



Edited by Mychael Black

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A Walk in the Woods by Jessica Freely

George walked home through the park, his head down, his hands in his pockets. He barely noticed the beauty of the autumn day around him. Though late afternoon sunshine lit the leaves on the trees to blazing glory, and the air was spiced with the tang of impending frost, all George was aware of was his own misery.

I should have known better, he thought. When Nate, the star of the student theater company at South Brighton Community College, had approached him in the student union, something had seemed off. For one thing, George was a freshman, and Nate was a senior. And though George had lusted after Nate since the first day of classes, he knew full well that, with his mousy looks and slight build, he was nowhere near Nate's league.

Nate was tall and strong, with a swimmer's build and golden blond hair. He had periwinkle blue eyes, for chrissakes. And perfect teeth. And a face made for close-ups. The fact that Nate was openly gay did nothing to put him within George's reach.

Nonetheless, when approached by the object of his desire, common sense abandoned George with all the alacrity he would have liked to use stripping Nate naked. Nate told him he was directing a production of *The Reluctant Dragon* for his senior project and he thought George would be perfect in it and would George mind stopping by his dorm room for a private audition?

George wasn't sure if the offered part was for real or just a ploy to get him to Nate's room, but he didn't care. A great shot at a good part or an afternoon of wild sex with the hottest guy on campus: it was all good.

He arrived at Nate's to find him alluringly clad in hip-hugging sweat pants and a thin tank top. Nate was just putting the finishing touches on the dragon costume, and his arms and face sported a few adorable smears of green paint. But he wasn't alone. Rebecca Haines and Victor Chessel were there as well, lounging on the bunk beds.

Nate handed George the script, and asked him to read a few pages. But after only a few lines, Nate stopped him.

"Do you like me?" Nate asked.

George stared at him. His heart pounded. "Yeah, you're nice."

Nate shook his head, his smile crooked. "No. You know what I mean. Do you *like me* like me." He pulled his shirt off, revealing a sculpted chest and honey-gold skin. His rose-brown nipples peeked out from a light dusting of curly blond hair. George swallowed. His mouth was dry, all of a sudden.

Nate stood close to George. George could feel the man's body heat. It made him sweat. He tried

to get his breath under control. “I... uh...”

“You’re gay, right?”

George nodded. He shot a glance over to the bed, to Rebecca and Victor. They were a couple, he knew that. They looked on with grave eyes and reassuring smiles. What was this, some kind of group sex thing? Or were they just trying to be welcoming?

Nate draped one arm over George’s shoulder and cocked his hips. “Well?”

George glanced over to Rebecca again, and she gave him a little nod. He wasn’t really sure if this was his scene, but... this was Nate Hollingswood, after all. How could he turn him down? With a sigh, George put his hands on Nate’s hips, closed his eyes, and leaned in for a kiss.

The next thing he knew, something rough and papery bumped him in the mouth. He opened his eyes.

“Psych!” said Nate, grinning, holding the papier-mâché dragon mask in one hand and pointing at George with the other. “Like I’d do a skinny freshman like you!”

George reddened. On the bed, Rebecca and Victor were laughing their asses off. “And in front of us, too. How desperate are you?”

George looked between the three of them, searching for something to say. He felt like he was going to throw up. He fled the room, their laughter and taunting voices dogging his heels as he ran.

Even now, it echoed in his ears, drowning out the sounds of birdsong and the rustle of the wind through dry leaves. Though his eyes told him that the park was beautiful, all his mind could focus on were the scornful faces of Nate, Rebecca, and Victor.

Which was undoubtedly how he tripped. One moment, he was trudging along, his hands in his pockets, his head down, cursing his fate and wondering if he should change schools, and the next, he was sprawled on the ground beside a large pile of dead leaves, the wind knocked out of him.

Great. He couldn’t even walk straight. Looking down, he noticed he’d torn the knee of his jeans. Could this day get any worse? He flopped back onto the leaves, no longer caring if anyone saw him. So what? To hell with all of them, he decided. Nate Hollingswood was an asshole. Why should he care what Nate and his fawning acolytes thought?

He took a deep breath, staring up at the trees overhead, noticing as if for the first time the splendor of their fall display. Myriad shades of red, orange, yellow, brown, and purple lit the woods with their glory. He sighed. Somehow, just lying here, cushioned by a pile of dead leaves and taking in the blue sky and the brilliant colors, he felt better.

That was when he noticed movement in the leaf pile. He sat up again. This pile of leaves was large, rising as high as five feet or more in the middle before tapering off again at the other end. Anything could be hiding in here.

Again, the leaves shifted, many of them fluttering down the slope to the forest floor. Something was definitely moving. It wasn't the wind. George got to his feet.

Now that he wasn't obsessed over Nate and his stupid mind games, George realized he was in a remote corner of the park. He must have wandered off course. This section butted up against a tall chain-link fence, and on the other side of that was an embankment leading to some railroad tracks. He was far from the street, and the area was further secluded by a utility shed and a row of dumpsters. No one was likely to hear him if whatever was moving in the leaves turned out to be dangerous.

Now the whole pile was undulating. Something was digging its way out. His heart in his throat for the second time that day, George started to back away.

And then he tripped again. It felt like the same thing he'd stumbled on before. His arms cartwheeled as he fought for balance and lost. He landed on his ass. Marvelous. Not only was he easily duped, he didn't learn well either. Sparing a glance away from the rustling among the leaves, George took a look at what he'd been tripping on.

It wasn't a root or a branch. It had scales. Burnished gold scales with a dorsal ridge of gleaming emerald. What the fuck? Was this more of Nate's bullshit?

Pissed now, George got up again, dusted himself off and said, "If this is Nate, or one of his little butt moles, why don't you just come out of the leaves and face me?"

The rustling subsided.

"Are you afraid? I can't believe you people. Do you really think these little games of yours are cute? If this is how you get your jollies, you're pathetic."

No movement. No response.

Losing patience, George stepped to the tallest, thickest part of the leaf pile and swiped it with his arm, dislodging a flurry of leaves.

And uncovered a pair of emerald green eyes with slit pupils.

For a moment, he couldn't move. Those eyes stared into his, predatory and primeval. He felt like a rabbit, frozen in terror, about to be devoured. Any doubt that this was real dispersed when those great lantern eyes blinked once, twice. Then the head moved, dislodging more leaves and revealing the rest of the creature.

The dragon was roughly fifteen feet long from toe to tail. It lay with its neck curled around and

its head nestled against the pale yellow scales of its belly. As it moved, more leaves fell away, revealing bronze-colored wings folded against a broad back. The tail twitched, and one taloned paw extended toward George.

He backed away. The creature opened its mouth and George threw his hands up over his face, expecting flame to erupt from its maw and reduce him to cinders. But that's not what happened.

"Help," said the beast.

Shaking like a leaf, George peeked out from between his fingers. The dragon still held one paw out and now he saw that a band of metal encircled its foreleg, biting deep into the burnished scales. Ouch. That had to hurt.

George took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, and turned away. He opened them again and looked out across the park. Everything looked normal. He turned around. The dragon was still there. He pinched himself. He didn't wake up. The beast looked at him with sad eyes. That band really looked painful. And so far, the dragon had shown no inclination to snack on barbecued George.

"Hey," said George, taking one tentative step forward. "Are you hurt? Let me see." Scarcely able to believe his own nerve, he took the dragon's proffered paw in his hand and examined the band. It was a thick piece of iron with symbols carved in it. "What is this, some kind of magic ring?"

"Curse," the dragon said.

This was getting weirder and weirder. "Curse, huh? I'm no magician. If I were, there are three drama students that would be newts right now. I can probably get my hands on a pair of bolt-cutters, though."

The dragon shook its head slowly. "Won't work."

George took a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was something about the warm paw in his hands that relaxed him. He shrugged. "Well, how do we lift it?"

"Kiss."

George stared at the dragon, who looked back at him with those luminous eyes, a hopeful expression on its... her... his... face. "You're kidding."

"Kiss from beautiful man, lift curse."

A little tremor ran through George. He swallowed. "Well, then you've definitely got the wrong guy."

"No."

They stared at one another in silence for several moments. George licked his lips. Was he actually going to go through with this? “If this is another trick, like before...”

