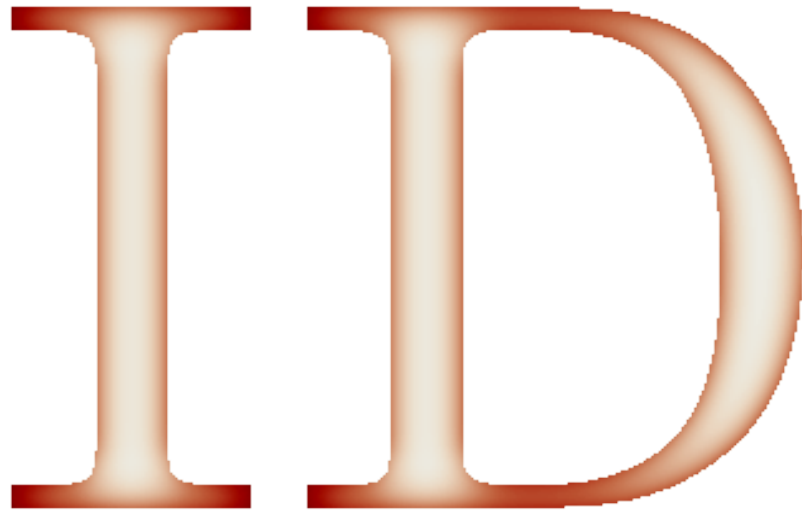


Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye



Welcome, and thank you for downloading *Inner Demons*. I, the author, hope you enjoy it.

First, I'll note that this is copyright to me, Kody Boye, and may not be republished, redistributed or reprinted without prior, written permission. If you're interested in working with me on something that relates to the novel, please, get in touch with me. I'll most likely be willing to work with you. The watermark at the side of the pages are for both my protection and your own.

I also want to stress the themes in this novel. There's mature themes (violence, swearing, etc.) but there's also gay characters. I'm warning you right now, don't start reading this if you don't want to read about gay characters. I don't need emails saying that they/their children read a novel with gay characters, sex and violence without them knowing about it. Take warning to this; don't read it if you're not satisfied with the themes.

Last but not least, please, feel free to visit the website, <http://insideyourinnerdemons.wordpress.com>. Originally, this was where the novel was posted in blog form, but I decided to take it down and update it with an advanced version. There, you can learn more about the world, its characters, and the magic that surrounds *Inner Demons*.

I love to get feedback, so don't be a stranger. Email me, post a comment; whatever you feel like. You don't *ever* have to worry about having your emails or words shared with another person, so don't worry about that.

Thank you,

~ Kody Boye
www.kodyboye.itrello.com

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Introduction

This is the second edition of *Inner Demons* that has been posted in this PDF format. This new edition contains better editing and more story that needed to be added.

I decided to repost this new content because I realized that my writing in a few years won't be the same. What does this mean? It means that what I'm writing now might not get picked up. So, while I wait for my writing to improve, I decided to post the novels I write now online. There are people out there who *love* to read, but just can't afford it. That's why they love serial novels so much; it gives them something to read without having to pay any money.

So, once more, I give you the updated version of *Inner Demons*. I'd like to send out a special thanks for my great friend Deedee Davis, who is quite a talented lady in her own right. She took the time to read the novel and point out things that were wrong with it. She is also the reason this new content is here.

You can visit Deedee online at <http://www.seedydeedee.co.uk>.

Part 1:

I Know Why The Caged Bird Flew

- - -

When I was seven, I started to get bullied; when I was thirteen, I went through puberty and discovered one of my inner demons; and at sixteen, I was so damn tired of where I was that I just wanted out.

I guess the reason I wanted out was because I was never able to make friends. Sure, I had had friends once upon a time, but in the end, they all turned out to be users or backstabbers. I had grown up and went through most of my schooling life in a small Mormon town. Part of my leaving was because I didn't have any friends, but the other reason was because an inner demon that had revealed itself when I had turned thirteen had become stronger. This inner demon had been controlling my emotions so much that I *had* to leave.

I was gay. That wasn't the inner demon in a bad sense, but wanting to leave and find someone was what spurred me into action. At fifteen--almost sixteen--I decided I wanted someone to love, a boyfriend, someone who accept

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me for who I really was. But that also meant making the choice to move out of Idaho and with my aunt in Colorado.

When I had been in school, I had been called a lot of things. Gay had been one of them, but I never got the reason why they had called me gay; I probably never would either. The majority of my friends had been girls. There had been four friends. *Girlfriend* was the word that came to most people's minds, but to *them*, they were *girlfriends*. Those *girlfriends* were the girls I was 'going out' with. I hated being labeled because of my friends, but regardless, I had still stuck with them. The two guy friends I had didn't really get me at all. One of them was a guy whom I had tried to display my emotions to, but had refused them altogether. The hypocritical bastard had turned around and told another friend that he was gay and engaged to another guy. My other friend just stopped caring. I had never wanted to display my emotions to him, but God, I would've liked to. We had been friends since we were little kids, and I mean *way* little. I spent my time building up a good twelve or thirteen years of friendship and what do I get?

What I got was a bunch of shit.

My parents hadn't helped either. They were alcoholics. Of course, when I meant 'alcoholics,' I meant it in the extreme sense. That was another reason I wanted to leave; I was tired of their fighting. I was tired of hearing them fighting about stupid shit like who was going to make dinner, or who was going to pay the bills. There were other things too, much along the lines of who was going where and who was doing what.

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That didn't matter though. When I turned sixteen, I waited about a week until I had contacted my aunt. She said she would do anything for me, and she had *meant* that, unlike anyone else in my life. She had plane tickets for me the next day, she had money to have a taxi pick me up at the airport, one that would take me to her house.

In the end, I knew something.

I knew why the caged bird flew.

I wanted to get the hell out of where it was.

Part 2:

The Clouds Over Colorado

- - -

“Excuse me, are you Mr. Dean McAllen?”

I looked up at the woman who had spoken to me. She was one of the women I had seen lurking behind the front desk. She was pretty. She had long blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, along with probably the prettiest set of eyes I had ever seen. At that particular moment, I didn’t really care if I had seen eyes prettier than hers. I was going on a mission, a mission to change my life.

“Yes, that’s me,” I said, not even attempting to wipe the dark, sweaty bangs out of my eyes.

“Your ticket’s cleared. You can get on the plane.”

Why, wouldn’t it have cleared? I thought, lugging the laptop case, filled with clothes and other personal belongings, up in my arm.

“Which plane?” I asked, stopping before I walked in through the door.

“You don’t remember the number?”

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"I forgot the number," I said. "This is hard for me to do."

"How come..."

"Could you please just tell me the number?" I asked, fighting my emotions.

She reached into her pocket, withdrawing the ticket.

"Four," she said. "I hope you have a nice trip."

"I'm not coming back," I said, walking into the hall that would lead me to the docking area. "Not ever."

It was April. With May almost approaching, the sun took its place high in the sky. The lion that had walked in would become the lamb, the April showers would bring the May flowers, and all that other pointless shit would come about with it. I walked out to the plane, where an African American security guard greeted me. I returned the smile he gave me, although it was more forced than anything else.

I was about to board the plane before I stopped, turning back to the man.

"Sir?" I asked. "I don't need to show you a ticket or anything?"

"You're out here, so you obviously have a ticket."

"The woman who helped me has it," I said. "I can go back and get it, if you like, I..."

"Don't worry about it. If you weren't allowed back here, someone

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would've already got you."

"All right. Thank you, sir."

The man gestured me inside the plane. I gripped the railing with my free, already beginning to feel the fear of my heights sinking in.

Oh well. It's better than being on a boat, right?

I gave a nervous laugh when I stepped through the open door, finding my seat and taking my place.

It was a window seat.

Great, just *fucking* great. The idea of being in a plane was more appealing than being on a boat, mostly because if you crashed in a plane, you were pretty much dead for sure. That, or you were alive and on the ground. If you sunk in a boat and lived, you'd be stranded in the ocean with the sharks, something I had not taken a liking to since I had seen a particular movie when I was little.

I took a glance out the window, glad that no one was sitting by me yet. I wouldn't matter, but it would be nice if I could go the whole trip without having to sit by anybody.

You're going to Denver, that wicked inner voice said. You think somebody's not going to sit by you? Take it up the ass, buddy; someone's going to sit there.

Almost on cue, a man dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and jeans sat down beside me. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before running a hand through his sweaty hair. He must've been in his late-twenties or early-thirties, an

attractive man in his own right.

Don't look at him, I thought, turning my head away. *All you need is a hard-on for the whole plane ride.*

"Excuse me, sir. Would you happen to have a stick of gum?"

"What?" I turned to face him, not sure if I had heard him right.

"I asked if you had a stick of gum," the man smiled. "My name's Adam, by the way."

"Dean," I replied, digging into my pocket, pulling a pack of gum out, placing it in his hand. "Here."

"I can't take all of this. I just wanted a piece."

"Take it." I waved the pack of gum in front of his eyes before placing it in his hand. "I don't plan on chewing much of it anyway."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

The flight attendant announced that we were getting ready for takeoff. She said for the passengers to buckle their seatbelts and secure themselves in the plane. I had such a good habit with buckling up in a car that it was an almost automatic gesture when we were taking off.

As the plane began to speed up and head down the runway, I closed my eyes and gripped the armrest on my right, not wanting to bump the man with my left arm. He was hot enough; I didn't need to come into contact with his skin. That would *surely* give me a hard-on.

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“Don’t like planes?” Adam asked.

“Not really, but they’re better than boats.”

“How come?”

When the plane lifted into the air, my stomach lurched.

“Because,” I gasped. “If we crash, at least we’re dead.”

After the plane had straightened itself out, I had gone into the bathroom and puked for what seemed like ten minutes. I was *still* kneeling on the floor, my hand on the rim of the toilet seat. Vomit shaded my lip in an ugly, colorless phlegm, most of which caused by not eating and drinking anything more than a glass of water. I heard a knock on the door and heard a man that wasn’t Adam ask what was taking so long.

“I’m sick,” I said.

The man left, muttering something. Although I couldn’t hear what he muttered, I knew it was something rude. Almost everybody seemed to be rude when they were in my presence. It wasn’t often that I looked into the eyes of a man or woman and didn’t see the looks they gave me. Their eyes reflected their thoughts, thoughts that said, ‘His hair’s too long,’ and, ‘He looks like he’s in some kind of cult with all that black on.’

I flushed the toilet, walking to the sink and wiping the phlegm off my face. I washed my hands, ran water over them and lifted a handful of water to my lips, spitting, repeating, then finally swallowing.

I don't have any money, I thought. So much for buying something to drink.

I wasn't particularly bothered with not having something to drink, but it would've been nice to get the stale, dry taste out of my throat. I shook my head, wiped my hands off and walked out of the bathroom. I stopped to let a man walk by before making my way to where Adam was sitting, squeezing in past him.

"Airsick?" Adam asked.

"Yeah."

"Sorry, kid. I feel bad for you. It all gets better after a few plane rides."

I tried to smile, but it was lost amidst the feelings that were plaguing my stomach. Adam went back to messing around on his laptop after giving me another friendly look.

Although I had planned on reading for the majority of the trip, I decided that reading was not the best option right now.

"I'm going to sleep," I said, strapping myself in. "Sorry if I mumble."

"That's fine," Adam said, not even bothering to look up from his laptop.

"Do what you want. I'm not here to say what you can or can't do."

I closed my eyes, drifting off to sleep.

"Hey, Dean, wake up."

Adam's hand was on my arm, gently shaking it. After a moment, I

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opened my eyes.

God, how long have I been asleep?

“What is it?”

“Look.”

Adam pointed out the window, at the abundance of clouds.

“We’re almost in Denver.”

Seeing the clouds over Colorado brought a sudden, strong happiness. I had went from living in a small Mormon town to Denver, a huge city where tons of different people of all different varieties lived.

“Thanks for waking me up,” I said.

“It’s no problem. We’re going to be there in about a half hour, just to let you know.”

I sunk into my seat.

Everything’s going to be all right., I thought. Everything’s going to be great from here on out.

Part 3:

Big Cities and New Opportunities

- - -

When the plane landed, it felt like I had stepped off some grand, angelical plane and was now entering the Garden of Eden. Of course, my idea of paradise wasn't running around naked where the leaves seemed to be in every location to hide your privates. My idea of paradise was a big city where I could meet new people, gain a new life, maybe even fall in love too.

Love, I thought, my heart soaring, wanting to fly out of my chest and get shot by a heart-tipped arrow. *It's so... So...*

"Dean?"

I jumped when Adam spoke, but calmed down when the man touched my shoulder.

"Yeah?" I asked, tightening the grip on my laptop case.

"You ok?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm just happy to be here."

Adam smiled, and for the next few minutes, he stood next to me, waiting for the crowd of people to get off the plane before we took our places at the end of the line.

“Well, I guess this is where we part,” Adam said. “It was nice meeting you, Dean.”

“Same here,” I said, shaking his hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“And thank you.”

We parted, going our own separate ways. Although I had just met a man I had considered to be a friend, I was leaving him to go his own way.

“Adam?”

When I turned to find the man, he was gone.

With a bit of guilt and stupidity resting in my chest, I walked out of the airport and begin placing Adam at the back of my mind. People I had just met or cared little about could be placed in the back of my mind easily, just like certain events in my life. Putting things in the back of my mind was the way I coped. I set them in the back of my mind, waiting for them to dissolve. In due time, they *would* dissolve, which made me happy.

I stepped out of the shade, into the light. The sounds of cars and people greeted my eager ears. I laughed, ignoring the fact that I had no clue how to get a taxi. I didn’t really care at that moment; I was in a new place, a new world, a new *galaxy*. Why the hell did I need to care about getting a taxi?

I took in the city before a taxi pulled up. I walked over, opening the

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backseat door.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

I buckled in and recited the exact address.

It took the driver a half hour to get to my aunt’s house. As he drove, I looked at the buildings and took in every single little thing I could. I took in the amount of people, the amount of cars, the way some of the roads soared into the sky and curled in ways that would have seemed unimaginable to a small-town guy like me.

“Sir?” the man asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my thoughts aside. “Are we here?”

“Yeah,” the driver said. “You have thirty bucks?”

“My aunt’s paying for it,” I said. “I came here without any money. You care if I go get her?”

The man gestured for me to get out. I lugged my laptop case out of the taxi, walked up, then knocked on the door.

“Dean!” my aunt Patricia screeched. “You’re here!”

“The man needs thirty bucks,” I smiled. “Sorry, not much of a friendly greeting.”

“No, no!” she laughed. “I’ll go pay him right now.”

My aunt walked past me, to the taxi. I took my chance to sneak into the

air-conditioned house, closing the door behind me. I looked around, thankful that I was here.

You can start over now. You can get a job, you can make a few friends, you can get a guy for yourself.

I was unsure about the last part, but I would work that out in time. It's not like I needed to be in a relationship immediately. I could wait for a little while, get to know my surroundings, establish myself as a hard worker wherever I decided to work, make a friend or two. A boyfriend would come with time and patience.

"Dean," Patricia said. "Is that all you brought?"

"Yeah," I said, looking down at the laptop case. "It's all I need."

That night, I got out of the shower and walked into my bedroom. Shirtless, wearing only my underwear, I sat on my bed, thankful that I didn't have to worry about my aunt walking in on me.

I'm getting up early to go shopping with the money she gave me. That's what I'm doing. After that, I'll go see if any of the local stores need a new employee.

I ran a finger down the hair on my chest, feeling the muscle.

You've escaped! The caged bird flew! You saw the clouds above Colorado! You're in the big city; you've got new opportunities waiting for you!

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Right then and there, I actually liked how my inner voice sounded.

Before, it had sounded depressed, moody; but now, it was excited. I was happy, actually *happy*, for once. I had been a sad person hiding behind a mask of fake emotions and bad jokes before this, but right now, I was so happy that I wanted to scream until my head hurt.

I closed my eyes and let my thoughts take me away. The caged bird spread its wings, pushed itself off the ground, and took flight.

That morning, I woke up at six o'clock and decided I would go then. I showered, dressed in a black shirt and jeans that ended at the knees, and combed my shoulder-length hair. Then, out into the kitchen, I scribbled a note before walking outside.

Town's not that far, I thought, smiling. *Besides, the sun's starting to come up.*

Although I couldn't really see the sun, it still felt good. It wasn't completely hot, but it wasn't cold either. It was the kind of temperature that a guy like me could enjoy.

Shorts might not have been the best choice. I rubbed my calf, the hairs tickling at my hand. *It's still not warm enough.*

It would be warmer by the time I got into town. It was April, almost May; it *always* got warmer after that.

I let my thoughts take me away, ignoring my surroundings and other

distractions while I walked down the street.

I had hated clothes shopping when I had been going with my mother back in Idaho, mostly because I couldn't get the clothes I wanted. My aunt had given me a good sum of money; one-hundred-and-fifty dollars. I intended on using it the best I could.

I didn't have much in my cart yet. I had some black undershirts and underwear, which I hadn't bought back in Idaho because I had always gone shopping with my mother. Black was my color; why not have black underwear as well?

I smirked, tossing the package into the cart. On the front was a shirtless man with a smooth, muscled chest. His body was devoid of hair, and for a brief moment, I placed a hand on my abs, almost feeling the hair through the fabric.

Is that what my boyfriend will want? I thought, the man's haunting, attractive smile pulling my mind in another direction. *Will he want me to be smooth like the man on the cover of the underwear package?*

I continued on through the men's department after shaking the bothering thought off. At this hour, there were hardly any people to disturb me. I thought I saw a guy tear a thing of men's thongs open and shove them into his pocket, but I kept to my own business. Turning your eyes to a man and trying to make his business yours was not a good thing to do, especially in a city like Denver, where you could get stabbed in a blink of an eye.

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I'm not like that. I'm not the kind of person to go sneaking into another man's business. Fuck, I'll probably get picked up by a guy at a party because he notices me.

The mentality of teenagers and the influences of high school had really turned me off on being sociable. I had been home schooled through the internet until I emailed my aunt. I had only gone through one year of high school before deciding that I didn't want to go anymore. I had been abused by my peers when I had been a little heavier, when I had girlfriends, when people started betraying me just because of the small talent I had with writing.

No! the little bird in my head screamed. *You are not any less than any of them!*

Of course, I knew they weren't any better than me. Stupid teenagers that said 'like' after every other word showed their stupidity. I knew I was smarter than them, *better* than them in every way I could be. A person who thought they were better than everyone else was just another ass-wipe that deserved to be shoved down a hole and shot dead. I wasn't the person to judge on first impressions, I never had been, but I had more than a first opinion with teenagers.

The man who I had caught shoving the thongs in his pants walked over beside me, picking up a T-shirt. I remained where I was, combing through the shirts. I glanced at the man from the side of my vision.

"Something wrong?" the stranger asked.

"No sir. Nothing's wrong."

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The man didn't say anything, which made me a little nervous. I looked at a shirt for a moment before setting it back on the rack. I grabbed the cart and turned it around, about to walk out before the man's hand was on the back of my shirt.

"You saw me?" he breathed. "Didn't you?"

"Yes sir. I did."

"How do I know that you're not going to snitch on me?"

"I'm no snitch, sir. Please, let me go. I'm not going to rat on you."

When the man released his hold on me, I turned and gave him a short but small smile.

"Thanks, kid," the man sighed. "I've got a bit of a money situation and can't afford underwear."

"That's fine," I said. "I mean, not fine about the money situation, but... Yeah. Have a good day, sir."

After that, I got out of the men's clothing department as fast as I could.

Although I had thought about getting a taxi and going home, I still had a job to find. I had paid the hundred bucks I had bought in clothes and walked out, struggling with my bag for a short moment before I got it in a good, non-painful position.

Fuck, I frowned, stopping to look around at the area. *Where am I?*

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That didn't bother me; I didn't have to know where I was. I was looking for a job. I could always get a cab later. I began to walk down the sidewalk before I stopped, looking across the street.

In the window of a dollar store, a 'Help Wanted' sign gleamed in all its glory.

I made my way across the street.

Part 4:

Meeting Ken Sanderson

- - -

My interview had gone so well, the manager had immediately hired me. I was surprised that I was able to get a meeting with the man the very minute I walked in the store, but didn't much care now that I had a job. The boss had heard me ask a cashier about the sign in the window, and the man had grabbed me and pulled me into his office. From there, he asked me a few simple questions, ignoring my repeatedly-asked question about filling out a résumé.

'A résumé, boy?' the man had asked, barking. 'You don't need no damn résumé. You're hired.'

I was restocking the peanut butter jars when I saw a man come up beside me.

"Mr. Douglass wants to talk to you," he said.

"All right, thank you..." I trailed off, looking for a nametag.

"Oh, sorry." The man gave an uneasy laugh as he turned to walk away.

“My name’s Ken, by the way; Ken Sanderson.”

I shook the man’s hand before walking up the aisle, back to the front of the store. I caught sight of Mr. Douglass speaking to another cashier.

“Sir?” I asked, standing in front of the counter. “You wanted to see me?”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Dean,” the man grinned. “How you likin’ it here?”

“It’s great, sir,” I said, returning the smile. “I’m still getting to know the place.”

“Ah, it takes a while the first time.” Douglas sent the cashier off before he leaned against the counter. “If you have any questions, just ask Ken.”

“About Ken, sir,” I looked back down the aisle and saw that the strange man wasn’t there. “He seemed a bit...”

“Depressed?” the man asked. “Yeah, I know. I feel bad for the poor guy. He just found out that he’s going to have to go through a lot of shit before he can have his surgery.”

“Surgery, sir?” I asked, sighing as I noticed my childish curiosity. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be so considered with his life...”

“He’s transsexual, Dean.”

My mouth formed an O before I realized that I looked rude. I looked back down the aisle I had met the man in.

“I’m sorry for being so snoopy, sir.”

“You have a right to be curious about your coworkers, Dean.”

“Still, I shouldn’t be asking questions like I just asked. It makes me feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t feel like that, Dean,” my boss said, leaning across the counter, patting my shoulder. “You’ll go through life knowing that feeling like an idiot or something else like that doesn’t get you anywhere.”

I stayed after the dollar store closed to sweep the floor. I didn’t think I would be wiping the floors the first day of work, but I hadn’t thought about liking work so much. I worked four hours a day due to the damn child labor law, was paid seven dollars an hour, and was treated good by my boss; what *wasn’t* to like?

The real reason I had offered to stay and sweep was because I wanted to talk to Ken. I wasn’t sure how many people knew he was a transsexual, but if I could at least talk and maybe get to know him, I might be able to make him feel better. I was more than sure that he didn’t have too many good friends.

It’s a sad thing that people are so fucking afraid of people who are ‘sick’ in their eyes, I thought, trying to see if Ken was anywhere nearby.

Somehow, after hearing Mr. Douglass’ words about Ken, I felt responsible. I felt like I needed to reach out and help him in some way.

The brief shock of Ken’s blonde hair made me look up.

“Hey,” Ken said. “What’re you still doing here?”

“Sweeping,” I smiled.

“On your first day? The boss is harder on the new kids than I thought he was.”

“No,” I sighed. “Mr. Douglass didn’t ask me to stay and sweep, Ken.”

The man gave me a concerned look efore he sighed, turning away.

“He told you, didn’t he?”

The tone he used made me feel bad. It made me feel guilty, like I was the bully listening to a rumor, a bully that would spread that rumor around with no feeling or remorse.

“Ken, I...”

“Please, just go home.”

Ken started to walk down the aisle. When I reached out for him, he slapped my hand away.

“Ken, I didn’t mean...”

“Just leave me alone!” he cried. “Please, just leave me alone, I...”

“I’m gay,” I said. “I’m gay, Ken. I’m not judging you in any way.”

Ken’s eyes changed, leaving behind the sadness.

“You’re in the closet?”

“Yeah.” I leaned the broom against the counter. “You don’t have to be afraid of me, Ken. I’m not the kind of guy to judge you.”

“You won’t?” Ken asked.

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I shook my head, hopping up on the counter.

“No, Ken. I’m not that kind of person. I lived with those kinds people for the first fifteen years of my life.”

“You don’t live here?”

“No, I moved out here with my aunt because I couldn’t take the bullshit anymore. I know where you’re coming from.”

Ken jumped up on the counter beside me..

“Thanks,” Ken said after that moment of silence.

“For what?”

“For, you know, not acting all freaked out.”

“Why would I act freaked out just because you’re transsexual?” I frowned. “You’ve had bad experiences with people, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Ken said. “I have.”

I looked up at the clock, saw it was only six, and walked to the payphones, digging through my pockets to find a few quarters.

“What are you doing?” Ken asked, walking up beside me.

“Calling my aunt,” I said. “You want to go eat?”

Me and Ken went to a small burger joint down the street. It wasn’t anything fancy, and I couldn’t buy food for the both of us, so we ordered our own meals and sat at our own table. Our table was in the back, away from

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everyone else. I had asked Ken if there was anywhere in particular he wanted to sit, and though he didn't actually say anything, I could see it in his eyes that he wanted to be at the back.

Ken was like me in a lot of ways. We were outcasts in the eyes of those so-called 'normal' people, the 'normal' people were the people that thought that every single little thing that was 'different' or 'bad' in their eyes. It was people like me and Ken who they didn't like, the gays and the transsexuals. These 'normal' people saw us 'different' people with different eyes, as people who had a 'choice' in being who we were.

The normal people were the biggest fakes on earth.

"You ok?" Ken asked.

I looked up, biting the end of a fry off.

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry, I was thinking about how the world is fifty-percent fake."

Ken laughed and bit into his hamburger, setting it on the table.

"You care if I ask when you knew?" Ken asked, his face not showing his usual smile or happy expression.

Ken didn't have to elaborate on 'when I knew' for me to know what he was talking about.

"When I was thirteen," I said. "That was my inner demon."

"Inner demon?" He frowned at the phrase.

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“Oh, those are things that trouble me,” I laughed. “They’re not really bad things. Well, not most of the time, anyway.”

“You ever been with a guy?” Ken sipped his soda, watching me with curious eyes.

“No. That’s part of the reason I moved out here. I lived in a Mormon town, so... Well, there weren’t any gay people there. Other than these lesbians, and even then, I didn’t know them.”

“You think you’ll find someone here?”

“I hope so. I’d like someone to lean on, you know? I was really depressed before I left Idaho.”

“This isn’t really about you being with someone, but did you ever... Well... You know?”

“Know what?” I asked. “What do you...”

It hit me so fast that I didn’t even expect the blush.

Ken wanted to know if I had had sex.

“No,” I chuckled. “And I don’t want to be with someone just for that either.”

After that, we stopped talking about our sexualities. We ate our meal, then when we were finished, we shook each other’s hand.

“I have to get a cab,” I said, patting my pocket, making sure my wallet was there. “I need to be getting home.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

"I'll give you a ride. Well, if that's all right with you, anyway."

I followed him out of the restaurant and down to his car.

"I appreciate you taking me home," I said. "Really, I do."

"It's no problem," Ken smiled. "I'll do anything for a friend."

The word *friend* made me so warm, especially coming from Ken.

"How did your day go, Dean?"

I looked up at my uncle.

"Fine," I said. "I made a new friend."

"That's good," my aunt said, walking over with a sandwich tray. "Who is it?"

Be careful, don't tell them about the transsexual part.

"Her name's Kendra," I said. "Kendra Sanderson. I work with her."

"A girl?" My uncle looked up, curiosity lighting his eyes.

"She's thirty," I said, which softened my uncle's mood.

"Come on, Walter; you think he's going to get a girlfriend as soon as he gets here?"

"If I had been living in that shitty little town and was out here, I'd be *starving* for a relationship."

You don't know the half of it, I thought, taking a bite out of my sandwich.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

I'm just not starving for that kind of relationship.

I took another bite to hide the stupid smirk that came across my face.

Don't worry, Ken said, his past words coming back. I have a feeling you're going to find somebody soon, Dean.

I hid the smile that passed over my face.

I hoped I would have somebody soon.

Part 5:

The Man That Said, ‘Smile’

- - -

At the very beginning of May, I was standing at the front register. A lot of the other people were out with the summer flu that was going around Denver. Me and Ken were lucky that we hadn’t got it, because the thing was supposed to be nasty as hell.

I looked up when I heard footsteps.

A customer, I thought, bending down to tie my shoe.

I hadn’t been in much of a good mood that day. I had just started to realize that I wasn’t going to get a boyfriend anytime soon. Here I was, into the third week of my time here in Colorado, and I hadn’t been approached by anyone. Or, better yet, I hadn’t approached anyone myself.

That’s what you get for being so squirrely. How do you expect guys to come up to you if they don’t know you’re gay.

I was *totally* going to get a shirt that said ‘Love the Rainbow’ or

something similar. Maybe that'd be a big-enough clue.

When I stood back up, I tried to force a smile, just to be friendly, but couldn't get one to come out. The man was an average man, with light-brown hair, a nice face and a sturdy build. However, he was a good-looking man, one with an easy, kind face and a pleasant smile. I tried to distract myself with what he was holding, a stick of deodorant. If I looked at him for too long, the warmth that was spreading in my chest would make me do something stupid. The guy seemed *that* good.

"Is this all?" I asked, taking the deodorant. "Three dollars and twenty cents."

I waited for him to hand me the money. All the while the man was searching his pockets, I was trying to pump my ego.

"Hey, smile."

The man caught me so off guard that I *did* smile. I accepted the five he gave me and gave him the dollar and eighty cents he needed.

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate it."

"You have *gorgeous* eyes," the man said, leaning in to look at them. "I've never seen such a nice shade of gray."

I turned to hide the blush that washed into my cheeks.

"Thank you," I said. "I... I don't know what to say."

The man leaned against the counter, still taking me in. I took a glance at

him as I turned to mess with the objects that were behind the counter.

“Was there anything else you needed?” I asked, trying not to be too nervous.

“Yeah,” the man said, lowering his deep voice. “Your number.”

My heart stopped. I looked up and stared at him.

“W-What did you a-ask?”

“Your number,” the man said, matter-of-factly.

“How do you...”

“I know. Your eyes say it.”

I didn’t know what the man was talking about. I just stood there, staring. Apparently, Ken had noticed the whole thing, because he came over.

“Hey, Dean, I need to *ask* you something.”

“What?” I looked over at Ken. “I...”

When Ken started tugging on my shirt, I gave in.

“Don’t go,” I said, hoping my words didn’t sound too much like a plea.

“I’ll be right back.”

I let Ken drag me a few feet away before he stopped, looking me in the eyes.

“What the hell are you doing, just staring at him like that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking down at Ken’s shoes. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, Dean. I may be wanting to become a woman, and I know that I’m a lesbian anyway, even though I’m in a man’s body, but I *know* when a guy’s attractive.” Ken looked over my shoulder at the new man. “He’s *gorgeous*, actually.”

“Yeah...”

“I think this is the guy,” Ken said. “The guy I said you would get.”

I nodded.

“So, since you’re my best friend and all, are you going to shove me back over there and have me give him my number?” I smiled.

“Yeah,” Ken breathed,

He *literally* gave me a push back toward the register. I gave a guilty smile and kept my eyes down as I grabbed my cell phone out of my pocket.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You have a piece of paper?”

The man pulled out his cell phone.

“How about speed dial instead?”

I could’ve melted, but recited my number instead.

“My name’s Dean,” I said, looking into his beautiful brown eyes.

“Mine’s Brad,” the man said. “I’ll call you later. We’ll get together soon.”

I watched Brad close his phone, watched him slide it back in his pocket before he walked out the front door.

He had forgotten his change.

“He forgot his change,” I mumbled, looking down at the dollar and coins.

“Who the *hell* cares.” Ken laughed, slapping my back. “Looks like you got a date.”

I would’ve fallen if Ken hadn’t have caught me.

“You ok?” Ken asked when we pulled up to the lonely, vacant parking lot of my aunt’s house.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Do you want me to come in?”

“I said you were Kendra,” I said, smirking when he gave me one of his odd looks. “To my aunt and uncle.”

“Shit. Guess I can’t stay then, huh?”

“My aunt works until three in the morning every day except Sunday and Monday, and my uncle is a businessman. He’s gone on one of his trips.”

Taking that as his cue to get out, Ken stepped out of the car just as I did. I stumbled and caught myself on the hood of the car, letting out a little laugh.

“You ok?” Ken asked.

“Oh, I’m fine. I just can’t believe some random guy just came up, gave me a few compliments, then asked for my number.”

“Uh, Dean. Hate to tell you this, but that’s called *flirting*.”

“A skill that I will always lack,” I chuckled. “At least I have a date,

right?”

I unlocked the door and let him into the house. When I went to make us a few sandwiches, the grin that had been on my face the whole day never left.

Me and Ken were sitting in front of the television set when my cell phone rang.

“It’s him,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“I just have that feeling.” I stood. “You care if I take this call in private?”

“No, go ahead.”

I walked down the hall and into my bedroom, closing the door before flipping the phone open.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dean,” Brad said. “Sorry it took so long for me to call.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “You’re busy.”

“Not really,” he laughed. “You feeling ok? I hope I made your day a little better.”

You don’t know how much better you made my day.

“You made my day. I really appreciate it.”

“I’m glad.”

For a moment, he was silent. I got nervous, thinking that I needed to somehow continue the conversation.

“So,” Brad continued, “I guess you already know that I didn’t call just to bullshit with you.”

“Yeah.” I tried not to sound too dreamy.

“You want to go out with me tomorrow? I know it’s Saturday and all, but if you don’t have anything to do...”

“No, tomorrow’s fine.” My heart was literally *pounding* in my chest.

“What time’s good for you?”

“My aunt goes to work at noon, so anytime after then.”

“How about I pick you up at one-thirty? Does that sound ok?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“All right, thanks Dean. Bye.”

“Bye.”

When I hung up, I could’ve fainted right then and there. Just hearing his gentle, deep voice made me feel things I’ve never felt before.

“Hey, Dean!” Ken called. “You ok?”

“Yeah!” I called back. “Just fine.”

It wasn’t long before I heard Ken’s footsteps. He knocked and pushed the door open.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“You ok?”

I had let my back trail down the wall until I was in a sitting position. I clutched my cell phone with weak fingers.

“He wants me to go out with him,” I said. “Tomorrow, at one-thirty.”

Ken offered me his hand. I gripped it and let him pull me up.

“Will you come over here at twelve-thirty?” I asked. “Just so I have a little moral support.”

“Sure,” Ken said. “You need to do something with that hair of yours. I think I can help.”

Part 6:

First Date

- - -

I was glad that my aunt hadn't asked about what I was going to do before she left. If she *had* asked, I probably would've broke down and said something stupid.

I paced, waiting for Ken. Just when I thought that he wouldn't show up, his fancy silver car pulled into the driveway.

"Thank *God!* He's here!"

When I looked back out the window again, I didn't see Ken coming up the driveway. It was a woman, dressed in a black shirt and jeans.

A woman? I thought. *Who could...*

At that moment, I remembered that Ken was transsexual. I opened the door and smiled.

"Ken...dra," I said, carefully using my words.

“Kendra’s fine,” Ken smiled. “My voice sound ok?”

Ken had been using a new voice.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s just that... You’re going back and forth between being a man and a woman that I...”

“I’m a woman when I look like one,” Kendra said. “I’m a man when I look like a man. Right now I’m Kendra. What am I when I’m at work?”

“Ken,” I said. “The man, right?”

Kendra’s face lit up with approval.

“All right, so we’ve got forty-five minutes to make you look all snazy,” she said. “I assume you already took a shower.”

I had just noticed that I was shirtless, and because of that, grimaced.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, honey.”

“You think I should shave it?” I asked, running a hand down my thinly-haired chest.

“Are you expecting anything to happen tonight?”

“No.”

“Wait then. After the first few dates, you’ll know if he likes a smooth chest or not.”

I agreed, but I was still a little subconscious about my chest. I shook it off and led Kendra to the bathroom. I wasn’t hairy-hairy; I had a treasure trail and

hair on my stomach, but other than that, I didn't have hair. I didn't shave under my arms or legs; I thought that was rather fake, for the most part.

Why are you so worried about it? Is it because you think there's the possibility that something might happen?

"I don't know if anything will happen," I said, standing in front of the mirror, watching Kendra grab a bottle of gel. "How am I supposed to know that?"

"You don't know, honey." She rubbed the gel in my hair. "But I do know one thing; if this guy is only interested in your body, he's not the guy for you."

I closed my eyes, agreeing with Kendra every single bit. I didn't want my boyfriend to be fake. I didn't want him to be some guy that just wanted to use me to have sex, or to cart me around like I was some kind of trophy.

You're no trophy, my inner voice said, causing me to open my eyes. Come on, look at yourself. You're nothing special. You're not a gorgeous model, you're not as skinny as a stick, you don't go to the gym four times a week. You're nothing special.

The truth was that I *knew* I was nothing special. I knew I wasn't gorgeous, I knew I wasn't sexy, I knew I had things to deal with, but that didn't really matter. A guy had walked up to me, said, 'Smile' and had made me feel like I was the tallest person on earth. When he had asked for my number, I had felt like I had died and gone to heaven. Wasn't that enough?

"Dean, what's wrong?"

I saw the tear that was rolling down my face in the mirror.

“Nothing,” I said, brushing it away. “Just thinking.”

“You’re not excited about going out with him?”

“No, it’s not that. I was just looking in the mirror and realized that I’m nothing to him. I’m not gorgeous or sexy or muscled. I’ll never compare to a guy like Brad.”

“This guy doesn’t care about that, Dean. He saw something in you that he wanted to see more of. He asked you out. Don’t let your past and what people have said to you sway your mind. You’re going to have the time of your life on this date.”

Kendra finished running the gel through my hair. She combed it back, but kept enough of it so the hair framed my face, which made my fair skin and face stand out.

“Is that all right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Thanks.”

I grabbed my shirt and carefully pulled it over my head, not wanting to mess up the work Kendra had just put into it. She had to comb it a little bit, but other than that, it was done.

“I like it,” I said, running a hand over my undershirt. “Thanks.”

“Are you wearing a jacket or something?”

“I have a sweatshirt. The one I always wear to work in the morning, you

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know?”

Kendra looked me up and down. I assumed that she was taking in what I was wearing. The black undershirt, the black denim shorts that ended below my knees, the tennis shoes.

“Black?” she asked.

“It makes my skin stand out. I like the color.”

“All right, I was just wondering.”

“I don’t look Goth, do I? I don’t want to look weird.”

“You look fine, Dean. Black looks good on you.”

I grabbed my toothbrush, squeezing out some toothpaste.

“If he’s taking you out to eat, what’s the point of brushing your teeth?” she asked, leaning against the wall, adjusting the long brown hair of her wig.

“I don’t want to look like an idiot,” I said, spitting before filling up a nearby glass and washing my mouth out. “I especially don’t want to taste like shit if we end up kissing. You have gum or a pack of mints I could borrow?”

Kendra reached into her purse, pulling out a pack of breath mints.

“Do you think he’ll kiss you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Right now, I’m not expecting anything. I just want to make it through the date without doing something stupid.”

“You have twenty minutes before he’s here. We might as well go sit on the couch and wait. Besides, the way you pace, you’ll wear yourself out before

you're out the door."

I chuckled, shoving the breath mints in my pocket.

Bad breath was *definitely* a turn-off.

When the car pulled up, I didn't know what to do. Kendra said to sit there with her and continue watching TV. She said, 'Wait until he comes up and knocks at the door. If he catches you looking out the window, he'll think you're desperate.'

I *was* desperate. Brad was a nice guy; he had made me smile, had made my day, had made me feel like the tallest person on earth and had let my caged bird fly to the sky. He had done so much for me; there would never be a way I could never repay him for those few minutes.

When the knocks came at the door, I stood, nervously looking at the door for a moment before looking to Kendra, who only gave me a small smile.

I opened the door, smiling as I saw Brad.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey. You ready?"

"If you are. You want to come in for a minute?"

I opened the door and let Brad walk in.

"This is Kendra," I said, gesturing for her to stand.

"Nice to meet you," Kendra said, grabbing Brad's hand and shaking it.

“You take good care of my boy now, right?”

“Yeah,” Brad smiled. “I sure will.”

While Kendra talked to him, I was able to take Brad in. His hair was combed and spiked in the front like he had done yesterday. His light-brown hair accented his beautiful, tanned skin. His red shirt hugged his body tight and his jeans accented each and every curve a man had. He smelled of some rich fragrance that I couldn’t place, but it reminded me of wine.

“You ready to go?” Brad asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I am.”

I gave Kendra a short goodbye before I walked out the door. She followed us out, closing the door behind her.

“I locked it,” she said. “No worries.”

I walked with Brad to his car, giving Kendra another wave goodbye before Brad settled into the driver’s side.

“You want to go to a movie?” Brad asked.

“That’s fine,” I said. “Whatever you want.”

Brad drew the seatbelt across his chest before driving off.

For the whole two hours that we were at the theater, I shied away from the casual touches he gave me. The first time he tried to interlace our fingers, I had stood and walked out of theater, into the bathroom. There, I splashed my

face with water.

My inner voice had been talking.

You shy, boy? it asked. *You too shy?*

I walked back into the theater. For the rest of the movie, he hadn't tried to touch me. After the movie, we went and ate at a small restaurant, like the one where Kendra and I had eaten. He then took me out driving to see the beautiful countryside.

"You ok?"

I had been so captivated by the mountains that I hadn't noticed he was trying to get my attention.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm trying my best."

"You don't have to be nervous. I'm not judging you."

I looked into his eyes. He was about to reach out and touch my hand when the dogs of the sky snarled.

"Fuck," Brad said. "That really sucks."

I sighed as he buckled himself in and backed out of where we were.

"Sorry," Brad said. "I don't want to get stuck in a storm."

"It's fine," I said, seeing the clouds darken. "I don't want to get stuck out here either."

Brad grunted, shifting gears, turning back onto the road.

It wouldn't have been so bad. You could've done some nasty things with

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him.

“No,” I whispered.

“What was that?” Brad asked.

“Sorry. I was talking to myself.”

Brad didn’t say anything, but I caught his nod out of the corner of my eye. I reached into my pocket and shook a few mints into my hand. I casually placed my hand to my mouth--as if I was going to rub my finger over my lips--and slid them in. Three breath mints too many. I grimaced before I finally got used to the sharp, hot taste.

“I have to get home,” Brad said. “I’m sorry we had to cut the date short.”

“It’s fine.”

Brad pulled into the driveway, putting the car in park. Just as he put it in park, the rain started up, hitting the car in the pitter-patter rhythm that rain always did.

“I had a really nice time,” Brad said. “I’d like to see you again, Dean.”

I blinked. Had he just asked to see me again?

“What?” I asked.

“I want to see you again, if that’s all right.”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine,” I said. “I’d like that.”

Brad stared into my eyes. He reached out and touched my face. I didn’t flinch or draw away. He smiled and leaned in closer, closing the distance

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between us. I could smell his breath. It smelled like the white chocolate he had nibbled on earlier. I knew what was about to happen, but I couldn't face it.

I turned my head away, breaking the moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I... Brad, I..."

"It's fine," Brad said, his voice showing the hurt that he was feeling.

"No, Brad, it's... You're the first guy I've ever gone out with."

I looked up and saw the understanding in Brad's eyes.

"Oh," he said. "I didn't know."

"I'm not from around here," I said. "I moved out here to my aunt's. I got tired of my old life."

He leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You're not eighteen then."

"I'm sixteen," I said. "I really like you, Brad. I don't want my age to force us apart."

He had closed his eyes. It was only obvious that the situation troubled him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll understand if you don't want to date me anymore."

I closed my own eyes. I had blown it, I had fucking blown it. I crossed the great borderline taboo; saying how old you were on a first date. I was fighting tears at that moment.

You'll cry, my inner voice taunted. You'll cry and show that you aren't the man that he thought you were.

I reached for the door handle.

Brad touched my arm.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "It's nobody's business if we're four years apart. I asked you out. I brought you on the date. I like you, and you like me. I want to see you again."

I gripped his hand. It was the first real, physical connection we had all day, other than when he touched my face just a minute ago.

"I'm sorry for killing the end of the date," I said, wiping a tear that had strayed down my cheek. "I really like you, Brad. I haven't felt this way about anyone, *ever*."

Brad smiled.

"I'll see what my schedule is doing. I'll call you."

"Bye. I had a great time."

"I did too. Bye."

"Bye."

I walked to the door, expecting him to have already started the car and pulled out. I looked back at his car. It was still there. He had waited for me to unlock the door.

I waved, opening the door. I watched as he backed out of the driveway

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and down the street.

When he did, I started crying.

Up until now, my life had been hell.

That first date gave me hope.

It made me feel like I was actually worth more to someone than I thought
I had been all along.

Part 7:

Brad's Strange Call

- - -

After Brad dropped me off, I had spent the majority of the time relaying the date to Kendra over the cell phone. She was happy for me. She said not to worry about not kissing him. She had also said that it had been nerves and that I would kiss him when I felt like it.

It was around seven after I got off the phone with Kendra. Brad had dropped me off at six, so I had spent an hour talking on the phone. I watched TV until eight, took a shower for an hour, then went to bed.

I had quickly fallen asleep.

The ringing of my cell phone woke me up at twelve o'clock. I moaned, grabbing for my phone, looking at the number.

It was Brad's.

I flipped the phone open.

"Brad?"

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“Who is this?” Brad asked.

“It’s Dean, Brad. You just called me.”

“I did? Fuck, Dean; I didn’t see the time.”

“It’s fine.” I sat up, resting my back against the bed’s headboard. “Is everything all right?”

“Go away,” Brad said, his words clearly directed toward someone else.

“I’m on the phone.”

“Brad?”

“Sorry.”

“Do you live with someone?”

“Go away!” Brad yelled.

“Brad?”

“I said *fuck*ing go away!”

“Brad, you’re scaring me. Are you sure everything’s all right.”

“Give me a second.”

The call ended.

I set the phone on my pillow. If getting woken up at midnight was one thing, hearing the guy you just went out with yell at somebody with such violence was something else.

Is he violent? I frowned. *He didn’t seem violent on our date. He was a*

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nice guy.

Nice guys finish last, buddy. That's why you were picked on.

I jumped when the phone rang. I pressed it to my ear.

"Brad?"

"Sorry, Dean. I was being bothered."

"Do you live with anyone?"

"No. Why?"

"You were yelling at somebody."

The silence from his end made the hair on my arms stand up.

"Brad?"

"Someone was at the door," Brad said. "Some of the stupid teenagers that prank you, you know? Kind of like..."

"Doorbell ditching," I finished. "Yeah, like that."

"Cept I don't have a doorbell," Brad laughed.

"Are you sure you're ok, Brad? You sure it wasn't something else?"

"I'm fine, Dean. Don't worry about me. Sorry about calling. I'll let you go. Night."

"Night."

I waited for him to end the connection. It took him a minute, but he did.

I placed the phone on the nightstand.

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Don't worry about me...

I was worried about him.

Part 8:

Ken's Musings

- - -

"So you're telling me that he called you in the middle of the night, was yelling at somebody *really* loud, and told you it was doorbell ditchers?"

"Yeah," I said. "Weird, huh?"

"Maybe he overindulges," Ken suggested.

I looked at him, trying to figure out what he was implying. He obviously knew I was troubled--that, or he caught the stupid look on my face--because he made a grabbing of the bottle and chugging gesture.

"Oh," I said. "I hope he doesn't drink."

"You don't like drinkers?"

"The parents are alcoholics, so, yeah... I don't really like the idea of my boyfriend being a drinker."

The 'ooh' from Ken brought my attention away from the cash register.

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“What?”

“You called him your boyfriend,” Ken smiled.

“I did?”

“Yeah, Dean; you did.”

I frowned.

“Sorry. He’s not really a boyfriend yet, is he?”

“Not until you’ve been on a few dates. You did enjoy yourself on the date, right?”

“Yeah. I told you all about it Saturday night.”

“Just making sure. Sometimes I forget.”

Ken tapped his head with his fist in a knocking-like gesture, which made me laugh. I knew the feeling of forgetting things.

“Are you going out with him again? You never said anything about that.”

“I want to. He said he’d see what his schedule had.”

Ken slapped my shoulder.

“See, I *knew* you would get someone!”

I grabbed a customer’s items and began to scan them.

“And you know why you’re my best friend,” I smiled.

Part 9:

Kiss Me, Softly

- - -

That next Saturday, Brad was sitting out in his car, waiting for me. This time, I wasn't holding Kendra's hand in preparation for the date. I hadn't gelled my hair back, and I had worn blue jeans and a red shirt this time, opting to not look like death walking the streets.

"Hey," Brad said. "You ok?"

"Fine," I smiled. "I was starting to worry."

He had been a half-hour late of picking me up at two-thirty. When I called him earlier, I couldn't get him to answer the phone.

"That's my fault," Brad sighed. "I got caught up in traffic."

"What about your phone?" I asked. "I was trying to call you."

"I turned it off. Someone kept calling me."

I looked out the window as he drove in the direction of the park.

“Somebody you didn’t want to talk to?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, letting out a nervous laugh.

With another nod, I kept quiet, not wanting to disturb him any more. The way he had laughed made me a little nervous. His laugh made me remember the way he had yelled at somebody when he had called me after our first date.

“I’m sorry,” Brad sighed, bringing me out of my thoughts. “I shouldn’t turn my phone off. You should be able to call me when you want to.”

“I try not to bother you. I don’t like to call people, it makes me feel like I’m interrupting them.”

“You can call me more than twice a week. I like talking to you.”

Since that first date, I had only called him twice, but both times I had enjoyed our conversation. Brad was a nice guy, one that was concerned for my wellbeing. He wasn’t trying to push me into anything, and he was easy to get along with. I had never had anyone who was so concerned about me. He didn’t look at me like a responsibility, like my parents did, and he didn’t look at me like someone he could use to his advantage, like my old friends had.

Brad was Brad; he was perfect.

“I like talking to you too,” I smiled. “You always know how to make me feel better.”

“I try to make you feel better,” Brad said, returning his eyes to the road.

“You do? I appreciate you being so nice to me.”

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“Why wouldn’t I be nice to you?” he frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No...” I shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

When Brad pulled into the parking lot, he kept the car running.

“Come on, Dean. Tell me.”

“You’ll just think it’s stupid.”

“No, I won’t.” Brad reached out, touching my hand. “I promise.”

“I’m not good enough for you,” I said. “I’m not good-looking or attractive in any way, I’m not sexy, I don’t have rock-hard muscles. I could never compare to someone like you.”

“Dean... You think I care about that?”

I looked up at Brad.

“I wasn’t sure,” I said. “I...”

Brad touched my face.

“I don’t care about appearance, Dean. Besides, you *are* good-looking. Don’t say you aren’t.”

I unbuckled and climbed out of the car. When he had touched my face, I had expected him to pull me in for a hopeful kiss, but he hadn’t. Brad knew I was still new to the dating game; I respected him for not trying to force me into something as little as a kiss. It wouldn’t be right, to just force something on somebody.

I walked out onto the field with him, where he was going to show me the

different things and maybe look at a few of the street side sales.

We stopped about an hour later and ate. Brad had bought the two of us corndogs, even after I had offered to pay for mine.

‘You’re too stubborn, Dean,’ Brad had said. ‘Loosen up a little bit.’

I sat there beside him, watching the teenagers run around, playing football or Frisbee. A group of teenage girls were gathered around the fountain, either sitting on or near it, talking amongst one another, the occasional giggle coming from the group.

“Sorry about the lack of things to do,” Brad said. “We can go somewhere else if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. I like it here.”

“I do too.” Brad leaned back, placing his hands behind his head. The shirt stretching against his chest, revealing glimpses of muscle beneath fabric. “I have a lot of good memories here. I used to escape my worries here when I was about your age.”

I scooted over, touching his hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’d show more affection, but I... I’m not out.”

“It’s fine,” Brad said. “I’m not entirely out either.”

“But you...”

“I know I asked you out at the store,” Brad smiled. “But it was just you

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and your friend Kendra. That *was* Kendra there, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s transsexual.”

“Is he--or she, I should say--your only friend here?”

“Yeah. I told you that I moved out here, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t like Idaho, not where I lived, anyway. The people were too judgmental.”

“Well, I’m glad you moved out here. Otherwise I wouldn’t be dating you.”

I gripped his hand.

I knew I had made the right choice in coming out here. If I wasn’t here, who knows where Brad would be.

Brad pulled into my aunt’s driveway at six. The three hours that we had spent together had been truly special to me. Those three hours made me realize that I *did* like Brad, *a lot*. I had liked him when he had asked me out and on the first date, but the second date had let me see so much more of him.

“I’m glad we went out today,” I said. “I had a good time.”

“I did too,” Brad said. “You want to go out again next week?”

“I’d like that. Thanks for dropping me off, Brad.”

“Hey, it’s no problem. I’ll see you later.”

I was about to get out of the car, but a great feeling rose in my chest. It was something I had never experienced for, but I felt as though it was a longing to show him my feelings.

“Dean? You ok?”

“Yeah,” I said, turning. “I’m fine.”

I sat back down, looking into his eyes. I touched his arm and let my hand glide down the hairs there until my fingers rested on the hairs on his wrist.

He closed the distance between us, pressing our lips together. I closed my eyes and held my lips to his. I was glad that he wasn’t forcing his tongue into my mouth. That would’ve broken the serenity of the moment.

We held the kiss for what seemed like a minute before we broke it. I wrapped my arms around him and rested my head on his chest.

“I like you,” I said, a tear sliding down my face. “A lot.”

I closed my eyes as he set his hands on my back. I let my head rest on his chest, my hands gripping at the back of his shirt, tears sliding down my face.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wiping the tears from my face. “I shouldn’t be so emotional.”

“No.” Brad touched my cheek. “You have every right to be. It was your first kiss.”

I held his wrist, letting more tears fall from my face.

“I... I don’t know how to ask this,” I began, turning my head away.

“Ask what?” Brad asked.

“I... I want you to be my... My boyfriend, Brad.”

I closed my eyes, turning my head down.

You’re so stupid, that inner voice said. *You think a guy like him is going to be your boyfriend?*

“I’m sorry,” I said after a long bout silence. “Thanks, Brad. I’ll just go now.”

“No, wait!”

The gentle look on his face brought comfort to my uneasy soul.

“I want to be your boyfriend,” he said. “I care about you so much, Dean. In the two short weeks we’ve been dating, all I can think about is you. You’re always on my mind. I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else.”

I kissed him again, pulling away after a moment.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“You’re the best thing that’s happened to me in a God-awful long time, Dean. I’ll see you next week on our date, ok?”

I kissed him one last time before getting out of the car. As he always did, he waited until I walked up to the door and unlocked it before leaving. I waved at him, watched his car drive off, then walked into the house, locking the door behind me.

I burst into tears of joy.

Part 10:

Mania

- - -

I didn't fall asleep after Brad left. It was twelve o'clock, and I had thought about going out and watching TV until my cell phone rang.

Just as I expected, it was Brad.

Do I answer it? Do I answer and see what's wrong this time?

I *had* to answer it. I didn't want to look like the boyfriend that didn't care about the other's problem.

Flipping the phone open, I placed it to my ear.

"Hello?" I asked. "Are you ok, Brad?"

"Fine," Brad said, giving me another one of his nervous laughs.

"Are you sure, Brad? You did this on our last date too."

"I just needed to hear your voice, Dean."

I rested my head on the pillow, trying to figure out what to say.

“Were they bothering you again?” I asked, remembering the doorbell-ditching teenagers.

“Who?” Brad asked.

Who? You were the one that told me that, not the other way around.

“The doorbell-ditchers,” I said. “Are they bothering you?”

“No. Someone was throwing rocks at my window.”

God, the teenagers must not like him.

“Are you ok? Your window didn’t break, did it? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. No windows are broken. One’s cracked, but not broken. I didn’t get hit with anything.”

“I’m glad you’re ok. Is that why you wanted to call me?”

“Yeah, and to say that I had a good time on our date.”

“I had a good time too.” I scratched my chest, waiting for him to speak. When he didn’t, I decided I would. “You can’t sleep either, huh?”

“Yeah, the t-t-teenagers... They kept me up.”

Did he just stutter?

“Are you sure you’re ok, Brad?”

“Fine,” he said. “I need to get to bed. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

He hung up before I got the chance to say goodbye.

“Oh, Brad,” I said, placing my phone on the nightstand. “I hope you’re

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all right.”

It killed me to just go to sleep, but I couldn’t do anything to help Brad.

I made a mental note to ask about it on our next date, or the next time he called.

Part 11:

Meeting the Boyfriend's Friends

- - -

Brad picked me up for our third date the next Saturday. It was the last week of May. This would officially make it the third week we had been dating.

Brad had asked me to come to his apartment to meet his friends.

"Are you sure they'll like me?" I asked, tapping my fingers on my shorts-covered knee. "I mean, what if they..."

"Dean, *chill*. My friends will like you. I guarantee you that."

I nodded as he pulled up into his apartment building. I counted this as a date, so I would just go along with it, pleasing my boyfriend and trying to get to know his personal life a little better.

"All right," Brad said. "They'll be here in about a half hour."

I got out of the car, followed him up the steps and into the apartment building. He let me in, leading me down the hall until he stopped at his apartment. He fumbled in his pocket until he found his keys.

“This is a nice place,” I smiled.

“Yeah, I like it. Besides, it’s cheap.”

Brad laughed and let me in. I looked around the place. It was smaller than I had expected it to be. His bed was against one wall, while the kitchen split the room in half. Another door led to what I believed to be a bathroom, and near the bed was a couch, a small TV sitting in front of it.

“I like it,” I said.

“It’s small, but I’m the only one living here.”

Brad’s sigh said it all. I knew he wanted companionship in his home; someone to talk to, someone to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with...

Someone to share his bed.

I didn’t say anything in response to his living alone comment. Instead, I sat on the couch and gestured him to come sit by me. Once he did, I wrapped my arm around his waist, leaning against his shoulder.

“You ok?” Brad asked.

“Yeah. Just cuddling with you.”

Brad turned the TV on, browsing through the channels until he found some sitcom. I knew that he wasn’t paying much attention to it. Instead, he started talking to me about random stuff. We talked about the recent weather we’d been having, how we were doing at work, and other small things. He didn’t ask me about my past life in Idaho, and I sure as hell didn’t *dare* ask him about

the weird phone calls and the teenagers that bothered him on Saturday nights.

It wasn't long before several knocks came at the door.

"That'll be them," Brad said, snaking his arm out from behind my back.

"No need to get up, Dean."

I remained in my seat, turning the TV off as Brad answered the door.

"Yo, Brad!" an African-American man said, slapping Brad's arm as two other Caucasian men followed the African in. "How's it?"

"Fine," Brad laughed. "Hope you guys don't mind some company."

Brad turned to face me.

"Dean, this is Soloman, Travis and Lex," Brad introduced them all.

Soloman was the African-American, Travis was the guy with orange hair and goatee, and Lex had a lip ring. "Guys, this is Dean, my boyfriend."

Soloman was the first to greet me as I rose. He slapped my shoulder and pulled my into a brotherly hug.

"Man, it's good to meet you," Soloman said, slapping my back. "Oh, and by the way, the name's Soul, not *Soloman*," he said, directing his real name at Brad.

"Thanks," I said.

"You taking good care of our boy?" Soul grinned.

"I've been trying."

"Well, good on you to have Brad as your guy," Soul said, walking to the

table, setting a paper bag down. "I brought the goods, by the way."

Soul pulled a twenty-four pack of beer out of the paper bag.

"Hope you're in the mood for beer," Travis said, patting Brad's shoulder.

"Lex here's been waiting until we got here to drink."

"I quit drinking," Brad said, looking over his shoulder at me.

I stared at him, surprised at his words. I had mentioned that my parents being alcoholics and how I hadn't liked living with it before, but we had never delved into the topic.

"What's the big," Lex began, then trailed off as he saw Brad look at me.

"Oh, I see."

I walked over to Brad, leaning up a bit to kiss his cheek.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Brad gave me a few pats on the back before gesturing me to sit beside him.

Lex pulled out a pack of cigarettes as he sat down, lighting one before he offered everyone else one. When he got to me, I stared at them for a minute before taking one out of the pack.

"Is this the first time you've smoked?" Brad whispered, nudging my side with his elbow.

"Yeah," I whispered back, holding out my cigarette as Lex pulled out his lighter. "It is."

“You’re sixteen.”

“And I’m not supposed to be dating you either,” I countered, placing the cigarette to my lip, grimacing as smoke burned down my chest. “Shit.”

“First cigarette?” Lex grinned.

“We’ll say that.”

All the guys laughed, except Brad, who only kissed my cheek and ruffled my hair.

“Ok, who’s playing cards?” Travis asked, pulling a playing deck out of his shirt.

“Not me,” I said, raising my arms in mock defeat. “I suck at cards.”

“Aw, come on,” Soul grinned, showing his pearly whites. “You *have* to play.”

“I’ll watch you guys. It doesn’t bother me.”

I sat there, watching them play cards. The game seemed interesting, but I had no idea what was going on because I didn’t know the rules. I laughed as everyone except Brad threw down their cards for a third game in a row.

“Damn, Brad. Good thing we ain’t playing for money,” Soul said.

“He’d have you drained by now,” I laughed, raising my hand to cover a yawn.

“You tired, Dean?” Brad asked.

“A little, but it’s nothing I can’t deal with.”

“Go lie down on my bed,” Brad said. “I don’t care.”

I stood, kissing his cheek before walking to his bed. I kicked my shoes off, closing my eyes, reveling in the fact that his bed was so soft and smooth.

I started dozing off almost immediately.

*

“He seems like a nice guy,” Lex said, looking up at Brad.

“Yeah,” Brad said. “He is.”

“How come you’ve never introduced us to a boyfriend before, Brad?”

Travis asked. “He’s the first I’ve seen in a good while.”

“You all know I have bad luck with relationships,” Brad sighed. “Dean’s tame compared to the other guys I’ve mingled with.”

“The last guy was a druggie, wasn’t he?” Soul asked, grabbing another cigarette and holding it out for Lex to light it.

“Yeah, he was.”

“So, what’s the whole thing with you dating an under-aged guy?” Travis asked. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I met him at the dollar store,” Brad said. “I asked for his number, and from there, that’s how this relationship happened.”

“Is he asleep?” Soul asked.

Brad turned and looked at Dean, frowning.

“Shit,” Brad said, standing, walking over to Dean. “Oh well, I’ll wake

him up.”

When he heard his boyfriend muttering his name in his sleep, Brad stood and walked over to the bed.

*

“Dean,” Brad said. “You ok?”

I opened my eyes.

“God, I’m sorry. I’m just so tired.”

“You want me to call your aunt?” Brad asked. “I’ll tell her you fell asleep and that you’re staying at my house.”

“Yeah.” I squeezed his hand. “Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Brad said, gripping my hand. “I love you, Dean.”

He had never said he loved me before.

“I love you too,” I said, gripping his hand tighter.

“All right, go back to sleep.” Brad gently kissed me. “I’ll call your aunt.”

I closed my eyes, drifting off into the darkness.

*

Brad picked up his cell phone and called Dean’s aunt. He forgot that she wasn’t home, so he just left a message, saying that Dean had fallen asleep and that he’d bring him home in the morning.

“He’s staying?” Soul asked.

“Yeah,” Brad said, sitting back down.

“You trying to get in his pants or something?” Lex smirked.

The look Brad gave his friend could’ve frozen any man’s blood.

“I’m not that kind of guy, Lex,” Brad said. “And I sure as hell wouldn’t be *sleeping* with my sixteen-year-old boyfriend.”

“You need to be careful,” Travis added. “I mean, it’s bad enough that you’re going out with him, but what if someone finds out and spills their guts. You’re not exactly the kind of guy to hide your sexuality, Brad.”

“And I don’t go around yelling, ‘Look everyone, I like dick!’ either. Besides, the only person that knows we’re together is his transsexual friend Kendra. Dean’s still in the closet, guys.”

