



# The Queen of Wands

*A Torquere Press Arcana*  
by Jenna Jones

There was a boy reading at the end of the bar. “Boy” was probably an exaggeration; he looked young, certainly, but he was old enough to order a drink and read his book without anyone bothering him. He had a distinct profile: a prominent nose and full mouth, and eyes, when he looked up, that were wide, bright, and lively.

It wasn't unusual for people to read in bars, as this was a college town, and people were always studying anywhere they could find a place to sit. The Granby was a well-lit gay bar modeled after a traditional English pub, not too noisy even with the jukebox playing, and most nights there'd be a few students studying alone or couples holding hands while they quizzed each other on biology or American history.

There shouldn't be any more students around, though. The term was over and everyone should have gone home. What this boy was doing here was a mystery.

J.T. Fogarty could not keep his eyes off the boy, as much he tried. He wasn't the only one: the boy had been approached by three other men as J.T. watched, but had sent all three away -- gently, with that amazing smile, so that none of them left looking angry or dejected.

As he watched, the boy looked up again and gave the bar a sweeping glance, and the boy's eyes landed on him. J.T. meant to look away but couldn't, and for a moment too long they only stared at each other.

The boy smiled. It was beautiful.

J.T. looked away. He picked up his drink and moved to a booth, where he could watch the parade of humanity -- most of them known to him, this town was too small and he'd lived here too long for many surprises in the gay community -- and drink in peace, and not think about mysterious boys and their reading. If he were younger, J.T. thought, if he were someone other than this scruffy, tired, hollow-eyed fellow in a raincoat, he'd smile back, maybe even try to talk to the boy himself.

But he wasn't: he was older by twenty years or more than the students, and he'd never been considered particularly handsome, and most nights he left the Granby on his own. And even when he didn't it was just a way of ignoring the obvious, and in the morning he was still alone.

He doubted he would be good company to anyone tonight, anyway. Dilys Tate Bly, his cousin and sometime employer, had requested a favor from him, and doing favors for Dilys never left him in a good mood. Today it was persuading Sophie Travers Tate, wife of city councilman Philip Tate, to end her affair so Philip wasn't disgraced by a divorce before the election. If Dilys wanted her cousin to divorce Sophie after the election, he would. Dilys always got what she wanted.

Today it was breaking a woman's heart. Tomorrow it would be persuading another cousin to marry the girl he'd knocked up, next week it would be convincing a potential blackmailer that he really ought to choose another family to profit from, and on and on it would go. The Tates were passionate but foolish as a tribe, but Dilys made sure their faults were not made public and J.T. did the cleaning up. This was the cost of family loyalty.

He'd stopped watching the people around him as he mulled over his day, but looked up when someone paused in front of him. It was the boy, his thick textbook held against his hip. He was even more handsome up close, his ruddy cheeks darkened with end-of-the-day stubble, his jeans and white T-shirt looking temptingly soft. J.T. felt his breath escape him. Sometimes beauty was too much to bear.

The boy smiled again, just as brightly as before. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you want to be alone, but I wanted to say hello. I -- I know who you are."

"Oh," J.T. said, disappointed. So it had been only working up the courage to speak to his landlord that had made the boy hesitate. "You must live in one of my buildings. What is it? You want an extension on your rent? Your secret puppy dog was found by the manager and you've come to plead your case? Your heat doesn't work? Though in this weather I'd be more concerned with your air conditioning."

The boy tilted his head ever so slightly. "No. I don't live in one of your buildings. I wasn't aware you owned any buildings. You are John Fogarty, aren't you?" His voice was pleasant and soft, burring a little over the Rs.

"J.T. Fogarty, yes. You're not from around here, are you?" J.T. said.

"I was born here. I lived here when I was small. May I sit with you?" He sat before J.T. could respond, taking his satchel from his shoulder and setting the textbook carefully to the side.

"And now that you're no longer small you're back home." J.T. said, "Studying..." he turned the book so he could see the title, "...law."

"I have family here," the boy said. "I want to set up a practice in my home town. First I have to pass the bar, though."

"Everybody here is family," J.T. said gloomily. "If that's so, we are probably related somehow, but I don't recognize you. So, who are you? Some Bly cousin? A Hoyt? You're not a Fogarty, I know all of them."

The boy was quiet a moment. "You're nothing like what I imagined."

"Get used to disappointment," said J.T., and drank.

"I'm not disappointed. In fact, I think I like it. When I was told I'd find you here I didn't know what to think, but now I'm glad."

"Who told you about me?" J.T. said, frowning. Being known was one thing -- being discussed was something else.

"All will be revealed in time. I find I rather like to keep a secret." The boy smiled, natural and mischievous. "Come out with me for a cigarette."

"I don't smoke," J.T. said, starting to smile back.

"Neither do I," the boy said. He scooted out of the booth and slung his satchel over his shoulder.

J.T. hesitated only a moment before he followed the boy out of the bar, to the alley outside. It had seen plenty of action in its day, even from J.T. more than once, and J.T. knew just the place to push the boy against the bricks and kiss him. The boy laughed against J.T.'s mouth and moved the satchel from behind his back. He gripped J.T.'s hips under his raincoat.

Why he was the chosen one when the boy had sent away men much younger, much more handsome and must less rumpled than himself, J.T. had no idea, but he was not going to spurn this gift just because he didn't understand it. A beautiful man who wanted him didn't come along every happy hour.

And to be perfectly honest, it had been far too long since J.T. had been kissed so unselfishly. He had to return the favor -- and return and return it.

There was a crack of thunder and the sky opened, pelting them with warm summer rain. "Damn it," J.T. muttered and started to move to go inside, but the boy grabbed his collar and pulled him back.

"Don't go. I like it." He gave J.T. a fierce kiss.

"You're an odd boy," J.T. whispered and kissed his neck. "I hate the rain."

"Why?" the boy whispered, letting his head fall back.

"It feels..." He stopped, rubbing his nose along the boy's slender throat. "It feels like despair, when it rains."

The boy held J.T.'s jaw in his palm and kissed him, much more sweetly than the kisses usually given in this alley, and J.T. leaned into him with a sigh. After dozens of rough, fumbling fucks this felt amazing, just to kiss someone, just to kiss this boy's sweet mouth and touch his face. Even the rain felt friendlier than usual, standing here like this.

His cell phone rang, and J.T. groaned with frustration.

"Ignore it," the boy whispered.

"Can't. It's my boss." He pulled away to get his phone out of his inner coat pocket, keeping his arm around the boy's neck. The boy kissed and nuzzled his neck as J.T. flipped open his phone. "Yes."

"You're late," Dilys said in her cool voice.

"I know. Sorry."

"Do you need more time? Is Sophie being stubborn? I would imagine it of her."

"No, I don't need more time. I'll be there in ten minutes." Dilys hung up without saying goodbye, which was usual, and J.T. turned off his phone and put it back. "I have to go."

The boy slanted a look at him, as if he was going to protest, but instead he held J.T.'s face and gave him a kiss that felt closing, but not final. "Go, then. I'll see you again."

"Here?"

"Maybe. It's a small town. Good night, J.T. Fogarty." The boy adjusted his satchel and trotted down the alley, his hands in his pockets, and his head bowed to the rain.

Cursing Dilys' sense of timing, J.T. turned and went the other direction.

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By the time J.T. reached downtown the rain had stopped and a fine mist clung to the street lamps. J.T. parked his car in a public lot and walked the few blocks to a brick three-story building off the central town square, the building where Dilys had her office.

J.T. let himself into the office building and took the stairs to the third floor, where the receptionist asked him to wait and sent him back as soon as she spoke to Dilys. The lady herself was at her desk, on the phone, not a chestnut hair loose from her chignon or a wrinkle in her suit. She gestured to J.T. to take a seat as she continued her conversation.

J.T. sat in one of the slick, leather chairs, looking around as he waited. Dilys had no plants, which always struck him as odd; she claimed they collected dust and she was allergic, but he thought they would give her stark office some much-needed warmth. He never said so, however; theirs was not a relationship where they could get personal.

On the wall of her office was a unique piece of artwork: a family tree of sorts, the tangled branches of Tates, Blys, Howards and Fogartys (with the occasional Dunbar and Hoyt) that made up the family, and the positions every member of note had held: mayors, judges, commissioners, officers, senators, even a governor. Two hundred years' worth of civic duty, and it all came down now to a few remaining children, the next generation now graduating from college or emerging from preparatory positions like arts commissioner or hospital board member.

"Short centerpieces," Dilys was saying. "People should not be forced to have conversations through tall bouquets. It's absurd. I would like white flowers -- rosebuds, lilies, tulips, that sort of thing. Nothing garish." She made a few notes on a small notepad with a slender gold pen, and then glanced at J.T., who was leaning his chin on his hand and trying not to look too bored.

"I must go," she said, "there's family waiting for me. We'll continue this tomorrow. Good night." She hung up the phone and smiled her cool, professional smile at him. "You're wet."

"I got caught in the rain."

"I see," she said, not interested. "Did you speak to her?"

"I did. She called him. It's over."

"Wonderful," Dilys said, calm. Dilys never exclaimed. She made a note on her pad -- not, J.T. hoped, on the same page she'd been making for her caterer. "I knew Philip never should have married that girl. Perhaps after he finishes his term a discreet divorce is in order. I can think of a dozen more suitable girls."

J.T. shifted in his chair. Poor Sophie. "She'll put up a fight."

Dilys looked up at him. "Oh?"

“Sophie loves her husband, despite the affair. She’ll end the affair, but she wants to see him more often. She wants you not to demand so much of his time.”

“How very amusing,” Dilys said, and J.T. sighed. The subject was closed; Philip would do what Dilys said, like everyone else, and Sophie would too whether she wanted to or not. “There’s another reason I asked you here tonight. My nephew Charlie has graduated from Stanford and will be taking the bar later this summer. I’m hosting a party this weekend for him.” Her voice was completely innocent as she said, “You remember Charlie, don’t you? My brother Eric’s boy?”

“Of course I remember,” J.T. said in the most neutral tone he could manage. It was the last name he’d expected to hear: he knew his late cousin’s son had spent the last three years in California, but he’d always hoped Charlie would stay far away from here even after graduation. He’d practically begged Zoe to keep Charlie away the last time they’d spoken. “How is he?”

“No worse for having been raised abroad.” A faint wrinkle of her nose expressed her entire opinion of Eric Tate’s choice of a Scottish wife and her family. “Fortunately, now that he’s done with school he has decided to make his home here, where he belongs. The party,” she added. “It’s Saturday. You’ll get a formal invitation tonight. I expect you to be there.”

“You’re including me on the guest list? I’m not somebody’s plus one?”

“Nonsense, J.T.” Dilys said. “You’re family, even if you are a slightly gray sheep.” The corner of her mouth quirked -- Dilys’ version of a chortle.

“Thank you,” he said drily.

“Of course.” Dilys took out a multi-check checkbook and wrote a check, tore it out and handed it to him. It was a generous amount, even for breaking a woman’s heart.

“Thank you,” he said again and tucked the check in an inner pocket of his raincoat.

“You’re quite welcome. I’ll see you Saturday. Please plan on staying overnight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” J.T. said. He got up and started to leave the office.

“J.T.,” Dilys said and he turned. “Sophie has never fit into the family and certainly isn’t going to start now. Please don’t encourage her in thinking so.”

“Yes, ma’am,” J.T. repeated and left, pausing to smile when the receptionist chirped, “Good night!”

Outside the clouds had parted a little, enough for some pale moonlight to shine through. The streets were black and slick with rain, glistening in the moonlight. J.T. sighed with regret, turned up his collar and went home.

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J.T. lived in an apartment near the center of the city. It was another red-brick building, like most of downtown after a long decade of civic improvements; it had three floors and wonky heating, no matter how well he paid the handyman, and was full of divorced men or kids just starting out. It was a peaceful place, where he didn't have to think about anything more than if there was enough beer in the fridge for the weekend.

J.T. hung up his raincoat on the coat rack, loosened his tie, and put his shoes away in the closet. He dialed a local Indian restaurant and ordered the usual, and wondered which of his DVDs would be worth watching again. He was spared finding the answer, however, when a knock came at his door.

"Allie," he said when he opened it, and his favorite cousin beamed at him and handed him a heavy, creamy envelope.