But he scanned the dragon’s body from nose to tail. Definitely a he, George realized. Good lord. Thank God it was just a kiss the dragon needed. And, there was no way this was some kind of animatronic construct. Hell, he could feel the beast’s body heat through the paw that he still clutched in his hands.

“O-okay,” George said, his voice unsteady.

He stepped closer, and leaned forward, his chin tilted up. The dragon extended his neck. George pressed his lips to the scales at the front of his snout. They were surprisingly soft, silky even. He closed his eyes. He felt a little flicker of tongue at his lips and he opened just slightly, feeling a velvet caress at the tip of his tongue and tasting a hint of smoke, like the distant aroma of burning leaves.

Suddenly the paw in his hand changed. A human hand grasped his, and another hand cupped the back of his head and pulled him closer. Fleshly lips moved against his and a human tongue swept over his lower lip. George opened up and that questing tongue stroked his.

Strong arms held him. George reached up, and his hands landed on a pair of firm shoulders. He ran his hands across warm, soft skin. He opened his eyes.

The kiss broke, and he took a step back. There, standing before him was a man. The most beautiful man he’d ever seen in his life. Rich auburn hair hung in loose curls about his shoulders. He had a long nose, and a wide mouth that quirked in a grin. He gazed at George with two of the greenest eyes George had ever seen. This close, there was no hiding the fact that the pupils were slits.

“Y-you changed,” said George.

The dragon? Man? The dragon-man nodded. “This form is more compatible, is it not?”

A glance up and down confirmed that yes, indeed, his form was compatible with all George ever could have desired in a lover. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a sculpted chest, a flat belly, and a slim waist. And he was naked. And evidently, he had enjoyed their kiss. His erect cock sprang up from a bush of auburn curls, curved, uncircumcised, and gold-red. It was big, but not so terrifyingly large as the dragon version had been. George glanced around. Lucky thing this secluded corner of the park was empty.

“You’re naked,” he said, once again demonstrating his mastery of the obvious.

The dragon-man raised one amber eyebrow and grinned. “I’m Lefnir.” He held out his hand. The band that had encircled it was gone, and in its place was a scar.

“I’m George.” They shook hands.

Lefnir noticed him looking at the scar. “A sorcerer trapped me in my dragon form.” He squeezed George’s hand. “Thank you for lifting the curse.”

George nodded, suddenly feeling shy. Lefnir had wanted to be freed of the curse. That was all.

Lefnir pulled him close and ran a hand up his back. He whispered in George’s ear. His voice was like brandy, warm and smooth. “Only a kiss from a man who matches my desire could restore me to my full powers. I’ve been waiting here for years. And now you’ve come and freed me. What can I do to show you my gratitude?”

George looked Lefnir in the eyes. “Is it true? I... match your desire?”

The smoldering look Lefnir returned him was answer enough. There was no need for more words. George grinned and hugged Lefnir closer. He turned his head and nuzzled the crook of Lefnir’s neck. The skin felt satiny against his lips and smelled ever so faintly of burning leaves. George licked and nibbled, and the taste of crisp apples exploded in his mouth.

Lefnir wrapped his arms around George’s waist. His erection, big and hot, pressed into George’s groin right beside his own stiffening cock. George let his hands fall and cup Lefnir’s round, firm ass.

They raised their heads and their lips met again. This time, there was nothing tentative about the kiss. They opened for each other, and each took turns tasting the other’s mouth. Lefnir’s mouth was warm. More than warm, hot, but not unpleasantly so. It was as if a little coal burned somewhere down inside him and the heat bathed George’s tongue as he tasted more apples, only baked ones, this time.

“Mmm.”

George was so hard he felt like he was going to burst right out of his jeans. Lefnir undulated his hips, rocking his hard-on against George’s. The friction set off little sparks all through George’s body.

“You have too many clothes on,” Lefnir complained. With one arm still around George’s waist, holding their groins tight together, he began to unbutton George’s shirt.

After the third button, he dipped his hand in and played with one of George’s nipples. His warm, almost hot touch was electric. It made George gasp. He bucked against Lefnir, his cock aching with need.

Lefnir chuckled as he undid the rest of those buttons and then bent his head to kiss and lick at the sensitive nubbins of flesh. The hot slide of his tongue was intoxicating. George had never felt anything like it before.

“You’re so *warm*.”

“I’m a dragon.” Lefnir slid to his knees and grasped the button of George’s fly. “Wait until you feel me on your--”

“Wait!” George grabbed his hands. Glancing about, he didn’t see any people. Still, he felt so exposed, out in the open like this. “What if someone sees us?”

Lefnir smiled up at him. “No one will see. No one sees dragons unless we want to be seen.” He became quite serious. “We’re magic, you know.”

George laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I know.”

Lefnir gave a little tug at his waistband. “May I?”

His cock had only one answer to that, and it was too adamant for his poor brain to argue with. George nodded.

Lefnir undid George’s pants and pulled them down around his thighs, along with his boxers. George’s cock, thick, if not overly long, sprang free. The cool autumn air felt good on his skin. When Lefnir opened his mouth and lowered it over the head, the contrast between the crisp breeze and his smoldering mouth was delicious. George moaned and swayed. He watched in fascination as his cock disappeared inside Lefnir’s mouth, where it was bathed in lambent heat. Lefnir ran his tongue up the underside, along the vein there, up to that super-sensitive spot just beneath the glans. George gasped and gripped Lefnir’s muscular shoulders to brace himself. His knees felt like they were about to buckle.

Lefnir swallowed him down to the root, his throat muscles massaging George’s cock. Of their own volition, George’s hips rocked, thrusting slowly in and out of that hot, wet mouth. Lefnir’s lips were so soft on George’s straining flesh, his tongue agile and searing. He reached up and cradled George’s balls, gently rolling them between his fingers. It was incredible. George felt lost in a sea of sensations. When one slick finger slid between his ass cheeks and petted his hole, he shouted out loud.

“Can... anyone... hear...?” he panted.

“Mn,” said Lefnir.

Whatever that meant, he really didn’t care, George decided as Lefnir gently prodded him open and he received the warm intruder. Trapped between the hot mouth on his cock and the agile finger in his ass, there was nothing George could do but give himself up to the intense sensations. He shouted; he groaned. He bucked forward, thrusting into Lefnir’s mouth, and arched back, impaling himself on Lefnir’s finger. And then Lefnir curled that finger just so, and stroked George’s prostate.

“Oh! Ga-ga-God!” George fisted his hands in Lefnir’s hair. “I’m gonna co-co-”

Lefnir pulled off of him and sat back on his haunches. “Not yet,” he said with a grin.

He was efficient in divesting George of the rest of his clothing and laying him down in the leaves. He lifted George’s knees to his chest and lowered his head again. This time, he bypassed George’s cock, which pulsed in need, hot, wet, and bobbing in the breeze. He licked and sucked at George’s testicles, gently rolling the tender globes with his tongue.

Lefnir’s hands on his thighs kept George from squirming, from bucking. He was slowly driving George mad with his tongue, and there was no sign that he was about to stop.

His mouth traveled lower. He tongued that little spot of skin between George’s balls and his ass. A whimper escaped George’s lips. He grabbed fistfuls of dead leaves in his hands. A sweet ache gathered in the pit of his stomach. He was so close.

Lefnir circled the base of George’s cock and balls with his fingers, holding them firmly, creating a warm, living cock ring, holding George’s impending orgasm at bay.

Then Lefnir lapped at his asshole with that hot tongue. George screamed. A moment later, he was filled with molten heat. Lefnir’s tongue was not a normal human tongue. It was longer, more agile. Long enough to reach his prostate, and lick and stroke it. George had never felt anything like it in his life. He shook and cried. He would have come right then and there but for the grip Lefnir maintained around the base of his cock and scrotum. He’d never been so hard in his life. Precome leaked from his slit and rolled down his cock in a steady flow. The fluid, cooled by the autumn air, was a sharp contrast to the overheated flesh of his shaft.

At last, Lefnir stopped torturing him with his tongue and withdrew. His asshole pulsed at the loss of that hot, sweet tormentor, aching to be filled again. Lefnir rose up on his knees. George, propping himself up on his elbows, got a good look at Lefnir’s erect shaft. Its prodigious rose-gold length glistened with precome. George could feel the heat radiating off of it on his buttocks.

“May I?” Lefnir asked.

Dumbly, barely able to tear his gaze away from that majestic cock, George nodded.

