didn’t try to bite back his moans of pleasure, and as Nate slipped his finger inside him, Lucas came with a cry that sounded like it echoed on every side of the club.

Nate supported him, wrapping his arms around Lucas as he kissed his cheek. “I knew you’d be a screamer if you got the chance.”

Chapter Seven

After he and Nate indulged in quick morning blowjobs, Lucas spent the next day with Sam and his buddies at an arcade featuring every kind of videogame known to man. He tried not to think about Nate every second, with varying degrees of success.

He and Sam hurried home and quickly changed before the family piled into Mrs. Kramer's SUV. At her sister Linda's house, Rachel opened the door, greeting them -- especially Lucas -- enthusiastically. The house was smaller than the Kramer's, but just as stylishly decorated. Most of the family from the first night of Hanukkah was there, and after lighting the menorah, the children began a game of *dreidel* on the carpet.

Lucas sat on the couch, watching the kids spin the four-sided top, making bets with chocolate coins wrapped in gold. Depending on how the dreidel fell, the players sometimes gained more coins or added another to the pot, and on some spins nothing happened at all.

Nate's grandfather joined Lucas and began clapping his hands, singing in a low baritone. "Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel, I made you out of clay. Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel, with dreidel I shall play."

The children joined in, and Lucas noted with amusement as Nate, watching the game by the window, sang along, too. Nate caught his stare and abruptly stopped singing, his flush visible across the room.

When the game was over, Linda, a shorter, plumper version of her sister, and Mrs. Kramer produced a pile of gifts from the other room. The kids squealed in delight as they tore the paper off video games and what Lucas could only guess were the latest trends in Barbie doll fashion. Nate perched on the arm of the couch beside Lucas to unwrap his gift, and Lucas resisted the urge to lean in close.

“So you get presents on Hanukkah?”

“Not traditionally, but I guess the little Jewish kiddies feel left out from the Christmas consumer madness. Adults don’t usually get anything.” Nate carefully peeled the paper off his box, revealing a state of the art camera flash that made his eyes widen and a smile split his face.

“Maybe your parents are cooler about the whole photography thing than you think,” Lucas whispered.

Nate snorted lightly. “I wouldn’t go that far.” He got up and hugged his mother and father as Sam let out a surprised gasp.

“Whoa. This is awesome!” He turned around a framed 8 x 10 black-and-white photograph of himself leaping up to make a basket. Sam grinned and yanked Nate into a bear hug. “Thanks, man. Sorry, I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s nothing; don’t worry. I just thought you’d like it.” Nate extracted himself from Sam’s embrace as everyone admired the photo. It really was beautiful, capturing Sam in perfect flight.

At dinner, Linda took advantage of the silence while everyone was chewing, telling Nate, “I saw Stephanie Stein’s mother last week at synagogue, and she told me Stephanie’s back on the market.”

Mrs. Kramer perked up. "She'd be perfect for you. Such a lovely girl!"

Lucas looked at Nate across the table. He stared down at his plate, pushing his food around with his fork, and Lucas could feel the tension coming off him in waves. "I'm sure she's great, but I'm too busy with school right now. Thanks anyway."

"Too busy!" Mrs. Kramer clucked her tongue. "Your brother's never been too busy for girls."

"She's so pretty, Nate! Just take her out to dinner. You'll like her, you'll see," Linda added.

However, before Nate could say reply, Sam spoke up. "Why don't you guys just leave him alone? He likes doing his own thing. He'll find his own girlfriend eventually."

That put an immediate end to the discussion, and after a few moments of awkward silence, Mr. Kramer complimented Linda enthusiastically on her pot roast, everyone echoing his sentiments. Under the table, Lucas reached out with his leg and briefly covered Nate's foot with his own.

* * * * *

As soon as they were inside Nate's room again, Nate shoved Lucas up against the door and kissed him hard. His knee pushed Lucas's legs apart, and he rubbed their crotches together as his tongue plundered Lucas's mouth.

Lucas gasped for a breath, a grin tugging on his lips. "Does 'The Dreidel Song' always make you this horny, Nathaniel?"

Nate practically growled, spinning Lucas around and steering him toward the far bed before taking his desk chair and jamming it under the door handle. Lucas waited, growing more and more excited by the lust in Nate's eyes.