Everyone kept silent after that, but the silence was finally broken after five painful minutes when Soul spoke.

“Is this the guy you’re staying with?”

Brad looked over his shoulder at Dean and smiled.

“Yeah,” Brad said. “This is the guy I want to spend my life with.”

*

I woke up later that night. Brad was laying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. Occasionally, he’d glance over at me, but he rarely did so. It was almost as if he felt guilty about looking at me.

“Brad?”

I sat up, looking around the room. The red carpet looked black in the dark, the kitchen's wooden floor, tinted with a pearly luminescence, reflected the moon's light. I appeared to be in shadows, the deep blue blankets a dark ocean amidst my light skin.

"Yeah?" he finally asked.

He had probably been trying to fake sleep to avoid any kind of discussion about where he was sleeping, but I wasn't dumb.

"Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

"Because you're in the bed."

Oh. I frowned, finally understanding the reason. *He doesn't want to sleep with me because I'm underage.*

Brad was a valiant man, especially since he was worried about something as small as sleeping in the same bed.

"We're not having sex or anything," I said, rolling out of the bed, planting my bare feet on the floor. Had he taken my shoes off? "It's not like we're doing anything illegal."

"We're still sleeping together."

"So? No one's gonna come in here."

Soul, Lex and Travis had since left, leaving me and Brad alone in the apartment. I walked to the sink, where I filled a glass with water.

"I'm still nervous about this whole thing, Dean."

“The relationship?”

“Not the relationship... Just us being alone together.”

“Brad, everyone we know thinks we’re *friends*.”

“Still, Dean...”

Brad shook his head. He sat up, running a hand through his short hair.

“Come on, Brad.”

Brad sighed, walking to the bed. He sat down, waiting for me. I brought my glass to the bed, handing it to him. He drank the last half before letting me crawl into bed beside him.

“Thanks,” he whispered,.

Resting my head on the pillow, I turned, scooting over so I was almost near the wall. He pulled the blanket over us. The bed so small that Brad was almost too big for it.

“Night,” I whispered.

He nodded. After about a moment of space between us, he drew me close to his chest.

“Night,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes, resting my head against his shoulder.

This was how I wanted it to be.

Part 12:

A Storm of Reason

- - -

After Brad had dropped me off at my aunt's house the next morning, I went into my room and watched TV until my aunt left. After that, I texted Brad and asked if he was feeling ok. He sent me a text a minute later saying that he was fine and that he loved me.

I leaned back, watching the people on TV talk with each other. I wasn't hearing them though. Brad was still on my mind. The way he talked, the way he kissed, the way he held me close to his body. It was still hard to believe that last night was the first night I said that I loved him.

He's such a good guy, I thought, pulling my knees to my chest. I just wish he'd open up to me a little more.

It was already obvious that Brad was a man that didn't like to show his weakness. If I had been the one being disturbed by someone in the middle of the night, I'd be talking about it to someone, especially my boyfriend. Brad, though, he... he wasn't exactly trying to be too much of a man, but he was displaying a

habit that I never imagined having in a boyfriend.

He'll come around eventually. You know he's not going to keep everything in his life away from you. You met his friend's last night for God's sake.

Still, it wasn't easy, trying to figure out what to say or not to say when I was around him. I could get along with him just fine, but I was still adjusting. Was I supposed to be adjusted to my boyfriend in the first month, or was it supposed to take longer?

"I need to get *Dating for Dummies*," I chuckled. "Maybe that'd help."

Then again, I figured I was doing a pretty good job on my own. Hell, it was my first relationship; it was a learning experience. I couldn't expect to know *everything* about dating right away.

I looked out the window.

Outside, a storm was coming, threatening to bring the rain.

Here it comes.

When I thought those three words, I shivered.

Something about them didn't seem right.

Part 13:

Something in the Field

- - -

It was another one of our casual weekends. I'd been going over to Brad's house so often that my aunt and uncle thought that the guy I was meeting up with was just a casual friend. I figured I was straight-acting enough to fool them, but even if they suspected, I didn't care; it was none of their business who I loved anyway.

"I figured we'd go back out to the field," Brad said, driving out of the city lines. "It's nice out there, don't you think?"

"I thought it was."

We took a long road that lined a cliff before splitting out onto an older dirt road. Here, the scenery turned into trees, fields and some rocky terrain. It was truly peaceful, especially since we lived in the busy city for most of our lives.

"I liked driving out in the wilderness when I was your age," Brad said. "It gave me a sense of freedom."

“I was pretty much confined to the house. I don’t even have a car.”

“That’s fine. I mean, I don’t expect you to cart me around.”

I knew from Brad’s expression that he hadn’t meant what he said.

“Sorry, Dean. You know I didn’t mean that how it came out.”

“I know. You don’t have to worry about it. I’ve offered to help pay for gas and other stuff.”

“I know, but I make enough money. Besides, I like taking you out.”

Brad pulled over to the side of the road, putting the car in park. He reached over into the dash, popping it over with a fist. He withdrew an area map.

“Trying to figure out a neat place we could go,” he mumbled, his fingers tracing the map.

“We don’t have to go anywhere special.”

“I know. Still, it’d be nice to spend a little time out of the city with you. Even if it’s only for an hour, that’s better than nothing, right?”

Yup. When I’m with you, I could care less how long it was. Even a few minutes with you is better than nothing.

When Brad had an ‘aha’ moment, I looked at the map.

“All right. Can you fold this up and put it back in the dash? I figured out somewhere we could go.”

I carefully folded the map back up, sliding it into the dash. Brad pulled out onto the road, continuing down the path.

“What kind of place did you find?”

“An old field. A *bigass* one, deserted for the most part. It’ll be a cool place to just hang out.”

“I don’t care. Wherever you want to go is fine with me.”

Brad turned the radio on, drowning out the silence that lined the inside of the car. Some old rock station played a series of screaming guitars and moaning drums.

“I can turn this off,” Brad said after a minute. “I don’t care.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s better than listening to nothing.”

Brad winked, turning down onto another road. Here, we entered a wooded area. It was so dark under the trees that Brad had to turn the headlights on.

“I don’t think it’ll storm again,” Brad started, “I mean, it’s been raining a lot. Even if it does start raining, it probably won’t be anything big.”

“We don’t have to go all the way out here if you’re worried about your car getting stuck in the mud.”

“I’ve got a cell phone. If we get stuck, I’ll call someone.”

Even though I was worried about coming out here because of the storm, Brad was more than determined to take us out here. The location didn’t necessarily bother me, but getting stuck all the way out in the middle of nowhere wouldn’t be fun, especially since we’d have to rely on people in the city to come

and find us.

Oh well. Just go along with it. The worse thing that could happen is that we'd get stranded, right?

In the early hours of the morning, the clouds and the scenery itself had a more vibrant, subdued glow. Here, at the top of a hill that stood above the field, you could see for miles on end. Brad pointed at a group of deer below.

"It's a pretty neat place. I come out here to draw sometimes."

"You draw?"

"Yeah. I didn't tell you that?"

"No. I think that's cool."

"What about you? What do you do in your spare time?"

"I write," I smiled. "Mostly darker stuff, but it's always uplifting, in a way."

"I think being able to write is in a whole other league than drawing is."

Brad settled down, crossing his legs. "I bet you're pretty good at it, huh?"

"I guess. I've been published a few times."

"You're gonna have to let me read some of it sometime."

"You're going to have to show me some of your stuff too."

"I'll make sure to do that when you come over to my place next time."

I kept quiet, lacing our fingers together. Thunder rumbled in the far distance. It didn't seem like it'd be here anytime soon, but that didn't mean it *couldn't* make it to where we were sitting.

"See anymore deer?" I asked.

When Brad didn't answer, I frowned. I nudged his leg with a few fingers, but still, he didn't respond."

"Brad," I said, extending the way I said his name. "You there?"

It wasn't until I waved my hand in front of his face that he blinked.

"What?"

"You ok?" I frowned, setting a hand on his back. "You weren't answering me."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Were you looking at something?"

"I thought I saw something in the field."

I turned my attention down the hill, trying to see if I could find whatever Brad had been looking at.

"What did it look like?"

"A wolf... or some kind of big dog."

Another glance at the field showed that there wasn't anything there.

When I turned to look at Brad, his eyes were wide.

“What?” I was starting to get worried. “What is it?”

“There’s something down there.”

“Brad, there isn’t...”

“Yes there *is!*”

Brad stood, trying to haul me to my feet. I grabbed his wrists and held them in place.

“Brad, it’s ok. We’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“But...”

“There’s nothing out here that’s gonna hurt us.”

Whatever Brad was seeing, it was starting to scare me. The way his pupils had widened, the way his nostrils were flaring, the way his breathing wasn’t coming in as normal as it should; it was all a sign of something bad.

“Dean, *please.*”

“Please *what?*”

“There’s something out here.”

Brad fell back against the car, hugging himself. Tears were beginning to sprout in his eyes.

“We gotta get out of here,” he mumbled, looking at his feet. “We gotta run.”

“What’s...”

“IT’S JUST BAD!”

He didn’t yell at me because he was mad, but afraid. The tears were now fully running down his face, tracing his cheeks before running down into his defined jaw line.

“It’s ok.” I stepped forward, opening my arms. “Come here, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Yes there is!”

By now, he was bawling, terrified of whatever it was that he had saw in the field. Had he really seen a wolf or some kind of wild animal, something that scared him enough to put him into tears?

“COME ON!” Brad screamed.

When he pulled the passenger door open and threw me inside the car, I hit my head on the compartment in the middle of the seat. I cried out as pain flared in my temple, but it was short lived when Brad jumped into the driver’s seat, taking off.

My door wasn’t shut.

I wasn’t buckled in.

When I began to fly out of the car, I grabbed onto the seatbelt, holding myself in place. I was half-in, half-out of the car as Brad flew down the road.

“BRAD!” I screamed. “LET ME IN!”

When Brad saw that I was almost ready to fly out of the vehicle, he

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lashed his arm out and gripped my collar, dragging me back into the seat. I had just managed to close the door before he made a sharp turn. I slammed my head into the window.

“What the hell is wrong with you!”

“There’s something after us!”

“There’s nothing wrong, nothing’s after us, what’s...”

I was forced into my seat when he sped the vehicle up. I caught a glance at the speedometer and saw the needle disappearing over the hundred miles-per-hour mark.

“You’re going to crash us if you don’t slow down!”

“I gotta lose it, gotta lose it, just gotta...”

A glance in the passenger’s rearview mirror showed nothing, and when I looked over my shoulder and out the back window, I couldn’t see anything either.

“Brad, *what* is chasing us!”

“Something bad, something so bad, too bad...”

What was chasing us? Something I couldn’t see, something he *thought* was chasing him?

“Baby... please, it’s ok.”

Five more minutes of going at a hundred miles-per-hour and he slowed down. He pulled over to the side of the road, putting the car in park before he

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shut it down completely.

“Brad, what *the fuck* was that?”

“Something was chasing us,” he sobbed. “Something bad was.”

“There wasn’t anything chasing us!”

Brad looked at me for a minute, then bowed his head and bawled.

What the hell had just happened? Why had we just got out of there like a bat out of hell, and why had Brad been so afraid of whatever it had been? *Why* had he nearly cost us both our lives.”

“We’ll go back to my place,” Brad said. “Yeah, we’ll do that.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I merely nodded, content with his decision.

Part 14:

Content with Art

- - -

When we got to the apartment building, Brad took a few minutes to compose himself before leading me through the parking lot and up into the building. He opened the door and let me inside his apartment.

“You want something to eat?” Brad asked. “I made a big pan of party potatoes.”

“I’ll have some.”

Brad reached into the fridge, pulling the pan out. I looked around the apartment, glancing over at the cupboards near the kitchen.

“You keep your drawings in one of the drawers?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Brad slid a big slice of party potato into the microwave, one which I assumed he planned on cutting in half for the two of us. “I keep all my art stuff in a cupboard and a few drawers. The apartment’s too small for me to have a desk.”

“You could put a small desk up against the wall, near the window here.” I

pointed to the area beside the bed.

“Well, yeah. I don’t want to bother with lugging something in here anyway. I draw at the table and put my stuff in my cupboard when I’m done. Nothing to worry about.” Brad stopped speaking as the microwave beeped. “I’ll show you a few drawings after we eat.”

I accepted my half of the potato, trying not to think about what had happened not more than a half-hour ago. I’d have to mention it sooner or later.

I’ll wait until he shows me his art stuff, I decided, liking the taste of the potato in my mouth. *I don’t want to bum him out so much that he doesn’t show me something he’s looking forward to sharing.*

“This is good,” I said, blushing when I realized I had talked with a full mouth. “Sorry.”

“No, no,” Brad laughed. “That’s perfectly fine. It means you’re enjoying it.”

When I finished, I took my plate to the sink, washing both the plate and my hands. Brad walked up beside me shortly after, planting a gentle kiss to my cheek.

I’m sorry I scared you, that kiss said. *I’m sorry I made you worry.*

After washing his hands, Brad walked to the cupboard, pulling a binder out. He unlaced the cords that circled it, pulling out a few drawings.

“This one’s my favorite,” Brad said, setting a black-and-white drawing in front of me.

I held it up. It was a picture of me, sleeping in the bed.

“This is me,” I whispered.

“Yeah.” Brad wrapped his arms around my waist, kissing my neck. “I thought it turned out well.”

“It’s beautiful, Brad.” A tear slipped down my eye, but I quickly wiped it away. “What about these other ones?”

“I did this one when I was staying on pretty much the top floor of a big hotel.” Brad pulled a cityscape out of the binder, smiling. “I sat up there for *hours* sketching this.”

“This is a *sketch*?” I stared at the piece. “You’re *great*, Brad.”

“Thanks, Dean.”

He showed me a few more of his drawings before putting them away. He was about to close the cupboard before I saw a sketchbook.

“Could you draw what you saw back there?”

Brad stopped moving altogether. Instead, he stared at the sketchbook that was resting in one of his plastic drawers.

“Brad?”

“Please don’t make me.”

“It’s just that... You scared the hell out of me back there. I don’t even know what you saw.”

“I told you, it was a wolf.”

“And you were worried about a single wolf chasing us?”

“It was a big wolf.” Brad stood to his full height.

“That doesn’t tell me much. Why would you be afraid of a big wolf chasing us?”

“Because I just fucking was, ok!”

Brad wasn’t a man that could be easily answered, but when he was upset, he could get pretty mean.

“Ok.” I sat on the bed. “I’m sorry it scared you.”

“I’m sorry I put you in danger. I should’ve just grabbed you and threw you in the car when I first seen it, but... but...” He stopped, taking a few deep breaths. “I was scared.”

“I’m not hurt, you’re not hurt; we’re both ok. There’s nothing to worry about, right?”

When Brad didn’t say anything, I stood and wrapped my arms around him, resting my head against his chest.

“See?” I whispered. “I’m not mad or upset.”

Brad bowed his face into the top of my head, running his hand through my long hair.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, taking in a deep breath of my lavender-scented hair. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. Are you afraid something will

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happen?”

“No.” Brad gasped, gently pushing us out of our embrace. “Nothing’s going to happen, ok?”

“Ok.” I set my hands on his arms, sitting him on the bed.

“Will you stay over here tonight? Please?”

“Yeah, I will. Let me call and leave a message.”

I walked into the kitchen, withdrawing my phone from my pocket.

The least I could do was help him get through the night.

Part 15:

Cry Wolf

- - -

“He *what?*”

“Shh!” I hissed, making sure that no one would pick up on me and Ken’s conversation. “I don’t want anyone hearing us.”

“Ok,” Ken whispered. “You said he saw a *wolf?*”

“He said he saw a *big* wolf, but that’s not what’s bothering me. What’s bothering me is that *I* couldn’t see it.”

“Maybe it was gone before you and Brad drove out of there.”

“You don’t understand, Ken. Brad said it was *chasing* us. I even *looked* out the back window and rearview mirror on my side. There was *nothing* there.”

“Maybe he panicked and was making an excuse for going fast by saying it was chasing you guys.”

I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I don’t know. It just bothers me.”

“Is he afraid of wolves or something?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe you should ask him.”

“I’m not going to ask him. It was bad enough having to see him cry, Ken. I’ve never seen Brad cry before.”

“I know it hurts to see the person you love cry, but that doesn’t give you the excuse to ignore what happened.”

“I’m not ignoring it. I... I just don’t want to think about it.”

“Which is the same as ignoring it.”

Ken pushed me to the side, scanning a woman’s items. While he did this, I looked around the store, trying to figure out why it was a dollar store when most everything except a few knickknacks cost more than a dollar. It was ironic, how some stores claim ‘it’s all a dollar!’ when, in fact, almost nothing is a dollar.

“Dean?”

“Yeah?” I asked, turning to face Ken.

“I want you to be careful, ok?”

“Careful about what?”

“About... about Brad.”

“Why?” I frowned. “If you mean about what happened, he probably just saw something I didn’t see. Or maybe I was too scared to see what was exactly going on.”

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Of course, I never mentioned that Brad took off when I was halfway in the vehicle either. I also didn't mention that if I hadn't had a hold of the seatbelt, I would've learned how to fly in a most unpleasant way.

"I don't know what happened, but I want you to be careful, ok?"

"I will."

"*Promise* me that you'll be ok."

"Ok, I *promise*," I said, accenting my word with a stupid grin. "Thanks, Mom."

Ken slapped me upside the hand.

"You know it," he said, setting a hand on his hip like some big-shot drama queen.

"Yeah, you'd know it too if I were taller."

We burst out laughing.

Part 16:

A Picture Worth a Thousand Words

- - -

I had just got off work at around four when my cell phone rang. I'd been lounging around the house, eating a sandwich and generally not doing anything. When I pulled my phone from my pocket, I saw that it was Brad calling.

"Hey, Brad," I said.

"You doin' ok, Dean?"

"Yeah, I'm great. How come?"

"I wanted to see if you could come over."

"I can come over, just let me get dressed and you can..."

"I can't pick you up. My car's in the shop."

I frowned.

Oh...

"It's not too far of a walk," Brad suggested. "I feel like an ass for not being able to pick you up. You don't have to come over if you don't want to."

“No, it’s ok. I can walk.”

“You sure? I can pay for a taxi or the bus fare.”

“I can walk. It’ll only take me a few minutes to get there.”

“All right. If you get stuck somewhere, tell me. I’ll call you a cab.”

“All right. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up after exchanging our goodbyes.

The way it had been raining around Denver lately, the weather was cold. I opted for a sweatshirt and long jeans instead of the shorts I normally wore around town. I crossed the street up near the dollar store I worked at.

It wouldn’t be long before I was at Brad’s apartment building.

Wonder why he wants me over there so much. It’s must be something important.

He had said that it was ok if I *didn’t* come over, but something in his voice was *begging* me to come over.

Is he going to try and explain what happened again, or... something else?

Whatever it was, I wasn’t going to try and worry about it right now. I could worry when I got to his place; no sooner, no later.

I knocked on Brad's apartment door. A moment later, he unlocked the door. When it opened, he was shirtless and partially damp. He had either just gotten out of the shower, or had been sweating. I suspected the former.

"Hey," he smiled. "Sorry I couldn't come get you. I don't know what the fuck's wrong with my car."

"It's fine. What did you want to show me?"

Brad gestured me inside, closing the door. He helped me out of my jacket, hanging it up on the rack beside the door.

"I got a drawing of what I seen."

"Oh." I tried to make my smile look unforced. "You did?"

"Yeah. Come here."

I walked into the kitchen, where he had his sketchbook open. He pushed it toward me.

"That's what I saw."

The wolf that he saw was big, compared to a normal-sized wolf he drew. At least twice as big, it had bulging muscles and a thick mane of hair, something that *no* wolf had. Its paws were also jutting up a bit in front, giving them an odd appearance.

"It doesn't really look like a wolf," I shrugged. "But this is what you saw?"

"Uhuh." Brad sighed, closing his sketchbook. "Don't think I'm nutty."

“I don’t, I believe you saw something. I just didn’t see it, which could’ve been because I was already scared enough.”

“Thanks, baby.”

Brad set the drawing down, wrapping his arms around me. When I wrapped my arms around him, he let out a breath he had obviously been holding for a good while.

“Brad,” I said, drawing away from him. “Promise me something?”

“What is it?”

“Promise that you won’t hide things from me.”

“I promise,” he whispered. “I promise.”

Part 17:

Special Seventeen

- - -

“Aw, no; that’ll be fine, Brad.” Uncle Walter glanced over at me, giving me a wink. “No, that sounds great. You’re a pretty good friend to my nephew here. All right, I’ll let you go. Thanks again Brad. Bye.”

I frowned. My uncle had *never* talked to my boyfriend, and while he didn’t know Brad was the man I was in love with, the two of them talking to one another was strange.

“Umm, sir?” I asked. “Why were you talking to Brad?”

“He rented a cabin up in the woods for your seventeenth birthday.”

“A c-cabin?” I asked. “He *rented* one for *my* birthday?”

“Yeah. Seems like a pretty good friend. How long have you known him?”

“I met him the month I came out here.”

“Ah, that’s cool.” Uncle Walter grinned, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Your aunt had to leave to go see her mother, but that’s ok, right? You don’t mind hanging out with your uncle, do you?”

“No. You know I like you.”

My uncle had been more of a father to me than my own dad had been, which was something, considering that my uncle was almost constantly gone.

“Well, Brad’ll be here to pick you up tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? My birthday’s not for three days.”

“I know. Apparently, he knows too, because he said he wanted to hang out with you.”

“Do you trust us being alone up there?”

“He’s your *friend* for God’s sake. Why *wouldn’t* I trust you?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Look, Dean.” Uncle Walter placed both his hands on my shoulders.

“You’re nearly seventeen, almost a man on your part. I’m not going to make you spend the day here alone while I’m gone. Your aunt’s never here, so you’re pretty much on your own most of the time anyway. I think you can take care of yourself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Uncle Walter clapped my shoulder.

“Better go pack up. You’ll be up at the cabin for at least a week.”

The next morning, I came out of the shower to find Brad and Uncle Walter standing in the living room. Brad was wearing one of his tank top muscle shirts, showing off the muscles that lined his arms. He occasionally laughed and ran his hand through his hair.

“I want to thank you for taking my nephew on this trip. It means a lot to know that my nephew has a good friend like you.”

“I try to be a good friend, Mr. Castor.”

“You probably already know that Dean didn’t have a lot of friends back in Idaho. It makes me happy to know that he’s got a good friend hanging

around.”

I stayed behind the corner, listening to the two of them talk.

“Dean’s a good guy, sir. I try to be there for him.”

“He thinks of you like an older brother, you know? He’s always talking about you.”

I think of him than an older brother, Uncle Walter.

I chuckled, deciding now was the time to stop hiding behind the corner and reveal myself. I picked up my backpack, stepping out into the living room.

“Morning,” Uncle Walter said.

“Hey, Dean.” Brad raised his hand, high-fiving me.

“Hey.”

“You ready to go?”

“Yeah, whenever you are.”

Brad nodded. He shook my uncle’s hand before I gave him a hug.

“Thanks for letting me go on this trip, sir.”

“It’s no problem, buddy. You and Brad have fun while you’re up there. Just be careful. Watch out for wild animals, and if you’re going to throw food or something out, do it away from the house. You don’t want a bear or something breaking into the house.”

“We’ll make sure we’re ok,” I smiled. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

We were still driving up to the cabin an hour later. Brad had the window down and the radio on, pop and electronica flowing from its graceful metal mouths.

“I got a few sandwiches in the cooler if you want some.”

“What all did you bring?”

“A shitload of bagged and canned food. There’s a bunch of sandwiches, but those won’t last too long. I mostly packed them from the trip up.”

Shrugging, I fished one out of the cooler, unwrapping the plastic.

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. I’m just glad your uncle’s letting me take you up here.”

“Did you think he wouldn’t?”

“I wasn’t really sure, to tell you the truth. I wanted to try and do something special. It’s the first birthday I’ve been able to celebrate with you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more than the hundred dollars I did for your twenty-first.”

“That’s ok, Dean. Besides, it helped buy a dresser I needed.”

“Yeah, that closet was getting a little... full.”

Brad laughed, slapping my knee.

“Yeah, you know it. But seriously, you don’t have to worry about my birthday. I’m just happy that we get to spend the next week together.”

“I am too.”

I took a bite out of my sandwich, smiling.

I knew this next week would be magical.

When we pulled into the driveway, Brad hopped out of the car and ran up to the house, unlocking the door. By the time I was just out of the car, my boyfriend was gesturing for me to hurry up.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I ran up to join Brad. He ushered me inside the cabin. As I was busy gawking over how impressive the entryway was, he ran into the living room, spreading his arms.

“The people here don’t keep the electricity going, which is why there isn’t a fridge or stove or anything, but *look* at it.” He turned in a complete circle.

“Isn’t it *gorgeous*?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“And see? We can light a fire to heat up the house before going to bed. We can just lay there on the floor, cuddling, talking...”

“Roasting marshmallows.”

Brad merely gawked at me.

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“Hey,” I shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to roast marshmallows on an open fireplace.”

“Whatever works, right?” Brad grinned, bringing me into his arms. He rocked out bodies for a minute. “Aw, shit. I forgot we still had stuff in the car.”

“I’ll go get it.”

“No, let me, birthday boy.”

He planted a kiss on my cheek before he was out the door.

I had a feeling I was going to be spoiled this next week.

“What made you decide to grill hotdogs?”

“I don’t know.” Brad shrugged, moving a few pieces of meat up onto the top rack. “They were in the cooler. You don’t mind eating hot dogs and chips for supper do you?”

“No, that’s fine.”

Brad grabbed a plate and spilled the six hotdogs onto it, leading us back into the house. We sat down in the living room, where Brad pulled the buns out of their bag.

“It’s not much, but it’s food, right?”

“I don’t care. I like hotdogs.”

I took a bite out of my own, reveling in its juicy, grilled flavor. The look from the nearby window caused me to stand, grabbing a plastic plate so none of

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the ketchup would fall off and onto the floor.

“It’s pretty out here.”

“Yeah, I think it is. That’s the whole reason I rented the place for a week.”

“You probably won’t tell me how much it cost, will you?”

“Nope. It wasn’t a whole lot though, so don’t worry about it.”

“All right.”

Brad came up from behind, setting a hand on my shoulder.

“We’re gonna have fun up here, ok?”

“Yeah, I know.”

I looked over my shoulder, accepting the gentle kiss he planted on my lips.

That night, we lay in front of the fire, wrapped in a blanket. The touch of our almost-naked bodies touching was something I’d never experienced before. Brad’s bare torso pressing against my back was soothing, his clean-shaven skin smooth under my back.

Good thing I picked up on shaving, I thought, chuckling. It’d be kinda awkward if I hadn’t.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” I said, rolling over so our chests were touching. “Just happy

to be up here with you.”

“Me too, babe. I’m glad you’re having a good time.”

“I am. It’s nice, being up here just by ourselves, so far... away from the people.”

I almost added ‘so far away from people,’ but I didn’t want to make Brad think anything. I didn’t want to remind him of what had happened almost a year ago, out in the field.

Why would saying that we were so far away from people remind him of last year. He’s pretty much forgotten about that, hasn’t he?

I couldn’t be sure *how* much of that event Brad had forgotten, or if he had forgotten it at all. All I knew was that I wanted to make this next week as special as I could.

“You’ll be seventeen in two days,” Brad said, kissing my forehead. “You excited?”

“Not really. I’m just another year older.”

“I’m excited.”

“How come?”

“Because it’ll only be another year until you can move in with me.”

A pang of stupidity rang throughout my mind.

“Oh... I didn’t think about that.”

“You want to move in with me when you turn eighteen, don’t you?”

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“Of course.” I pushed myself into his body, closing what little distance there had been between us. “You know I do.”

“Don’t think I’m trying to push you into doing anything.”

“I know.”

“I’ve tried to be a good boyfriend.”

“You *are* a good boyfriend.” I pushed myself up on one elbow, frowning. “You don’t think you are?”

“I sometimes wonder if I’m doing enough to make you happy. We don’t get to see each other that much, since you’re living with your aunt and uncle. I know you’re probably dealing with things outside of our relationship. It makes me feel shitty when I can’t call or come over whenever I feel like it.”

“You don’t have to feel that way. We talk almost every day. I tell you what’s been going on, what’s been bothering me.” I set a hand on his cheek. “You know if you ever need anything, you can call me whenever you like.”

No... They’re just teenagers.

I smiled, despite the thought that had just passed through my head.

He hasn’t said anything about that for over a year.

“Ok?” I said. “You know I’m here for you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Brad set his head in the crook of my neck. I stroked his back, wishing I knew what was going through his head.

We slept in the master bedroom upstairs. The huge bed was long enough for even Brad, who's feet hung over the bed at his apartment. I couldn't imagine not being able to fit on my own bed, but I'd probably learn what it felt like after I moved in with Brad.

If I grow an inch or two, I chuckled.

I stroked his shoulders, listening to his low, deep breaths. It was nice, being up here all alone, without the sounds of the cities to keep me awake. I'd gotten used to it, but sleeping in silence was always nice.

Brad grunted, rolling over. I thought I had woke him up, but he was still soundly asleep.

That was close. I drew my hands back to my sides. *No more touching him while he's sleeping.*

I rolled out of bed, making my way out of the bedroom and down the stairs. There, I grabbed a soda out of the cooler.

It must be a pretty good cooler if the ice is still frozen.

Then again, it was colder than hell. Ice usually stayed frozen when it was cold.

"Can I have a sip of that?"

I jumped, nearly spilling the drink all over myself. I handed Brad the soda.

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was," he muttered. "I have to go take a leak."

"Ok. Just don't go too far."

"I won't."

Brad unlocked the door, slipping out with little more than a yawn. I sat down at the counter.

I forgot there wasn't any running water here.

The only running water was by the stream near the cabin. Thankfully, Brad had brought enough water and soda along, so we wouldn't have to worry about running out of anything to drink.

"We could always go into town anyway," I muttered.

Brad came back in through the door, taking another sip of my soda before I finished it.

"Thanks. You ready to get back to bed?"

"Yeah, I am."

I stood, following him back upstairs.

"It's pretty nice out here, huh?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, it is."

We were sitting on a large rock near the water. I was sitting between his

legs, leaning back against his chest. His arms were wrapped protectively around me, almost as if I would fall in at any moment.

“I’m not gonna fall,” I smirked, nudging his stomach with my elbow.

“You don’t have to hold me in a death grip.”

“I know,” Brad chuckled. “I like holding you, that’s all.”

“I know. I was just kidding.”

Brad kissed my neck. He did this for almost a minute, tenderly sucking the skin there. He stopped when something caught his eye.

“Fish.”

“Where?”

“There.”

He pointed, guiding my hand to where he had seen it. I waited until I saw the thing’s dark shape pass by.

“Neat, huh?”

“Yeah, it is.”

I laced our fingers together, bringing his hand back against my stomach.

“You *do* like it up here, right?” Brad asked, a little worry in his voice. “I mean, if you don’t, we could go somewhere else. I...”

“No, Brad. I like it up here.” I tilted my head back, looking up into his eyes. “Wat makes you think I didn’t like it here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being paranoid.”

“Like you never are.”

Brad’s stupid smirk, followed by his joyful laugh, made me smile.

“Yeah, I’m *always* paranoid,” he chuckled, smacking the back of my head. “Oh! Look! The government is ready to take us away!”

“Where? Where are they?”

I’m such a dumbass, but he’s being goofy too. Might as well play along.

“There! Across the stream, in those trees! That fish, see, it wasn’t even a fish at all! It was a submarine!”

“A *navy* submarine?”

“No! No! It was... It was...”

Brad couldn’t finish. We both burst into a fit, rolling around on the ground, unable to contain ourselves anymore.

“Oh God,” Brad panted, still unable to control his laughter. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

I rolled over on top of him, smothering him in kisses.

“Happy birthday, baby.”

I opened my eyes. Brad was on all fours above my barely-awake form, happiness just etched over his face.

“Hey,” I said, reaching up to touch his face. “What’re you doing up so early?”

“Because I got a few things ready.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know, but I wanted to anyway.”

Brad pressed his lips to mine. He sat back, balancing himself on his legs just above my waist.

“Come on, I don’t want it to melt.”

“Want what...”

“It’s a surprise.” Brad hopped off the bed. “Come on.”

I stumbled out of bed, pulling a pair of jeans up my legs. Before I was even able to grab for an undershirt, Brad took hold of my wrist, pulling me out of the bedroom.

“At least let me go get a shirt on.”

“You don’t need a shirt. We’re not going outside.”

“Still...”

“Come on, Dean. You’re hot as shit and we’re both alone here; it’s not like I’m going to say anything about you being shirtless.”

I blushed, but quickly shook it off as he dragged me into the living room. He opened a box, pulling out a few cupcakes.

“Sorry, a cake would go stale up here.”

One of the cakes had ‘happy birthday’ scribed into its surface with tiny chocolate frosting.

“Thank you.” I looked up, wrapping my arms around his waist. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know. I helped pitch in for this too.”

Brad walked into the kitchen, plucking something off the counter. He returned with a laptop computer.

“Brad...”

“It’s from me *and* your uncle.”

“Thank you.” I accepted the computer, running a hand over its smooth surface. “When did you go get this stuff?”

“I woke up early and drove into town, got the cupcakes ordered, then went over to your uncle’s house for an hour or so. I picked up the stuff, drove back here, then went back to bed for a little before waking you up.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a busy morning.”

“All for you.”

I stared at the laptop and the cupcakes, thinking of all Brad had done today; all for me, no doubt, when he didn’t even have to do anything more. After setting the laptop down, I leaned forward, pressing my lips to his. I ran my hand across his cheek, prying his lips apart with my tongue.

We didn’t French kiss often, but when we did, it was always passionate.

It wasn't filled with the need for sex or lust, but with a passion that two lovers had. We shared the kiss for around two minutes before I broke it.

"I love you. You didn't have to do all of this for me, but I appreciate it."

"I know I didn't have to do it for you, but I did anyway. Love you, baby."

"Love you too."

I kissed his bare shoulder, leaning against his body.

This was the best birthday I had had in a *long* time.

That night, Brad was standing on the porch, looking out at the woods. I'd been setting the laptop up when he went outside. I'd been screwing around, installing pre-inserted updates and drivers, when I noticed he'd been out there for ten minutes.

Probably just getting fresh air.

Then again, who went and got ten minutes of fresh air?

"He'll be ok," I said, nibbling a piece of cupcake.

I messed around with the computer for another minute, making sure that I had a good word processor.

Good ole Brad; he made sure to get me the best.

I smiled at the thought. He'd loved a novel I'd written and said I should send it off to some publisher. I told him that I wouldn't be able to sign a contract even *if* it got picked up because I was underage, so I simply told him that I was

waiting until I was eighteen until I sent my stuff out.

“Screw this.”

I dashed for the door. Peeking out, I saw Brad staring out at the woods.

“You see something?”

He jumped, looking over his shoulder at me.

“A bigass elk, or something‘ like it.”

“You don’t know what it was?”

“Not really. What kind of deer has antlers that curve up like this.”

Brad turned, making two Ss that connected at the end of the tail.

“It’s got *really* weird antlers. The two Ss are just the main shape... It’s hard to explain.”

“It’s ok,” I smiled. “What else was weird about it?”

“It was pure white, for one. And it had some sort of mane coming out of the back of its head.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and what’s even weirder is that I *swore* it had a human’s face.”

A hole opened in my chest.

“What?”

“It wasn’t a normal face. It was white and had *really* smooth features, like a sculpture. You know? It had two eyes, a nose, a mouth, a little of a chin.”

“You’re telling me that you saw some freaky-ass thing out there?”

Brad watched me. After he realized what he had just explained, he dropped his hands at his sides.

“It’s just gonna be another big repeat of what happened last year.”

“I never said I didn’t believe you.”

“No, but...” Brad turned, looking back out at the woods. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok. If you saw something, I believe you.”

“No you don’t.”

“How do you...”

“Because I can tell.”

“I never said...”

“It’s ok, Dean. Maybe I was just seeing things. I’ve got a bit of an overactive imagination sometimes.”

Brad wrapped his arms around me when he turned around. He held my head against his shoulder.

“I hope I didn’t ruin your birthday.”

“You didn’t ruin *anything*.” I pulled away, putting my hands on his face.

“Please, don’t think that.”

“All right.” Brad pulled me forward, so that my forehead was touching his. “Just think. Only one more year and you can come live with me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Only one more year.”

Only one more year...

Just one more year.

Part 18:

(Almost) Eighteen Years Old

- - -

I had that I was moving in with Brad a week before my eighteenth birthday. My aunt hadn’t cared. She had kissed my cheek, gave me a thousand-dollar check to help me start out, then offered to help me pack. It wasn’t long before Brad came over and helped me carry the stuff out to his car.

“You ok?” Brad asked, touching my arm.

“Fine,” I said, looking up at my aunt and uncle’s home, where I had lived for two years. “Thanks, Brad.”

Brad pulled out of my aunt’s, turning off onto the road that led to his apartment building.

“You sure I won’t be a burden on you?”

“Dean, we’ve been through this before. You’ve been my boyfriend for almost two years, you’re *not* a burden. I’m in love with you, I want to spend every second we can together, but most of all, I want you to live with me. You’re *no* burden.”

“I’ll just sleep on the couch. So you can have the bed, I mean.”

“Dean, you’re going to sleep in my bed.”

The statement wasn’t blunt, but it wasn’t sugar-coated either.

“I-I know.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I mean, I was just trying to...”

“Dean, you don’t have to try to do different things just to give me the space you think I need. I *want* you to sleep in my bed with me. I *want* you to live with me. I *love* you.”

“It’s just that, God, I don’t know how to say this.” I took a deep breath, expelling it soon after. “I haven’t slept with another man before.”

“I’m not going to force sex onto you, Dean.” Brad pulled into his parking spot, stopping the car. “You think I would force sex on you?”

“No, I don’t think that.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not that kind of guy, because two years ago, when you first told me you loved me, you slept on the couch instead of on the bed. I was

the one who made you get up in the bed with me.”

“I know.” Brad undid his seatbelt, opening the car door. “Come on, let’s get this stuff moved up into my... No. *Our* place.”

It hadn’t taken too long to move the boxes. When we had them on the floor in our apartment, Brad collapsed on the bed and kissed me, nuzzling his face in my neck.

“What are you doing?” I asked. His stubble was tickling the skin on my neck. “That tickles.”

Brad growled, rolling on top of me.

“God, you look so much bigger when you’re on top of me.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. Get off of me.”

Brad laughed when he climbed off, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“You know, you’re going to like it here.”

“I know I will. As long as you’re here, I’ll love it.”

“Kendra!” I couldn’t help but grin when I wrapped my arms around my friend. “It seems like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Since I moved, you haven’t.” She laughed, her new voice making it

sound like a giggle. “So, you and Brad still together?”

“Yeah.” I sat down, thanking the waitress for my coffee. “I moved in with him.”

“You’re almost eighteen?”

“Yeah. What about you and your girlfriend?”

“We’ve been doing fine. Has Brad been treating you good?”

“You’ve been asking a lot about Brad.”

“I’m just curious.”

“The only bad habit he really has is smoking,” I said. “Besides, I picked that habit up when I was sixteen.”

I laughed when she punched my shoulder.

“You two sleeping together yet?”

“Sleeping *with* each other, yes. Not *together*.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“No it’s not. Sleeping *together* is having sex. Sleeping *with* each other is just sleeping in the same bed.”

“All right,” Kendra said, setting her hands on her coffee cup. She looked around at the café, turning her eyes back to me. “It’s nice that we were able to meet like this.”

“Yeah,” I smiled. “It is.”

“Hey,” Brad said. “How was your lunch with Kendra?”

“Fine.” I shut the door behind me. “Sorry to leave you here alone. You could’ve gone with me.”

“I know. I figured I’d just let you talk to your friend.”

I got up on the bed, pecking his cheek before spreading out alongside him.

“I missed you,” Brad said, wrapping our fingers together.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just left you here alone.”

“It’s not that, it’s just that...” Brad trailed off, shaking his head. “Never mind.”

“Brad?” I frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Don’t worry about it, Dean.”

Brad rolled off the bed, walking the short distance to the kitchen. From there, he pulled a box of hamburger helper out of a cupboard, ripping the top open..

“It’ll be ready in an hour,” Brad said. “Ok?”

I nodded, not really wanting to bring anything else up.

“Here.” Brad slid a plate of hamburger helper toward me. “I hope you like it.”

“I’ve liked the stuff you’ve cooked in the past,” I said, blowing a few breaths on what was on my fork, sticking it in my mouth. “It’s good.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” he grinned.

“Sorry. It’s just good.”

“I’m glad you think it is.” Brad looked out the window. “It’s getting dark.”

And it’s Friday night, I thought. My birthday’s tomorrow.

I smiled, but kept the fact to myself. I knew that Brad knew my birthday was tomorrow. My original thought returned, which bummed me out. I remembered something that had happened to him before, when we had just started dating.

Saturday is when the teenagers come to torment him.

“Brad, can I ask you something?”

“Yes. You know you can.”

“Have the teenagers still been bothering you? You haven’t mentioned anything for the past year or so.”

Brad dropped his fork. He stared for a minute. He bent over and plucked his fork off the floor, making his way to the sink.

“Why?” he asked.

“I was just wondering. You’ve been pretty nervous some of the times you’ve called me.”

“They haven’t been bothering me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just drop it, all right?”

I didn’t say anything when he sat down and stabbed his new fork into the hamburger helper. I continued eating, occasionally looking back up at him. His anger was evident on his face.

“I’m sorry. I was just looking out for you.”

Brad set his fork on the half-empty plate.

“I shouldn’t have said that to you,” Brad bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m the one who should be saying sorry.”

“No, you shouldn’t. You’re just concerned for my well-being. You know that I have a bit of a temper sometimes.”

I nodded, sighed, and stood, walking around to his side of the table. There, I wrapped my arms around him.

“I love you.” I nuzzled my cheek against his. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad.”

Brad set his hand on my arm.

“You make me whole, Dean,” he whispered. “You make me whole.”

Part 19:

Troubled Sleep

- - -

I gazed at Brad's bare back, taking in the muscle structure. I set a hand on his shoulder. My body yearned for this man, but I knew I wasn't ready, not yet. Until tomorrow morning, I was under-age. That didn't even begin to factor in how nervous I was.

You'd like him to fuck you, wouldn't you?

I *did* want to have sex with him. I had been with this gorgeous man for two years, had restrained myself to my hand instead. I'd gone crazy at times because I couldn't have sex with him. Deep down, I had always dealt with it, in one way or another. Now, though, I was almost eighteen. I *could* have sex with my gorgeous boyfriend.

"Uhh," Brad mumbled.

He must be having a hard time getting to sleep too. I stroked his spine,

trying to ease some comfort into whatever world he was in

Since we had gone to bed, I hadn't heard any knocks at the door or rocks being thrown at the windows. Maybe the teenagers weren't here tonight; maybe they had decided to go and torment the living hell out of someone else.

Or maybe there were no teenagers in the first place.

That sick little voice was wrong. There *had* been teenagers. Brad had told me. Brad wouldn't have lied or made something up.

See how he dodged the question at dinner, Dean?

"Knock it off," I whispered.

My inner voice had a problem with letting itself out too often. It was another one of my inner demons, that bad side of me. When the cartoons illustrated the fact that someone had a God-like figure sitting on one shoulder and a Devil-like one on the other, they *were* right.

"No, leave me alone," Brad mumbled.

"Brad? Are you ok?"

He rolled over. Fear ran through my body when I saw his expression. He looked like a wild animal caught in the headlights of a car. His pupils had widened, red lines running through the cornea of his eyes.

"Dean?"

"Yeah, Brad. I'm here, baby."

He pulled me into a bone-breaking hug. I gasped, but let him hug me,

regardless of the fact that it hurt little bit.

“Bad dream,” Brad laughed. “Sorry if I scared you.”

“It’s all right.” I pulled away, looking into his eyes. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

There’s the nervous laughter, the laughs he uses when he’s talking to me on the phone at midnight or some other ungodly hour of the morning.

I wrapped my arms around him, bringing his face to the crook of my neck. Now that I thought about it, had he been so nervous and angry when I asked about the teenagers because it wasn’t really teenagers that bothered him, but nightmares? Even grown men could have nightmares; there was no doubt about that.

Does he have ongoing nightmares?

I had heard about cases being so bad that men needed to take medicine to get rid of them. I was more than sure that Brad only had the occasional nightmare, because otherwise he’d have been calling me every night. He had only called after the dates we had.

Could he be having a bad dream that involves me?

Whatever it was, I decided to ignore it. Brad had since fallen asleep in my arms. I wasn’t going to let thoughts of some forbidden nightmare cloud my own mind.

The following morning, I woke up to hear the sound of the running water. I rolled over and looked at the bathroom door, throwing my legs over the bed.

I might as well shower with him.

I knocked on the door.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

“Yeah!” Brad called back. “Go ahead.”

I pushed the door open. I pushed the curtain aside, stepping into the shower with him.

“Dean!” Brad cried. “You about scared the shit out of me.”

“I think I *did* scare the shit out of you.”

“What are you doing in here anyway?” Brad turned to face me.

“I’m eighteen today. Why not start off my adult life by showering with the man I love?”

“Why not?” Brad leaned forward, kissing me.

I let him push me against the wall of the shower. When he slid his tongue in my mouth, I almost lost it. With his naked body pushing up against mine, I couldn’t help but get hard. I pushed him away with a few laughs.

“Get me hard right in the morning,” I said, trying not to stare at anything past his naked chest.

“Sorry,” Brad smiled.

“No, I liked the kiss. I just don’t want to have sex yet.”

Brad kissed my cheek before turning and resuming his shower. He was acting like I wasn’t even there.

“Brad?”

“What, baby?”

“You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“Why would I be mad at you for being scared about having sex?”

“I’m not scared... I’m just not ready.”

“You’re eighteen, you’ll be ready when you’re ready, right?”

My erection had since wilted, which brought a good amount of peace to my mind. I wrapped my arms around him.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” Brad set his hand over mine. “I’m glad you’re here, Dean.”

I was glad too.

I jumped when I heard the sound of the door closing. I saw it was only Brad, carrying a small white box in.

“Hey,” Brad said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s fine.” I watched him sit the white box on the table. “Where did you

go anyway?”

“I figured I’d go pick you up something for your birthday.” Brad gestured me up. “Come here.”

I walked to the table. He pulled the top of the box up to reveal a round, chocolate cake.

My name set in white frosting, smack dab in the middle.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I said, looking down at the cake. “But damn, Brad, why chocolate?”

“Because I know you love it,” Brad grinned. “I got you this too.”

He reached into a pocket, pulling out a small black box. He opened it, revealing a ring.

“You’re not...”

“No!” Brad laughed, setting a hand on his chest. “I’m not proposing to you, Dean!”

I smacked his shoulder, grabbed the ring, and held it up to the light. The black lines that ran through the front of the ring made me smile. Brad knew I liked black and silver, and I was especially fond of the red stones that were inlaid along it.

“How much was this?”

“Not saying. You’ll throw a fit.”

I laughed. When I caught something on the inside of the ring, I held it

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down so that the light would fill in whatever I was seeing.

You're the light in my darkness, Dean McAllen. I love you.

I looked up at Brad, trying not to act too emotional.

"Thank you." I slid the ring down my ring finger, stepping into his embrace. "It's perfect."

"No," Brad said. "*You're* perfect, Dean."

I set my head in the crook of his neck.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Dean."

Part 20:

Giving Him My Virgin Skin

- - -

That night, Brad came out of the bathroom wearing only his towel, as he usually did. But tonight wasn't like any other night though.

Tonight, I was going to give him my virginity.

I had since stripped down into my black underwear and spread out on the bed. I watched him move to his dresser, where he kept his eyes on the clothes in the drawer.

"Brad."

He looked up. When he saw me laying there in just my underwear, he stared at me.

"Dean?"

"Come here, Brad." I gestured him to me with a wave of my finger.

He closed the drawer. When he walked toward me, his towel loosened

and fell from his waist.

He didn't care.

He lay on top of me. When he did, I kissed him,. Setting his hand on my chest.

"Take my underwear off."

He slipped his thumbs into the waistband. His eyes showed curiosity and questioning, like he was looking to me for some kind of permission.

"Do it."

He slipped my underwear off, revealing my hardness. I got off the bed and pushed Brad onto the bed, falling to my knees. I looked up and stared into his eyes before I took his cock into my mouth. I pulled my lips over my teeth so I wouldn't hurt him.

"Dean," Brad moaned. "I love you."

I rubbed his leg, the tickle of hair under my hand erotically stimulating. I moaned, caressed his balls, stimulated them with my fingers. I came up for air.

"God," I gasped. "You're huge."

"You're so good, baby." Brad pulled me into his lap. "You want me to take you, don't you?"

"Yes." I kissed his neck, sucking his Adam's apple. "Please, Brad; take me."

He lay me out on the bed. I spread my legs, anticipating his preparation.

He slid a finger in. I whimpered. My muscles trapped his finger. When he started thrusting, I went over the edge. I cried out as he slid a second finger inside, and soon did the same once he slid a third finger in.

“Brad!” I cried. “Fuck me!”

He pulled his fingers out, throwing my legs over his shoulders. I almost screamed when he entered me, but he pressed his lips to mine to stifle the noise.

“Baby,” he whispered. “We’re in a public building. You need to be quiet.”

I rolled my eyes, delirious with pleasure.

“Be gentle,” I said, taking a moment to adjust my vision and stare at his eyes.

“I know. I will.”

He set the head at my entrance, pushing. I grimaced. God, if *that* hurt, what would the whole thing feel like?

As he began to ease the rest of himself in, I grimaced. Tears spilled out of my eyes, and I could do no more than grind my teeth together, for fear that I would cry out. The pain was excruciating. It was like I was being ripped in two.

“It’s ok, baby. I’m all the way in now.”

The tickle of pubic hair was on my ass. I looked down, awing at the way it had stretched to allow him inside.

“Do me.”

He began his thrusts slowly, grabbing my sides and holding me in place. I

moaned. The pain was gone, now replaced by pleasure. When I told him to speed up, he got faster and faster. Eventually, he was going so fast that I couldn't contain myself anymore. I *did* cry out. His animalistic grunts brought out the beast in me. I gasped and moaned, begging him to fuck me harder.

He slammed all the way in. I felt his orgasm and nearly came myself, but I held it in. I wanted Brad to taste my virgin body. He held himself in, slipping out, rolling over on his back.

Blood stained his cock.

I grimaced, only now just able to feel the blood that stained the inside of my thighs. Brad had a big cock, at least ten inches. Did I expect *not* to bleed?

I wasn't in a dire amount of pain, but my ass still hurt.

"Brad."

He looked up just in time to see me crawl over him. I supported myself on my arms, sliding my cock into his mouth. I moaned, trying as hard as I could to hold myself up. When I came, he sucked at my cock like a wild animal, the slurping noises only drawing me into a state of bliss. After a moment of recovery, I slid out.

"I love you," I whispered, too drained of energy to talk any louder.

"I love you too." Brad pulled me close, entwining our limbs. "Happy birthday, Dean."

Part 21:

Birth Date Demons

- - -

We had showered after sex. I cried the whole time. Hell, I even cried when Brad was changing the bloody bed sheets.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Brad said, pushing the bloody, now-ruined sheet into the garbage can. “I should’ve said something.”

“I’m not stupid.” I pulled my underwear on, grimacing. “I knew I would bleed.”

“I love you, Dean.”

“I love you too. But goddammit! I’m acting like a fucking baby over a little pain.”

“You just lost your virginity. That’s an emotional experience. I cried when I lost my virginity.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I did.”

Brad threw a simple blanket on in place of a sheet. He turned the light off and led me to the bed, where he covered me up, drawing me close to his chest.

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I love you so much, Dean.”

“I love you, Brad. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

From behind, I felt Brad’s nod before he settled his head on the pillow. He fell asleep shortly after, but I remained awake, wondering whether or not one of his nightmares would begin.

I was woken by Brad’s mumbling.

Another nightmare.

I felt the pain in my ass as I rolled on my side, but I ignored it, resting a hand on his shoulder blade. He was almost always faced in the opposite direction after asleep. I was never able to see his face. I didn’t even lean over him, for fear that I would wake him up.

“Brad?” I asked, rubbing his shoulder. “You ok?”

It took me a minute to get him up, but he finally did, rolling over to face me.

“Yeah, baby? You ok?”

“I’m fine. What about you? Did you have another nightmare?”

“Yeah.” Brad pulled me close. “But I’m ok.”

“You can tell me anything you want, Brad.”

“You want me to tell you what I dream about?”

“Yes, tell me.”

Brad sat up. When I got into a sitting position, he gestured me to scoot over so we could lean against the wall.

“I dream of a darkness,” Brad began, “a darkness that I don’t think anybody can know but me. When I dream, I see so many dark things. Shadows are nonexistent in our sense, but they’re still born of light. The lights in my dreams, they look like they’ve been messed with in a photo program on a computer. They’re glorified so the outer rims are orange, while the insides are still white. But they’re etched, you know? Like someone drew them that way.

“But in my dreams, Dean, shadows are real. They *are* real in our sense, I know, but they’re living things in my dreams. Snakes weave over the floor, because in my dreams, all the lights in my apartment are on. The floor *crawls* with snakes. They bite at my ankles, trying to draw blood, because that’s what they feed off of, blood.

“But the thing I’m afraid of is not the snakes, Dean; it’s something I can’t see that scares me.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Brad shook his head.

“I don’t know... but I don’t want to think about it.”

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I sighed, kissing his cheek.

After readjusting ourselves on the bed, I fell asleep, not wanting to think about the nightmare that my boyfriend had just had.

Part 22:

Snakes

- - -

When I woke up the following morning, I got in the shower with Brad. When I kissed his naked shoulders, I was reminded of the love we made last night, but I was also reminded of the nightmare he had had. His skin seemed to crawl, because just thinking about his horrible nightmare made me wonder if my boyfriend was just dreaming these things, or if something had happened to make him experience these horrors.

“You ok, Dean?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just didn’t get too much sleep last night.”

Brad turned my chin up, kissing me.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you last night,” he said, letting one hand trail down my side, where it rested on my hip. “I really am, Dean.”

“It’s all right. It only hurt for the first little while, anyway. Then it just stung.”

He ran a hand through my long hair, leaning against the wall.

“Did I scare you?”

“Scare me?” I asked. “What are you...”

“My dream. “When you woke up and rubbed my back, then woke me up. Remember me telling you about the dream?”

Yeah, I remember. I remember the snakes.

The water hitting my ankles made me jump. For a moment, I *had* thought there was a snake down there, curling itself around my leg, inching its way up my body, ready to bite a hole in my neck and suck my blood.

“Dean?” Brad asked. “You ok?”

I sunk back against his chest. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warm water running over my body, his arms around my chest, holding me close.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “I have to go to work, baby.”

“I do too, but I’d like to stay in here forever.”

“We’d get a little *too* wet,” he laughed.

I laughed with him, grabbing a towel, drying myself off.

When I looked into his eyes, I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be

like to live without him. That single idea was a fear that had been haunting me for the past few months.

“Hey, Dean!”

I looked up from the register to see Lex.

“Hey, Lex,” I smiled. “What’s up?”

“Ah, nothing much,” Lex grinned as he set a *Playboy* on the register.

“Just getting a magazine.”

“Playboy?” I asked, scanning it, accepting the exact change from my boyfriend’s friend. “I didn’t think you looked at magazines.”

“*Everyone* looks at magazines,” Lex said, accepting the plastic bag I set it in. “You never looked at magazines when you were younger?”

“Sadly,” I began, leaning forward, so no one walking in could hear me, “they don’t have magazines with men in them in most convenience stores.”

“Not even on the net?”

“I was scared shitless of being found out. So no. I looked at a few bare chests and got off, but other than that, no.”

Lex shook my hand before walking out of the store.

“So, that’s one of your friends?”

I looked over my shoulder to see my friend Kason. I’d made friends with him shortly after I had switched jobs, when Kendra had moved to the other side

of Denver.

“Yeah. Well, one of my boyfriend’s friends, anyway.”

“Everything still going ok with you and Brad?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You were telling me that he has bad dreams.”

“You remind me of some older man trying to impart wisdom upon a pupil.” I winked at him just to imply my point.

“I’m only twenty-seven,” Kason shrugged. “Besides, I was just asking.”

“He had another nightmare last night, yeah. I’m starting to worry about him.”

“He has bad dreams, Dean; *everyone* has them.”

“Not like he does. He has them a lot... A little too much if you ask me.”

“Maybe you should ask him about it.”

“I *have* asked him about it.” I put a ‘This register is closed’ sign on the counter before gesturing him outside. “He blew up when I asked him.”

“What did he say?”

“You *really* want to dig this up, don’t you?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest in a non-threatening manner.

“I just want to help, Dean. I mean, come on; I’m your friend. Friends are there to help, right?”

I sat on the ground, accepting the cigarette he offered me.

“He got mad when I asked him about it the first time,” I said, letting Kason light the smoke. “I felt bad, because he had looked hurt after I asked about it.”

“He probably feels ashamed,” Kason suggested, sitting down by me.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, think of it this way,” Kason began, blowing out a mouthful of smoke. “He’s a grown man, right? He’s twenty-two. He’s not a teenager, and he doesn’t have anything to worry about. He’s got a good job and a gorgeous boyfriend...”

“Kason!”

“You know I’m straight,” he chuckled. “But you are good-looking, Dean.”

“Anyway,” I said. “Keep going.”

“Well, he has a job and a boyfriend; he has absolutely *nothing* to worry about. He has nightmares. No big deal, right? Well, it *is* a big deal, because he has them *a lot*. And when his boyfriend asks about them, he gets defensive because he doesn’t want to show a weakness that hurts him.”

I took all of what my friend said in. After thinking about it for a minute, it made a lot more sense than anything else I had come up with.

“So, you get what I’m saying?” Kason asked.

“Yeah.” I took a deep drag from my cigarette. “It bothers me though.”

“Why? I mean, I *know* it bothers you, but what is it about the dreams that bothers you?”

“The snakes.”

“What snakes?”

When my friend actually said the word, that nauseating, gut-wrenching feeling came over me. It was that feeling of something slimy--something *cold*--rubbing up against my ankles.

“*His* snakes,” I said, tapping my head for emphasis.

“Oh.” Kason nodded. “I see. What bothers you about them?”

“I really don’t know. I mean, I don’t like snakes either. Hell, I can’t stand anything bigger than a garter snake, but his snakes... they bother me.”

I shivered when the picture came back to me. It was a picture of our apartment with the orange-rimmed lights and the coagulation of snakes on the floor; they writhed, they slid, they hissed, they tried to bite at Brad’s ankles; they did *everything*.

“You think he’s afraid of snakes?” Kason asked.

“I’m not afraid of them, but I don’t like them. Yeah, I think he might be afraid of them.”

“You going to ask about it?”

“No.” I dropped my cigarette and crushed it under my heel. “I have

another way of trying to get it out of him.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Simple,” I said. “I rent a movie.”

Brad had gone out to get a few things for dinner, which gave me the perfect opportunity to get my idea ready. I had a copy of an older snake movie on the screen, and I had just finished fast forwarding it to the part where the main characters start to see the gigantic snake.

We'll see what this does to him.

I hated my whole idea. I had a feeling that I might give Brad more nightmares, but I had to find out what was going on. I didn't think that his fear was something that I needed to worry about, but I wanted to know if he *was* actually afraid of snakes.

Maybe they're not really snakes, that inner voice suggested. *Maybe they're just shadows that he calls snakes.*

“That could be.” I stood, walking into the kitchen, pouring myself a glass of orange juice. “But I want to make sure.”

I scratched my chest, rubbing the muscles on my abs.

“And to think I used to have problems with my weight,” I laughed.

The doorknob turned and Brad's voice came in through the door. I stood, unlocking the door.

“Hey,” Brad said, accepting the kiss I gave him. “Sorry, had to get some stuff for tacos.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I was just watching a movie.”

He walked past me. I relocked the door before I went back to the couch. Sitting down, I started the movie back up.

“*SNAKE!*”

The scream made me jump, but it also made Brad jump as well. He had just picked up a glass bottle and was about to move it before the scream came. The bottle shattered, sending teardrops of glass all over the floor.

“Turn it off,” he said.

“Brad, I’m sorry, I...”

“I said turn it off, Dean.”

I paused the movie, turned the volume down all the way, and ejected the DVD before placing the disk back in its case.

“I’m sorry,” I said, bending down, grabbing the dust pan he gave me. “I didn’t know the volume was up.”

“Just drop it,” he said. “Just drop it.”

I cleaned up the glass. When I stood and dumped the mess in the trash can, I caught the look on his face.

The troubled expression only confirmed my idea.

Brad was afraid of snakes.

Part 23:

Calling the Snake Man

- - -

A week later, I was at work when I saw Soul, Travis and Lex come up to the counter. They were all together, which was odd, considering I *never* saw all three of them at once outside of planned meetings.

“Hey,” I said. “What’re you guys doing?”

“What do you mean, ‘What are we doing?’” Soul asked, a sly smirk passing over his lips..

“I never see the three of you together.”

“We heard about Brad’s snake thing,” Lex said.

Shit! How the hell did they...

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t know we know,” Travis added. “We didn’t know he was afraid of snakes.”

“How did you guys find out?”

"I overheard you and Kason talking about it," Soul said.

You fucking dumbass.

"Come on, guys. *Please* don't say anything to him. I don't want Brad to be mad at me."

"*Chill*," Lex said, his goatee spiking up. "We're not going to say anything."

"Why are you all here then?"

"We just wanted to ask about it," Travis said.

"There's nothing to ask," I sighed. "I'm working, guys. If you don't have anything to buy, then please, leave. I'm waiting on other customers."

"All right," Soul said, smacking my shoulder. "See you later, Dean."

I picked up the old lady's medication, accepting her change and bagging it before she walked off.

"Dean?"

I looked up at Kason.

"They heard me and you talking about Brad's fear of snakes."

"They're not going to give him hell, are they?"

"They'll hear from me if they do. I don't want to hurt Brad's feelings. You know how embarrassed he'd be if they said something to him?"

"I can only imagine," Kason sighed. "I..."

Kason was cut off as my cell phone rang.

“Who would be calling me?” I reached into my pocket, withdrawing my phone.

Brad’s name was clearly visible on the caller ID.

“It’s him,” I said. “I hope everything’s all right.”

“Why?”

“He stayed home today. He’s got a touch of the flu.”

Kason kept quiet as I flipped the cell phone open.

“Hello?”

“B-B-Baby,” Brad stuttered.

“Brad?” Knots formed in my chest. “What’s wrong?”

“I think there’s a snake in the apartment.”

“A snake?”

“Yeah, s snake.”

“Brad, are you *sure* there’s a snake in the apartment?”

“Yes!” Brad cried. “Would I lie about this, Dean?”

No, you wouldn’t.

“I’ll be right there,” I said. “Just keep an eye on it, if you can. We’ll want to know where it is so animal control can get it.”

“All right, bye.”

When I hung up, I got a weird look from Kason.

“Animal control?”

“There’s a snake in my apartment. Can you cover for me?”

“Wait! A snake?”

“Yes, a snake. Do I have to repeat myself?”

“No, but... You have a snake in your apartment? Dean, does anyone on your floor have a pet snake?”

“Pets aren’t allowed in the building.” I shrugged, taking my apron off, heading for the door. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be all right.”

“Brad, are you *sure* you saw a snake?”

“Yeah,” Brad said. “I’m sure.”

I looked back at the animal control man. He had disappeared into the bathroom, where Brad had said the snake had gone.

“Well, I see no snake in there,” the man said. “Did you have the door open?”

“For a minute,” Brad admitted.

“It’s probably gone. What did you say the snake looked like?”

“It was big, not black, but maybe a dark brown.”