"Your invitation to Charlie's party," Alexandra Bly said, welcome as ice cream and bright as sunshine, with her smooth red hair and the Tate blue eyes. She was at once Dilys Bly's greatest joy and her greatest frustration, because Allie had no interest in politics. Allie had the genes, the brains and the connections to go to Congress, if she wanted. She'd considered internships and clerkships her senior year of college, but instead of all of that, she'd decided to stay home after graduation and volunteer around the city for a while.

It was noble. It was just like Allie. The night she announced her plans was one of the few times J.T. had seen Dilys lose her temper.

"I've ordered Indian; can you stay?" J.T. said, taking the envelope. He'd look at it later.

"I'd love to stay." Allie came into the apartment, putting her bright pink raincoat on the coat rack over J.T.'s. She toed off her shoes as well and wiggled her toes on the rug. "What are you up to?"

"Just unwinding from the day. Beer?" He went into the kitchen and took down two glasses.

"No, thank you, I'm driving."

"More invitations to deliver?" He chose a can of iced tea for her.

"You're the last." Allie moved to the sofa and curled up in the corner, tucking her legs under her. "I was hoping you'd ask me to stay. But I'll be going back to Westbrook later."

He gave her the glass and sat at the other end of the sofa, stretching out his legs to prop his feet on the ottoman. "Glad to oblige, then, dear. What happened to your hand?"

Allie sipped and flexed her fingers. There was a bandage on her right hand, covering most of her palm. "I was working at Habitat for Humanity this week and missed the saw. Real carpenters say it's not a finished project until you've bled on it, so I guess I've finished. I have stitches and everything. Do you want to see them?"

"No," J.T. said pointedly. "Did your mom freak out?"

“Of course she did.” Allie rolled her eyes. She could be very young. “But I’m fine. It’s only a flesh wound,” she added with a grin, and he had to smile. He’d introduced her to many things Dilys had decreed inappropriate, like surreal British humor, gin and tonics and pool halls. “So you’ll come to the party, right? Mom said she’d call you today about it.”

“I talked to her about it, yeah. I’m not sure I should, though. Charlie will have no idea who I am. He hasn’t seen me since he was five.”

“Charlie will have no idea who most of the people there are,” Allie said. “And everybody knows cousin J.T.”

“The perks of being notorious,” J.T. said, and had another drink.

Allie drank and said, looking eager, “So, what did you do today?”

There was no way he was telling her about Sophie. “I went to the Granby.”

“And what did you do at the Granby?”

“I... met someone,” he admitted, and she giggled.

“Who? What’s his name? Was he nice?”

“A guy, I didn’t get his name, and yes. He was... sweet.” J.T. drank, contemplative. “He was very sweet.”

“And you didn’t get his name.” Allie shook her head. “Oh, J.T. Are you going to see him again?”

“Well, as I mentioned, I didn’t get his name, so I’m not sure how.”

“Easy. You put an ad on Craigslist or the weekly freebie, in the missed connections section. Something like, ‘I met you at the Granby on Tuesday and didn’t get your name, but I want to see you again. Call this number.’”

“What if he doesn’t read Craigslist or the weekly freebie?”

“You’ll never know until you try,” Allie said, and drank more tea. “And you really ought to try, if you liked him. And you liked him, right?”

“Yeah,” J.T. admitted.

“Was he cute?”

“God, yes,” J.T. said and Allie smiled again. “But don’t get your hopes up. I’m old and set in my ways.”

“You’re not old,” she said gently, “and your ways are wonderful.”



“Thanks,” he said, embarrassed, and got up to answer the door when the bell chimed. He took the delivery and tipped the delivery man. “Naan and goat cheese,” he said to Allie and put the bags on the counter.

“You are the only person I know who eats take-out from a plate,” Allie observed as he set about getting plates from the cupboard. “And the only person I know who eats pizza with a knife and fork.”

“There’s no reason not to be civilized.” He spooned rice and goat cheese in sauce onto their plates, and stacked the naan on another plate.

“So, Saturday you can bring your very civilized self to Westbrook and enjoy the party, and stay Saturday night, and we’ll have a lovely brunch on Sunday where you can tell us all to mind our manners and stop living like pigs.” Bringing her glass, she moved from the sofa to the counter and perched on one of the bar stools. “And because it’s you, everyone will listen.” She started to sip her drink, and added, “It’s too bad nobody knows but me what a teddy bear you are. Well, me and the guys you meet at the Granby.”

J.T. put the plate in front of Allie and gave her a warning look, and she smiled even wider. “Cousin J.T., the attack dog with the heart of gold,” he said drily, and sat on the other stool.

“Exactly.” She looked at him, serious now. “Come to the party. I’ll play billiards with you to make it worth your while.”

J.T. chuckled and said, “All right. I’ll come.”

Allie sat up straighter. “I have you wrapped around my finger,” she said smugly, which had been true since she was born.

“Yeah, yeah,” J.T. said, and nudged her foot. She nudged his back, so he nudged her again, and she nudged his hard and started to giggle.

It wasn’t all bad, his life. It had some very lovely moments indeed.

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Twice more during the week J.T. went to the Granby, and while there were handsome boys, none of them were the boy he hoped to see.

He did not place an ad in the weekly freebie or on Craigslist, though he knew Allie would pester him about it sooner or later. But if the boy had decided not to keep in touch with a man twice his age and who was not someone he could bring home to Mother, J.T. could not blame him.

On Saturday, J.T. packed pajamas and a few changes of clothes -- even an informal weekend at Westbrook could require dressing for dinner -- and drove out of town to the Westbrook estate. It was the Tate family seat, solid and rambling, like an English manor from its front drive to the well-ordered back gardens.

Charles Alexander Tate, the patriarch of the family, had built the place to resemble the house he'd left behind, where he'd been nothing more than a servant's son. He'd brought with him his younger brothers, his wife Elizabeth Bly, and her passel of brothers and sisters. The family was prolific enough that there was always at least one marriage between cousins a year, and now it was hard to find a Bly or Tate that didn't have a dozen more Tates and Blys in their ancestry.

When he reached Westbrook, J.T. drove his car to what had once been the stables and parked in a far garage, where he could leave early if he decided it was necessary. Inside, he gave his bag to Dilys' unsmiling butler, Sutherland, and ambled into the conservatory for drinks.

There was a portrait of Charles Alexander and Elizabeth on the wall, both looking like stern pioneers, strong enough to carve a home out of the wilderness. J.T. stopped in front of it, and smiled hello at the cousin who paused at his side. The man nodded and quickly stepped away, finding other company to keep.

J.T. sighed, unsurprised, and sipped his drink. The whiskey burned his throat, exactly as he needed. The family was split on their opinion of him: some saw him as a disgrace, an ugly reminder of how underhanded politics could be. Some saw him as a necessity, the only person (aside from Dilys) who could make problems disappear. They all thought there was nothing he wouldn't do, but he didn't think he was quite that debauched yet.

He suspected Charles Alexander would not approve, nonetheless.

An arm slipped around his waist, and J.T. smiled genuinely and kissed the top of Allie's head. "He gives me the creeps," Allie confided, pretty and glowing in her black velvet party dress. A silver cameo hung from a black satin ribbon around her throat.

"Really?" J.T. looked down at her, then at the portrait. "I've always liked him. Have you ever read the journals?"

"Never," Allie said, shaking her head.

"You should sometime. He was an interesting fellow. Funnier than you'd think, too, for a guy who lived two hundred years ago."

"I'm sure he made a lot of jokes about consumption and scalping," Allie said and took his hand. "I like this one better." She pulled him to another portrait, this one a photograph: it was Eric Tate, Charlie's father, the last golden boy of the family. In the portrait he was twenty-four-years-old, a new father, just starting to realize his powers of inspiration, his eyes bright with hopes and plans. "I wish I could remember him."

J.T. squeezed her hand. "He was wonderful," he said. "He was perfect."

"You still miss him," Allie said, squeezing back.

"Every day. He was my best friend." He tweaked her nose. "Until you."

Allie laughed. "Stop that. Come on, I say it's time you said hello to Charlie." J.T. followed placidly, keeping his hand in hers, as she led him across the room and through the other

cousins, to where a small knot of people stood enthralled to the prodigal son. "Charlie!" Allie commanded, and the man stopped speaking and smiled at them both.

Once, on summer break during college, J.T. had gone camping in Yosemite. He'd woken up one morning before everyone else in his group, and sat outside the tent making coffee while the sun rose. The world had slowly woken up around him, birds singing, trees rustling, as the sky went from gray to pink to gold -- and then suddenly the sun had been up and the sky had been blindingly blue.

Seeing Charlie Tate's face was better than that moment. It was his boy, the boy from the pub, the boy he'd been thinking about and wanting and missing for days. And the way Charlie smiled said he had been thinking and wanting and missing just as much.

J.T. didn't know if he should laugh or cry or sing.

"Charles," Dilys said in her calm voice, "you remember your father's cousin, J.T. Fogarty."

"I remember you," Charlie said, his voice soft as he shook J.T.'s hand. His eyes were the Tate blue and his hair was chestnut like his father's, and J.T. could see the resemblance he'd missed before in Charlie's nose and chin and merry smile. "It's good to see you again. Mr. Fogarty. It's been such a long time."

"J.T.," said J.T. "We're family."

Charlie smiled wider, still shaking his hand. "You were friends with my father."

"It was a long time ago," J.T. said, unable to look away from his sparkling eyes.

"I know, but I still have pictures of the two of you. You had more hair." J.T. chuckled and Charlie added, "I have one, where my father has this beard, and he's patting you on the back of the head, and you're smiling at him, and whenever I miss him I look at that picture."

Dilys cleared her throat delicately, and J.T. remembered there were other people in the room and gently pulled his hand from Charlie's. "I miss him a lot, too."

"Come, Charlie," Dilys said, taking Charlie's elbow, "there are a lot of people you need to meet."

"All right, Aunt Dilys," Charlie said, but gave J.T. another smile as Dilys led him away.

"Wow," Allie said, "I've never seen Mom cut somebody off like that."

J.T. looked around the room, at all these people who were subtly, studiously keeping their distance from him. Cousin Keith had gambling debts; cousin Claudia had borne her husband's partner's baby; cousin Simone was addicted to painkillers; cousin Vincent had a hit-and-run hidden in his past. Even the supposedly good ones had something -- a bribery here, a drunk-driving charge there.

Charlie glowed among them like a star.

“Excuse me,” he said to Allie, who nodded, concerned, and he could feel her eyes on his back as he left the conservatory for the gardens where he could get some air. He walked as fast he could in his dress shoes through the neat box gardens to the lawn, and stopped at the first wrought iron bench he found. He sat and leaned his arms on his knees.

He shouldn’t have come. These people suffocated him; he knew too much about them and they hated him for it, hated him for knowing their secrets. It was better when he was just the guy in the raincoat at the backs of funerals or ducking out of weddings after the I Do’s.

J.T. didn’t look up when he heard footsteps, and thought, just keep walking, just keep walking, but of course they didn’t. They stopped, and Charlie sat on the bench beside him.

“Aren’t there people you should be meeting?” J.T. muttered.

“Was I rude, back there?” Charlie said. “I know Dilys was, but Dilys always is. I thought you’d be used to her.”

“I am used to her,” J.T. muttered.

Charlie leaned back in the seat. “I’m sorry about the pub. I thought if you knew who I was you wouldn’t want me. And I --” He paused and looked at J.T. “I just couldn’t bear that.”

“Why?”

“J.T.,” Charlie said softly, “you’re amazing. And you clean up good, too.”

J.T. chuckled dryly and looked out at the gardens. “So you chose me out of everybody at the bar because you like my face.”

“Not just that.” Charlie paused again. “My mum has pictures of my dad everywhere, back at home,” he said slowly. “Pictures of him doing all those things he’s remembered for, the protests and speeches, and you’re in all of them. Just to the side and back. I’m as familiar with your face as I am with his.”

“So you grew up seeing me, so what?”

“So I’ve wanted to meet you for as long as I can remember,” Charlie said. “I used to ask Mum why we didn’t visit you, and she’d tell me because you lived in another country and were too busy to travel so far.”

“Ouch,” J.T. said.

“I think she was a bit hurt you didn’t try to keep in touch.”

“I have every letter she sent,” J.T. said. “Some even had pictures of you -- this skinny kid in short pants.”

“I grew up meantime,” Charlie said.