Still maintaining his grip on George’s cock and balls, Lefnir used his other hand to guide himself between George’s ass cheeks. The broad head pressed against his wanton hole, the heat spiking up through the core of George’s body, radiating outward, all the way to his hands and feet.

Lefnir pressed inward, the flared head of his cock gently breeching George’s entrance, slowly widening him. He was so big. But George wasn’t afraid. He felt himself stretching, opening, welcoming the warmth and the weight and the touch. With one final thrust of his hips, Lefnir penetrated him fully and paused, giving George an opportunity to relish the massive cock inside him. The feeling was indescribable. Lefnir was formed to fit every nuance and curve of George’s body, touching him everywhere, pressing against his prostate and filling him with luscious heat. Little tremors ran up and down George’s spine and outward to his fingers and toes. His cock, already aching hard, pulsed. Precome streamed down his shaft and over Lefnir’s restraining

hand, running down between his ass cheeks and over the stretched ring of his asshole, to drip onto the ground. The feelings were so intense, he felt like he could barely breathe.

“P-p-please,” he whispered, and flexed his hips ever so slightly.

“You want me to fuck you?” asked Lefnir.

George nodded frantically.

Lefnir arched his back, pulling out of George in a long, smooth glide, and then plunged back in, nailing George's prostate and filling him up again. He pulled out again, and pounded in again, and George thrust up to meet him.

Their bodies pistoned in tandem, heat for heat, want for want. George lifted his head and saw Lefnir's mouth open, his jaw slack, his eyes squeezed shut in passion. He couldn't bear it anymore. He needed to come.

“Lefnir!” he screamed, “Please!”

Not missing a beat in their maddening, quickening rhythm, Lefnir switched his grip on George's cock, releasing the pressure at the base. As he drove into George, hitting his prostate again, Lefnir stroked up and down the length of George's cock, pressing his thumb against the spot just below the glans, on the underside. George exploded, his orgasm rocking through him from the inside out. He ejaculated in torrents of thick, ropy come that splashed all over his chest and steamed in the chilly autumn air.

Lefnir's eyes grew wide and he leaned forward, lapping it up as his hips pistoned into George in short, ragged strokes. He roared. The sound made the ground shake beneath them, and with one final, savage thrust, he came.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Lefnir stared down at George, as if taken by surprise by the force of his own orgasm. Little tendrils of smoke curled from his nostrils. George, his mind a haze of sated pleasure, gave him a lopsided grin. With a sigh and smile, Lefnir slumped against him, resting his head against George's shoulder.

“George?”

“Mmm?”

“Can I stay with you?”

Tears pricked the corners of George's eyes and he held Lefnir close, bending his head to press a kiss against the soft hair. “Yes, of course. But we'll need to find you some clothes.”

Lefnir grinned. “What, you don't like me like this?”

“No, it’s just that I have to go to school some time, and I’ll never get out the door with you parading around naked all day.”

Lefnir snuggled closer. “Okay. If I have to.”

They dozed in one another’s arms. George ran his fingers through Lefnir’s silken hair and reveled in the security of being wrapped in those strong arms. Nate Hollingswood and his friends seemed so insignificant now, his humiliation at their hands already a distant, irrelevant memory. He opened his eyes and looked up at the treetops, at the reds and golds and browns, so vivid against the blue sky above.

“Hey... can you fly?”

“Mmn?” Lefnir raised his head and peered blearily at him. “M-yeah. When I’m in full dragon form.”

George smiled.

Lefnir grinned back. “You want a ride?”

They gathered George’s scattered clothing, and then, standing just on the edge of the trees, before the wood gave way to a large, open field, Lefnir transformed. It was the oddest thing George had ever seen. In a single, fluid movement, he went from man to dragon, and now, Lefnir stood before him, still wearing that same grin. Only the dragon version had more teeth.

“Hop on,” he said, his pointed tail pointing at his back. “I take you where you wish.”

As a boy, George had often dreamt of soaring through the sky on the back of a dragon or a winged horse. Now, he was actually going to do it. He didn’t hesitate. He climbed onto Lefnir’s back, between his wings, and wrapped his arms around the dragon’s neck.

Lefnir curled his neck around so that he faced George. “Where to?” As a dragon, his voice was deeper, and his speech more clipped.

A thousand far-flung destinations flitted through his mind. The Alps, the Eiffel Tower, the Fiji Islands: they were all very exciting. But there was one place in particular that George was most anxious to show Lefnir: his new home. “Hartford and Sixth. Land on the roof.”

Lefnir’s wings unfurled with a sound like wind rushing through dry leaves. His wingspan was easily twenty feet, maybe more. “Hold tight,” said Lefnir, and he began to run.

The ground beneath them blurred to a brown haze as they sped over it. Lefnir gave one mighty flap of his wings, and another, and a third, and they were airborne, rising steadily up above the tree line, and then higher. Houses and cars and trees got smaller and smaller. George could see the community college, and the downtown, and far off in the west, the lake. His city looked like a toy, and they glided above it in slow, easy circles, far above anything that could ever hurt them.

The Big Bang

by G.S. Wiley

It was a Monday in October when David told me we were all going to die.

“It’s been on the radio all day,” he said, looking at me like he couldn’t believe I didn’t already know this. “What have you been doing?”

“Studying, mostly.” I was a senior physics student, and, like all physics students, I spent most of my life in the lab. David was an English major. He spent his days at the campus bar, looking at girls. “What’s going on?”

“The Soviets are stockpiling nukes in Cuba.” I’d heard of that, vaguely, a few days earlier, but the news hadn’t treated it like it was a big deal. “Kennedy is setting up a naval blockade. Do you think that’ll go over well?”

Even physics students knew the answer to that. “No.”

David shrugged. “So World War Three is imminent.” He glanced around. A couple of co-eds in tight sweaters walked by, shuffling their saddle shoes through piles of fallen leaves. “You want to get a drink?”

There was only one possible answer to that question, as well.

The bar was full of people drowning their sorrows, although I figured most of them were more worried about midterm exams than nuclear winter. David got us a couple of beers and came back to the table in the corner. When he handed me a glass, I reached for my wallet, but he waved me away.

“You can get the next round.”

“Guess I’d better hope the world ends before then,” I joked. David didn’t laugh.

I guess you could call us unusual friends. Apart from me being a scientist and him being, as I said, an English major, he was the kind of guy who dated a dozen girls at once and could charm his way out of anything.

I, on the other hand, had exactly one dating experience under my belt. It had been an unmitigated eleventh-grade disaster that ended up with me spilling a large glass of Coca-Cola over the girl’s brand new, pink poodle skirt. I went to the men’s room to get her paper towels and was too nervous to go back, even though we were in the same math class. I sneaked out the bathroom window, and then I had to sit behind her for the rest of the semester. We never spoke to each other again.

As I said, I’m a scientist.

David and I had met on the first day of freshman year, right after I found out the physics student who was supposed to be my roommate had been preemptively expelled due to some shenanigans involving a pipe bomb, his high school principal, and criminal charges. David, who had apparently signed up too late to get in with the other literature types, needed a room, and he showed up as I was unpacking my scale model of the solar system. I'd bought it through a mail-in offer from *Popular Science*, and I couldn't bear to leave it at home, mostly because I knew my mother would have thrown it out the moment I left the house.

"Neat-o," he said when he saw it, and immediately I didn't like him. He dropped his bag on my bed and pointed to the eighth ball in my solar system. "What's this, Mars?"

"No," I replied, seriously. "It's Uranus." He laughed like I'd said something hilarious, and I knew I would be in for a long semester.

In the campus bar, we drank our beers, talked about nuclear holocaust for a while, and since David wasn't too scared to still be thirsty, I went up to the bar to get my round. Matthew, a guy I kind of knew from one of my chemistry classes, was behind the bar, and I pushed up my glasses nervously when I saw him.

"Hi, John," he said blandly. "How are you?"

"It's Jim, actually, Matt. Hi."

He looked through me to the busty blonde on the other side of the room. "Sure, Jim. Right. What can I get you?"

"Two beers, please." As he opened the bottles and filled the glasses, I tried desperately to think of something witty to say. I couldn't come up with anything. Instead, I took the beers silently and went back to the table, but not before I heard Matthew say, "Hi, Pat, how are you?" to the next guy in line, exactly the way he'd said it to me.