Nate rustled around in one of the desk drawers, not bothering to turn on a light. The curtains were open, and the streetlight cast pale white light and long shadows across the

room. When Nate peeled his clothes off, Lucas followed suit, and soon they were both naked and kissing on the tiny bed.

Nate pressed something into his hand, and Lucas realized he was holding a condom. His eyes jerked up to meet Nate's. "You want..."

Nate's gaze was steady and direct. "I want you to fuck me."

Kneeling, Nate popped the lid off a tube of lubricant and reached his hand around behind himself. Lucas realized he was lubing himself up, and his cock twitched in anticipation. They were really going to do it.

He was going to fuck another man.

Nate fingered himself, his chest gleaming in the streetlight. A small smile graced his lips, and Lucas took a deep, calming breath, his pulse racing. He tore open the foil package, rolling the condom down over his cock. With a slick hand, Nate stroked Lucas's shaft, and Lucas tried to focus on keeping his cool.

When Nate got on his hands and knees, Lucas almost lost it, but he clambered up behind him, reaching out and holding Nate by the hips. He positioned the head of his cock at Nate's hole, taking another breath. This was it.

"*Fuck me*," Nate gritted out, and Lucas did.

He pushed inside him, moving into the tight, incredible heat inch by inch. Nate pushed back, squeezing his muscles and establishing a rhythm. Lucas began thrusting in and pulling almost all the way out, pleasure shooting through his cock. After a tentative start, he felt like he got the hang of it, grabbing one of Nate's shoulders for better leverage as he worked his ass.

Nate grunted and breathed heavily, and their skin grew slippery with sweat as Lucas pumped into him. "Harder," Nate demanded.

Lucas pistoned his hips forcefully into Nate's tight heat, panting for air and biting his lip to stop from crying out. He was inside another man. He was inside *Nate*; he was fucking

Nate. He never wanted it to end; he wanted to stay inside him forever, locked together in abandon and bliss.

Of course, he was about to shoot his load, and he stopped moving for a moment, willing his body to obey him as he sucked in air. When he felt back in control, he rocked his hips forward again, plunging in and out of Nate's ass.

Reaching back, Nate took Lucas's hand and placed it on his cock as they writhed together. Lucas stroked him rapidly, jerking Nate's cock in tandem with the thrust of his hips. Nate squeezed down with his ass, and then he was shaking as he came.

The pressure and heat on his cock was intense, and with a cry, Lucas shot into the condom, closing his eyes as his orgasm rocked his body. He collapsed on top of Nate, both of them breathing hard, skin slick. After a minute, he reluctantly pulled out.

After he disposed of the condom, wrapping it in almost an arm's length of toilet paper just in case Mrs. Kramer was the nosy type, Lucas returned to the bedroom. He hovered at the foot of Nate's bed, not sure what to do. Nate was sprawled on his stomach, taking up the whole space.

Lucas suddenly felt very exposed, and he quickly put on his T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Turning to Nate, he sat on the side of his bed and waited. Nate crooked his finger. "C'mere."

Lucas knelt beside Nate's bed. He had no idea what to say. With the two girls he'd slept with, afterward there'd been awkward declarations of affection that Lucas hadn't meant. He cleared his throat. "I guess we should get some sleep."

Reaching his hand behind Lucas's head, Nate pulled him close for a long, slow kiss. "That was amazing." A rush of pride made Lucas smile, and Nate tapped him on the nose affectionately. "You're a natural."

Saying thanks would sound kind of stupid, so Lucas just kissed Nate again before climbing into the other bed. They were only a couple of feet apart, but Lucas yearned to press against Nate's warm body, to fall asleep holding him.

* * * * *

The next day dawned bright and sunny, so Mrs. Kramer declared it a perfect time to visit the Bronx Zoo. Lucas hadn't expected the zoo to be so sprawling or state of the art, and the only thing that could have made wandering the exhibits better would have been holding Nate's hand. He longed to touch him all the time, and considered dragging him into a bathroom stall after lunch for a quick grope. Mr. Kramer put a kibosh on that by coming to the bathroom, too. Nate had winked teasingly at Lucas just briefly at the urinals, so apparently Lucas needed to do a better job of hiding his sexual frustration.