“Yes,” J.T. said softly. “I noticed.” They looked at each other and Charlie started to smile. He leaned close and kissed J.T.’s lips carefully, as if he were afraid of going too fast. J.T. held Charlie’s shoulder and, despite the sweetness of Charlie’s lips, pulled away. “Stop. You’re beautiful, but you’re still my best friend’s son.”

“There’s no arguing with that, is there?” Charlie said, the smile gone again.

J.T. removed his hand from Charlie’s shoulder and leaned his arms on his knees again. “I’m afraid not.”

“Are you coming back to the party, at least?”

“I don’t know.” J.T. looked up at the house. “I should remember how much I hate these things before I agree to come.”

“Why do you hate them?” Charlie said with honest confusion in his voice. “I would have thought you’d be the toast of every family party. You were my father’s best friend, and you’re carrying on his work.” J.T. huffed a wry laugh and Charlie said, “Aren’t you?”

“Oh, Charlie,” J.T. said. “Not at all.”

Charlie was quiet a long time. “Oh.”

“Charlie,” J.T. said, “Your father changed my life. He... made me want to be a better person. And his death broke my heart.” Charlie’s hand moved from his side to J.T.’s back, and J.T. smiled, grateful. He said, “I miss him every day, but he wouldn’t know me if he saw me now.”

“No,” Charlie said. “He would. You’re family.”

“And you’re just like him,” J.T. said. “Seeing the best in everyone.”

Charlie looked pleased. “Don’t leave the party yet. At least stay through dinner.”

J.T. nodded to the house. “They’re all afraid of me in there. I know too much about them.”

“Well, you don’t know anything about me, so you can stay and talk to me.” He stood, dusting off his trousers. “I think we have lots to say to each other. At the very least I want you to tell me more about my dad.”

J.T. looked up at Charlie and nodded, feeling slightly less weary than usual. He stood as well and they walked back into the house.

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Allie must have made the seating arrangements, because J.T. was placed between her and one of the younger cousins. While cousin Deanna spoke mostly to the man on her other side (someone’s new boyfriend, J.T. suspected, because J.T. didn’t know him and he made it a point to know everyone), Allie made certain to include J.T. in her conversation.

This was a good reminder not to stare at Charlie, though J.T. found it hard to look away. In this setting, Charlie reminded him so strongly of Eric it was hard not to call him by that name. They spoke the same way (except for the way Scotland had roughed up Charlie's consonants and rounded his vowels), gestured the same way, even laughed the same way. If they'd been in the same room there would have been no mistaking they were father and son.

All those years J.T. had spent trying not to miss Eric, and now with Charlie here it was like losing him all over again. Eric, you'd be so proud of your boy, he thought.

At least he wasn't seated close to Charlie and could keep some perspective. Dilys commanded Charlie's attention, of course; Dilys could never share a spotlight. But Charlie had a way of making the whole table laugh, even when only the head of the table heard what he actually said.

"He's fitting right in," Allie whispered to J.T. and nodded to Charlie. "All the strangers and you'd think he was talking with his best friends."

"He's a natural," J.T. said simply. No doubt Dilys thought so too, with the way she was nodding in approval and looking pleased with herself. J.T. could almost hear her brain ticking away with plans for him, the next golden boy.

When the catering staff had cleared away the plates and they were left with coffee and cake, Dilys stood and tapped her glass with her knife. "Everyone," she said, "everyone," and waited for the talk to die down. "I want to say a few words. Mainly that we are so happy," she smiled down at Charlie, "that our cousin has returned to us. There's nothing as important as family, and we are overjoyed that Charlie is back in the safety of ours. Here's to Charlie," she held up her glass of wine, "and his future."

"To Charlie," said everyone, lifting their glasses, and Charlie looked embarrassed and waved it off.

He stood once everyone had drunk, holding his own glass. "Family," he said. "I've never known how to address the lot of you. Tates and Blys and Howards and Fogartys -- and now I feel like Bilbo Baggins at the last birthday party --" A few people chuckled and the rest looked puzzled at the reference. "Thank you for coming, all of you."

He paused a moment. "My mum's family is much smaller, of course. I lived with Mum and Gran and my uncle Gerald, who had very little to say among all the womenfolk. Dunbar women are just as strong-willed as the Tate variety," he added to chuckles, and he smiled. "Anyway, Uncle Gerald and I were having a good long walk a few days before I left to attend university, and he said something I've thought about a great deal since. He said, 'Charlie, you're only one man, but it only takes one man to make the world a better place.' He believed that. My mum believes that. My father believed that." He looked at J.T., and J.T. looked back as steadily as he could.

"So," Charlie went on, "here's to my uncle Gerald, and to all of you welcoming me home, and to making the world a better place." He drank -- as did the rest of the family, with a confused murmur -- and took his seat again.

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The party broke into smaller groups after that. There was music in the ballroom on the second floor, and billiards and poker in the game room. Small groups of matrons gathered on couches to discuss babies and teenagers and who was looking younger than they should.

J.T. drifted through the house, catching bits and pieces of conversation. He wondered, as he often did, how things would be if he'd just made a different choice, followed a different path -- if they would welcome him, if he'd be innocent and unknowing as the rest of them, or if he'd still have ended up as an outsider among his own people.

He went upstairs to the ballroom and stood near the door, smiling when he saw Allie and Charlie dancing together, Charlie's tie undone and Allie's high-heeled shoes hanging from her fingers. J.T. felt someone lean against his elbow and looked down to see Dilys. She was also watching Charlie and Allie, and she said, not looking at J.T., "Charlie is here to find a wife as well as start his career."

"Tell you this himself, did he?" J.T. said.

"Of course not." Her gaze flicked to him. "But I know what he needs, and he needs a wife."

J.T. smiled to himself, amused that for once Dilys didn't know as much as she thought she did. "I suppose you want me to find a suitable girl."

"No," she said, surprising him. "I know a suitable girl. What I want you to do is divert his attention from anyone else."

"Okay," J.T. said. "Who is it?" Dilys smiled and looked out at the dancing young people, and J.T. said, "Allie? You can't be serious."

"Alexandra will be a perfect wife for him. She's intelligent, charming, and beautiful. They're already friends. They merely need to see each other with new eyes."

"They're cousins," J.T. said. "Not just cousins like how we use it, but actual, we-have-the-same-grandfather cousins."

"Marriage between cousins is not illegal in this state." Dilys was serene. "I've made up my mind, J.T. I expect your help in this. You're not going to let me down, are you? After all I've done for you?"

J.T. stared hard at the dancers, at Allie and Charlie enjoying the movement and the music. "Right."

"It's so good to know I can always rely on you," Dilys said and patted his arm. She left his side and went out to join the dancers, and Allie laughingly gave up Charlie so Dilys could dance with him. She lit up when she saw J.T. and scampered through the other dancers to grab his hand and pull him out onto the floor, too.

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By the time J.T. went to bed, the light rain that had started during supper had become a full thunderstorm. Several others were staying at Westbrook as well: people who lived too far

away to drive home this late at night or had had too much to drink. It took nearly an hour for doors to stop slamming and people to stop running up the hall or down the stairs. J.T. lay in bed for a while, listening to the noise of everyone settling in. Even when the house was quiet except for the storm he didn't fall asleep; worry about Allie and Charlie kept him awake.

Finally he got out of bed, put on a bathrobe, and went to the kitchen. A cup of tea with a slug of brandy sounded perfect. The rambling house wasn't easy to navigate in the dark but he felt his way with his fingers along the wall, trying to remember where the various end tables were before he bumped into them.

The light was on in the kitchen, and he could hear Allie talking as he approached. He smiled at the prospect of company, and then paused when he heard what she was saying.

"I don't know exactly what he does for Mom, but you're not wrong. A lot of the family is afraid of him. But I don't think it means he does anything bad."

"'Bad' is such a broad term." This was Charlie's soft voice.

"I don't think he kills people," Allie said drily. "He just takes care of things."

"I always thought that meant he looks after people," said Charlie.

"He does. I think. And he does other things, too. To be honest, he doesn't talk to me about his work; he talks to me about everything else instead."

J.T. peeked into the kitchen. Allie and Charlie sat at the kitchen island, mugs on the counter in front of them. They were both in pajamas, which made them both look a decade younger than they were. If Dilys saw them now, J.T. thought, she would think her plan was already in progress.

"But do you think he's a good man?" Charlie said, and J.T.'s heart sank at Allie's silence.

Finally she said, "I think he's wonderful. But good? I don't know."

J.T. backed away from the doorway silently and made his way back to his room. He took off his bathrobe and lay on his bed, his hand over his eyes.

Eric had been good -- generous and friendly and deeply dedicated to improving the community. Charlie, no doubt, had expected J.T. to be the same way, if all he knew were the stories Zoe and Allie had told him. But now here was the truth: J.T. was not a public servant, was not like Eric anymore, was not even that good.

Even if he didn't want to sleep with Charlie, J.T. thought gloomily, he'd want Charlie to admire and respect him. There was no chance of that now.

There was a soft knock at his door. J.T. pushed himself up and opened it, hoping it was someone he could send away quickly.



But it was Charlie, who smiled uncertainly and said, “Did I wake you?” J.T. shook his head and stepped aside to let him in. Charlie’s feet were silent on the carpet, and he rubbed his arms, shivering a bit. “Chilly night.”

“You should be used to this kind of weather.”

“I’ve been living in California for the last three years,” Charlie reminded him. “Palo Alto is very mild, especially compared to Burney.” He rubbed his arms again, looking at J.T., and then stepped closer to him and put his hands on J.T.’s face. “Hey,” he said softly.

J.T. closed his eyes and folded his arms around the boy, inhaling the light, soapy scent of him. His skin was cool from wandering around at night, and J.T. held him closer, wanting to warm him. “Hey, Charlie,” he answered, just as softly.

Charlie kissed him, sweetly like he had in the alley, stroking J.T.’s face with his thumbs. J.T. knew he should stop the boy -- Charlie was too young for him -- Charlie was Eric’s son, for God’s sake -- but his mouth was so delicious and his skin so smooth, J.T. couldn’t pull himself away. None of it mattered, not one thing, except getting more of those kisses, tasting more of that skin.

He cringed at the whimper that escaped him when Charlie finally stepped away, and Charlie chuckled and took hold of his hand. He pulled J.T. to the bed and kissed him again, and left him there to open a window. He left the sheers closed, letting in the loamy scent of rain.

J.T. stretched out on the bed and raised his arms over his head, slowly inhaling, and smiled at Charlie as he moved back to the side of the bed. J.T. held out his hand, which Charlie took and held onto as he lay on the bed at J.T.’s side. He leaned his head on J.T.’s shoulder, then propped himself up on his elbow and held J.T.’s face to kiss him again.

J.T. helped him take off his T-shirt; Charlie’s skin was pale and slightly freckled, the muscles in his arms and stomach lightly defined. His hips were slim and his legs were long and he tasted divine under J.T.’s tongue. His hands grasped J.T.’s shoulders and pulled him back for more and deeper kisses.

“Don’t be gentle,” he muttered into J.T.’s mouth, and J.T. groaned. He slid his hands down Charlie’s legs, drawing off his tissue-thin sleep pants, and placed kisses down his throat. Charlie grabbed the pillow behind his head and gasped, the fingers of his other hand thrust deep into J.T.’s hair. He writhed when J.T. bit his neck.

“Shit, sorry,” J.T. muttered. “It’ll bruise.”

“Don’t care, don’t care,” Charlie said, and pushed J.T. onto his back. He yanked on J.T.’s pajamas, laughing with frustration when his trembling fingers couldn’t get the buttons undone. “I feel like a kid again.”

“Oh, you’re not,” J.T. said, and combed his hand through Charlie’s hair. Charlie smiled and turned his head to kiss J.T.’s wrist.

He sat back on his knees. J.T. pushed off his pants and got onto his knees, watching Charlie’s eyes grow dark. Charlie reached for his cock and slid his long fingers down the length,

smiling as J.T. moaned. He took J.T.'s cock in his fist and jacked J.T. with short, tight strokes, his other hand in J.T.'s hair to keep him close enough to kiss.

J.T. held Charlie's hips and licked deep into his mouth, loving the way Charlie's skin heated up under his fingers, and moved his hands down to squeeze Charlie's ass and finger his hole. Charlie groaned and the rhythm of his hand faltered.