"Who's that at the bar?" David asked, when I came back to the table.

"Matthew."

"He a friend of yours?" He took the glass from me gratefully and sipped the beer.

"Not really." Not at all, in fact. As we had just conclusively proven.

"Good. He looks like a palooka."

"A palooka?" I raised an eyebrow. "Is that a literature term?"

"Yeah." David smiled. "Like bozo. Moron. Boob."

“No,” I said, getting out my cigarettes. “Boob is a biology term.”

David laughed and reached into his pocket. Before I could find my matches, he’d flicked one of his and held the flame to the cigarette in my mouth. “Can I borrow one of those?” he asked, putting the matches onto the table. I handed him my cigarette case, a graduation gift from my grandparents who hadn’t known what else to get me. David lit up, and then said, thoughtfully, “What about asshole?”

I grinned at him. “Proctology,” I said, and reached for my beer.

It had taken us a long time to become friends. We tolerated each other for most of freshman year, spending as little time as possible in close proximity, which was difficult since we shared a dorm room of about four hundred square feet. Surprisingly enough, it was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life that finally brought us together.

When we’d first moved in together, David had come up with a system by which we would hang a necktie over the doorknob if we were entertaining a girl and didn’t want to be disturbed. I figured this would be a system used exclusively by David, and it was, although he only used it a couple of times. It didn’t even cross my mind to put a necktie on the doorknob, or anywhere else, when I was “entertaining” myself, and that came back to bite me one day. Although, fortunately, not literally.

About the same time I spilled Coca-Cola over Betty Miller’s poodle skirt, I figured out girls weren’t for me. It wasn’t just that I was awkward and shy like a lot of guys -- namely, every one of my friends in the high school audio-visual club -- I just wasn’t interested in women. Maybe I’d lived too long with my three older sisters, maybe I was born that way, but when I thought of sex, which, like any other teenager, I did practically every waking moment of my life, I thought of men.

Not that I’d ever done anything about it. The closest I’d come to even telling anyone what I liked was when, one spring day near the end of freshman year, I gathered every last scrap of my courage and went to a newsstand a few blocks from campus. I spent at least ten minutes staring disinterestedly at a relatively chaste *Playboy* cover before I sidled over to the man behind the counter and said: “Do you have anything a little... different?”

As a physicist, I know why spontaneous human combustion is impossible, but I have never felt so close to imploding from sheer embarrassment as I did at that moment. The clerk gave me a bored look and pulled out half a dozen magazines from beneath the counter. I glanced at *Black Beauties*, *Naughty Nurses*, *Saucy Spanking Stewardesses*, and a few other alliterative titles before saying, “I, ah, I actually meant something *different*.” The man put away the girlie magazines and, with just as little interest, dropped another magazine on the counter.

It was Italian, judging from the few words on the cover, and had a front-page picture of a glistening, dark-haired, half-naked Adonis emerging from a swimming pool. That was my kind

of thing. I paid the clerk, who wrapped the magazine in a brown paper bag, and went back to the dorm.

I hid it under my bed and I only brought it out when I knew David had class or, more usually, a date, and wouldn't be home anytime soon. It was a great arrangement until one day, when I got home from class in the mood for a little "entertainment," I pulled out my magazine of posing Italians and was just getting comfortable on my bed when the door opened.

"Oh, shit," was David's reaction.

Mine was pretty much the same, although I seemed to have lost the power of speech. I dropped the magazine onto the floor in my haste to fasten my trousers, and David, who had already recovered enough to bust a gut laughing at me, stopped abruptly when he saw the pouty-lipped youth reclining in the magazine. The pouty-lipped *male* youth.

"Shit," he repeated.

"David," I started, but I didn't know what else to say. There was nothing to say. This was the worst possible thing that could have happened. David would, of course, ask for a new room assignment, my secret would be out, and my life would no longer be worth living. I would probably have to change schools, maybe even drop out of college altogether, and I would likely end up a penniless homosexual hobo. I cursed myself for being such a stupid, impulsive idiot.

After a long, awkward silence, David said, "Listen, Jim, I come from the only Jewish family in Salt Lake City, so I know what it's like to be different, okay?" He picked up the magazine and flipped through a few pages of scantily clad men frolicking on Italian beaches and lying on striped deckchairs. "Uncircumcised, huh? Guess there are no Jews in Spain, either."

I didn't correct his geography or his history. I was too grateful.

I still expected David to change rooms, but he didn't. When we came back to college the next September, David even asked if I would be his roommate again.

"I don't want to get used to living with someone new," he explained. Then he winked at me. "Even if you still haven't figured out the necktie-on-the-door system."

When we got back to the dorms after our drinks, a few dozen students were gathered in the television room. "Are we missing Ed Sullivan?" I joked, but it was President Kennedy on the screen, of course, talking seriously about Cuba and Soviet ships heading for the blockade.

David shook his head, and the joke he'd been in the middle of telling died on his lips. "I told you, Jim, this is some serious shit." I guessed so. I couldn't think of any other reason the campus Young Republicans would be silently watching the president.

The serious shit continued over the next few days. On Wednesday, according to the news on the radio, Kennedy set a deadline for the Russians to take their missiles out of Cuba. By Thursday, even my professors were talking about it. One of them said we were standing at the doorstep of history, whatever that meant exactly, while the other was blunter:

“We are closer now than we ever have been to nuclear annihilation,” Professor Larssen told us in his almost incomprehensible Scandinavian accent. “Remember, there will always be a need for rational scientists, no matter what the future holds.”

With that cheery thought, he let us out into the world. It was another warm October day; the autumn sun was low in the sky and the leaves were falling slowly to the ground. I was supposed to meet my lab partner, Carl, in an hour to work on some experiments, but Carl was always late, and I didn’t feel like spending any extra time in the lab today. I walked across the campus until I got to the English Department, an ivy-covered brick building on the west end of the quadrangle.

I didn’t know David’s exact schedule, but I knew he was usually out of class around one, and he was always ready for lunch. Sure enough, about ten minutes after I sat on the stone steps to wait, he appeared with a couple of women by his side.

“Hey, Jim.” He grinned at me. That was the good thing about David: he always seemed happy to see me. “You know Patty and Charlene, right?” I didn’t, but his friends were too polite to say that.

“Hi, Jim,” one of them said, while the other gave me a little wave and a bat of her eyelashes.

“We were just going to discuss the relevance of Hamlet to post-apocalyptic American society,” David went on. “Possibly over a few drinks. Want to come along?” I looked at David, who looked fondly at Patty, or possibly Charlene. The women were pretty enough, a short, rosy-cheeked blonde and a taller, thinner brunette. Maybe if I were someone else, someone like David, I would have jumped at the chance to have a drink with them, but I was me.

“I don’t think so, thanks.” I gave them a polite smile anyway. “I’m supposed to meet my lab partner.”

“Creepy Carl? Bring him along,” David invited. “Always room for one more, right, Patty?” The blonde, who I assumed was Patty, giggled like this was some private joke.

“I’ll see you later, David.” I walked back toward the physics building, and David and the women headed for the bar.

That was the most difficult part of being the way I was. Even after my Coca-Cola-poodle-skirt debacle, I was sure that, if I liked girls, I could have found someone to have fun with. There were a few girls in the physics program -- smart, capable women who I liked well enough as friends and lab partners -- but I couldn’t imagine doing any “extra-curricular experimentation” with any of them. The people I could imagine experimenting with, men in my classes and men I saw on

campus and at the bar, were, of course, completely off-limits. If there was some simple, safe way of telling which men were like me, I hadn't discovered it.

So, nothing had changed since freshman year. Even as a twenty-three-year-old college senior, I was resorting to magazines to fuel my fantasies, although I always remembered to put a necktie on the doorknob nowadays.

I expected that Friday would be one of those nights. David, I assumed, would be out late with Patty and possibly Charlene, and I was preparing to spend a night with my physics assignments and my two-dimensional European friends. Then another of our dorm-mates, a guy called Chaz who always left big clots of black hair in the shower drains and would likely be bald by the age of thirty, ran into me in the hallway.

"You gotta come see this, Jim," he said, and I followed him downstairs.

The students were once again gathered in the television room. David was there, without Patty or Charlene, sitting on the sagging brown sofa between a couple of guys from the floor above ours. On the television, Walter Cronkite was talking about a U2 plane that had gone down over Siberia, and another that had supposedly been shot down over Cuba. The room was quiet as the television cut to a commercial for Maidenform bras.