“Probably someone’s pet.” The man offered Brad an easy smile. “I’ll be

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going now.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “I appreciate you getting out here.”

“It’s no trouble. Just doing my job.”

I gave the man a final thanks before I closed the door behind him.

“I told you to stop leaving the door open,” I sighed.

“I only had it open for a second. I had to carry stuff in here. I went shopping.”

“Still.” I stopped, looking at my boyfriend. “You scared me, Brad.”

“I’m sorry,” Brad said, wrapping me in a hug. “Are you going back to work?”

“No, I’ll just stay here. I’ve had enough excitement for the day.”

Brad led me to the couch. I sat down, leaning against my boyfriend’s shoulder. The snake was gone, gone for good.

Part 24:

A Rendezvous With Kendra

- - -

“You had a snake in your apartment?” Kendra asked, looking up from her salad.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Can you believe that?”

“Sort of,” she said. “So, tell me about it.”

“Brad called me at work. Thankfully, Kason’s a good friend, so he took over. Brad scared the hell out of me though.”

“Why?”

“Remember when he was calling me back when I first started dating him?”

“You mean in the middle of the night?”

“Yeah. He sounded freaked out, so, naturally, I was worried. I ended up calling animal control. The man looked around, couldn’t find the snake, and

asked Brad if he had left the door open after he had called, which he had.”

“So the snake got out?”

“I haven’t seen it, and it’s been three days since it happened.”

“Thanks for telling me. I like to be informed, you know?”

“You’re my best friend, other than my boyfriend, anyway. You and Kason have been there for me; why shouldn’t I keep you up-to-date on my exciting happenings?”

I gave her one of the big, stupid grins that I had picked up from Brad. She laughed and patted my arm.

“You’ve barely touched your burger,” she said.

“Oh.” I picked it up, taking a bite. “What would I do without you, Kendra?”

“You’d be chasing off snakes,” she smiled.

“About that.” I put my burger down, staring at it. “You’re working as a counselor down at a public center, right?”

“I thought I told you that?”

“You did. Can I ask you something, something about Brad?”

“Sure.” Kendra set her hands on the table. “What do you want to know?”

“If you were me, and your boyfriend woke you up every so often with nightmares, would you be worried?”

“How often is ‘every so often?’”

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“Every other day, almost.”

“Have you tried talking to him about the nightmares?”

“He’s told me about one, but whenever I’ve tried to ask him about it, he gets defensive. When I was trying to find out if he was afraid of snakes or not, I rented an old movie and rigged it a little too well. The volume was up high, a woman screamed ‘Snake,’ and he dropped a glass bottle and broke it. He was a bit upset and mad at me. I also tried to ask him one night at dinner, but he told me to drop it. That’s what he always tells me. Drop it.”

“What do you think of the whole thing?”

“Kason said that it’s just him trying to defend a weak spot. You know how men like Brad are. They don’t like to show weakness, and to him, having nightmares is a weakness.”

“I understand,” Kendra said. “But be careful, Dean. I know Brad isn’t dangerous, but I just want you to look out for him. Brad’s a nice guy; I wouldn’t like to see anything happen to him.”

“Thanks, Kendra,” I smiled.

She took hold of my hand.

“I’m just looking out for your best interest, Dean. You’ve always been a good kid.”

I nodded once more, more than glad that I had come to lunch with Kendra today.

Part 25:

Fireworks

- - -

Those few months after moving into Brad's apartment had passed quickly. Now, we were preparing to go out and watch the fireworks. Brad had rented a small boat for the two of us--*just* the two of us, without any of his friends--to watch the fireworks.

It was one of the more romantic things he had done. Of course, Brad *was* a romantic. On all of our dates before I had moved in, he always took me to the best places; the park, the river, his house, up to the cabin for my seventeenth birthday; so many magical places. The fact that he had bought me what was probably an expensive ring didn't delude his romantic gestures any.

I hadn't taken it off since my birthday; I doubt I ever would.

But the fireworks was something I had always dreamed of. I had dreamed of watching the fireworks with my boyfriend, just the two of us sitting on the grass or in a car. But Brad, he had one-upped my dream by renting a boat..

“Dean?” Brad asked.

I looked up from my place on the couch.

“Yeah?”

“You ok?”

“I’m fine,” I said, resting my head against his chest. “How come?”

“You seem a little...” Brad trailed off before speaking. “I don’t know how to explain it. Maybe distant?”

“I’m all right. Just happy to be going somewhere with you.”

His hands slid up and down my back. I relaxed, letting him hold me upright as he continued his massage.

“We better be getting out,” Brad said. “We’ll have to find ourselves a good spot on the lake.”

I kissed him.

I couldn’t ask for a better boyfriend.

“You sure you’re going to be warm in that?”

I had decided to wear black shorts and my hooded-sweatshirt. Under the sweatshirt, I wore a T-shirt, but I knew he was worried about my wellbeing. Brad was worried I’d get cold

“We brought blankets, remember?” I asked, rubbing the coat he was wearing. “You hardly ever wear this.”

Brad was wearing the brownish-yellow coat that he kept hidden away for most of the year. He only wore it on special occasions, so I figured that the Fourth of July was something he considered to be important.

“Why’d you ask that?” Brad smiled.

“I like it,” I said, rubbing the fur with my finger. “It is real, right?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, but then he spoke in a lower voice. “Don’t say anything out loud though. I’ve gotten shit from some people because of it.”

I got up on my tiptoes, kissing his cheek. Making my way to the back seat I reached in and grabbed the cooler, while he popped the trunk. I stepped back before it came up and hit me.

“Sorry,” Brad said, taking the blankets under one arm. “I hate doing that.”

“How come?”

“I’m afraid somebody’ll go walking by and get hit by the trunk.”

“You don’t have to worry about that with me. You’re not going to get me with the trunk.”

Brad led me out of the dock. Around us, boats shifted as the tide went in and out, the water moving the boats in an almost symphonic rhythm.

I stopped when Brad looked up the dock, squinting.

“There!” Brad said, readjusting the blankets under his one arm before pointing at a smaller boat. “That’s ours.”

I held the cooler steady as he pulled the boat in with his free arm. He tossed the blankets into the boat before jumping over. I handed him the cooler, accepting his hand as he helped me over.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ve never really liked getting on and off a boat.”

“Sorry. We don’t have to watch them from a boat if you don’t want to.”

“You rented the boat,” I grinned. “And besides, boats don’t bother me.”

Brad bent down to start the boat. I rearranged the cooler and the blankets so they wouldn’t be in the way. After he got it started, I sat down.

“You drive boats?” I asked.

“No,” Brad said. “It’s not that hard though.”

“I had a grandmother that used to live up in Minnesota,” I said, standing, gripping a handhold. “One of my uncles or cousins took us out on the boat when we were there.”

Brad concentrated on the road. Right then and there, I wanted to reach out and touch him. I wanted to run my finger along his strong jaw line, I wanted to kiss those sweet lips. I wanted him to throw me on the floor and make love to me right where we were.

He’s the perfect guy.

“You ok?” Brad asked, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

“Fine. Just thinking about how you’re the perfect boyfriend.”

Brad smiled. I decided to leave him alone and sit down. I watched other

boats to drive by, watched water birds take flight, and watched the ripples of the water pass through the reflection of the slowly-setting sun.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” Brad said, stopping the boat and settling in beside me. “I’ve always thought it was pretty.”

I opened the cooler, grabbing a soda for the two of us before I pulled a blanket up over my bare legs.

“You want some of this?” I asked.

“The blanket, or you?” Brad asked with one of his sexy grins.

I blushed and turned my head down, trying to hide it. I *always* blushed when he gave me one of those smiles.

“I was talking about the blanket,” I said, looking back up at him. “I thought about giving you some of me, but then I remembered we were in a public place.”

Brad gestured me to scoot over, where the seats rose up to shoulder level. When I did, he squeezed in and pulled some of the blanket over his waist.

“So,” he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Now we just wait for it to get dark.”

“It probably won’t take that long,” I said. “It’s getting dark.”

“It won’t be much longer.”

I set my head on his chest, yawning.

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“You tired?”

“A little. I haven’t been feeling really great lately.”

“Are you getting sick?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve just been a little tired.”

“If you want to take a little nap, go ahead,” Brad said, kissing the top of my head. “I’ll wake you up.”

“All right. Love you, Brad.”

“I love you too, baby. I’ll wake you up when they start.”

I closed my eyes and fell asleep almost immediately.

“Dean, baby; wake up.”

I looked around. For a minute, I didn’t know where I was until I saw the blooming lights in the sky.

I wrapped an arm around Brad’s waist.

“Thanks for bringing me out here. Every little thing you do makes me happy. I mean that, Brad.”

“I know you do. And being with you is the best and only thing I could ever ask for.”

I could’ve sworn that last firework I saw had been in the shape of a heart, and I was more than sure that--as it faded--it spelled out Brad’s name.

Part 26:

To Be Thankful

- - -

The next few months had flown by just as quickly as they always had. I *knew* the months were going by so smoothly because I was living with Brad, what I had wanted all along.

I sat at the table, eating a bowl of soup while Brad leaned against the counter, the muscles on his bare chest flexing with every movement.

“I *know*, Dad,” Brad said, casting a glance at me before turning his back to me. “I’ll think about it. No, Dad, you *know* I have work, and you *know* that I’m living with someone right now. Ok. Love you too. Bye.”

After he ended the call, Brad stood there, both hands gripping the end of the counter. The muscles in his back flexed as he stood there. It was more than obvious that he was troubled with something.

I stood and walked up to him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, wrapping my arms around his waist.

"I was talking to Dad," Brad sighed. "Our relationship isn't the best."

"What did he want?" I asked, drumming my fingers on his abs.

"He wants us to go up there for Thanksgiving."

"Us?" I asked. "Did you tell him about me?"

"I mentioned I was living with someone," Brad said, turning to face me.

"Does he know you're..."

"Gay?" Brad asked, cutting me off. "Yeah, he's known since I was eighteen."

"I haven't come out to my parents. I don't think I will anytime soon though."

"How come?"

"They're... They don't like gays. Well, at least that's what I got out of them. Always calling gay men faggots and all that."

"Well, don't worry about it," Brad said, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. "I'm not even sure I want to go up to my dad's house."

"How come? Aside from the not having a good relationship part of it?"

"For one, I'm working. And for two, you're here."

"I'd go with you. It wouldn't bother me."

"You'd really go up to Nebraska with me, Dean?"

"Well, yeah. You're my boyfriend, remember?"

“How could I forget that?” Brad asked, nuzzling his cheek against mine.

“You always steal the blankets when we’re sleeping.”

“I do not!” I laughed.

“Do so!” Brad grinned. “I always have to grab a spare.”

I kissed him, smiling as I walked over to the bed. I gestured him over.

“So,” I said as I reached out and gripped his chin. “You’re gonna take me to Nebraska?”

“I guess,” Brad said.

“I’d like a little vacation,” I said, reaching up and kissing his neck. “I forgot to mention something.”

“What?”

“I’m horny.”

“Well,” Brad said, sliding his hands under my shirt, helping me take it off. “I guess we can fix that problem, right?”

I fell under his body.

An hour later, Brad was up making dinner. The horny bastard was teasing me with the sight of his naked ass.

“Watch out. “Wouldn’t want you to burn something important.”

He turned and saluted me. I laughed.

“You better be showing respect to your officers,” I said, grabbing a nearby towel, snapping his ass.

“Yeowch! Yes sir, officer, sir!”

“Sorry,” I said, rubbing the area I had slapped. “My bad.”

“Don’t make me horny,” Brad growled in his deep, sexy voice. “I’ll burn dinner.”

“And we wouldn’t want that, now would we?” I grinned. “Maybe we should put some clothes on.”

“Why?” Brad asked, giving me a stupid smile.

“I don’t know... It feels weird, both of us being naked.”

“Nothing weird about it, Dean,” Brad laughed. “Besides, I like seeing my boyfriend naked. Gives me something to look at, with all that muscle and sex that you are.”

“*You* are the one who deserves to be looked at,” I said, rubbing his chest. “You’re the sexiest man on earth.”

“You too, baby,” Brad kissed me. “You dress, then watch this stuff and I’ll get dressed.”

I walked over to the dresser. I dressed in my underwear and an undershirt before walking over to the stove.

“Sorry for being all freaky on you,” I said as I assumed his position of cooking.

“What do you mean?”

“Almost everything I wear is black.”

“I don’t care,” Brad said, setting a hand on my abs. “Besides, it accents your skin color.”

“I try. I’m not muscled like you are, but I try to look nice.”

Brad ran a hand through my hair.

“Baby, you’re *gorgeous*. I mean that. You have nice hair, you’ve got a sexy smile, you have a toned stomach. Any guy would want you.”

“Not really,” I said, letting him go back to his cooking. “I’m nothing special.”

“Yes you are. I thought you said you were going to stop bringing yourself down like that?”

“I...” I trailed off, taking a few breaths. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t like you talking bad about yourself. You’re everything to me, Dean.”

“And you’re everything to me,” I said, sitting down as he pulled the hamburger helper off of the stove.

“Now we’re on the same page,” Brad said, setting the food on the table before grabbing us each a fork and a plate. “You really want to go to Nebraska then?”

“Yeah, if you want to.”

“Good,” Brad said. “I want to leave in the morning.”

I leaned back as we were going down the highway. We had it planned out *perfectly*. We’d get there a week before Thanksgiving, stay for the holiday, then leave two days after that, giving us a good--and far lengthy--break from work.

“You like road trips?” Brad asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I like being on the road. Besides, I get to see your sexy self in sunglasses.”

Brad kept his eyes on the road. I turned the radio up, closing my eyes, enjoying the feel of the cool autumn wind on my skin.

“How long did you say it was going to take us to get there?” I asked.

“About two days. We’re gonna stop at a hotel, all right?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

Besides, I thought. I’ve always wanted to have sex in a hotel.

I was getting better at seducing him. It wasn’t hard to just get on the bed and call him over to me anymore. I liked the way his hands roamed over my body, how his lips felt against mine, how he felt inside me.

“God!” I cried. He was fucking me harder than he usually did. “God, Brad, you’re so good.”

I gripped the headrest, grinding my teeth together. My eyes rolled up into

my head.

Fuck me...

“Fuck me,” I gasped. “Fuck me, Brad.”

“God,” he growled. “I’m going as hard as I can, Dean.”

I began to buck against him. He came in no time, collapsing on top of me. I was still hard, and I wanted a piece of his ass.

“I’m hard,” I said. “I want to fuck you.”

Brad blinked and gave a small, sly smile.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I’d like that.”

I gripped my throbbing cock and guided myself in. It took me a few times, as my body was shaking, but I finally slid in. Brad gasped and groaned as I began my thrusts, but he quickly quieted as he buried his head in a pillow.

God, I thought. His ass couldn’t feel any better than this.

I was starting to wear myself out. I had to stop and take a few breaths before I started thrusting again, but I was desperate. Release was soon, but it was building, keeping me on the edge. My balls were pulling up into my sack, coming dangerously close to my body.

“Ah!” I cried, pushing myself in the rest of the way. “God, Brad. Fuck!”

I collapsed on his back, my deflating cock still inside him. I rested my head between his shoulder blades.

“You’ve never fucked me like that before,” Brad laughed.

“You didn’t like it?”

“No, I like it hard. You don’t have to worry about hurting me.”

“I like to be on the bottom,” I said. “I’m not a top guy.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Brad chuckled when I pulled out. “You’re starting to get pretty good at seducing me, you little romantic.”

“I try,” I said, kissing the tip of his nose.

“Well, you succeed!” Brad laughed. “But God, I’m beat. Let’s go to sleep, baby.”

“Yeah, I’m tired.” I slid under the covers, cuddling in close to his body.

“Night.”

“Night.”

*

A few hours later, Brad woke up. He got out of bed and walked into the bathroom, sighing, leaning against the wall as he relieved himself. His ass still burned from when Dean fucked him, and he was spent, *literally* spent. Even after a few hours of sleep, he was still tired from all the sex.

God, you’d think that a little guy like him couldn’t drill you as hard as he did, Brad grinned. *Still, he knows how to have sex.*

He flushed the toilet and walked out of the bathroom. He went to the window and parted the curtains, looking out at the countryside. He could see lights from the distant houses.

It made him feel small.

He looked over his shoulder at Dean.

He's the only man I've ever been so deeply in love with. I don't think I could go on if something happened with our relationship.

He didn't like to think bad things about his relationship with Dean. He loved his boyfriend; that's all that mattered.

He settled back into bed, kissed Dean's lips, and fell asleep.

*

The next morning, I woke to the sound of Brad messing around in the bathroom. I rolled out of bed, planted my feet on the floor and walked into the bathroom. Brad had shaving cream lathered all over his face, a razor carefully gliding over his skin.

"Makes me feel a bit guilty," I said, messing with the hairs on my chin. "I haven't shaved in a while."

"I like those little hairs on your chin," Brad said, reaching out and rubbing his finger across the underside of my chin. "Makes you sexier than you already are."

"You think I should keep it?" I asked.

"Yeah," Brad grinned. "You should."

"You wouldn't care if I had a little bit of a beard?" I asked.

"Just don't grow it into a goatee. I think it's just me, but I don't really

like them.”

“Lex has a goatee.”

“But he’s not my boyfriend. They don’t bother me a lot, but... Well, I don’t think you’d look good in a goatee. Maybe if you had a *really* thin face, but other than that, no.”

“I wouldn’t want a thin face,” I laughed. “I like the way my face is. Not too thin, but not too large either.”

“Average,” Brad grinne. “You want to shave?”

I accepted the clean razor he offered and quickly got everywhere except my sideburns and chin. I didn’t have thick sideburns, but I did have a noticeable line of hair running down to my jaw.

“There,” I said, throwing the blade in the trash. “That was easy.”

“No cream?” Brad asked.

“Don’t use it. Doesn’t help if I can’t see what I’m getting off my skin.”

Brad laughed, embracing me.

“You’re such a good guy, Dean. I think my dad’s going to like you.”

At six o’clock that night, we pulled into Brad’s father’s house. It was a simple house; a two-story building with brown paint and nice tiling on the roof. Compared to the other houses, this one seemed plainly inviting, with its brown and whites. The others seemed like they wanted to jump out and run into you.

“What if he doesn’t like me?” I asked.

Brad stopped the car. His smile brought me some comfort, but not much.

“My dad will like you,” Brad said. “Come on, Dean. We can’t just sit in the car for ten days.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt, closing the door behind me. I waited for him to lock the doors with the keypad and took his hand, holding it as two lovers would as we walked up the small pathway.

“Don’t worry,” Brad said. “He’s gonna like you.”

After Brad knocked on the door, we waited for a moment until it opened, revealing a man of Brad’s height, with broad shoulders.

“Brad,” the man said, shaking Brad’s hand. “It’s good to see you, son.”

“Good to see you, Dad,” Brad said. “Can we come in?”

“Yes, yes, come in,” Brad’s father said, gesturing us in through the door.

After I stepped into the house, the man closed the door. We stood in the living room. I immediately took notice of pictures of a young man in a football uniform.

Brad used to play football, I thought, looking over at my boyfriend. I wonder why he stopped.

“So, who is this?” Brad’s father asked, gesturing to me with his hand.

“Dad, this is Dean,” Brad said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

“My boyfriend.”

“It’s good to meet you, Dean,” the man said, reaching out and shaking my hand.

“It’s good to meet you too, sir,” I said.

“Please, don’t call me sir. That makes me sound old!” the man laughed.

“Please, call me Robert.”

“Yes, sir, I mean Robert, sir.”

Robert only laughed.

“I’ve got the guest bedroom ready for you,” Robert said, grabbing me and Brad a soda before setting them on the table. “It’s not large by any means, but it’s big enough for the two of you.”

I cracked open my soda, taking a sip from it.

“You have a nice house, Robert,” I said.

“Thank you, Dean. I appreciate the compliment.”

I looked over at Brad. He seemed nervous, like he didn’t want to be around his father.

“So,” Robert began, drumming his fingers on the table. “How long have you two been together?”

“Two years last May,” Brad said.

“How did you meet?” Robert asked, apparently pleased at his son’s ability to maintain a steady relationship.

“I met him at a dollar store,” Brad said. “I liked him and asked for his

number. We started dating after that.”

“You make a habit out of picking up strange men, Brad?” Robert asked.

“Especially men that seem to be only just eighteen right now.”

“I have to use the restroom,” I said, standing.

“Down the hall, second on the right.”

I wasted no time in getting out of the man’s kitchen. I was down the hall and in the bathroom before Brad could even attempt to stop me.

Why did he say those things?

I stared at my reflection. The color had drained out of my face. It could’ve been from the bad, piss-yellow lighting in the green room, but I knew that wasn’t the case.

“Dean?” Brad knocked on the door. “Can I come in?”

I opened the door and let him inside. I placed an arm on the wall, leaning against it.

“He doesn’t like me. I knew he wouldn’t like me.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t like you, Dean; it’s because I just picked you up at a store is what he’s mad about.”

“That’s *flirting*, Brad. Besides, if you had just ignored your conscience, we wouldn’t be together.”

“I know, baby. Come on, let’s go back out there. Dad goes to bed at nine, so we can stay up an extra hour or so to just relax.”

I hugged him for a good minute before we walked out of the bathroom together, entering the kitchen.

“I’m sorry if I said anything to make you uncomfortable, Dean,” Robert said. “I didn’t mean to say that you’re not a good guy.”

“I don’t have any bad habits, sir,” I said. “I don’t do drugs, I don’t drink, I’m not asking Brad to spoil me with anything he can. I love your son.”

“I’m sure you’ve been taking good care of Brad.”

“Quite the opposite, sir. Brad’s an independent man. I could be independent, but I wouldn’t be comfortable with it.”

“Well, I’m not going to leave you,” Brad said, wrapping me in a hug, kissing my cheek. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

Even though I was looking in the opposite direction, I knew Brad was giving his father one of the cruelest looks he could give the man. I closed my eyes, tightening my arms around him.

I was thankful for Brad’s embrace.

I looked up from my place on the bed as Brad walked out of the bathroom. He had the towel hanging from around his neck, not even bothering to cover himself up as he walked out into the guest bedroom we were staying in.

“What?” Brad asked, smiling.

“Nothing,” I said. “What if your dad came in here?”

“I’m not a teenager, Dean.” Brad ruffled my damp hair. “Dad won’t just barge in on us.”

I spread myself out across the bed, glad that I was at least dressed in underwear and an undershirt. Brad, on the other hand, was bending over and looking in our suitcases, his naked ass shining in all its glory.

I shook my head, deciding to look at the ceiling instead. I didn’t really like the idea of having sex in a house that wasn’t ours. Then again, we had had sex in a hotel, so I guess that wasn’t any different.

“What are you smiling about?” Brad chuckled

I turned my head to watch him pull his underwear up his legs.

“Nothing.”

“Come on,” Brad said, climbing up on the bed beside me. “What were you smiling about?”

“We’re not going to have sex here, are we?”

“Mmm, if I feel like it.”

“What if your dad hears us?”

“My dad *knows* I’m gay, and he knows I’ll be having sex with you.”

“We’re not going to have sex tonight though, are we?”

“No. I was just screwing with you anyway. I’m too tired to have sex.”

“Yeah, it’s ten-thirty. We should be getting to sleep.”

Brad reached over to turn the lamp off. He stopped to look out the

window.

“Brad? Is something wrong?”

“No,” Brad said, turning the lamp off. “Nothing’s wrong.”

I nodded and kissed him goodnight before I closed my eyes.

I woke up because Brad wouldn’t stop tossing and turning. He was struggling with his blankets. I untangled him and leaned in close to his ear.

“Shh, it’s all right,” I whispered. “Everything’s all right, Brad.”

“They’re chasing me,” Brad said.

At first, I thought he was awake, but when I looked at his eyes, they were closed.

“Brad?”

He didn’t respond when I said his name; he just repositioned himself and continued to sleep.

What’s chasing you? Please don’t have nightmares, Brad.

I wished I could chase his nightmares away. I wished I could be the young hero with sword in one hand and magic light in the other, chasing away the darkness that plagued his dreams. I wished I could take all of the bad dreams away.

I drew in close to his body, kissing his shoulder.

I may not be able to go into his mind and chase the nightmares away, but

I could sure lend a comforting touch.

We sat at the table on Thanksgiving day, eating turkey and other food. The conversation was mostly dead, with not much more than a ‘Can you pass the gravy?’ every so often.

I *really* wanted to say something, but I kept my silence. I had to bite my tongue a few times, but it worked.

“Dad?”

That was the first I had heard out of Brad since I had sat down.

“What is it, son?” Robert asked.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, son. Nothing’s wrong. Why?”

“I was just asking, Dad,” Brad said, sticking a piece of turkey in his mouth. “No one’s been saying much of anything.”

“There’s not much to say,” Robert said, picking up a napkin and wiping meat sauce from his chin. “I never really thought there was much to say anyway.”

I finished what little bit I had left on my plate before I stood, walking to the sink and setting my plate inside.

“I’m not feeling very well,” I said. “I’m going to go lie down.”

“All right,” Robert said. “Hope you get to feeling better, Dean.”

“Thank you for the meal, sir. I appreciate your generosity.”

The man returned his attention to the food in front of him. I walked out of the kitchen and down the hall, to the guest bedroom.

Why does he resent me so much? I stripped out of my shirt, tossing it on the bed. *Why doesn't he want to accept me?*

I ran a hand through my long, dark hair, trying to figure out why the man didn't like me. He talked to me when I asked him something, he was polite, but I couldn't figure out why the man didn't seem to keep me distant from his thoughts. Was it because I was Brad's boyfriend? Was it because I was a 'pick-up' *material* boyfriend? Was it because the man didn't like the fact that his son was gay, but had to accept it?

I walked into the bathroom, stripping out of the rest of my clothes before stepping into the shower. I turned the water on, wondering why Robert didn't want me here.

“Dean?”

I looked up and parted the curtain. Brad stood there, his shirt partially unbuttoned. It was almost as if he had been undressing to get in the shower with me, but had stopped because he wasn't sure if I was having a private moment or not.

“Yeah?” I asked. “You can get in if you want, I don't care.”

I opened the curtain and turned the showerhead in the direction of the wall so the water wouldn't get on the floor. I left it open because it felt better to

be able to see him, because I could look at him and know that he was concerned for my wellbeing.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” I said, watching him step out of his jeans.

“I know your father doesn’t like me here.”

Brad frowned.

“It’s not that he doesn’t like you, Dean, it’s just that...” Brad shook his head and pulled his underwear off, stepping into the shower.

“It’s what, Brad? Tell me.”

“My father wasn’t happy when I came out. He wanted grandchildren, I knew that. He accepted me though. He didn’t kick me out of the house, but you can see why I left.”

“Has he always been like this?”

“Always, since my mother passed away after I was born.”

I turned and looked into his eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s not much to be sorry about. I might feel more pain for my mother if I knew her, but I never knew her, so there’s not a whole lot of pain. There *is* pain though.”

“I know. I just worry about you, Brad.”

Brad kissed me, closing his eyes, turning his head up to the showerhead.

“Can I ask you something, Brad?”

“Of course you can, Dean.”

“You woke me up early this morning, at one or somewhere around there. Were you having another nightmare?”

Brad’s smile faded, but he didn’t appear angry.

“I was.”

“Something was chasing you.”

“How do you know that?”

“You were struggling with your blankets. I got you untangled, then kissed you, saying everything was all right. Then you said, ‘They’re chasing me.’ I thought you were actually talking to me. I found that you weren’t and was rather thankful.”

“I don’t remember what was chasing me. I’m sorry for waking you up, Dean.”

“Have you always had nightmares?”

Brad nodded

“The dogs...”

He stopped and shook his head.

“Dogs? Is that what you were being chased by?”

“Yeah, dogs.”

I decided to drop it. Brad would tell me about the dogs if he wanted to. All it would take is time and a little bit of confidence on his behalf.

Part 27:

Christmas Nears

- - -

I always liked Christmas. I liked it because most people were in a good mood and were into the holiday cheer. People would say, ‘Merry Christmas’ or, ‘Happy Holidays’ without a second thought.

I particularly liked Christmas because it was the first one I would be spending with Brad. When I had been living at my aunt’s house, I was never able to go see Brad and he was never able to come see me. This year would be different.

“Dean?”

I jumped as Kason said my name.

“Sorry,” Kason laughed, patting my shoulder. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Work is... Eh.” I give him a nervous smile. “Yeah.”

Kason chuckled, pushing me aside to tend to the customer that I would have just checked out.

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing a pack of gum, handing him the two dollars before tearing it open. “I appreciate it.”

“You seem a little stressed,” Kason said. He looked up at the man he had just checked out. “Oh, sorry sir. Have a nice day.”

Kason watched the guy walk off before he turned back to me.

“Something wrong?”

“Thanksgiving didn’t go so well.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, it wasn’t just me and Brad. We went up to his dad’s house. I could tell that his dad didn’t like me very much.”

“I’m sorry. I feel for you. Thankfully, I’m single, so I don’t have to worry about going to Thanksgiving.”

“You don’t go to your parent’s house for Thanksgiving?”

“My dad kicked me out of the house when I was sixteen. That was after I had gotten a girlfriend pregnant.”

I grimaced.

“You have a son?”

“Yeah. He just turned eleven not too long ago.”

“What’s his name?”

“Darryl,” Kason smiled. “I’m glad that I’m able to see him as much as I can. The girlfriend’s with another man, of course, but I can pretty much go over and see my son anytime I want.”

“It sounds complicated. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. It’s not your fault.”

“Still, if I were you, I’d hate being in that kind of situation. Sometimes I look at myself and a straight man and see that I have it so much easier.”

“Well, you have a good guy.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m looking forward to spending my first Christmas with him.”

“I’m so happy for you, Dean. You found a guy and you’ve stayed with him ever since. Brad’s a good guy for you.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Hey, you care if I come over after we get off work?”

“No. I’d like that.”

I let Kason into the apartment before closing the door behind me.

“When’s Brad going to be home?” he asked.

“He usually gets home around five,” I said, looking over at the clock.

“Just an hour left. But hey! You want to stay for dinner?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, it’d be nice to have some company. Brad likes you.”

“All right. If you’re sure.”

“It’s no trouble. Sit on the couch, watch TV. I’ll make dinner.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Hamburger helper,” I laughed. “Not much, but it’s food, right?”

Kason only grinned and left me to my cooking.

I had just finished making the hamburger helper when the door opened. I heard Brad say hi to Kason before he walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, baby.” Brad pecked my cheek. “Hope your day was good.”

“It was. What about yours?”

“You know, handyman does what handyman does, eh?” Brad took a deep breath of the kitchen air. “It smells good.”

“I tried. You ready to eat now?”

“Can I jump in the shower real quick?”

“Yeah, but doon’t be too long.”

“Five minutes,” Brad said, walking back to the dresser and pulling some clothes out before disappearing into the bathroom.

“You want yours now, or you want to wait for Brad?” I asked, turning to Kason.

"I'll wait. I'm sure you're going to wait for Brad."

"Yeah, I am. Now that I think about it, I should've waited until he got home to start making dinner."

Kason only shrugged, scooting over so I could sit on the couch.

Kason had been watching the discovery channel. *Snakes* were on it.

"You are *so* fucking lucky," I said, turning the TV off. "Brad doesn't like snakes, remember?"

"Oops." Kason glanced at the bathroom. "Thankfully he was too preoccupied with seeing how you were."

"I'm glad he's like that. I don't want him to freak out because you're watching something about snakes."

"You said something about him freaking out when you rigged the TV, right?"

"He dropped a glass bottle, it went *everywhere*. He was in a bad mood for the rest of the night."

I shook my head when the bathroom door opened. Brad was pulling a T-shirt over his head.

"Sorry I made it so early," I said, patting his damp cheek. "I just wanted it to be ready when you got home."

"That's fine. I don't care."

I walked into the kitchen, where I grabbed plates and forks for the three

of us before I pulled the tinfoil off and served the food. I walked back to the table, beginning to eat.

“How did work go?” I asked.

“Fine. Had a few teenage girls staring at me after I took my shirt off.”

“You took your shirt off? What were you doing?”

“I was helping this guy build a set of shelves. The damn house was so hot that I would’ve roasted if I hadn’t.”

I put some hamburger helper in my mouth before I could ask him something else. I could’ve asked him something along the lines of, ‘Did you enjoy the attention’ or something like that, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. I had a bad habit of saying stupid things.

“So work went fine, other than the teenager girls gawking over you?”

“Yeah. We got the shelf finished. I’m glad I’m through a handyman business, otherwise I wouldn’t be making good money.”

“Fourteen bucks an hour is good money. Twice what I make. Besides, you’re a construction worker, not a handyman.”

“Building a shelf isn’t really construction,” Brad laughed, looking up at Kason. “How about you, Kason? You and Dean still been slaving away down at the grocery store?”

“God, you have *no* idea how bad I want to quit,” Kason said. “I think Dean can vouch for me.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Funny thing. Kason went up to help this old woman and she ended up hitting him with her purse.”

“The bitch had her cell phone in there too,” Kason said. “Got me a good one in the hip.”

“You *are* ok, right?”

“I’m fine, no worries.” Kason took his plate to the sink. “I’ll get going.”

“There’s more there, Kason. You can help yourself.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll leave you two alone. I’m gonna stop by my ex’s house and see my son anyway.”

“All right. Thanks for coming over.”

“Thanks for inviting me. Bye.”

Me and Brad said goodbye when Kason went out the door. I was glad that it was just me and Brad here. Not that I didn’t like Kason, but now me and Brad could spend the rest of the evening together.

“He’s nice,” Brad said, helping himself to more of the hamburger helper. “I don’t really know a lot of your friends.”

“Kason and Kendra are the only two friends I have.”

“Soloman, Lex and Travis are my only friends. I know Kason and Kendra, but not enough to be considered friends.”

“That’s fine. Besides, all I really need is you, Brad.”

“And all I need is you, baby.”

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Part 28:

On Christmas Eve

- - -

“Come on,” I whispered. “It’s starting to get late.”

It was six o’clock on Christmas Eve, and here I was, standing in a line that didn’t seem to end. I wasn’t the only one starting to get feisty; there were people in front of me who had actually broken out in a battle over who had butted the other when obviously *neither* of them had done so.

I shook my head, holding the leather jacket close to my chest. My gift for my boyfriend wasn’t original, but it was expensive. It was red leather, like the biker’s wore on their red Harleys. Thankfully, I knew Brad liked the color red just as much as I did.

The three-hundred-dollar price tag cut out half of my check for December, but at least Brad would have something for Christmas.

Just as I thought I was going to sit in line forever, I saw a new register open. I quickly made my way over and slapped the jacket down on the counter.

“Thank you,” I said. “*So* much.”

“Not too busy, huh?” the man smiled. “You want this wrapped, sir?”

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, I’d appreciate it.”

The man scanned the item, blinking as he saw the price.

“Woah. Must be somebody special to get a three-hundred-dollar jacket.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” I said, my smile fading shortly after I realized my wording. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry, sir.”

“No sweat. Don’t worry about it. I don’t care.”

I pushed my hands into my pockets and watched the man wrap the present.

“Any extra charge on the wrapping?”

“No worries. I’ve got it covered.”

I took the box, pushing it under my arm.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Merry Christmas.”

I stopped, turning to face the man.

“Merry Christmas to you too.”

Part 29:

A Love Letter to Brad

- - -

It's been a little over two years since we've been together, Brad, and in those two years I have fallen in love with a man that could have just let me stand there in that dollar store, being as miserable as I always was. When you told me to smile, it warmed my heart, and every time I see you smile, it continues to do the same thing. I know it always will.

I've conquered demons because of you. You have no idea what I had gone through as a teenager, even though I've told you. Alcoholic parents, bullies at school, thoughts of suicide. But when you came into my life, everything got better. Our first kiss was something I'll never forget, and your touch and embrace will always remain a strong memory in my mind. Even when you're not hugging, kissing or holding me, I know what it feels like.

I hate getting all mushy, you already know that. I just want you to know that you're the world to me, Brad. You make me feel like I'm on top of the world

and I'll never be able to come down. You tell me I'm your gorgeous boyfriend, and you brag to your friends about how you've got the best guy in the world. You make me whole, Brad.

I love you. You hear that every day, but I can never stop telling you.

Love, Dean

I had to fold the piece of paper up and stick it inside the envelope before more tears could fall on it. That was the first letter I had written to him, mostly because my feelings had been expressed through phone calls, text messages or--now, more recently, since I had been living with him--talking. I had never written Brad a letter. To put all my thoughts on paper was astoundingly emotional.

"Oh, quit it," I said, wiping the tears from my eyes. "Lick the damn envelope and get home to your man."

I did just that. I licked the envelope--even though I *hated* doing it--and started the car up, driving back home.

I wished I could get my damn car fixed. Something was wrong with it, and I couldn't afford the bill to fix it. I didn't have an exact estimate, but the mechanic said that the steering was starting to get bad and the cost to fix it would be somewhere over a thousand dollars.

I couldn't afford a thousand-dollar bill right now.

I shook my head and pulled into the apartment's parking lot. I got out, stuck Brad's present under my arm, then locked the car before I walked into the apartment building.

The building was deathly quiet, especially for a Christmas night. I was more than sure that the parents had told their children that Santa Clause was coming and to get to bed, while they themselves were enjoying the peace and quiet.

I knocked on our apartment before pushed it open.

"Hey, baby," Brad said, looking up from the couch. "Sorry, I fell asleep."

Brad *looked* ready to go back to sleep. He was down in his underwear, his short hair in disarray, his forehead covered in a layer of sweat.

"It's all right," I said, holding up the present. "This is yours."

"You didn't have to do that," Brad said. He glanced at the small box that lay on the counter. "You'll like what I got you."

"I don't care if the box is big or not," I laughed, making sure the envelope wasn't going to come off Brad's present. "I wouldn't have cared if you got me a present."

"Neither would I," Brad said, gesturing me toward the couch. "You've been at the store the whole time?"

"Yeah, I went there right after I got off work. I spent an hour dorking around in the mall, then stood in the line for an hour. Thankfully, I'm sneaky and saw a new register open up before more people could steal my spot."

“You always were a sneaky one,” Brad grinned. “But if you can get home by being sneaky, then by all means do so.”

I stood and grabbed sandwich items out of the fridge.

“Will sandwiches work?” I asked, cutting up the cheese. “I’m sorry, I’m tired.”

“It’s fine,” Brad said, sitting up and running his hand through his hair. “A sandwich is good.”

I finished cutting everything up before setting the sandwiches on a plate.

“You want chips or something?” I grabbed a bag, just because I wanted one.

“Chips will be good. Thanks.”

I got a handful of chips for both of us and wrapped the bag up, smiling when Brad sat down and began eating.

“You don’t mind that I’m tired?”

“Dean, *chill*. A sandwich is just fine. It’s not like I expect you to make hamburger helper or something every night.”

“I try to make different things.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dean. As long as we have food, I’m not picky about what I eat.”

I laughed. By the time we were done, it was nearing seven o’clock. We were both dog-tired and in no mood to stay up any longer. I put the plates in the

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sink.

Tomorrow would be Christmas...

And all was well.

Part 30:

It's Watching You

- - -

The last thing I expected was to be woken up by Brad's mumbling. He hadn't been having nightmares for a good while. I thought that they had stopped for good.

"Brad?" I asked, rubbing his back. "Baby?"

I let my hand trail over a faint scar on his left shoulder, one he had never told me about, one that I had never *asked* about. He shivered as I touched him. I kissed his shoulder and drew the blankets up over us.

"Brad?" I asked again. "You ok?"

Brad rolled over.

When I looked into his eyes, I wanted to whimper.

His eyes were wide, veins running through them.

"Brad? What's wrong?"

“It’s here. It wants to hurt me, Dean.”

“What’s here? It’s ok, Brad. You had a bad dream, nothing more.”

“No, Dean, it’s here. It’s at the end of the bed.”

I looked down at the foot of the bed, trying to find whatever it was that was watching us. My heart was pounding in my chest. What was there, sitting at the end of the bed? What was tormenting him so badly?

“Brad, there’s nothing at the end of the bed.”

“Yes there is!” he screamed. “*Yes there is!*”

“Brad, baby, everything’s all right, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Dean, it’s looking at you! Don’t let it look at you, Dean!”

“Don’t let what look at me, Brad?”

“Oh God!” Brad cried. “Dean, it’s getting off the bed.”

My mind was running at ten times the normal speed it should have been. My heart was pounding so hard that I could feel it in my wrists and hear it in my ears. The look on Brad’s face was wild; his eyes were caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, his lips were curled down in fear, his skin pale as death.

“Dean! Get away from it!”

“There’s nothing here!” I said, grabbing Brad’s arms, trying to get him to look into my eyes. “There’s nothing here, Brad!”

“Get away from it!”

“Brad! There’s nothing here, baby! There’s nothing here!”

Brad screamed, throwing me away from something only he could see. I had no chance to slow myself down. I slammed into the side of the table, crying out as an incredible pain blindsided the right side of my body. I collapsed to the floor, drunk with pain. My eyes rolled back in my head. It felt like I was breathing fire.

“B-B-Brad,” I gasped. “W-W-Why?”

Brad fell to his knees and was about to reach out to me before I stopped him. He was hurt by my gesture. Tears swam over his eyes before they burst, flowing down his face.

“It was trying to get you, I had to keep you away from it.”

“There’s nothing in this apartment, Brad,” I said, grabbing his hand. “There’s nothing here that’s going to hurt us.”

“Let me help you, let me take you to the doctor.”

“And what good will that do? I have broken ribs, Brad; I already know that. If you take me to the doctor, they’ll just tell me to take some pain medication. What about when they ask what happened? You’ll make something up? Come on, Brad; doctors aren’t stupid. They’ll take one look at the two of us, call the police and have you taken in for domestic violence.”

Brad turned his head down, hiding his face. I tightened my grip on his hand.

“I’ll be fine. I’m tough.”

“I know you are. But... but Dean, *I* hurt you. I said I would never hurt

you... I hurt you. How can I ever forgive myself?"

"You didn't mean to hurt me. But, Brad, I want you to listen to what I have to say, and I don't want you to be mad or angry at me. I just want you to listen to me, all right?"

"Yeah, baby What is it?"

"There's something wrong with you, there's nothing wrong with that. You're my boyfriend, and I'm worried about you. There's something wrong, Brad, something *very* wrong. You're having nightmares, but you're hearing and seeing things too. You need to go to the doctor."

"But baby..."

"But nothing, Brad. Something's wrong inside your head."

"I'm not crazy!" Brad cried.

"I never said you were crazy. Don't be mad at me, Brad."

"I'm not mad; I'm hurt! How can you say something like that?"

"Brad, you have a little problem that you need to have looked at, that's all. I went to the doctor for some mild depression while we were dating. I had a problem and had it looked at. You're strong, I know you can do it."

Brad wiped more tears from his eyes.

"I want to get you in bed," he said. "I want to help you."

"You can pick me up, but please, be careful."

Brad slid his arm under mine, snaking his hand across my back and

resting it in the dust of hair under my arm. He then slid his other arm under my knees and lifted me up. I cried out, but the pain was short-lived as he set me on the bed.

“I’ll get some Aspirin.”

I lay there, trying to chase away the pain with thoughts that Brad would get help. After this little episode, I *knew* something was wrong inside his head. I didn’t have a lot of knowledge on mental illnesses, but I knew Brad had something wrong with him. He was perfectly fine as a person, but he had nightmares and saw and heard things; that was what I was worried about.

“Here, baby,” Brad said, drawing me out of my thoughts. “Take this.”

I grabbed the pill, accepting Brad’s help as he held the glass of water for me to drink. I gestured the water away when I was done.

“Thanks,” I said, watching him walk over in the direction of the couch.

“Where are you...”

“I don’t want to hurt you. I’m gonna sleep on the couch.”

“No, Brad. Come sleep on the bed.”

“Baby, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“*Please*. Please, Brad, come sleep with me. I don’t want to be alone in the bed.”

Brad shook his head, throwing the blankets over the both of us.

“I love you so much, baby,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “You know

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that, right?”

“I know. I love you too.”

Brad lay his head on the pillow. He closed his eyes, and before he could even begin drifting off to sleep, I laced our fingers together.

A smile passed over his lips.

Part 31:

Healing Christmas

- - -

The next morning, I opened my eyes and heard the shower running. I was about to throw my legs over the bed before I felt a burning pain in my side. I cried out, closing my eyes.

He threw you into the table. Not intentionally, of course. He was trying to keep whatever it was he saw from getting you.

I carefully moved off the bed before running a hand through my hair, straightening it out as best as I could.

“Brad!” I called. “Can you come out here?”

The shower stopped and Brad came out, wrapping a towel around his waist.

“You ok, baby?”

“Can you help me shower?”

“Yeah, I can. Come on.”

I took his hand and carefully stood up. I grimaced, taking careful steps. When I found my bearings, I let go of his hand and was able to walk just fine by myself.

“You want help undressing?” Brad asked.

“I can undress.”

I grimaced as I pulled off my shirt, and just when I did, Brad fell on his knees and started kissing my bruised side. The dark mark was more than obvious. His kisses weren’t painful.

“Brad, don’t.”

“A kiss to make it better,” he said, looking up at me. “And to give my apologies.”

“I already accepted it,” I said, pulling my pants and underwear off. “You don’t need to worry about it, Brad.”

“I *hurt* you. I *hurt* you Dean.”

I looked down at him, placing my hand on his cheek.

“You’re only hurting me more by being on your knees. Get up, Brad. We need to shower.”

Even though I tried to get Brad to stop babying me, he refused. After we showered, he heated up some breakfast rolls for the two of us. We ate before he

gave me my Christmas present.

“Thank you,” I said, carefully peeling the paper off. “I said you didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I know,” Brad said. “I wanted too though.”

When I opened the box, I was shocked to see a set of earrings.

“Wow,” I said, picking one of the studs up. “What are these?”

“Onyxes. Fine-quality onyx at that.”

“How much did it cost?”

“Not telling,” Brad grinned. “They weren’t too much, Dean. Not more than anything you got me.”

I reached up, feeling that the piercing was still in my right ear. I undid the snap and pushed it into my ear, smiling, leaving the second onyx in its case.

“Only got one pierced,” I said, lying down. “Does it look ok?”

“Looks gorgeous, babe. Glad you like them.”

“Go get yours. I’d get it for you, but…”

“Don’t finish. I’ll get it.”

Brad walked the short distance to the kitchen, where he grabbed his box. When he could only stare at me, I ended up gesturing him to open the box.

“Dean,” Brad said, pulling the red leather out of the box. “How much did this cost.”

“Not more than what you got me.”

Brad chuckled.

“You’re a jackass, Dean.”

“I know. But don’t worry, it wasn’t too much.”

“I love it, baby. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “All I would’ve wanted was to be here with you, and you got me these earrings.”

“Same with me. You got me the jacket.”

I kissed him, watching Brad set the Christmas stuff on the table. I wanted so badly to embrace him, to tell him that everything was going to be ok.

“You cold?” Brad asked. “I ask because you’re only wearing your underwear.”

“I’m fine. Are you cold?”

“Just a little.” Brad flicked the thermostat up. “It gets cold here in the winter.”

“Yeah, I know.” I took a deep breath. “Brad... We need to talk about last night.”

Brad didn’t look at me. Instead, he closed his eyes.

“Yeah, I know.”

I wanted to be able to talk about this in manner as friendly as we could. I didn’t want to upset myself, but I most definitely didn’t want to upset him. I

wanted to get this conversation over with as soon as I could.

Brad sat on the bed. He broke a small smile, though I could tell that it was hard for him to do so. He reached out and gripped my hand.

“I know we need to talk about it,” Brad said. “I *want* to talk about it.”

I sat up. I was able to keep from crying out as I adjusted my seating position. As soon as I was leaning against the headrest, I gave him a small, encouraging nod.

“I know you may not know what your nightmares are about,” I began, “but I need you to try and tell me what they’re about.”

“I can’t explain them,” Brad said. “They’re... They’re jumbled, Dean.”

“Try. Try to tell me about them.”

“What do you want to know?”

The question left me dumbfounded. What was I supposed to ask?

Now you wish you would’ve taken Psychology in that one and only year of high school. Maybe then you might be able to make some sense of it.

“The snakes. What do you know about them?”

“I’ve never liked snakes,” Brad said, placing his hands on his knees. “Not since high school.”

“What happened in high school?”

“One of my friends--not Soul or Lex or Travis, I didn’t know them--snuck a boa into my backpack.”

I shivered.

“A boa? Why would they do that?”

“As a joke. It was supposed to be funny, but I’ve never liked snakes at all. The snake in the backpack trick *worked*. I ended up taking it home with me.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I was *supposed* to be doing geometry homework, but, well... I found a few DVDs on the side of the street. Turned out it was man on man action. I had just came and decided that I *had* to get my homework done, right? So, I cleaned myself off, hid the DVDs, and went to open the backpack. I *did* open it, but I got a little more than I expected.”

“What happened to the snake?”

“It got out of the bag. I was too scared to tell my dad that there was a snake in the bag. I was afraid he’d call me a stupid fuck or something along those lines.”

“Your dad called you a stupid fuck?”

“Only when I was stupid, or when he *thought* I was being stupid. Anyway, the snake stayed in the house... In my room.”

“And you never tried to get it out of your room?”

“I was too scared. I started having nightmares of snakes after that. I’ve always dreamed of them being all over the floor, biting my ankles, swallowing me whole. ‘Cept the snakes in my dreams aren’t real, they’re shadows, like all of

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it is.”

“And what you saw last night. Was that a shadow?”

“I...” Brad looked up, confusion in his eyes. “I-I don’t know, Dean. I don’t know what any of it is.”

When he started crying, I embraced him, letting him cry into my shoulder.

“It’s all right,” I said, stroking his hair. “I’m going to get you the help you need.”

Part 32:

Phone Calls

- - -

A week later, I was able to walk better. I hadn't been called about my job at all. Since it was the new year, I assumed they were going easy on me because I hadn't missed a day. Maybe they thought I had the flu or something.

The phone rang while I was standing in the kitchen, eating a piece of cheese. I picked it up and pressed it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"God, Dean. Where the hell have you been?"

It was Kason.

"I broke some rib. I haven't been able to come in to work."

"Broke some ribs? Dean, what happened?"

"Fell down the stairs," I lied. "Hit a desk somebody had left on the front floor."

“Ouch. Sorry to hear that, buddy.”

“I’m all right,” I said. “I can’t come into work for a while though.”

“All right. I’ll let you go, Dean. I was just calling in to check in on you.”

“Thanks, Kason. Bye.”

With that, I shut the phone off.

I was going to be out of work for a good while.

I flipped through the phone book, trying to find a good doctor on mental illnesses. I had picked a good time to do it too, because Brad was asleep on the couch.

God I hope I can get him some help.

I was about to turn the page before I caught something. The name Doctor Robert Lee practically leapt off the page. It had drawn my attention so much that it could’ve bit me.

Under the man’s name, the words *Mental Illness Specialist* were in clear, bold letters.

“Doctor Robert Lee,” I said, dialing the number to the nearby hospital.

“You’re the man that’s going to look at my boyfriend.”

I waited a few moments before the phone picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, may I speak to Doctor Robert Stan Lee, please?”

“Doctor Lee only talks to people who may be considering bringing

themselves or someone else in.”

“I *am* going to bring someone in. I’ll schedule an appointment right now if it’s needed.”

“Sir, you don’t have to be so rude, I…”

“Let me talk to the damn doctor!”

The line went silent for a minute before music started playing. I sat down, grimacing. I usually wasn’t rude to people, but I needed to talk to the doctor.

“Hello?”

The man’s deep voice startled me, but I quickly regained my composure.

“Hello, Dr. Lee. My name is Dean McAllen.”

“Hello, Dean. How can I help you today?”

“I’m looking to bring my boyfriend in to see you.”

“Oh? What seems to be the problem?”

“Well, sir, he… He has terrible nightmares. I wake up and hear him talking to someone that’s not me. It was only last night that he mentioned something sitting at the end of the bed.”

“You want to evaluate him for a mental illness?”

“If it wouldn’t be any trouble, sir. He got pretty scared the night before Christmas. I had to scream to keep him from doing something crazy. He pushed me out of the way because he thought something was going to hurt me.”

“Were you injured, Mr. McAllen?”

“No, sir, I wasn’t.” I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling ever more guilty about lying. “I’m all right.”

“What’s the patient’s name?”

“His name’s Brad Michelson. Can you see us today, sir?”

“I think it would be best if I saw him sooner rather than later. Can you come in right now?”

“It’s only noon, right, sir?”

“Yes, Mr. McAllen; it’s only noon.”

“All right, sir. I’ll be there in an hour.”

I hung up, looking over at Brad. I didn’t want to take him to the doctor, but I *had* to. One of us was going to get hurt if he didn’t get medical attention.

I stood, walked over to Brad, and shook his shoulder.

“Brad. Wake up, baby.”

“Dean? What’s wrong?”

“I’m taking you to the doctor.”

Part 33:

Meeting Doctor Lee

- - -

We were sitting in a small doctor's office. Brad was seated next to me, and although he was doing his best to hide it, his fear clearly showed through that mask he was trying, but failing, to put up. I had tried to reach out and hold his hand, but every time I did, he drew it away. When I pulled my hand back, he would sit his hand back down.

Brad was distant. I hated it.

"Brad, you don't have to worry about anything."

"I'm not worried. Do I look worried?"

"Yes."

He sighed, offering me his hand.

"This doctor isn't going to be mean to you, Brad." I kissed his knuckles.

"The doctor's going to help you, Brad."

Brad looked up as the door opened.

“Hello, gentlemen,” a tall man with a clean-shaven face and glasses said.

“I’m doctor Lee.”

I stood, shaking the man’s hand.

“Thank you for seeing us, sir. I’m Dean McAllen, the man you spoke to on the phone.”

“So, this must be Mr. Michelson,” Doctor Lee said, smiling, shaking Brad’s hand. “Are you nervous, sir?”

“A little,” Brad said. “But I need to find out what’s wrong with me.”

Doctor Lee pulled out a clipboard, sitting in a chair and rolling himself in front of us.

“Before I run any tests, I want to know a little about your genealogy. Can I start with your parents? Do they have any mental illnesses?”

“My father didn’t,” Brad said, frowning when Doctor Lee started scribbling notes on the clipboard. “I wouldn’t know about my mother. She passed away after I was born.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You have any siblings?”

“A brother, but he’s no longer alive. He passed away when he was a small child.”

He never told me this. I tightened my grip on his hand.

“I’m sorry for your losses,” the doctor said, pushing his glasses up his

face. “When did you first have these problems?”

“It started when I went through puberty, when I was twelve.”

“Your boyfriend said that you have nightmares. Can you tell me about them?”

“No, sir. I don’t know anything about my dreams.”

“Can you describe your dreams to me, Brad?”

“Dark, creepy, stuff that would probably drive a normal man mad,” Brad said, popping his knuckles. “Is it necessary to go into my dreams, sir?”

“Yes, as much as you can.”

Brad told Doctor Lee about the snakes and the dogs. It was all over fairly quickly.

“What about the thing you saw at the end of your bed? What was it?”

Brad was silent. I looked up at the doctor and saw his calm, reassuring look. I tightened my grip on Brad’s hand, but he didn’t do anything.

“Brad,” I said, “you need to tell the doctor what you saw.”

“Yes, Mr. Michelson. You need to.”

“You’ll think I’m crazy,” Brad said.

“No.” The doctor set a hand on Brad’s shoulder. “I won’t.”

“I don’t know what I saw, sir. It was something that looked like a cat, but it wasn’t a cat. It had a long head and had spikes running down its back. It had armor over its body, and a whip-like tail.”

“Was this the creature that caused you to push Mr. McAllen for fear of his safety?”

Brad’s head whipped around. His eyes showed the same kind of panic they had on Christmas Eve. He stared at me for several seconds before nodding.

“Yes, sir,” Brad said. “That was the creature that made me fear for my boyfriend’s safety.”

The doctor stood, stretching his legs.

“I want to start running the tests,” Doctor Lee said. “Mr. Michelson, could you take your shirt off and hop up onto this table?”

Brad slid out of the leather jacket, then pulled his shirt over his head before jumping up on the counter. He grimaced when the doctor placed a stethoscope on his chest.

“Mr. McAllen, this will take a few hours,” Doctor Lee said, looking back up at me. “Would you like to go home?”

I looked over at Brad.

“Do you need me here?” I asked, taking his hand.

“No, babe. Go home, get some rest. I’ll call when I’m done.”

I kissed his cheek.

“I love you.”

“Love you too, Dean.”

I walked out of the room. Before I took my last turn down the hall, I

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looked back into the room and gave Brad a small wave goodbye.

Part 34:

Kendra's Condolences

- - -

"Kendra?" I asked, the cell phone close to my ear. "You there?"

"Dean? What's wrong? You didn't even let me say hello."

"Brad's undergoing mental evaluation."

"Oh God! Dean, what happened?"

"He's not in a nuthouse or anything, do don't worry about that."

Her sigh was more than obvious.

"What happened?"

"He saw something on Christmas. He pushed me away from whatever it was, but I ran into a table and broke a few ribs."

"Dean!"

"What? I just can't go to the hospital! They'd put him in jail for domestic violence. I love Brad too much to do that."

“I’m coming over.”

“You know where I live, right?”

“Yeah,” Kendra said. “I do.”

She hung up without saying goodbye, but at that moment, I didn’t care. I was just glad that she was coming over.

I was just about to doze off before there was a knock at the door. I knew it was Kendra; she had been on my mind for the whole half hour I was waiting for her.

She’s the poser child for driving slow during the winter, I thought, grinning. She was probably the slowest person driving in Denver today.

“Dean! Open up!”

“I’m coming!” I said, opening the door. “You need to start driving faster.”

“I’m sure getting stuck in a lake or getting in a car crash would really get me over faster, huh?” she said, tossing her purse on the table. “So, what’s going on?”

“I told you over the phone.”

“You said Brad was having some tests done on him for some mental illness.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“His nightmares have gotten that bad?”

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“I thought he was asleep all the times he was talking to himself. Or, you know, just muttering. I didn’t know he was talking to somebody. Wait, not somebody, *something*.”

“When’s he supposed to be getting home?”

“I don’t know. The doctor said it’d be a few hours. It kills me to imagine Brad going through hours worth of tests, but he has to get help.”

“Are you ok? I mean, your ribs?”

“They hurt, but it’s nothing I can’t deal with. I’ve dealt with pain before.”

“I’m sure you have, but are you *sure* you’re ok?”

“Kendra, I have scars on my back from staph infection. Ask Brad. I’ve dealt with pain before. I mean, at least the ribs will heal in a month. I had some *really* bad staph infection that lasted for months.”

Kendra kept her peace. I was glad that she was so concerned about me, but I didn’t like it when people tried to baby me; it made me feel uncomfortable, like I needed someone to lean on for support. I had *never* leaned on anyone; it hadn’t worked out in the past, so why start now?

“You hungry?” I asked. “I can make something.”

“No, Dean. Go lay down. You don’t look so good.”

I thought of Brad and felt the first tear roll down my face.

“I wish I could make it all go away,” I said. “All the bad stuff he’s going through.”

“I know. But honey, you can’t do that.”

“It just hurts!” I sobbed. “I knew something was wrong when I was sixteen! I knew something was wrong and I didn’t do anything for Christ’s sake!”

“Dean, calm down.”

I didn’t let my emotions stay inside of me. I cried. Deep down, I knew Kendra wouldn’t think I was less of a man by crying; she wasn’t that kind of person. That brought me *some* comfort, at least.

“It just hurts so bad, Kendra. The man I love might have something that I can’t help get rid of.”

“But you helped him get the help he needs. That’s enough, right?”

I accepted the hug she gave me.

“I’m going to go lie down,” I said. “Wake me up when he calls.”

I walked to the bed, kicking my shoes off before I covered up.

“Thanks, Kendra. I appreciate it.”

I dozed off.

Part 35:

Waking Up

- - -

I woke up to two people talking.

I opened my eyes, where saw Brad and Kendra sitting at the table.

Shit! That bitch didn't wake me up...

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Kendra looked over after I spoke.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I thought you wanted to sleep.”

“I wanted to go get my boyfriend myself,” I said. “I wanted to...”

“Dean,” Brad said, cutting me off. “Tell her thank you.”

“Brad...”

“Don’t ‘Brad’ me, Dean. Tell her thank you.”

I sighed and nodded.

“Thank you, Kendra,” I said, wrapping my arms around Brad as he stood.

“I appreciate it.”

“It’s ok. We stopped at a burger place on the way back. There’s stuff in there for you two to eat.”

“I’ll pay you back.” I reached for my wallet.

“Don’t. It’s fine, Dean.”

“Are you sure? I can pay you back, Kendra.”

“I’m sure. Everything’s going to be all right, guys. Bye.”

“Thanks for picking me up, Kendra,” Brad said, giving her a hug. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble. Everything’ll be fine, Brad.”

Kendra patted Brad’s cheek before picking up her purse and walking out the door. I stared at Brad for a moment before leaning up to kiss him.

“I’m sorry,” I said, hugging him. “I love you, Brad.”

“What are you sorry for?” Brad asked, gently pushing me away so he could look into my eyes.

“The doctor. I thought it would upset you.”

“I’m a little upset, but I’m all right, Dean. I feel better now that I’m back home with you.”

I tightened my grip around him before I broke our embrace, grabbing the bag of hamburgers, pulling one out for each of us.

"I bet you're hungry," I said.

"A little," Brad said, unwrapping the foil from around his burger and taking a bite. "Your face is red."

"I was crying before I fell asleep. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if I was crying in my sleep."

"I'm sorry. I don't like to make you worry."

"I know. I worry because I love you."

"And I worry because I love you," Brad said, his gray eyes showing that calm peace that could wash away any storm. "You woke me up, Dean."

"I woke you up?"

"Yeah," Brad said, setting his hamburger down. "I was asleep, Dean. I've been asleep for a long time. My problem's been an ongoing problem. When I met you, I woke up. I've fallen asleep a few times, but you keep me awake. Now, though, I think I'm going to wake up and *stay* awake."

I could understand what he was saying. I had felt the same way in the past. Shutting yourself away from people, retracting, curling up in your shell, pulling the curtains to be in the dark; all of that was part of life. Some people had it worse than others. I had it really bad when I was younger, but being with Brad changed all of that. Every single day, hour, minute, second and everything beyond that was so, so precious. "I woke up when I met you," I said. "I've told you how miserable I was until I came out here to live with my aunt. When you told me to smile, it seemed like something inside of me had woken up."

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“You still remember that?”

“Of course I remember it. You were the first and only guy that had ever showed me any sympathy for the situation I was in.”

“When I saw you standing behind that register, I saw a young man who was sad. So, I did what was natural; I told you to smile. I fell in love with your smile, Dean. When you’re not smiling, you’re a blank slate, an empty person, if you know what I mean. But when you *are* smiling, Dean, people... They notice that.”

Brad *always* knew how to make me feel better. He could draw me out of any bad mood I was in; he could hug me and chase away the darkness; and, most importantly, his voice was what lit the fire of my soul and being.

“Waking up,” I said. “I think you put our situations in the perfect light, Brad.”

Part 36:

The Waiting Game

- - -

I had always been good at waiting for things. I had waited for the longest time to get out of Idaho; I had waited to get out of school; I had waited to do so many things. People could call me impatient, they could say, ‘It’ll come, in time,’ but they would never know the things I waited for. Someone could pass me on the street and think, ‘Why is he in such a hurry, what’s he waiting for?’ but they would never know that I was patient.

I was a patient person...

Except when it came to the man I loved.

It had been a week since Brad had gone to see Doctor Lee. I told him that everything was going to be all right, that everything was going to be fine. He didn’t like it when I said that. He got all emotional and say things like, ‘How would you feel if I said that to you?’

The truth was that I *didn’t* know how I would feel. I *would* probably be

upset.