"More," he whispered and licked J.T.'s neck, so J.T. wet his finger with his tongue and slowly thrust his finger into Charlie. Charlie shuddered and leaned against him, gasping for breath. He twisted his hand on J.T.'s cock, making J.T. groan. They rocked their hips together, kissing hard, licking at each other's mouths, until Charlie's hand lost all rhythm and he groaned against J.T.'s neck as he came onto J.T.'s belly.

Charlie fell onto his back and clamped his hand over his eyes, breathing hard. "Sorry. I got so excited."

"It's okay," J.T. said, and chuckled when Charlie used his T-shirt to wipe his stomach. He ran his hand through Charlie's hair, and let out a soft sigh as Charlie knelt between his legs and ran his tongue down J.T.'s cock. Charlie licked it luxuriously, stopping sometimes to nip at the skin of his belly or his thighs, while J.T. leaned back on his elbows and watched. The sight of Charlie's full red lips sliding over his shaft, of Charlie's hand stroking him tight and fast, was more than he could bear: he groaned and let his head fall back, his back arching, and then forced his eyes open so he could watch his come paint Charlie's face.

When Charlie moved away he smiled and used his shirt to clean his face, and then crawled up J.T.'s body and tucked himself against J.T. J.T. held him tight and kissed his hair, and pulled a throw over them to keep them warm against the rainy night air.

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Charlie dozed at J.T.'s side, breathing soft and even. J.T. held him with one arm, looking down sometimes to watch him sleep, sometimes just brushing his fingers through Charlie's hair, his own eyes closed. Nothing seemed clear but this: he had not had enough of Charlie Tate, and he suspected he would not any time soon.

He sighed and drew his arm from under Charlie, lay on his back and folded his arm under his head. He smiled when he felt Charlie's hand on his chest.

"Sleep," Charlie murmured. "I can feel you thinking."

"I can't stop thinking. Too worried."

Charlie propped himself up on his elbow. "What are you worried about?"

"You. Allie. The family." J.T. looked at him, loving the shape of his face in the moonlight. "I'm always worried about the family."

Charlie nodded slowly. "We were talking about you earlier, Allie and I."

"I know," J.T. said, since they were being honest. "I heard you. I don't kill people, Charlie."

“I know,” Charlie said. “I always thought you were in politics too, but I guess you’re more of a behind-the-scenes fellow.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “It’s better that way.”

“But you used to be so visible, back in the day,” said Charlie. “What changed?”

J.T. pushed himself upright. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have lying down. “I didn’t want to anymore without your father,” he said quietly. “He made it feel like we were actually making a difference. He made it fun.”

“I have pictures of the two of you chained to a fence,” Charlie said. “A nuclear protest, I think.”

“Yeah, we did a lot of those.”

“And community projects,” Charlie said with growing enthusiasm. “Like planting trees in Tate Park. I’ve got pictures of that, too.”

J.T. smiled at the memory. “Eric wanted to create community gardens,” he said. “Plots people could look after and grow anything they liked. Vegetables or flowers or even fruit trees.”

“It’s too bad that never took off,” Charlie said. “You need some green, even when you live in the city.”

“He wanted to make everything beautiful, your father.” J.T. brushed his fingers through Charlie’s hair. “How’s your mother?” he said finally. “I’m surprised she didn’t come back with you, at least for a weekend.”

“Too many memories,” Charlie said. “I don’t think she ever got over losing my father. I told her I’d met you again, though, when I called her earlier. She sent her love.”

“Tell her I send some back when you talk to her next.”

“I will.” Charlie laid his head on J.T.’s shoulder.

“What’s she up to lately?”

“She keeps busy. She was promoted to DCI last year.”

J.T. shook his head. “DCI?”

“Detective Chief Inspector.” At J.T.’s blank look Charlie laughed. “She’s police. Didn’t you know that? No, I suppose Allie didn’t tell you. She joined the Burney police force soon after we moved to Scotland.”

“It makes sense,” J.T. said. “She always was curious and observant. And law-abiding.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “She’s good at it. She likes it.” They both were quiet, and J.T. shivered a little: the room was getting cold with the window open. Charlie said, “I’ve been looking at pictures of you all my life. You and my dad, you and my mum, you and me, even. Listening to the stories, it’s been like you’ve been there, just always in the next room.”

“It’s been much more complicated than that.”

“I know.” Charlie sighed in frustration. “I’m trying to tell you something, J.T., and I’m not sure how. Is it wrong to feel that somebody you knew as a child is like a film star?”

“Yes,” J.T. said with a small laugh. “I’m not a film star. I’m not anything glamorous. I’m your fifth cousin twice removed or whatever it is, and I’m staring a midlife crisis in the eye.”

Charlie’s expressive face held more than a little mischief. “I always thought the cure for a midlife crisis was to have an affair with someone far too young for you. Or to buy a new car. I’d be happy to go car-shopping with you.”

J.T. sighed. “You’re not looking at this practically. You’re just fascinated with someone who knew your father. Reality is never as good as fantasy.”

“I don’t know about that,” Charlie said. “This reality is just what I hoped for.”

“Stop that,” J.T. muttered.

“I came here to meet you,” Charlie said, so earnest it made J.T. ache. “You’ve been a part of my life all of my life, but you’re still a mystery. I’d ask Allie about you all the time, and she told me everything about you.”

“Allie doesn’t know everything about me.”

“She knows enough. She told me that you work for her mother, she told me the family is afraid of you, she told me you only talk to her and Aunt Dilys, and told me you’re gay--”

“Did you tell her you are?” J.T. said.

Charlie nodded. “Years ago. Allie knows everything about me, too.”

“Then how did Dilys get the idea that you’re here to find a wife?”

“She what?” Charlie laughed dryly. “God, so not interested. She wants you to find me a wife, I suppose.”

J.T. looked at the ceiling. “Close enough.”

“Well, I’ll tell her that’s not going to happen. She’ll understand. I don’t know why everyone is so cautious around her. I don’t find her terrifying in the least.” Charlie paused. “Nor you, J.T.”

“I don’t want anyone to be,” J.T. said. “But you know why the rest of the family is? Because they’ve all got secrets and I know what they are. I know where the bodies are buried. People who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear, but no one quite understands that.”

“No one’s completely innocent,” Charlie said.

“Even you?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m sure you’ll figure me out eventually.” He had long, thick lashes, chestnut like his hair, and the way he looked at J.T. now said he knew how to use them.

J.T. touched his cheek. “Don’t flirt with me.”

“Who’s flirting?” Charlie said, so innocent it could only be flirtation, and J.T. laughed.

“I knew you when you were in Osh Kosh overalls and spoke with a lisp. It’s a little weird for me.”

“You’ll get over it,” Charlie said with certainty. “Look, J.T., I’m not here because of Dilys or the family. I’m here for you. That’s all that matters to me right now.”

“You’re Eric Tate’s son,” J.T. said. “You’re the last male direct descendent of Charles Alexander Tate. Dilys isn’t the only one who’d like to see you take your father’s place.”

“Not interested,” Charlie repeated. “I don’t want to be a politician. I want to be a public defender. I want to make the world a better place.”

“So did your father,” J.T. said. “For your mother, for you. Maybe even for me.”

Charlie said contemplatively, “Did you love my father, J.T.?”

J.T. closed his eyes. “Yes. He was the closest thing I had to a brother.”

“But you never--”

“No. He wasn’t interested in men, for one thing. And he loved your mother. God, how he loved her.”

“I know,” Charlie said softly. “That’s why she’s still mourning him twenty years later.” He took a deep breath. “J.T., I don’t want to be the love of your life, but let me be something -- let me be someone to you.”

“Oh, Charlie,” J.T. sighed and turned to Charlie, wrapping his arms around Charlie again and fitting their bodies together. Charlie rubbed circles on J.T.’s back with his palm and rubbed his cheek against J.T.’s temple. He smelled wonderful, fresh as water. J.T. hesitated, then pressed his palm to Charlie’s chest to feel his heart beat. “Tell me. Does your family, your mother’s family, do they know about you?”

“That I’m gay? They’ve known since I was a teenager. I had a boyfriend at university.”

“Good,” J.T. said quietly, and raised his head to look into Charlie’s face. “I feel like I’m corrupting something innocent by being near you.”

Charlie laughed. “Well, you can stop that. I’m not a child.”

“I know you’re not.” He closed his eyes as Charlie began touching his face with the pads and the backs of his fingers. He pressed his lips to Charlie’s palm, and Charlie slid his hand to cup J.T.’s jaw. “But it’s hard to keep how I remember you separated from how you are now. Oh, the memories I have of you. Like the first time you fell asleep in my arms.” Charlie stopped stroking and looked at him, surprised. “That first summer I was working with your dad. It was the Fourth of July, watching fireworks at Tate Park. You were so tired from parades and barbecues and ice cream socials that you slept through the fireworks. You were heavy,” he added and Charlie smiled. “Your skin was hot. Children are always hot, I don’t know why.”

“I was two and you were nineteen,” Charlie said, “and my parents trusted me with you because you loved them. And now I’m going to trust me with you if you’ll trust you with me. Okay?”

“Okay. I’ll try. I’m not used to this.” At Charlie’s raised eyebrows he said, “People trusting me.”

“Well,” Charlie said simply, “I do.”

J.T. couldn’t answer; he tucked his head against Charlie’s neck and sighed, relaxing for what felt like the first time in twenty years.

Charlie said, “I’m not going to be working this summer, but I am going to be studying for the bar and that’s a full-time job in itself. I want to see you as much as I can, and we’ll just fit it in between me studying and you doing whatever you do for Dilys, and -- and it’ll work.” He nodded to himself.

“Don’t be surprised if you’re kept away from me, Charlie. Dilys’ plans--”

“Anybody who tries to keep me away from you is just going to have to stop.” Charlie looked as fierce as he could with that elf-like face, and J.T. had to smile.

Still, he said seriously, “What if it’s me, Charlie?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if I decide we shouldn’t see each other anymore?”

“You won’t,” Charlie said confidently.

“Really?” He started to smile. “I won’t?”

“You won’t. You like me too much.” He kissed J.T., sliding his hands up J.T.’s chest.

“You’re right about that,” J.T. murmured, moving down the bed so he could lie flat, and he pulled Charlie on top of him. “I like you so, so much.”

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In the morning, the weather cleared enough to make being outside pleasant, so those who didn’t leave right after breakfast went out to swim or play tennis or just walk in the gardens. Allie persuaded J.T. to join them, though she could not convince him to get into the pool no matter how hard she tried. He brought a book instead, and read in the shade while she and various cousins paddled about in the pool.

Charlie was among them, of course, and J.T. often looked up from his book to watch Charlie dive or glide smoothly through the water. Clothed, his body looked slim and boyish; in his brightly-patterned swim trunks his legs looked long and well-shaped, his chest deep, his shoulders broad.

Charlie caught him looking, and J.T. tried to focus on the page again but gave up when he saw Charlie climb out of the pool. This distraction was welcome, at least.

“I know you swim,” Charlie said, plopping down wetly on the lounge chair beside him, and he shook out his wet hair. “I’ve seen pictures.”

“I don’t swim anymore.” J.T. turned a page and tried not to stare at Charlie’s ass as he scrubbed himself dry with a towel.

“That’s too bad,” Charlie said. “I swim all the time. I think I’ll go back in, too.” He stood, scrubbed his hand through J.T.’s hair, and dove back into the water.

J.T. watched him, not looking back at his book until he saw Charlie’s head above the surface of the water again. Allie splashed him and Charlie splashed her back, and J.T. smiled to himself and resumed reading as a water fight went on.

He started when someone put a hand on his shoulder: Dilys, watching the swimmers through her enormous sunglasses. “It brings back memories, doesn’t it, J.T.?” she said.

“Yes, it does.” He refrained from shrugging off her hand.

“It’s burned in my memory, that day. You, Zoe, Eric, the children... it started so joyfully, didn’t it? Who would have guessed we’d be mourning Eric by nightfall?”

J.T. stared hard at the pool. The actual events were fuzzy in his memory -- he’d had too much to drink, and he’d been young enough to indulge without a single thought of consequences, but he could remember everything with ghastly clarity after he hauled Eric’s body out of the pool. Dilys shouting at him, “Do CPR, do CPR!” and Zoe screaming Eric’s name and Eric’s body, heavy, bleeding from the wound on his forehead, no breath left in him.

He said in a hollow voice, “Yes. Who would have guessed?”