It was Chaz, of all people, who said, "This is it, huh?"

It echoed the feelings of everyone in the room. I hadn't been following the crisis closely, but even I knew what this news meant. Kennedy would have to respond, Khrushchev would respond to that, and the situation would escalate from there.

"Maybe we should find a fallout shelter," someone else suggested, and there was a nervous titter before the room lapsed into silence again.

Walter Cronkite came back, repeating the news bulletins and introducing some vague kind of expert, a middle-aged man in thick black glasses like mine who was apparently eager to share his take on the situation. The other students stared, transfixed, as the expert talked about survival rates and worst-case scenarios, but David stood up suddenly and left the television room.

I gave him a minute, and then I followed.

There was no necktie on the doorknob, so I went in without knocking. He was sitting on his bed, and I went over to his room.

As seniors, we'd finally been able to move out of the one-room, privacy-free box that had caused the Italian magazine incident. Our new place had separate, cubby-like bedrooms as well as a sitting area. David looked up when I came into his tiny bedroom, the one with the big piles of laundry around the narrow single bed and a poster of Kim Novak on the wall.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

David looked pale. "It's the end of the world," he said.

I wasn't sure how to comfort him. I was trying to come up with some scientific explanation of why everything was going to be all right, even though I knew it probably wouldn't be, when he stood up and kissed me.

I stood still, possibly in shock, for a long moment, until David slid his tongue against my lips. Then I jerked backwards. "What are you doing?"

"I can't wait forever, Jim." He smiled at me, but his eyes were unfocused. "We don't have forever." He was right, but there was still a problem with this scenario.

"You're not... you know." He did know, though, obviously. I guessed it was me who didn't.

"Who cares about labels?" he said. "I like you." He put his arms around me again.

He tasted like beer and cafeteria food, meatloaf and mashed potatoes. When my glasses started to get in the way, I took them off, leaving them on a stack of books against one wall. Suddenly blind, I held onto David, who led me the very short distance to his bed.

I had spent a lot of time imagining what it would be like to have sex with an Italian model, and a little less time imagining what it would be like to have sex with Matthew from my chemistry class. I'd never once imagined what it would be like to have sex with David, and as soon as he pulled off his shirt, I realized that had been a mistake. I couldn't see him well, but his skin was soft, interspersed with patches of rough dark hair. I lay beside him, not sure what to do next, and he took the lead.

Somewhere along the line, I lost my clothes, and I shivered, from cold and from something else, as David kissed his way down my body. When he finally reached my very surprised penis, I jerked suddenly and, with a laugh, David planted his hands on my hips and took me into his mouth.

It was over in about three seconds, but they were the happiest three seconds of my life. Afterwards, David lay beside me for a while, one hand in my hair and the other against my chest, where my heart was threatening to explode with the power of at least a dozen nuclear warheads.

Finally, he said, "Can I do it, Jim?" I couldn't refuse him.

It was the strangest sensation I'd ever felt, painful but enjoyable at the same time, different from anything I'd ever experienced, but oddly familiar, like I'd been doing it my whole life. After a very brief moment of awkwardness, I felt suddenly comfortable, and I lay down with my eyes closed, breathing in the smell of David and feeling his sweat-slicked skin against my back.

He didn't last much longer than I had. I don't know how much time passed, but when David stood up, it was dark. He opened his tiny window and the room cooled down instantly. A breeze

blew in, and, as he handed me my glasses, a shriveled yellow leaf tumbled through the window onto the floor.

“Wow,” he finally said. “That was pretty... explosive, huh?”

“Kaboom,” I agreed.

“If the world ends tonight, I can go happy.” He looked like he really meant it.

Of course, I was still a scientist. I needed proof for everything.

“What if the world doesn’t end?” I asked. What if, I thought, David decided this was a mistake? We still had to live together and we still had to face each other every day until graduation.

“Then,” David said, without hesitation, “I’ll buy you a beer and throw out those damn magazines of yours, because you’re not going to need them anymore.” He kissed me again and held me tightly, and I wondered if it would be appropriate to send a thank you note to Nikita Khrushchev. Or maybe Walter Cronkite.

The Straggler **by Addison Albright**

Blake Renner breathed in the crisp autumn air and took a few practice swings before addressing the ball he'd placed on the tee. He was a straggler at the Towering Pines Golf Course and was killing time at the driving range, hoping to hear a page calling for him to join a threesome.

Unfortunately, none of his friends liked to golf. He often found himself showing up at the course, hoping to be able to join a group that showed up short a player. He usually managed to get in after a brief wait.

Blake was the brand manager for natural powdered drink mixes at Jensen's Natural Beverages, Incorporated. He'd been promoted from marketing analyst over the summer and was working his ass off these days trying to build his credibility within the JNB organization.

Autumn was his favorite season and he'd awoken this morning with a desire to spend the day outdoors. He loved the blaze of colors in the trees and the freshness of the air, so driving out to the golf course this morning had been a no-brainer.

He stepped up to the tee and swung his driver, connecting solidly with the ball. It landed about two hundred and fifty yards out. Not bad. He'd hooked it slightly, though. He reached into the bucket and placed another ball on the tee.

After going through about ten balls with his driver, he traded his club for the three wood. He practiced a while with that and then reached for his seven iron, but didn't get the chance to use it.

"Jacobson threesome on deck for number one tee," announced the starter over the loudspeaker. "Renner single join Jacobson threesome on tee number one."

Sweet, he was in. Blake picked up his golf bag and hiked over to the first tee. He spotted the trio on deck and walked toward them. As he approached, one of the men turned to look at him.

Damn, it was Frank Miller, the Chief Financial Officer at JNB. Thankfully he didn't answer to Mr. Miller and, in fact, never had to personally even deal with the man because Mr. Miller had a reputation for having unrealistic standards and was said to be cutthroat when dealing with his underlings.

Blake had been spotted so it was too late to remove his Gay Pride earring before joining the threesome. There were laws protecting him from discrimination, but some things weren't very provable and it had just seemed better to fly under the radar regarding his sexuality at work.

Maybe Mr. Miller wouldn't recognize him as a fellow employee at JNB. It was a large company and their scopes of work didn't bring them into direct contact with each other. Hell, if coworkers hadn't pointed Mr. Miller out to him in the building's cafeteria, Blake wouldn't have recognized *him*, so it didn't seem like a completely unreasonable hope.

Apparently, it was, though, because the look in Mr. Miller's eyes made it clear that he recognized Blake at least on some level. Just how *well* Mr. Miller knew him was clarified as Blake drew closer.

"Blake Renner." Mr. Miller smiled at him and held out his hand. "Are you as good at playing golf as you are at landing new contracts?"

Jesus. So much for hoping Mr. Miller wouldn't even recognize him as a random employee of the company. The man fucking knew *exactly* who he was.

Blake shook Mr. Miller's outstretched hand. "Oh, ah -- I'm about average for a recreational player, I suppose. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Miller."

"Frank."

Jesus. "Frank. Thank you, sir."

One of the other two men in the trio snorted. Then the other one started laughing. What the fuck? Mr. Miller just smiled tolerantly at them.

Mr. Miller looked back at Blake and winked. Mr. Miller actually *winked* at him. "Just ignore them," he said, and then turned back to the two men. "Clive, Sammy, please meet Blake Renner. He's a brand manager with JNB. Blake, please meet my good friends Clive Jacobson and Sammy Jones."

The men sobered up again and they all shook hands. They had a couple of golf carts with them and Mr. Miller took Blake's golf bag from him and placed it in the back of one. The foursome in front of them had all teed off, and the two men and two women in that group were heading down the fairway to make their second shots.

Blake noticed Clive looking at his ear. Fuck. Blake chewed on his lower lip. Clive quirked an eyebrow at him and gave him a little half grin.

Mr. Miller spoke up at that point. "Let's get our starting order settled. Sammy, do you mind going first? Clive can follow, then Blake. I'll bring up the rear."

Sammy choked back another snort.

Mr. Miller rolled his eyes and shook his head indulgently at Sammy.

"That order sounds good to me," said Clive. He was sporting a very wide grin.