After a witty and intelligent volunteer named Leslie gave them a lesson on lemurs near the end of the afternoon, Lucas and the Kramers wandered through the gift shop. Lucas was drawn to the magnets, and as he plucked a gorilla from the metal holder, he said to Nate, "My dad would --"

The next words lodged in his throat, and Lucas realized he hadn't thought of his father once all day. His dad had loved collecting silly magnets everywhere they went, covering their fridge from top to bottom.

Like a finger removed from a dam, guilt and grief flooded him, and he blinked back tears, the magnet slipping from his fingers. He was only vaguely aware of Nate's hand on the small of his back, leading him out into the brisk air. He tried to breath, leaning against the wall of the building for support.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the Kramers exit the store and approach. Nate drew them away, murmuring, and Lucas willed himself to get a grip. After a few deep breaths, he told everyone he was fine and followed them to the parking lot in silence.

Mr. and Mrs. Kramer kept up a steady stream of chatter in the front seat, their forced cheer evident. Lucas stared out the window, feeling alone and more aware than ever that no matter how kind the Kramers were to him, his father, his only family, was gone. Nate's thigh pressed against his, but Lucas remembered his words about not wanting a relationship. After the holidays, Lucas would be on his own again.

The evening passed in a haze -- lighting the menorah and then watching another movie. Lucas picked at a slice of pizza, and told Mrs. Kramer he was fine. When the credits rolled, Lucas excused himself to bed. Nate followed a few minutes later, shutting his bedroom door quietly behind him. Lucas climbed into bed, Nate watching him silently.

"I just want to sleep tonight, okay?" Lucas wasn't in the mood for anything else.

Nate nodded, and soon he was in his own bed, the lights out. Curling on his side toward the door, Lucas tried to clear his mind, but it was useless. Soon he shook with sobs, burying his face in his pillow to stifle them.

The mattress dipped, and Nate's long frame spooned up behind him, his arms snaking out to hold Lucas close. As Lucas wept, Nate caressed his hair, whispering calming words in Hebrew that sounded like a lullaby.

Lucas wasn't sure how long he cried before his breathing became easier. Nate still soothed him, and soon Lucas wanted more. *Needed* more. He shifted, and in a tangle of limbs, Nate rolled on top of him on the narrow bed. Lucas pulled Nate's head down for a kiss, and their tongues wound together as Lucas's hands roamed over Nate, sliding up beneath his T-shirt.

The feel of Nate's body on top of his was heady, but not enough. "Please," Lucas breathed.

Nate pulled back and watched him for a moment, asking without saying a word if Lucas was sure. "Please," he repeated. He pulled Nate's shirt over his head, and soon all their clothes were tossed aside.

Nate was up and back before Lucas knew it. He bent Lucas's knees, placing his feet flat on the mattress, kneeling in front of him. Squeezing the lube into his palm, Nate warmed it up before his fingers found Lucas's hole, gently working the slick gel inside him. He started with one finger, lightly stroking Lucas's cock with his other hand.

When he had the condom on and lubed, he moved closer and placed Lucas's legs up onto his shoulders, opening him up. Lucas had never felt more vulnerable, but he only shivered with anticipation. He trusted Nate completely.

Nate slowly pushed his way inside, and Lucas felt like he was tearing open. His eyes watering, he gasped for air as the pain blossomed. Nate leaned down, kissing him tenderly all over his face: cheeks, forehead, and eyes. "Just breathe," he whispered, and Lucas felt a calm come over him, his body relaxing.

Inch by inch, Nate moved farther inside him. They were both breathing heavily, and sweat glistened on Nate's forehead in the streetlight. When Nate was almost all the way in, he hit a spot that made Lucas see stars, a moan of pleasure slipping from his lips. With another kiss and a little smile, Nate began shallow little thrusts, hitting that spot every time.

Lucas began moving with him, the pain ebbing away to become pure pleasure. Nate pressed Lucas's knees to his chest and drove into him, grasping one of Lucas's hands. Lucas felt like he was in a dream, drifting in a world where nothing else existed but him and Nate. Their eyes locked together as their bodies flexed and rocked, and Lucas had never felt so connected to another person.

His cock was hard and leaking, squeezed between their bodies as Nate increased his rhythm. He found the spot again, grunting softly as he hit it over and over. Lucas couldn't stifle his cry as he came, his orgasm ripping through him. As he shook, Nate thrust sharply two more times before shuddering in release.