Brad was washing the dishes. His shirt was off, as it always was. He had told me that he hated doing the dishes with a shirt on because he *always* got water on him.

“Brad? You want me to do those?”

“It’s my turn,” he said, not even bothering to look back at me.

“I know,” I said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “But I’ll do them.”

Brad stopped scrubbing the dish he was working on to look at me. I could see the weary person through his eyes. I was always able to tell what kind of mood Brad was in just by his eyes. They didn’t link directly to his soul, but they weren’t a mirror, by any means.

“Would you?” Brad finally asked. “Would you do them, Dean?”

“Of course. I know you’re not feeling good.”

Brad washed his hands, wiping them off on the shorts he was wearing before he started walking toward the bed. He stopped.

“Thanks, Dean.”

“It’s ok, Brad. You don’t have to hide how you feel around me.”

“I don’t,” Brad said. “Do I?”

“You want to cry,” I said, sitting down on the bed beside him.

I accepted him as he fell into my embrace. He buried his head in the crook between my neck and cried. Hot tears made rivers down my neck before

flowing down under my shirt. I held and rocked him back and forth, trying to bring him as much comfort as I could.

“I love you,” I whispered. “So much, Brad.”

“I know you do. You’ve stuck with me all the way. My other boyfriends haven’t. They dumped me as soon as I called them in the middle of the night, asking to talk to them. They never listened to me like you did.”

I kissed his neck, closing my eyes.

“We’re going to get the answer soon. I promise you that.”

After I had calmed him down, Brad had walked into the bathroom and had got in the shower. I waited for five minutes to see if he would call out and ask me to join him, but he never did. I leaned against the door with my arms crossed over my chest, trying to resist the urge to get in the shower with him.

He might want a moment to himself. Everyone needs time alone, right?

Everyone *did* need time to think out their own problems without the presence of another person. Brad was hurting; I wanted to reach out to him.

I knocked on the door.

“Brad? Can I come in?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

I pushed the door open and closed it behind me, not wanting the steam to set off a fire alarm. I sat down on the closet toilet seat, setting my hands on my

knees.

“I’m sorry you have to go through this, Brad.”

Brad pushed the shower curtain open so I could see him. His naked body gleamed, the drops of water catching the light.

“It’s ok,” Brad said, trying to force a smile, but accomplishing little. “I just have to wait, Dean; we play that game.”

I turned my head down, letting my dark hair hide my face. I felt extremely guilty, like I was the cause of all the pain he was feeling. I wasn’t sure if Brad knew how I was felt, but I was sure he picked up on some things.

“Come shower with me,” Brad said.

I undressed, stepping into the shower with him. Brad took me in his arms and held me close. I let him rock me back and forth, resting my head on his chest. I wrapped my fingers together behind his back and let my balled fists rest on the curve of his lower back.

“You hold me together,” Brad said. “You know that, right?”

“You’re a solid man. You’ve always been solid.”

“But when I’m upset, I start to break. Before you were sleeping with me, when I had nightmares, I cried. I cried until I couldn’t cry anymore and then I called you, Dean. Those phone calls were one of the few things that held me together when I was away from you.”

“Brad, I don’t know what to say. I try to make you happy, Brad. I try to

be a good boyfriend.”

“You *are* a good boyfriend,” Brad said, letting one hand rest on the back of my head. “You don’t judge, you’re still with me. God, Dean; I’ve told you how the other guys I dated dumped me because they thought I was some kind of freak.”

“But you’re not a freak, Brad.”

“No, not a freak. Just someone who needs a little help, that’s all.”

Brad kissed my forehead, holding my head in that position for several minutes before he pulled away.

Holding him was something I could do to make the demons go away.

That night, we ate a small dinner and went to bed almost immediately after. I had brushed my teeth and stripped down to my underwear before I adjusted on the bed, waiting until Brad got out of the bathroom. Soon after he came out, he turned off the kitchen light, wrapping his arms around me.

“Your ribs feeling better?” Brad asked.

“It’s been half a month. They’ll be fully healed in another two weeks or so.”

“I’m sorry that happened.”

“It’s all right. You were protecting me.”

“A boyfriend isn’t supposed to protect a boyfriend and get him hurt. A

real boyfriend wouldn't do that."

I pushed his arms away from me and sat up.

"Baby, what are you..."

I slapped him. He stared at me in shock for a moment before rubbing his cheek.

"What was that for?"

"You *are* a real boyfriend," I said, standing. "You're *my* boyfriend!"

"Dean," Brad said, opening his arms to me. "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be saying sorry," I said, placing my hand on my forehead.

"You shouldn't be cutting yourself down like that."

"I'm sorry, baby; I won't do it anymore."

"You know why I don't like it when you do that?"

"N-No."

"It's because I used to be like that, Brad. It's because I used to sit in my room back in Idaho and believe I was the cause of every problem around me. I used to think that my dad would come home drunk because of me; I used to think my mom wouldn't leave the house because of me; I used to think that I didn't have friends back there because of some kind of problem I had. I don't like to see that in you, Brad, because... Because it hurts."

"I'm sorry," he said, tears coming to his eyes. "I don't like to make you feel bad."

I stepped forward, kissing the cheek that I had slapped before setting my hand on it.

“Let’s just get to bed.”

Brad let me settle into the bed first. He gave me the side by the wall. He kept the open side because it had always been like that.

“Night,” I said.

“Night.”

The next morning, I woke up to the phone, careful to look on the caller ID before I answered it.

It was Doctor Lee’s office.

“Hello?” I asked, placing the cordless phone to my ear.

“Mr. McAllen,” Doctor Lee said. “I’m glad you’re there to get this call. Is Mr. Michelson up?”

“He’s in the shower. Why?”

“The news, Mr. McAllen... It’s not so great.”

I gripped the cupboard for support as I took even, controlled breaths. My mind was running at a million miles an hour. What was wrong? Did the tests come back bad? What did Brad have?

“Mr. McAllen. Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Mr. McAllen, I know this is going to be terrible news for you and Mr. Michelson, but I need to pass this along.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Your boyfriend has schizophrenia. The brain patterns from his scans and the way he reacted to questions about his nightmares, what he sees and hears... It all points to schizophrenia.”

Tears burnt down my cheeks

“Will you tell him?” I asked. “It’d break my heart to tell him, sir.”

“I’ll tell him. Is he almost out of the shower?”

“Yeah.” The door opened. “He’s done.”

Brad looked at me. At first, he was confused and concerned. He tried to ask what was wrong. When I gave him the phone, he said, ‘Hello?’ and stood there, listening to Doctor Lee. I knew when the doctor said he had schizophrenia when the color drained out of Brad’s face.

“T-T-Thank you, s-s-sir,” Brad stuttered, tears flowing down his face. “I’ll get the prescription today.”

Brad ended the call and tossed the phone on the bed. He looked at me for a moment before hugging me, crying into my neck.

“It’s ok. Everything’s going to be all right.”

In the back of my mind, I *knew* an old inner demon had surfaced.

It intended to make my life as miserable as it possibly could.

Part 37:

Prescription

- - -

Brad cried for a half hour. I had held him the whole time. I didn't think he was any less of a man for crying, because I couldn't imagine the unbearable agony that was ripping at his heart right now. Agony had ripped through his chest and had gotten to his heart, where it was now slowly clawing and gnawing at it like some wild animal.

"Dean," Brad said, his face red and hot with tears. "It's gonna be ok, right?"

"Yeah. We know what's wrong now, and that's all we've ever wanted. Now we can start getting rid of the bad dreams and the things that haunt you."

Brad stood, grabbing his underwear off of the end of the bed and pulling them up his legs. He sat back down and looked up at me. I knew he was trying to find some form of happiness in me.

"I love you," I said, giving him my hand.

"I love you too. Thank you for being here for me, Dean."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm here because I love you."

"You gonna come with me to pick my prescription up?" Brad asked, standing.

"No," I said. "You're going to come with me."

I thanked the receptionist one more time before I walked out of the grocery store. I waved to Brad, who was parked a short ways off. He pulled the car up to the curb, where I walked around and crawled into the passenger's seat.

"Take one pill twice a day, in the morning and at night," I read, setting the bag down between us. "That's easy enough."

"What's the drug called?"

I picked up the bag and looked for the name until I found the drug.

"Stelazine," I said. "Why'd you ask that?"

"I was just curious. I was going to go running. You want me to drop you off at the apartment?"

"Where do you run?"

"Down the wood trail," Brad shrugged. "I don't see you go to the gym or anything, so I was wondering how you stayed fit."

"Little exercises," I laughed. "I went to the gym a lot before I moved in with you. I'm not saying that you turned me off to working out, it's just that I

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don't want to waste gas driving back and forth to the gym."

"We'll go together. I usually go before you get up on Saturday."

"I knew you got up, but I've fallen asleep before asking where you were going. I think you mentioned the gym a few times."

"Yeah. I've always gotten up early, ever since I was a teenager," Brad laughed. "That's just me. The nightmares kept me up too. Finally, I decided that I'd get up earlier. See, if you get up early, you fall asleep quicker because you're more tired. I did that, then I'd wake up at five-thirty, even though school didn't start until eight. See my point?"

I nodded, sliding my hand down to the bag.

Knowing that Brad had medication made me feel *a lot* better.

Part 38:

The Woods

- - -

I had always liked nature, and I was glad Brad offered to take me jogging with him. He pulled into a parking space and got out of the car, leaving the door open.

“Might as well just leave your shirt here,” Brad said. “No use in them getting sweaty, right?”

I shrugged and pulled my shirt off, revealing my white skin to sun that it rarely saw. My slim, v-shaped torso made me stand out when I was with Brad, who had well-defined muscles, while I was simply toned. I didn’t care though; I wasn’t a guy who was vain enough to care about how much muscle they had.

“I think you’ll like this trail,” Brad said, locking the car, shoving the keys into his pocket. “I’ve always liked it.”

“I didn’t know this was even out here.”

“We’re a little ways out of Denver. The trail goes out a fair ways, then

curls around, leading into another trail that stops closer to Denver than where we are. I usually just go halfway and turn around.”

“Better than nothing,” I shrugged. “How come you don’t go the whole way?”

“Tried,” Brad said. “Snakes.”

“Kind of surprising that the weather’s so good, huh?” I asked, leading the conversation in a different, safe direction. “It’s usually *freezing* in Denver in January.”

“Yeah. Weird, huh?”

I kept my pace with him. It *was* weird that Denver was so warm. It was like a few years back, when the whole global warming thing had messed with the temperatures. I guessed this was the same thing. I wasn’t bothered by the climate change, since it let me bond with Brad a little more. I was actually thankful for the weather, because I knew Brad enjoyed being out in the open, being *free*.

“Hey, Dean. Come on!”

I blinked, realizing that I had stopped jogging. I ran up to Brad.

“You ok?” he asked, slapping my shoulder.

“Got distracted. You know I have a bad habit of thinking.”

“You sure are cute when you do it though.” Brad tapped the end of my nose before kissing me. “I’m surprised your ribs aren’t burning up.”

“Me too. I guess it’s because I’ve taken it easy.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Brad said. “Let’s keep going.”

We jogged up to the halfway mark before we took a break. I sat on the bench while Brad drank from a nearby water fountain.

“It’s cold,” Brad said, revealing a wet chin.

I took my drink and backed away so Brad could finish up. He splashed water on his face before shaking it off like some wet dog.

“Sorry,” Brad grinned, running a hand through his sweaty hair. “Did you want to stay here for a few more minutes or start heading back?”

“I guess we should head back The sun’s starting to get a little high. I don’t want to bake.”

“Neither do I,” Brad said. “I bet you’d look hot with a tan though.”

“You think so?” I asked, wrapping my arm around his waist.

“I think you would.” Brad closed his eyes. “Yeah, you’d *definitely* look hot, although you’re hot just as you are.”

Part 39:

Pills

- - -

Brad was looking at one of his pills. He held it like it was some kind of disease, something untouchable, made from a group of people that wanted to hurt him. I watched, trying not to push him into anything.

“You ok, Brad?”

“Fine,” he said, filling a glass of water up. “Just thinking.”

I set my hands on the table, lacing my fingers together. I watched Brad stare at his pill for another moment before he put it in his mouth.

“What will this do to me?” Brad asked, looking back up at me.

“I read the side-affects. When we were driving home earlier, from the jogging. It might make you sick the first little while, but it’ll make you feel better.”

“Sick how?”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Headaches, maybe a few stomachaches here and there. Just don’t drive anywhere without knowing what it’ll do to you.”

“Will you drive me to work tomorrow?” Brad asked.

“Yeah, I will.”

Brad lifted up his prescription bottle, shaking the pills around.

“Looks like I’m going to be normal for once,” Brad laughed. “For the first time in my life.”

“You were always normal,” I said. “And you always will be.”

Part 40:

Work

- - -

I dropped him off at work the next day, and after that I drove to my work.

I walked into the grocery store and waved at Kason.

“It’s good to see you, man,” Kason said, slapping my shoulder. “You feeling better?”

“*Much* better,” I grinned. “Did you get my text?”

“About the doctor visit? I lost my cell phone and found it just this morning, otherwise I would’ve called you.”

“Brad is schizophrenic.”

“God, Dean, I’m sorry.” Kason wrapped me in a hug.

“Thank you. Your friendship means a lot to me, Kason. You’re the only friend I can talk to about Brad on a guy-to-guy level. Kendra might understand, because she was a man a few years ago, but I’d rather talk with you.”

“I understand,” Kason said, rubbing my shoulder blades. “Are you sure you’re up for working today?”

“Not really. But if I can be here at work with you, it’d make me feel better.”

“All right. Put on your work uniform. You can check the people out; I’ll do all the bagging.”

Work wasn’t hard with Kason helping. We had gotten dirty looks from the boss, but the man had left us alone. The boss knew that I had broken my ribs, and Kason’s glares were enough to send the man back into his office.

“You care if I come back to your house?” I asked while walked out of the building.

“You want to?” Kason asked. “It’s just an apartment, but...”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, I’d love some company. I have to pick up my little boy though. He gets to come over for a few days.”

“I can go home. I don’t want to intrude on time you could spend with your son.”

“Dean, it’s *fine*,” Kason said, stressing the last word. “Just follow me. The ex doesn’t live too far away from my apartment building.”

I got in my car, chasing Kason out of the parking lot. I followed him for

ten minutes until he stopped at a nearby house. I pulled in behind him, waiting for him to go pick up his son.

My thoughts wandered to Brad and how he was handling the pressure at work.

Be safe, Brad. Be safe.

*

Brad had been sitting in the boss' office for a half hour. The man had *never* made him wait this long for anything. He drummed his fingers on the leather armrest, trying to ignore how time had *really* passed.

What's taking him so long?

Finally, the door opened.

"Sir?" Brad asked. "What's wrong?"

"Well, I went over your medical transport that Doctor Lee sent me," the man said, interlacing his fingers.

"Why did you go over them, sir?"

"Because, Brad; I have to know what I'm dealing with. Since you're diagnosed with a mental illness, I'm not sure if you'd be able to keep working like you have."

"I'm no different from before. I'm gonna be better, sir."

"No, Brad; it's not that simple. I'm worried about you; I want what's best for your health."

Brad sat there, fear rushing through his veins like a high. It burned through his veins and up into his mind, where it sparked a fearful ecstasy that sent pains into his heart.

“S-Sir? “What are you saying?”

“I’m letting you go, Brad. Your check will be in your apartment box in a few days.”

*

I smiled when Kason gestured his little boy into the other room so we could talk. I had never seen such beautiful blonde hair or blue eyes on a child before. In a way, Darryl reminded me of his father. Kason had the same hair, but it was darker, and the eyes I assumed were from his mother. Everything else came from Kason. I had no doubts that Darryl would look *a lot* like his father once he grew into a man.

“How’s Brad taking the diagnosis?”

“We both cried for a half hour after he got the diagnoses, then we went to the pharmacy and got his prescription.”

“So he’s ok with it?”

“I don’t think anyone would be ok with being schizophrenic,” I said, accepting the cup of coffee Kason gave me. “I know I wouldn’t.”

My cell phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw Brad’s number.

“Brad?” I asked. “You ok?”

“No, Dean. You need to come pick me up. I just lost my job.”

I pulled up to the handyman shop and saw Brad sitting on the curb. Brad didn't seem too terribly upset over losing his job; he looked disappointed more than anything.

“Hey,” Brad said, giving a badly-forced smile. “Thanks for picking me up.”

“It's no problem. I was at Kason's apartment.”

Brad buckled himself in. I pulled away from the shop, turning back onto the road

“What happened, Brad?”

“I really don't know. The boss called me into his office, then left to go look at some stuff. When he came back, he said that he had looked at the medical report Doctor Lee sent him. Then he let me go.”

“I'm sorry.” I squeezed his hand. “You can get a new job.”

“Not likely,” Brad said. “My boss explained the whole process of that. You *have* to say if you have any medical condition on the résumé.”

“What's gonna happen?” I asked, pulling into the apartment building's parking lot. “You can't not get a job because of a medical disability. That's illegal.”

“They'd make *something* up. They'd say that they had too many people,

that there were better candidates. Maybe they wouldn't say anything at all."

"So what now?"

"The boss said that he'd help me file for disability. Remember what the doctors said, that even though my schizophrenia's only affected me at night, the medicine I take might mess with me during the day? But whatever. As long as I can get this sorted out, that's all I care about."

I knew how much it hurt him to say that. Brad's sigh was troubling. I did as much as I could to comfort him by reaching out and squeezing his hand again.

"Even if you do sign a few papers and are marked as disabled, you're still the same Brad. Right, baby?"

"Yeah," Brad said, slipping his hand out of mine and getting out of the car.

I watched him walk up into the apartment building, leaving me there to sit in the car by myself. I let my tears fall freely, because I knew that Brad was going through hell.

Part 41:

Behavior in Blood

- - -

The following morning, Brad was sitting at the kitchen table, eating dry cereal while I waited for someone at my work to pick up. I wanted to talk to my boss to request another day off.

“Hello?” my boss answered.

“Hello, sir,” I said, walking away from Brad and into the bathroom, closing the door behind me. “I need another day off.”

“What happened this time?” the man asked in an almost rude tone.

“My boyfriend lost his job. His boss suggested filing for disability.”

“Kason told me about it. He’s got schizophrenia, right?”

“Yes sir. It’d really mean a lot to me if I could have another day off.”

“What’s one more day to the three weeks you already missed? I mean, I’m out of a worker and you’re losing money; it’s a lose-lose situation, Dean.”

“What are you saying, sir?”

“I can’t let you keep missing work, Dean. If you miss today, I’m firing you.”

I ground my teeth together.

“Thanks for your sympathy, sir,” I snarled. “Fuck you.”

I hung up without waiting for a reply. I leaned against the counter, placing a hand on my forehead.

Great, now look what you did. You lost your fucking job too!

I was about to leave the bathroom before I caught a flash of blood on the kitchen sink. It was a splash, not a few drops, on the side. I bent down to look at it.

Brad? I thought. Did he hurt himself and not tell me?

I grabbed and wet it before wiping the blood away. I cleaned the blood until it wasn’t there, then wiped the area with soap before I tossed the rag in the dirt laundry basket.

I hope he’s all right.

I walked out of the bathroom, watching Brad eat his cereal. After a moment of my staring, he looked up and smiled.

“What?”

“Did you get hurt?” I sat down by him. “There was blood on the sink.”

“Oh... That...” Brad gave me a small smile and shook it off. “I’m fine.

Got a little nosebleed, that's all."

For a little nosebleed, that was a lot of blood.

"You sure you're ok?"

"I'm fine, Dean," he kissed my cheek. "Love you, babe."

"I love you too," I sighed. "You want to hear something mildly amusing?"

"What?" Brad asked, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

"I just got fired too."

Brad looked at me for a short moment, his questioning eyes trying to bring it out of me.

"My boss said me staying home today was just like me staying home for three weeks. He didn't have a worker and I wasn't being paid; a lose-lose situation. He let me go, and all because I wanted to stay home to make sure you were all right." I hugged him. "I don't feel as bad though, because I told him to go fuck himself before I hung up."

Brad rubbed my injured side.

"Your side still hurting?"

"No, not really, not anymore."

"I'm glad you're feeling better. I'm sorry."

"You didn't hurt me, Brad. The sickness did. You could never hurt me."

Brad ran a hand through my long hair, kissing my lips.

“You hold me together,” he whispered. “You hold me together more than you could ever imagine.”

I had been wondering why Brad was wearing a sweatshirt when it was a little warmer than the usual weather. That night, when we went to bed, he had the same sweatshirt on, which bothered me a little.

“You getting sick? You don’t usually wear a shirt to bed.”

“I think I might be. I don’t know though.”

“You sure you’re ok?” I asked, drawing in close to his chest. I liked the feel of the sweatshirt against my skin.

“I’m fine,” Brad said, wrapping his arms around me. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m all right.”

I closed my eyes, whispering, ‘I love you’ to him before he drifted off to sleep. Regardless of the fact that his mind was in a different place, he didn’t move. Brad held me in his arms as if I was going to slip away, even in sleep.

He loves me a lot, I thought, rubbing my face against his shirt again. *He’s the only person who’s ever understood me.*

“Or loved me for real,” I whispered.

I fell asleep in his arms.

“Dean,” Brad said, shaking me. “Get up, sleepyhead.”

I opened my eyes and was greeted by Brad's face. I touched his cheek and kissed him.

"What time is it?"

"Almost eight. You sure you're not the one getting sick?"

I threw my legs over the bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Just a little tired, that's all. You want to shower with me?"

"I'm making breakfast," Brad said, rubbing his arms with his hands.

"God, it's freezing in here."

When I stood and gathered up my underwear and jeans, he turned the heater up a little more. I wasn't cold, and I was in my underwear. I wasn't even in a shirt, whereas he had a sweater on.

He's sick, I thought. He's getting a cold.

"All right, I'll be out in five minutes," I said, brushing his arm with my hand before walking into the bathroom.

I stripped, got in the shower, and was greeted by a blast of water that woke every nerve in my body. I even cried out at the cold.

"You ok?" Brad called in.

"Yeah!" I said. "I'm fine!"

I ran shampoo through my hair and got out of the bathroom, drying my hair off before I combed it back. I dressed from the waist down and walked out into the kitchen, where I wrapped my arms around Brad from behind.

“Scared me a little there,” Brad smiled. “It’s almost ready.”

I left him to his cooking. I sat down at the kitchen table, watching the cars run rampant in the streets. People were going to jobs, driving kids to school, or going out of town. What they were doing was a mad dash to get to wherever they wanted to go.

At least you can stay home with Brad. You don’t have to worry about anything. Now you can stay here.

At the thought, I began to think about how much money we had saved in the bank.

“We’ve got enough money saved up so we don’t have to work for the time being.”

This was the way I had always wanted it. I had wanted to move in with a good boyfriend who made good money, I had wanted to save that money, and I had wanted to make sure we had enough money for the two of us.

“A security blanket,” I muttered.

“What?” Brad asked.

“All the money we have, you know, so we won’t have to work for a while.” I smiled. “I was just thinking about how I had wanted to have a security blanket for the two of us, so I hardly spent any money. It was my dream to move in with you once I turned eighteen, and that dream’s come true. But we’re both out of work, but we have all this money, right?”

“Yeah.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“So I can stay home, at least until we get used to the situation we’re in.”

Brad gestured me to start eating. I was thankful that my boyfriend was so understanding. I couldn’t have said what I was saying to anyone else and expected to get away with it.

We ate. I was glad that I was with such a good guy.

Part 42:

Bleeding Brad

- - -

It wasn't long before Soul, Lex and Travis came over. They had come over the day after I got fired because Soul had called and asked if Brad was all right. I had explained the situation, then the three whisked Brad off to some kind of social event.

I stayed at home, filling out paperwork for Brad's disability. Brad had told me that he would fill everything out, but I had told him that I would do it. I didn't want to burden Brad with the responsibility of filling out his own disability.

I need a bathroom break, I said, standing, walking the short distance into the bathroom. *I'll try to finish it after I'm done*.

I relieved myself. I stood there, looking at the tiles, keeping my thoughts fairly straightforward.

I flushed the toilet and was about to leave the bathroom before I caught

site of blood on the shower door.

He didn't have another nosebleed. Something else is wrong.

I opened the shower door and was horrified to see blood on the side of one wall. It wasn't a little blood, it was *a lot* of blood. I stood there in shock for a moment before I saw the glint of metal.

It was the knife he had been using to cut himself.

"Oh God," I said, tears flowing down my face. "Brad, why are you doing this?"

I leaned against the outside of the shower and cried. I slid down the shower wall and sat on the floor, crying, my world falling in around me. My boyfriend was schizophrenic, he was depressed, and now he was cutting himself for some strange and inhuman reason.

My wails eventually ended in a knocking at the door. I walked to it and looked through the peephole, surprised to see the landlord standing there with the security guard.

"Sir," I said, wiping tears from my eyes.

"Dean, is everything all right?" the landlord--Mr. Roscoe--asked. "We heard you screaming."

"Everything's fine, sir," I said. "I mean no, everything's not fine. I just found my boyfriend's cutting knife."

Daniel Roscoe set a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Help me clean the shower, if you would, sir."

"I'll help," Daniel said. "Stefan, would you care to help? I don't think Mr. McAllen is up for much right now."

"Yeah," Stefan said. "I'll help."

I let the two men into the apartment and closed the door.

"You just sit down and take it easy, Dean," Daniel said, patting my shoulder. "Me and Stefan will have it cleaned out in a jiffy."

I just sat there, letting tears flow down my face.

I didn't know what I was going to do with Brad.

"Where do you want the knife?" Stefan asked, holding the knife by the hilt.

I took the knife from him blade first.

"Why would he just leave the knife in there?" Stefan asked. "I mean, you could've showered and found the knife."

"I don't know," I said, looking up at the African American man. "Is it all cleaned up?"

"Yeah, it is," Daniel said, appearing out the bathroom door. "Is there anything else you need, Dean?"

"No. I need to get his disability stuff filled out."

“Disability?”

“No one will hire a schizophrenic, sir. I mean, not willingly. But his boss said that the schizophrenia can be marked as a disability.”

Daniel patted my shoulder.

“You and Brad are good guys. I have to ask though. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“I got fired because I wanted to stay home with Brad. Don’t worry, we have enough money for rent. We’ve got a bunch in the bank.”

“You’ll be ok. Me and Stefan need to go though. If you need anything, just call my apartment. I’ll be more than happy to help.”

“Thank you sir. Very much.”

When Brad got home, his friends didn’t come in. Brad said goodbye at the door and waved to them as they left.

“Hey, Dean,” Brad said, smiling. “How was your day.”

“Oh, the same,” I said. “But I found something of yours.”

I pulled the knife out from behind my back. He stared in utter shock, his eyes wide and the color draining out of his face.

“Leaving blood on the shower walls and the knife on the shampoo rack wasn’t very smart.”

“Dean, I...”

“Take your shirt off. I want to see your cuts.”

Brad seemed like he was ready to fight, but when I gave him the boldest look I could muster, he stripped out of his shirt. He unwrapped the bandages around his arms, revealing bloody cuts.

“Brad, why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know,” Brad said, tears coming to his eyes. “I don’t know, Dean.”

I carefully grabbed his right arm and looked it over. He had been cutting his right arm more than his left, that was more than obvious. The cuts stopped just below the elbow, but it didn’t seem as though Brad had targeted any other part of his body.

“Are you ok?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

“I’m fine,” Brad said, then reconsidered his words, closing his eyes, forcing tears out. “No, Dean, I’m not.”

“What’s wrong, Brad? Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” Brad sobbing. “I just don’t know, Dean.”

Part 43:

Adam Green

- - -

Just as I had found Brad's other doctor, I found Doctor Adam Green in the phonebook. Dr. Green was a counselor for people with mental illnesses and self-mutilators, both of which Brad was.

I waited for the man to pick up the phone. Brad was in the shower, tending to his cuts and probably crying some more. I wanted to go get in with him, but I needed this counselor over here as soon as possible.

"Hello? This is Adam Green speaking."

I was surprised at getting the doctor on my first call. Usually, I had to be transferred at least once.

"Hello, Doctor Green. My name's Dean McAllen."

"What can I do for you, Mr. McAllen?"

"Would you come to my apartment, sir?" I asked, listening for the sound

of the shower, not wanting Brad to walk in on me.

“I can make a house call. What seems to be the problem?”

“It’s my boyfriend, sir, Brad Michelson’s his name. He was just diagnosed with schizophrenia and now I just... I just found his cutting knife.”

“How long has it been since he’s been diagnosed, Dean. Can I call you Dean?”

“Yes sir, you can call me by name. As to his diagnosis, it’s been about three, four days since the doctor gave us the bad news.”

“And you’ve only just found out he was cutting?”

“Yes sir. He only started wearing long-sleeved shirts a few days ago.”

“How many?”

“Three.”

Doctor Green sighed.

“Give me the name of your apartment and what room you’re in. I’ll come over and talk to your boyfriend.”

After I had given Dr. Green the name of the building and what apartment we lived in, I hung up the phone. Brad walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair still damp.

My eyes were immediately drawn to his cut-up arms.

“You ok?” I asked, walking over, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.”

I couldn’t keep myself from fingering one of his larger cuts. This one was halfway between his wrist and elbow, and very fresh.

“When did you do this one?” I asked, pulling my finger away to find blood.

“After I lost my job,” Brad said. “When you were asleep.”

I absolutely hated myself for not catching him when he was doing it. I let go of his arm and sat on the bed, watching him dress into shorts and an undershirt.

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

“I used to do it when I was a teenager. I never cut as deep as I have now though.”

I turned my eyes away from Brad. I looked out the window and watched the cars go down the street, as I often had when I was troubled.

“A doctor’s coming over here,” I sighed.

“What?”

I looked back at him and took a deep breath before speaking.

“This man, Adam Green, is a counselor, Brad. I want you to talk to him.”

“Why do you think I need to keep talking to doctors and counselors?”

“I just want you to get help, Brad.”

“Get help with what? You already dragged me to the doctor and put me through hours of testing.”

“I want you to get over your cutting!” I cried, standing. “And I didn’t make you go through that testing!”

“Yes you did!” Brad growled. “You pretty much forced me to do it.”

“You broke my ribs! You could’ve done a lot worse to me!”

“Like what? Tell me what I could’ve done, Dean!”

“You could’ve killed me!”

“I would *never* hurt you,” Brad said, coming toward me.

“You already did! And you hurting yourself *does* hurt me!”

“FUCK OFF!” Brad roared. “STAY OUT OF MY BUSINESS!”

I sunk away from my boyfriend. I couldn’t help but start crying. I sat on the bed and backed into the corner, so one side of my back was on the headrest while the other side was on the wall.

Brad stared at me for several long minutes.

“Dean, I’m sorry. Please, I...”

Brad was cut off by knocking on the door.

I rolled out of bed and walked toward the door, but stopped as I passed Brad.

“Hold on!” I called.

I turned, wrapping my arms around Brad.

“I’m sorry,” I said, tears sliding down my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Brad set his hands on my back and held me. The stubble on his face rubbed against my cheek. That feeling was enough to send the fire of love through me.

“I love you more than anything else in this world, Brad,” I said, tears rushing down my cheeks. “If something happened to you, it would kill me.”

“I love you too, baby,” Brad said, gripping the back of my head. “So much.”

There was another series of knocks on the door before the door opened, revealing a man with short brown hair and a thin beard along his jaw, which ran up to his upper lip from his chin.

“Hello,” the man said, closing the door behind him. “I’m sorry for walking in on you, but I heard your argument. Which one of you is Dean McAllen?”

“I am, sir,” I said, wiping away my tears, shaking the man’s hand. “This is my boyfriend, Brad Michelson.”

Brad shook the man’s hand. It was more than obvious that Adam Green was making the handshake last longer to he could look at Brad’s cuts.

“It’s nice to meet you, Brad.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Dr. Green.”

“Please, call me Adam. Dean called me because he said you were injuring yourself.”

“Yes, Adam,” Brad sighed.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Brad,” Adam said, setting a hand on Brad’s shoulder. “I’m here to help you.”

Brad looked over at me. I kissed his cheek before walking into the kitchen, grabbing the three of us a soda as Adam Green sat at the table.

“Sit, Brad,” Adam said.

I was about to sit down next to Brad before Adam raised a hand.

“Dean, could you leave the two of us to talk?” Adam asked. “Is there somewhere you could go. Say, a friend’s house?”

“Yeah. You want to talk to him alone, I get that.”

I grabbed my coat, about to leave before I looked back at Brad. I walked over to the table and kissed his cheek.

“I love you,” I said. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I know. I love you too, Dean.”

I gave Adam a small nod before I walked out the door, intent on going over to Kendra’s house.

Part 44:

Talking With Kendra

- - -

“Dean?” Kendra asked. “What’s wrong?”

“A lot of things,” I said, wiping a hand across my face. “Can I come in?”

Kendra opened the door, letting me inside and out of the cold.

“Brad’s been cutting himself.”

“What?” Kendra asked. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know why he’s been doing it, but he’s cut his arms up. I’ve got a counselor over at our apartment now.”

Kendra gestured me over to the couch, where we sat down. She tipped my chin up and looked into my eyes.

“How come you’re not at home with Brad?”

“The counselor wanted to talk to Brad alone,” I sighed. “The man said he heard us fighting.”

“You were fighting? You said you two get along just fine.”

“We do, but we have little things here and there. Like when I tried to see whether he was afraid of snakes or not. Me and Brad are a good couple; we get along.”

“I know you do. So, are you sure he’s going to be all right?”

“No. I’m not sure. I wish I was there to hear what Adam was asking him.”

“Adam?”

“Adam Green. He’s the counselor, psychologist, whatever the hell you call him.”

“That’d be a psychologist, Dean.”

I stood, pushing my hands in my pockets.

“Can I lay on the couch or somewhere?”

“You can go in the guest bedroom,” Kendra said, leading me down the hall. “You sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, entering the bedroom. “Thanks, Kendra.”

Kendra was about to leave before I stopped her.

“Here,” I said, handing her my cell phone. “If Brad or Adam Green calls, wake me up.”

She took the phone before I closed the door. I kicked my shoes off before falling into bed.

I fell asleep with Brad on my mind.

“Dean, it’s Doctor Green.”

I grabbed the cell phone and pressed it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Dean, this is Adam Green. I’m done speaking with Brad.”

“Can I come back, sir?”

“I’d like to ask you something first,” Adam said. “Do you and Brad have problems with your relationship?”

“No, we don’t. Why?”

“When I asked about your relationship, Brad mentioned a few of your fights. Like the most recent one. He says that you make him feel weak when you two argue.”

“We have a few disagreements, Adam, but we always make up.”

“All right, I was just wondering.”

“You better not be filling him with anything,” I warned. “If I find one little doubt that you might be trying to turn him against me, I’ll get a restraining order against you.”

“Dean, why would you think I’m filling his head with lies?”

I sighed, placing a hand on my forehead.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. I’m just worried about him, that’s all.”

“You have every right to worry about him. You just need to keep everything in order, Dean. You need to help Brad get through this.”

“I know.” I rubbed my arms, shivering. “Will he need stitches for the bigger cut on his right arm?”

“I don’t think so, it’s not too deep.”

“Can I come home, sir?”

“Yes, Dean, you can.”

“Thank you, sir. Goodbye.”

I hung up.

“I’m going home,” I said, throwing my legs over the side of the bed. “I appreciate you letting me stay here, Kendra.”

“It’s no problem, Dean. You’ve been a good friend for two, almost three years now.”

Kendra smiled before I made my way out of her house.

Part 45:

Counseling

- - -

“Brad,” I said. “You ok?”

“Fine,” Brad said, hugging me when I walked toward him. “Glad you’re back, Dean.”

“I’d like to continue my sessions with Brad,” Adam said, “if it wouldn’t be too difficult.”

“It costs me money to drive to other people’s houses, sir,” I said.

“That won’t be a problem. I’d like you to be here next time.”

I broke my embrace with Brad to walk up to Doctor Green. I stared at the man for a short moment before shaking the hand he offered.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

Adam gathered up his papers, tape recorder and bag before he gave me and Brad a final goodbye.

When the door closed, I turned to Brad and kissed him, helping him onto the bed. I slid my tongue in his mouth. We hadn't kissed like this for a good month. Me and Brad usually only used our tongues when we were horny or ready to have sex. This time, though, I wanted to show him that I cared.

"What was that for?"

"Because I love you."

Brad rested his hand on my side.

"Are your ribs feeling better?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because, Dean; I want to make love to you."

I closed my eyes, laying back on the bed. I lay there for a moment before peeling my shirt off, kissing him. He pressed up against me and moaned, kissing my nipples before pulling his own shirt off.

"Fuck me."

Brad grinned and unsnapped my belt, pulling my jeans off. He was out of his jeans and on top of me before I could say anything. He pulled my body close, grinding his hard on into my own erection.

"God. Come on, Brad."

"I want it just as much as you do."

I grabbed his cock, stroking it through the boxers.

"Unless you want to come in your shorts, I suggest you take them off."

Brad stripped out of his boxer shorts and pulled my own underwear off, kissing my upper body before sliding a finger up my ass. I moaned and pushed back against him, accepting the second and then the third finger that loosened me up.

“Fuck me,” I said again.

Brad slid into me. I moaned and arched my back, feeling that first part of the ache that came when two men had sex. I ran my hand over his face. He threw my legs over his shoulders and thrust in me hard. I jerked off as Brad fucked me.

“Fuck!” I cried, my orgasm sending jets of come across my chest.

“I’m coming,” Brad said, thrusting in deep before he growled, closing his eyes, the muscles in his neck and shoulders bulging. He collapsed on me, holding me close.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. You didn’t.”

“You want to clean up?”

“Not yet. Better wait to shower. We don’t want to steam up the bathroom with our smoking hot bodies.”

Brad laughed and kissed me. He held that kiss for a long minute before wrapping his arms around me.

“Do your cuts hurt?”

“They sting from the sweat.”

“We better go shower then,” I said, releasing his cock from my ass.

“Come on.”

I stood, took his hand, and led us into the bathroom. We settled into the shower and kissed each other as the water washed away sweat and bad downs.

At nine o’clock the next morning, me and Brad were sitting at the table. Adam Green was sitting across from us, his eyes darting over his notes.

“You said you’ve done this before?” Adam asked, looking up at Brad, the light from the window reflecting off the lenses of his glasses.

“When I was a teenager, I did it a little.”

“Was it as bad as it was now?”

“No. I’ve never cut so deep. I’ll have a few scars from this.”

Adam looked at Brad’s bandaged arms before speaking.

“You’ve been taking care of them?”

“Yes sir. Dean put some ointment on them this morning before you came. He bandaged them too.”

“You have a good man at your side, Brad. Dean’s worried about you.”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing his back, right between his shoulder blades. “I am, Brad.”

“I know you are,” Brad sighed.

“So, Brad, can you answer my question?” Adam asked.

“What question is that, sir?”

“Why are you cutting yourself?”

Brad shook his head, closing his eyes. He was trying to reach into himself to find the answer, that was easy enough to see. I continued to rub his back.

“I don’t know,” Brad said. “I can kind of tell you what brings it about though.”

“You can?” Adam asked, grabbing his pen from his shirt pocket. “Go on, Brad.”

“Well,” Brad began. “I cut myself when I was depressed. After I broke Dean’s ribs...”

“You broke his ribs, Brad?”

“I didn’t tell you this?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I saw something on Christmas Eve, sir. I pushed Dean out of the way because I thought it was going to hurt him.”

“And this was a result of your schizophrenia?”

“Yes, sir,” Brad said. “Can I continue on with what I was saying?”

Adam nodded, but before he sat down, he ran a hand through his hair and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“Keep going.”

“After I had broken Deans ribs,” Brad continued, “*on accident*, I felt really low. It made me feel like one of those guys who abuse their boyfriends because they’re weaker than them. When I got the news that I was schizophrenic, I lost it. It was like there was a voice in the back of my head telling me to cut myself.”

“Was this before or after you took your medication?”

“*After*,” Brad said, stressing the word. “I know what the voices sound like when I’m not taking medicine. This was my conscience talking to me, sir. My conscience was saying, ‘You know what, you hurt him, you hurt him bad. Why don’t you hurt yourself to make up for it?’” Brad paused, interlacing his fingers. “So I cut myself. I cut myself to try and make up for the pain that I made Dean suffer through.”

A tear ran down my face as Brad related his experience. I didn’t know he had been cutting himself because he was trying to make up for what he did to me.

“Why did you do it?” I asked. “Why did you try and make up for pain you caused me?”

“Because, Dean; guilt eats at you from the inside out,” Brad said, touching my face, wiping my tear away with his thumb. “It’s a parasite. It locks itself into your mind and makes you want to make up for it in any way you can.”

“Brad, I forgave you.”

“But I didn’t forgive myself. I didn’t forgive myself because I *couldn’t*

forgive myself, Dean.”

I hugged Brad, trying to bring him a little extra comfort. I hated it--absolutely *hated* it--when he felt like this.

“Thank you, Adam,” I said. “You let us have our own little moment.”

“It’s no trouble,” Adam smiled. “I should be going.”

“But sir,” Brad said. “You haven’t even been here for an hour.”

“Do you need me here, Brad?”

Brad paused, but shook his head, tightening his grip on my arm.

“No, sir. I don’t.”

I stood and patted Brad’s shoulder, shaking the man’s hand.

“Thank you, Adam. I appreciate you coming over.”

“I’ll be over here the same time tomorrow, if that’s all right?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” I said, looking over to Brad, seeing his agreeing nod.

“Can you come over on your free days?”

“I’m free, except I have the weekends off,” Adam said. “I have a fiancé who’s expecting our child in the middle of February.”

I nodded. The time had flown by so fast. My ribs had been broken on Christmas Eve, and here I was three weeks into recovering.

Already the second week of January. Look at how much your life’s been spiraling since then.

“You ok, Dean?”

I looked at Adam.

“Yes sir, I’m fine. No need to worry about me.”

“All right. If you need anything, you can call me, Dean. You do know you can call me, right?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You can call me too, Brad.” Adam reached across the table, gripping Brad’s hand. “You call me if you need someone to talk to, you hear? If Dean’s not here or he’s asleep, I’ll be here for you.”

With that, Adam finished gathering up his stuff and walked to the door, leaving me and Brad alone in the apartment. I leaned against the wall, thinking over what Brad had just said.

Guilt eats at you from the inside out; it’s a parasite. It locks itself into your mind and makes you want to make up for it in any way you can.

“You really thought that you could make up with your guilt of hurting me by hurting yourself?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, forcing a laugh. “I did.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Brad--still sitting in the chair--grabbed my hand and nuzzled his face against it. The tickle of his stubble made me smile.

“You need to shave.”

“I haven’t been up for much since you put the ointment on my arms,”

Brad said, tilting his head up and looking at me. “They’re sore.”

I leaned in closer. I bent my head over his and let him capture my upper lip between his lips. We held this awkwardly-positioned kiss for a moment before I drew away.

“Thanks,” Brad said. “I needed that.”

I sat down beside him and wrapped my fingers in his.

“You don’t need to ask me for a kiss. Just give me one when you want to.”

“I do. But, you know; the mood gets killed by depressing stuff like cutting myself.”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Why are you asking that?” Brad frowned.

“I was just asking.”

“Of course I do, baby. You know that I love you, right?”

Brad wrapped his arms around me. My smile only continued to stay as Brad nuzzled my neck and nibbled my earlobe.

“You do that when you’re horny.”

“Not this time,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “Just cuddling with you, baby.”

I sat on the windowsill, grabbing Brad’s collar and gently pulling him

closer. I kissed him, sliding my tongue into his mouth. He knew that this wasn't a sexual kiss and followed along. We opened and closed our mouths as it was needed, losing ourselves in each other.

When I kissed Brad, my world exploded in colors. Those colors flowed over my closed vision as we kissed. When our tongues touched, sweet fragrances lit up my senses. When I touched his face, I could feel his personality; the way he waited a few days before shaving, allowing a short beard of stubble to come to his face, the strong jaw line, the smooth, sweet curve of his neck.

I pulled away.

"Sorry."

"For what?" Brad asked.

"It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment kiss."

"We never made out like we were supposed to when we were younger. Well, when I was younger, anyway. I'm starting to get into the older double-word age."

"You're still young," I said, rubbing his chin with my thumb. "You don't think you're old because of me, do you?"

"No. I just know that I'm getting up there. I'm gonna be twenty-four this year, Dean."

"I'll be nineteen," I said, then laughed. "Sorry, bad example."

"That's ok," Brad said, kissing my cheek. "You know what, we haven't

snuggled up on the couch and watched a movie for a while. You up for it?”

I took his hand.

The movie ended at noon. Brad had almost fallen asleep, but I woke him up as I rose to stop the movie.

“That movie was a little long,” Brad said.

“Sorry, I didn’t know it was that long. You dozed off a few times there.”

“Your shoulder’s a nice pillow,” Brad said, rising and turning the TV off.

“You getting hungry?”

“Sort of. Why?”

“I was going to order pizza. That ok?”

“Yeah, do what you want.”

Brad picked up the phone, dialing the number. In this light, his muscles flexed as he moved, making me want to reach out and touch him.

Part 46:

Will You Be My Valentine, Baby?

- - -

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby.”

I blinked as he handed me the heart-shaped box of chocolates. I would’ve forgotten about Valentine’s day if he hadn’t said anything.

“I haven’t got you anything. I’m sorry, Brad.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Besides, all I want is to mooch off that chocolate of yours.”

“Sure,” I said, handing him the box after tearing the plastic off. “I don’t care. You know how much I like chocolate.”

“Yeah, but you don’t eat junk,” Brad said, tapping my bare abs with his hand.

“I try to stay fit. You, though; you’re a hunk.”

I ran my hands up and down his abs as he popped a chocolate into his

mouth. He chewed, swallowing the chocolate before kissing me.

“Mmm,” I said, pulling away. “You taste like cherries.”

“I know,” Brad said, kissing me again. “Hey, you know what I was thinking?”

“What?”

“Wanna go on a date?”

I watched him pop another chocolate in his mouth.

“We haven’t went on a date since I moved in with you.”

“Exactly,” Brad said, grimacing after he finished chewing his chocolate.

“Coconut’s not as good as the cherry.”

“Still tastes good. Especially when you taste like it.”

Brad ran his tongue across his teeth, wiping away a small amount of chocolate before walking to the sink, grabbing a glass of water.

“Where did you plan on going?”

“I figured we could go to the park. They’ve got Lover’s Lane this year.”

My mind went back to the times when we had walked in the park, not wanting to go into Lover’s Lane. They had a strict rule that you had to be eighteen, and I hadn’t been eighteen last year. I remembered that area of the park lit up in red lights, with a heart-shaped sign that said, ‘Lover’s Lane.’ That sign also glowed, except the heart itself was pink while the words were red.

“I thought you weren’t into that kind of thing?” I asked. “I thought you

said it was corny last year?”

“I said that because I felt bad. I wanted to take you, but you were still seventeen.”

“Do they serve alcohol there? I didn’t get the whole, ‘You must be eighteen to enter’ deal.”

“Yeah, they serve a few drinks,” Brad said. “But it’s mostly because of the eroticism of the whole place. They’ve got a few girls there that run the boat ride. They wear tassels in place of actual clothing.”

I pounded his chest, leaning against him.

“Oh, God,” I said. “You can always tell a woman has flavor when she has no clothing, right?”

Brad chuckled and set his glass of water on the counter.

“Will you be my Valentine, baby?”

“I’d be more than glad to.”

We paid our small fee and walked under the big ‘Lover’s Lane’ heart. I grabbed his hand and wrapped our fingers together.

“Dean?”

“What?”

“Why are you...”

“Because if people care, they can fuck themselves. I’m not hiding in the

closet anymore.”

Brad kissed my cheek, tightening his grip on my hand.

We walked between two rows of hedges. They were decorated with red lights that sent the night into a brilliant, beautiful red light. Each and every red light looked like a firefly that was meant to be in some far-off world or a science-fiction movie. All the warm colors made me feel safe and protected.

“What are we gonna do here?”

“Well,” Brad said, “they have a few games, and they have a food and drink stand. They have a little boat ride that goes through a small tunnel they built. It’s corny, but it’d be something to do.”

I looked down at my watch. It was only six o’clock, but it was already dark. Winter--although not cold--had spread her influence out and put this side of the world to sleep at an early hour.

Brad led me down to the game area, where we sat down on a bench and held hands, watching other people do their own thing.

“Anything you want to do first?” Brad asked.

“No. You want to do anything in particular?”

“I figured we’d save the boats for last,” Brad said. “You want something to eat?”

“Sure.”

We walked over to a food stand. Brad ordered us each a corndog and

grinned as the man turned, giving me a nudge.

“What?”

“Remember what we ate on our first date?”

“A fast food place. We had corndogs and French fries.”

“We sure did, baby,” Brad said, letting his hand trail down to my lower back. “That’s something special, you know?”

“The corndogs?”

“Yeah. It’s special because we both remember it.”

“I’ll never forget anything about our first date. That was the happiest day of my life.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never told you that before?”

“I don’t think so. Love you, baby.”

Brad grabbed the corndogs from the man and gave him the three dollars, thanking him before the two of us walked off. Brad gestured me to follow him down another, almost hidden row of hedges before biting the head off his corndog.

“It’s quiet back here,” Brad said. “They have the fountain here.”

I took a bite out of my own corndog, following him all the way back until we were almost in complete darkness. The only light here was coming from a flickering lamppost.

With a circular shape, the area was surrounded by benches on the three sides away from the entrance. In the center, an angel-like figure was on his knees, his hands clasped together, wings folded to his chest, his naked body silhouetted by the water falling around him.

“He’s too beautiful to be back here where no one can see him,” I muttered.

“What, baby?”

“I was just saying how pretty the angel was.”

“Yeah,” Brad said, sitting on the bench. “Wonder why he’s back here by himself.”

I sat down beside Brad, continuing to eat my corndog. The two of us sat there in silence, eating, not making a sound. It was almost as if there were forbidden forces around us, keeping us quiet for fear that we may get punished by something divine.

“You know,” Brad said, tossing his corndog stick in the trash, doing the same with mine as I handed it to him. “Since this is all romantic and all, you want me to tell you something?”

“Sure.”

Brad kissed my cheek, wrapping his fingers in mine.

“When I first saw you, I was afraid to talk to you.”

“Why?”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

"I don't know. You have a strong presence, Dean. When you were working at that cash register, just standing there and waiting for someone to come up, I could feel the loneliness in you. I could feel that you weren't feeling too well. I was afraid that you would freak out, or worse; you'd be straight."

"You told me to smile. Remember that?"

"Clear as day. Just like when Kendra pulled you away from the register, back when she was a man. Standing there for that minute seemed like an eternity."

"How come?"

"Because I *really* wanted your number. I wanted to get to know you better."

"What we have could be considered a fairytale romance," I said, brushing my hair back from my face. "Not many first-time couples stay together, especially two gay men."

"A lot of gay men are afraid to stay with each other because they're afraid of the commitment. They're afraid of it because that means you can't sleep with other guys. A lot of gay men are sex hounds, Dean."

"I know. I had doubts when I went on my first date with you. I was afraid you were going to force something on me."

"I know. You'd barely let me touch you."

"I got up and walked out of the theater because you tried to touch my hand. I even shied away when you tried to kiss me on the first date."

“But I got you on the second one, huh?”

“Caught me like a fisherman catches his fish,” I said, kissing his lips.

“I’ve loved you since that first date, Brad.”

“You have?”

“We only told each other we loved each other after the third week, but I’ve loved you ever since we went on that first date. I loved the way you smiled, I loved the way you laughed, I loved the way your eyes showed every part of you. But what I loved the most, Brad, is that you took care of me.”

“I wanted to shelter you. When you told me you were sixteen, all I wanted to do was protect you.”

“And you always have, you always will.”

“Yeah. I always will.”

We sat there, listening to the sound of the angel’s weeping halo. We were both lost in a moment of pure, bliss love. I wanted him to hold me forever. Maybe we’d turn into statues, like the angel in the center of the area. Maybe we would be forgotten, to melt away into nothing when fire or ice ended the world.

I didn’t care if we were forgotten.

The only thing I cared about was Brad and that I was with him.

I never wanted this peaceful moment to end.

When we left the area where the fountain was, Brad led me down the

walkway, to the boat rides. He paid ten dollars for the both of us and glared at a woman who slapped his ass, causing her to back away in fright.

“Ignore stupid women like that,” I said, strapping myself into the boat seat.

“I do,” Brad laughed. “Don’t worry about it, baby.”

“What?”

“Women slapping my ass.”

“I don’t,” I said, grinning, leaning over and rubbing his leg dangerous close to his crotch. “You’re mine.”

“Come on, Dean; don’t make me hard.”

I gave him a sexy grin before pulling away.

“We’ll wait to do nasty things. I might jump on you when we get inside the apartment though.”

“Oh, don’t worry; we’ll be having some fun once we get home.

When we got home, we had sex for a good three hours before we finally stopped. Brad collapsed beside me, panting, sweat gleaming on his chest, catching the light that was coming in through the window.

“God,” I gasped, staring up at the ceiling. “I don’t think we’ve *ever* had sex for that long.”

“I never went slow. I made sure to pleasure you in any way I could.”

“Yeah, and you nearly drove me over the edge. I was ready to start screaming for you to fuck me.”

“Wouldn’t want to disturb the neighbors,” Brad grinned.

I kissed his chest, wrapping my arms around him.

“I liked it. It was different from our normal sex.”

“I tried, baby. I’m not the kind of guy who works with his mouth very well.”

“You gave me one of the best blowjobs you’ve ever given.”

Brad teasingly licked his lips.

“You know what, Dean; if I can make you feel good, I’ll do whatever I can. If you like me blowing you, why not just ask for it?”

“I’m not the kind of guy to ask something like that,” I said, sitting up and leaning against the headrest,

“You need to be more assertive. God, I *loved* it when you fucked me at the hotel.”

“Back around Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah.”

“What about this time?”

“Loved that too, babe,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “But you were holding back a little. When we were at the hotel, you were an animal.”

“I try not to let my sex drive control me.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Still, I like it hard, baby.”

Brad gave me a wink and stood, making his way across the room before he was in the kitchen. He grabbed two sodas and walked back to the bed, handing me one of them.

“Thanks.”

“No trouble. Did you have fun tonight?”

“I had a blast. I didn’t think you could throw a hardball like that.”

“For a fifty dollar prize, I can throw pretty much anything,” Brad laughed. “You ready for bed, baby?”

“Yeah. I’m tired.”

Brad grabbed my soda, placing it on the table.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby,” Brad said, kissing my cheek.

“Goodnight.”

Part 47:

Bad Valentine

- - -

“No, you’re not supposed to be here.”

I opened my eyes as I heard those words, but quickly closed them when I saw that Brad sitting up. His eyes were focused at the end of the bed, where he stared at something.

“Why did you come back? You weren’t supposed to come back after I started taking the medicine.”

A black needle slid through my chest, into my heart.

No! This isn’t supposed to be happening! He’s supposed to be getting better!

Why wasn’t the medicine working? Brad was on some of the best schizophrenia medicine, and it stopped working? How the hell could that be

possible?

“Brad?” I asked.

When I opened my eyes, Brad was staring down at me.

“They’re back, Dean,” Brad said. “The Watcher’s sitting at the end of the bed right now.”

I looked down at the end of the bed. As I thought and already knew, I wouldn’t be able to see what Brad was seeing. I didn’t have that horrible thing that he had, that gift to see things and people that weren’t there.

“What is it saying?”

“It wants me to go back to where I belong.”

“Where do you belong?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know, Dean.”

I wrapped my arms around him and turned his head away from the end of the bed. I guided him back down on the bed, hugging him, giving him the chance to stare at the wall.

“Close your eyes. They can’t see you if you don’t look at them, Brad.”

Brad gave a shaky nod, but his grip on my body was enough to reassure me that he had no intention of looking back at the end of the bed.

Part 48:

Prescription Update

- - -

I *hated* waiting in doctor's offices; I always had. The minutes seemed to tick by so slowly, and it *always* seemed like time stood still when you were sitting in that blue chair, looking around the office, watching other people to keep your mind off of why you were there.

Doctor Lee will up his dosage, that's all. Maybe he'll tell Brad to take it with food, or drink lots of water.

I hoped that Brad would come back soon. I didn't think Doctor Lee would keep him long. Brad would explain what had happened and Doctor Lee would tell him what to do regarding the medication.

"Dean?"

I jumped as Brad spoke beside me.

"Yeah? Everything ok?"

“Yeah, everything’s ok. Doctor Lee’s having me take two pills a night now.”

“That *is* safe, isn’t it?”

“Doctor Lee said I was a big enough guy, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

He was six inches taller than me at six-foot-two, and he was well-muscled, so that added more weight to his frame. I didn’t think an extra pill at night would bother him.

“All right. You ready to go?”

“You want to go to the gym?”

I shrugged and followed him out of the building.

“Are you feeling up for that?” I asked.

“Need to pump a little iron,” Brad said. “Besides, I can help you get a little more toned.”

“I don’t care about that. As long as I stay in shape, that’s all I care about.”

I liked going to the gym with Brad. It gave me the chance to run on the treadmill to burn a few extra calories, and it gave me the chance to see him pump iron. The weights were right in front of the treadmills, so I always got a good luck at Brad’s flexing muscles. It was nice to see other guys staring at my boyfriend and knowing that they couldn’t have Brad because he was mine.

Coming out wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. People here don't even care.

A lot of people didn't care, anyway. There was the occasional person or two that gave me and Brad disgusting looks when we were out walking around holding hands, but we ignored them. People were hypocritical bastards as it was; we didn't need to let them get to us.

"Hey," Brad said, sitting up, the muscles in his abs tightening, showing them in all their glory. "You ok, Dean?"

"I'm fine."

"You want to come lift some of these?"

"I can't lift as much as you can."

"I'll help you."

I walked to the bench, where I lay down and gripped the bar. I could see a few of the other gay men staring at me, particularly my abs. I was skinny, but I wasn't as defined as Brad or some of the other guys were. I guess a lot of gay men liked the kind of skinny I was; with hip bones visible and the curves of the lower body letting me fit into tighter jeans.

"I'm holding on to this," Brad explained, "so you won't have to worry about dropping it."

"Thanks," I said, letting him give me the brunt of the weight, while he held onto the bar..

“Just don’t do too many. You’ll hurt yourself.”

I did ten before I gave the weight to Brad. I sat up, wiping sweat from my forehead.

“You ready to go home?” I asked, looking up at him.

Brad gave a small nod and walked into the locker room with me. We stripped and got under our own separate shower stalls. I kept my eyes away from the other men, as I still had a tendency to get hard around them. It was mostly straight men who came to this gym, but there were a few gay men, like me and Brad.

“You ok?” Brad whispered.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Brad saw my discomfort and finished showering, leading me back to the locker room. We dried off, dressed and left the building quickly, before I could say anything else.

“Sorry,” Brad said. “I forgot you didn’t like being in public showers all that much.”

“It’s because I’m afraid of getting hard. There’s naked men showering, Brad. I’m also afraid of getting raped.”

“I don’t think any of those guys would rape you,” Brad said, backing out of the parking lot.

“That’s the thing, you *don’t* know.” I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it, Brad. Let’s just go home and forget about that.”

Brad turned out of the parking lot, going down the street, heading to our apartment building. I kept my thoughts to myself, not wanting to bother Brad.

He’s already gone through enough today. He’s been to the doctor’s office and was rushed out of the shower because I didn’t want to be around other naked men.

I had never liked taking my clothes off in public, not that I had ever had to. I went to the swimming pool for gym class in middle school, but had always changed in the stalls. I never had to worry about showering in high school because I never took gym the single year I was there.

“Dean?”

I jumped as I felt Brad’s hand on my leg.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure, baby? I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable. We usually just left the gym and went home to shower, but this time I figured we’d just shower there. We won’t do that anymore.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll get over that once we go to the gym a few more times. I’m so stupid, acting all squirrely just because I’m in a public shower.”

“Everybody has something they’re uncomfortable about. Remember me

telling you how I couldn't stick with a boyfriend because they thought I was weird?"

"Yeah."

"I started getting uncomfortable with asking men out, or dating them for that matter. I took a chance with you."

"And that chance worked," I said, patting Brad's arm.

When we got home, I got to work on dinner while Brad stripped down to his underwear and spread out on the bed, resting his eyes while he listened to the sound of me cooking.

"Are you going to be awake to eat this?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at him.

"Yeah. I will."

I nodded, but I stared at him for another moment. His long, muscled body was enough to make me smile. He liked to be in his underwear at home. It gave me the chance to admire his body any time I could.

"What?" Brad asked, smiling.

"Just looking at you," I said, returning his smile.

Brad closed his eyes, placing his hands behind his head and resting, his chest rising and falling with his even breaths.

God, he's so fucking sexy.

There wasn't a word to describe how sexy Brad was. I had seen a lot of half-naked and naked men, but none of them compared to Brad. Brad kept his body clean shaven, except for his arms--and under them--his legs and his pubic hair, and I had quickly picked that up from him. Brad's chest was gorgeous, with his sensitive nipples always jutting when his shirt was off and those hard mounds of flesh that ran down his body. When we were cuddling on the couch or on the bed, I liked to rub my hands over his abs just to feel the muscles there.

Don't make yourself horny, I chuckled. You don't want to be distracted.

I'd save the distraction for tonight.

I finished making the lasagna and got it out of the stove, calling Brad over. It took a few minutes of me calling his name, but my boyfriend finally rolled over and got out of bed.

"Lasagna?" Brad asked, running his tongue over his lips. "You make good lasagna, baby."

"I try." I cut a piece for myself before handing him the spatula. "I like to cook different things. I know it sucks to eat the same things over and over."

"I could eat your lasagna for the rest of my life and never get tired of it."

"Thanks, I'm flattered."

Brad stood, walking to the counter, grabbing his bottle of pills.

"You haven't taken them yet?"

"I take it when we get back from the gym. Don't worry, I wait a good

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seven, eight hours before taking the next one.”

“Ones,” I corrected. “You take two at night.”

Brad popped the pill into his mouth, grabbing his glass of orange.

I sure hoped as hell that his new prescription would help.

Part 49:

Bad Dreams

- - -

The first night of taking two pills instead of one worked *much* better. The only time Brad had woken me up was when he rolled out of bed to go to the bathroom, and when he had plopped back on the bed and started snoring, I rubbed his back, something that usually kept him from snoring.

I was lying on the bed while Brad made pancakes. His bare back flexed as he moved his neck around, drawing the stiffness out of it. I couldn't remember how many times I told him not to flip them, but he always did. I was more than sure he did it just to piss me off.

"Brad," I said, another cake soaring into the air. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful," Brad laughed. "Haven't you noticed that?"

"You'll learn your lesson once you get a hot pancake on your chest. I'm not going to give you any pity either."

"Aw shucks, baby," Brad said, looking over his shoulder at me. "Not

even a little bit?”

“Maybe a little bit,” I grinned, getting off the bed and walking up behind him, where I wrapped my arms around his waist. “How much longer are they gonna be?”

“They’re almost done. Why? You gettin’ hungry?”

“A little, but I can wait.”

Brad kissed my cheek. I leaned against the counter, but soon decided I was safer if I was away from him.

“I’m not going to hit you with one!”

“Still, I don’t want to be in firing range!”

Brad burst out laughing at the comment and nearly *did* burn himself on the pancake batter. He yelped and dodged out of the way just in time to avoid most of it, having a little land on his abs.

“Fucker.” Brad turned the stove off. “They’re done.”

“I warned you,” I said, grabbing a damp rag, cleaning the batter off of his stomach. “You ok?”

“I’m fine. Guess I better listen to you more often, huh?”

“You listen to me enough. You have the right to ignore the littler things, as long as it gets me on my good side.”