The couples in front of them were in the process of making their second shots, so Blake and his companions got into their golf carts and moved up to the tee. Sammy got into the first cart with Clive. Blake got into the cart that held his golf bag, that Mr. Miller -- er, Frank -- was driving. Without a doubt, he was going to have trouble remembering to call Mr. Miller 'Frank.'

Clive and Sammy had their heads together, laughing. What was so fucking funny? Had he landed into the middle of a pack of homophobes? Whatever their problem was, he had the feeling it was going to be a long, long morning.

They reached the par-four tee and Blake got out of the cart and drew the driver out of his bag. He picked out a ball and tee as Sammy took his backswing. Sammy followed through with his swing and the ball went sailing. His shot had a little bit of a hook and traveled maybe two hundred and twenty or thirty yards.

Blake cleared his head of the worry that had been plaguing him since spotting Frank Miller and decided to hell with it. If the man hadn't noticed the earring yet, he would shortly. His loony buddies would fill him in later, if it managed to escape his notice in the meantime.

Clive approached the tee next. His shot was straighter than Sammy's and a little longer.

Fuck 'em all anyway. Mr. Miller wasn't in the chain of command over him at work and surely it would be beneath the man to stoop to spreading gossip around, wouldn't it? He'd just be polite and make the best of it. Damn, and do his best to ignore Mr. Miller's nutty friends, who seemed to be laughing at everything he said.

At least Mr. Miller wasn't joining in on that. He was being rather friendly, in fact. Hell, his friends had laughed at an innocent comment Mr. Miller had made, too. Maybe the rumors about him at work were exaggerated, or perhaps he just knew how to relax outside of work, because his and his friends' behavior was totally at odds with what Blake would have expected.

Blake approached the tee and set up his shot. He swung and hit a soaring shot, straight down the fairway. It looked like his ball had gone at least two hundred and fifty yards. Maybe closer to two hundred and sixty. Sweet. He smiled to himself. At least he wasn't going to embarrass himself with his golf game.

"Good shot, Blake," said Mr. Miller.

"Thank you."

"Hell, yeah," added Clive. "Frank, you might actually lose a game today."

Mr. Miller -- Frank -- laughed. "Trust me, I lose plenty. Just because I can always beat you two doesn't make me *good*."

Sammy laughed and looked at Clive. "I think we're being dissed, hon."

Hon? What the hell? Were Sammy and Clive *together*? Clearly, they were at least gay because he couldn't think of a single time he'd ever heard straight guys call each other 'hon.' It just didn't happen. So much for his worries that they were homophobes. Hell, they were kindred spirits and

Frank Miller was their friend, so obviously it wasn't an issue with him. Blake smiled to himself. Hell, maybe Frank was gay, too.

Frank just chuckled and shook his head as he approached the tee. Frank's form on his backswing and follow-through were flawless. As was his shot, straight and about the same distance as Blake's.

Blake smiled. "Nice."

Clive chortled and Sammy burst out laughing. Jesus, what was *with* those two?

Sammy revived first. "His shot or his *form*?" he managed to choke out.

Oh, fuck. Blake's jaw dropped. He *had* been checking out Frank's *swing*. Had Clive and Sammy noticed that and thought he was checking out the *man*? He didn't even want to know how red his face was. Probably the same shade of red as the changing maple leaves.

Frank chuckled. "You boys need to cut poor Blake some slack. He's going to stroke out on us before we're through with the front nine if you keep it up. Come on, let's ride out. We're holding up the folks behind us."

They climbed into the two carts and Blake tried desperately to think of something -- anything -- to say that might diffuse the awkwardness that was overwhelming him. He could think of nothing.

Frank wasn't so tongue-tied, though. "Don't let Clive and Sammy bother you, Blake. They're good guys, really. They're very happy together and now they've made it their mission in life to get me partnered up. They never miss an opportunity to try to set me up. Trouble is, their antics have the opposite effect as often as they have the desired effect. They're not very subtle, are they?"

They were trying to set up *Frank Miller* with *him*? Jesus. As for subtle, did Clive and Sammy even know what the word meant? He couldn't help loosening up a bit, though, as relief washed over him. Relief that Clive and Sammy weren't somehow making fun of him. Relief that Frank Miller seemed to be a pretty good sport and, well, a nice guy trying to make *him* feel more comfortable.

The man wasn't anything like the hard-assed prick he was rumored to be at work. Or if he was, he drew a solid line between the person he needed to be at work and the person he was in his private life.

Blake smiled over at Frank. "No, they're not, but they mean well. They seem like nice guys. Good friends."

Frank smiled back. "The best," he replied. "They mean a lot to me."

They pulled up to their balls and got out. Sammy was furthest from the hole so he shot first. He didn't hook it this time, but he just didn't have the distance Blake and Frank did. Clive was somewhere in between. He could hit the ball further than Sammy by about ten to twenty yards, but fell short by that same figure of what Blake and Frank hit.

Blake's ball was actually a little closer to the green than Frank's, so Frank hit third, followed by Blake. Frank and Blake each managed to par the hole and Clive and Sammy each took a bogey.

"Nice hole, Blake," said Frank, then he turned and winked at Clive and Sammy. "It's nice to have some actual *competition* for a round." Clive and Sammy weren't insulted, they just smiled back.

"Thank you, sir," replied Blake. Blake realized his mistake even before Sammy's snort, but it was too late to pull the word back in. Clive did better this time and only smiled.

Frank smiled at him. "It's *Frank*, Blake."

"I'm sorry -- *Frank*," Blake smiled at him as they hopped back into the golf cart. "It's hard to separate this from my image of you from work."

Frank leaned across and placed a hand on the nape of Blake's neck and gave him a kiss. It wasn't too hard, nor was it too soft. It was fucking perfect -- for the three seconds it lasted before Frank let him go.

"Maybe *that* will help you out."

Jesus. Yeah, Blake certainly thought so. Damn, the man could kiss. Needless to say, Blake had no trouble whatsoever remembering to call, and even think of him, as 'Frank' for the rest of the round.

Blake didn't hear anything more from the peanut gallery, either. Clive and Sammy knew when their work was done and backed off. Blake's game was shot, though. He spent the rest of the round reliving that perfect three-second kiss and checking out Frank's form -- okay, his *ass* -- when he was swinging his club, or even when he was just walking along. Hell, Blake even studied the man's hands on the steering wheel of the damned golf cart -- and beautiful, well formed hands they were, too.

It was the worst round he'd shot in a long, long time. He still managed to beat Clive and Sammy, but Frank beat him handily.

The sun was high in the autumn sky, but a cool breeze swirled the crisp colorful leaves around their feet as they lugged their golf bags back up to the clubhouse. They laughed about Sammy's double bogey on the seventeenth hole where he'd wasted three shots trying to get out of a sand trap.

Clive changed the subject to their afternoon plans. “Frank, are you still planning to barbeque for us? I’m starved!”

“Hell, yes, so am I,” Frank replied, then turned to Blake. “Blake, you’ll join us, won’t you? We’re having a little cookout at my place. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, very hungry. Thank you for the offer.” Blake smiled. Hell, he *liked* this side of Frank Miller and very much wanted to see where this day would lead. He wanted to determine if Frank’s kiss had been the casual remember-to-call-me-‘Frank’-and-not-‘sir’ thing he had implied, or if there was potential for more. Frank hadn’t made any more personal comments or moves towards Blake, but, damn, now that Blake was thinking of the man that way, he found Frank to be incredibly hot.

Blake tossed the football back to Sammy, who caught it skillfully. Sammy lofted the ball high in the air back to Blake, making him run to catch it. Clive was up on the deck keeping Frank company as they flipped burgers on Frank’s backyard grill.

“Come and get it!” Clive hollered down to them.

Sammy whooped and ran in, with Blake right on his heels. They’d all worked up big appetites and were ready for the meal. They took the wooden steps two at a time up to the deck where Frank and Clive were waiting.

“I think they’re hungry,” said Clive with an eye roll.

“Ya think?” Frank chuckled and turned to Sammy and Blake. “It’s on the table, boys.”

They sat down around the glass-topped patio table and passed the food around. Frank had some potato salad and a fruit salad on the table to go with their burgers.

“It looks delicious, Frank,” said Blake. “Thank you again for inviting me.”

“You’re welcome, Blake. I’m glad for the opportunity to get to know you better.”