Dilys patted his shoulder. “And you’ve done such a good job of setting things to rights over the years. You’ve taken such good care of the family.”

J.T. acknowledged her praise with a nod. When Dilys had cornered him after the funeral, making her accusations in a silky whisper -- "You wanted him for yourself, everyone knows your perversities, you let him die because he wouldn't sleep with you" -- he'd had no way of defending himself. He'd still been reeling from grief and loss, too shocked and depressed to counter her arguments. So he'd simply agreed, yes, yes, it was his fault. He should have known Eric was in no condition to swim, he should have noticed that he didn't come up from the dive quickly enough, he should have known Eric was in trouble much sooner than he did.

"Charlie doesn't know," Dilys said casually. "Of course, no one does but you and I. One has to wonder if he'd smile at you so happily if he knew the truth about you."

J.T. felt his heart knock in his chest. "Dilys," he began, but there was nothing he could say to follow it.

"Don't get in my way, J.T.," Dilys said, smiling at him as if they were discussing the loveliness of the day. Allie called, "Mom!" and waved to her, and Dilys waved back as she said, "If you've got influence over him already that's wonderful, but distract him one inch from my plans, and I will end you."

"Yes, Dilys," J.T. whispered, and closed his book so hide how his hands were shaking.

"Good. I knew I could count on you." She rose and walked to the edge of the pool. "Lunch is in half an hour on the south veranda. I expect you all to be dry and dressed." She walked back up to the house.

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J.T. was packing his clothes when Charlie knocked on his door and popped inside. He was still in his swimsuit, his hair slicked against his skull. "Can we be late to lunch or will Dilys go on a rampage?"

"She'll go on a rampage," J.T. said, folding a shirt.

"Then let's do it fast and dirty," Charlie said as he took hold of J.T.'s hips. J.T. stepped away and Charlie watched him, frowning. "J.T.?"

"I have to get back to the city."

"Right now?"

"Right now." He zipped his bag closed. "And Charlie, we can't see each other again."

"Don't tease me like that," Charlie said. "I'm not going to chase you." J.T. sat in one of the armchairs to put on his shoes and Charlie frowned even more. "You're not teasing. You're serious."

"Completely," J.T. said, standing. "There are things you don't know about me. I prefer they stay that way." He picked up his bag.

"Are they dark, dastardly things?" Charlie said, moving closer to him.



“Very dark.” He looked into Charlie’s eyes, studied his face. This would be as close as they came from now on, he supposed: Charlie would marry Allie and become a politician, just like Dilys wanted, and not have any place in his life for someone who lived in shadows. “Very dastardly.”

“I don’t believe you,” Charlie said, taking J.T.’s face in his hands. “Please stay. Tell me all these dastardly things later.”

J.T. closed his eyes and slowly breathed, and then opened them and stepped away from Charlie. “Stop it. It’s no joke. I’m going home.”

There was another rap at the door and in bounced Allie, dressed for lunch. “Come eat -- oh.” She looked from one of them to the other. “Am I interrupting something?”

“J.T. says he’s leaving,” Charlie said.

“Oh, no, J.T., stay for lunch at least. We still have so much to talk about and now with fewer people around we can actually do it.”

J.T. sighed. One person he could argue with, but the two of them together were impossible. “You’re ganging on up on me, you know,” he said as he put down his bag, and Allie laughed and hugged him.

Charlie went to his room to dress as Allie and J.T. went downstairs to the veranda. “You do like him, don’t you, J.T.?” Allie said.

“Very much, though my approval doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” Allie said. “He’s the only actual cousin I’ve got, no offense meant. Everyone else is just relations, but Charlie -- well, he’s the only one I don’t feel obligated to love, aside from you. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” J.T. said. He added in a careful tone, “So you love him?”

“Since I was a tiny thing,” Allie said. “He’s like having a brother. Somebody who’s known me since I was young and loves me no matter what.”

“Yes, you’re so old and debauched now,” J.T. said, and laughed when she punched him in the arm.

She sat him in the chair beside her, giving a fierce glare to anyone who tried to take the chair on his other side until Charlie came down in jeans and a white button-down shirt. He took the open chair with a smile, and Allie looked pleased with herself.

Lunch was civil. The food was good and the chitchat was light, about movies and grandchildren, until there was a pause in the talk for the rest of the table to hear Dilys say, “Now with Charlie here we’ll start having parties again, like the old days. A Tate son back in Westbrook -- it must be commemorated.”

“Aunt Dilys,” Charlie said, leaning forward so he could talk past J.T., “I can’t attend parties all summer. Studying for the bar will take up all of my time.”

“Surely you can spare a few nights here and there,” Dilys said.

“No,” Charlie said seriously. “I can’t. In fact, I wasn’t planning to even stay at Westbrook. You really should have spoken to me before you started making promises.”

Dilys’ lips grew thin. “Then where are you planning to stay, if you won’t be at Westbrook?”

“I thought I’d get a place in the city, near the university so I can use the law library. I need someplace quiet.”

“Westbrook is quiet. You’ll be able to exercise and eat properly--”

“You have people in and out all day,” Charlie said. “The doorbell’s constantly ringing, the phone is always going -- I can’t concentrate. I need a place where I won’t be interrupted.”

Dilys’ nostrils flared and she was about to speak when Allie said, “I know the perfect place,” and everyone looked at her. “J.T.’s place is near the university,” she said. “He’s gone a lot, so you’ll be alone most of the time, and there are all those great cafes in the square so you won’t have to cook. And he has a spare bedroom.” Her face was utterly innocent when she looked at J.T. “Don’t you, J.T.?”

He gave her an irritated, questioning look. “Yes, but I doubt that’s what Charlie has in mind.”

“That’s exactly what I have in mind,” Charlie said, looking innocent, too. J.T. didn’t believe for a moment they hadn’t plotted this somehow.

“Well, I can hardly say no to that, can I?” J.T. said, and both Charlie and Allie smiled with delight.

“There,” Allie said to Dilys. “All taken care of. He’ll have a quiet place to study and J.T. will look after him. Won’t you, J.T.?”

J.T. tried to telegraph to her that she was in very, very big trouble and he would deal with her later, and said, “Of course I will.”

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After lunch J.T. went back for his bag and took it out to his car. Charlie followed, which didn’t surprise him, and said, “We kind of strong-armed you, didn’t we?” in a nervously jocular tone.

“Yes, but I suppose you could do far worse in finding someone to look after you than me.” J.T. tossed his bag into the back seat of his car.

Charlie leaned his hip against the car. “I think this is the right thing to do, for both of us. You need someone. I can see it in your face. I saw it last night, with the way everyone treated you. You’re alone and you don’t deserve that. You deserve better.”

“I’m not sure what I deserve,” J.T. said quietly, and leaned against the car too, his arms folded over his chest.

Charlie leaned against him, ever so slightly. “If you don’t want me there I understand. I shouldn’t just show up.”

“Well,” J.T. said, “there is a spare bedroom and there’s a bed in there, as well as a desk and a chair. Plenty of room for your books and flashcards and pencils.” He kissed the top of Charlie’s head and looked up at the house. He couldn’t tell if any curtains in the windows facing the garage were open from here. “You don’t know what you may have started, Charlie.”

“I think we’ve started something wonderful.” Charlie straightened up and moved in front of J.T., pinning him to the car with his hands on the roof and their hips pressed together. “I want you. I know you want me, too.”

“Of course I do,” J.T. whispered, and swallowed hard. He put his hands on Charlie’s hips. “But Dilys doesn’t deal well with her plans being upset, even by family.”

“She can’t be that bad, J.T.,” Charlie said. He moved his hands into J.T.’s hair and slowly kissed him. “I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? When will you be home?”

“Call me in the morning,” J.T. said. “We can see what arrangements need to be made then.”

Charlie touched J.T.’s cheeks and then let him go. “It won’t be much. I don’t have much. I’m also small and don’t take up a lot of space.”

“Go on with you,” J.T. said as Charlie started to walk away, and Charlie turned and waved a hand to him.

“Don’t worry! I’ll take care of everything. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

J.T. raised his hand in response and got in to his car when Charlie turned back to the house. He slumped in the driver’s seat and wondered what the hell he’d gotten himself into, and then started the car and drove back into the city.

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J.T.’s sleep was restless, and he was awake when his phone rang, early. He picked it up, expecting Dilys, and said simply, “Yes.”

“Oh -- um, J.T., this is Charlie. Did I wake you?”

“No.” He sat up. “I was awake already.”

“Good. I’m glad. I’ve been awake for hours. Dilys left a pile of ads for flats under my door before she went into town. I think that was her opinion on the situation.”

“I’m sure she’s not the only one.”

Charlie sighed into the phone, irritated. “You know, for how important everyone says family is, nobody seems to like each other very much.”

J.T. chuckled. “It’s more like being stuck together on a long car trip than a supportive network of love and friendship.”

“Yeah.” Charlie was quiet. “Nobody would say a word against it if we were the same age.”

“Or if it were anybody else but me.”

“I hate that,” Charlie said. “It’s hypocritical. You’re family, too, and you’re vital to Dilys. People should respect you.”

“Oh, they respect me, all right. It’s just based more on fear than anything else.”

“Dilys’ attack dog,” said Charlie. “Somebody called you that at the party.”

“A lot of people call me that.”

“But you’re not an attack dog,” Charlie said, his voice warming. “You’re gentle.”

J.T. couldn’t answer that for a moment. “I.. have not been accused of that lately.”

“But you have been accused of it,” Charlie said in an amused tone. “Anyway. Still want me to come over? With all my flashcards and pencils?”

“Bring every last pencil,” J.T. said. “I’ve got the room.” They said their goodbyes and he hung up the phone.

His apartment was tidy already, but he still spent the next hour dusting and straightening, and had coffee going and music playing when the doorbell rang. “Charlie,” he said when he opened the door, and Charlie hugged him before he even stepped inside.

J.T. relaxed in his arms, leaning his head against Charlie’s temple, and then noticed Allie in the hall as she waited and studied the ceiling. He stepped back, embarrassed. “Um. I’m happy to see you both,” he said and moved aside, holding the door open. Charlie picked up his duffel bag and a file box and came into the apartment, and Allie followed him, carrying more file boxes and barely suppressing a smirk.

“No hugs necessary, J.T. I’ll just put these in the spare room.” She went through the living room to the little second bedroom across from the master bedroom. Charlie beamed at J.T. and went along with her. J.T. ran a hand through his hair, and asked himself again what he’d gotten himself into, and then went to the spare bedroom, too.

Charlie was arranging his file boxes beside the desk as Allie bounced on the bed, sandals dangling off her toes. “Nice,” she said with an approving nod.

“It’s small but it’s functional,” J.T. said.

“It’s perfect,” said Charlie, and opened one of his boxes. “Pencils.” He laid a package of wood pencils on the desk, and J.T. had to laugh.

“Okay, I believe you,” J.T. said. “You are actually here to study.”

“Just keep him fed,” said Allie. “He’s too skinny.”

“I was a starving student a mere month ago,” Charlie said, hands on his hips. He looked ten years younger than his age, with his green cargo shorts hanging low on his narrow hips, his blue T-shirt looking about two sizes too big.

“Yes, yes, living on ramen and pizza,” Allie said, waving her hand. “J.T. will keep you fed. He’s very good about that.”

“Thank you, Allie. Is that all you brought?” J.T. said, frowning at the lone duffel bag.

“I only brought what I thought would be necessary,” Charlie said. “I didn’t bring any suits.” He smiled at J.T., one of those private smiles they’d been sharing since Saturday night.

“No,” J.T. agreed softly, “you probably won’t need suits.”

Allie pushed herself off the bed. “My work here is done. See you boys later.”

“Thanks for your help, Allie!” Charlie said, waving, and went back to unpacking his books.

J.T. followed to let her out. “How’s your mother taking this?”

“Like you’d expect,” Allie said, “but she’ll get over it.” She hugged J.T. quickly. “You two take care of each other.”

“I’m sure we will,” J.T. said and let her out.

He went back to the guest room, unsurprised to see that Charlie had pulled off his shirt and folded back the sheets, and even closed the blinds against the bright morning sunlight. “It’s a little warm in here,” Charlie said.

“It’s the eastern exposure. It’s great in winter.”

“Do you have someplace you need to be?” Charlie said as he approached J.T., and he took hold of J.T.’s waist. “Or can you hang out with me for a while?”