“Aren’t you *always* on your good side?” Brad asked, flipping the pancakes onto a plate.

“Yeah, I usually am.”

Sleeping had been easier since Brad had changed his medication. He didn't wake me up, and the few times he did was because he got up to go to the bathroom or snoring.

I woke to the sound of him snoring five minutes ago, and I had been rubbing the area between his shoulders to try to make his breathing easier. I didn't mind Brad snoring--God knew I did it too--but sometimes it woke me up. It was easier to just rub his back and let it pass.

He's so manly even when he's sleeping. I looked up after a moment.
Might as well get a drink while I'm up.

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before I climbed over him, balancing myself on the headrest until my feet were securely on the ground. I filled a glass of water up.

At least he's sleeping all right. No nightmares, no talking in his sleep, no seeing something at the end of the bed.

I let out a thankful sigh before taking another small sip of the water. I watched Brad's body rise and fall with his slow, even breaths. I was about to walk to the fridge and cut myself a few pieces of cheese before he muttered something.

“Brad?” I asked, thinking he was speaking to me. “You ok?”

When he didn't answer, I opened the fridge, grabbing the block of cheese

and taking it to the cupboard. I sliced it on a spare plate that I pulled from the clean dishes.

Just as I was about to make the first cut, Brad spoke again. This time I listened closely, cutting a few pieces of cheese while I listened to him talk.

“Oh God! Dean! Oh God! Fuck me harder!”

I slipped and cut my finger, swearing under my breath.

That’s the first I’ve heard about this in his sleep, I thought, pulling my finger out of my mouth.

We had had sex earlier, before we had fallen asleep, but that had been at ten, but that had been at one.

I’ll let him sleep, I thought, the hard-on tenting my underwear. *I swear though, we’re having sex as soon as I get up.*

I chuckled before I began eating the cheese, glad that Brad was sleeping so well.

I was happy that he wasn’t having any bad dreams tonight.

“God, Dean,” Brad said, grimacing when I pinned him to the wall of the shower. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m horny,” I said. I slid into him. “Fuck!”

I liked the moans he was giving me. I thrust myself in all the way before I drew in close to his ear.

“You like having sex with me this early, don’t you?”

“Fuck yeah,” Brad said, tightening the muscles in his ass around my cock. “Fuck me hard, baby.”

I did fuck him hard. Right before I came, he sprayed the wall of the shower with his come. I slipped out of him and slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor. My eyes were rolling back into my head, so I closed them and sat there, panting.

“God, that was some nice, good early-morning sex.”

“What made you do that?” Brad asked, sliding down the wall beside me.

“You were saying how good I fucked you at one o’clock in the morning, in your sleep. It made me horny.”

Brad wrapped his arm around me, kissing my cheek.

“We’ll rest here for a moment,” he said. “Then we’ll make breakfast.”

I stood over the stove, making eggs while Brad dressed into shorts and an undershirt. I was glad that the day started so well, even if it had been sex.

It’s all good. Brad enjoyed it, so that’s all that matters.

“Breakfast almost done?” Brad asked.

“Yeah, almost.”

He came up and wrapped his arms around me.

“Don’t burn yourself,” he whispered.

I lightly elbowed his abs before taking the eggs out of the frying pan, setting them on a plate.

“I’m careful,” I said, running a finger down his undershirt. “I actually wear something when cooking.”

“Hey! That’s the first accident I’ve had in a while.”

“You’re lucky that you only got it on your wrist and a little on your abs,” I said, lifting his wrist and examining the fading red mark before kissing it. “Could’ve got it full-bore on your chest or face.”

“Yeah, but I got Mr. Safety watching my back,” Brad said, grabbing me in a headlock, messing with my hair.

“Hey! Let me go!”

Brad let go, kissing my cheek before messing with my hair again.

“It’s fun to mess with you.”

“Well, just you wait,” I said, giving him a cocky grin. “I’ll mess with you again.”

“You already did.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“That wasn’t messing with you, that was *fucking* you.”

“Still, pretty much the same thing. Although I liked the fucking part.”

I punched his chest before hugging him.

“I love you so much. You don’t know how much it means to be with you.”

“You don’t know how much it means for me to be with you,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “You don’t know, Dean.”

I couldn’t sleep. The day had gone all right, but I couldn’t find the urge to slip into dreamland. I shook my head, grabbing the laptop and booting it up, deciding to do a little writing. I had a few things that I had never finished, but I hadn’t had a lot of time to write with all that had been going on.

Brad’s been scaring the hell out of me for the past month, I thought with a small, uneasy smile. *At least he’s on medicine.*

I booted up the internet and found a few new acceptances, which I was happy about. Even though I rarely got published, the few times I did were good enough. I was starting to break into the bigger markets, and even though they were only short stories and novellas, it was better than nothing.

If I drank, I’d be waking Brad up now and pouring champagne, I thought with a grin, quickly replying to the emails, giving the publishers my apartment box address before walking to the table, sitting down and opening the novel I’d been slowly writing.

I had written a few pages when I had Brad muttering something in his sleep. I kept my attention on the laptop, not wanting to distract my mind with whatever he was saying.

I definitely *did not* need a hard on.

I continued writing for another ten minutes before Brad's mumbling finally did get my attention. I frowned and looked over at him.

"Brad?" I asked.

"No, leave me alone."

"Brad?" I asked, touching his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"No! Why are you chasing me?"

I slapped Brad's cheek until he woke up, fear weighing down my heart. When he opened his eyes, he gave me a thankful smile.

"The dogs were chasing me," he said with a small, nervous laugh.

I helped him up, where I led him into the kitchen and handed him my glass of water.

"You were writing?" Brad asked.

"Yeah. I stopped to make sure you were all right."

"Thanks, baby. I appreciate it."

I couldn't help but wonder why he kept having nightmares about the dogs. He had never told me about the dogs in-detail, but I had never asked.

"Brad?"

"Yeah?"

"I..." I trailed off before I could even begin to ask.

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“What, Dean?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it, Brad.”

Brad accepted the piece of cheese I gave him. As I watched him eat, I couldn’t help but wonder what the thing about the dogs was.

Part 50:

A Talk With Doc

- - -

I had told Brad that I was going to go grocery shopping, and he had accepted that without any question. Unbeknownst to him, I wasn't going grocery shopping; I was going to talk to Doctor Lee.

That bastard isn't doing something right, I thought, taking time to take a few deep, even breaths. Either Brad isn't taking the medicine right, or something's wrong.

I turned down the street, casually letting my car flow with the traffic. I hated driving on a weekday, especially during the morning. There were too many people out and about.

As the hospital came into view, I turned into the parking lot, finding a spot. I locked the car and walked up to the front door, where I passed through the halls until I came up on Doctor Lee's office. I entered and stood at the desk, waiting for a receptionist.

“Hi,” I said. “I need to speak with Doctor Lee.”

“Do you have an appointment, sir?” the woman asked.

“No, but my boyfriend’s his patient.”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“McAllen,” I said. “He’ll want to speak with me.”

The woman gave me an odd look before she disappeared from sight. I stood there, waiting at the front desk. I wanted to see Doctor Lee, and if I couldn’t see him right away, I would wait. I would tell that damn receptionist that this was something I needed to ask the doctor about if she gave me any lip.

“Mr. McAllen?” the receptionist asked. “He’ll see you.”

I pushed the door open, walking down the hall until I came to his office. I knocked and waited, sticking my hands in my pockets.

“Dean,” Doctor Lee said, opening the door. “Come on in.”

I closed the door behind me.

“What seems to be the problem, Dean? The receptionist said it was something about your boyfriend?”

“Brad had another bad dream.”

“Has he been having them frequently?”

“No, but it still bothers me. You said that the medicine was supposed to get rid of the bad dreams.”

“It won’t get rid of every single little one, Dean,” Doctor Lee said, setting

his feet on his desk. “He hasn’t had one in the past two days? Since I gave him the new prescription?”

“No, but that doesn’t...”

“Look, Dean,” Doctor Lee said, taking his feet off the desk, setting his hands where his feet had been. “What you’re trying to tell me is that he’s having a bad dream, I understand that. The thing that you’re trying to instill in my head is that the medicine isn’t working.”

“I never said...”

“No, you didn’t, but you were implying it. I know you’re concerned for Brad’s wellbeing, and I’m glad you are. Brad couldn’t have a better boyfriend than you. But Dean, can I give you a little advice?”

“Yes sir.”

“You blow things out of proportion. Two days ago, you brought Brad here to talk about the night before. He said that you were worried and that he himself was worried. I was a bit disappointed.”

“He was *hearing things*. You expect me to sit back and let him suffer?”

“I don’t expect anything out of you, Dean. I just want you to know that the medicine Brad is on will help him. He’s improved a lot, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, he has.”

“And he’s loosened up, right? He sleeps better too.”

I decided to raise the white flag in surrender. I couldn’t argue with this

man; he was Brad's doctor. Arguing with him would be like arguing with a police officer; nothing would run in my favor here.

"I'm sorry for bothering you, sir," I said, standing, heading for the door. "I'll just go now."

I was about to open the door when I felt the doctor's hand on my arm. I turned and looked at the young doctor, taking in his features. His calm eyes showed a concern that made me feel guilty.

"I'm sorry if I came off as rude," Robert Lee said, sitting on his desk. "I'm worried about Brad as well. I worry about all my patients. You know something, Dean?"

"What, sir?"

"When you deal with patients who have mental illnesses, it can really depress a man. It hurt me to tell Brad that he had schizophrenia. It hurt me to hear his muffled cries."

"It means a lot to have a good doctor, sir," I said, sitting back down. "I had to lie to him to come up here."

"What did you say you were doing?"

"I told Brad that I was going shopping. I don't have a lot of people I talk to about my life, sir, but Brad's the only person I really care about. He was the first man I ever loved at sixteen. He's the man who took me on my first date, the man I first kissed, the man I lost my virginity to."

I sat there, closing my eyes and letting the peace of the situation swallow

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me.

“I can understand how you feel. I’ve been with my wife for a long time as well.”

“Your wife probably doesn’t have a mental disorder.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“It’s not the same.” I stood. “Thank you for letting me talk to you, Doctor Lee.”

“It’s no trouble.” Robert shook my hand. “I got a call from Adam Green. He’s been coming over for Brad’s counseling?”

“He hasn’t been over for a few days. I think he was giving us a break.”

“You can call him if you need to. It might be better to do that.”

I shook the man’s hand again, thanking him once more before I walked out of his office.

I had to knock on the door with my foot because of the amount of groceries. When it opened, Brad laughed and grabbed a few of the bags.

“I was starting to get worried.”

“Sorry,” I said, kicking the door, only walking into the kitchen when it shut. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I’m just a worry-wart,” Brad said, taking the final bag from me, rubbing our noses together. “Specially when it comes to you.”

I kissed his lips when he said ‘specially.’ It was one of his words he used, one of the ones that could always make me smile.

“Thanks, baby. You get those spicy fries?”

“You mean the seasoned ones?”

“Yeah.”

“I got them. I was going to make hamburgers tonight.”

“Mmm. You always cook good stuff.”

“You’re a good cook too.”

“How about we’re both good cooks?”

I hugged him, glad that I was home, glad that I was holding him in my arms.

“I want us to start talking to Adam again.”

“Adam Green?”

“Yeah, if that’s all right with you?”

“That’ll work. Anything you want to talk about?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I have a confidence issue.”

“You just need to get out a little more. The gym’s just something you have to get over.”

“That’s my confidence issue. And I don’t like being in public all that much either.”

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Brad tilted my chin up, kissing me.

“We’ll talk to Adam tomorrow,” Brad said. “I promise.”

Part 51:

Two Makes A Pair

- - -

“You want to talk about your confidence issue?” Adam asked, surprised at the topic of conversation.

“A little, sir,” I said, tightening my grip on Brad’s hand. “I just have a hard time being out in public, that’s all.”

“You don’t like going out in public?”

“No, sir,” I said, looking up into Adam’s shockingly-green eyes. “I don’t.”

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“When me and Brad went to the gym, we had to leave because I was nervous.”

“About being around other men?”

“It was in the locker room. We were showering.”

Adam exhaled, closing his eyes.

“You were afraid of getting an erection?”

“A little, sir. Brad’s the only guy I’ve slept with and will ever sleep with, but the sight of a naked man, to me, is erotic. I’m turned on when I see Brad naked.”

“Is there something else you’re nervous about?”

“I’m a little afraid of getting raped. I know Brad’d kick the shit out of someone if they tried to do something to me, but if enough guys were there, they could get Brad out of the picture fairly easily.”

“I can’t really say much, Dean, but I will tell you this. People with confidence issues are usually afraid to open up and embrace the fact that life is tough.”

“I know life’s tough. I moved away from Idaho because I didn’t have friends and because I couldn’t have a boyfriend. Brad’s really changed my life since I’ve been with him.”

Adam turned his attention to Brad.

“Have you been well?”

“Yes sir,” Brad said. “I have.”

“Are your cuts healing?”

Brad looked down at his arms. The cuts had since scabbed over and were healing quite nicely, but the bigger one halfway up his arm would scar; that was

already obvious.

“Yes sir. Dean’s been putting ointment on them every day.”

“You haven’t thought about picking the knife back up?”

“No. After you came and talked to me, I realized how bad I had hurt Dean by hurting myself. I’ll never cut again because I know it’ll hurt my boyfriend.”

I kissed Brad’s cheek.

“Have you been having bad dreams?” Adam asked.

“I had one last night.”

“What was it about, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Dogs.”

“Dogs?”

“Yeah,” Brad laughed. “I’ve never liked them, not since I was a teenager, anyway.”

“Why don’t you like them?”

“I got chased by a pack of wild ones when I was sixteen. I had to jump a fence to get away from them.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you dream about the dogs often?”

“Sometimes, I rarely do though. It’s a distant memory that likes to resurface from time to time.”

Adam wrote a note on his clipboard.

“You two have been doing all right?”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Relationship wise.”

“We’re both madly in love with each other.”

“Yeah,” Brad added, kissing my cheek. “We don’t have any problems.”

“You don’t argue?” Adam asked.

“Hardly ever,” Brad said. “We argued a little about my cutting and the medicine, but other than that, we don’t argue.”

“We get along fine,” I added.

“I ask because I haven’t been here for a few days,” Adam said.

“Sometimes my patients and their partners end up arguing about something if they’ve been diagnosed with a mental illness or have other personal problems.”

“We’re fine,” Brad smiled.

Adam stood.

“If that’s all you two need to talk about, I’ll be leaving.”

“All right,” Brad said, rising, shaking Adam’s hand. “Thanks, sir.”

I shook Adam’s hand and gave him a short thank you before the man walked out of the apartment.

“I never knew about the dogs,” I said.

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“I never told you?” Brad asked.

“No. I’ve never asked.”

“I just got chased by a few dogs way back when. I think it was the week before my seventeenth birthday, now that I think about it.”

I accepted what he told me. There was nothing else he could’ve said about the dogs, and if there *was* something else, I wouldn’t ask. Asking certain questions around Brad--particularly questions about his past--made me uncomfortable, and it made Brad more than a little nervous.

Part 52:

Outer Forces

- - -

“No, they’ve left me alone. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m all right.”

My blood chilled.

Brad was talking to something.

The medicine...

The thought was a needle stabbing into the base of my spine, sending acid to my brain. It made me more aware of everything that was going on, even though my eyes weren’t open. Brad was scratching his leg while laughing under his breath.

“Brad?” I asked, sitting up. “Who’s here?”

“Harmoire.”

“What?” I asked, looking at the end of the bed, once again finding that

there was nothing there.

“Har-Moi-Er,” Brad pronounced.

“Harmoire?” I asked, saying the word the way he had say it.

“Yeah,” Brad smiled. “That’s it.”

“Who’s Harmoire, Brad?”

“Oh, he’s a friend.” Brad turned to acknowledge whatever he was looking at. “Harmoire’s been with me for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Since the shadows started visiting me. After our first date, Harmoire was the one who told me that you were a good guy. That’s a big compliment coming from him.”

This one’s harmless. This one isn’t scaring him.

Regardless of whether this thing that Brad was calling Harmoire was harmless or not, it was still here. It needed to go.

“Tell him thanks,” I said.

“I don’t have to tell him. He can hear you just fine.”

Brad’s words sent shivers down my spine, but I kept my cool. My eyes had been set on Brad, but now, I looked down at the bed, hoping to catch a glimpse of the creature called Hamoire.

Why are you looking? You already know there’s nothing there.

I shook my head.

Brad thinks something's down there.

"What is it, baby?" Brad asked.

"Let's go back to sleep. Goodbye, Harmoire."

Brad frowned after I said goodbye to Harmoire. It was as if I had dispelled the creature from this world and sent it back to wherever it had come from.

"Brad?"

"Sorry," he said, lying down beside me. "I'm sorry that I woke you up, Dean."

"It's ok. Go back to sleep."

Brad closed his eyes. I closed my eyes as well, but I had no intention of falling asleep.

No.

I was going to call Doctor Lee.

It took a half hour for Brad to fall asleep, but when he did, I stumbled out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen, grabbing the phone off its cradle before I walked into the bathroom. I shut the door and kept the light off, thankful for the nightlight's soft yet widespread light.

That bastard is going to hear it from me, I thought, dialing the man's home phone number, completely ignoring the clock in the upper right-hand part

of the display window.

I pushed the toilet set down and sat on it, hearing the first few rings. After the fourth ring, I was about to give up hope before I got an answer.

“Hello?” Robert Lee asked. “What is it? It’s after one in the morning.”

“Hello, Robert. This is Dean McAllen.”

“Dean? Why the hell are you calling me at one-thirty in the morning?”

There was a shuffling in the background, then a door closing before I heard the man’s breathing.

“I was busy, Dean, I was having...”

“I don’t care if you were screwing your wife or not. Your medicine isn’t working.”

“For the love of motherfucking God! Why the hell are you telling me this?”

“Because it’s not working.”

“I upped his medication, Dean; your boyfriend is *fine*.”

“No, he’s *not* fine. Why are you giving him a medicine that doesn’t work? We’ve spent around a thousand or so dollars on visits with you and the medicine isn’t working.”

“That medicine is working perfectly fine. I’m starting to wonder whether or not you have some attention disorder, Dean.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You like drawing attention to yourself. You liked the fact that I was giving you sympathy when you came in to talk to me. You liked the attention you were getting.”

“I don’t draw attention to myself.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the man’s stupid words.

“Obviously Brad’s attention isn’t enough for you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were cheating on him.”

The blood in my cheeks boiled.

“You can say I’m drawing attention to myself, you can say I have a disorder, and you can tell me that my boyfriend’s medicine is working when it isn’t, sir, but you cannot--*cannot*--tell me that I am cheating on my boyfriend. Take my money and shove it up your rich, motherfucking ass!”

I pushed the off button so hard that I was afraid I would break the phone. I had the urge to throw the phone against the wall, but I kept my cool and set the phone on the counter.

Why did he say those things to me? I thought, putting my face in my hands. *Why would that man be so cruel to me? It wasn’t more than a few days ago that he was offering me condolence.*

The tears easily slid through my fingers and onto my bare legs. I let them fall. I kept myself from sobbing because I was afraid I would wake Brad up. Brad *always* woke up when I cried. I didn’t get up and cry very often, but I had cried a few times quite recently.

I was so preoccupied with my crying that I didn't even hear the door open.

"Baby?"

I looked up and into Brad's eyes. Those calm gray eyes looked into mine. My own gray eyes--although not the shade his were--stared at him before I wrapped my arms around his waist.

"Doctor Lee said things to me. He made me feel like dirt."

"Shh," Brad said, placing a hand on the back of my head, holding my head to his shoulder. "It's all right, baby. Everything's going to be all right."

"How can a man stand to take another man's emotions and twirl them around his finger?"

"I don't know, baby. I don't know."

The phone rang, and when Brad reached for it, a look of disgust crossed his face before he pressed the phone to his ear.

"I don't want to hear from you ever again," Brad said. "Have a nice fucking night."

Brad turned the phone off and hugged me close.

Being in Brad's arms was one of the greatest comforts I could have.

Part 53:

Alexandra Carmen

- - -

Alexandra Carmen could've easily been the star in any porn film. Her long legs, pretty face and small but nicely-endowed chest would have made her money outside the work she did as a doctor.

"She's a cat," Brad said, watching her talk to another doctor.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know those women who walk like they own the world, like they won't take no shit off anybody? *That's* a cat."

I watched Doctor Carmen come into the room, escorted by a young nurse. The guy was so young that he couldn't be older than twenty-five.

"Hello, Mr. McAllen, Mr. Michelson," Doctor Carmen said, shaking my hand, then Brad's. "You're here to switch schizophrenia medications, right, Brad?"

“Yes, ma’am,” Brad said.

“We had been going to Doctor Lee,” I said. “The medicine he gave Brad wasn’t working. I was afraid for Brad’s health.”

“That’s perfectly fine,” she said, grabbing her clipboard, flipping through her notes. “What were you on?”

“Stelazine,” Brad said. “Is that good or bad?”

“That’s good medicine,” Doctor Carmen said. “But if it’s not working for you, we’ll try something else. Could you take your shirt off? I want to look at a few things.”

The doctor obviously caught what she said, as she blushed and shook her head.

“It’s fine,” Brad reassured her, stripping his shirt off, revealing his toned body. “I’m gay, and hot stuff over there’s got me wrapped around his finger.”

Brad winked and I grinned, watching Doctor Carmen place her stethoscope on Brad’s chest.

“Have you been feeling all right?” Alexandra asked.

“Fine,” Brad said. “Why?”

“Your heart seems to be beating pretty fast.”

“We jogged up here. Huh, Dean?”

I nodded and was satisfied with Alexandra’s nod. She took his pulse, sliding a thermometer into his mouth.

“Under the tongue,” she reminded him.

“Sorry,” Brad said, closing his mouth.

I winked at him before she pulled the thermometer out of his mouth.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “I have all the results from your tests, so we’re going to switch your medication.”

Brad got off the table, pulling his shirt over his head, readjusting it against his wide chest. Doctor Carmen handed him a prescription and gestured for him to go outside.

“Thank you,” I said, rising. “I appreciate...”

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Mr. McAllen?”

I looked back at Brad, who only shrugged and disappeared from sight.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “But I talked to Doctor Adam Green after you called. He says Brad has had nightmares and was recently cutting himself.”

“It’s because he was depressed. Don’t worry, he’s fine.”

“What bothers me is the fact that he was seeing things even though he was on medication,” she said, leaning against the counter.

“It scares me when he sees things.”

“Oh, I can imagine. But listen here, Dean. If he starts seeing things, hearing voices, or whatever the hell you think might be weird, I want you to contact me *immediately*.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

Doctor Carmen reached into her pocket and pulled out a business card.

She turned it over, writing something down before handing it to me.

“That’s an anytime, anyplace number,” she said, patting my hand. “I want to make sure he’s ok.”

“Doctor Carmen?”

She turned and looked at me, the tip of one high heel in the entrance to the room.

“Yes, Mr. McAllen?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“What happens if his bad dreams start up again?”

“We’ll have to see if that happens. Only then will I be able to tell you what we’ll do.”

Part 54:

Beliefs

- - -

“So, what’d she keep you for?” Brad asked.

“She wanted me to keep an eye on you. That’s all.”

“Sure she didn’t shuck your drawers and blow you?” Brad grinned.

“Hey!” I said, slapping his shoulder. “That’s not fair.”

“Just a little joke.”

“Besides, you’re the only one who gets to do that.”

The way he looked over at me for a short moment made me grin. That was the look he gave me whenever I rubbed his leg in a public place, or in the car.

“Come on, Dean. Let’s do that at home.”

I patted his knee before he pulled into the pharmacy. Brad told the woman that his prescription was supposed to be in before she scurried off.

“Sorry,” I said, leaning in closer and inhaling the smell of sweat on his neck. “You’re just so hot, Brad.”

I kissed his neck and tasted sweat there, moaning as my cock twitched in my pants. Brad pushed me away before I had the chance to get harder than I already was.

“Thank you,” Brad said to the woman, taking the bag of medication. “Let’s get home. We have a few... Hazards we have to take care of.”

I grinned as Brad squeezed my throbbing cock.

Brad pushed himself in all the way before collapsing on top of me. Whenever he collapsed on top of me, it meant that he had enjoyed the sex. I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my head into the crook between his neck and shoulders.

“You ok?” I asked.

“Yeah. God, you’re so good, baby.”

I kissed his neck before laying my head back on the pillow. I closed my eyes, taking deep breaths, exhaling them at the same pace.

“You want me to get off of you?” Brad grunted.

“No,” I said. “Maybe just pull out of me.”

I gasped as Brad pulled out of me, but I quickly accepted him back into my arms as he spread his body across mine. His breaths against my neck were

hot and quick, but they were slowing.

“I love you, Dean. I love you so much. I don’t love you for your body or because of the sex. I love you because you’re you.”

“Why are you telling me this? I know you love me for me, not just the sex.”

“I just wanted to let you know that,” Brad said, laying on his side of the bed. “I feel like our relationship was dangling on a taut wire for a little while.”

Taut wire? He usually doesn’t talk like that. He only talks like that when he wants to show how much he means something.

“What made you think that?” I asked.

“When you caught me cutting, it literally broke my heart. I knew it broke yours, but it broke mine too. I talked to Adam about the way I felt. I said, ‘I think this might hurt our relationship,’ then he said, ‘How?’ After that, I said that you had had a shitty teenage life before you moved out to Colorado and that you might not stay with me if I started to get really bad.”

Brad looked into my eyes. There was an emotional storm brewing within him. His eyes showed *everything*; they always had and always would.

“I would never leave you. You’re the first man that I fell in love with, and the only man that I will ever love.”

“If and when I am gone because of an outer force,” Brad said, running a hand through my hair. “There will be another man to take my place.”

“Nothing’s going to take you away from me.”

“You don’t know that. There are forces at work that men don’t even comprehend.”

“Are you talking about God, Brad?”

We had never really addressed the question of religion. This May, we would be together for three years. The whole time, we hadn’t even discussed what our beliefs were. I myself was an agnostic riding on the thin line between atheism, but I had never asked about Brad’s own beliefs.

“I don’t believe in God,” Brad said, closing his eyes. “How can God exist if so many bad things happen?”

“I’ve thought the same myself. But do you think it was just random coincidence that we met each other?”

“No. We were meant to be together.”

“What do you mean?”

“People who are meant to be together end up being in a relationship as long as we have been. Men and women will divorce each other, and sometimes married gay couples will as well, but when that happens, it’s because they haven’t found the right person.”

“Some people never find the right person.”

“And they die that way,” Brad said. “But that person was always there, in some way or another.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“I pray, but I don’t believe in God-God, like what all the religion says,” I said. “What do you believe in, Brad?”

“Another world,” Brad said. “A world that exists alongside us. That world, Dean, is full of things that are too marvelous for us to see, and there are horrors there that don’t even begin to touch upon the horrors of our world.”

I snuggled in close to him, closing my eyes and reveling in the warmth of his body.

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant when he said he believed in another world, but I wasn’t going to ask. Brad told me what he wanted to tell me, and if he didn’t say anything more, I usually didn’t ask about it. Asking Brad questions about his personal life and beliefs was like asking a complete stranger to tell you everything about them.

Sometimes, I felt like Brad was a stranger, even though I knew almost everything about him.

Part 55:

Butterfly Koi

- - -

“What’s that you got there, baby?”

I jumped as Brad walked forward and attempted to grab one of my two bags from me, but I held the plastic one in place.

“Take this one,” I said, passing him the paper bag. “This one’s fragile.”

Brad gave me an odd look, but shrugged and grabbed the paper bag. He made an ‘oof’ sound and readjusted his grip on it.

“What the hell’s in here?” he asked. Brad set the bag down and reached into it, pulling out an underwater suction hose. “What’s this?”

I set down my plastic bag and opened it, revealing a small red and black butterfly koi. It swam in its plastic bag without a care in the world.

“Neat,” Brad said, lifting up the bag.

“I thought it would liven up the apartment. I was tempted to get a ferret,

but I figured we'd never find it once I let it out. You're allergic to cats, so I didn't get a kitten."

"You can always go and get a kitten too," Brad said, tapping on the side of the plastic bag, grinning as the fish swam toward him. "I can take some allergy medicine."

"I don't think we can have cats here."

And you're afraid of dogs, so that's out of the question, I thought, grabbing the rest of the items out of the bag before beginning to assemble everything.

"You like fish?" Brad asked.

"It's just a small foot-long tank. But I've always liked koi. I had a few fish back home in Idaho. Don't know if they're still there though. My parent's might be taking care of them."

Brad set the fish down, looking at the air pump I was putting together.

"You haven't mentioned your parents a whole lot," Brad said.

I was surprised by his words.

"I'm fairly sure my aunt knew I was going out with you," I said. "She never said anything, but you called my phone a lot. I'm sure she looked at the numbers."

"So?"

"Kendra rarely called me on my cell phone because we worked together.

The call ratio was one to ten, Brad.”

“What does your aunt possibly knowing you’re gay have to do with your parents?”

“She probably told them. They’ve never liked gays.”

Brad moved the dishes away from the wall socket.

“Here,” Brad said. “You can put that stuff here.”

I gathered up the smaller stuff, placing it on the counter while Brad grabbed the small fish tank.

“You’ll need more water,” Brad said.

I attached the heater and thermometer to the side, plugging them into a power bar before pushing the air filter inside.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” I continued. “If my parents haven’t wanted to talk to me because I’m gay, that’s their problem; screw them.”

Brad filled the tank with water, nodding as the heater light came on.

“Dump him in,” Brad said. “It’s not too cold.”

“The rocks first,” I said, ripping the bag of rocks open, running water over them before dumping them into the tank. “Now the fish.”

I grabbed the bag and spilled the little thing into the tank, smiling as it swam around, exploring its new surroundings.

“It’s not much, but it livens up the counter.”

Brad wrapped his arms around me and kissed my cheek as I placed the

top on the small fish tank.

“It does,” Brad smiled.

When I got up in middle of the night to get something to eat, I was drawn to the glow from the fish tank. I walked away from the fridge and tapped on the glass, watching the small fish.

“Hey,” I said. “Hope you’re liking your new home.”

Curiosity drove the fish to my side of the glass. It looked at me with its small, almost beady eyes before darting to the other side of the tank, hiding in a large section of fake coral.

Gotta be quiet. Don’t want to wake Brad up.

I walked back to the fridge and cut myself up some cheese, watching the fish.,

I smiled, liking the way the aquarium brightened up the counter.

I woke up by Brad’s gentle shakes.

“The fish is dead, Dean.”

Excellent way to start off the morning, I thought, walking over to the tank, seeing the fish sitting on the bottom of the tank.

“I’ve had this before. It was sick with something.”

“How do you know that?”

“Fish float to the top when they die, this one’s at the bottom.” I grabbed the handheld net and got the corpse out. “I have the receipt. Grab a plastic bag for me, will you?”

Brad grabbed a bag, opening it so I could dump the body in there.

“Kind of morbid how you can cash in on life, huh?”

“I agree, but I’m going to tell them to clean their tanks. It’s bullshit when people go in to buy fish and they end up dying the next day.”

“I agree with you there,” Brad said. “You going up today?”

“I will later. How long have you been awake?”

“I just got up,” Brad said, stretching his arms, pushing his chest out to stretch his back.

I took his hand, leading him into the bathroom.

I had told Brad to stay home when I went up to the local pet store to get a new fish. I had really bitched the manager out after showing him the dead fish, and he had done his fair share of bitching before I threatened to call the animal rights activists on his business. After that, the man had instantly shut up and gave me a new koi.

“Lots of little things to deal with, huh?” I asked the plastic bag sitting beside me, seeing the white koi swim up top. “Well, at least I got you out of there. Hopefully you’ll do all right in the tank.”

I had been thinking about the tank ever since I left the apartment. I *knew* I hooked up everything right, there was no doubt in my mind about that. This fish came from a different tank though; a small pond at the back of the store, so I wouldn't have to worry about it being sick.

Hopefully not, anyway. The first one died the first day in its tank.

Hopefully, this one's a healthy fish.

I pulled into the apartment building's parking lot and locked the car up before getting out, holding the plastic bag in my hand. I made my way up the stairs and down the hall, where I knocked on the door.

"Brad!" I called in. "You up?"

When he didn't respond, I grabbed my key and unlocked the door. When I pushed it open, I saw that he was in bed, his naked back gleaming in the light that was streaming through the window.

He must've got to sleep later last night, I thought, walking to the tank and setting the plastic bag inside the water so the fish could adjust to the temperature. *I have the same thing sometimes.*

I kicked my shoes off, walking over to the bed and laying beside him. I covered both of us up before laying my head on the pillow, sighing, rubbing his upper arm, letting the hairs tickle my fingers.

"Heh, heh," Brad said, rolling over. "That tickles."

"Sorry."

When he didn't say anything, I smiled.

He's even ticklish in his sleep, I thought, kissing his shoulder before closing my eyes.

After we had gone to bed, I laid awake for a good hour-and-a-half before falling asleep. I woke up at twelve and walked into the kitchen to have my almost-daily ritual of eating cheese in the middle of the night.

What I saw horrified me.

The fish was suspended between the coral. Its eyes bulged out and its insides were floating out of its body, suspended only by thin strands of flesh. The eyes terrified me the worst. Its eyes said, 'Why did you put me here? Now I'm dead! Now I'm dead you stupid motherfucker! Now-I'm-fucking-dead!'

I cried out, startling Brad out of his sleep.

"Baby?" Brad said, jumping out of the bed and running over to me.

"What's wrong, Dean. What's..."

Brad trailed off as he saw the fish. He gagged before pushing my head into his chest.

"It's all right," Brad said, gently rocking me. "Everything's all right."

"How did that happen? Did the fish intentionally kill itself?"

"Of course not," Brad said, a slight quiver in his voice. "Fish can't kill themselves."

I forced my head away from his chest and walked over to the fish tank. I

looked at the animal for a moment, setting my hand on the glass.

That's when I felt the water on the outside of the tank. I looked on the counter and saw that there was water there too.

How could water have gotten on the outside of the tank? That fish isn't big enough to jump and hit the top of the tank, much less make the top fly out. What could have...

My eyes turned to Brad. His eyes showed shock and fear.

"Did you..." I let the word trail out, my heart blackening from fear.

"No! I would never kill an animal, much less your pet."

"Why is the tank wet?" I cried. "Why, Brad?"

Brad walked over beside me and ran his hand along the tank.

"Ouch!" Brad said, pulling his finger away. "Motherfucker."

Brad sucked on his finger for a short moment before pulling it out of his mouth, revealing a cut.

"The tank had a crack in it," Brad said, reaching into a nearby cupboard for a Band-Aid.

"How did the crack get there?"

"The bag," Brad said. "The tank must've hit something when you were carrying the bag in. Maybe the crack only started leaking tonight."

I grabbed the net, about to get the body out before I turned away, shivering.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“I can’t,” I said.

“I will. Go back to bed, Dean.”

I walked over to the bed, looking back at Brad before I tucked in under the covers. A minute later, I heard the toilet flush before Brad got in bed with me, pulling me close to his chest.

Thoughts of how the fish got to be speared on the coral haunted my mind until I fell asleep.

Part 56:

The Color Black

- - -

Another fish was swimming in the tank, but after my experience from last night, I thought that it'd be so much more peaceful if I plucked it out of the water and killed it right there. I wasn't one to think such morbid thoughts--much less one to think about killing or injuring an animal--but after seeing the last fish die in a brutal and bizarre way, I wasn't sure what to think.

Brad wasn't home. Lex, Soul and Travis had came over earlier and picked him up for a day out on the town. I had decided to stay home, mostly because I wanted to go get another fish. The other reason I wanted to stay home was because I was bothered with what I had seen last night.

How could a fish get impaled on a piece of fake coral? I thought, reaching out and pressing a hand to the glass, fingering the duct tape that Brad had put on the crack.

Brad had knocked some sense into me with the, 'Fish can't kill

themselves' thing, but it still bothered me. Did I mess something up on the tank? Did the fish run into a heater, burning it so badly that it flew into the coral and got speared there?

I shook those thoughts away as the little black koi came over to the side of the tank. It stared at me with eyes so dark that they were almost invisible on its skin.

He's pretty, I thought. Maybe it's just because I like black though.

I brushed at my own black clothing. The cut-offs and undershirt I was wearing were both black. The underwear I was wearing was also black, but that didn't really matter. That *wouldn't* matter unless Brad decided to get nasty with me tonight.

He'd like that, I grinned, walking over to the table, opening my laptop.

I jumped when a heavy blast of music escaped from the laptop.

"Brad," I muttered. "Here I went and unplugged the earpiece he was using and I get scared half to death."

I clicked on the internet explorer window he had left open and found a news article about a local man that had died. I frowned and scrolled up, looking at the man's face.

"Who's this?"

The man's name was Dominic Washington. The name didn't ring a bell in my head, but if Brad had been looking at the man's obituary, it must've meant something.

Was that why he was acting so bummed out? Was that why Soul, Lex and Travis came over?

Maybe the guys had gone out to get drinks. Brad had stopped drinking back when I was dating him, but I could understand the need to get completely wasted. Men did that when their wives broke up with them or when they had had a bad day, *especially* when a friend died.

I felt bad now that I was here alone. Brad had asked me to come along and I had told him to go and spend time with his friends, to not worry about me. The kiss he gave me before they left had been a longer kiss than he normally gave me when he was just leaving with his friends.

“I’m so fucking stupid. I should’ve known that something was wrong.”

I had seen something in his eyes before he left, but I hadn’t questioned him, especially with Soul, Lex and Travis standing there. Soul would’ve said something. I didn’t want Brad to feel uncomfortable around his friends.

I shook my head and walked over to the couch, where I sat down and turned the TV on.

“Might as well kill some time.”

A knock at the door made me jump. The shark had just burst out of the water and pulled a woman off a ramp before the knocking had startled me.

“I’ll be right there!” I said, turning the TV off.

I looked through the peephole and found Adam Green standing at the door. I unlocked the bolt and chain.

“Adam?” I asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Where’s Brad?”

“He’s out with his friends. Why?”

“Dominic Washington was found dead in his apartment building a few days ago.”

The way Adam had said that made the hairs on my arms and neck go up.

“What happened?” I asked, feeling sweat stick to the hair under my arms.

“I mean, what...”

“What’s wrong, Dean?”

“He was looking at a news article this morning,” I sighed. “Now I feel bad, because he’s off with his friends.”

“You want me to stay?”

“If you could, I’d appreciate it. Besides, I’ve wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure,” Adam said, walking to the table. “What is it?”

“Two years ago,” I began, “I met a man named Adam on my flight to Colorado. This man had a little lighter hair and a stubble beard, like yours, but just stubble, not long hair. He was messing around with a laptop, and he was concerned for my wellbeing... Was that you?”

Adam closed his eyes for a moment, a smile spreading across his face.

“Yeah, that was me. I’m naturally concerned about people, that’s pretty much what my job entails. You got airsick, I remember that.”

I rest my elbow on the table, looking at the man I had lost in a crowd of people two years ago.

“I had turned around to ask for your phone number, so we could keep in touch, but you were gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam said. “Well, at least we know that it was the two of us that met on the plane. I thought about you for a good month before you faded in my mind.”

“Why?”

“It looked like you were a sad teenager. I felt bad because I lost contact with you.”

I laced my fingers together.

“Who was Dominic Washington?”

“One of your boyfriend’s friends from when he was a teenager,” Adam said. “Brad talked about him, said he moved out here not too long after Brad himself had. He also said that Dominic called Brad when he was out with his friends a few days ago and said that he was really depressed.”

“Why was he depressed?”

“Dominic didn’t have his life in order. He got into drugs and his life

turned into a one-way, downward spiral to hell. Brad got all emotional about it.”

“How come?”

“Brad said that he and Dominic were sexual during their teenage years. They had never dated, but apparently Dominic had thought that the playful experimentation that pubescent and teenage boys do was real love.”

I never had the chance to do any ‘experiment’ because I was so afraid of what others would think. Brad, though, hadn’t seemed to mind.

“Did he tell you what they did?”

“Oral sex, mostly.” Adam placed his hands behind his head. “They didn’t have anal sex, I don’t think.”

“It wouldn’t matter to me. Brad loves me; that’s all I care about. I don’t care about his past boyfriends.”

Adam nodded.

“Brad might come home a little bummed out tonight, Dean. Just tell him you love him and give him his space.”

I nodded, glad that I had Adam’s company. I knew I’d go crazy if I was here by myself.

The knock on the door made me rise from my place on the couch. Adam had been getting himself a drink of water before the knock came.

“Baby!” Brad said, giving me a wide, stupid grin. “I love you so much!”

Brad pressed his mouth on mine, sliding his tongue in.

I could taste alcohol.

I pushed Brad away, using a smile to hide my disgust. I couldn't stand the smell of alcohol, much less the taste of it.

"I'll get going," Adam said. "Hi, Brad."

"Hello officer!" Brad grinned. "You have a good chat with my hotshot boyfriend?"

"Sure did," Adam said, forcing a smile, even though it was more than obvious that Brad was drunk. "See you guys later."

Adam looked at me for a short moment before walking out the door.

"You ok, Brad?"

"Fucking hell! I feel like I'm ten...ten...Dammit. What's the phrase?"

"Ten feet tall?"

"Yeah, that." Brad stumbled past me, catching himself on the wall. "I feel like I'm ten feet tall!"

I locked the door, turning just in time to see Brad at the fish tank.

"What the *fuck* is this?"

I froze in place as he looked at the koi.

"It's a fish, Brad. I got it after you left."

"Get rid of it."

Brad's voice was blunt and without emotion. His words struck me hard.

"Brad, I wanted another one. You said you didn't care."

"It's fucking *black*."

"Black? Brad, *I'm* wearing black."

"You're not trying to mess with me though," Brad said, tapping the side of his head. "*Are* you trying to mess with me, Dean?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's a black fish in here," he growled. "You think that it feels good to have people fuck with me, Dean? You want to know what it feels like? *This* is what it feels like."

Brad jabbed his finger into my chest, his mouth curled into a twisted snarl.

"This," Brad said, jabbing my chest again. "Is what it feels like."

With each word, he jabbed his finger into my chest.

"Stop it!"

I slapped his hand away.

Brad hit me, hard.

Hot tears poured down my face.

"I'm sorry about your friend, Brad."

Brad's demeanor quickly changed.

“Oh, baby,” Brad said, pulling me closer. “Oh baby, baby. Please, I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you doing this? Why did you hit me?”

“I don’t know, baby. I don’t know.”

“I know,” I said, pulling away from him.

“Why?” Brad asked. “Why did I hit you?”

“You have to promise not to hit me,” I said. “I’ll call someone, Brad. I don’t want to get hurt.”

“I won’t hit you,” Brad nodded, rubbing his face. “Call the coppers if you want, I don’t care.”

“You went out with your friends and got drunk to wash your sadness away.” I took his face in my hands. “I would’ve talked with you, Brad.”

“I thought you would’ve been mad.”

“Adam told me about what you and Dominic did as kids. I don’t care, Brad. I know you’re here with me. Nothing you did in the past is going to change that.”

“I love you, Dean.”

“I love you too, Brad. Go to bed. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Brad walked to the bed, where he kicked his shoes off before collapsing on top of it, clothing and all. I sighed as his snores began.

He’s asleep.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

Why was he so afraid of the black fish? I turned and looked at the tank, watching the fish swim back and forth. I pulled Brad's shirt and pants off before turning the light off.

In the kitchen, the black fish continued to swim...

Back and forth...

Back and forth...

Back and forth...

Part 57:

Conversations of Black Things

- - -

I woke to the sound of Brad's slow, deep breaths. I remembered last night and touched my cheek, grimacing.

He hit me hard, I thought. What time is it?

I looked over at the clock.

Nine?

Brad was hung over, otherwise he would've already been up. I got out of bed, grabbing the phone.

Kendra...

My fingers had entered her on speed-dial before I could do anything else.

"Hello?"

"Kendra, can you come over here?"

"What is it, Dean?"

“I just need someone to talk to.”

The knock on the door startled me. I rose from my place in the kitchen and walked to the door.

“Dean, you’re not dressed.”

I blushed.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Oh God! What happened to your face.”

I placed a finger to my lips.

“Brad went out with his friends yesterday. He got home later last night. He was upset, Kendra... He hit me.”

“That bastard. I swear, I’m gonna...”

“His friend was found dead in his apartment the day before yesterday. He was upset after I calmed him down.”

Kendra set her purse on the table.

“He’s still out?”

“He usually gets up at five-thirty. Well, he did, before all this happened. Now we usually get up at seven.”

“What about you?”

“I only just got up,” I said, grabbing my jeans and pulling them up my

legs, sighing. "I'm sorry. I must smell."

"Don't worry about it. Are you ok, Dean?"

"Yeah, 'I'm fine."

"Are you *really* ok though?"

"No. He freaked out when he saw the fish."

Kendra walked over to the fish tank, staring into the glass.

"Why?"

"It's black."

"Black? What's wrong with the color black?"

"I don't know. Brad was drunk, so I couldn't really get anything out of him."

Kendra leaned against the counter, crossing her arms over her breasts.

"I don't know what to tell you, Dean. "I do want you to watch out for him though."

"I do." I touched my cheek. "Is there a bruise?"

Kendra grabbed her purse, pulled her makeup case out, and opened it, showing me what my cheek looked like.

"Ouch. It could've been worse."

"It could've been *a lot* worse. I thought he quit drinking?"

"He did. I think it was because of his friend."

“Was this man a close friend?”

“No. It was a friend from a few years ago. Adam told me that Dominic had called Brad and had talked to him, said how much he hated his life. It brought some old stuff back up with Brad.”

“How come?”

“Adam said Brad and Dominic were sexual partners when they were younger.” I rubbed my neck. “I’m guessing around their early teens.”

Kendra looked over my shoulder. I turned, sighing my thanks as I saw Brad peacefully sleeping.

“The fish was what set him off?” Kendra asked, drawing me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah. Because it was black.”

“Does he not like the color black?”

“I wear it all the time. He doesn’t say anything.”

You’re leaving out the part where he said that black was evil and that you were trying to fuck with him.

I shook it off.

“Thank you for coming over, Kendra.”

“Do you need me to stay longer?”

“No. I don’t want him to wake up and ask why you’re here.”

Kendra turned, about to leave.

“Just be careful, Dean.”

She kissed my cheek before walking out the door. When I heard the door close, I rubbed the cheek that she kissed.

I could always count on Kendra.

I looked over at the bed as Brad groaned.

“What time is it?” Brad asked.

“Ten,” I said. “You ok?”

“I feel like a bomb went off in my head,” Brad said, moaning before throwing his legs over the bed.

“You got drunk last night,” I said, saving what I was working on before closing the laptop.

“I remember. Dean, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you.”

“I know you didn’t. You were drunk, you couldn’t help it.”

“I could’ve helped by not getting drunk,” he said, wrapping his arms around my shoulders. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“You could’ve talked to me, Brad.”

“I was afraid of what you would ask.”

“Adam already told me you and Dominic were sexually interested in each other when you were teenagers.” I pulled away, touching his arm. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen,” Brad said. “The two of us were thirteen.”

“How long had you known him?”

“Since Kindergarten. He was my best friend up until we hit puberty, then we got into the sex and...” Brad shook his head. “We had to force ourselves away from the sex, Dean. But you know something? When a friendship turns into a relationship, and when a relationship turns into something sexual, there’s not much you can do.”

I gave Brad a minute before I continued.

“You had to break the friendship.”

“We would’ve gone further than just blowjobs if we hadn’t. What we were doing wasn’t something out of love, Dean. What me and Dominic did... We were doing it because it felt good. We were too young to know what love was.”

I placed my hand on his. I wanted to say something to comfort him, but didn’t know what to tell him.

“I can’t say anything to make the pain go away, but I’m here for you, Brad. You know that, right?”

“I know, baby. I love you.”

“I love you too. We have to talk about the fish though.”

Brad looked in the tank, then turned his head away. He set his hands on the table, wrapping his fingers together.

“What’s to talk about? It’s just a fish.”

“You freaked out when you saw it. It’s what started the fight.”

“I was drunk. I could’ve gone off about anything.”

“But out of everything, you went off on the fish. You said that by having this black fish, I was fucking with you.”

Brad bowed his head.

“Brad,” I said. “Please, tell me.”

“It’s an evil color, a very evil color. It’s *always* been an evil color.”

“What’s wrong with the color? I wear black. You don’t seem to mind.”

“I know you, Dean,” Brad said, looking up at me, his gray eyes dark, filled with storms. “I know you’re not evil.”

“Of course I’m not evil, but what makes you think that the fish is evil just because it’s black?”

A tear fell from his face and landed on his naked knee.

“I’m afraid,” Brad said. “I’ve always been afraid.”

“Of what?” I asked, touching his shoulder, surprised to feel how skin his cold was. “You’re still suffering the hangover, Brad. Let me get you some aspirin.”

“No!” Brad said, grabbing my arm before I could rise from my seat. “I might not tell you if I don’t right now!”

“What is it, Brad?”

“They torment me,” Brad said, his voice becoming a whisper. “The black things do.”

“What black things? What black things, Brad?”

“The things I see,” he gasped. “The things I hear,” he gasped again. “The things... The things that torment me in the night, Dean. The things that bite at my ankles...”

Brad groaned, setting his head on the table..

“This fucking hangover,” he moaned, his voice evening out, returning to its normal pitch and tone.

“I’ll get you aspirin.”

I was practically having to hold Brad up in the shower. He was never good with medicine, even simple painkillers. He was falling asleep on me.

“Brad,” I said, patting his cheek. “Stay awake, will you? You’re heavy.”

“That’s why I’m on top all the time,” he said, forcing a grin.

I kissed him, running the bar of soap over his chest.

“How much did you drink last night?”

“Lost count after five beers and ten shots.”

“Of what?”

“Whisky,” Brad grinned, his eyes lazy, and half shut.

“You’re not going to become an alcoholic on me, are you?”

“No,” Brad said, tightening his hold on me. “You don’t like the drinking.”

“I don’t like the taste of it either. You shoved your tongue in my mouth and I almost gagged from the taste.”

“Sorry, I won’t do that again.”

“I don’t like to see you like that. It’s only the third time since we’ve been together, but I don’t like seeing you drunk.”

Brad sighed.

“I want to go to his funeral,” he said.

“Dominic’s?”

“Yeah. I want you to come with me.”

“I will,” I said. “I’ll come with you.”

Part 58:

Funeral

- - -

It was an open-casket viewing. Brad and I were sitting in two spare chairs, letting the other people go first. Lex, Soul and Travis weren't here, as they were not friends of the family or passed, and because it was a private viewing.

Regardless of the fact that I had been holding Brad's hand the whole time, no one had said anything. They had glanced over at me and Brad and forced a smile, but they hadn't said anything about our sexuality.

"It's ok," I said, wiping a stray tear that fell from Brad's face.

"I know. There's not much you can do by crying."

"No, but it helps to know that he's going somewhere, right?"

I only noticed how blunt my comment was after I said it.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know," Brad said, squeezing my hand. "I know you didn't mean it like that."

"A place like heaven, that's what I meant."

"I know. That other world I believe in will be bringing him in soon enough."

The peace in Brad's voice was more than reassuring to me. I squeezed his hand, standing as he pulled me up.

"Do you want me to come up with you?"

"That's your choice."

I let go of his hand.

"Say what you need to say."

Brad turned, walking to the casket.

*

A man that was very dear to Brad lay in the casket in front of him. Although Dominic's face and body were pale, that didn't detract from the beauty the man had.

I let him go just because I was scared, Brad thought, tears rolling down his face. I let him go because I was scared and didn't know what love really was.

Brad took Dominic's hand, leaning in close to his now-gone friend's face.

"I'm sorry," Brad said. "I'm sorry, Dominic."

A tear escaped his face, where it fell on Dominic's shoulder.

“You’re so beautiful. You always were.”

Thoughts of their flesh touching each other came to Brad’s mind. Thoughts of kisses, of moans, of cries and of sorrow pinched his mind. Another tear fell from his face.

“I’m sorry,” Brad said, gripping Dominic’s hand. “I’m sorry, Dominic. I shouldn’t have stopped calling you. I shouldn’t have pushed us apart. Dominic... You were the first man I ever loved.”

Brad closed his eyes and sobbed. He cried for the man that he had left, he cried for the times he had missed with Dominic, and most of all, he cried because he had lost a man whom he had loved.

Brad looked over at Dean, taking comfort in the fact that his boyfriend was here.

“Sleep easy, Dominic,” Brad said, kissing the man’s forehead. “You’re in a place that’s far better than the hell I live in.”

*

I accepted Brad into my arms as he walked over to me. He buried his head into the crook of my neck, sobbing. I held him, casting glances at the people who had stopped to look at the scene.

No one had been crying.

No one but Brad.

“It’s all right,” I said, stroking his back. “Everything will be all right,

Brad.”

“He’s gone. I never got the chance to say that I was sorry.”

I stroked Brad’s head.

“You can say sorry whenever you want,” I said. “You can talk to him, too. Maybe he’ll talk back.”

Brad hugged me tighter.

“We have to go. I couldn’t bear to see them put him in the ground.”

I took his hand, following him out to the car.

“It’s all right,” I said, helping Brad out of his jacket. “He’s in a better place now.”

Brad walked to the kitchen table, where he sat down. He started crying again.

“Brad,” I said, hugging him. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Brad said. “But that doesn’t bring him back.”

I nodded, about to walk to the fridge before I heard a knock at the door. Soon after, the door opened, revealing Soul, Lex and Travis.

“Hey Brad,” Lex said with a small smile. “You ok?”

“No,” Brad said, wiping tears off his face. “What’re you guys doing here?”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Brought over some painkillers,” Travis said, pulling a twenty-four pack out of a paper bag. “Figured you could use it.”

Brad looked over at me.

‘Go ahead,’ I mouthed.

Brad gave a small nod and reached out, cracking open a beer.

I knew from the very first drink that this wasn’t going to be a one-time thing.

Part 59:

Alcohol Poisoning

- - -

It had been three days since the funeral.

Brad was hung over...

Again.

I couldn't say that I *completely* hated the alcohol, as it was dulling Brad's pain, but it also hurt me. Lex was right when he said it was a painkiller, that was for sure. Little did Lex know that it was also a pain *bringer* too.

It was ten AM. I had checked my email and found three new acceptances and was pleased. Since I had replied, I had been writing, gradually working on my novel while waiting for Brad to get up so I could make breakfast.

He should be waking up sometime soon.

I continued on with my writing for the next ten minutes before he fell out of bed. I jumped out of my chair and ran over to where he was.

“Brad?” I asked, patting his cheek. “You ok?”

“Yeah,” Brad grinned. “Just fell out of bed.”

I gave him a hand, which he took. I grunted as I pulled him up, since he wasn’t doing much to help me. Brad slapped my back before walking over to the fridge, pulling a beer out.

“This early?” I asked.

Brad cracked the beer open.

“You care?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t do anything about it anyway. A man would drink, regardless of whether or not his boyfriend liked it.

“I love you,” I said, kissing his lips, hiding my grimace as I tasted the sour acid.

“I love you too,” Brad said, taking another drink. “I’m gonna go wash up.”

I sighed, looking over at the phone.

It wouldn’t take long for Brad to get drunk, at the rate he was drinking.

I and decided that I would invite Kason over.

“He’s already getting tipsy,” Kason whispered, watching Brad walk to the fridge.

“You want a beer, Kason?” Brad asked.

“No thanks, Brad.”

“Suit yourself,” Brad said, cracking open his beer and sitting down beside me. “Love you, baby.”

“I love you too,” I said, kissing his cheek. “You feeling all right?”

“I don’t have a hangover,” Brad grinned.

Of course you don’t have a hangover. Alcohol usually gets rid of that.

“You feeling all right, Dean?”

I looked up at Kason.

“I’m fine,” I said, forcing a smile. “What makes you think I wouldn’t be fine?”

“Nothing,” Kason said, placing his hands behind his head. “I was just checking.”

I looked over at Brad, who took another drink before standing.

“Gonna use the bathroom,” Brad said. “I’ll be back.”

I watched him disappear into the bathroom before looking back up at Kason.

“What’s wrong?” Kason asked.

“He hit me when he got drunk that night. The bruise on my cheek is gone, but he hit me.”

“Are you two having problems?”

“The only problems we’re having is the alcohol. I asked you over because I wanted someone to be here with me.”

“So he wouldn’t get violent?”

“Yeah. He freaked out because of the fish.”

“The fish?” Kason frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He said that the things that tormented him were that color.”

“His little visitors.”

“Yeah. That’s exactly how I feel.”

Kason pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

“You want one?”

I took the smoke. I had pretty much stopped smoking, not that I had wanted to, but I just hadn’t had the cigarettes. Brad had stopped too, but it was probably because of my reason.

“Thanks,” I said, holding it between my fingers as Kason lit it. “I appreciate it.”

“No trouble,” Kason said, sticking his cigarette between his lips.

I exhaled a mouthful of smoke before Brad walked out of the bathroom.

“You want a cigarette, Brad?” Kason asked.

“I don’t care,” Brad said, accepting the cigarette Kason offered.

“Thanks.”

“No trouble. You ok, Brad?”

“Fine. Just a bit bummed out about my friend, that’s all.”

“Dean told me about it,” Kason said, leaning over the table, patting Brad’s shoulder. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you,” Brad said, then, as an afterthought, added, “is that why you came over, Kason?”

“Yeah. Just wanted to give you guys some company.”

“Well, I appreciate it. It’s not too often that me and Dean get visitors.”

Kason and Kendra will be over more than you think. You scare me when you’re drunk, Brad.

For the next three days, Kendra and Kason had alternated coming over to visit. They left around six, leaving me and Brad alone in the house. Kason had left just a few minutes ago.

“I’ll start making dinner,” I said, standing. “You’re probably getting hungry.”

“Yeah,” Brad said, standing, wrapping his arms around me from behind. “For you.”

I gasped as Brad began kissing my neck. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, enjoying the playful attention he was giving me.

At least he’s in a good mood. At least he’s a happy drunk most of the time.

“I need to make dinner, Brad,” I said, pushing him away.

“I already know what I want. It’s you.”

Brad spun me around and drew me close to his chest, kissing me. I ignored the taste of alcohol.

“See,” he gasped, pulling his mouth away. “You,” another gasp, “want,” a third gasp, “it.”

I pushed him away and pulled my shirt off. Brad growled, throwing me on the bed, kissing and licking my face.

“God, Brad. You’re that horny?”

“Hell yeah.” Brad licked my hard nipples. “I want you so bad, baby.”

I moaned when he kissed my stomach. Soon after, his hand gripped my dick.

“I want these pants off,” Brad said, pulling both my shorts and underwear down. “God, yes.”

Brad took my cock in his mouth. I arched my back. Brad didn’t blow me that often; he offered, but I usually said not to worry about it. Now, though, I was liking this.

“God,” I said, pushing his head into my crotch. “Keep going, Brad.”

Brad continued sucking me, soon pulling up to the head. He kept his wraps wrapped around the head and pleased that until I came, and when I did, he sucked me dry.

“Yeah,” Brad said, pulling his own shorts off. “You taste good, baby.”

I climbed into his lap, pushing down on his cock. Brad liked to be on top, but I liked to ride the thick piece of meat he had between his legs on occasion.

“God, Dean,” Brad said, kissing me.

I continued riding him, losing myself in the pleasure.

I had lost sense of time after we had finished. Brad was passed out beside me. I was so sore that I could hardly move. A quick look at the clock showed that we had gone for two hours.

“At least he had a good time before he passed out,” I mumbled, running a hand across my sweaty forehead.

I touched Brad’s back and ran my hand down it, shivering. I knew that I had to talk with Brad’s friends. They were the ones that had started the drinking back up.

You’re going to be sorry for messing with me. You’re going to be sorry.

Part 60:

Bad Boys

- - -

I had listened to Brad enough to know that they would all be at Soul's apartment. I left a note and walked out of the apartment, locking the door behind me. My body still ached from the sex, but I forced myself to walk down the stairs and out to the car.

They need to be informed on what's happening, I thought, making my way toward Soul's apartment. *They started Brad's drinking again.*

I took slow, even breaths. It hurt to sit. Brad had pounded my ass a good one, and as always, he hadn't been gentle. I grimaced and sucked up, ignoring my pain.

I had one thing on my mind.

I stood in front of Soul's apartment door, readying myself for this whole experience. I was trying to figure out what to say. It's not like I could just barge

in and demand them to fuck off.

You'll play it by ear, I thought, knocking on the door. *That's the only thing I can do.*

There was the sound of the three of them talking before someone rose and came to the door.

"Dean?" Travis asked, running a hand across his bare chest. "What're you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you guys. Can I come in?"

Travis let me in. I looked over at Soul and Lex, who were smoking, both shirtless and sweating.

"What's going on?" I asked, tapping my chest.

"Oh, that," Lex grinned. "We were lifting weights."

I leaned against the wall, grimacing.

"What's wrong?" Soul asked.

"Me and Brad had sex before I came over here," I said. "For two hours."

Soul grinned and took another drag.

"What was it you needed, Dean?"

"I wanted to talk to you guys about Brad's drinking," I said, walking to the table and sitting down, grimacing before getting used to the pain. "We need to talk about it."

"What's to talk about?" Travis asked. "So what if he's drinking?"

“So what?” I asked. “You have no idea how fucking bad I hate alcohol.”

“Just because you don’t drink doesn’t mean you have to hate it,” Soul said. “You...”

“My parents were alcoholics,” I growled. “I don’t need my boyfriend drinking.”

“Brad can make his own decisions, Dean,” Lex said. “He’s a big boy.”

“And you think letting him drink is going to make him better?” I asked, standing, glaring at the three of them.

“Leave him alone,” Lex said. “He doesn’t need you screwing with his emotions.”

“What the hell did you just say?”

“I said leave him alone.”

“And who the hell are you to tell me what to do?”

“I’m his friend,” Lex said, walking around the table.

“And I’m his boyfriend. I know what’s best for him.”

“You’d do best to fuck off, Dean.”

“I’m not afraid of you. Just because you’re bigger and a little heavier than me doesn’t mean I’m afraid of you.”

“You little cocktease,” Lex hissed. “I ought to kick your whiny fucking ass.”

“He needs help. Can’t you see that?”

Lex shoved my back against the wall, lifting me up in the air.

“He was doing just fine until you came into the picture. He spent time with his friends, he wasn’t a freak, he wasn’t distancing himself from us.”

“I thought we were friends.”

“We’re only friends with you because you’re Brad’s cockteasing boyfriend. You think that we’d treat you like a friend?”

“I don’t care if you beat me up,” I said, tasting the salt in my tears. “If it’ll make you feel good, beat me up.”

Lex stared at me for a moment before sighing, placing me on the floor. I slid down the wall, sobbing.

“Dean,” Lex said, bending down. “I... I didn’t mean those things I said about you.”

“I’m a broken person anyway. It doesn’t matter if you call me a cocktease or a slut.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Lex said, touching my shoulder. “I didn’t mean that, Dean.”

“I want to get Brad some help. He’s going to get sick if he keeps drinking the way he does.”

“All right,” Lex said. “You get him help, Dean.”

I stood, accepting the hand that Lex offered me. I was about to turn and leave before Lex pulled me into a hug.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“I’m sorry,” Lex said. “I know saying I’m sorry won’t make what I said go away, but I want you to know that. I was mad, Dean. I just want Brad to be all right.”

“I know,” I said, resting my head against Lex’s shoulder. “I’m going to talk to him about Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Part 61:

Alcoholics Anonymous

- - -

The day after going over to the guys' place, I was making breakfast when Brad rose. He immediately went for the fridge, but when he pulled the drink out, I turned and looked at him.

"Please don't, Brad."

Brad looked at me, taking a drink.

"What?" Brad asked.

"I don't like you drinking."

"You said you didn't care."