The food *was* delicious and the company entertaining. Clive and Sammy amused them with stories about the eight-night Mexican Riviera cruise they had returned from the previous week. It sounded like a wonderful time, both on board with the wild dance parties and outstanding food, and in port along the Mexican Riviera.

When they were done eating, they got up to clear the table. The day was turning blustery and clouds were rolling in. It looked like it might rain later on, so it was time to go inside anyway.

Sammy turned the conversation back to Blake as they entered the kitchen. “So how do you like working at JNB? Frank said you’re in Marketing, is that right?”

“I like working there, it’s a great company. Very fair and lots of opportunity. Yes, I’m in marketing. I’m the brand manager for natural powdered drink mixes.”

“So you don’t really interact much with Frank at work?” asked Clive.

“No, I don’t. In fact, we hadn’t actually formally *met* before today.”

Sammy piped up again. “Then there are no conflict of interest issues at work if you were to ask Frank out, right?”

Jesus. Blake had to laugh, however. Frank’s friends were damned persistent. Frank was finally getting a little annoyed, though.

“Christ, Sammy. I’m not helpless, you know.”

Sammy blushed. “Sorry, Frank,” he said before rushing on. “You know we love you and I know you aren’t helpless, but damn, you aren’t making any progress here either. The man’s been ogling you all morning, but you aren’t making any moves, even though it’s obvious you want to. For a man who can cut his way through boardroom bullshit as cleanly as you do, you sure are slow when it comes to initiating relationships.”

Blake wasn’t sure who was turning redder, Frank or himself. It was probably a toss-up. *Ogling*, for Christ’s sake. Sammy had just come right out and announced to the room that he’d been ogling Frank all morning.

It was true, he had been, but damn! No wonder Frank was blushing. Regardless of what Sammy said, Blake didn’t think there was anything *obvious* about Frank’s wants here and was inclined to think Frank *wasn’t* interested in him romantically after all.

Frank turned to Blake with curiosity reflected in his eyes. “You’ve been checking me out?”

Oh, fuck. How was he supposed to answer *that*? Fortunately, he was saved from having to make an immediate reply.

Clive put a hand on Sammy’s shoulder before speaking up. “Frank, we’re going to take off now. Thanks again for lunch. I’ll call you tonight.”

Frank blinked and turned to his friends. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, we need to bag up some more leaves before it rains,” Clive replied. He took Frank’s arm and led him out to the entry, leaving Sammy behind with Blake.

Sammy turned and spoke quickly and softly to Blake. “Listen, if you’re interested in Frank, and it looks to us like you are, then *you* need to make the moves here. Frank’s a completely different person in personal relationships than he is at work. You have no idea how incredibly out of

character it was for him to kiss you at the golf course. It means he's *very* interested. It's probably not obvious to you, but it's clear as day to me and Clive. Trust us. Let him know you're interested and make the moves yourself because he's *way* too passive when it comes to initiating a relationship to do it himself."

"Really? You're *sure* he's interested in me, too?"

"Trust us, Blake. He *wants* you -- badly."

Sammy turned to look out at Clive and Frank then back to Blake. "Do you top?"

Jesus. Cut right to the chase, why don't you, Sammy? "Um, yeah -- usually. I'll switch, though."

"That's perfect," Sammy said. He looked back out at Clive and Frank. "Come on. We've got to get out there and join them."

They walked over to the entryway where Clive and Frank were discussing their plans for the next weekend. Frank turned to them as they approached. "Goodbye, Sammy," he said, giving the man a hug.

"Love ya, baby," replied Sammy, giving Frank a kiss on the cheek. "Talk to you later."

Clive turned to Blake. "It was nice to meet you, Blake," he said.

"Thank you, Clive." Blake shook his hand. "It was nice meeting you, too."

Blake turned to Sammy and shook his hand, too. "Sammy, a pleasure." But a handshake wasn't going to cut it for Sammy.

Sammy pulled Blake in for a hug. "Later, babe," Sammy replied.

After the door closed behind them, Blake smiled at Frank. "Shall I help you with the dishes, Frank?"

"Thank you, I'd appreciate that." Frank smiled back at him. "I don't want to keep you from anything, though, if you have plans."

Well, fuck. How the hell was he supposed to interpret *that*? Were Sammy and Clive wrong, because it sure didn't sound like Frank wanted him to stay much longer?

He told Frank he didn't have any plans. They walked back to the kitchen and Blake loaded the dishwasher while Frank took care of the leftovers.

Blake grabbed a dishcloth and wiped the counters. He looked over at Frank and caught him staring -- at Blake's arms? Blake worked out regularly and his arms *were* rather muscular. Blake placed the dishcloth back at the sink and walked over to Frank.

He hoped he wasn't committing professional suicide as he placed one hand at the nape of Frank's neck and the other at the man's waist and brought his mouth down on Frank's.

He didn't have to worry for long. Frank's response was immediate and strong and, within moments, their tongues were dancing.

Frank moved one hand up to Blake's shoulder and the other moved around him, pulling him close. Fuck, yes. Blake backed Frank up to the refrigerator and pressed in hard. Frank moaned and tightened his grip on Blake's shoulder.

Blake's cock was filling and he began to grind in against Frank. Blake could feel the hard ridge in Frank's pants pulsing and growing as Frank pushed back.

Blake moved his hand down to Frank's ass and squeezed. Damn. Nice and firm and round. The man had a fucking perfect ass.

Their kiss softened and Blake began nibbling Frank's lips. Frank's eyes were closed and his head was thrown back. God, he was beautiful like that. Blake moved his other hand from Frank's neck up to card through his hair.

Frank was breathing faster now and Blake could sense his own breath speeding up as well. Blake moved his lips around to Frank's ear and spoke softly, his voice hoarse, "We should move this to your bedroom, Frank."

Soft brown eyes looked straight into Blake's. "Yes," was all he said, but that was plenty. Frank moved his hand from Blake's shoulder, down Blake's arm to grasp his hand before leading him down a hallway.

Rich, warm colors dominated Frank's bedroom. The furniture was elegant yet tasteful. The bed was king-sized with a huge wooden frame.

Frank pulled back the bedcovers and turned to Blake. Blake untucked his polo shirt from his pants, pulled it off over his head, and tossed it aside. Then he reached for Frank's shirt and did the same before pulling the man back into his embrace.

Lean and toned, Frank was compact rather than muscular. He had a lovely scattering of hair across his chest and a trail down his lower abs. Blake had a larger, more muscular frame and at six-foot-one, he was about two inches taller than Frank.

Frank's arms both came up around Blake's shoulders as he reached up to start another kiss. Blake met his lips and they began a slow, sensual exploration of each other's mouths.

Shoes were kicked off, then Blake moved one of his hands back to the front of Frank's pants and unbuckled his belt, then unfastened his pants, letting them drop to the floor.

Frank stepped out of his pants and broke their kiss to pull off his socks while Blake removed his own pants and socks. Blake pulled Frank back in and nuzzled and nipped along his neckline. Frank put his arms around Blake's waist and arched back with a low moan.

"Jesus, Frank, you're gorgeous," Blake murmured close to Frank's ear.

Frank smiled. "You're a fucking Adonis, Blake. God, you're stunning."

"You're exaggerating, but thank you."

Blake brought his lips back down on Frank's for a deep kiss. Frank pressed in hard, mashing their pelvises together in a slow grind. Damn, that felt good. It was time to move to the bed.

The kiss broke. They were both breathing hard. Blake wasn't sure how to proceed. How far should he go? He didn't want to assume too much. Should he just move them to a mutual jerk-off session unless Frank indicated otherwise?

Frank seemed to sense his hesitation and moved out of Blake's arms to open the drawer of his bedside table. He pulled out a condom and a bottle of lube and tossed them on the bed.

Blake smiled and hooked his thumbs in his boxer-briefs and pulled them down and off. Frank's eyes widened appreciatively then he pulled his own briefs down. Oh, nice. Frank was rock hard and his balls were high and tight.

He gave Frank a soft kiss and drew him onto the bed, pulling Frank into his arms. Blake rolled over onto Frank and looked into his eyes. He didn't want to make any assumptions here.

"How do you want it, Frank?"

"Your choice."

"Okay," Blake grinned at him and wiggled his eyebrows. "I *love* your kisses, so I choose nipple to nipple."

Frank laughed and reached up to draw Blake down for a slow, easy kiss. Blake deepened the kiss and moved a hand to one of Frank's nipples. He pinched lightly and Frank arched into it.