“I thought you had to study,” J.T. said as seriously as he could. “I mean, you have all those pencils.”

Charlie started unbuttoning J.T.’s shirt. “See, that’s the thing about pencils. They’re patient. Me, not so much.” He stooped to kiss J.T.’s chest.

J.T. inhaled and his eyes fluttered closed a moment, then he took hold of Charlie’s head and pulled him up. “Hold that thought.” He kissed Charlie’s lips quickly and went to the bathroom, and returned with a small bottle of lubricant and a condom.

“Perfect,” Charlie said with a laugh, and quickly stripped off his cargo shorts. He was nude beneath them and already hard, and J.T. had to grab hold of the bedpost at the sight of him.

“God,” J.T. said softly, “how are you so gorgeous, kid?”

“Good genes,” Charlie said demurely, and stepped into J.T.’s arms to kiss him. He finished unbuttoning J.T.’s shirt and pushed it off, and steered J.T. to the bed, still kissing him. J.T. stroked Charlie’s smooth skin, loving the warmth and vitality in him.

He fell back onto the bed and laughed when Charlie fell onto him, and kissed him, fingers thrust into Charlie’s hair. Charlie hadn’t shaved that morning so J.T. rubbed his face against Charlie’s golden-brown stubble between kisses to his mouth. Charlie stroked him through his trousers as they kissed, until he sat back on his heels and unzipped them, kissing J.T.’s stomach. J.T. lifted his legs to help get his trousers off and ran his hand through Charlie’s hair.

“I can’t remember the last time I had sex in the middle of the day.”

“You should do it more often.” Charlie wrapped his hand around J.T.’s cock and stroked him until J.T.’s legs shook.

“I should,” he gasped in agreement. “You’ll help me with that, right?”

Charlie laughed quietly and whispered, “Oh, yes.” He kept their gazes locked as he licked J.T.’s cock. J.T. brushed his fingers through Charlie’s hair and let his head fall back, breathing deeply as Charlie licked and sucked him. Finally he tugged on Charlie’s hair to raise his head, and Charlie leaned over him, hands planted on the bed. J.T. pulled him down to kiss his mouth, hooking his legs over Charlie’s hips. Charlie thrust their hips together, the back of J.T.’s head cradled in his palm, and J.T. stroked Charlie’s back and lean muscled arms.

J.T. reached down between them and stroked Charlie’s cock, smiling in triumph when Charlie moaned, and coaxed him onto his back so J.T. could kiss his chest and lick down his belly.

It was warm in the little room, and there was already sweat beading on Charlie’s skin. J.T. licked him thoroughly, enchanted with the taste of him, the thickness of his cock, the way his toes curled, and his burr roughened when he moaned, “Oh, lovely, you’re driving me mad.”

“Let me fuck you,” J.T. whispered as he moved up Charlie’s body.

“Oh, yes.” Charlie took J.T.’s face in his hands and pulled him down again for a long, deep kiss. He swallowed hard as J.T. twisted away to find where he’d put the condom, and his hands were shaking as he stroked them over J.T.’s shoulders and watched him roll the condom on.

J.T. squeezed lube onto his fingers and worked them gently into Charlie. He kissed Charlie’s lips and teased his tongue, and Charlie grasped his shoulders and softly keened. J.T. bent and twisted his fingers, his body rocking with eagerness to be inside Charlie, his tongue thrusting into Charlie’s mouth.

Finally Charlie pulled his mouth away. "I'm ready," he whispered and kissed the side of J.T.'s mouth. "I'm ready, don't hold back, I'm ready."

J.T. kissed him and withdrew his fingers. He lined up their hips and pulled one of Charlie's legs over his shoulder, and grasped his cock to guide it into Charlie's tight, sleek ass. Charlie gasped and his fingers dug into J.T.'s shoulders, and his body rocked to meet J.T.'s.

He was slick and hot, this gorgeous boy, and J.T. couldn't stop kissing him: his sweet mouth, his fragrant neck, his pounding heart. Charlie kissed him and stroked his back, reached down to squeeze his ass, caressed his legs with his feet. Whenever their eyes met it was hard to look away; even dark with lust Charlie's eyes were so happy, so lovely.

J.T. pulled out of him and whispered, "Turn over," with a quick kiss to his shoulder, and Charlie obeyed him, trembling. J.T. kissed his spine and pressed into him again, shivering with satisfaction as Charlie moaned. He held Charlie's hips as he thrust, Charlie's body shaking under his hands, until his body snapped and he came, his hips slowing as pleasure washed through his body.

He slumped onto his knees and Charlie twisted under him. He took J.T.'s hand and placed it on his cock, and pulled J.T. to him for more kisses as they both stroked him. Charlie laid a leg over J.T.'s hip and teased him with his tongue, moaning softly against his lips as he came on their hands.

J.T. lay down his head, his hand slowing. It wasn't even noon and he was sleepy again. He ran a fond hand through Charlie's damp hair and Charlie smiled. He tucked his head against J.T.'s neck and laid his hand over J.T.'s chest.

"Yeah," J.T. murmured. "Definitely doing this again."

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"Mum," Charlie said into the phone a few days later, "I'm not at Westbrook. I'm staying with J.T. It's fine." He rolled his eyes at J.T. as he listened. "You can ask him yourself if you like, he's right here." He said to J.T., "Do you want to talk to my mum?"

"What should I say?"

"That it's okay that I'm staying with you."

J.T. gestured for the phone and said when Charlie gave it to him, "Zoe."

"J.T." Her accent was a little stronger than it had been twenty years ago, but her voice was the same, warm and sweet. "Are you taking care of my son?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And how is he?"

J.T. smiled at Charlie, who smiled back. "He's a lovely houseguest."

“Just keep him out of trouble.”

“That’s not hard. He studies, I feed him, we sleep.”

Zoe was quiet a moment. “J.T., there’s no one I trust with him more than you. So promise me. Really promise me, J.T., that you’re looking after him.”

“I promise,” J.T. said softly. “I’m looking after him.” Charlie furrowed his eyebrows, confused, and J.T. smiled to reassure him. “He’s looking after me pretty well, too.”

“That’s no surprise,” Zoe said. “Give the phone back to him, please,” so J.T. gave the phone to Charlie again.

“You’re interrogating again,” Charlie said. He listened, a fond smile on his face, and said, “Yes, Mum. I will, Mum. I love you, too. Talk to you soon.” He hung up and smiled at J.T. “You got off easy.”

“That was easy?”

“Yes.” He poked J.T.’s thigh with this foot. “She approves of you.”

“Would you leave me if she didn’t?” He took hold of Charlie’s foot.

“Probably not.” He leaned back, smiling as J.T. massaged his foot. “Maybe. She’s all I’ve got.”

“You’ve got Allie.”

“Allie hardly needs me. She’s got a lot of her own stuff going on.”

“I suppose so. What did you promise your mum you’d do?”

Charlie gave J.T. one of his mischievous looks. “That I’d look after you. I told you she approves. So it’s a mandate from my mum, not just me returning a favor.”

“Yes, sir,” J.T. said, amused.

Charlie wiggled his toes, looking pleased, and moved his foot from J.T.’s hand. “So, I’ve got you, and you’ve got me, too,” he said as he moved onto his knees, and he took J.T.’s face in his hands to give him a hard, long kiss.

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Their life together went like this.

Charlie studied. He made flashcards and covered pages of his yellow pads with notes; he watched DVDs of lectures; he had J.T. quiz him, or Allie when she came over; his books had so many tiny Post-It notes sticking out they looked like colorful porcupines. J.T. cooked the meals or ordered the take-out, and when Charlie started rubbing his eyes and stretching his



back, J.T. would drag Charlie out of the apartment to see a movie or ride their bikes around the park.

J.T.'s work for Dilys continued as it always had; he made the way smooth for the family, sometimes in the city, sometimes out to the capital for a few days. When he came back from the longer trips Charlie was delighted to see him; he would jump into J.T.'s arms and kiss him, and they often ended up making love on the couch or on the floor.

Charlie rarely slept in the guest bed. It was covered with his books and notes, filed with his own odd organization system. He often fell asleep in J.T.'s bed still dressed, a book open on his chest, though he'd put it aside if he woke when J.T. got in; he'd curl into J.T.'s arms and kiss him a few times before dropping into sleep again.

It was a quiet way to pass the days, but still better than his former life. J.T. had never lived with a lover, hadn't even had a roommate since college, but he loved living with Charlie. If Charlie was watching his DVDs, J.T. would read at his side; if Charlie was studying, J.T. kept his music low and brought Charlie lunch wordlessly, only scrubbing his fingers through Charlie's hair before leaving the room; if Charlie went to the library for a change of scenery, J.T. felt ridiculous for missing him.

It occurred to him he might be in love. It also occurred to him that he just loved having the company. Whatever it was, he was happy.

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One rainy July afternoon Charlie got a package from Scotland. He unwrapped it and laughed with delight. "Look, J.T.! Mum sent my photo albums. Come look at them with me." He moved onto the sofa beside J.T.

"All those years I missed," J.T. said, and leaned on the back of the sofa to look over Charlie's shoulder.

"Some of them," Charlie said as he paged through the album. "These are the pictures I was telling you about, the ones of you and my dad."

"Oh, I haven't seen these for years." His own pictures of Eric and Zoe were packed away. He couldn't bring himself to look at them. "Look at that -- I needed a haircut like crazy." He'd been such a different person then, mop-headed and quick to laugh. Whatever happened to that young man? he thought and couldn't help but sigh.

"You looked fine," Charlie said, and quickly kissed his cheek. "I love this one." The picture was of Eric and J.T. on the steps of city hall, both wearing "Vote No on Proposition 39" T-shirts. J.T. couldn't even remember what they were protesting -- something about reducing green spaces, he thought vaguely -- but the cause hadn't mattered much, they were young and together and making a difference. "You look so happy."

"We were happy." He leaned his head on Charlie's shoulder as Charlie turned the page. "Your dad made everything into a celebration."

"You miss him a lot," Charlie said quietly.

“Every day.” He frowned at he looked down at the page. “Where did you get that one?”

“Mum had them,” Charlie said, frowning too. “What’s wrong?”

It was another joyful picture: the group of them -- Eric and Zoe with Charlie on her knee, J.T., Dilys holding Allie -- by the pool at Westbrook. The children were pointing at the camera and laughing, and the adults were laughing as well -- except for Dilys, who only had a chilly smile beneath her enormous sunglasses and floppy straw hat.

“That’s the day your father died,” J.T. said, and Charlie looked down at the picture again. “I don’t know why she’d give this to you.”

“Mum didn’t exactly give them to me,” Charlie said. “She had them in a box and I took them, years ago.” He touched Eric’s face with his fingertips. “I didn’t know that was when he died. There’s nothing written on the back.”

J.T. drew his arm from behind Charlie’s shoulders and rubbed his forehead. “I suppose you’d have no reason to know.”

“J.T.?” J.T. looked at him, still holding his forehead, and Charlie said, “Tell me what happened.”

“Eric hit his head on the pool wall and drowned,” J.T. said shortly.

“I know, but... no one can tell me how. Mum wasn’t there. She was inside. I can’t ask Dilys: she just tells me not to dwell on unpleasant things. You’re the only one who’ll always tell me the truth.”

“I don’t remember, Charlie. I had too much to drink that night. “

“Are you sure?” Charlie said earnestly. “Are you positive you don’t remember? Have you tried?”

“Of course I’ve tried,” J.T. snapped. “I’ve tried nearly every day since that night to remember some clue, some hint, anything I could have seen or noticed that would have told me Eric was in trouble. But there’s nothing.” He got to his feet and went to the window, staring out at the rain. “It was late,” he said quietly. “Zoe went inside to put you and Allie to bed. Eric and I probably should have gone in, too, but the night was so beautiful and we wanted to have one more drink, wanted to stay out and swim a little longer, and we were having such a good time...”

And Dilys, he remembered, Dilys had been acting so oddly all day. She’d been taking pictures of them, encouraging Eric to put his arms around J.T., saying things like, “The way you two act you’d think you’re in love,” which had only made Zoe laugh.

“They’re like puppies,” Zoe had said, and Eric had called J.T. puppy for the rest of the day.

He swallowed and said, “Eric was messing around on the diving board. He dove in, or fell in. I’m not sure. I applauded, Dilys was telling me something, some story... and then we both

realized Eric hadn't come up yet and it had been a long time. And by the time I hauled him out of the water it was too late."