I finished making breakfast, setting the eggs, bacon and toast on the table.

"You know me, Brad; I don't like alcohol."

"It helps me, Dean," Brad said, setting the beer down, grabbing my

shoulders. “Don’t you want that?”

“Alcohol slowly kills you,” I said, touching his bare chest. “It’s called alcohol poisoning, Brad. It messes with your whole body.”

“You can’t make me stop drinking.”

“I know I can’t. It’s an addiction, which is why we’re going to get rid of it.”

“What?”

“We’re going to dump that beer down the sink, and then we’re going to an AA meeting today.”

Brad could only stare.

“You can’t make me go. You can’t, Dean.”

“Then I leave,” I said, a tear rolling down my face. “And I leave for good.”

Hurt washed over his face. His hands started shaking and his eyes went dark.

“You wouldn’t leave. You love me.”

“I can’t love a man who drinks as much as you do.”

“Dean...”

“Either you dump the rest of your beer down the sink or I’m leaving today.”

“But baby... We’ve been together for so long.”

“And it’ll hurt me if I leave. It’ll probably kill me, Brad. I can’t live with an alcoholic, much less love one, or share his bed.”

A tear ran down Brad’s face. He tossed the beer he had already drank into the sink.

“I love you so much, Dean,” Brad said, pulling me close. “I won’t let something as stupid as beer break us apart.”

I let him hold me for several minutes before he broke the embrace. He turned, pulled the twenty-four pack out of the fridge, and started cracking the cans open, one at a time. I stared in mute fascination as the piss-yellow liquid ran down the sink.

I knew things were going to get better, I just knew it.

“So,” the AA counselor said, looking up at all of us. “How are you today?”

Everyone muttered a fine or an all right, but Brad didn’t say anything. I could tell he was nervous. I tightened my grip on his hand and gave him a small smile.

“I see we have a few new people here,” the man said, looking up at us. “Care to give us your names, gentlemen?”

“I’m Brad Michelson,” Brad said. “And this is my boyfriend, Dean.”

Everyone gave us a small hello or hi, but the AA counselor smiled and

offered me and Brad his hand.

“I’m Chad Armstrong, the AA counselor.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, patting Brad’s hand.

“I guess we’ll start with you today, Brad,” Chad said. “How come you’re here?”

“Because I’m an alcoholic. Because I don’t want to lose Dean.”

Chad smiled.

“That’s the first step,” Chad said, patting Brad’s shoulder. “Admitting your problem is *always* the first step.”

“Yes sir,” Brad said, smiling. “I don’t want to lose Dean. That’s the whole reason why I bucked up and decided to come.”

“How would he lose you, Dean?” Chad asked.

“I don’t like alcohol, sir,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “My parents were alcoholics when I was growing up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Chad said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Alcoholism is a disease that’s hard to cure.”

I gave Brad’s hand another squeeze, mouthing, ‘I love you’ before listening to what the others had to say about their own alcohol problems.

“See, it wasn’t that bad.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Brad said. “It was rather depressing though.”

“I know. Hearing all of those people talk about what’s happened to them.”

“I’m just lucky I didn’t lose you,” Brad said, pulling me close. “I don’t think I could live without you, Dean.”

I kissed his cheek, leading him into the kitchen.

“Lasagna ok?” I asked, pulling ingredients out of the fridge.

“Sounds good, baby,” Brad said, wrapping his arms around me from behind, nibbling my earlobe. “You make the best lasagna.”

“Thanks. I try, you know?”

“You succeed!” Brad said in an enthusiastic voice.

I burst out laughing and turned, kissing him.

“You know how to make me laugh.”

“We know how to make each other laugh,” Brad grinned. “That’s what makes us so good for each other.”

I gave him a few pats on the cheek before turning, continuing to make dinner.

I knew that things were going to get better because of these AA classes.

People never know what it feels like to hold someone they love until they actually do it. When I was in Brad’s arms, the world dissolved. I fell into a place where only the two of us existed. This was where our souls joined together like

some beautiful, androgynous siamese twin.

“Brad, you ready to go to bed?”

“Yeah. Just a few more minutes, baby.”

“You...” I shook my head. “All right.”

I had been about to say that he was falling asleep on me, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. If Brad wanted to hold me, that was fine.

“I love you,” Brad whispered, pulling me to his chest.

“I love you too. You ok?”

“Yeah. AA isn’t tomorrow, is it?”

“They don’t have our group on Sunday.”

“All right. I was just asking.”

“You don’t want to go?”

“No. I *do* want to go. I like going. It made me feel better knowing that I wasn’t the only alcoholic in the world.”

“Of course you’re not the only alcoholic in the world.”

“Anyway, I was just asking. Sunday’s a good day to relax anyway.”

“Goodnight, Brad.”

He was already asleep.

Part 62:

Disabled Payment

- - -

When I went out to our apartment mailbox, I pulled out a few bills and a few promotional offers. I tossed them in a trashcan. I also pulled out an AA card that said, ‘Stay Sober, Brad!’ on it, which made me smile.

Then I pulled the final letter out. It made me sigh.

It was from the healthcare organization.

It was Brad’s disability check.

Oh well, he knows that this would come eventually.

The first day of March, we received his disability check. It was rather ironic, the way things like this liked to pop out of the woodwork and cause problems.

With one last sigh, I made my way back up the stairs and to our apartment, where I saw Brad sitting at the table, eating dry cereal.

“Brad,” I said, closing the door.

“Yeah?” he asked, tossing some cereal in his mouth before standing.

“What is it?”

I handed him the letter.

“It’s your... Your...”

“I know what it is. I’m ok with it.”

“You are?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, a small smile crossing his face. “Sometimes you just have to accept what happens in your life, Dean. You know that.”

I *did* know that, to a T. I had learned to deal with Brad’s schizophrenia, the medicine he took, the way he sometimes got depressed. But I had learned to help him with it too. For every single thing someone has to deal with, there was something they could do to help that problem.

“Dean?”

I looked up at Brad, kissing his cheek.

“You ok, Dean?” Brad asked, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m fine. I love you.”

“I love you too. So much.”

That night, we had decided to go out. Brad had drove us down to the park, where we sat on the bench. The bench that we sat on was the one that we

had sat on on our first date. Just touching its wooden seat and cold, metal armrests was enough to bring that whole memory back.

“This is where we sat on our first date,” Brad said, breaking the night’s silence.

“I know. I wouldn’t forget.”

“Things like that are hard to forget. Memories never go away, Dean. Memories can fade, but they never go away.”

“Sometimes you just want to forget all the bad memories.”

“Sometimes you can’t forget some of those memories,” Brad said, wrapping his arm around me. “But when you’re with someone you love, you don’t have to worry about those memories, because those memories don’t really mean anything anymore.”

“I know what you mean. After our first date, it was like the slate of my soul was wiped clean of all the bad things that had happened in my life.”

“You know what, Dean? All those people that ever wronged you have worse lives than you. All of those people are shit. They’ll never be happy. The nagging thought that they were so cruel when they were teenagers will always haunt them in one way or another.”

“I’ve forgotten my past. What’s the use in hanging on to it if it was hell?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Why hold on to it?”

Part 63:

Kaleidaorbs

- - -

I had just come out of the bathroom when I saw Brad on my laptop. I pulled some underwear and jeans up my legs before I walked over to him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders.

“Watcha doin’?”

“Just messing around in this photo program.”

I watched him make the final touches to a beautiful red orb. The inside pattern, coupled with the softening and glowing affects he was using, made the image stand out *a lot*.

“What is it?”

“A kaleidaorb,” Brad said.

“A what?”

“Kel-ay-da-orb. They’re little orb things that I used to draw when I was a

teenager.”

“I didn’t know you could do stuff like this. I mean, on the computer.”

“I did a few little things here and there. When I couldn’t sleep, I’d get out of bed and tinker around. Making these orbs are my favorite thing to do.”

I stared at it for another moment before Brad saved and closed the file.

“I was waiting for you to get out of the shower to start making breakfast,” Brad said. “I figured I could warm up that hamburger helper you made last night.”

“That’d be fine.” I looked back at the computer when we walked in the kitchen. “Do they mean something, Brad?”

“What?”

“The kaleidaorbs?”

“No, not really. Just something to keep the dark away.”

He winked. I smiled. It was one of his Brad-isms. My boyfriend said a lot of odd things, but this was one of the weirder ones. *The dogs were chasing me*, and *they bite at my ankles* were the more familiar ones. I *knew* that those two referred to his nightmares, but this one--*just something to keep the dark away*--was new.

“Brad?”

“What?” he smiled.

I shook my head, deciding to keep my peace. I had learned not to ask

about his isms. When I asked about them, it sometimes led to him getting upset or depressed.

“You sure do like red,” I said, remembering the orb.

“Course I do. It’s my favorite color.”

“Is that why the kaleidaorb was red?”

“Hell no. It’s because I was born in October.”

Born on the darkest month of the year.

“They’re colored by month?”

“Yeah,” he said, sticking the hamburger helper in the microwave.

“January’s blue, February’s pink, March is a darker green color.”

“What would my month be?”

“April? Yeah, that’s it. It’s gold with a black pattern inside, like a snowflake.”

“I see,” I said, glad that he was so into his orb artwork.

“What?” Brad grinned.

“Oh, just you with your art.”

“It’s like you with your stories,” Brad laughed. “You’ve got ‘em running all over the places, being romantic, fucking, dealing with werewolves and vampires and all that good ol’ shit.”

“At least we’re entertained, right?”

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“Sure as shit there.”

I playfully punched his shoulder as he pulled the hamburger helper out.

Part 64:

To Keep the Dark Away

- - -

Brad's tossing and turning was what woke me up. I shook him until he woke.

"God," Brad said, tears streaming down his eyes. "Thanks, baby."

"You ok? You're crying."

"My eyes sting, that's all."

"You sure you're ok?"

Brad stood, walking over to the laptop. He sat down and booted it up, waiting for a few minutes before he clicked on something. He stared at it for a minute before turning the laptop toward the bed.

It was the red kaleidaorb he had made earlier this morning.

"Be right back," Brad said, walking into the bathroom.

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. My attention was fixed on the glowing kaleidaorb in front of me. Its beautiful, red magnificence would not let go.

Just a little something to keep the dark away.

I wasn't going to question Brad's reasoning. The computer would go into sleep mode after ten minutes of inactivity, so there was no reason for me to worry about it losing battery life. Even if it was dead in the morning, I could just charge it up.

"You ok?" I asked.

"Yeah. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I cuddled in close to him, ignoring the glare that could faintly be seen above Brad's body. I buried my head into his chest, soon falling asleep.

Part 65:

Scratches

- - -

When Brad came out of the bathroom, he was about to put a shirt on before I stopped him.

“Where did you get all of these scratches?” I asked, running my finger over one of them.

“I slipped in the bathroom. I hit my side and chest on the shower wall.”

“You’re lucky. You could’ve got cut worse.”

“Yeah, I could’ve.”

I ran a hand over his muscle shirt, smiling.

“You know how sexy you look in a muscle shirt?” I asked. “With this nice, tight fabric pulled over that nice, wide chest.”

“I try,” Brad laughed, messing with my hair. “I’ll make breakfast.”

“You sure?”

“You made breakfast yesterday.”

“No, that was the day before. We heated hamburger helper for breakfast yesterday.”

“Oh.” Brad gave me a sly smile. “That’s fine, I’ll make breakfast.”

I nodded and looked at the computer, which had been in sleep mode for a good amount of the night.

“Sorry about leaving the computer on.”

“It’s fine. I thought it made a nice nightlight.”

Brad cracked an egg over a pan.

“Just whatever works, right?”

I moved the touchpad, the screen coming to life with the kaleidaorb.

“Yeah,” I said, my mind elsewhere.

Just whatever works...

I ran my hands through my hair, feeling sweat on my fingers. We hadn’t gone to the gym for a few days, but now that we were here, I was enjoying myself. Brad was benching a good hundred pounds or so while I was running on the treadmill. Watching him work out was something I did to keep my mind off of things, especially when my thoughts were bothering me.

What did he say about the kaleidaorbs? He said that they meant something.

I continued to run, my mind going back to yesterday at breakfast, when he had been telling me about them. They meant *something*, but I couldn't remember what he said.

All right, I thought, closing my eyes, running over what had happened last night. *He woke up after a bad dream, got up, turned the computer on and messed around for a minute before turning it toward the bed. The kaleidaorb was on the screen. Then he went to the bathroom and came back to bed. What was he doing by leaving the kaleidaorb facing the bed? What was he...*

It hit me so hard that I almost fell off of the treadmill. I had to grab the handholds to keep from losing my balance.

Just something to keep the dark away.

"Something to keep the dark away. Now what would that mean?"

I thought about this for another moment before I remembered the nightmare. Was the kaleidaorb a form of comfort to Brad? If it was such a strong comfort that Brad wanted a kaleidaorb to be facing the bed, then how come he hadn't made them before?

Maybe you were asleep when he had a few nightmares. And he gets up before you too, remember? It wouldn't be hard for him to hide the fact that he takes comfort in something that he makes on a computer.

It wasn't right for me to think that Brad didn't do that all the time. He probably got up, turned the computer on, plugged it in and then turned it off before I woke up around seven. I couldn't keep track of *everything* he was doing,

especially in the later hours of the night.

That made me wonder about something. If Brad *did* turn the computer on and put the kaleidaorb image on the screen, how come when I got up, the laptop wasn't open?

Does he time the way he leaves it on? Does he know when I get up? Does he turn the computer off when I get up, then turns it back on when I fall asleep?

The hairs on my arms and neck rose at these thoughts. Why would Brad be doing something like this, if he even *was* doing it? Was it because something was wrong? Was it because something inside of him was telling him to? Was it because...

Just a little something to keep the dark away.

Brad was having nightmares again. If he was having nightmares, then why wasn't he waking me up at night? Why wasn't he telling me if something was wrong?

Brad gets depressed when you ask him about stuff like that. Like after he got diagnosed with schizophrenia, he started cutting himself. He...

A flash of Brad's naked chest entered my mind. The small scratch marks that adorned his smooth, tanned skin stood out in their blood-red lines.

Oh God! He's hurting himself again!

I couldn't let this go.

I had to call Adam.

Part 66:

Counseling Mutilation

- - -

Brad fell asleep on the couch after we got home from the gym, like he usually did. I held the phone in my hand, trying to decide whether or not I really wanted to call Adam. I *did* want to call him, but at the same time, I was afraid of what Brad would say or think.

He's never been mad at you for trying to help him.. He's been upset, but never mad.

I speed-dialed Adam's number. I leaned against the cupboard, counting the rings.

Come on, Adam. Pick up the phone.

"Hello, you have reached the Green residence, please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

I waited for the beep.

“Adam,” I said, my voice shaking. “Please, if you’re there, pick up the phone.”

I waited for a moment.

“Brad, Adam... It’s about Brad.”

“Hello?”

“Adam? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it is. I’m sorry, Dean. I was starting to doze off. What’s wrong, Dean?”

“Brad’s scratching himself.”

“Scratching himself? Dean, what are you talking about?”

“This morning, he came out of the shower and had scratches all over himself. He said he had fell and the shower door had scratched him...”

“He probably just fell, Dean.”

“No, Adam. He has scratches on his arms too. He didn’t get those scratches by falling down.”

“Are you sure, Dean? Are you sure that he couldn’t have just fallen down?”

“I’m sure. He had a bad dream too. He wasn’t talking to himself, but after he got up, he put one of his kaleidaorbs on the computer?”

“What did you just say?”

“They’re something he drew as a teenager. He made one in on a photo

program I have on my laptop, a red one. He said that they keep the dark away.”

The silence from Adam’s end made me nervous.

“I’m sorry, Adam. I’ll let you go...”

“Wait!”

“I’m here.”

“I want to come over and talk to Brad. Play catch up, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll just say I’m there to check up on him. I haven’t been over there in a few days, so I think it’d be a good time to come over.”

“How soon can you be over here?”

“In an hour. Does that work?”

“That works fine. Brad’s asleep anyway.”

“All right. Hang in there, Dean; I’ll be there in an hour at the latest.”

“Thank you, Adam.”

I turned the phone off, holding it to my chest. I looked at Brad.

Adam’s the only one who can get to you. Adam will find out why you’re hurting yourself.

The knocks at the door were what woke Brad up.

“Goddammit,” Brad groaned. “Who’s here?”

"I don't know," I said, getting off of the couch, sighing as I saw Adam.

"Who is it?"

"It's Adam."

Adam gave me a small, easy smile. The man was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, his report bag held firmly in one hand.

"Hey, Dean."

"Hey."

"Can I come in?"

I let Adam in, closing the door behind him. Adam had this act nailed on the head.

"Hey, Brad," Adam said, stopping by the couch. "How've you been?"

"Fine," Brad said, shaking Adam's hand. "Let me put a shirt on."

"It's all right. "Don't worry about it."

Brad rubbed his eyes, yawning before standing up.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Brad said.

"I'm sorry I haven't been over here. I needed a break from everything."

"That's fine. It's good to see you though."

Adam nodded, glancing at me from the corner of his vision before turning back to Brad.

"What happened to your chest, Brad?"

Brad stared at Adam for a short moment before laughing.

“I fell into the shower door,” Brad said, scratching the back of his head.

“Pretty clumsy of me, huh?”

“Where did the scratches on your arms come from?”

Brad froze up when Adam asked that. Brad stared at Adam for a moment before walking into the kitchen.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

I followed the two into the kitchen, but kept my distance.

“Where did the scratches on your arms come from, Brad?” Adam asked again.

“I don’t know. Maybe I was scratching my arms a little too hard.”

“You don’t know?”

“I already said that,” Brad said, raising his voice. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“Brad, are you hurting yourself?”

Brad’s face lost all of its color after Adam said those words. Brad stared at the man before the sheen of tears came to his eyes.

“No, I haven’t.”

“I think it’s time I start coming over on a regular basis again,” Adam sighed, pushing his glasses up his face. “I want you to know that I’m here for you, Brad. I know what you’re doing to yourself is bad, and I know that you may

not think it's you hurting yourself. I'll be over tomorrow, Brad. Hope you're feeling better."

Adam gave Brad's arm a few pats before he passed me.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Adam stopped and gave a small nod before leaving.

"Why?" Brad asked, letting the tears flow down his face.

"I'm worried about you, Brad. I don't want you hurting yourself."

"I'm not hurting myself!" he cried.

"Yes you are, Brad."

"Leave me alone."

"Brad, I don't want you to think that I'm against you. I'm worried."

"I'm not hurting myself," Brad said, roughly wiping tears from his eyes.

"I'm not fucking hurting myself!"

"Yes you are!"

"No I'm not! They're making me do it!"

I stopped my advance and stared at him, the hairs on my arms and neck rising.

"Who's making you hurt yourself? Who is, Brad?"

Brad turned and looked at me. His eyes showed panic, a panic that I only seen when he told me something that he wasn't supposed to tell me.

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“Drop it.”

“But Brad...”

“I said drop it, Dean.”

I did, but I wanted to know what was wrong with him. I wanted to know if there was something that he wasn’t telling me.

“Can I give you a hug?” I asked.

Brad opened his arms. I fell into them.

“I don’t want to make you feel bad. But Brad, if something like this happens, you can’t expect me to let it go.”

Brad held my head to his chest.

“I know,” Brad whispered. “I know.”

Part 67:

Imaginary Friends

- - -

Flashes of blood and skin flowed over my vision. Brad's hands were moving over my body. It was almost as if my skin was water and his hands were solid, two opposites meeting in beautiful passion. Brad was gentle, but at the same time, rough. I cried out and moaned as he began thrusting harder. I called his name several times before I stopped.

Brad was weeping, but he wasn't weeping tears...

He was weeping blood.

I screamed, trying to push him away. I wanted to run to the phone and call 911. I wanted to scream that my boyfriend's eyes were bleeding and that he needed help. Instead, Brad grabbed my wrists and pinned me down. The blood that came from his eyes dripped onto my body. When he forced his mouth on mine I could taste the tang of blood.

"No! No! No! No! No!..."

I hadn't realized that I had been dreaming until I opened my eyes. Sweat covered my body and ran into my eyes. The salt stung. I closed them, rubbing my eyes with the back of my hands.

What the hell was that? Why did I have that dream?

I had never had a bad dream about Brad, not once. I hadn't dreamed about him in any way but a good way since we had started dating.

I rolled over and was met by an empty bed.

"Brad?" I asked. "Where are you?"

When Brad didn't call back, I frowned, looking around the dark apartment. I couldn't see any trace of Brad, not anywhere. I was about to stand up before I heard whispers coming from the bathroom.

God, please, don't let it be what I think it is.

I got out of bed and made my way over to the bathroom, being as quiet as I could be. I pressed myself up against the wall, not wanting Brad to see me.

"They're hurting me, Harmoire," Brad said. "They're making me hurt myself."

My breath caught in my chest.

"I can't help it," Brad said. "I can't fight them, Harmoire. They're starting to take over. I don't know what I'm going to do if they keep it up."

I took slow, deep breaths so Brad wouldn't hear me. The seconds of silence went by as if they were hours. It was starting to drive me mad. I wanted

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to pound my hand against the wall to get some kind of noise out of Brad.

Brad's sigh made me calm down.

"I can't do that, Harmoire!"

I heard Brad swear under his breath.

"I can't talk right now, sorry. I think I heard Dean just now."

I made a mad but silent dash back to the bed, where I got under the covers and acted like I had just woken up.

"Dean?" Brad asked. "You're sweating. You ok?"

"Bad dream. It's good to see your face, Brad."

"Sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. I had to go to the bathroom."

"It's all right."

In the back of my mind, I knew that it wasn't all right. I knew that it wouldn't be all right until I had an answer to why his medicine had stopped working.

Part 68:

Help Me, Doctor Carmen

- - -

I'm going to the grocery store, Brad.

How come?

Because we're running out of food. I'll be back in an hour or so. If I'm late, it's because of the traffic.

I hated lying to Brad, but it was what I had to do. How else was I going to go see Doctor Carmen if I didn't lie?

"Oh well. It's just a little white lie. It won't hurt him."

Just a white lie! my inner voice barked. *That's still a lie!*

I pulled into the clinic. I sat in the car, rubbing my hands together, hoping that the heater would warm them. My inner voice was right; whether it was a white lie or not, it was still a lie.

He needs help. I'm here to give it to him.

I pulled the key out of the ignition and got out of the car, entering the hospital. I walked to the front desk and asked to see Doctor Carmen. The nurse gestured me along back.

He needs help. You can't feel guilty about wanting to help him.

If that was true, then why was I feeling guilty about seeing Doctor Carmen?

I knocked on the woman's office door.

"Dean?" Doctor Carmen asked. "What're you doing here?"

"Remember when you told me to come back if something happened with Brad?"

The woman only stared.

"Close the door."

I did. when she gestured for me to take a seat, I planted myself in the leather.

"What happened?"

"He's scratching himself."

"Scratching himself?"

"Self-mutilation. Doctor Adam Green has been coming over to counsel Brad. Adam's going to be coming over every day now that Brad's hurting himself."

"What does this have to do with the medicine?"

“He said that *they* are making him do it,” I said, tapping my head. “And I woke up from a bad dream last night and heard him talking to someone in the bathroom.”

“I’m guessing he wasn’t on the phone?”

I shook my head.

“No, Doctor...”

“Alex. Call me Alex.”

“All right, Alex. No, he wasn’t on the phone.”

Alex opened a drawer, thumbing through some files before she pulled one out. When she opened it, Brad’s picture was attached to a set of papers.

“There’s something wrong if the medicine isn’t working for him,” she said. “Was it working before?”

“Just fine. It started to weaken, then it stopped. When you switched the medicines, it worked for a little before it stopped working.”

“I’m going to call him in for a ‘checkup.’ I don’t like the way this is sounding.”

“Thank you,” I said. “So much.”

“Shopping sure does take you a little sometimes,” Brad said, taking one of the paper bags from me. “You ok?”

“Fine. Why?”

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“You seem a little pale.”

A little? I thought, laughing to try and relieve the tension of the situation.

I’m kind of dealing with your illness, Brad.

“It’s cold outside, that’s all.”

“All right. Just making sure you’re ok.”

I turned, hugging him. He was a bit surprised, but he wrapped his arms around me.

“You sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah,” I said, closing my eyes. “I’m fine.”

Part 69:

Checkups

- - -

“You sure that hamburger’s good?” Brad asked, preparing his own burger. “I don’t usually make them, especially not on a stove.”

“It’s fine,” I said, taking another bite and swallowing. “They’re good.”

“We’ll get a grill some day, wWhen we have our own place.”

“We could go buy a house, you know? I’d have to start working again though.”

“Which is why I don’t want to rush into anything,” Brad said, setting his hand over mine. “I like this little apartment, Dean. I’ve been living here since I was eighteen.”

“And you didn’t have a steady boyfriend until me?”

Brad shook his head.

“I’ve told you that it was hard to get guys to like me. I’d call them in the

middle of the night to talk to them, after I had my nightmares, you know? They broke up with me because they thought I was a freak.”

“Well, you’ve given me my first everything. My first date, my first kiss, my first time... My first love.”

Brad kissed my cheek.

“You know how much I love you, baby. I wouldn’t want any other guy in the world.”

I continued eating, glad that our relationship was still at its best, regardless of whether or not he was going through personal problems.

“You ok, Brad?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, we’re just lying here, not even trying to go to sleep.”

Brad ran his hands through my black hair.

“It’s starting to turn blonde again,” Brad smiled. “You need to dye it.”

“I know,” I laughed. “You just decided to lay on the bed for a few minutes before we go to sleep?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“That’s fine, I like it when we cuddle with each other.”

“You know how much I like it,” Brad said, tickling my neck with his beard stubble.

“Hey! That tickles.”

“That’s why I do it,” Brad laughed. “God, Dean. You don’t know how good it feels to hold you.”

“I think I do, if it feels as good as it does when I hold you.”

Brad rest his head against mine.

“I’m so tired,” he said. “You know, it just feels like I’ve been drained the past little while, Dean.”

“Like how?”

“I’m just tired, that’s all. I think it’s the medicine I’m taking. Don’t worry about it; I’m all right.”

“I *do* worry about you,” I said, supporting the bulk of my weight on one elbow. “Are you *sure* you’re ok?”

Brad nodded, kissing my cheek.

“If I wasn’t so tired, I’d probably make love to you.”

“It’s fine. We can wait until tomorrow.”

Brad covered the two of us up with a swing of his arm.

“Goodnight,” Brad said, turning the lamp off. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Goodnight.”

“Brad,” I said, hugging his back. “Oh, God.”

His kisses at my neck were driving me wild. I wanted him to fuck me, whether or not we had foreplay or not. Brad slid his tongue into my mouth.

“God,” I said, wrapping my legs around his waist. “Don’t let me go, Brad.”

“I won’t.”

I moaned as he fucked me. It was nice, slow, and easy for the first part, but that didn’t last long. It was rare when Brad took as long as he had to speed up, and even though I liked it when he fucked me quick and hard, I liked the way he teased me with his gentle thrusts as well.

Brad came just before I did. My cock pulsed and sent white cream all over my chest, my moans dying as my cock pulsed a few more times.

“You ok?” I asked, placing my hands on his shoulders.

“Yeah. Just give me a minute.”

I closed my eyes, enjoying the post-sex waves that were rolling through me. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he pulled out, setting my feet on the ground. Brad licked the come off my chest.

“Sorry ’bout it being so early in the morning,” Brad said with a lazy, tired grin.

“That’s all right. I don’t care.”

“I woke up with a hard-on, and I mean a *real* hard on, not one of those pansy tingling feelings in your cock. I was **hard**.”

“How come I didn’t notice your hard on?” I asked.

“Dunno,” Brad laughed. “You weren’t paying attention to what was going on down there?”

“Not until you pushed me against the wall and started kissing my neck.”

“Yeah, you were giving me a nice hand job.”

I kissed his cheek before closing my eyes, leaning against his chest.

“Probably should’ve waited to do that. We haven’t had our coffee.”

“We could always go back to bed. You didn’t get much sleep last night?”

“Not really.”

“Something on your mind?”

“No.”

Yes, my inner voice said. He did, actually. You can’t hear me, Brad, but he was up all night wondering when Alexandra Carmen was going to set up an appointment for you.

“Yeah, let’s go back to bed,” I said.

Brad stood and turned the water off before we got out of the shower. We pulled ourselves into our bathrobes and walked to the bed, where we got back in.

Brad was out before I could say I love you. I drifted off shortly after that.

I was woken by the phone ringing.

“You want me...”

“I’ll get it,” Brad said, throwing his legs over the bed. “Stay in bed, Dean.”

I watched him walk to the phone. His robe had parted slightly, giving me a glimpse of his cock before his lower body disappeared behind the counter.

And you’re thinking about sex again?

It’d be nice to blow him, but I’d wait until tonight. It had been a good while since I had given Brad a blowjob, mostly because he liked to come inside me after a long bout of fucking.

“Hello?” Brad asked, picking up the phone.

His hello brought me out of my thoughts. I looked at him. He scratched at the stubble that had grown over his face in the past three days. It was threatening to turn into a beard if he didn’t shave it soon.

“All right,” Brad said, looking over at the clock. “I’ll come in at ten. That’s only an hour away. Let me and Dean have some breakfast and we’ll be right there.”

Brad hung up.

“Who was it?” I asked, pulling some underwear and jeans up my legs.

“Doctor Carmen,” Brad said, coming up beside me, dressing from the waist down. “She wants me to go in for a checkup.”

I pulled a shirt over my head, catching a glimpse of the fading scratches

on his chest before he pulled the muscle shirt on.

“Your scratches ok?”

“Yeah. They’re fine. Can we just heat up something or make a sandwich?

I don’t want us to be late.”

I walked into the kitchen, pulling out stuff for sandwiches. I made us each one and handed him his.

“Kinda weird how she’s asking me to come in for a checkup so early,”

Brad said. “Hasn’t it been two weeks since I seen her?”

“Fifteen days today,” I said, taking a bite out of my sandwich. “So yeah, two weeks and a day.”

Brad finished his sandwich, running his tongue over his lips.

“You ok?” he asked.

I nodded, finishing my sandwich.

“You ready to go?” I asked.

Brad slipped into his jacket. I slipped into my jacket as well, but I caught Brad rubbing at the leather, a smile curving his lips.

I was glad that he was comforted by the fact that I would be with him on this doctor visit.

“So, Brad,” Alex said. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” Brad said, arching his back, stretching the muscles. “How come

you called me in so early?”

“Just as a precaution,” she said, placing the stethoscope on his bare chest.

“Have you been feeling all right?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

I stayed in my seat, watching the doctor take Brad’s temperature and pulse. I dreaded what Brad would do when I came and picked him up later. He wasn’t going to be a happy camper once he found out he had to have some tests run on him.

“Brad, do you care if I run some tests on you?”

“What kind of tests?”

“Like the tests that I ran when you first came to see me.”

Brad looked at her for a moment before glancing at me. He sighed, looking back at Alex.

“Yeah, that’ll be fine. It’ll take a few hours, huh?”

“Yes, it will. I’m sorry, Brad.”

“It’s fine,” Brad said, pulling his shirt over his head. “I don’t work anyway, not anymore.”

Alex nodded.

“You’ll pick me up, right, baby?” Brad asked.

“Yeah. I will.”

Brad smiled, following Alex out of the room.

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I smade my way out of the room, then out to the car.

Please don't hate me, Brad.

Part 70:

Questions

- - -

“You’re not going to talk to me?” I asked, looking over at Brad.

Brad hadn’t said a word since I had picked him up. He had either looked down at his hands or had been looking out the window.

“Come on, Brad.”

“What’s there to talk about”

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Brad grunted.

I pulled into the parking lot and followed him into the building, up the stairs, and into our apartment room. He made it a point not to turn around and look at me as we walked through the door.

“Please don’t be mad at me, Brad.”

“Why were tests done today, Dean? You want to tell me?”

“She wanted to give you a checkup.”

“No, she didn’t. She told me you were worried about me, Dean.”

“Of course I am, Brad. I...”

“And she also told me that you wanted to have the tests done.”

I froze. My mind went out to Alex, how I thought I had had her trust on not telling Brad about anything.

That fucking bitch.

“Brad, I’m worried about you.”

“For what?” Brad growled. “I’m fine.”

“You were talking to Harmoire again!”

“Harmoire’s *harmless*. And why the fuck were you listening in on what I was saying anyway?”

“I’m worried about you!”

“I was talking to someone, Dean. You shouldn’t be interrupting my conversations.”

“You shouldn’t be talking to something that doesn’t exist!” I cried, tears burning my cheeks. “It’s not right, Brad!”

“Fuck you! Why can’t you just leave me alone about these things.”

“Because you were scratching...”

“I wasn’t fucking scratching myself!”

“Then who was? Who was, Brad?”

“*They* were!”

“Your medicine isn’t working anymore. That’s why I went and talked to her, Brad. I’m worried about you. I love you.”

Brad turned, leaving me where I stood. I didn’t hide my tears. I let them fall and sat on the bed, sobbing.

“I care about you. I’ve always cared about you.”

“I’ve told you not to worry about me,” Brad said, his voice softening.

“But I *do* worry about you. You can’t expect me to *not* worry about you.”

Brad pulled me off of the bed, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m sorry for being so mean,” Brad whispered, resting his head on my shoulder. “It just hurts to have so many people thinking I’m a nut.”

“You’re not a nut. You know that.”

“I know, but having all these doctors crowding around me makes me feel like one.”

Part 71:

Brain Scan

- - -

“Shit!” I said, pulling my finger away from the pan. “Motherfucker.”

The burn wasn’t anything serious, but it still hurt. I sucked on it before pouring the bacon onto a clean washcloth. I was about to start pulling plates out before the phone rang.

Who could be calling here so early in the day? It’s only eight.

I pulled my finger out of my mouth and grabbed the phone.

“Hello?”

“Dean, this is Doctor Carmen.”

I looked over at the bathroom. The door was still closed, so Brad was still shaving.

“What is it?”

“It’s been about a week since I did Brad’s brain scans. I want you to

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come down here and take a look at them.”

“It’s kind of a bad day. I mean, Brad’s in a good mood. That doesn’t usually happen when he’s had tests done and is waiting for results.”

“You *need* to come down here, Dean. This could be crucial to Brad’s health.”

“Yeah. I’ll say my friend Kason called and wants me to go help him with something.”

“All right. “Just hurry, Dean.”

I set the phone down, sliding it in its cradle just as Brad walked out of the bathroom.

“Who was that on the phone?” Brad asked.

“Kason. I have to go, Brad. Kason’s sink sprung a leak while he was in the shower... He needs help cleaning it.”

Brad kissed my cheek.

“Go help him. Wait! You want a piece of that bacon before you go?”

“I’ll eat something when I get back. Love you, Brad.”

“Love you too,” Brad said, right before I closed the door and rushed down the stairs.

“I’m sorry I called you down here like this,” Alex sighed, tying her hair back. “But this is something we need to discuss.”

I drummed my fingers on the armrests, trying to keep my cool. I had learned to keep my emotions at bay, for the most part, but there were times that they could show through. I was more than sure that they would show through sooner rather than later.

I was here because of Brad.

“All right. You called down here to discuss his brain scans?”

“Yes,” Alex said, grabbing a folder and pulling two separate pictures out. She pinned them to a whiteboard before turning the board’s light on, showing the brain scans in their entirety.

I waited for her to say whatever it was she needed to say.

“All right. This one on the left is the brain scan I did when he came in two weeks ago.”

I looked at the left image, only turning to the right one when she tapped on it.

“This one’s from last week.”

“I don’t see your point... Sorry, that was rude. I’m not a doctor; I don’t know anything about this stuff.”

“There’s no difference between the two scans, Dean.”

I looked at each of them for about a minute each, taking in each and every little detail I could. When I looked at both of them at once, I saw that she was right.

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“W-What does this mean?”

“He’s been taking his medicine, right?”

“Yes.”

“Dean, this means that the medicine isn’t working.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was numb to her words. I didn’t feel a thing.

“What?” I asked. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I heard you.”

“His medicine isn’t working,” Alex repeated.

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“I’ll tell him that the medicine isn’t helping,” she said. “That’s all we can really do.”

“Dean, what are you doing here?” Kason asked, letting me inside.

“You have a broken pipe.”

“Uh... No I don’t.”

“Yes you do. It’s my excuse for going and seeing Brad’s doctor.”

“All right, whatever.” Kason scratched his chest, setting his hands behind his head.

“How come you’re not at work?”

“Got fired,” Kason grinned.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I have a tutoring job down at the high school. It’s not much, but it’ll pay my rent and utilities for the time being.”

I sat on the couch.

“I haven’t asked, but what did the doctor say?”

“Brad’s medicine hasn’t been working.”

Kason didn’t say anything at first. When he sunk into the couch beside me, I opened my eyes.

“How come?” he frowned.

“She doesn’t know, but I wish I did. You know how bad it kills me to not know?”

“I can only imagine. I’m sorry, Dean.”

“It’s not your fault. You know, it’s not really all that much of a shock.”

“What do you mean?”

“Brad’s still been having nightmares and talking to things.”

“I don’t think I could stay with someone who was like that. You’re a strong person, Dean.”

“If you’ve ever been in love with a person as much as I’m in love with Brad, you’d know why I’ve stayed. It helps to know that I have you and Kendra supporting me.”

“Well, we’re your friends; that’s what we’re here for.”

I stood, stretching and yawning.

"I never asked if you wanted anything to drink," Kason said, standing.

"You want something?"

"You have coffee?"

"Yeah, I've got coffee. I might as well give you something if you're going to be here for an hour."

"Hey, baby!" Brad said, hugging me as I walked through the door. "Did you get Kason's leak cleaned up?"

"Yeah. It wasn't a whole lot, but it took us a little while."

"Well, I'm just glad you're home. You didn't get wet?"

"I rolled my pants up."

Brad led me into the kitchen, where he heated up some lasagna and handed me a plate.

"Thanks," I said, beginning to eat. "Sorry I was gone for so long."

"You were only gone two hours."

"I know. What happened to your face?"

Brad fingered the band-aid on his face.

"I cut myself when shaving," he laughed. "Don't give me that look, I cut myself with the razor."

"Are you ok?"

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“Fine,” Brad grinned. “It turned me off to shaving anything past my high cheekbone though.”

I touched his face.

“You look good with a stubble beard.”

“You think so? I rarely have anything past shadow.”

“I think you should keep up.”

“I will then.”

I sat back down, watching Brad do the dishes.

The smile that remained on his face warmed my heart.

Part 72:

Insomnia

- - -

Brad couldn't sleep.

He was keeping me up.

I was still in bed, my eyes half shut, watching as he screwed around on my laptop. He seemed to be reading something. I wasn't sure if he was reading a news article or catching up on the newest bit of my novel, but whatever he was doing, he was content. His face was lit up in white light, so I was more than sure he was reading my novel.

"You ok?"

Brad looked over at me.

"Sorry, baby. I can't sleep."

"That's all right. It's only eleven-thirty."

"I'm not keeping you up, am I?"

“No.”

Yes, I thought, my thoughts contradicting what I had just said. You’re keeping me up.

I rolled over, facing the wall. I pulled the blanket up so it covered my hips, knowing that my naked back was shining in the faint light that the laptop was giving off.

There’s nothing wrong with him not being able to sleep. I was like that when I lived with my aunt. There were days when I couldn’t stand what was going on in my head.

I jumped when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry,” Brad said, kissing my cheek. “Go back to sleep, baby; I don’t think I’ll be coming back to bed anytime soon.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Catching up on your book,” Brad grinned.

“All right. Love you.”

“Love you too, night.”

I closed my eyes, trying to push my rampant thoughts into the back of my mind so I could go to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up and saw Brad in the bed with me. I sighed, thankful that he hadn’t fallen asleep at the table. I scooted in closer and laid my

head on his arm.

“Hey, baby. You ok?”

“Fine,” I said. “What time did you come to bed?”

“Almost one. Sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“I thought I was keeping you up.”

“You weren’t.”

“I’m glad.” Brad wrapped his arms around me. “Were you going to get up?”

“If you’re not ready to, I’ll stay in bed.”

“No, get up, get in the shower, I’ll be up in five minutes.”

I made to the bathroom. I looked at Brad for a short moment before I entered, closed the door to a crack, stepping into the shower.

I hope he’s all right. I’d hate for him to be having more nightmares.

Alex’s diagnosis that Brad’s medicine wasn’t working was a painful one, one that wouldn’t be easy to deal with. If Brad’s medicine hadn’t been working since she switched it, had he been having nightmares? Had Brad kept his nightmares to himself, fearing unneeded doctor visits?

He’s never had a problem with doctors. At least not one he’s told me about, anyway.

I jumped when hands settled on my stomach.

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“Sorry, baby,” Brad said, resting his stubbly chin on my shoulder.

“It’s all right. You ok?”

“Just need coffee, that’s all.”

I ran my hands through my hair.

“You came to bed at one?”

“Yeah,” Brad said. “I told you, right?”

“You did, I was just double-checking,” I said. “You weren’t able to sleep last night?”

“No.”

“Was something on your mind?”

“Not really. Just couldn’t sleep.”

“What did you do?”

“Read the next few chapters of your book, messed around with some art and read some news on the ‘net.’”

“All right. Just checking. I worry about you.”

“I know, my little worry-wart.”

“And I take that title as it’s given.”

Again...

I had decided to stay up with Brad tonight. Even though it was ten-thirty

and I was dog-tired, I was going to support my boyfriend and give him the support he needed.

“Sorry,” Brad said. “You don’t have to stay up with me.”

“No, that’s fine,” I said, taking a sip from my soda. “Just watching this show.”

“What’s it about?” Brad asked, typing something on the laptop before looking over at me.

“Just the animal kingdom.”

I’ve seen this at least three times. There’s usually nothing on TV but porn and infomercials this late at night.

I grabbed my soda and walked over to the table, where I sat down beside Brad.

“Another kaleidaorb?” I asked, watching him manipulate the colors on the screen.

“Yeah. I get bored, you know?”

I grabbed the book I had been reading, walking over to the bed.

“I’m gonna read. ‘K?”

“Yeah. I won’t bother you.”

I opened the book, but every so often, I glanced up at Brad, hoping that he was all right.

“Seems as though he has a little problem with insomnia,” Kendra said, sipping her soda.

I looked over at Brad, watching his naked back rise and fall with his even breaths.

“I don’t know why he’s suddenly staying up later. It’s starting to scare me.”

“How come?”

“It’s something about the way he’s been making kaleidaorbs.”

“Kaleida-who?”

“Kaleidaorbs,” I said, grabbing the laptop, finding the folder he put the images in. “I’ll put it on slideshow for you.”

She accepted the laptop as I handed it to her. I had the slideshow-speed on high, so the images would go through quicker than they normally would.

“These are gorgeous. He made these in a photo program?”

“Yeah. I told him to draw one out for me. Gimme a sec.”

I walked to the cupboard, where I pulled out a drawing of the orb he did.

“Wow. This is pencil, right?”

“Yeah. Careful, don’t smudge it.”

“What do they mean?”

“To keep the dark away. That’s what he told me, anyway.”

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She looked over at Brad before her eyes returned to the laptop. I was instantly captivated by the beauty of Brad's artistic skills.

Part 73:

Screams

- - -

When the atmosphere in our apartment fell below the normal temperature, I got nervous. We weren't in bed yet, but we were getting ready to settle in for the night. Brad was in his boxers and messing around on the computer while I was eating cheese. I watched Brad. His eyes were squinted, focused on the computer screen. It looked as though he wanted to get something out of that computer, something that he *needed* to get.

"Brad? Are you all right?"

"Fine." Brad dyoof. "I'm using the bathroom."

When I was sure he was using the bathroom, I walked to the laptop.

I stifled my cry with my hand.

Hundreds upon hundreds of kaleidaorbs were splattered in a mess across the image, covering every possible inch on the screen.

Something to keep the dark away...

Nightmares...

They made me do it...

It's watching you...

Every hair on my body went up as the last thought went through my head. I wasn't thinking these things; they were hitting me with such force that I wanted to fall to the floor, grab my head and scream.

Somebody beat me to it.

That somebody was Brad.

His scream scared me so bad that I jumped. I ran into the bathroom and grabbed his arms, turning him toward me.

"Brad!" I screamed, trying to make him stop. "What's wrong!"

"They're *here*! They're fucking *here*!"

"Brad! Brad! It's all right!"

Brad pushed me as hard as he could. I flew out of the bathroom, landing on the floor. I grimaced, getting back up.

"Brad!"

"Dean! No! No! They're going to get me! Dean! Help me!"

When I tried to grab his arms, he pushed me away. He dug his fingers into his arms, tearing deep gashes in them. He screamed as blood ran from his arms. Blood splashed across the white tile, turning it the most horrific shade of

red I had seen.

Brad's blood wasn't red.

It was black.

"Brad!"

"No! Dean! Help me!"

I was about to go to him when the door burst open, revealing Daniel Roscoe, the landlord.

"What the hell's going on here!" he screamed, raising his voice over Brad's hellish cries.

"Call 911!"

Brad screamed as I tackled him. We both tumbled against the shower wall. I fought for control of his hands, desperately trying to keep him from hurting himself. He screamed and snapped at me, growling, screaming, spittle flying in my face.

"Brad! Brad!"

"Teg yawa, nead!" Brad screamed, spit flying in my face as he spoke in some strange tongue. "Teg yawa!"

"Call 911!"

Brad pushed me against the wall. He grabbed my wrists and stared at me with those wild eyes. Gone was the human conscience that was in Brad's mind. Brad was not Brad anymore...

Something had taken over his mind and possessed his body.

“Mi annog llik uoy,” Brad said, his laugh maniacal and wild, like a hyena. “Mi annog llik uoy!”

I spit in his face and kneed him in the crotch. The thing inside him did nothing; it merely laughed.

“Uoy kniht uoy nac thgif em?” Brad asked, blood running from lips he had since bit. “Od uoy?”

“Hey, you bastard! Take this!”

Stefan struck Brad in the head with his nightstick. He howled in pain and backhanded the man. Blood exploded from Stefan’s nose and splashed across Brad’s face. I took this chance to bite Brad’s wrist, drawing blood before ducking and running out of the room.

The door burst open. Emergency medical technicians flooded the room.

“Uoy llac srotcod?” Brad laughed. “Uoy llac meht?”

“What’s wrong with him?” one of the EMTs cried, his will shaken by the maniac covered in blood.

“I don’t know! He’s lost it!”

One of the EMTs who attempted to approach Brad was merely laughed at. This EMT was a woman, her blonde hair falling in front of her face.

“Uoy kniht uoy nac teg em, hctib? Uoy od?”

“Sir, you need to calm down. You need medical attention.”

“On I tnod! On I tnod!”

When she got too close, Brad pushed her back into me. I caught the young woman and held her steady as I fell against the wall, my arms tight below her breasts.

“What’s wrong with him?” she whispered.

“I don’t know!”

She didn’t attempt to ask anything else as Brad advanced on us.

“On eno sehcuot nead!” Brad growled. “On eno tub em!”

Brad grabbed the EMT and dug his hands into her arms. The woman screamed as Brad’s fingernails tore gashes in her flesh. The other EMTs drew syringes and advanced on Brad, attempting to stab him with sedatives. Brad backhanded both of them at once.

“Uoy emoc raen em dna uoy eid! Uoy eid!”

I was trembling. Brad lifted the EMT and threw her into the wall. A framed picture of me and Brad hugging each other shattered as the EMT’s head slammed into it.

That picture had been there for almost a whole year, and although it was only a cheap photo print set in a frame, it infuriated me, knowing that whatever was inside him wanted to destroy the bond between me and Brad.

“No!” I screamed. “No! You get out of him! You leave him alone!”

“Uoy kniht I ma darb? Od uoy?”

“Leave him alone!” I wailed, trying to break through that thing’s barrier and get to Brad. “You leave him alone!”

Brad was about to advance on me before a light lit the room. The smell of burnt flesh permeated the air as an EMT stabbed Brad’s bare chest with a stun gun.

“On!” Brad screamed. “Dratsab!”

Brad tried to grab the EMT but the manshocked Brad once more and sent him to his knees. The uninjured paramedics stabbed Brad’s body with syringes.

Brad’s cries of pain broke my heart, but I knew it wasn’t the real Brad. When he looked up and into my eyes, I could tell it wasn’t him. The thing that had taken over Brad’s body looked at me, its eyes trying to feign unattainable.

“Nead,” Brad said, tears streaming down his face. “Nead.”

Brad went limp. The rise and falls of his back was the only thing that kept me from thinking he was dead.

It was only after Brad was unconscious that I felt blood running down my arms. Brad had dug deep gashes with his fingernails. Several bite marks lit up my shoulders. A cut bled on my forehead.

“Dean,” Daniel said. “What happened?”

I was transfixed by the sight of the medical technicians wheeling a stretcher into the room. It took two of them to lift Brad’s body. From there, they strapped him in, making sure to tie him down as tight as they could.

“I-I-I-I d-d-don’t k-k-know,” I stuttered, falling to me knees. “I don’t know.”

I remained on my knees for several minutes until I took notice of the paramedic. Her breathing was regular, but she was unconscious.

“W-W-What a-about S-S-Stefan?”

As I said the man’s name, the African American stumbled out of the bathroom, blood still pouring out of crust that covered his nostrils.

“Are you ok?” Stefan asked, looking at my wounds. “You need to get to the doctor.”

“So do you,” I said. “A lot of people got hurt tonight.”

Stefan nodded.

“There’s more ambulances here,” Daniel said, looking out the window before pushing the curtain back into place. “You need to get to a hospital, Dean.”

I looked over at an EMT who was tending to the unconscious woman, the one I had saved from more serious injury.

“Y-Yeah. I do.”

Part 74:

Hospitals

- - -

I sat in the room Brad was in. My boyfriend was strapped down to the bed, an IV running through his arm, an oxygen tube in his nose, monitors running diagnostics on his body. I knew the one that spiked up and down at odd intervals was the activity in his brain.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” an EMT asked, carefully applying some gel to my torn arms.

“The shock’s numbing the pain.”

“You got hurt pretty bad,” the man said, finishing one arm before wrapping it.

“What’s your name?”

“It’s Kendall.”

“Thank you for taking care of my boyfriend, Kendall. It means a lot to

me.”

“You’re the one who needs to be taken care of,” Kendall said, wrapping my other arm up. “God, he tore skin off of your shoulders with his teeth?”

“I guess,” I shrugged, grimacing soon after. “I hadn’t noticed it at the time. I was too worried trying to help him.”

“Let me take care of your head first,” Kendall said, dabbing away blood with a sanitary napkin. “How did this happen?”

I shook my head, not able to answer.

“He might have scratched me.”

“I noticed he had sharp fingernails. One of the EMTs said that he was schizophrenic.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Was he taking medicine?”

“It wasn’t working. Doctor Alexandra Carmen told him to stop taking it.”

“I see,” Kendall sighed. “Well, he’s strapped down to the bed, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I hate to see him strapped to a hospital bed like some kind of wild animal, but if it’ll keep him from hurting someone, it’s ok.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. He started screaming and said *they* were at the apartment. After that, my landlord came up. That’s when I told him to call 911. Brad freaked

and started speaking in some kind of tongue.”

“Tongue?”

“Like in those exorcism movies.

Kendall glanced over at Brad.

“Here,” Kendall said, carefully spreading the gel over my shoulder wounds. “I’m sorry, it must hurt.”

“Yeah, it does.”

And it’s not even the physical pain that hurts. It’s because something took him over and made him do this.

I winced as Kendall finished putting the bandages on my shoulders. At that time, Alex Carmen walked into the room.

“Are the others ok?” I asked.

“The EMT has a concussion,” Alex said. “The woman. She has a bit of a cut too. The other two EMTs only have bruised faces.”

“What about Stefan?”

“His nose is broken,” Alex said. She frowned at Brad’s resting form. “He really did a number on all of you, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“He started screaming, then I tackled him into the shower wall and tried to hold him in place until the ambulance got there, then he started speaking in

tongues and attacked everyone.”

“Even you?”

“I didn’t realize I had been hurt until Brad was unconscious. But Alex, that wasn’t Brad in there. Something... Something else was inside of him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He was speaking some different language.”

“Are you saying he was possessed?”

“I don’t know. All I know is this. Before Brad passed out, the thing that was controlling his body looked up at me and said ‘nead.’ It was trying to speak to me, Alex. It was trying to get me to give it sympathy.”

“It looks like that activity is still happening,” Alex said, watching the monitor spike. “He’ll probably calm down though.”

I walked over to the couch, sitting down..

“Do you want to go home?” Alex asked, setting a hand on my upper arm.

“I want to stay with him.” No matter what anyone said, *no one*, and I mean *no one*, was going to tell me otherwise. “Can I stay here? I thought there was something about gay couples not being able to stay in their boyfriend’s hospital room because they weren’t legally bonded to each other?”

“There won’t be any arguments about that. I’m your doctor, and besides, you’re injured. Anybody tries to kick you out, you tell them to come talk to me.”

I nodded.

“Where’s a phone?” I asked, ready to walk out of the room, if the need arose.

“Use mine,” Kendall said, handing me his phone.

I dialed Kendra’s number.

“Kendra, can you come to the hospital?”

“What happened, Dean?”

“Brad freaked out. I’m hurt, and so is he.”

I had just got done relaying my story to Kendra when Kason knocked on the open door, walking into the room.

“Hey, Dean,” Kason said with a small, uneasy smile. “How are you?”

“Hurt, but fine,” I said, looking down at my bandaged arms, carefully touching one of my bandaged shoulders.

“Brad freaked out?”

“I tried to keep him from screaming until the EMTs got the house, then he started speaking in tongues and attacked Stefan and a few of the paramedics.”

“How did you get hurt?”

“When I was holding him back, and when he had me pinned against the wall. At least I think that’s how it happened.”

“Why was he screaming?” Kendra asked.

“He said *they* were there. Kendra, Kason, you already know that Brad was seeing things. I think there was something in that apartment with us, something I couldn’t see.”

Kendra placed a hand on my leg.

“Are you going to be ok?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s just that... Brad...”

“He’ll be ok,” Kason said. “You should go home, Dean, or at least come home with one of us.”

“I’ll stay here. I got permission, and Alex will defend my case if anyone bitches at me. You guys should get going. You have work tomorrow, and besides; I’m starting to get tired.”

They both stood. Kason gripped my hand and gave me a short hug. Kendra also hugged me, but she kissed my cheek as well.

“Feel better,” Kason said.

“Bye, Dean,” Kendra added.

“You need a ride home, Kendra?” Kason asked.

“I drove,” she smiled.

I waved both of them off, expelling a breath when Kendall walked in

“You want some pain medicine, Dean?”

“You already gave me some.”

“That was Tylenol. I have some pain medication from the hospital.”

I shook my head, sitting on the couch.

“I’ll be fine. I do want to get to sleep though. You have a blanket I could use?”

“Yeah,” Kendall said, giving me the gentlest smile I had ever seen. “I’ll go get one.”

I spread out on the couch, lying on my back to restrict the pain that was running through my arms and shoulders. I closed my eyes at the early onset of tears.

“Here,” Kendall said, covering me up. “Are you all right?”

“Everything hurts, but my heart’s hurt the most.”

“I’m sorry,” Kendall said, brushing my hair out of my face. “Are you sure you don’t want some more pain medicine?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Thanks, Kendall.”

The man gave me a short goodnight before walking to the door, turning the lamp off, closing the door.

I fell asleep watching Brad’s monitor.

I woke to the sound of people talking. I carefully sat up and looked over at the bed.

Brad was awake.

“Hey, baby,” Brad said, giving me a weak smile. “You ok?”

"I'm fine," I said, walking to his side "Are you?"

"I hurt all over, but I'm all right. I'm sorry I hurt you. I couldn't control myself."

"What happened, Brad?"

"Something the... the Watcher did, Dean. There was something else there with it last night."

"Were you possessed?" I whispered so no one passing by could hear me.

"Yeah, I was."

"And you watched the whole thing?"

"Yeah. Every single part of me was fighting to control myself, Dean, but... But I couldn't."

Brad broke into tears. I kissed him, gripping his hand tighter.

"It's ok. Everyone's all right. It could've been a lot worse."

Brad looked at the bandages and IV that ran into his arm.

"I hope we can go home. I hurt all over."

"You might want to stay here for another day or so. You got clubbed in the head with a nightstick and shocked with that stun gun so much that I could smell your skin burning."

"So that's why my back hurts," Brad said, giving a short laugh to reassure me that he was ok.

"I'm sorry, Brad. I just want you to know that I love you, and no matter

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what's wrong, I'll always stand by you."

"Thank you, Dean."

Part 75:

Psychosis

- - -

We were back home. We weren't feeling good two days after the incident with something taking over Brad's body, but we felt better than we had the day after.

"You ok?" Brad asked from his place on the bed.

I nodded, continuing to make breakfast. Brad hadn't been out of bed since we got home at six this morning, and I didn't think that he would be out of bed anytime soon. His back was still paining him, and while my shoulders flared up at any rash movements, I still cooked and took care of Brad.

"Dean?"

"What?"

"You're not feeling good, are you?"

"Not really," I sighed, taking the bacon and eggs off the table. "Can you

get out of bed?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, grimacing, walking to the table.

“I’m sorry, Brad.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For this.”

“Why are you sorry? You couldn’t have done anything to prevent it.”

“I tried hard not to let you hurt other people, Brad.”

“And now we’re probably going to get sued through the roof,” Brad sighed. “At least I am, anyway.”

“No, Brad.” I said it in a tone more direct than sympathetic. “We’re not going to get sued.”

He looked at me with a frown, which I took as him trying to figure out what I had just said. Then his frown evened out.

“What is it?”

“Doctor Carmen said that you should go on psychosis pills.”

“Psychosis pills?” he barked, standing, grimacing but glaring at me.

“Yes.”

“I’m not crazy, Dean.”

“Psychosis pills aren’t just for crazy people.. They’ll help you, Brad. Doctor Carmen said they’re downers and that they’ll help you.”

Brad sat back down.

“Whatever,” he said, stabbing at an egg with his fork.

“I’m sorry,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “But Brad, if the medicine will help, then why not try it?”

“We don’t know if it’ll work.”

“You *bit* me. I don’t know what happened, the doctors don’t know what happened, and I doubt you even know what happened. You said something took over your body, but you can’t be sure of that.”

“No, I can’t,” Brad said, setting his fork down. “We might as well try it, I guess.”

I sat down beside him, beginning to eat my own food. Although my mind was rushing, I knew that we had to try something. If medicine for a schizophrenic wasn’t helping, we might as well try some heavy-duty downers.

Brad held the bottle in his hand, staring at the label. His arms were no longer bandaged and beginning to heal. Mine were as well. I had taken the bandages off my arms, but I was still afraid of what Brad would think. The cut on my head was also feeling better, but the bites on my shoulders still pained me.

“You think these will work?” Brad asked.

It had been a week since he had attacked me and the others, but that didn’t matter. If Doctor Carmen wanted to try psychosis medicine, we would do

that.

“I think it’ll help.”

I caught the unease in my tone a moment too late. Brad closed his eyes, entering his own little space.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I hope it works too. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You weren’t trying to.”

“I promised I would never hurt you. I promised you that before I broke your ribs, after I broke them, and now I’m promising it again. How am I supposed to keep a promise I’m not sure I can keep?”

Brad broke down. I kept my arms wrapped around him. Brad did not hurt me one single time as he was crying. His grip may have tightened around my body, but he didn’t hurt me, not one bit.

“I love you so fucking much, Dean.”

“I’ll stick with you to the end, Brad. I’ll never leave you.”

I held Brad, his sobs ringing a chorus in my heart that I wish would never end.

To be with Brad was everything.

If I lost him, I would lose myself as well.

Brad took his first pill at five o’clock in the evening, and at six o’clock--

when I had began making dinner--he was just sitting there. Brad was someone who had lost all sense of himself. He sat on the bed, doing nothing but staring at his hands. He would occasionally mess with his thumbs and smile, but other than that, there was no emotion coming from him.

“Brad? You ready for dinner?”

He didn’t seem to hear me.

“Brad? Dinner’s ready.”

He still hadn’t heard me. This time, I walked to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Brad,” I said, tilting his chin up. “You ready for dinner?”

“Yeah,” he said, giving me a small smile a moment later. “I’m sorry, baby. I don’t feel like myself.”

I frowned when he got off the bed. He walked to the table and grabbed a fork, where he cut his lasagna until he had it in reasonable, bite-sized chunks.

“Are you feeling all right?” I asked, sitting down beside him.

“I feel fine. Maybe a little tired, but that’s all.”

That medicine isn’t doing anything but making you look like an empty vessel. I put a forkful of lasagna in my mouth. Please don’t stay like this, Brad.

We lay in the bed. His arms were wrapped around me from behind and his hands were resting on my abs, his fingers splayed out across the expanse of

muscle.

“Are your wounds hurting you?” Brad asked.

“Not really. What about yours?”

“Not at all. The medicine must make me numb.”

It must make everything about you numb.

“Baby?”

“Yeah? What is it, Brad?”

“Nothing,” Brad said, leaning his stubbly cheek against my head. “I was just making sure you were all right.”

I leaned back against him, enjoying the feel of his body.

“I’m glad you’re ok.” I set my hand over his.

“I’m glad I didn’t hurt you any more than I did.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m tough.”

“I know you are. Tough as nails.”

Tough as nails.

I would need that.

I stroked Brad’s naked back. He hadn’t turned over to face me, and he sure as hell hadn’t made any attempt at our before-bed communication. I

“Brad, are you ok?”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure? You can tell me, baby.”

“I’m sure,” Brad said, rolling over, his eyes sad. “I love you.”

“I love you too. You’re sure you’re ok?”

Brad looked at the ceiling.

“Just not feeling chipper.”

I kissed his shoulder, pulling the covers up over us. I lay my head on his chest.

“Goodnight,” I said.

“Goodnight.”

One week later, I was ready to tell Brad to stop taking that medicine. Brad wouldn’t talk to me unless I talked to him, and every day all he did was sit on the bed or stare at the television screen. That was *all* he did. It was breaking my heart to see him like that.

I grabbed the phone and began to walk toward the bathroom before I looked over at Brad.

“Who are you calling?”

Brad shocked me. He hadn’t right-out said something to me in five days, but now that he had, it made me feel a little better knowing that the wasn’t completely gone when he was on that fucking psychosis medicine.

"I'm going to call Doctor Carmen."

"Why?"

"Because the medicine is stripping you of who you are."

"I'm fine." Brad stood. "Don't I look fine to you?"

"No, you don't."

"Dean," Brad said, his voice cracking. "What if it comes back?"

"It won't, I promise."

I could see the worry in his eyes. I gave him a quick peck on the cheek before walking into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I waited a moment, getting my bearings before I punched the numbers. I was calling Alex's cell phone, so I wouldn't have to worry about going through doctors or having my call recorded, if hospitals even record their phone calls.

They probably do.

"Hello?"

I hadn't even heard her phone pick up.

"Hi, Alex. It's Dean."

"Is something wrong?"

I didn't need to explain my pause.

"It's Brad," she said, filling that gap of silence. "Isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

“What is it, Dean?”

“The medicine, it’s...”

“The medicine is supposed to make him calmer, Dean.”

“*Calmer* is *not* acting like a complete *zombie*. I don’t like Brad like this, Doctor Carmen.”

“The medicine is helping him, Dean.”

“I don’t care if it’s helping him. If medicine can help him, so can I.”

“You can’t help what’s going on in his head. Don’t try, Dean.”

“You’re not someone to tell me what to do, Doctor Carmen. The doctors I’ve been going to have been screwing me over and over again.”

“What are you going to do, Dean? Take him off the medicine?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m going to do.”

“You’re making a mistake, Dean. You’re...”

“I’m not making any kind of mistake.” I raised my voice. “The mistake I made was thinking that a doctor’s medicine could help me, especially with a medicine that’s for a complete freak.”