Blake moved his mouth down to Frank's neck, pausing to trail kisses along his collarbone before moving down to tongue Frank's other tightly peaked nipple. Frank moaned and clutched the back of Blake's head. Blake moved back up to kiss Frank's lips before reaching for the lube and condom.

He tore open the condom wrapper and rolled the rubber down over his hard shaft. Then he snapped open the bottle of lube and squeezed some out onto his hands.

Taking Frank's hard shaft in one slick hand, Blake began stroking him. Frank closed his eyes and groaned, drawing his legs back and opening himself up for Blake. Blake added lube at Frank's entrance before pushing a finger in past the tight ring of muscle.

Frank moaned and Blake continued to pump and squeeze Frank's hard prick. Blake added another finger at Frank's hole and moved in and out, scissoring to loosen and stretch the muscle.

Withdrawing his hands, Blake reached again for the lube. Frank opened his eyes and looked intently into Blake's. Blake realized the man was placing a tremendous amount of trust in him. In his honor, his integrity, and in his discretion. He understood that Frank's professional reputation was at stake and appreciated the enormity of the gift he was being given.

Blake leaned down and kissed Frank's lips, then moved his mouth down to Frank's ear to speak softly. "You can trust me, Frank."

Frank's hands were at his back, gently petting him. "Thank you," Frank replied.

Raising back up, Blake snapped open the lube. He slicked some over his cock and lined himself up at Frank's entrance, his hands firmly on Frank's hips.

Frank closed his eyes and took a deep breath as Blake pushed slowly in, breaching the tight ring of muscle. Frank groaned and Blake felt him relax as Blake steadily entered him until he felt his balls resting against the crack of Frank's ass.

Blake leaned forward and nibbled at Frank's neck and reached a hand to take a firm grip of the man's rigid cock. Frank's arms were around him, gripping him tightly. Frank turned his face, and Blake heard his name murmured before Frank captured his lips.

The firm pressure of Frank's hands and lips captivated him. Blake pulled back a bit then pressed back in. Frank felt so hot and tight. Blake moaned and moved his mouth down to suck at Frank's collarbone. He knew he was leaving a hickey, but it was below the collar line and Frank made no objections to being marked and claimed.

Frank's hands vigorously caressed his back and ass. Frank was breathing heavily and Blake pumped at Frank's cock as he pulled back to set up a rhythm thrusting.

Sweat beaded on Blake's forehead with the exertion. Frank's movements were erratic and Blake knew he was close to coming.

Blake could feel his own orgasm building. He tightened his grip on Frank's cock and ran this thumb through the fluid leaking from its tip.

Groans filled the air, and hot come shot out over Frank's abs as his ass tightened around Blake. Blake brought his mouth down on Frank's for a hard kiss, his tongue seeking the heat of Frank's mouth.

Blake's orgasm overtook him quickly. He cried out and felt his body jerk in Frank's embrace as his cock throbbed deep inside the man's body.

The room seemed silent now except for their breathing and the soft, muted sounds of their lips nibbling and smacking. Blake felt boneless, but held his weight on his arms as he lingered over Frank.

Their cocks softened and Blake eventually found it necessary to lean back up and withdraw before tossing the used condom to a waiting trash can. He rolled to the side and pulled Frank along with him.

They lay together on the large bed, with Frank in Blake's arms, Frank's fingers stroking through the curls on Blake's chest. It felt so good and right. Blake wasn't sure what to expect next or what to say to Frank, so he closed his eyes and rested, waiting for Frank to make the next move.

When Blake opened his eyes it was starting to get dark and it took him a few moments to remember where he was. Frank wasn't in the bedroom anymore and the house was quiet.

He slipped out of the bed and found his clothes folded neatly on top of one of the dressers. He put them on and moved into the bathroom to freshen up.

Blake wandered silently down the hall, listening and looking for signs of Frank. He'd had a great time today with Frank -- the golf and socializing as well as the sex, which had been spectacular. He knew he wanted to see Frank again and he'd gotten the impression as they snuggled, before he fell asleep, that Frank would be interested in that, too.

Finally, he heard the soft clicking of a keyboard coming from an open door off of the living room. Blake stepped forward and knocked lightly on the door frame.

Frank turned and stood up when he saw Blake. The look in his eyes was inscrutable. He had seemed happy to see Blake, but then that look had quickly been replaced by one that made Frank look uncertain.

"Blake," was all he said, with a small nod of his head.

Shit. Blake would have taken the look for a kiss-off, but Sammy's words came back to him. He'd made the right decision when he'd kissed Frank in the kitchen, despite the lack of obvious encouragement. Perhaps he should just speak up again and downright tell Frank he was interested and ask him if he wanted to get together again.

Blake nodded in response to Frank's nod then swallowed and replied, "Thank you for letting me sleep. I hadn't realized I was so tired."

"Not a problem." Frank gave him a little smile. "I hope you were comfortable."

That wasn't much help. Frank wasn't making this very easy. He still had that wary look in his eyes. How could such a successful and seemingly confident man be so unsure of himself in a situation like this? If Sammy was right and Frank truly was interested in Blake, then there had to be a reason for this odd behavior. Perhaps there was a painful and harsh breakup in Frank's past.

He put his trust in Sammy and felt completely vulnerable as he spoke. "Frank, I thoroughly enjoyed your company today and would like to see you again -- socially, that is -- if you're interested."

Frank's smile was immediate, wide and sincere. The apprehension in his eyes was replaced by a look of relief. "Yes, I'm interested."

The relief in the room was almost palpable. Blake smiled back, instinctively opening his arms. Frank didn't hesitate before stepping into them.

Frank wrapped his arms around Blake's waist, and Blake wrapped his around Frank's shoulders, pulling Frank to him. "Thank you," Blake said.

Frank gave him a squeeze before stepping back again to look at Blake. "Do you have anything particular in mind?"

"No. Not yet anyway. What do you like to do, besides play golf? Do you like to go out dancing?"

Frank's eyebrows went up. "Ah -- well -- sure. It's been years, but yes. I used to love dancing." He smiled weakly at Blake.

"We'll figure it out, Frank." Blake stepped forward, took Frank's face in his hands, and gave him a soft kiss. "Trust me, okay? I promise I won't ever do anything to hurt you."

Frank's smile was rueful. "You can't promise something like that."

Blake sighed. He supposed that was true. "Well, I can promise to always be honest and straight-forward with you. I can promise never to cheat -- I don't do that. I can promise to never treat you in a hurtful manner." He looked at Frank and Frank looked rather contemplative as he considered Blake's words. Blake continued. "And I think I can trust you to do the same for me."

Frank smiled again. "Yes. You can trust me to be all of those things."

"If you're free next Friday night, why don't we plan on getting together? We'll figure out what we'll do between now and then."

"Actually, I do have plans for next Friday night. I've been invited to a dinner party, but I can bring a date. Would you like to attend that with me?" Frank asked.

A dinner party -- was it a *business* dinner party? Frank wouldn't mind bringing Blake as a date to something like that? He just accepted the invitation blindly. If it *was* a business thing, then if it was okay with Frank, then there would certainly be no reason for it not to be okay with him.

"I would be honored to attend that with you," replied Blake. Frank's smile was broad and heartfelt, and Blake couldn't resist leaning down for another light kiss.

"Perhaps we can get together for dinner sometime this week, too," ventured Frank.

"Sounds great. My calendar is pretty flexible in general, so I'll let you pick the day."

"I'll get in touch with you within a couple of days, then, once my schedule is settled for the week."

"Great," replied Blake. "Well, Frank, you seem to be busy and it's getting dark and stormy, so I'll get going. I don't want to keep you from your work."

Frank laughed. "Yeah, I'm mired in the financial paperwork associated with a large new contract one of our hot shot brand managers pulled in this past week." He winked at Blake before continuing. "You can expect to see the paperwork by the end of the week to present to the customer."

Blake laughed. "I know the customer is anxious to see it. Thank you, Frank."

They lingered over a final goodnight kiss. As Blake stepped off the stoop into the light rain, he heard Frank's cell phone ring.

"Hi, Clive." Frank paused before continuing. "You two couldn't wait to call and ask me that, could you?" Blake heard Frank's laughter as the door shut behind him, cutting off the rest of the conversation. Blake smiled to himself as he got into his car to drive home.

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