Lucas winced when Nate pulled out of him, and Nate dropped a kiss to his shoulder. Sitting up, he tossed the tied-off condom into the garbage pail by his desk. Before Lucas

could even ask him to stay, Nate pulled the covers up over them, wrapping Lucas tightly in his arms.

Chapter Eight

As morning broke, Lucas woke. His left arm was trapped and numb under Nate, but for a moment he didn't move. Nate snored gently, the soft lines of his face looking even more innocent in sleep. They were coiled together in the small bed, heads close on the pillow. Even with Lucas's numb arm and the wet and sticky sheets, everything was...perfect.

He felt as if they'd connected deeply the night before, and as Lucas watched his lover -- it sent a thrill up his spine just to think the words -- he found himself hoping the spell wouldn't be broken in the harsh light of day. The fracturing grief for his father had receded, and he felt whole in a way he couldn't explain.

Lucas hadn't meant to fall in love, but he realized with a sinking sensation that was exactly what he'd done.

Finally the pins and needles became too much, and he gently tried to extricate his arm. Nate blinked at him before yawning widely. Lucas found himself holding his breath before cursing his stupidity. He couldn't expect Nate to feel the same way he did. They were just having some holiday fun, and Lucas needed to get a grip.

He tried to think of some kind of flip remark to make, but before he could, Nate traced Lucas's cheek with his knuckles. "Hey."

Lucas swallowed hard. "Hey."

Nate pressed their lips together. "You feel okay?" He caressed Lucas's hip.

"More than okay." Lucas smirked, trying to keep things lighthearted so he wouldn't freak Nate out. "Although sitting down might be a bit challenging."

"Guess we'll have to stay on our feet today. How about the Met? The Egyptian stuff is awesome."

"You sure you don't mind? You must be bored of going to all the touristy places." Lucas felt it was only fair to give Nate an out.

Nate gazed at him intensely for a long moment before kissing him again. "I'm sure."

* * * * *

Running, Nate and Lucas barely made it on board the ferry before it left the dock, and they laughed, their icy exhalations puffing out in front of them. As usual, most passengers crowded inside, but Lucas liked to watch the city glide by. On the upper deck, they leaned against the railing and caught their breath.

It had been a perfect day.

The Met was crowded with holiday visitors, but Lucas barely noticed. He and Nate were in their own little world, and Lucas vowed to himself to just enjoy it and worry about the future when it came. Of course, as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Nate, watching the Statue of Liberty in the distance, his mind wandered to his inevitable return to school. He sighed audibly, and Nate nudged him gently, an eyebrow raised.

"I'm just thinking about the new year. Going back to school." Lucas's dour tone pretty much said it all.

Nate was quiet for a few moments. "So why are you going back?"

"Because I have to." Where else would he go?

"What are you doing at Brookfield? Even Sam notices you're miserable."

“What? You and Sam were talking about me?”

“Not in a bad way, but my usually clueless brother knows you hate it there.” He took a breath, as if steeling himself. “You could move here next year. Transfer schools; there are about a million to choose from. Figure out what you really want to do with your life.”

The thought of returning to Brookfield and the noisy dorm, going back to his chemistry books and the degree he didn’t truly want, filled Lucas with dread. Maybe Nate was right. What was stopping him from coming to New York and living his own life? His father had wanted him to be happy, and Lucas had pretended for long enough that his father’s dreams for him were his own. “Okay, it would be pretty awesome to live in New York. But what about you? Are you going to quit law? Switch to photography?”

“I’m not good enough,” Nate said dismissively.

“Yes, *you are*.”

“You’re being nice, but I don’t have the talent.” He smiled ruefully and muttered under this breath. “*My little hobby*.”

“Your mother has no idea what you’re capable of. You do *so* have the talent. You’re just afraid to take a risk, but you expect *me* to.”

Nate was silent for a long moment, peering out to the horizon. Finally he sighed. “You’re right. I’m a hypocrite.” He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering as the wind whipped off the water.

“You don’t have to be. Neither of us is happy. We need to make a change. We could do it together.”

Nate looked directly at him. “Together?”

“Oh, I mean...not...I don’t...” Lucas didn’t say what he desperately wanted to.