“Brad’s borderline psychotic. You take him off that medicine, you might lose him forever.”

“If I keep him on this medicine I’ll lose him. Goodbye, Alex.”

A burden that had been weighing down on my heart instantly lifted.

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“Dean?” Brad asked, opening the door.

I handed him the phone and walked out of the bathroom. He only watched as I grabbed his pills, walked back in the bathroom and dumped every single one into the toilet.

I hoped the water’s blood-red color wasn’t a sign of things to come.

Part 76:

Turning the Lights On

- - -

A day after Brad got off the medicine, I woke to his shrieking. He jumped out of bed and looked around the room, his eyes wild and chest heaving up and down from his rampant breaths.

“Brad,” I said, touching his arms. “It’s all right.”

“The snakes,” Brad said, tears breaking the surface of his eyes. “Oh God, Dean, the snakes.”

“It’s all right. There’s no snakes, Brad.”

“They’re in my head,” Brad said, tightening his grip on my body.

I caught a glimpse of his arms. The scars were starting to fade from their red color, which I was thankful for. I wouldn’t have scars on my body, except for one of the deeper bite marks on my right shoulder right in the crook of my neck, but that didn’t matter.

“It’s all right. There’s nothing to worry about.”

He continued to shiver in my arms.

“You want some cheese?”

Brad leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest, sighing.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting a piece of cheese.

I cut up a few pieces for the both of us.

Last night was a blur in my mind. Brad was watching TV, his eyes blinking every so often. His eyes had red veins running through them.

Poor Brad. I wish I could do more to help.

Seeing Brad like this hurt. I didn’t like seeing him tired, because I knew that he had had a bad night when he was tired. When he had woken me up by shrieking, I had been afraid and worried that something else was wrong. I remembered that it was just a nightmare, but that didn’t bring me a whole lot of comfort.

“Brad,” I began. “Are you ok?”

“Huh?” Brad asked, looking up at me, his tired eyes giving me his full attention.

“”I asked if you were all right.”

“Oh. I’m fine, Dean.”

“I’m just making sure. Did you have anymore bad dreams last night?”

“No. Holding you helped, Dean.”

“I’m glad.” I stepped away from the couch. “I was going to make breakfast. Anything in particular you want?”

“No. Don’t worry about it, Dean.”

“No, Brad,” I said, touching his face, running my hand through his stubble beard. “Tell me. I’ll make anything you want.”

Brad closed his eyes, adjusting his position on the couch.

“Make some cinnamon rolls. The orange flavored ones.”

I kissed his cheek. It made me warm, knowing that he still had the childish desire for cinnamon rolls.

“That does sound good though.” I licked my lips and fetching the tube out of the fridge.

I popped the roll open and began making the cinnamon rolls.

“Brad,” I said, shaking him awake. “They’re done.”

Brad accepted my kiss.

“Thanks, baby.”

I offered hand. I helped him up, leading him to the table.

“I hope I made them all right. I think this is the first time I’ve made cinnamon rolls on my own.”

Brad ran his finger through some of the orange frosting, placing it to his lips.

“Mmm. I don’t think I’ve had a cinnamon roll in years.”

I sat down beside him.

“I didn’t know you liked cinnamon rolls,” I said. “I knew you liked sweets...”

“I stole your chocolate,” Brad grinned. “Remember Valentine’s Day, and the chocolate cake I got for your birthday?”

“Yeah. “I won’t forget that.”

Brad took a bite out of his roll.

“You did a good job.”

“Thanks. I tried.”

“You succeed!” Brad said with a goofy grin.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” I laughed.

“I am too.”

“It’s ok, Brad. It was just a bad dream.”

Brad accepted my embrace. I held him in my arms, having him rest his head on my shoulder.

“It’s ok. I love you.”

“I love you too. It’s just... They’re bad dreams, Dean.”

“I know they are, baby,” I said, kissing the top of his head. “But I’m here, so there’s nothing to worry about, right?”

“Y-Yeah. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I pushed him away, gesturing him to lie down beside me.

“See, everything’s ok, right?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, wrapping his arms around me. “Everything’s all right.”

I rest my head on Brad’s chest.

As long as he felt better, everything would be all right.

I sat up writing. Brad had since went to bed. He hadn’t woken up once screaming.

Thank God. I’m so glad he’s all right.

I was about to rise from my seat before I saw the light shining on his face. When I moved the light, he grimaced and mumbled something. I moved the light so it was shining on him and he relaxed, his body loosening up.

The light helps him sleep. If I had known that, I would’ve got a nightlight or something.

I walked to the fridge, thankful that I was able to help Brad sleep better, even if it was with something as simple as turning a light on.

Part 77:

Nineteen

- - -

“Come on, Brad. “Take your hands off of my eyes.”

“No way. That’ll ruin the surprise.”

I pat his wrist, stopping as he tightened his grip on them.

“All right. Open your eyes.”

When he pulled his hands away, I opened them.

The kitten sat on the bed, it’s wide, gold eyes taking me in before meowing.

“Aww,” I said, getting on my knees, smiling as the kitten came up and bumped its head on my fingers. “You got me a kitten?”

“And another chocolate cake,” Brad grinned.

“I thought you were allergic to cats?”

“I thought I was too, but when I went in there and looked at them, I

didn't sneeze or anything."

I picked the kitten up, looking into its eyes.

"What's its name?"

"Cinnamon," Brad said. "He's a cute little thing, isn't he?"

"I can see why you named him cinnamon. You don't see a lot of brown-speckled tabbies."

"I felt bad for him. He was the littlest one there, so I picked him up and fell in love with the little guy."

"He's cute, Brad," I said, setting the kitten back on the bed, wrapping my arms around Brad. "Thank you."

"I couldn't think of anything to get you. Sorry."

"It's ok. I got you. That's all I ever want."

Brad set his arms around me, passionately kissing me.

"Not right now, big guy," I said, pushing him away. "Don't want to give the little one any bad images."

"Aw, a shame," Brad said, popping a button on my shirt. "Because I was going to do naughty things to you."

"Like what?" I asked, moaning as he slid a hand into my shirt, rubbing his thumb over my nipple.

"Anything you want."

"Where we going to put the cat?"

“We’ll throw him in the bathroom.”

Brad was still kissing my body, regardless of the fact that he had finished blowing and fucking me. I didn’t care; I liked the attention and wasn’t going to stop him.

“You like that?” Brad asked, lifting his head, a bead of sweat running down his forehead.

“Yeah. You’re good with your mouth.”

Brad kissed me. I could still taste my come on his lips, which--had he not already blown me--would normally have made me hard.

“You taste good,” Brad said, grinning.

“I know.”

Brad spread out along me.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, just got a little worked up,” Brad said, taking deep, even breaths.

I rubbed his shoulder.

“You having a good birthday?”

“So far, yeah. Don’t know how you could top the sex.”

“Figured I might as well lay you. We haven’t had sex in a few days.”

“You ready for dinner?”

“Sure. I’ll make it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, baby.”

I got out of bed, grabbing my boxers, watching Brad do the same. I turned, watching him walk into the kitchen.

Brad stopped, standing in the middle of the room.

“Brad?” I asked. “You ok?”

He didn’t have time to say anything.

He dropped.

“Brad!” I cried. “Brad!”

I ran to his side. Brad was twitching, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“Cuh-Cuh-Call nuh-nuh-9-wha-wha-1.”

I grabbed the phone, dialing the number.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“My boyfriend’s twitching!” I cried. “Oh God, somebody help me.”

“Twitching how?”

“Like a seizure. I don’t know what’s wrong with him!”

“It he epileptic?”

“NO! Please, HELP ME!”

“Somebody will be over there right away, sir. Is he on any medication, is he...”

“Thank you. Good...”

“You need to stay on the line, sir.”

“I need to keep him breathing,” I cried. “Goodbye!”

I hung up the phone and tossed it. It shattered and fell to the floor. I could hear the kitten’s protests in the bathroom.

Brad was my only priority.

“Brad!” I slapped his face “Brad!”

Brad’s grey eyes rolled back into place, but there was no emotion in them. They were clear, almost transparent against his white cornea.

“Nead,” Brad said. “Pleh em.”

I froze in place. The scars on my arms and the one on my shoulder tingled as the thing inside Brad spoke.

“Leave him alone.”

The thing inside Brad whined, false tears staining Brad’s cheeks.

“Pleh em, Nead. Pleh em.”

Brad’s sobs continued for another minute. His back arched. He, his eyes rolling back into his head.

The pounding at the door made my heart leap, but I ran to the door and unlocked it, pulling it open. The paramedics rushed in.

“What happened, sir?”

“I-I don’t know. He just collapsed.”

“We need to get this man to the hospital,” one of the EMTs called. “He’s having some kind of seizure!”

A group of EMTs swarmed into the room, carrying a stretcher. They set the stretcher on the floor and counted, picking up Brad’s twitching body. They strapped Brad in and lifted the stretcher, the muscles on the EMTs’ arms bulging.

“Sir?” one of the EMTs asked. “Are you all right?”

My world spun. I swayed. An EMT caught me, holding me against his chest.

“Are you all right, sir?”

“I-I don’t know,” I said, my vision swirling.

“It’s all right, sir. Everything’s going to be fine.”

I gave the man a faint nod before I passed out.

Part 78:

Family and Friends

- - -

What's wrong with him?

We don't know.

You don't know? How can you not know what's wrong with this man?

We don't know what's wrong with him.

I opened my eyes to see two doctors standing beside Brad's table. I was lying on the couch, my shirt off, a damp rag on my forehead.

"Mr. McAllen," one of them said. "My name's Tray Michaels."

"Hello, sir," I said, sitting up. "What's wrong with my boyfriend?"

"He's your partner?" the doctor asked, frowning. "We weren't aware of that, Mr. McAllen."

Up until now, I had never considered Brad to be my partner. But now, since the doctor had worded it in that way, I realized that Brad *was* my partner

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and not *just* my boyfriend.

“Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

“We don’t, sir,” Doctor Michaels sighed. “I wish we did though.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’s fine right now. All of his vitals and brain levels are perfect. We don’t know why he won’t wake up though.”

I picked Brad’s hand up, kissing it.

“So, he’s all right?” I asked once more.

“For now, yes.”

“For now?”

“We don’t know if anything else will happen. We don’t think anything else will, but it’s best not to expect anything beforehand, right?”

I leaned over and kissed Brad.

“I should start calling people. You have a phone I could use?”

“Ask the nurse for some change.”

I counted out the change in my hand. There was three dollars in quarters.

I need to call Kason first. He needs to go get Cinnamon out of the bathroom.

I felt bad for the little cat. When I had checked the clock a few minutes

ago, it had shown that it was five-thirty. The little thing had been locked up for four hours.

I slipped the quarter into the phone and dialed Kason's number.

"Hello?"

"Brad's in the hospital."

"For what?" Kason asked, raising his voice in panic.

"He collapsed... And he was twitching... I don't know why, but the doctors say he'll be ok."

"You want me to come up there, Dean?"

"Not necessarily. I do need to ask you a favor though."

"Shoot."

"Brad bought me a kitten for my birthday and..."

"I forgot it was your birthday."

"It's ok, Kason. Really."

"That must really suck, having your boyfriend in the hospital on your birthday."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Anyway, I want you to go over to our apartment and ask the landlord to let you in. Tell him you're my friend. Brad put the kitten in the bathroom so we could... Umm..."

"No need to finish. I know what you mean."

“Can you watch the kitten until we get home?”

“Sure, I can do that. It’s been a while since I’ve had a furball running around my house.”

The short laugh that came out of my chest was comforting.

“Thanks, I’ll let you go.”

“Wait! What’s the cat’s name?”

“Cinnamon,” I said. “Thanks Kason.”

“No problem. I’ll say a little prayer for you and Brad.”

“Thanks, bye.”

“Bye.”

One thing taken care of. Now I need to call Kendra.

I dialed her number and almost immediately got an answer.

“Hello?”

“Kendra, Brad’s in the hospital again. Wait! Before you start, let me explain. He collapsed and started twitching. The doctors think he’ll be fine.”

“God, Dean, and on your birthday.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. Kason’s going to kitty-sit the kitten Brad adopted; you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“You want me to come down there?”

“I... You don’t have to.”

"I will, Dean. You know I will."

"All right. Can you call Soul and the others for me?"

"Yeah, I'll do that. Can you give me their numbers?"

I recited the three men's numbers off.

"Thanks, Kendra. I couldn't have a better friend."

"Kason and I are here for you, Dean; you know that."

"I know. Thanks."

"Stay safe, Dean. Love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

Kendra gave me a short goodbye before I hung up. I walked down the hall and into the hospital room, where Brad was lying on the bed, tubes running up his nose and an IV in his arm.

"Oh, Brad," I said, brushing back his hair, kissing his forehead. "What's wrong with you?"

The first of my tears rolled down my face.

Kendra arrived first, followed by Soul, Lex and Travis. They all hugged me and said everything was going to be ok. All of them were concerned, but after a half hour of discussion, the guys said that they had to get going, saying that they had to help a friend. They all went to Brad's side and squeezed his hand or patted his shoulder, whispering something to him before leaving.

Me and Kendra were the only two left in the room, other than Brad, who was God knows where.

“Did you call his parents?” Kendra asked.

“Father,” I said. “His dad’s the only one that’s alive.”

“I don’t know what to say, Dean. I don’t know why Brad’s like this, but I think he’ll be all right as long as you stay with him.”

“Yeah. I hope so.”

I stood, stretched, and was about to walk out of the room before I looked back at Kendra.

“Will you stay in here with him? And if something happens, will you call a doctor and come get me?”

Kendra sat in the chair I had pulled up beside the bed.

“I will. Go call his father, Dean. He’ll want to know what’s going on with his son.”

I made my way out of the room and back down the hall, slipping a quarter into the payphone.

I hope he’ll come down here. I need someone like him here.

My parents had never really played a big role in my life, and I didn’t expect them too, ever.

“Hello?”

The older man’s voice was a comfort to my ears.

“Mr. Michelson? This is Dean, your son’s boyfriend.”

“Dean? What’s wrong?”

“Your son, sir, he... He collapsed and started twitching.”

The man’s silence was expected, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Was he speaking in a tongue, Dean?”

I froze.

How does he...

“Was he, Dean?” Robert repeated

“Y-Yes sir.”

“And he’s done this before, but maybe more violent?”

“He attacked me.”

The man’s sigh was evident.

“I can’t come down there, Dean.”

“What? Sir, why...”

“Brad’s dying. No doctor will be able to tell you that.”

“Sir, how...”

“Because I went through the same thing, but not as bad as Brad.”

“He’s dying, sir? You know about his shadow things, you...”

“He’s not schizophrenic, and he most definitely has nothing wrong with him.”

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I took the chance to let this sink in. So his father had gone through the same thing, or something similar. Could I trust the man with his advice?

“Is he really dying, sir?”

“Yes, Dean.”

“How do I help him? I love your son, sir. I would do *anything* to help him.”

The man’s sigh scared me.

“All I can tell you is this, Dean. You need to get inside his head. You’ll only figure out how to help him if you do that.”

Part 79:

In Brad's Head

- - -

You need to get inside his head...

I walked back into the room. Kendra gave me her spot by Brad.

"You ok?" Kendra asked.

"Not really."

I'm the only one who knows he's dying.

"You want me to stay here tonight?"

"No. You can go home, Kendra. I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Not really, but I'm tough."

"All right. Bye, Dean."

I didn't expect the kiss she planted on my cheek.

“Thanks.”

She pat my shoulder before leaving.

Brad, how am I supposed to help you?

His father had told me to get inside his head, but how was I supposed to do that if Brad wasn’t even conscious?

“Here goes nothing,” I said, tightening my grip on Brad’s hand. “Brad, baby; it’s me, Dean.”

I kissed his lips.

“Your dad told me what’s happening. He’s worried about you.”

Talking to Brad like this pulled my heart in too many directions, but I had to try *something*. If Brad’s father had said that this would work, I had to try.

“I love you, Brad, and so does your father, Soul, Lex and Travis. Kendra and Kason do too. We want you to be all right, Brad. Come on, baby. Help me help you.”

The faint squeeze that he gave me made my heart soar.

“Brad?”

Dean...

The voice sent spiders up my spine.

“Brad? Can you hear me?”

Yes... Dean...

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“Baby, you need to let me in. Your dad says you’re dying. I need to help you.”

Baby... It’s time you learned what happened.

My vision swayed. I felt like throwing up, but quickly regained my composure, falling into wherever Brad was taking me.

Part 80:

The Nether Lands

- - -

I woke to a blinding white light. I closed my eyes and gradually opened them, letting my eyes adjust. When I did take the area in, it wasn't like anything I had ever seen. The sky was white, and while everything the field and grasses looked green, it didn't look real. It looked like it was rendered in colors too soft.

"Where am I?"

Wait... I got into Brad's head.

I crossed my arms over my chest. When I glanced down at my arms, I saw they were still their usual color, and so were my clothes. Apparently, I was the only thing in the world that had color outside of the light and shadow spectrum.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

The breeze caused the dark trees to move. I shivered, both in awe and fear of this new, strange world that I was in.

“Come on!. “Someone, please, tell me if you’re there!”

The flock of birds that went up scared me. The things had been hiding in the grass right below my feet. I fell to the ground and covered my head with my hands, ready for something to happen. After a moment, I was sure that nothing was wrong.

What am I supposed to do here?

I lay there for another moment crying before I stood.

“H-Hello! Please, if someone’s there, help me!”

I heard a rustling close by. Every hair on my body stood on end. I turned in a quick circle, panic escalating to the highest point. Here I was in a strange, foreign world, and I didn’t even have any kind of protection with me.

“Stay away from me! Stay the *fuck* away!”

I turned to run, but felt a hand on my shoulder.

“No!”

I hit whatever it was that touched me. An ‘oof’ escaped the thing.

I turned.

Brad was in front of me.

“Brad?” I asked. “Is that you?”

Brad smiled.

“In a way, yes. I’m the Nether Brad.”

The Nether Brad was the same as Brad was back in the real world, complete with color and everything.

“So you’re not Brad?”

“I’m part of Brad, yes,” the Nether Brad said. “I’m the part of him that exists in this world when he’s not here.”

“What do I call you then?”

“What do you want to call me?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Why not just call me Brad?”

“All right, Brad.”

My boyfriend’s name was a word all too familiar on my tongue, but calling this thing Brad was strange and at the same time hurtful.

“Brad’s dying,” I said, adding, “the real one.”

“I am real,” Brad said. “Well, in this sense, anyway.”

“What do I do to help him?”

The Nether Brad frowned.

“You need to get rid of the Watcher. But I think Brad told you something before he brought you here, didn’t he?”

I nodded, trying to bring back the exact words he said.

“He wanted me to know what happened. I think he meant in his life.”

“Yes, I believe that’s what he meant. Come, follow me. We’ll go to our favorite spot.”

I nodded. The Nether Brad saying that he was taking me to his and Brad’s favorite spot was comforting, but at the same time, it was hard to hear.

Just go along with it; you don’t know anything about this world. At least this... This Nether Brad is going to help you help Brad.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s a tree,” Brad said, pointing.

I looked up at the tree. Rising out of a mound of earth, the weeping willow had her branches spread over the hill, her leaves swaying in the light wind.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, Brad and I believe so. Well, as you said, the *real* Brad, anyway.”

“So... You’re not real?”

“You’ve asked this question before.”

“I did?”

“It’s expected. But to answer your question, yes, I am real. I’m the part of Brad that exists in this world when he’s not here.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that... Everything’s so hard to get.”

The Nether Brad turned and faced me, setting a hand on my shoulder.

“It’s fine. We’re almost up the hill.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

I took his hand, allowing him to lead me up the hill. I stumbled a few times, but the Nether Brad was always there to catch me.

“Thanks.” I sat down, leaning against the willow tree. “I don’t think I would’ve gotten up the hill if you hadn’t helped me.”

Brad sat down beside me.

“So, where do you want to start?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I guess at the beginning would be the best.”

“I’m going to take you into his world, Dean. The beginning starts a good ways back, *way* back, back to when he was a child.”

“All I want to do is save him. I’d listen to you tell me Brad’s life second by second if that’s what it took to save him.

“We’re going to start to when he was a little boy,” Brad explained, “when he was just six years old.”

Part 81:

A Little Boy

- - -

Brad looked up at his parents. His mother and father were fighting again, but he stayed in his place. His daddy would get mad if he got off the couch. His daddy *always* got mad if he left the couch when he had been told to stay there.

Mommy and Daddy are fighting again, Brad thought, tears glistening the surface of his eyes. *I don't like it when Mommy and Daddy fight.*

To a six-year-old child, it was hard to see his parents fight. Brad knew that his mommy and daddy fought because of whatever was inside daddy, but Brad was always comforted by the fact that his daddy would never hurt him. That was the *only* thing that comforted him.

When Daddy started speaking in that strange language, Brad knew not to get in Daddy's way; that was the secret law that *everyone* had to follow, even Mommy, who liked to try and make Daddy calm down.

"D-Daddy," Brad stuttered. "A-A-Are you o-o-ok?"

Daddy turned his eyes on Brad, the storm inside him calming.

"I'm fine, Brad," Daddy said. "I'm... *Fuck*... Fine."

Brad lay on the couch, watching his father. A stuffed rabbit was dangling over the side of the couch; the only thing keeping it up was Brad's small hand.

The stuffed rabbit was a comfort. He closed his eyes and imagined that he was in a wonderful world full of rabbits and deer and other small animals. He wished he could escape to that world right now...

Daddy would *never* let him escape.

"Come on, Robert," Mommy said. "Why don't we go lay down? You're stressed."

"No. Stay with the boy."

Brad opened his eyes just in time to see his Daddy disappear into his and Mommy's bedroom.

"Mommy? Are you ok?"

"Yes, Brady," Mommy said, getting down on her knees. "I'm fine."

"Is Daddy?"

"No, dear; Daddy isn't fine. Daddy is very, very sick."

"Mommy?"

"I want you to know that if anything happens to me, Brad, that I love you."

Brad was about to sit up before Daddy came out of the bedroom, holding

his gun.

“Robert, put the gun down.”

“Tuhs pu, hctib.”

Daddy raised his gun and fired. Mommy didn’t have time to scream before her head was gone.

“MOMMY!”

Daddy turned the gun on Brad.

“Moor,” Daddy growled. “Og!”

Brad stared at his father, tears staining his eyes. He didn’t let his sobs and screams escape him, but at the same time, the thought of knowing that Mommy was gone terrified him. Knowing that Daddy could do the same to him would keep him silent. He wouldn’t tell anybody.

Brad walked to his room, the stuffed rabbit never leaving his hand.

Mommy was gone.

Part 82:

Comatose

- - -

I came to shaking. The sight of seeing Brad's father murder his mother was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

I must have walked over and laid down while I was in his world, I thought, wiping the tears from my eyes. But his father killed his mother and got away with it?

I wiped my face with my shirt, knowing that I could do nothing about it. Brad had lied to me; he had said that his mother had died at birth and that he had never had the chance to miss her.

Brad had been missing his mother all his life.

His dad had what Brad has. Is this why I'm supposed to save Brad? To save him from becoming a maniac?

Brad's father had never said what was killing Brad; he had just said that Brad was dying.

“Oh, Mr. McAllen,” Tray Michaels said, stopping at the door. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“It’s fine, sir. I just had a bad dream, that’s all.”

“I’m afraid I have some more bad news for you, Mr. McAllen... Brad’s in a coma.”

“A coma?” I asked. “He’s all right though, isn’t he?”

“His vitals and brain signature is fine, but we’ve come to the conclusion that his body’s put itself in this state for some reason.”

“Do you know why?”

“No, Mr. McAllen; we don’t.”

“All right. Thank you.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. McAllen. I’m sure your partner will be fine.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as the man walked out of the room.

I walked over to Brad’s side and fell back into his world.

Part 83:

Meeting Harmoire

- - -

“His father killed her?” I asked. “Can I call you Brady?”

“Yeah, it’ll make it easier for you. I think Brady’s easier than Brad anyway.”

Brady *was* easier than Brad, because Brady wasn’t Brad; he was Brad’s double that lived in this world.

“Brad’s father had the same thing Brad has right now,” Brady said. “I don’t know if it’s hereditary or not, but I believe it is.”

“It’s probably good that Brad’s gay then. Right? He can’t spread it that way.”

“I believe Brad’s donated sperm, Dean. I don’t know if it’s hereditary. I’ll never know though. I can’t follow Brad’s offspring or go back in time to see if Brad’s grandfather had this.”

I sighed.

“Who is Harmoire?”

“Brad’s guardian.”

“Can you take me back to when Brad met Harmoire?”

“If you would like, yes. Harmoire came along when Brad was going to puberty, after he realized that he was gay.”

“When he was thirteen?”

“Yeah. You ready?”

I fell into the world where I could see Brad’s past in front of my eyes.

*

Brad fell back in bed, his teenage body covered in sweat, his stomach covered in come. Being thirteen and hormonal wasn’t helping much, especially when he got random hard-ons for no reason. The body hair was something new as well.

Oh well. It’s puberty; what was I supposed to expect?

He had taken the sex education class quite recently, as he was in eighth grade, but it was still different from what he had expected. He didn’t mind the body hair or the hard-ons, but his dad had almost caught him getting off.

Of course, it wouldn’t have mattered if his dad had caught him anyway; Dad would just have a ‘man to man’ talk with him, like he already had after discovering Brad’s come rag. His dad hadn’t been mad; he had actually

encouraged it.

Heh, that's Dad. Always there when I need him.

Getting off had relieved the worry that something was in his room earlier. Ever since had had his first orgasm a week after his thirteenth birthday, he had been having bad dreams. He had never complained to Dad about them though. He was sure that his dad would tell him to, 'Buck up,' or--his father's personal favorite--'Fuck off with that stupid shit.'

He was just about to go to sleep before he felt that horrible feeling creeping up his back. He brushed at the hairs on his arms, hoping that his bad feeling was just a bad feeling and nothing more.

Come on, quit being such a big baby. Nothing's going to pop out of the closet and get you.

At that thought, he looked over at his closet. Although it was only partially cracked, he wasn't going to take any chances. He got out of bed, closing the sliding glass door.

"That's over with. Thank *God*."

That horrible feeling of being watched struck him harder than it ever had in his life. It seized his being and made him shake like he never had before.

Open your eyes...

Brad shook his head, not wanting to, but spurring himself on with his thoughts.

There's nothing there.

Brad was greeted by something he knew would be with him for the rest of his life. Its bony, shadow figure watched him with glowing white eyes. He felt no fear from the creature, but he was afraid at the same time. The creature was a bipedal rabbit, one who's glowing eyes lit the room in a dull, almost-florescent light.

"It's ok. It's not real."

"I am real," the creature said, its deep voice a whisper.

The creature held up Brad's stuffed rabbit, a memento from the times when he had been a young, innocent child. Brad looked at the rabbit, afraid that the creature would crush it to dust in its large paw.

Take it."

Brad reached out, grabbing the rabbit. He shivered when his hand touched the creature's form. The shadow disappeared, but when Brad drew his hand away, rabbit intact, the being's form resorted itself.

"Are you the thing that's been watching me?" Brad asked. "A-A-Are you?"

"Yes."

"What are you?"

"A friend. A friend to help you through the hard times that will come, Brad."

“You know my name?”

“Yes, Brad. Would you like to know mine?”

Brad nodded, holding the stuffed rabbit close to his chest.

“Y-Yes.”

“My name is Harmoire. I’m here to help you, not hurt you.”

“H-H-How do I know that you’re not going to do anything to me?”

Harmoire reached behind his back, watching Brad.

“Would someone who was going to harm you give you this?”

The creature held a cinnamon roll in its hand. Brad looked at the creature, then at the cinnamon roll. Normally, he wouldn’t have been so willing, but he accepted the treat, biting into it.

“It’s your favorite, isn’t it?”

Brad finished the roll, licking the orange cream away from his lips.

“Yes, it is.”

The creature stepped aside, allowing Brad to get back in bed.

“What’s going to happen to me?” Brad asked. “Didn’t you say that something was going to happen?”

“Yes, Brad.” Harmoire crouched down. “You’re going to start having bad dreams.”

“I’ve *been* having bad dreams.”

“Yes, Brad, but they are going to keep up for a long time. You won’t be able to escape them that easily.”

“The dreams I’ve been having. What’re they from?”

Harmoire shook its head.

“That is something I cannot answer, Brad. Fear not, because there are other people in the world like you.”

“You’re not here to judge then?”

“No, Brad; I’m not.”

“I’m afraid, Harmoire... I’m afraid because of what my dad will think of me.”

“What will your father think of what, Brad?”

“I’m... I’m gay.”

Brad turned his head down.

“There is no set rules for this world. “Being attracted to another man is not your fault; it is the way your body wants it to be.”

“But I’m afraid. I’m afraid of not being able to find someone.”

“You will find someone in due time, Brad. A boy like yourself, but shorter, with longer hair. Everything will be all right, Brad. I will be here if you need me. All you need to do is say my name.”

Brad watched the creature disappear, comforted by the fact that he had someone to talk to.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Hamoire?”

“Yes, Brad?” the thing said, its voice distorted from whatever plane of existence was separating them.

“Will I be ok? I mean, with the way my body’s changing?”

“You will have body hair and feel the desire of the flesh, but you know how to solve the latter problem. Fear not, Brad; everything will be fine.”

Part 84:

Seduction

- - -

I opened my eyes to the blinding light of the Nether World. I sat up, seeing Brady leaning against the tree, his--*Brad's*--gray eyes watching me.

“Will I ever meet Harmoire?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Brady said, scratching the stubble on his face. “Are you all right?”

I scoot over beside him, resting my head against his shoulder.

“It doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“No,” Brady said, wrapping his arm around me. “I’m a part of Brad, remember?”

I nodded. Being in Brady’s arms made me feel better, because I knew that--even if he wasn’t the real Brad--he was still part of Brad.

“It’ll be ok,” Brady said, nuzzling my cheek with his stubble beard.

“How do you know?”

“I just know. I want to ask you something, Dean.”

I looked up at Brady.

“What?”

“I want to take you.”

I blushed, turning my head away. His invitation for sex was inviting, but I wasn't sure if I could accept it.

“Dean?”

“I'm sorry. It's just that, you...”

“You don't have to worry, Dean. There's no part of me that's different from Brad.”

Although Brady looked like Brad, it wasn't the real Brad. Brady couldn't deny the fact that he *wasn't* Brad, but he was trying to use Brad's body, touch and voice against me.

“I love you, just as much as Brad does.”

“I know.”

After a moment of silence, Brady spoke.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Aren't you going to say it?”

“Say what?”

“That you love me?”

I could see the worry and hurt in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. It’s hard, knowing that I’m in a world inside of Brad’s head.”

“I know. But Dean, I want you to know that I am *not* any different from Brad back in the real world. I want to show you that love that he can’t show you right now.”

“How...”

“Brad will know what I’ve done, And he will remember what you have gone through. In a way, Brad’s acting through me.”

“All right.”

Brady closed the distance between us. He parted my hair and tilted my head back, his lips going to my neck, right above my Adam’s Apple. I closed my eyes and uttered a soft moan, his hand snaking under my shirt.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Brady said. “Take your shirt off, Dean.”

I pulled my shirt over my head. Brady soon did the same, pulling off what looked to be some kind of animal skin, revealing Brad’s body. He bent his head, taking one of my nipples in his mouth.

“Oh, Brady,” I moaned. “Brady.”

Brady continued to give my nipples attention. He pulled licked at them, gently nibbling each one. He kissed me, sliding his tongue in my mouth. After a

moment, Brady pulled away from my mouth, undoing my belt buckle.

“I bet you like a good blow. Huh?”

I nodded, tasting the sweat that had developed on my upper lip.

“Good. I’m here to take your mind off of things.”

I gasped as he slid my jeans off. He pulled my shoes and socks off before kissing my legs, working his way up until he was at my boxer-covered crotch.

“You’re beautiful, Dean.”

He slid his boxers down and licked my balls, taking them in his mouth. He sucked one at a time, occasionally letting them out of his mouth, sliding his tongue under them in a hammock-like caress. He gently bit the skin there, tugging at them with his teeth. When I felt his my dick couldn’t get any harder, he sucked up the length of my cock until he came at the head. There, he swirled his tongue around it, capturing the precome.

“God, Brady.”

Brady took my cock in my mouth, bobbing up and down until his nose was in my pubic hair. I tried not scream. I wasn’t sure if screaming in this world would be the safest thing to do.

“Brady, oh Brad. I’m coming.”

He moved his lips up to the swollen head of my cock, where he sucked on it until I exploded. I screamed as loud as I ever had after orgasm. Brady sucked until he could get no more out of me.

“Fuck me, Brady. God, I need it.”

Brady pulled his trousers off, throwing my legs over his shoulders. He slid his cock up my crack, teasing me with the slick head. He popped my anal ring before shoving all the way in. His quick, deep thrusts brought the animal out in me. I bucked, moving with him, helping him slide into deeper depths.

“Dean.”

“Brady.”

Our lips locked, exchanging saliva and come. Brady’s thrusts were hard and fast. Our bodies met together with the wet sound of sex. He ‘ohed’ over and over, hitting my prostate harder than ever. Finally, he shoved all the way in, threw his head back, and roared. He soaked my insides with so much come that it flooded out around his cock. I came again, soaking my chest with my second load.

“God,” Brady said, falling on top of me.

“Thank you,” I said, kissing his shoulders, lapping up the sweat on them.

Brady let me tend to his body. I had licked all the sweat off of his chest before I collapsed on top of him.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Dean. I’m not Brad in the flesh, but I’m still Brad.”

I rest my head on his chest, wrapping my arms around Brady’s--*Brad’s*--wide shoulders.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“His snakes,” I said. “Does that come after he meets Harmoire?”

“Yeah, when he was fourteen. You ready for me to tell you the story?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Tell away.”

Part 85:

The Snakes of The Fall

- - -

“Hey, Brad,” Peter said. “You going home already?”

“Yeah,” Brad said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. “Dad’ll kill me if I’m not home by the time he gets back from work.”

“Aww, come on, you’re fourteen. Your dad won’t kill you.”

“I doubt that. He’d kill me *after* I was dead if he saw that my homework wasn’t done.”

“All right. Bye, Brad.”

Brad turned, walking down the hall and out the doors. Regardless of the fact that his father had never applied or paid for him to take the bus, he didn’t care. He liked walking home; it made him feel better, more like a regular teenager instead of one who was babied by his parents.

Besides, it gives me time to escape into my own little world.

Shaking his head, he made his way down the sidewalk, glad to be out of school and heading home. It wasn't as though he didn't like school, but it was depressing most of the time. While his friends were hooking up with girls, he was left with the undeniable fact that he would never be able to find a guy that would go out with him.

Oh well. At least I have Harmoire.

Even though Harmoire wasn't a real part of this world, Brad took comfort in the fact that the creature was there for him.

He was about to continue on before he caught sight of two DVD cases on the side of the road.

"What the?" Brad asked, bending down, picking the cases up. "I wonder who'd just dump DVDs on the side of the road."

He popped open the cases and found the words 'EXPLICIT CONTENT' on the inside covers.

He smiled, shoving the DVD cases in his pants pocket.

"God," Brad moaned. "Who would've thought I'd get gay porn on the side of the road?"

The two guys fucking on screen were men that could have been taken out of the gay novels themselves. He stroked himself in synch to their fucking, thrusting his hips every so often. He had been slowly teasing himself with the porn for an hour, he had to hurry.

It was starting to get dark.

Dad'll be home in an hour... He'll kill you if your geometry isn't done.

He tightened his hand around his cock and gave it its last few strokes. He came, come flying all over his chest. He lay there, recovering from his intense jack-off session.

Thank you, whoever the hell was stupid enough to drop porn off on the side of the road.

It wasn't often that he got such a treat. All of the gay novels that he had had to be stashed under his bed in a nondescript box that his father never bothered to look at. He had read those novels countless times, and while they were comforting--as they were about young gay men like himself--they weren't like the porn, which satisfied his sexual urges.

"I need to get working," he said, wiping himself off.

He walked to the DVD player and ejected the disk right as the young twink began sucking the older man's cock. He pulled the box out, pushing the DVDs under the books.

"That's done. Thank God dad's gone."

He fingered the hair on his chest for a short moment, wishing he could shave it. His father would throw a fit if he seen him with a clean chest. He got a few remarks from the other guys in gym class because of his measly amount of bod yhair, but he ignored them, for the most part.

"Geometry," he reminded himself. "Dad'll surely kill you if you don't get

to work on that.”

He walked over to his backpack, fingering for his book.

Something cool and smooth s;od under his fingers.

“Shit!” he cried, falling backward. “What the hell?”

The snake eased its way out of his backpack. The boa reared its head, which sent Brad out of the room faster than he could have ever imagined.

Oh God. There’s a fucking snake in the house!

His thoughts went back to his friends, who had been messing with his backpack earlier.

Those little...

Brad shook his head, feeling tears coming to his eyes. He had never liked snakes in the first place, but now that he had one in his house, he didn’t know what to do.

“Dad’ll call me a fucking fairy if I say something,” Brad whimpered.

“He’ll call me a fairy.”

Brad wasn’t sure that his father knew that he liked guys or not, but he didn’t liked being called a fairy. It was a stupid and hurtful name.

“Just ignore it. It can’t hurt you if you pretend it’s not there.”

With a sigh, he walked back into his bedroom.

The snake was gone.

“Great,” he said. “Just great.”

That night, Brad couldn't sleep. He heard hisses, and most of all, he heard whispers. The whispers had gotten so bad that he had to call Harmoire to comfort him.

"You'll stay with me, right?" Brad asked, rolling over, seeing Harmoire sitting at the end of the bed.

The creature nodded.

"The snake won't bother you," Harmoire said.

Brad...

"Don't worry, they won't."

I'm here, Brad; you know I'm here. Don't deny it; I'm going to torment you for the rest of your waking hours.

Hot tears flowed down his face. He buried his head in his pillow, hoping Harmoire's words were true.

Part 86:

A Walk in the Park

- - -

I walked in the park with Alexandra Carmen. Even though I had had my disagreements with her about the psychosis medicine that Brad had been taking, that hadn't weakened her concern for me or Brad.

"Dean," Alex said. "Do you know what's wrong with Brad?"

I stopped, looking over at her.

"Do you think I know what's wrong with Brad? If I knew that, he wouldn't be in a coma."

Alex sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You're just trying to make me feel a little better."

"I am. I mean... Well, if my boyfriend was like Brad was, I'd be crushed."

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Are you saying I’m not crushed?”

Alex merely shook her head.

“I should just keep my mouth shut; I’m not helping any by keeping it open.”

“I’m just worried about Brad.”

“Of course you are. Anyone would be worried. All of the hospital staff are worried about Brad too. It’s not often we find a person we can’t find the answer to their problem.”

I didn’t say or do anything at her words. I looked out at the park, watching the little kids running back and forth across the playground. I smiled, happy that they were still innocent and didn’t have the world’s weight on their shoulders.

“You see those little kids over there?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I envy them.”

Alex looked at the children.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“When you’re a little kid, you don’t have anything to worry about. I think back on my own childhood and wish it could be like that.”

“You had a bad childhood?”

“Yeah, particularly the single year of high school I was in before I moved

out here. All my friends were either used or stabbed me in the back, my best friend stopped caring and calling, and the guy I had a crush on refused my advances and told another friend that he was dating another guy.”

Alex nodded, deciding to keep her peace. I was thankful that I had someone to vent and release my emotions to.

“I can leave you alone, if you want.”

“Leave me alone? Dean, I’m the one who came out here with you.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok, it’s not your fault.”

“I know, but still; it probably doesn’t help you any to tag around with me.”

“I’m worried about you, that’s all,” Alex said. “Your friends are working, and so are Brad’s. I work at the hospital, so the least I can do is have my lunch break with you.”

I caught sight of a few dogs running across the park, their owner high on their tails.

“You like dogs?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. Brad doesn’t though.”

“How come?”

“He never told me.”

I made a mental note to ask Brady about it once I got back into Brad’s

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520

head.

Part 87:

Dogs

- - -

“Brady?” I asked. “You there?”

Brady waved at me from the willow tree. I ran up the hill

“I remembered something.”

“What’s that?”

“Brad’s dogs. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Sure. You ready?”

I nodded, laying my head in his lap. My world went dark after Brady wrapped a protective arm around me.

*

Brad shook his head, holding the groceries in his hand. His dad had sent him off grocery shopping. Here he was--a sixteen year old--walking to and from his house to get the groceries.

Oh well. Dad's hard on money, and what little money I'm making is to help Dad.

He knew that he would get his driver's license, in time. It didn't matter if he had his license right now. It didn't matter if his friends were driving or if random teenagers at the school drove by and shouted obscenities or made rude gestures at him; as long as he was happy, that's all he cared about.

The sun was beginning to set. Brad was thankful that he had snagged his dad's baseball cap. The cap was long enough in the front to keep the sun out of his eyes, which was good. He didn't need an eyeful of sunlight.

"Great, just great."

He turned, cutting through an alley, making his way across the cemetery. The old place had been forgotten by almost all the people of the city, but Brad knew it was here. The place was a good shortcut, especially when you had to walk a mile to get to the nearest convenience store.

Brad was about to continue before he heard a snarl. He turned, catching sight of a dog.

"Good pooch," Brad said, backing away, keeping his eyes away from the dog's. "I'm not here to hurt you."

The dog growled, four more appearing with it.

We know where you're going, Brad.

Every bit of instinct that was left inside him burst.

Brad ran.

The dogs gave chase, fast on his tail. The only thing that was fueling him was adrenaline. He knew that getting caught was not an option.

The dogs would tear him to pieces.

He cried out as one snapped at his ankle. Had he been a second slower, the dog would've taken a bite out of his leg.

"Leave me alone!" Brad screamed. "Leave me alone!"

We won't leave until we get what we want.

"What do you want!"

You.

Brad yelled when he saw a fence. He took a glance over his shoulder, seeing the froth run from the dogs' mouths. He vaulted over the fence, screaming as a loose portion cut into his shoulder.

"Fuck!" Brad moaned, still running, even though the dogs were trapped behind the chain-link fence. "Fuck!"

"Brad, what's wrong?" his father asked. "You're sweating, son."

"I got chased by dogs, Dad. I got hurt."

His father walked over to him.

"Did you get bit?"

“No, I had to jump over a fence.”

Brad peeled his shirt off, showing his father the wound.

“Goddammit! Those fucking dogs.”

“Don’t touch it, Dad; it hurts.”

“We need to take you into the doctor, Brad; you need stitches.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Bullshit. I’m not letting a cut this bad go. Get your shirt on; we’re taking you to the doctor.”

Brad felt a trail of blood ooze down his spine.

“It’s all right, son,” Dad said, setting his hands on Brad’s arms when he started crying. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

Brad nodded, but knowing that a bunch of dogs had nearly killed him didn’t settle his mind any.

“You ok, son?” Daded asked, opening the door.

Brad nodded. He had been lying on his bed because of the pain in his shoulder, sometimes talking to Harmoire when he was needed.

“I’m fine, Dad. Thanks for asking.”

“I’m going to bed, son. You need anything else before I go?”

“No. Thanks anyway.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“Goodnight. I love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

Dad closed the door, leaving Brad alone in the dark room.

“Why did the dogs chase me, Harmoire?”

The creature rematerialized at the end of his bed.

“They’re creatures of a dark world,” Harmoire explained. “There’s not much more to it. Things like the dogs follow certain people. I haven’t found the reason myself, but I believe they need to feed off human life in order to survive.”

Brad rubbed the stubble on his chin. He didn’t want to delve into the specifics of why the creatures were chasing him.

All he wanted to do was go to sleep.

Part 88:

Harmoire

- - -

When I opened my eyes, I saw Brady standing, talking to a shadow figure. I immediately recognized the creature as Harmoire, the thing that had been guiding Brad from adolescence and adulthood.

Is this him? Harmoire asked in its deep, rumbling voice.

“Yes,” Brady said. “Dean, this is Harmoire.”

I nodded, not even thinking to reach out and touch the creature’s hand. Harmoire didn’t seem to care; it remained bold, upright, and dark, just as it had been in all of the visions of Brad’s past I had experienced.

You’re here to save Brad.

“Yes. I am.”

Harmoire nodded.

It’s a difficult thing to do, Dean. I feel that you are capable of doing what

needs to be done though.

“I’d die for him. I’d spill every drop of blood I could to save him.”

What we need to journey to is the tree of life.

“The tree of life?”

Yes. The tree of life.

“Isn’t this...”

“No,” Brady said, cutting me off before I could finish. “This is just the tree that Brad likes. There’s no significance to this tree.”

“When do we go?”

Not now. You need to return to the human world for a short while. I will beckon to you from Brad and call you into this world when I feel it is safe for you to return.

I turned and wrapping my arms around Brady.

“Thank you. It means a lot, Brady.”

“It’ll be all right, Dean. “I love you. So does Brad.”

I kissed the man’s naked shoulder before I slipped into the human world.

Part 89:

Life

- - -

I woke with an escalating sense of fear burning through my veins.

Harmoire had to find a clear path to the tree of life before I could go back into the Nether World, and until then, I had to wait and suffer with the fact that Brad was slowly but surely dying.

“Dean?” Alex asked, leaning on the doorframe. “Can I come in?”

I sat up, gesturing to her.

“I must’ve fallen asleep there,” I said, forcing a small laugh.

“You haven’t been sleeping a whole lot, have you?”

“Not really, just sometimes.”

“I see you sitting there looking out the window at night. You need to sleep more, Dean.”

“It’s hard to sleep when your boyfriend’s in a coma.”

“I know, but you got to have hope, Dean.”

“I do have hope. That’s the only thing that’s keeping me here.”

Alex touched my arm.

“I need to go, Dean. I hope you get to feeling better.”

I watched her walk out before standing.

“Brad,” I whispered. “I love you, baby.”

I touched his hand, recoiling at the chill.

“Oh God,” I said, tapping the button that called a nurse.

“What’s wrong, Mr. McAllen?” the woman asked. “You’re still tapping that button.”

“He’s getting cold,” I said, sweat dripping down the back of my neck.

“What the hell does that mean?”

The nurse checked his pulse.

“His breathing seems fine,” she said. “I’ll go get the doctor.”

I sighed, backing away from his bed.

Please hurry, Harmoire... I don’t know how much longer Brad can last.

“Harmoire?”

The creature appeared beside me. I was surprised that I was able to see it in the mortal world.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

What is it, Dean?

“I can see you because I’ve been in Brad’s world, right?”

Yes.

I didn’t want to have any of Brad’s demons coming to me. If I was attached to Brad’s world enough to see Harmoire, what stopped the dogs, snakes and the Watcher from targeting me?

“Will they come after me? The demons?”

No. They won’t.

“Does this mean you’ve found a safe way to the tree?”

Not yet, but you need to go to the world tomorrow. From there, we’ll decide what to do.

Part 90:

The Nether Journey

- - -

I opened my eyes, sighing as I found myself lying under the willow tree.

“Hey,” Brady said. “You ok?”

I accepted his hand, letting him pull me up.

“Is Harmoire finding a path?”

Brady nodded, leading me down the hill and to a large expanse of rock that seemed to travel endlessly.

“Where are we going?”

“To my home.”

I was comforted by the fact that he was going to take me somewhere other than the willow tree to wait for Harmoire to come back. We crossed a small bridge over a thin stream before we stopped at the rock face.

“Well, this is it,” Brady said, opening a wooden door embedded into the

rock. "Come in."

I entered, awing at the small house. There was a small, if primitive, kitchen in the corner--which consisted of a dug-out fireplace, wooden bowls and bone knives--and a makeshift bed of blankets on the floor. The rest of the small house taken up by a small table and two chairs, leaving the rest of the area with open space.

"This is where you live?" I asked.

"It's not much, but I'm satisfied."

I sat on the bed.

"How long is it going to be until Harmoire gets back?"

"I don't know," Brady said, pulling his shirt off. "You want to screw around?"

I frowned. He had never put it in that wording before.

"It sounds like we're teenagers."

Brady smiled, walking toward me.

"Do you?"

I stood, pressing my lips to his.

"I guess that's a yes?"

I slid my tongue into his mouth.

“It’s getting cold.”

Brady rest his head against mine. The sex had been great, I couldn’t deny that. The only thing I was worried about was the time.

I had never been in Brad’s world after dark.

“Am I safe here?”

“Yeah,” Brady said. “See that window? It’s open, so you’ll feel a chill, but nothing ever comes in here.”

I glanced up at the window.

“Thank you, Brady.”

“For what?”

“For holding me. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

“I love you as much as Brad does. It’s only right for me to comfort you when Brad can’t.”

“Did you... did you ever want to be with me before I knew how to get here?”

“Sometimes. I experience Brad’s emotions, so it was like you were here with me.”

“I’m sorry.” A tear slid down my cheek. “If I would’ve known...”

“It’s not your fault,” Brady said, kissing my lips.

“But I feel bad. I don’t want to grow distant once Brad’s better.”

“You can visit me in your dreams. It’ll be just like the way you enter this world when you’re awake.”

“I love you so much, Brady.”

“I love you too, Dean.” Brady kissed my forehead. “Me and Brad *both* love you.”

“I know.”

Brady accepted my tears. I buried my head into the crook of his neck, rubbing his back.

Lying in Brady’s arms helped chase my tears away.

When I woke the next morning, Brady was sitting at the table, eating something out of one of the wooden bowls.

“What’re you eating?”

“Soup. You want some?”

I gave a short nod, pulling the covers around my naked body. I felt vulnerable without my clothes on, especially when I was in this strange world that existed inside Brad’s mind.

“Here,” Brady said, handing me a bowl and a wooden spoon.

“Thank you.” I lifted a spoonful, tasting it. “What is it?”

“Just some meat and broth.”

“I didn’t think anything was... Well...” I trailed off, trying to find words

for what I wanted to say.

“You didn’t think you could eat the animals in this world. That’s what you were going to ask, huh?”

“I’m sorry. I wish I knew more about this world.”

“Brad does too.”

“Does Brad ever come here?”

“He can’t. The things that torment him may live here, but that doesn’t allow Brad to come here.”

I continued to eat my soup. While the food was good, and while Brady’s company was better than none, a bad feeling rest in my chest.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not cheating on him by sleeping and having sex with you?”

“I’m Brad, Dean; I just live in this world.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings by asking that question.”

“I know. I love you, Dean. I may not be the real Brad, but I am Brad.”

“It hurts me that I hurt you.”

Brady finished his soup, walking to the counter. He would’ve been naked had it not been for his loincloth.

“You done?” Brady asked.

I handed Brady my empty bowl and spoon.

“Harmoire won’t be back for at least another day. I hope that doesn’t interfere with your real world.”

“How different is the time here?”

“I don’t think it’ll affect you back there though. The worst that could possibly happen is the people back in the real world thinking you’ve slept a few days because of exhaustion.”

That made enough sense.

“Is there something you wanted to do? I mean... What do you do around here?”

“I walk around. Would you like to come with me?”

I pulled my underwear and jeans up my legs.

“Are you sure I’m not a burden?”

“You’re not, Dean. Come on. Let’s go.”

Brady took my hand.

“It’s pretty, even if it is dark, it...”

I shook my head.

“Something wrong?” Brady asked.

“Is it always like this?”

“Most of the time. This world is tainted by the evil that the Watcher

brought.”

I nodded, taking my seat on the rock beside Brady..

“I’m sorry.”

“Baby...” Brady trailed off, obviously nervous about using that word.

“It’s ok. You can call me baby.”

“Baby,” Brady began, taking a deep breath before expelling it. “I don’t want you to go running around in this world.”

“I’ll be fine, won’t I?”

“I don’t know... I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m afraid of this place... I’m very afraid of it.”

“Everything will be fine, Dean. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

The next morning, I woke to the sound of Brady’s voice. I saw Harmoire crouched in the corner, watching me.

“Hello,” I said, rising. “I’m sorry.”

You have nothing to be sorry for. You should prepare yourself; we are leaving now.

I didn’t want to leave. There was a part of me that wanted to stay here with Brady and never leave, but if I did that, Brad would die. What would happen if Brad died while I was in his world? Would I remain here, trapped inside a world because I chose to be here? Or would I be forced out of a dying

man's conscience when this world end in some cataclysmic, white light?

It's ok, I thought, trying to lighten the situation. You're going to be all right.

We must hurry.

"Calm down, Harmoire," Brady said. "Let him eat first."

I pulled my clothes on. I ate quickly, mostly because I could feel Harmoire's intense, headlight-like eyes staring me down.

It means to do this quickly, I said. Why would it want to rush me?

I wasn't sure why Harmoire wanted to get going, but maybe it was because he was afraid for Brad. If Harmoire had been Brad's guardian for ten years now--eleven this October, when Brad turned twenty-three--then it was only natural for the creature to be concerned. Or, maybe, the trip was hell, and Harmoire wanted me to get there before hell seeped through the tiny cracks and inhabited our little path.

I finished the soup and handed the bowl back to Brady, who set it on the table. He pulled me into a hug.

"I love you, Dean," Brady said, trying to fight off tears.

"I know." I set my hands on his back. "I love you too."

I fell into the fact that Brady was holding me. I didn't want to go with Harmoire. I didn't know the creature, I didn't know this world, I didn't know the dangers inside it outside of the snakes, dogs and the horrible being known as the

Watcher.

The evil that gripped my mind would not let me go.

We need to go. Harmoire stood to its full, imposing height. *This world will die if Brad dies, Brady. You know this better than anyone.*

Brady broke our embrace, kissing my lips.

“Stay safe, all right?”

I patted his stubbly cheek before I followed Harmoire out the door. I turned and saw Brady looking out the window. I waved, trying to bring him some small form of comfort, even if it was just a wave goodbye.

Around us, dark trees cradled the sky with their long, bony branches. No leaves or needles rested upon their bark. They were dead, just like the dirt path we walked on.

“Where are we?”

A dark forest, Harmoire mused. *A very dark forest.*

Since we had been traveling, I hadn’t spoken to Harmoire once, nor did it speak to me. I was starting to get nervous. Was Harmoire just a lifeless, soulless being intended to answer when asked something, or was it just being quiet, letting the world sink into my skin?

“Harmoire,” I began. “How come you’re being so quiet?”

There’s no need to speak.

Regardless of the fact that I was scared out of my mind, the creature didn't offer any comforting words.

How could Brad have talked to this thing? How could he have talked to something that has no concern for anyone?

I crossed my arms over my chest. How could Harmoire just leave me like this if he was my guide?

"Can we stop?"

We've only been going for two hours.

"I-I know, but I'm cold."

Harmoire stopped, turning his bright eyes on me.

All right. We will stop.

I followed, thankful that Harmoire was showing at least a small amount of compassion.

I lay in the corner of a cave, my back turned to the dark creation. The creature was watching for trouble, but it didn't help to chase away the feeling of loneliness that rested in my heart.

I wish Brady was here.

Brady would've held me, he would've made me feel better. He would've kept my fears away, would've made me feel better about being with Harmoire.

He's not going to hurt you I reassured myself.

I wasn't sure if Harmoire was the dangerous type, but from what Brad told me, he wasn't. If Harmoire was a kind enough creature to help Brad through his life, then he was a kind enough creature to not hurt me.

"Goodnight," I whispered, pushing away all other sound.

The water in front of me was cold, low and black. I stared at it, mesmerized by its forbidden beauty. Shivers slid over my body, not because it was black or because I was in a foreign world, but because I didn't know what lurked beneath the surface.

We have to cross.

"What?"

We have to cross, Harmoire repeated. *It's in the middle of the lake.*

"What is?"

Brad's tree of life.

"But how are we..."

I trailed off as I realized what Harmoire meant.

"Is there anything below the water?"

If you stay close to me, they'll leave you alone.

Harmoire stepped into the water. The creature's form made ripples that went out far enough to disappear in the fog that surrounded the area.

Come.

I considered taking my shoes off, then had second thoughts.

Oh, yes, my inner voice taunted. You better keep your shoes on. Who knows what kind of little critters are waiting to take a little nibble out of you.

I followed Harmoire into the water. The water wasn't cold, but it wasn't that warm either. It was that lukewarm temperature you got in water you let sit for a few hours.

"How far is it?"

Not too far.

Not too far...

Bullshit.

Pure, utter bullshit.

We had been wading through these shallow, waist-high waters for what seemed like an hour. There was no island, and I didn't think that there *would* be an island anytime soon.

"Harmoire."

What?

"I thought you said the island wasn't too far away?"

It's not.

"We've been going for a long time."

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

Not too long.

“I’m starting to get cold.”

Harmoire stopped.

It’s there.

Harmoire pointed. The tree was huge, with branches that extended for what seemed like forever until they came back down and touched the surface of the water.

Come.

I continued on. When my foot stepped up onto dry land, I wanted to collapse and lay there.

You’ve come.

I looked into the eyes of a creature that I thought I would never see.

I was staring into the eyes of the Watcher.

Part 91:

Watching

- - -

Hello, Dean.

It was just as Brad had described it; catlike, armor covering its body, a long, thick tail with a spike at the end.

“Y-Y-You...” I turned to Harmoire. “You set me up.”

You’re the last link to Brad, the Watcher said. If you die, then he dies.

I backed away from Harmoire and the Watcher, my foot touching the water.

Your death would be much quicker here, Harmoire said. Much quicker.

“How could you do that to him? How could you play Brad like that, Harmoire?”

Brad was a person who had opened himself up to things that he shouldn’t have. He let me in. If the boy had been smart, he would’ve backed away. But no.

That boy was seduced by the taste of one little cinnamon roll.

“You *bastard!* How the fuck could you be with him all these years and then turn on him?”

Because for us to live, we feed off life, the Watcher said. *And if you die, he dies.*

I ducked just in time to avoid being torn in half by the Watcher’s tail. I jumped, landing on my feet. The water was up to my thighs.

Harmoire nor the Watcher followed me.

You’ll die out there, Harmoire said.

“No, I won’t. I’m too damn stubborn to die.”

I didn’t know how much longer I could take it. Things had been brushing up against my legs since the island had disappeared from sight. So far, I hadn’t felt the sting of teeth. The only thing I *could* feel was something tugging at my pants every once in a while. I was afraid to even begin to reach down and touch my jeans. I didn’t want to expose bare flesh to whatever it was that was following me.

As long as you don’t know what it is, you’re safe. Right?

I let out a low, nervous laugh. Fear touched me as I realized that I didn’t know what direction I should be going in.

“Oh fuck,” I said, tears coming to my eyes. “Motherfucker!”

My scream was lost in the fog, and it didn't return in the form of an echo.

The tears were flowing down my cheeks so fast that they dodged my shirt and landed in the water, creating small splashes.

"It's ok, just keep walking. Nothing's going to get you."

Whatever it was that was following me bumped into my leg.

I thought I was seeing things when I first saw it. I rubbed my eyes, hoping to dispel the image and continue on with my journey.

No.

I was seeing the real thing all right.

"Oh God!" I cried. "Land!"

I waded to the slope and stepped up on it. I turned just in time to see something with a small dorsal fin swim away, disappearing under the water.

"S-S-S-Shark."

I nearly passed out when I looked down. Both sides of my jeans were gone at the knees, torn off by the creature's teeth. I also had several tiny but deep cuts that steadily bled. This was what I *could* see. I couldn't imagine what my eyes were tricking me into *not* seeing.

I fell on my ass, the world spinning. I closed my eyes, wanting to be swallowed up into sleep.

I woke to the sound of a fire. I bolted up and instantly regretted it, pain sparking in my legs.

“Dean, lay down.”

Brady’s voice.

“Thank *God*,” I said, lying back down. “I thought I was going to get eaten out there.”

“The little buggers are nasty when they’re hungry,” Brady said, kneeling down beside me. “You ok?”

I gripped his hand. Even though his bed was made out of animal furs and thin cloth, it was still comforting.

“How bad are my legs?”

“Bad enough. I’d prefer if you not look at them though.”

“Please hold me. I was so afraid, Brady.”

Brady moved under the covers, holding me close. I let my tears fall as I lay my head on his chest.

“It’s ok. You’re safe now.”

“Harmoire betrayed me. He betrayed *us*.”

“What?” Brady asked, jumping to his feet.

“He led me to the Watcher,” I sobbed. “I need to kill it, Brady. You need to help me kill it.”

Brad looked out the window.

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

“I’ll help you kill it,” Brady said. “I will.”

Part 92:

Dean's Kaleidaorb

- - -

"Dean?" Brady asked. "You awake?"

"Yeah, I'm awake," I said, opening my eyes. "What's up?"

"You wanted a way to kill the Watcher? I have it, right here."

Brady tapped the surface of an old, wooden box. The thing was so old that it looked like it would crumble if he did any more than tap it.

"What's inside?"

"See for yourself."

I opened the box, shielding my eyes at the light that came out of it.

"Touch it," Brady said. "It'll dim."

I touched the smooth surface of the contents of the box. The single object dimmed.

I stared in shock.

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“It’s... It’s...”

“A kaleidaorb.”

I pulled the orb out, looking at the beautifully-dark butterfly-like pattern.

“This is mine. It’s April.”

“You saw Brad making them, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“This will kill the Watcher and keep all the other bad things away. This is what will keep you alive in this world, Dean.”

“This... Brad makes everything in this world, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. He made the kaleidaorbs, he made the tree we sat under, he made the lake and his tree; he made everything.”

“Is some part of me here?”

“No. Brad would *never* put *any* part of you in this world. He loves you too much.”

I was about to ask *why*, then I realized how cruel and dark this was. I wondered why Brad would make Brady live here, and why Brady wouldn’t care living here.

“Did he make you?”

“No,” Brady said. “I’m one of the few things in this world that actually belongs here.”

“I’m glad, Brady... I don’t know if I could deal with you being

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something out of Brad's imagination."

"I can understand that."

Part 93:

In Foreign Arms

- - -

I held the kaleidaorb close to my chest that night. Brady had since fallen asleep, his arms around me, his stubbly cheek resting against the back of my neck. The kaleidaorb's low, faint pulses marked the beats of my heart. The kaleidaorb made me feel warm, special, even.

Maybe it's because it's my birth month orb, I thought, looking at the dark lines running through it's yellow-gold surface.

The object was fascinating, but at the same time, empowering. Knowing that the object would serve me in defeating the Watcher was something that couldn't be easily replaced.

"Dean," Brady said. "You ok?"

"It's beautiful."

"It is," Brady said, nuzzling my cheek with his own. "Can't sleep?"

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A novel by Kody Boye

“Not really.”

“You’re not uncomfortable, are you?”

“No, I am. I feel safe in your arms.

Brady kissed my cheek.

“I’m glad I can substitute while Brad’s not here.”

“You’re not substituting. You...”

I stopped.

“I what?”

“Brady, I don’t know how to say this, but you and Brad... You seem like two completely different men.”

“We’re not. I’m the same man that Brad is.”

“But...”

“When you save Brad, you’ll realize that.”

“I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“You’ll be able to see me in your dreams.” Brady paused. “That is, if you want to.”

“Of course I do.”

I rolled over, facing Brady, the kaleidaorb still in my hand. His smile warmed my heart.

“I’m glad, because I love you just as much as Brad does.”

I snuggled close to his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, and I allowed him and sleep to take me in their embrace.

“Brady?”

He opened his eyes and smiled at me. It was starting to get lighter--what with the sky turning a pale shade of blue--but it was still dark.

“Yeah, Dean?”

“I’m afraid,” I said. “I need to go today, otherwise I won’t ever go.”

Brady sat up. The muscles in his back and shoulders tightened, his brow furrowing in thought.

“Brady?”

“I know you’re afraid. I have faith in you.

“What if I don’t come back? What if something happens to me?”

“Don’t say that!”

“Answer my question. I need to know.”

“The world will continue to collapse in on itself until Brad dies. When he dies, I’m guessing we’ll all disappear.”