Charlie was silent behind him. J.T. didn't want to turn around, but he did, breathing slowly as he waited for Charlie's reaction.

Charlie was staring down at the album, his mouth unhappy, his eyes full. "You pulled him out of the water."

"Yes. He was bleeding. He'd hit his head. And -- and I couldn't get him to breathe. I tried pumping his chest but he wouldn't breathe." God, it hurt, after twenty years it still hurt like being stabbed in the heart.

Charlie closed the album. "Okay," he said softly, and put the album back in the box.

"Charlie?" This was just what he was dreading, if Charlie knew the story he'd realize what a mistake he'd made.

"I need to go for a walk," Charlie said, and pulled on his sneakers. J.T. listened to him go, his head against the window, and then raised it when Charlie came back in a mere moment later. "J.T.," he said, his voice choked, and J.T. took Charlie into his arms and held him as he sobbed.

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In bed that night, Charlie was restless. He opened the window to let in the rainy air and lay beside J.T. with his arm over his eyes.

J.T. started stroking Charlie's hair. "Are you okay, kid?"

"Yeah." He was quiet. "No. I don't know."

J.T.'s hand paused. "I could sleep on the couch tonight."

"No," Charlie said, "I'm not going to make you sleep on your own fucking couch. I'm confused, I'm not vindictive."

"Thank you for that."

Charlie was quiet for a few moments more, and J.T. continued stroking his hair. Charlie said, "You know, I never wanted to define myself just as someone whose father died. I wanted to be his legacy. You know?"

"I know."

"He's always been my hero."

"That's the way it should be. He was a good man."

"But he died in such a stupid fucking way."

J.T. wound his fingers through Charlie's hair. "It's not the way you die, kid, it's the way you live."

Charlie chuckled. It sounded a bit damp. "You should embroider that on a pillow."

"The moment I take up sewing, I will." He kissed Charlie's hair and sat up so he could speak to him seriously. "Charlie. No matter what you chose to do with your life, even if you were selling roses by the interstate, you'd still be the best thing Eric Tate ever did."

Charlie laughed again, in that same nearly-weeping kind of way, and turned so he could tuck himself against J.T.'s side. "I think I love you, J.T."

J.T. wrapped his arms around the boy tight. "Let me know when you know for sure."

"I will." He kissed J.T.'s neck. "Meantime I'll just lust after you something awful."

"Yeah, that's okay for now," J.T. said, and kissed him back.

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"How are things progressing with Alexandra and Charlie?" Dilys said, her pen pausing as she wrote out a check.

J.T. shifted in his chair. "They're very good friends."

"They've been very good friends since they were born. They need to be in love. He needs to propose."

"He's really not thinking about that," J.T. said. "He's entirely focused on passing the bar."

"Then why does she keep coming into the city to see him?"

"She helps him study," J.T. said.

Dilys studied him. "Children," she said, and finished writing the check. "I suppose courtship is something you just don't understand. I mean, it's not something you do, is it? You go to bars. You don't even ask for their names, do you?"

J.T.'s smile felt plastered on. "No, I do nothing of the kind."

"If I didn't know better I'd think you were being sarcastic." She handed him the check. "I want them engaged by the time he takes the bar, J.T."

"That's only two more weeks."

"Well, then, you have a deadline."

He decided to try another tack. "Have you ever asked Allie what she thinks about this?"

“Of course not. Alexandra’s a child. She doesn’t know what she wants. It’s a mother’s duty to guide her children to the right choices in life, and Charlie is right for Alexandra.”

J.T. folded the check and put it into his inner jacket pocket. Charlie and Allie were like brother and sister: he’d never felt a rumble between them of interest, romantic or sexual. Of course, he was biased: it wasn’t Allie that made Charlie smile like a sunrise, after all.

At home later, J.T. watched Charlie read and wondered if Dilys ever asked Charlie what he wanted. Did she have any idea he was gay? Would it change her plans if she knew?

He touched Charlie’s foot with his own and waited until Charlie looked up to speak. “Have you ever told your mother about us?”

“About us ‘dating’?” He lowered his voice on the last word and waggled his eyebrows, which made J.T. smile. “Yeah, I told her.”

“Is she okay with it?”

“She’s okay. She thinks you’ll be a good influence on me.”

“Does she really?” J.T. said with a laugh. “What do you think about that?”

“I think if I pass the bar this time around it’s your doing.” He patted his stomach. “Plus all the pancakes and pie.”

“I feed you more than pancakes and pie.” J.T. rubbed their feet together, thinking.

“You’ve got that look again. What are you worrying about now?”

There was no reason not to tell him, he supposed. “What if you got married?”

“Simple. I’m not going to,” Charlie said.

“What if you did? What if you met a girl and--” He shrugged, not sure how to finish that.

“I’m not going to meet a girl. Why would I suddenly fall for a girl when I’ve liked men all my life?” He shut the book and crawled down the length of the couch and to lie at J.T.’s side. “What are you thinking, J.T., hm?”

“Dilys wants you to get married.”

“Dilys is disappointingly heteronormative,” Charlie said and kissed him.

“To Allie.” He looked at Charlie steadily.

Charlie sat back on his heels, frowning. “Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

“Why?”

“It’ll be good for your career.”

Charlie laughed shortly and got off the couch. He went into the kitchen and paced a little, finally going to the fridge to get out bottles of beer, and twisted the caps off both. “My career as a public defender.”

“Your career as whatever Dilys wants you to be. A senator by the time you’re thirty, probably.” He took the bottle when Charlie brought it to him and sipped as he watched Charlie wander about the room like he was too upset to sit.

“I don’t understand this at all. I thought this family had a history of public service out of love, not fear.”

“We do. There’s a great deal of love. Just, Dilys--”

“Dilys, Dilys,” Charlie said. “I’m tired of Dilys. When did she become the puppet master for this family? She runs everything, she runs you, she tries to run Allie, I know she runs everybody else because no one has the courage to stand up to her.” He stopped and frowned at J.T. “Even you. Which I don’t understand at all.”

“We have a history,” J.T. said quietly. “I owe her... loyalty.”

“Why? Because she’s family?” He shook his head and had a pull of his beer. “This is ridiculous. I’m not going to marry Allie. She’s my cousin, for God’s sake.”

J.T. drank and shrugged a shoulder.

“J.T.,” Charlie said quietly, “what has she said to do to me if I don’t marry?”

“What?” He twisted back on the sofa to look at Charlie.

“That’s what you do, isn’t it? Make everyone do what Dilys wants? So what are you going to do with me?”

“Nothing,” J.T. said, sitting up. “I’m not going to do a thing. I want you to be happy.”

“You don’t agree with Dilys? You don’t want me to marry Allie?”

“No,” J.T. said. “I’m selfish. I don’t want to share you. I want you all to myself.”

“Oh, good,” Charlie said quietly and came back to the couch. He knelt and kissed J.T., and J.T. held his waist and gently kissed him back. “I won’t ever ask you to share me.”

“Maybe with your mom,” J.T. said. “That’s allowed.”

“With my mom,” said Charlie as he draped himself over J.T.’s lap. “With Allie in a friendship way. With my clients. With your tenants. But other than that, I’m all yours.”

“I can do that,” J.T. said, and closed his eyes with satisfaction.

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“Charlie, I’m home,” J.T. called as he let himself into the apartment. “I brought Chinese. You like pot stickers, right?” Charlie didn’t call back in response, so J.T. went back to the guest room to see if he was studying there. Sometimes he’d wear ear phones to help him focus. “Are you hungry?”

He stopped in the doorway, shocked wordless to see Charlie packing his books. “Charlie? What’s wrong, kid?”

“Don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me that again.” Charlie sniffed and wiped his face with the side of his hand, and went back to trying to fit six books into a bag made for two.

“Charlie, what’s happened?”

“What’s happened?” Charlie said and threw down the books. “What’s happened? What happened is I went to Dilys to tell her about us, and Dilys told me the truth about that night. She said you let my father die.”

J.T.’s breath felt knocked out of his chest. “Is that what she said?”

“Do you deny it?”

“I told you what I remember. I didn’t see that he was in trouble until it was too late.”

“Dilys said,” said Charlie, stalking to him, “that you knew my father was in trouble far before you said anything about it, and that you wanted him dead because he wouldn’t sleep with you. She said,” Charlie swallowed to steady his voice, “that you were in love with my father, and that you let him drown because if you couldn’t have him, no one would.”

“That’s not true,” J.T. whispered. “That’s not true. I respected how much Eric loved your mother. I would never--”

“Do you deny you loved him?” Charlie demanded.

“Of course not,” J.T. said. “I loved him. I loved him very much. But I never tried to sleep with him. Never.”

Charlie’s lower lip jutted out like a disappointed child’s. “That’s not what Dilys says.”

“Dilys only told you what she wants you to believe. Please, Charlie. I’d never hurt your father, and I’ve lived with the guilt of what happened for the last twenty years. You’ve got to believe me.”

Charlie went back to the bed and shoved the last of his books into his duffel. “I don’t know who to believe.” He picked up his duffel and file boxes, stacked awkwardly under his arms, and carried them out.

“Oh, Charlie,” J.T. said softly, but didn’t try to stop him. What could he say, after all? He didn’t remember what happened that night any better than he’d already told Charlie, and if Charlie chose to believe what Dilys said, there was nothing J.T. could do about it.

He looked out the window and saw Allie’s car on the street. Allie got out, hugged him for a long time, and then helped Charlie put his things in the trunk. They both got in and drove away.

J.T. put the forgotten Chinese food away in his fridge and drove to Dilys’ office. Dilys was still there, and looked up without surprise when he burst in. “Good evening, J.T.,” she said mildly. “I assume you’ve spoken with Charlie.”

“You told him I killed Eric.”

“No,” she corrected, “I told him you didn’t react fast enough to save him.”

“He thinks I let Eric die. How could you say that? How could you tell him such a thing?”

Dilys regarded him, her face impassive as ever. “How?” she said quietly. “I have given you one assignment for this summer, and you have failed me completely. Not only failed me, but betrayed me. Charlie’s lover all summer hasn’t been my daughter. It’s been you.” Her expression grew disdainful. “Disgusting. He’s young enough to be your son.”

“But he isn’t my son. He’s--” J.T. stopped himself. He had no idea what Charlie was: lover, friend, distraction?

“Not for you,” Dilys said. “And you are no longer in my employ, J.T. No one betrays me. Not even you.”

“So you’ll destroy me, finally, after all these years?” J.T. said. “You’re finally making good on all those subtle threats. You’ve been biding your time for how you could wreck me best.”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Dilys said, returning to her papers. “You’re hardly destroyed. You still have your health and relative youth, and all those buildings you buy must be good for something. Worse come to worst you could become a bouncer at a bar.” J.T. turned to leave, and she called after him, “Don’t try to contact Charlie, J.T. He doesn’t want to see you.”

J.T. slammed her office door shut and left, not even stopping to flirt with the receptionist, and went home.

The apartment was lifeless and far too empty without Charlie. J.T. sat on his sofa and wondered what more it would take to break him down or if he should just surrender to the despair now.

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After three days of takeout, ignoring the phone and no showers, J.T. lumbered to answer the door, not caring that he was unshaven and still in his pajamas. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered as the bell rang again and opened the door, and stood there, too dumbfounded to speak, when he saw who it was.



“Hi, J.T.,” Zoe Tate said quietly. Her hair was still as dark and her eyes just as bright, though her face was a little more lined. She was still the girl he remembered, the woman Eric had loved.

“Zoe,” J.T. said. “Oh, my God. Come in, come in.” He stepped back to let her into the apartment. She smiled and came inside, and looked around as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing. “Go on, say it,” J.T. said, going past her to pick up the empty takeout cartons and dump them in the trash.

“Say what?”

“Whatever you’re thinking,” J.T. said. “Something about thirty pieces of silver, I’m sure.”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all,” Zoe said, smiling. “Just that this is a far cry from that little dump you had twenty years ago.”

“I still have the Humphrey Bogart poster,” J.T. said. “It’s in the bathroom now.”

“I would expect no less.” She sat on the couch and leaned back into it, comfortable at once. She looked like she belonged, J.T. thought. As well she should, in the house of a friend.

“When did you get here?”