“We could see how it goes. You know, if things work out with us.”

His heart rate increased, and Lucas felt slightly lightheaded. “Us?”

“You’re only a couple of hours away. Sam goes on the road for basketball, and he’s going to Daytona for spring break. I could visit.”

Lucas tamped down his rush of excitement. “What about when we’re not together? You’ll still be seeing other guys?”

Reaching up, Nate brushed the hair off Lucas’s forehead. “I don’t want to see anyone but you.”

Lucas’s feeling of warm happiness exploded in his chest. “I thought you weren’t looking for a boyfriend.”

“I wasn’t.” Nate smiled crookedly. “I guess one found me.” His smile faded. “If you want me.”

Not caring who was watching, Lucas threw his arms around him. “I want.”

Nate held him close, their warm cheeks pressed together. Lucas watched the sun sink over the horizon in a blaze of red and orange before closing his eyes as the ferry sailed on.

* * * * *

In the cab, Nate checked his watch. “We missed lighting the menorah on the last night of Hanukkah. If we miss synagogue, I’m dead meat.” When they’d gotten home to a darkened house, they’d quickly changed into suits, Lucas borrowing a tie and jacket.

“But I thought you weren’t that observant.”

“We’re not, but we always have to go to synagogue at least once every holiday, or we’ll never hear the end from Papa. I kind of like it, actually.”

Hopping out of the cab in front of the temple, Nate gave the driver a twenty and told him to keep the change. On the empty steps, Nate skidded to a halt on the stair above Lucas and pulled a rounded, dark gray suede piece of material from his pocket. He placed it on the back of his head.

“Okay, this is going to sound like a stupid question, but --”

“How does it stay on?” Nate laughed. “Years of experience.” He pulled another piece of material out of this pocket, this one black. “You, however, get a bobby pin for your *yarmulke*.”

Lucas stood still while Nate gently pinned it in place. Their heads were close together, and Lucas could feel Nate’s warm breath. Nate stood back. “There you go. Looks good. What about me?” He laughed suddenly, rolling his eyes. “I know, I look like a complete dork.”

Fat snowflakes had begun to fall, nestling in Nate’s hair, and Lucas told him the truth. “You look beautiful.”

Nate leaned closer, their lips inches apart. Just then, a van pulled up, unloading a chattering family who rushed by them up the steps. Lucas and Nate followed, finding a seat near the back. Lucas gazed in wonder at the blue and gold ceiling soaring high above. A center aisle separated rows of pews, and ornate chandeliers hung in pillared archways along each side of the room, with a gallery of extra seating on the left and right through the arches on the second level.

The rabbi spoke of freedom, and conquering fear and despair. As the service went on, Lucas found himself filled with a sense of peace and contentment he couldn’t remember ever experiencing.

For the first time since September, he thought of his father and smiled.

Glancing down to his left, he saw Nate’s hand on the bench beside him. Sliding his palm over the polished wood, he touched Nate’s pinky finger with his own. He would have been satisfied with just that small contact, but a few moments later, Nate flipped his hand over. As the congregation began singing, Lucas covered Nate’s palm with his own, threading their fingers together.

Lucas didn’t understand the words, but he tried to sing along anyway.

* * * * *

After the service and socializing, Lucas and the Kramers pushed open the doors of the synagogue to discover the world had been covered in white. Large flakes of snow floated down, blanketing everything and giving the night an unnatural, serene brightness. They all paused in unison to admire the beauty of the winter's first real snowfall.

Mrs. Kramer's fingers brushed over Lucas's yarmulke playfully. "It suits you, Lucas. You'll have to come and stay for Passover." She planted a kiss on his cheek. "And I won't take no for an answer!" Hooking her arm through her husband's, she led the way down the snowy steps. "Come on, let's go home and eat."

Nate and Lucas followed side by side, neither of them able to hide their smile.

 THE END 

Keira Andrews

When not writing love stories, obsessing over her favorite TV shows, or spending far too much time online, Keira makes her living as a copywriter in Toronto. A passionate world traveler, she has a weakness for road trips, and it doesn't take much to convince her to get behind the wheel and crank the stereo up. She once drove to Texas for the weekend to eat a good steak, drink a good margarita, and hug a good man. Keira also loves to read, watch movies, work out, and eat (although not necessarily in that order).

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