“We?”

“Well, I will, and anything else Brad put in this world. I still don’t know how much of his real life he put into this world.”

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A novel by Kody Boye

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I laced our fingers together.,

“I love you and Brad so much. I’m not going to let anything happen to the three of us.”

Part 94:

The Beginning of an End

- - -

Brady held me in a long, tight bear hug. My hands were cupped at his lower back, the kaleidaorb the only thing separating my hands from his skin.

“You’ll be all right,” Brady said. “I have faith in you.”

I pulled away from him, but not before grabbing his face and pushing my tongue into his mouth. I held the kiss for at least a minute before pulling away, gripping his hand.

This is it, I thought, making my way toward the forest. This is where you either save him, or die trying.

When I tried to step into the forest, I was met by a barrier. I touched its surface, a ripple spreading out over its duration. It spread from the rock face all the way into the forest across from Brady’s home.

“Brady!”

"I see," he said, stopping beside me. "I... I don't know what this is."

"It's a barrier." I touched the surface again, watching the ripples. "If I can't get back to the lake this way, then where do I go?"

Brady touched the barrier. He tapped it with each of his five fingers, smaller ripples spreading out along with the original large one.

"Wait here."

He turned and ran back toward the rock face, crossing the bridge of the small stream. I slid my hand into my pocket, setting it over the kaleidaorb.

What am I going to do if I can't get to the demons?

I shook the thought from my head. There would be no 'I can't's' here. There would only be an 'I can.'

A moment later, Brady was back, holding a piece of parchment.

"This is a map I drew," he said. "Look."

The majority of the map was drawn in. The rock face, the individual streams, the forest and the path through it, the lake and, finally, the tree. What seemed to be missing though was the area beyond the woods before the mountains. Here, Brady had 'unexplored' wrote.

"This mountain," Brady said, tracing the curve of the empty area, "most likely has an alternative route to the lake."

"Why isn't it drawn in?"

"Because I've been afraid to go there."

I frowned. I looked up at the mountains, their tall, imposing peaks taunting me.

“Why, Brady? What’s in there that’s you’re afraid of?”

“Monsters.”

I turned to face him.

“Monsters?”

“I think there’s other people here, in this world. I mean, if you and Brad in the real world connect with others, why wouldn’t there be some kind of hidden connection?”

“Like this world lying under ours?”

“Yes. I think there are people over those mountains. But the thing is, I tried going in once. Late at night, I’d been looking at food *before* I figured out how to grow my own. I’d wandered up to those woods and saw something slip back into the woods.”

“*Something?*”

“Something,” Brady agreed. “Something that nearly scared me to death.”

At this, Brady rubbed his sides. Was there a memory imbedded in his mind, one powerful enough to affect his physical behavior?

“I don’t want you to go in there,” Brady said, drawing me out of my thoughts, “but I don’t know what other choice there is.”

“Will my kaleidaorb protect me?”

“Yes. It’ll keep you safe.”

I’d been chewing my bottom lip to the point of making it tender. I reached up and fingered the overly-ripe flesh, realizing just how much danger I was putting myself in.

You go in there and there’s a good chance you won’t come out alive. But if you don’t go in there, there’s a good chance you’ll lose Brad.

If I lost Brad, I would most surely die. If I lost the man I love and the one who guarded the treasures of his mind, the man I was now standing in front of, would I truly be able to go on?

No. I wouldn’t.

I knew if Brad died, I would kill myself to end my pain.

“I’ll go.”

I stepped forward, not wanting to face Brady, not ready to tell him goodbye for a second time. Instead, Brady wrapped his arms around me, kissing my neck.

“I love you, Dean.”

“I love you too.”

“Be careful, ok?”

“I will.”

“And if trouble comes, just imagine,” he whispered. “Your thoughts are what will keep you alive.”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

I walked for a long time. The field was larger than I originally expected. I climbed hills and crossed streams, stopped and rested a few short times, and even considered going back to get food. I quickly dispelled my thought when I realized how far back I would have to go.

If I turn around now, I'll have lost all that time and more.

I looked at the forest. Here, the tall trees had leaves. Unlike the forest which Brady called the 'Dark Forest.'

"Here we go," I whispered. "This is where I save Brad."

I took my first step into the forest.

Part 95:

The Woods are Dark

- - -

When I entered the woods, I pulled my kaleidaorb out. The moment it came out of my pocket, it brightened, surrounding my body in a ring of light that extended a foot out.

I guess this is better than nothing.

With no map to go on, and with no way to know how I would get to the lake, I decided to follow my instincts. I took my first few steps, walking around trees and stepping over rocks.

Would the orb warn me if I was going the wrong way, or was it simply a weapon which I would have to learn? I could almost hear an old sage saying 'Patience is a virtue, grasshopper,' but at that moment, it sounded more like, 'Patience is *avert* you.'

If patience was averting me, did that mean I was being too hasty? Or did that mean that my calm demeanor would slip away, that I would turn to irrational

thinking instead?

“Fuck it.”

I kept going in what I assumed was a straightforward direction, but I quickly realized that no matter what way I was going, it would most likely *not* be straightforward.

People lose sense of direction when they have no idea where they're going. Right can be left, left can be right, front can be back and back can be front. You could be walking in the direction you just came from.

“Don’t turn around, Dean. Goddammit, don’t you even *begin* to change your footing.”

If I did turn, if I *did* get caught up in the game of illusion, I would surely lose my way.

“Little Dean McAllen, walking through the wha-oods, walking through the wha-oods,” I sung, trying to channel how anxious I was. “He’s gonna go find what they do-oooh do-oooh. But dun turn ‘round, dun turn ‘round, ‘cause they might come after you-oooh.”

I stopped when it was too dark to see. Although the kaleidaorb gave me a fair amount of light, I didn’t trust what lay outside the ring of light. Something could be following me and I wouldn’t even know it.

I saw something... Something that nearly scared me to death.

The bumps in my skin heightened until they were clearly visible. Enough was enough; I had to figure out where to go.

I could climb a tree, or go in a cave.

Climbing a tree wouldn't be easy though, and what if I couldn't get down? And where was the so-called cave that I wanted?

At this revelation, a terrible fit came. Several sobs escaped, while tears traced my cheekbones down to my chin. If I didn't find somewhere safe to sleep, I was most surely going to get attacked by something.

Hamoire and the Watcher aren't going to come after me, not all the way out here. If they wanted to kill me, they'd have left the barrier down.

If the demons had known about this path, why did they leave it open? Were they hoping that, by forcing me to detour down a dangerous path, death would overcome me? Or were they testing me, my love?

It's a mind game. I wouldn't be surprised if Hamoire suggested the barrier.

The Watcher had tried to outright kill me when I came into contact with it. Hamoire would've been able to kill me in the forest or lake, but didn't. The demon's psychopathic personality was alarming, mostly because it tortured its victims in a careful, calculated way. It did not kill outright. Instead, it chose to play games, making its victim suffer as much as he could.

As I thought over this, I continued to cry. Not because I was only just realizing that I was being forced down this path, but because of my situation.

Here I was, standing in the middle of the woods, with an orb no bigger than an orange that probably served no purpose other than to be a nightlight.

Imagine.

“Imagine,” I repeated.

Your thoughts are what will keep you alive.

“My thoughts are what will keep me alive.”

I slid the orb into my pocket, grabbing a nearby branch.

Something touched my leg when I pulled myself up into the tree.

I wasn’t sure if it was just another branch, or if it was something else.

The thought was gone when I pulled the kaleidaorb back into my pocket.

I set it on my lap, nestling myself in the cradle of branches.

I fell asleep to the sound of the wind.

The following morning, I climbed down the tree and started off again.

The night before, I had dug an arrow in the ground with my foot, pointing at the direction I would be headed.

Here goes nothing.

I didn’t know exactly how long it’d take to get to the mountains, but no matter how long it took, I was determined to get there. The dull throb in my stomach told me I needed to eat, but until I found some fruit or vegetables, I’d be going hungry.

How long can I go hungry though? How long will I be able to go without nutrition?

The most I'd had in two days was the single bowl of soup. While it had been filling, it wouldn't last long. I'd be miserable sooner rather than later.

"Just don't think about it," I muttered, stepping over a fallen branch. "If you don't think about it, you won't have to think about food."

It was a logical-enough idea.

While I continued on, the kaleidaorb pulsed with my heartbeat, as it usually did when it wasn't lighting up my surroundings. Here, in the grey fog of morning, it merely followed what my heart was doing; beating. Beating because it gave me life, beating because it gave me will, beating because it gave oxygen to the rich cherry that made up the mannequin cake that I was.

Mannequin cake?

Had I called myself this because I was being toyed with, or because I was entering a different state of mind?

Of course you're in a different state of mind. You're wandering a forest, going into God knows what kind of mountain, to either kill or be killed. Of course you're going to be in a different state of mind.

It was pretty bad when I wasn't referring to myself as myself anymore.

I closed my eyes, listening to the sounds of this strange world. Although the color was more normal here, I knew parts of the world were being taken under the darkness that Hamoire and the Watcher commanded. Would the field

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soon lose its vibrant greens, like the lake had lost its blue and the trees had lost their brown, or would Brady no longer be in his beautiful color?

I didn't think on this.

Instead, I continued, not wanting to think about the bad things anymore.

Two days later, I came to the entrance of the mountain. Here, what looked to be a carved-out path went up the mountain until it disappeared above my sight. I'd be able to climb it, but it wouldn't be easy.

Well, here goes nothing.

Sliding the kaleidaorb into my pocket, I took my first step toward the mountain.

Part 96:

Climbing the Mountain

- - -

When I was finally on top of the slope, I looked back down. I didn't know exactly how high I had climbed, but I knew it had to have been a good distance. Below, the tops of the tree were so small.

Better not slip.

If I took a wrong step here, I would surely fall to my death.

Can I die here?

I didn't see why I *couldn't* die. I had felt passion, I had felt pain, I had felt the chill and the warmth; there was no reason why I *shouldn't* be able to die.

"Just be careful," I said, looking at the jagged path of rock and dirt before me.

Standing, I paused to look back at how far I had come. I could see Brady's rock in the distance. Like the trees, it was smaller than I could have ever imagined it to be.

If I don't come make it back, this will be the last piece of Brad and Brady I'll have left.

I set my hand over my chest and began my descent into the mountain.

I had to stop for fear that I would keel over. I hadn't had water or food for two-and-a-half days.

God, whoever the fuck you are, please, help me.

Leaning against a slab of rock, I swallowed air. I wasn't even able to spit anymore, let alone have comfortable breathing.

What did Brady say? That my imagination would keep me alive?

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Was I supposed to imagine food and water? Was I supposed to imagine that they'd fall out of sky, dropped in a cradle by the mother stork? *What* was I supposed to do?

"Here goes nothing."

I closed my eyes and imagined coming upon a stream around the next bend. I imagined finding wild fruit; tomatoes, growing next to the stream, nurtured by the constantly damp ground. I imagined biting into this luscious fruit, tasting the Nether Lands in all its glory, and I imagined tasting its fresh, untainted water.

"I'm just torturing myself. Who am I kidding? Maybe Brady was saying

that to make me more confident.”

No. Brady wouldn’t do that. Brady wouldn’t have sent me without food had he not meant what he said.

I stood, taking another painful breath.

When I rounded the corner, some hidden part of me came alive.

I took the first bite out of a delicious tomato. The juice ran down my chin. I moaned, setting it down. I pulled my shirt off and tore into the fruit, not even caring when the juice spilled down my chest.

He was right. Brady was right!

I finished the tomato and threw my face into the stream. I drank what seemed like a gallon of water before I fell back, resting on the ground.

My belly was full. I’d figure out a way to gather some water and stuff as many tomatoes as I could into my shirt.

I closed my eyes, drifting to sleep.

When I woke up, it wasn’t dark. There wasn’t any sun in this world. Instead, the sky remained white until that certain time, then it darkened until it became pitch black.

I better get going.

As I had imagined before I fell asleep, a leather canteen lay next to the

tomato bush. I filled it with water, attaching it to my belt. I then made a makeshift bag out of my shirt, stuffing at least half a dozen tomatoes into it. I tied the tomato-filled shirt to my belt.

When I looked up, I realized that there was no where left to walk. Instead, I would be climbing up a rock face that seemed to go into the sky forever. I could see what looked like the top, but there was no way to truly gauge how far up it was.

Oh God, no, please.

The thought of slipping on one of the rocks and falling to my death lodged itself in my head. I cried, knowing that I had no choice in the matter. I had no other path other than the one into the sky.

This is for Brad, I reminded myself. This is for the man you love.

“For Brad and Brady.”

I walked to the cliff, grabbing hold of one of the rocks. I pulled myself up, grabbing another rock, stepping into juts of rock below. I kept doing this, knowing that no matter what happened, I had to keep climbing.

I don't know how soon it's gonna get dark.

That'd be my luck; getting stuck on the side of the cliff in pitch-black darkness. What was I supposed to do if it got dark and there was nowhere for me to stop and rest? Stay on the side of the cliff until the sky turned white?

You're not gonna think about that. You're going to keep climbing. The more you climb, the sooner you'll be at the top.

That was what I was going to stick with.

I slipped.

I don't know how it happened. I reached for the next slat, then lost balance. I grabbed for anything I could, but it was no use. The next thing I knew, I was falling.

I'm so sorry, Brad.

I closed my eyes, knowing that now was my time to die. It was my time to go to whatever place people went after they died. Heaven, Hell, a third realm like this one.

I had failed. I had done everything I could, yet I couldn't even save the man I loved.

The breath shot out of my lungs. I opened my eyes, gasping, gripping for whatever I landed on.

A branch...

I gripped its cracked surface, taking slow, deep breaths. I had landed on my stomach, which was nothing short of a miracle itself.

"I'm... alive."

I had only fallen a few feet.

Something was watching out for me.

That, or I was having extremely dumb luck.

I slid onto a larger rock, getting my bearings before I continued the climb up.

I was just sliding over the top of the cliff when the last traces of light left the Nether Land. My hand was in my pocket the next minute, gripping for the kaleidaorb. I set it in front of me, inching away from the cliff.

I don't know how I did it, but I'm here.

Miraculously, I still had the canteen and tomatoes. I took a moment to gain my bearings. A rock formation jutted out not too far away. When I walked over, I realized it was a small cave, slanting down for a few feet until it stopped, revealing smooth ground.

I set the kaleidaorb down, letting it hit the bottom of the cave.

Nothing was there.

Did I expect something to be living so high up?

I didn't know what to expect, but it was always good to stay cautious. I crawled down, settling myself in a sitting position. I took a quick drink of water and ate one of my tomatoes.

Five tomatoes and more than half a thing of water.

I'd have to save the water, most definitely. The tomatoes would also have to be saved. It was dumb enough luck that I had got them earlier; who knew how many times I could play the 'get out of bad situation' card.

Holding the kaleidaorb close, I set the shirt and water beside me, closing my eyes.

Sleep took me almost instantly.

I woke to the rain. Thankfully, it wasn't sliding into the cave, so I could continue to rest for tomorrow's journey.

I'll have to see what all there is here.

I was more than sure that I would continue to walk as I normally would. As far as I had seen, the mountain rose and continued on for quite a while before it gradually slanted down. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any more climbing.

I wouldn't know until tomorrow morning, when the light returned to the sky.

Sliding a finger over the kaleidaorb, it got a little brighter, but not so much that it bothered my eyes. Right now it had, more or less, the same kind of light a nightlight would put off.

"It's fucking freezing in here."

I could try and imagine a blanket, but I wasn't going to take my chances. As I had thought before I had gone to bed, I didn't know how many times I could use my 'imagination' to help me.

I'd save it for dire situations; for food or water, or if I had to save my ass again.

Lightning slashed the sky, lighting up the cave for a brief moment. When it was dark, the kaleidaorb pulsed with each breath I took.

I wonder why it does that.

The orb was probably connected to me in some way. That, or it was just the way it worked. I wasn't sure if the other months operated the way my orb's month did. I just hoped I'd get the chance to ask Brady.

I'm not going to die.

There was no guarantee about that though.

Closing my eyes, I tried to go back to sleep.

The second time I woke up, it was because of the thunder. It was so loud that it literally shook the inside of the cave.

Come, Dean.

Come?

“What?”

This wasn't Harmoire or the Watcher's voice. This thing's voice was lighter, but had a dull, monotonous sound.

I made my way out of the cave. The orb in hand, I stood in the rain.

When the kaleidaorb brightened, five dogs stood in front of me.

Oh God...

These were the demons that had tried to kill Brad when he was sixteen.

Dean, the leader said, sitting on its haunches. *We've come for you.*

"You're not going to stop me."

What makes you think that?

I pulled the kaleidaorb back from where it had been in front of me.

Before I knew it, it materialized into a staff of light.

"You're going to have to kill me if you want me to stop."

That can be arranged.

The dogs stood, surrounding me. I held the staff close, counting its pulses.

One...

Two...

Three...

Four...

One of the dogs launched itself at me. I brought the staff up, hitting it away.

All five were on me.

I dove out of their way, slamming the staff into the one's head. It yelped and flew off into the darkness. The next two came at me at once. I brought the end of the kaleidaorb staff up, slamming it under the chin. I heard a crack before the dog fell on its side.

You've got three more of us! the dog demon screamed.

I ran, dodging around the two that were chasing me. I rolled behind the rock, picking up a nearby stone. When I chucked it at one of the dogs, it passed through without doing any kind of damage.

The light is what kills them.

I slammed the staff down on the one's back, doing it over and over. When its spine bowed, I knew it was dead.

I had the last of the two now.

This demon dog jumped. When its paws connected with my shoulders, I went down, the staff spinning away.

"NO!"

I grabbed the dog's throat, hitting the side of its head with my hand. I saw faint traces of gold on my palms.

This is why I can hurt it.

Bringing my other hand up to the thing's neck, I grabbed the throat and squeezed as hard as I could, releasing my hold on its snout to stab my fingers into its eyes.

Black blood stained my face. I forced my fingers in deeper, stabbing at what I assumed was the brain.

When the dog weakened, I threw it off the nearby cliff.

You think you can kill me, mortal?

When the demon dog came closer, I realized this was the first demon I had ever had a scenario with. This was the dog-thing that Brad had saw at the hill when I was just sixteen, the thing that had supposedly chased the car.

“You tried to hurt me when I was young.” I picked the staff up, thrusting the blunt head at the demon. “You nearly killed me.”

As was my intention, pathetic mortal.

“Now I’m going to kill you.”

I carefully backed toward the cliff until I was near the very end of it. When the dog stalked toward me, crouched down, and jumped, I ducked.

Die!

I slammed the staff up into the creature’s stomach, pushing it over the side of the cliff.

All I heard was a terrible howl all the way down.

“They’re dead,” I breathed. “They’re *fucking* DEAD!”

The staff returned into its original shape. When I looked down at the kaleidaorb, mist swam over its surface, as if clouds were moving over a forbidden world.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

Part 97:

Descending the Fall

- - -

The following morning, I woke up, took a sip of water and made my way out of the cave. The dogs' bodies were gone. They had, most likely, dissolved when the light came out.

That's what killed them, I thought, taking a deep breath of the cool morning air. *That's probably what made their bodies disappear too.*

I turned and found what I had hoped for. The mountain slanted down, with rock on both sides. It was almost as if some God-like figure had taken a sword and torn the mountain's belly open.

And it's wooded, I mused, rubbing the thin coat of stubble that lined my face. *Guess that means I'll be going downhill from here.*

I chuckled, then realized what my thought had sounded like. I shook my head, making sure my shirt and canteen were attached to my belt before I began the next part of my journey.

I stopped to take a sip of water. Here, in the wooded mountain area, I was as alone as I could be. I hadn't heard or seen any kind of animal since I had entered the woods.

I haven't seen any animals. What the hell am I thinking?

I could've been subconsciously ignoring them, or I maybe they weren't even there. Whichever it was, I wasn't going to worry about it.

No.

I had to find a way to Brad's Tree of Life.

*

"What do you think's wrong with Mr. McAllen?" Doctor Michaels asked.

Alexandra Carmen shook her head, not sure what to say. It seemed like exhaustion had finally won its fight over the young man's body.

"I think his body's trying to reduce the amount of stress it's going through."

"That doesn't explain why he suddenly..."

"Tray." Alex shook her head. "He's breathing fine, his eyelids flicker. He may have been sleeping for the past day-and-a-half, but there's nothing to worry about."

Tray shook his head, walking to Dean McAllen's side. The doctor pressed two fingers to the young man's neck, seeking a pulse.

“He’s breathing fine.”

“See, I told you.”

Tray ran a hand over Dean’s forehead, pushing the hair out of the man’s face.

“Get him a blanket,” Tray said.

Alex opened the nearby cabinet. Tray took the blanket and covered Dean up, but not after he pulled Mr. McAllen’s shirt off his head.

“That’ll be more comfortable than the tight shirt he’s wearing,” Tray smiled.

“Yeah.” Alex looked over at Brad, frowning. “He’s been doing well, hasn’t he?”

“You mean Mr. Michelson?”

“Yeah, I mean him.”

“He’s been fine. Why?”

“I just want him to wake up,” Alex sighed. “I want the both of them to finally be over this nightmare.”

*

I lay in another tree that night, listening to the soft purr of the wind. It wasn’t cold tonight. Thankfully, the warm wind kept me from being completely uncomfortable.

Last night had been cold as shit.

Last night, I'd done things I'd never imagined. I still couldn't believe that I had fought off five demon creatures with only a staff of light.

People do crazy things when they're in love.

I smiled at the thought.

"I'll do anything for you," I whispered, setting the orb in my lap. "I wish you were here, Brad."

I rolled on my side, holding the orb close to my chest.

It wouldn't be easy to fall asleep tonight.

I stopped in my place when I thought I heard something hiss at me.

You're hearing things.

I'd been 'hearing' things for the past little while now. Usually, it was a rustle in the bushes or a twig snapping, but it wasn't frequent enough to warrant any kind of fear. I'd have known if something had been following me.

Unless you were intentionally blocking it out, of course.

I wouldn't 'intentionally' block something out that would put me in danger.

Drawing an arrow in the dirt, I turned, examining my surroundings. Pretty much everything looked the same though; trees, trees, and more trees, with the occasional large rock.

If something's following me, it could hide behind the trees or the rocks.

I gripped the orb tighter, reveling in its warmth.

Just keep going.

I started back in the direction my arrow was pointing.

Even though I had been going all day, I had no intention of stopping. The darkness that surrounded me was frightening, but no matter what, I wouldn't stop. I *couldn't* stop. If something *was* following me, I couldn't risk bedding down for the night.

I wasn't even sure if the orb would protect me from the shadow demons that inhabited this world.

The dogs are gone, so I won't have to worry about them.

There were the dogs, then the snake, which I hadn't yet encountered. Then there was Harmoire and the Watcher.

There could be more, you know?

Brad had been a man of many secrets, even after he had been possessed the first time. Who was I to know if there weren't dozens or maybe even hundreds of dark things lying in wait.

He saw a really weird deer too, back when I was seventeen.

The deer didn't seem like a problem though. Brad hadn't been afraid of being up in the woods with the 'deer' he had seen. The only thing he had done was tell me about it in a clear, calm manner.

“He felt like an idiot after he told me though.”

After all this time, I couldn’t imagine living with a secret that I couldn’t even tell the person I loved. If I were Brad and he were me, would I have been able to tell him about the darkness that lived inside my mind? Would I have been able to let loose the horrors that haunted my dreams to the person I love? Would I have been afraid to do that, for fear that, somehow, the man I loved would be enveloped in whatever chaos ruled my life?

Too late. I’m already involved.

I didn’t doubt the fact that I had become willingly involved. All I had wanted to do was help Brad get through whatever had been going on in his head. Now, though, *I* was knee-deep in his problem.

Well, figuratively speaking, of course. I wasn’t *just* knee deep; I was *top-of-the-head* deep.

No matter; I wasn’t going to stop anytime soon.

I conjured an image of Brad and used this as my strength.

I witnessed the way light came in this room. At what I called sunrise, something exploded in the distance. From here, trails of white that resembled jet-smoke traced the sky. Those lines exploded, lighting up the sky in miniature clouds. Each and every piece of white continued to explode until the sky was bright.

So this is how dawn comes.

I smiled, running a hand over my chest. I bore scars of dirt and blood, mostly because I had either fallen or had tree branches snap back at me, but I wasn't in pain. Most of all, I was tired.

Who knows how long I walked.

Taking my place beside a large rock, I curled into the fetal position, holding the orb close to my chest.

I saw glimpses of fire in the orb before I passed out.

When I woke up, it wasn't morning, but it wasn't raining either.

I woke up to the sound of something hissing.

Child.

I flew to my feet, kaleidaorb in hand, almost instantly.

"Show yourself!"

The snake slid out from behind a nearby tree, rearing its head up so it was level with me. The snake's long body was still hidden, although I could take in its head. Here, in the bizarre abnormality of the Nether Land, the snake's head was as wide as my chest, its tongue as long as my forearm.

It's good to see you.

"I am *no* child."

You look like one. So short, so thin, so... so young.

"What do you want?"

You, of course.

“I’m not going to let you hurt me. I’m going to kill you, damn you! You tortured Brad for too long. Now I’m going to get my revenge.”

I was on the ground the next minute, pain throbbing in my shoulder. I rolled away just before the snake could get me.

You and your silly little orb of light. You think it will protect you?

“It killed your bastard dog friends!”

They were weak and deserved to die. The snake opened its mouth, revealing rows upon rows of sharp teeth. *I am stronger through, much, much stronger.*

“THEN PROVE IT!”

When the snake lashed out at me, the kaleidaorb sent an explosion of sparks in front of the thing. The snake recoiled, the kaleidaorb turned into a sword, and I was thrust into the position of a warrior.

Foolish child. Your sword will not hurt me.

“Come try again then!”

I thrust the sword at the creature. Again, sparks flew in front of the sword. The snake lashed out at me. I ducked and ran the sword down the bottom of the creature’s neck.

You won’t kill me that easily.

Normal snakes were hard enough to kill. How was I supposed to kill this

giant?

“I’m going to kill you!” I screamed. “Just you watch!”

I ran toward the creature, thrusting the sword forward, creating the sparks every single time. When I got close enough to the face, I thrust the sword just inches away from the thing’s head.

The sparks exploded right in its face.

The snake screamed, giving me my chance to inflict maximum damage. I crawled on top of the thing’s body, fastening my legs around its slick body. Like some sick cowboy, I rode this creature as it thrashed and squirreled. I stabbed the creature, then pulled myself up, repeating this gesture over and over until I was finally at the thing’s head.

“You think I *can’t* kill you?” I screamed. “DIE!”

I plunged the sword into the thing’s brain. Its screams forced my hands up to my ears. I realized I had let go of the thing only after it threw me off.

When I hit the wall, I lost consciousness for a little while. I woke up because blood was flowing down my face and into my mouth.

Shit.

I wiped the blood off my face and walked over to where the snake lay. The sword was still in its dead body.

Better be safe than sorry.

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Pulling the sword from the thing's skull like Arthur had done with Excalibur, I proceeded to chop the thing's head off. After severing the head from the body, I kicked it as far as I could.

Only when I saw it roll into a ditch did I deem it safe to rest for the night.

Two demons were down...

How many were left to go?

Part 98:

The Stepping-Stone Path

- - -

It wasn't long after I woke up the next morning that I found the next part of my journey. Here, a long river spread down the divided mountain path. Lining the top of it were square stepping stones with curved corners.

I bent down and washed the blood off my face and out of my hair.

I must've hit the back of my head a good one.

When I reached up to feel the back of the head, I came back with blood.

Yeah, I hit that rock hard.

I brushed my hands off on my blood-splattered jeans, jumping on one of the stepping stones. Now that I was on my set path, I'd be able to step on each individual stone.

I wonder how long this will take.

No matter; at least I would be on stones with water surrounding me. If I

fell in, I could just climb right back out.

When night came, the throbbing in the back of my head started to get worse. I sat down, careful to keep my feet up on the stone.

This fucking hurts.

I couldn't help the tears that came. Here I was, trying to be as strong as I could, yet I could do nothing. I didn't have any way of bandaging my head, much less dulling or stopping the pain.

I spread out on the stone, keeping my knees drawn up to my chest. It was the only way I would be able to relax, and while it wasn't the most comfortable thing in the world, it was better than nothing.

"I'll be ok," I whispered. "I've got the kaleidaorb here. I don't have anything to be afraid of."

I wasn't sure if I would complete this part of the journey by tomorrow night. I desperately wanted to get away from this water, but until I stepped off the last stone, I was stuck.

"Don't cry. It's ok."

I rubbed my arms, wishing Brad was holding me. If only he were here with me. Brady would've been a great companion, but even if he *did* resemble Brad, and he technically *was* Brad, he wasn't *my* Brad.

"I love you, Brad. I wouldn't put myself through this hell for anyone else

but you.”

I cried myself to sleep.

When I felt something bumping against my foot, I figured it was just my imagination, so I ignored it. When it continued, I drew my foot out away from the water.

My eyes shot open.

Something was in the water.

I sat up, gripping the kaleidaorb. I saw a dark shape gliding underneath the water.

What the hell is it?

If it was a demon, wouldn’t it have killed me outright?

When the thing came closer, I realized it was the black koi that I had back at the apartment. It was larger, of course, but it was still the black koi.

“You won’t hurt me,” I whispered. “Huh?”

The fish blinked one its huge, beady eyes before disappearing back to the depths.

I’m safe. Thank God.

Curling back up on the stone, I tried to get another few hours of sleep.

When I started off the next morning, I was extra careful. I drank the rest of my water, refilled it, and ate a tomato. I was glancing at the water the first little while I was walking. The fish hadn't come back yet.

It won't come back, not until it's dark.

I hoped I wouldn't get another chance to see it. Getting to see the fish again would mean that I would end up here on the rocks for another night.

I had already told myself that I wouldn't be stuck on these rocks for another night.

I had *promised* myself I wouldn't.

When I stepped off of the last stone, I looked back at the water. Its pristine surface didn't reflect any light, as there was no sun, but its deep blue color was enough to make me yearn for it. I could stay here for the rest of my life, drinking from that beautiful river.

But Brad would die.

And I, too, would most likely die.

"I'm almost there, Brad. Don't give up yet."

Part 99:

Through the Woods and Over the River:

To Harmoire's Home We Go

- - -

So far, I'd encountered woods, cliffs, and a river with stepping stones on it. I couldn't imagine what else I would possibly go through. I was walking down a long, dirt path. The grass that grew here didn't touch the perfect path. Instead, it shied away. It looked as though someone had cut the grass at an angle on both sides, making the path look more extravagant than something that nature would create.

Something made this path... Something angled that grass.

When I had first took notice of the grass, I'd bent down and examined it. It had been perfectly cut, each and every piece. That frightened me, because I was already clueless enough. Could something else have done this beforehand, something that had cut in front of me and *made* the grass this way?

“That’s just silly,” I muttered.

I bit into another tomato. I had found another patch of them near the river, so I had pigged out, then picked a new stash. The red juice that splashed down my chest was hot, like the blood that had been on my chest when Brad had bit my shoulder.

The Watcher did it, I thought, tracing the curve of the reddening bite mark. *The Watcher made Brad do what he did*.

I knew I was going to make it to Harmoire and the Watcher, sooner or later. I planned on it being sooner though.

My legs ached for me to stop, but regardless, I pushed on. There was *no* way I was going to stop, not now.

“I’m going to get to you, Brad. Don’t you worry.”

The red juice of the tomato splashed down my chest.

I slept in the grass that night. I wasn’t afraid of any of Brad’s other demons, mostly because he hadn’t mentioned anything other than the snakes and dogs. Then again, there could’ve been others, but I wasn’t going to worry about them.

I’m too tired to worry about anything.

The throb in my legs hadn’t gone away, even after I spread out on the ground. It probably wouldn’t go away at all.

I didn't try to curl up into a ball this time. Instead, I stay spread out. I'd hurt my legs if I didn't.

When I found I couldn't sleep, I kept my eyes closed. Eventually I would fall asleep. That, or I would start walking.

I need to rest.

I'd kill over if I didn't give myself time to recover.

Count backward from a thousand or something.

So I did. I started at one-thousand, went to nine-hundred-ninety-nine, then to nine-hundred-ninety-eight.

That was the last number I was able to count to.

I was just about to leave the path. No longer would the grass bother me, and no longer would I feel as though something had intentionally played me like some puppet.

Ok, not from here, we go...

Across a bigass bridge...

The wooden bridge was suspended over a deep canyon. If Brady was right, there *were* other people in this world. If they lived in these mountains, great; I'd either run into them or avoid them. If there *weren't* people who lived here, that was an entirely different matter altogether.

"I'll just say that *people* made this."

Like everything else, the bridge was long, disappearing into the fog. The temperature was cooler here near the bridge. It was odd, because I only had to take a few steps back to bring myself into the warm air.

“There’s something wrong about this place.”

Would the bridge snap if I stepped on it? Would it crumble to ash?

I tried my weight on the first little bit of the bridge. When it didn’t break, I started across it.

“Just hold on to the rope, Dean McAllen. Just hold on to the rope.”

I would’ve held on to the rope even if I was in the real world. Somehow, though, this seemed more ominous. The way the wind made the bridge sway, the way the planks shifted under my feet. If I wasn’t careful, I could easily slip through the bottom.

They’re close enough together. If you get your foot stuck in one of them, you can get it out. You won’t fall to your death.

If only I had someone else to reassure me everything would be all right. I *hated* trying to boost my own self esteem.

Brad would do it if he were here. He’d know what to say.

When I thought of him, I felt his hands at my stomach. I momentarily let go of the rope to rub my abdomen.

“Brad.”

I closed my eyes, taking a few deep breaths.

Just a phantom touch, nothing more.

That touch would remain phantom until I got out of this world.

When I stepped off the bridge, the rope snapped off. I barely had time to jump out of the way before the rope came soaring toward my head.

Luckily, I wasn't hit. Watching the ropes snap and the planks fall down hundreds, maybe even thousands of feet was bad enough. Knowing *I* could've been down there with all the debris was on another level entirely.

"You're ok," I said, pulling myself into a sitting position. "You're still here."

I didn't doubt that whoever had set the bridge there had *intended* for it to collapse after I got off of. However, it made me wonder why something was trying to make me die, yet making it so I *wouldn't*.

You could be using your imagination to keep you alive, you know? Or whatever's trying to kill you isn't really trying to kill you yet.

The Watcher and Harmoire wanted to kill me; that was clear enough. What would happen if I didn't kill them first? Would they kill me and Brad, then jump to someone else who was going through puberty? Wasn't that how Harmoire had gotten into Brad's hard; just a small bit of kindness to an adolescent boy, given to him by something that he still wasn't able to understand, even at twenty-three years old?

I took a tomato out of my shirt. Not too far away, there was a small cave

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

that went into the nearby rocks about five feet.

It'd be better than sleeping out in the open.

The next morning, I set off before the world got bright. Somehow, my body had told me that now was the time to leave, to get up and start early. I'd been sleeping in for the past few days, and although I knew I couldn't afford to waste time, I did my best to keep my energy up.

I felt like lying down and rolling in a grave. I was *that* tired.

"It's ok," I said. "We're almost there."

When a small stream crossed the path in front of me, I closed my eyes.

Somehow, I knew I'd have to face something else before I got to Harmoire and the Watcher.

Part 100:

Dominic

- - -

The stream had slowly been changing color as I progressed along my path. It started out with a small tinge of green, then slowly progressed into magnificent gold.

Gold... What a weird color.

I didn't know water could turn gold, but then again, pretty much anything was possible in this dreamland that existed in Brad's head.

Not a dreamland, a nightmare land.

Sliding my hands into my jeans, a chill passed through, hardening my nipples and tracing my spine. I was met with the desire to leave the tomatoes and put my shirt on, but that was out of the question. I didn't know how much further I had to go.

Something tells me I'm close. I don't know, but this just seems...

That something was telling me that the gold water was a good sign. What kind of sign that was, I didn't know.

"It's ok. Come on, don't start freaking out about this."

I doubted that anyone in my position could keep their cool. The fact that I was managing to do it was a feat in itself.

"Just keep pumping yourself up. Nothing's gonna get you down, because nothing's gonna happen."

I started whistling. I rarely whistled, but I sometimes did it just for the hell of it. The sound of sucking air through my lips in a higher pitch--even if it wasn't perfect--was better than listening to nothing.

It's too quiet, much, much too quiet.

"Quit doing that."

You're starting to realize how quiet it is, Dean McAllen. Yes, it's me, your demon, your inner demon. You know I'm here. You know I'm here to bring you down because you know I gotta do it...

"You don't have to do anything. GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"

I thrashed my head back and forth. Possessed by the devilish soul of a rockstar, my hair flew in all directions, imitating the snakes that rested on Medusa's head. If I looked into the eyes of a mortal man, I would turn him to stone, for he would be transfixed by the beauty that I held, the beauty of an androgynous nineteen-year-old man that was stuck in a fucked-up wonderland.

Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies...

Oh where oh where did he go, oh where oh where could he be...

You are my sun, my moon, my earth...

“STOP!”

My legs gave out. When my knees impacted with the hard ground, I couldn't help but let a strained sob pass from my lips.

Maybe it's winning. Maybe what... whatever... maybe it's...

No. I wasn't going to let that inner demon win. Although that demon inside me may not have been a physical or mental harm to my body, it was trying to beat me down with the iron hammer of insanity.

I wasn't going to let it win.

When I brought a handful of the golden water to my lips, sugar exploded over my tongue. At first, I thought I was imagining things. With a second sip, I realized that the water below me was spiced with some forbidden treat. I could almost imagine a candy cane dropped across a wider area of the stream, the river eroding away its gold and sugar.

It's so good.

I didn't eat a lot of sugar, mostly because I'd lost the taste for most sweets after losing so much weight as a teenager, but the occasional sweet here and there was good.

I swear, I'm going to make Brad so many orange cinnamon rolls when this is all over with that he's never going to want another one again.

I giggled a giggle only a man can. It was that kind of giggle that came with extreme happiness, that kind of laugh that only men without deep voices can achieve. That sound that usually comes in five bursts, who's first two notes are low, the third is high, then the fourth and fifth return to the same decibel that the first two have.

That giggle made me smile. It was one of the few times I had smiled without thinking of Brad, about all the good times we had together.

We would be together again, and soon.

I just knew it.

I slept by the golden river that night. I was wising up though; I slept in a tree. As high as I could get off the ground at maybe fifteen feet, I leaned against the trunk, trying not to doze into too deep a sleep. If I got too deep, I might fall out of the tree.

This tree doesn't have a base that I can sleep in.

All the other trees had had hollow bark, which allowed me to crawl inside their massive trunks and sleep on the floor of the makeshift home. I hadn't known what made them, and at the time, I may not have cared. Now, though, resting against that bark, my hands around the branches above, my legs wrapped around the branch I was sitting in, I wished I would've chosen a different spot to

sleep.

I tried to convince myself that sleeping off the ground was safer, in the long run, but that didn't do any good. I wanted something solid under my back, something that I could roll over on without the fear of falling and breaking my neck.

I'll be ok. Don't think about falling out of the tree. If you're that worried, just close your eyes and rest your body.

Wasn't just laying there with your eyes closed and without thought the same as sleeping? You didn't think in your dreams unless you were dreaming, and you didn't dream unless the cells in your brain were firing off, mixing old and recent memories and creating image patterns out of them.

"I'm gonna be ok."

The kaleidaorb pulsed in my hand, sending warmth up my arms and into my chest, where it distributed that through the rest of my body. During the day--or when it wasn't dark--it was little more than an ornament. At night or when it was dark, it was a thing of magic; a light-bringer and warmth-maker.

And a weapon, don't forget that.

I wouldn't forget how the kaleidaorb had protected me anytime soon. It had killed the dogs *and* the snakes. I didn't think there wasn't much the orb *couldn't* do.

Just get some rest. Your journey is almost over.

I already knew that after this hellish nightmare was over, I would write

this story. Even if it never got published as a work of nonfiction, I would always know what had happened to me and Brad.

By the time night fell, I was standing in front of a glowing, golden waterfall. Here, the grass was bleached a straw yellow, the trees were sparkled with glowing dew, and the rocks were a blessed white.

Somehow, I knew I would have to get over this area. But how? The rocks were too slick to climb, and the trees were nowhere near the waterfall. Although the waterfall couldn't have been more than twenty feet up, it was still a daunting thing to look at.

This isn't going to be easy.

What *had* been easy for me?

Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

"Ok," I said, taking a step closer to the ring of water. "Where to go from here."

Before I could step any closer, something rustled in the bushes behind me.

When I spun around, I was met by a humanoid creature. Its back hunched at the shoulders, a long mess of dark, stringy hair hung in its face. Pale, white skin had only the hints of grey where muscles were.

When the thing looked up at me, I realized what it was.

This is...

“Dominic.”

The thing blinked, revealing glowing red eyes.

What is he doing here?

Had Brad captured all the bad in his past lover and placed it here? Had he caught the drugs, the unneeded sex, the suicide and somehow morphed it together into this? Had some part of his mind created this monstrosity standing before me.

“It’s me, Dean. Brad’s partner.”

The broken remnant of Dominic made a low whining sound in its throat. It pawed at its thin, anorexic chest, bowing its head. It was only after a few minutes of the thing making the sound that I realized it was crying.

Crying... But not really crying.

The sound wasn’t human, nor could I relate it to any kind of animal I had heard. It was painful to hear; not because the thing was evil, but because the thing was showing emotion. No matter what the thing may look like, it had been a part of Brad’s life at one point. The mere mention that I was the one who was with Brad was upsetting to Dominic’s Nether-world self.

“Dominic, it’s ok, it’s just me.”

When I stepped forward, the thing cringed away. When it felt safe to look up at me, Dominic parted his hair, revealing the bloody tears he shed.

“It was supposed to be *me* and him.”

Dominic’s voice was tinged with malice. Whether or not that was because we were in this world, I didn’t know.

“You and him? I...”

“*We* were the ones in love. *He* was the one who loved *me*. ”

“I’m sorry.” I set my hand on my chest. “I can’t help what happened to you. You made some mistakes. You’re in a better place.”

“Is *Hell* a better place?”

Dominic thought *this* was hell?

“This isn’t...”

“We’re in Brad’s hell. He puts everything he hates here.”

“No, he doesn’t. He never hated you.”

“He hated being in love with me.”

“You were teenagers, you...”

“And *you* were a teenager. *He* was only twenty.”

“I can’t...”

“I saw you two, the day you came out of the doctor’s office. I saw you kiss and hug each other. *I* saw you. *I killed myself* because I knew I could never be with him.”

“Why...”

"I used to stalk him," Dominic said, "I used to follow him around. He never saw me, but some of those times, I wish he had. Maybe he would've left you alone."

"I deserved happiness too."

"*You?* Some little *whore?* I bet you made him fuck you the first time you went back to his apartment."

"I did *no* such thing."

Dominic stopped. His whole demeanor changed all of a sudden. The anger in his face disappeared, replaced by sadness.

"All I want to do is rest in peace. I can't be in peace here."

"I can't help you, Dominic. I'm trying to save Brad."

"You can't save him." Dominic balled his hands into fists. "You're too weak."

"I *am not* weak. I wouldn't be this far if I was."

"They said that if I got rid of you, I could be with him."

"Who did?"

"The things that watched over Brad. They said that if you died, I could be with him."

The kaleidaorb tingled in my grasp, lengthening into a small dagger. Dominic didn't seem to notice; his eyes were on me.

"Dominic, please. They're trying to kill me, they're trying to kill *Brad*."

“No, Dean. They’ve never been trying to kill Brad. They say he’s too good a specimen to kill.”

“They’re lying to you. They’re trying to use you to kill me.”

“All I want to do is be with Brad!”

Dominic’s high-pitched scream startled me, so much that I nearly turn and ran away.

“They said that if I kill you, every single memory of you will be replaced with memories of *us*! They said that *I* would be with Brad, that *we* would be in love, that *we* would be each other’s *partners*.”

“Please...”

“They said we would be *together* again!” The dead man’s tears came, more blood splattering down his face. “They said that I wouldn’t die!”

Dominic lunged. Before he could reach me, I stepped forward, sliding the dagger into his kidney. I slid my arm around his body, holding the kaleidaorb dagger in place.

When Dominic gasped, I led him to the ground. He stared at me, looking down at the knife in his side.

“All I wanted... All I wanted was for him to love me,” Dominic sobbed.

“He’s always loved you,” I whispered, stroking his dark hair out of his face. “What part of you is here is the part that makes you believe he didn’t. The Watcher... he wants Brad to die. He wants your memory to die with Brad.”

Dominic reached out to me. I slid my fingers in his, lacing them together, as two men who loved another would do when a man they loved was faced with crisis.

“At your funeral,” I said, watching Dominic’s slowing, dying breaths, “he said that he loved you. He said that he *always* loved you. He said that if I hadn’t come along, he would’ve found you again.”

Tears were sliding down my face as I told the dying man the last words Brad had ever said to him. My heart was being ripped apart each passing second.

So this is it, I thought, reaching up to wipe the tears from Dominic’s eyes. *This is my final test, the thing that would challenge me the most.*

“Brad loves you, Dominic. You’ll never die in his heart.”

“Thank you, Dean,” Dominic whispered. “Tell Brad that... Tell him...”
Dominic closed his eyes, a dying smile crossing his lips. “Tell him that I always loved him.”

When the young man died in my arms, I cradled him to my chest.

The enormity of what I had just done was visible before my own two eyes.

I had pulled the knife out of Dominic’s side. No blood came out with the knife, which had quickly returned to its kaleidaorb form.

He’s so thin.

“I wonder...”

I slid my arms under the man’s knees and arms. He lifted easier than I had expected to.

He’s only as tall as I am.

I carried him to the water. I brushed his hair out of his eyes one final time before I bent down, laying his body in the golden pool.

“Sleep well, Dominic,” I said. “I’m sorry it had to end this way. You’ll never die in our hearts.”

Dominic’s body sunk deeper into the pool, disappearing in its golden depths. The water that fell from the fall slowly dispersed, trickling down until it revealed a large cavern.

This is where I go. This is where I save Brad.

Part 101:

His Fair Guardian

- - -

When I stepped out of the cavern, a path slanted down the hill until it met with the beginning of the island. Above all the dead, twisted trees, the tree of life was more than visible.

This is it. This is where I fight, or die trying.

Halfway down the hill, Harmoire appeared before me.

“Get out of my way.”

The creature merely stared at me. I hadn’t realized how haunting its glowing orbs of eyes were until now.

You don’t notice this until you finally confront it as an evil thing. You think of it as something good... Then it turns out that it’s been using you all along.

“Harmoire, why did you do this to Brad?”

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

We are beings of shadow. In a human world full of light, we are only able to exist in shadow. With energy from a human being, we are able to endure the piercing rays of the sun. But the real reason is that without a human body, we are simply nothing more than abstract thoughts trying to be physical forms.

“You’re *killing* him!”

When the host becomes too weak, we feed off what remaining energy we have. It could be months, maybe even years until we find another suitable host.

“It isn’t fair! You *tricked* him! You made him think you wanted to help him!”

Yes, I did. It was the only way I could keep my master alive.

My grip around the kaleidaorb was hurting my skin. The orb’s intense heat was cutting into my hand; not exactly burning it, but sending painful vibrations.

When I loosened my grip, the pain stopped.

“I have to stop you,” I said, holding the kaleidaorb up. “You’re going to hurt him otherwise.”

Try to kill me. You’ll find that I don’t take kindly to threats.

Harmoire was upon me before I could even do anything. I slammed the orb into the demon’s shoulder. A piercing ray of light hit Harmoire’s shadow, dispersing its arm before it slowly reformed.

“I’ll *KILL* you!”

The shadow rabbit lunged, baring sharp claws. I raised the orb as a shield. Sparks flew and Harmoire's rabbit scream exploded inside my head.

Pathetic human!

"I'm not pathetic! I'm BRAD'S BOYFRIEND!"

My mad dash toward the creature resulted in the orb changing into a whip. I snapped it at Harmoire. Each time I hit the demon's body, light tore apart its body. Before long, the only thing I could do was scream and cry and pray that what I was doing was killing the damned thing.

When Harmoire fell to its knees, I wrapped the rope around its neck.

With one final tug, Harmoire's head exploded. The rest of its body dissolved in the golden-white light of my kaleidaorb.

When I looked up, I saw the tree.

I knew what I had to do.

Part 102:

Killing The Watcher

- - -

I could feel the creature even before I could see it. The sense of dread in the air was unmistakable, almost like a thick fog that clouded the road you were driving on. I held my kaleidaorb above me, hoping that it would do something--*anything*--to help me feel better.

“Watcher!” I called. “I’m here!”

I heard a sick, twisted laugh, but couldn’t tell which direction it was coming from. It seemed as if it was coming from all sides; in front, in back, on both sides.

The hairs on my arms and neck stood up.

Oh God. Please don’t let me die here.

“You think you’re going to win by hiding from me!” I screamed. “You really think you’re going to win!”

I don't need to worry about winning, because you're going to lose.

I ducked just in time to avoid the creature jumping over my head. It walked to its throne of stone, staring at me with black eyes.

"You need to leave," I said. "I'll make you leave if you don't."

Oh? And how will you do that?

"I'll kill you."

Why are you wasting your time here? Brad's life is almost gone. Did you not see the orbs?

The orbs hung from the tips of the branches. Almost all of them were black, but some were faintly glowing with life.

"Why are you doing this?"

Because you were defeating us. Your love was strong, but when we began to break Brad down, we began to break you. Brad will be gone soon. What's the point of staying here and dying with him?

"He's not going to die!" I screamed. "Because I'm going to kill you!"

I raised the orb. A beam of light erupted from its burning surface. The stone throne it had been sitting on exploded, but the Watcher disappeared in the cloud of smoke.

"You motherfucker! Come and get me!"

I screamed as the spike on its tail came at me. I jumped back and raised the orb, firing another beam of light at the creature. It retreated, leaving me

Inner Demons

A novel by Kody Boye

where I stood.

“Come back! I’m going to kill you!”

You think you will, but you won’t. I will kill you!

“Then come and do it! I’ll die to save Brad!”

No, child. YOU will die. YOU will finally be rid of!

The Watcher’s tail flew toward me.

At that moment, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to survive the attack.

The only thing I could do was save Brad.

I raised the kaleidaorb and put every emotion, every memory I had ever experienced in it. When the spike tore into my side, I screamed for the worst pain I had ever felt. But before I fell, I released the energy from the orb.

The creature had no time to scream before it was swallowed up in the light.

“Brad,” I whispered, falling back, toward the water. “Please... don’t ever forget me.”

I was swimming in a river of light. Surrounded by warmth, I drifted on a neverending ocean. In the distance, a bird who’s body and wings took over the whole sky flew above me. A rainbow trailed behind it, sparkling the sky in magnificence.

I must be in Heaven, *I thought*. I really must be in Heaven.

I realized that I couldn't be in Heaven. If I was in Heaven, why was Brad still on my mind? Was he calling to me, or was it because I had just given my life to save him?

I whispered his name, but only on my lips. Somehow, I knew speaking his name would only make my grief worse.

Brad, I love you so much. Please, don't forget me... Don't forget the man who gave you his heart.

When someone touched my arm, I didn't dare look up. I wasn't sure who's face I would see. I wasn't sure if I would see the ghost of Brad. I was afraid of seeing the Watcher of Harmoire. And on an oddly-subconscious level, I desired to see the face of God, or maybe Christ himself.

It spoke...

Dean, *the voice said.* Come back to me.

And I responded. Every part of my body bloomed warmth. My mind was at peace, my heart was slowly coming back to life.

I was floating...

Floating...

Floating...

"Dean. Come on, wake up."

I opened my eyes. I thought it was Brad, but then I realized that it was

Brady.

“Brady,” I gasped. “What happened?”

“You almost died,” Brady said. “But we can’t talk right now. You need to get back to the human world.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

“Brad’s fading. He might die, Dean.”

I felt my side.

There was no wound there.

“Die? But I killed the Watcher and Harmoire, I...”

“He still might die. I think if you go back to the human world, you can hold him there, Dean.”

I began to will myself back to the human world, but before I did, I reached out and grabbed Brady’s face, pulling him into a warm, passionate kiss. Our tongues danced for a short moment before I pulled away.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Hurry, time’s running out.”

I fell back into the human world.

Part 103:

Death

- - -

“His pulse is weakening!”

I snapped into a sitting position so fast and hard that I thought I’d have whiplash from it. I jumped off the couch and tried to get to Brad, but two paramedics pulled me away.

“BRAD!” I screamed. “BRAD!”

“Mr. McAllen, let the doctors help him!” one of the paramedics said, fighting to hold me in place.

“LET ME GO YOU MOTHERFUCKER! LET ME GO!”

Blinking lights and blaring alarms went off everywhere. I heard someone cry flat line. The sound of two defibrillators forced my body forward.

“BRAD!”

“Clear!”

Another shock.

“BRAD! PLEASE DON’T GO!”

“Clear!”

A third shock.

“BRAD!”

The room went silent as the faint buzz of a flat line continued. The doctors pulled away, one of them gesturing for a nurse to come up.

“Time of death... nine-oh-two PM.”

When the paramedics released their hold, I fell to my knees. What started as strangled sobs and gasps escalated into screams so violent and loud that even the paramedics didn’t know what to do. I screamed his name, wailing, crying, sobbing.

Brad was gone...

And it was all my fault.

Part 104:

Memory

- - -

The tears were thick on my face. Brad's hand was in my own.

It was hard to believe he was gone.

Brady and Brad... They're gone...

Kendra and Kason were at my side. They made no attempt to hide their tears; they didn't need to. Brad was just as close a friend to them as I was.

"Brad," I said, standing over him. "You gave me the best three years of my life."

I kissed his lips, which were already starting to chill. I held my lips there for several minutes before pulling away, letting go of his hand.

"Dean," Kendra said, standing. "Where are you..."

"I need to start calling people. His friends, his father..."

I started crying. I almost fell. If Kason hadn't been there to catch me in

his strong arms, I *would've* fallen.

“He’s gone!” I cried. “Brad’s gone!”

“It’s ok,” Kason said, stroking my back. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

It was false hope, something I had heard too many times in my life. I pulled away and looked at Brad. I wanted him to be faking his death. I wanted to hear him say, ‘Baby, sorry; I was just playing around with you.’ I wanted him to open his eyes and laugh, to kiss me, to hold me.

That would never happen.

Brad was gone.

Three years of my life... Three years. He’s gone... He’ll never come back.

I barely felt Kendra’s hand on my shoulder, and I barely heard her sobs. My mind was reeling, spinning, flying back to the past.

I was standing at a dollar store checkout. Kendra was beside me, still a man, her smile showing her white teeth. I bent down to tie my shoe and heard someone walk up. A man stood there, holding a stick of deodorant.

“Three twenty-nine,” I said.

“Hey, smile.”

I blushed, warmth sprouting on my cheeks. I did smile and accepted the man’s change.

“You have the most gorgeous eyes I have ever seen.”

I blushed again.

“Was there anything else you needed?”

“Yeah, your number.”

I blinked.

He tried to put his hand over mine, but I shied away. The movie theater’s wide screen bathed both of our faces in light. When I felt safe enough, I put my hand back down. It wasn’t a moment later that he tried to put his hand over mine again.

“Brad...”

Our lips were touching. Roses bloomed in my mind. The fabric of his shirt was velvet. Not once did he try to break the seal of my lips, not once. He was so gentle, so compassionate, so loving.

“I failed you, Brad.”

“I love you.”

I blinked when I heard his words. Soul, Lex and Travis were talking, something about cards. I didn’t care what it was. All I had heard was Brad’s words.

“I love you too.”

“You changed my life, Brad. You changed it so much.”

“Happy birthday, baby.”

I looked down at the chocolate cake. My name was etched in white

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A novel by Kody Boye

frosting on top of it, with an eighteen right below. Brad's arms were around my body, his hands on my stomach. I fell against him, losing myself in the moment.

"I did everything I could..."

I took him in my mouth. The hairs on his legs glided underneath my touch.

"Baby... You're so good."

He beckoned me up and laid me on the bed.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I cried, I cried for the man that I loved.

Fireworks bloomed in the sky above us. Brad's arms were around me, his hot breath against the back of my neck. Beautiful works of light traced in the sky, and when they all ended, there was a heart. I thought I saw me and Brad's name in that heart.

I cried because I would never hold him again.

It was Thanksgiving. Me, Brad and his father sat at the table, celebrating everything we were thankful for. I left early because of the tension, and it wasn't long before Brad joined me in our bedroom. He said that nothing was wrong, that he loved me, that I was the only thing that mattered to him.

I cried because I would never kiss him again.

I stood in a crowded mall, holding a leather jacket close to my chest. It was red, Brad's favorite color. The price tag read somewhere in the three-

hundred-dollar range, but that didn't matter. Money wasn't something I cared about, something I would never care about. The only thing I cared about was making Brad happy.

I cried because I would never make love to him again.

I was writing a love letter. I was crying, and while I cried, I told him how much I loved him. I told him that he was my everything, that he called me his gorgeous boyfriend when I wasn't anywhere near gorgeous, that he took care of me, that I took care of him.

I cried because I would never be able to tell him 'I love you' again.

Christmas morning. He handed me a small box. Inside that box was a pair of onyx earrings. I asked him how much they had cost, but he said he wouldn't tell me. Everything was gone. My life, my love, my best friend. Everything I had cared about had died with him.

He was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I held him close, saying everything was all right, that this wouldn't change anything about him. I told him that, maybe, just maybe, he might feel normal for once in his life. He said he was a freak, and I said no, that he wasn't a freak. I said he was just sick, and that he was now finally being cured.

The world was against me, it had always been against me. The cruel, savage world took good things from good people. It had just taken Brad from me.

"You wanna go on a date?"

He popped a chocolate in his mouth. I kissed him, said how good he tasted. He popped another sweet in his mouth. He asked if I wanted to be his valentine; I said yes.

There was no such thing as happiness. Not anymore.

“What do they mean?”

“To keep the dark away,” Brad looked back at the laptop screen, at the item he called a kaleidaorb.

Brad was gone...

The kitten mewed at me. I bent down beside it, wiggling my finger

“I thought you were allergic to cats?”

“I thought I was too, but when I went in and looked at them, I was fine.”

“What’s his name?”

“Cinnamon.”

And now, this. I looked up at Brad. That *couldn’t* be him there. That *couldn’t* be my boyfriend. My boyfriend hadn’t *died*. My boyfriend *couldn’t* die. My boyfriend *wouldn’t* die.

The realization of what had happened slowly started to come. I cried, I screamed too, and when the doctors came in to try and sedate me, I backed toward Brad’s bed and said that they would do no such thing, that I was fine, that it was their fault that he was dead.

They left me alone after I threw my cell phone, hitting one of them in the

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chest.

I fell to my knees and sobbed.

Part 105:

Second Chances

- - -

“I...” I looked up at Kendra and Kason. “I have to go call them. I’ve waited too long.”

I stood.

I was about to leave before I heard a voice.

“Baby...”

I turned.

Brad was there, smiling...

Living.

I ran and jumped on the bed, wrapping my arms around him and kissing every spot of bare skin I could.

“I love you,” I sobbed. “Don’t you *ever* do that again!”

“Thanks for saving me, baby,” he whispered.

I cried for the innocence I had lost as a teenager, I cried for my past life, and most importantly, I cried because I was able to hold my beautiful boyfriend in my arms once again.

The doctor came into the room, his mouth hanging open.

“How is he...”

“I don’t know,” I said, holding Brad close. “He just woke up.”

“You must’ve got some kind of electrical charge from deep inside your body,” the doctor frowned, looking at the monitors, watching Brad’s steady heartbeat. “You were clinically dead for half an hour.”

“How, sir?” Brad asked.

“I don’t know... I don’t think it really matters though, do you? As long as you’re alive and well.”

“Yeah,” Brad said.

“We’ll have to run a few blood tests, just to make sure you’re ok.”

“All right, sir.” Brad tightened his grip on me. “Whatever you need... As long as I’m here with Dean.”

“You want to know what I think?” Doctor Tray smiled?

“What?” Brad asked.

“I think your partner saved you, Brad. I think that’s why you’re still alive.”

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When Doctor Tray left the room, I bent my head and covered Brad's mouth with mine. I slid my hands through his hair, down his shoulders, caressing his upper back with my hands.

He was fine...

He was alive.

Part 106:

Home

- - -

It had been our dream to move into our own home.

It came true.

After Brad got out of the hospital, we packed up everything in our apartment and moved into a log cabin in the nearby mountains. Even though we weren't far from the city, I still felt distant, but not in a bad way.

I loved the feeling.

"Dean?"

I looked over my shoulder at Brad. He wrapped his arms around me, looking out at the woods.

"Nice view, huh?"

I nodded, gripping the porch's railing. It wasn't nice it was *beautiful*.

"Yes," I said. "It is."

I turned, wrapping my arms around him.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I said.

“I am too, baby,” Brad said. “I am too.”

That night when we went to bed, I felt like the luckiest man in the world. Brad was here with me; there was nothing else I could want.

We made love for hours before we stopped. Brad lay awake for an hour afterward, staring into my eyes. I told him I loved him dozens of times before he fell asleep.

Brady...

I escaped into Brad’s world. The world was resorted and everything was in vibrant, beautiful color. Brady waved at me from the top of the hill.

“I know you need to go back to the human world!” Brady cried, running toward me. “But Dean, you did it! You’re alive, Brad’s alive; we’re all alive!”

I jumped into his arms, letting him spin me around like teenage lovers would on a warm summer day. I kissed him before he set me back on the ground. I held him for several more minutes before he pushed me away.

“Go,” Brady said. “Go back to Brad.”

I was about to turn before I stopped.

“I love you.”

Brady smiled.

“I love you too.”

I began to walk away.

“Come back and see me again, Dean; I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I will!” I called, tears staining my eyes. “I will!”

As I faded away, I saw Brady waving at me. I waved back. Watching Brady fade away into the world that existed in Brad’s mind was beautiful. The way the colors framed his body, the way the tree he was sitting under bloomed with orange light, the way that his hand waved back and forth; everything was so beautiful. Then I was back in Brad’s arms, snuggled close to his chest.

Every fiber of my being was back in place.

Once upon a time, I had been a teenage boy with the dream of having love. Once upon a time, I had met a man who had told me to smile. Once upon a time, I had fallen in love with a man who had a dark past. And once upon a time, when everything was bad and seemed like it would die and wither away, it didn’t.

Life... It was a precious thing.

Life was something I would never take for granted.

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Conclusion

So... This is it. We've come to the ending. We've seen the things that Brad has gone through in his life. We've seen the hell he's had to endure because of the things that have haunted him, but we've also seen a few other things. We've seen the love and dedication of someone Brad loves, of someone who, through thick and thin, never left his side, even when other people had.

When I finished the first draft of the novel, I couldn't help but be filled with emotion. It's true when they say that a story speaks to its author and that the author is nothing more than the host in which a foreign host takes to tell its story. I was amazed at how the story unfolded, how it spoke to me, and I'm still amazed.

Going back through this story has never been difficult for me. Since the first draft, it's gone through four or five drafts (this one being the most recent,) and it's only continued to get better and better.

I hope that, one day, *Inner Demons* will get more popular, but I'm not asking for it. The people that do come and read it are the people I truly care about. I'm not interested in fame or fortune; I'm interested in what people have to say. And even if I never reach the fame that some authors have, I'll be satisfied. People slowly find my fiction, one way or another, and some of those people tend to stick around.

Again, thank you.

If you'd like to find out more about *Inner Demons*, please visit the website at <http://insideyourinnerdemons.wordpress.com> . There, you can view additional information about the novel. And who knows? Maybe one day you'll be able to buy a physical copy of the novel.

- Kody Boye

<http://kodyboye.itrello.com>