“Last night. I stayed in a hotel. I haven’t even called Charlie yet.” She crossed her legs and looked at J.T. “Three days ago he called me to tell me he’s coming back to Scotland as soon as he’s taken the bar, though he wouldn’t tell me why. Though I can guess -- I suspect it has something to do with when he told me he’d met you and liked you very much and planned to stay here for a while.”

“Oh,” J.T. said. “Yes. Well. About that. Do you want something to drink?”

“No,” Zoe said. “Just tell me if you’re in love with my son.”

J.T. muttered, “I think I need a drink,” and got some water from the fridge and had a swig. “I like Charlie very much, too.”

“I see.” She was quiet a moment. “After Charlie called me to say he’d be coming home, who should call me but Alexandra Bly. She said he called her in the middle of the day to come get him and take him to Westbrook, because of something Dilys did, or you did, or both. I need to call her, too. Or just go to Westbrook and see what’s going on for myself.”

J.T. looked down at his water. “Dilys told him the truth about what happened the night Eric died.”

He heard Zoe inhale and looked at her. She smiled at him with effort. “And that made him leave you?”

“Yes.”

“I see. So she didn’t tell him the truth.” J.T. narrowed his eyes and she smiled a little more. “She told him some version of it. The problem with Dilys’ version of the truth is that is always close enough to the actual truth that you can’t tell the difference. I remember it well. It’s taken me years, sometimes, to realize I’ve been lied to.”

J.T. said slowly, “I’m not sure what you’re telling me.”

“I’m telling you that you made my son happy, and now he’s unhappy, and I intend to fix it. Go take a shower and get dressed. We’re going to Westbrook.”

“Yes, ma’am,” J.T. said, feeling a flair of hope.

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Dilys’ somber butler Sutherland let them in without so much as a skeptically-arched eyebrow, and showed them to the library. Allie arrived a moment later, and embraced Zoe with a delighted, “Auntie Zoe!”

“Look at you,” Zoe said, patting Allie’s cheek. “The pictures don’t do you justice, darling.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” J.T. stood by awkwardly, uncertain if he should say anything until Allie let go of Zoe and hugged him, too. “I’ve been worried about you,” she said softly, looking into his eyes. “You weren’t answering your phone.”

“I’m all right. Promise. I think I’ll be better after this.”

“I hope so.”

Charlie appeared in the doorway, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He glanced at J.T., and then said, “Mum,” in a pleased voice and crossed the room to hug her and kiss her cheek. “You didn’t need to come out here.”

“I think I did,” Zoe said, smiling at him tenderly. “Dilys is on her way. We all need to talk.”

“Mum,” Charlie said as he shook his head. “There’s nothing to talk about. Dilys told me everything.” He glanced at J.T. again, and then deliberately away.

“You’ll believe me, right?” said Zoe.

“Always.”

“Good boy. Sutherland,” she said to the butler, who was waiting just outside the doorway, “Mr. Fogarty hasn’t had breakfast yet. I would guess Alexandra and Charlie have not yet, either, at this hour.”

“Yes, Mrs. Tate,” he said and faded away.

Zoe and Charlie moved to a sofa to catch up. Allie slipped her hand into J.T.’s. “I was on the verge of getting the manager to unlock the door for me.”

“You wouldn’t have seen anything but me watching soap operas.”

“Considering I was afraid I’d find you dead on the floor, I’d be fine with that.” She looked up at him. “How are you, really?”

“I’m fine,” J.T. said. “I’ll be fine.”

“And him?” she said softly, nodding to Charlie.

J.T. watched him, not looking away when their eyes met. “I have no idea.”

Sutherland came back into the library. “Breakfast is served on the veranda.”

The four of them followed him outside, where a small table was set with Westbrook’s usual opulence: cut crystal glasses, pitchers of orange juice, racks of toast and covered dishes of eggs and bacon, and an enormous silver pot of coffee. They sat, passed platters poured coffee, and they tried to make conversation in a normal way -- which was difficult when two of them could not speak to each other.

They were halfway through the meal when Dilys appeared on the veranda, looking exasperated. “Zoe,” she said, “wonderful. What a surprise. Is this why I was called away from work at ten a.m.?”

Zoe rose from the table, folding her cloth napkin beside her plate. “Dilys,” she said and they kissed the air beside each other’s cheeks. “Do join us.”

Dilys gave a dismissive glance to the table. “How nice, to be invited in my own home.”

“My home,” Zoe said calmly as she took her chair again. “Or rather, Charlie’s, as his father left it to him when he died, but thank you for taking care of it for the last twenty years.”

Charlie stopped buttering his toast. “Mine?”

“Of course,” Zoe said. “You’re a direct descendant of Charles Alexander Tate, and the only son of the only son. This house is your birthright.”

Dilys poured herself a glass of orange juice and sipped. “I was going to tell you when you passed the bar.”

“And when I proposed to Alexandra, I suppose,” said Charlie in a dark tone.

“When you what?” Allie exclaimed.

Dilys sipped her juice again. “I could give you the house as a wedding present.”

“Your mother wants me to marry you,” Charlie said.

“Gross,” Allie said. “You’re like my brother. And he’s gay, Mom.”

“Nonsense,” said Dilys. “He’s merely young.”

“He,” said Charlie, “is right here, and has opinions on all of this, not that anyone is listening.”

“I’m listening,” J.T. said softly, and Charlie smiled the ghost of a smile at him.

“I’ve known Charlie is gay since he was a boy,” said Zoe. “I’m certainly not going to push him into marriage, and not with Allie. No offense, Allie.”

“None taken,” Allie assured her.

“But the point here isn’t the house, or even the bizarre plans you’ve made for my son,” Zoe went on. “The issue is the lie you told Charlie about J.T.”

Dilys leaned back in her chair, still holding her juice. “Indeed.”

“Yes. You know, Dilys, for years I wondered why you were so jealous of Eric and J.T.’s relationship until those last few weeks, but Charlie’s call made it all come clear to me.” Zoe drank some coffee. “You had plans for Eric, like you have plans for everyone else, and when he wouldn’t follow them you decided to punish him.”

Dilys made a scoffing sound and sipped her juice.

“And since you never liked me much anyway,” Zoe said calmly, “you decided to make me leave him. And how did you decide to do that?” She drank her coffee again. “By making me think he was sleeping with J.T.”

J.T. started to protest but fell silent when Zoe shook her head.

Dilys said, “Nonsense,” though her voice was not as steady as it could have been.

“The problem being, of course,” said Zoe, “that Eric loved me, and J.T. loved me, too. So they’d never do anything to hurt me, even if they’d loved each other as anything other than brothers. So it wasn’t working, no matter what kind of hints you dropped or how drunk you got them. And stoned, I think, too. It’s so easy to drop acid into an open beer bottle, and J.T. was -- sorry, sweetheart -- was pretty tweaked that night.”

J.T. looked down at his plate, frowning. That would explain so much about his memory and his confusion about that night.

“And then Eric fell into the swimming pool,” Zoe said softly. She swallowed. “And your plans changed in a heartbeat.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Dilys. “All these accusations.”

“So easy,” said Zoe, “to keep J.T. occupied just long enough to let Eric drown. And so easy to order J.T. to get Eric out of the pool even though he could barely stand. So easy to lay the blame on someone you find disgusting, to ruin his life in ten minutes, and to use his guilt about it to control him until he’s no longer of use to you.”

“You’re still just a grieving widow after twenty years,” Dilys said. “I killed Eric out of jealousy and used J.T. to do it? Is that the best you can do?”

"It gets better," Zoe said. "The officers I spoke to this morning were very interested to hear how your husband died. The similarities are striking."

Dilys drank some juice, her hand shaking.

"Mom," said Allie in a quietly devastated voice. "Is this true?"

"Don't believe a word she says," Dilys ordered.

"But why shouldn't she?" said Charlie, his food untouched. "You're not denying it. You lied to J.T. that night, you lied to me about it, and you'll keep on lying because it gives you control. All of us, we're so wrapped up in your lies we can't even recognize the truth."

Dilys looked at each of them in turn, her mouth tight with anger. "Alexandra, I'm your mother."

"You're evil," Allie said softly.

"J.T. --"

"Oh, no," J.T. said. "You do not want me to testify to your integrity."

"You all forget," Dilys said, "that this family would fall apart without me."

"Yeah, about that," said J.T., catching Zoe's smile as she sipped more coffee. "About those two centuries of public service that this family has done. We never used to have to hide our sins, you know. We used to put the community before ourselves -- even before the family -- until you came along."

"There's blood on your hands, J.T.," Dilys said.

J.T. nodded. "I know. Because I thought I was taking care of the family." He said to Zoe, "Do you think turning myself in will accomplish anything?"

"You can't do that!" Dilys cried, and both Charlie and Allie looked anxious at the prospect.

"I can," J.T. said. "I will, if I decide it's what's best."

"We can talk about that later," said Zoe. "Though I suspect the local authorities would be lenient on you in exchange for your testimony. What do you think they can charge her with: extortion, blackmail, conspiracy? And of course, criminal negligence."

"Just to start with," J.T. said, and Dilys leapt to her feet, shaking with anger.

"You can't do this. I've taken care of this family. I've sacrificed everything!"

Charlie whispered, "Including my father," and reached for J.T.'s hand. J.T. took it gladly and held it tight.

“Charlie,” she said, “whatever you think of me, everything I’ve done has been for the greater good.”

“I wish I could believe that,” Charlie said. “But I don’t. The greater good would have been served better if my father had been alive for the last twenty years. Think of all the good he could have done, the people he would have served. Instead you let him die -- and for what? So you could be the one in control, instead of him?”

“Everybody loved him,” Dilys spat, “because he had a pretty smile and said all the right words. He didn’t understand anything about power. He could have been president if he’d just been willing to make some compromises.”

“But he wasn’t,” Zoe said. “So you killed him.”

“I did what I had to do,” Dilys said. “If you’d been in my shoes you’d have done the same.”

“No,” Zoe said, “because I have a heart, and I wanted my husband to be happy. I didn’t want him to be something he wasn’t.”

Sutherland appeared in the doorway, and there were two uniformed officers behind him. “Mrs. Bly,” Sutherland said, “these gentlemen are here to see you.”

“Alexandra,” Dilys tried one final time. “Tell them -- tell them all the good I’ve done -- tell them how I’ve looked after this family --”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Allie said, tears in her eyes, and she covered her face with her hands as the officers arrested Dilys for the murder of Eric Tate.

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Once Dilys was gone and J.T. promised to come to the station to answer some questions, he went out to the gardens and sat in a lounge chair by the pool. Clouds had started to gather, but for once J.T. wasn’t dreading them: a summer shower would feel refreshing after the heat.

Charlie came out of the house and sat beside him, looking out at the water, too. He said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You did the best you could with the information you had.”

Charlie shook his head. “I should have believed in you. Trust is a big part of a relationship, you know?”

“I know.”

“So, I’m sorry.” Charlie bent and untied his sneakers and took them off. He wiggled his toes on the brick patio.

“You’re forgiven,” J.T. said and leaned his arms on his knees. “Am I?”

“Yes,” Charlie said seriously, looking at him. “Yes.”

J.T. smiled at him and looked out at the pool again.

“What are you going to do now?” Charlie said softly.

“I don’t know, exactly. If I’m arrested I’ll have to make arrangements for the buildings. Do you know anything about real estate?”

“Not a thing,” Charlie said. “Allie does, though. She knows about a lot of things.”

“I’ll have to talk to her about that.”

“And if you’re not arrested?” Charlie said and there was hope in his voice. “If you’re not charged with anything?”

“I don’t know,” J.T. said honestly. He looked up as a cold raindrop fell on his neck. “I thought I might go swimming.”

“Swimming in the rain,” Charlie said, and pulled off his shirt. “I like the sound of that.”

“That wasn’t--” J.T. began but Charlie was already stripping off his clothes, and he looked so amazing, long and slender and delicious, that J.T. leaned back in the lounge chair to appreciate him properly.

Charlie dove into the water, came up a few seconds later, and swam to the edge of the pool to fold his arms over the side. “Well? Are you coming in?”

J.T. got to his feet, took off his clothes, and dove into the water. He swam a few strokes before surfacing, and Charlie laughed and swam to him. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Charlie said, putting his arms around J.T.’s neck. “It’s like riding a bicycle, isn’t it? You never forget how.”

“I haven’t forgotten a thing,” J.T. said and kissed him. “Come on, let’s swim.”

<End>

Queen of Wands

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