



I'LL BE YOUR DRILL, SOLDIER

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Dark Roast Press

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Note to readers: Although this reads like our Army and our war, this is purely fiction. This is set in a world where everyone is treated the same regardless of sexual orientation-- like it should be.

CHAPTER ONE

Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri was hot as hell in the spring and even hotter in the summer, which happened to be the time that Ryan Gracin arrived for basic training. The first thing he realized was he damn sure wasn't in Ohio any more, and secondly, there wasn't a pair of ruby red slippers to get him home either.

Their arrival was a rather low-key affair for the Army. Only two Drill Sergeants met their bus. Ryan was jarred out of peaceful sleep by the gruff no nonsense screams of he who would later be known as Staff Sergeant Robert Beaver.

“GET YOUR PANSY FUCKING ASSES OUT OF THIS BUS, ON THE FUCKING DOUBLE!” roared the voice of the graying Sergeant. “WHAT ARE YOU FUCKING PUSSIES WAITING FOR, A FUCKING ENGRAVED INVITATION?”

The sounds of several recruits saying 'oh shit!' and 'I think I seriously fucked up when I signed up,' could be heard chorusing throughout the bus.

It was mid-day and the heat was oppressive. The sun glared down on the new enlisted men, and most of them were nearly panting. Bags were grabbed, and they all lined up. Ryan took that time to glance at both Drill Sergeants some more. One was an older man, whose hair was turning gray, and he looked like he was at least thirty years older than Ryan's own twenty-two. ‘Beaver’ was proudly announced on the man's name tag, which Ryan found really hilarious for some reason. It wasn't all that surprising that he actually giggled.

For a man that looked to be old...old, he moved like the freaking wind. SSG Beaver was not only in Ryan's face in no time flat, but his rounded hat was inches from Ryan's forehead.

“Oh, look, Drill Sergeant Roach, we have a pretty boy who likes to make jokes. Is there a joke you want to tell the class, pretty boy?” Beaver called to his buddy. “Tell us a joke, funny man.”

Jeff Roach was shorter than Ryan by at least a few inches but when the man stood at his side, Ryan felt honest to God fear. “Hell, son, I love a good joke, tell us a joke.” The voice was so soft, and so smooth. It sounded like the guy really did want to hear a joke.

“Oh wait, I know a great joke, Jeff. Stop me if you heard this before. There once was a man from Nantucket...” Beaver said, still staring at Ryan. “Now, tell me the joke, son. We all love a good joke around here.”

Ryan froze. He could feel a giggle wanting to come out of him. He tried to picture anything that didn't involve the two men in front of him, 'cause he was a giggler when he got nervous. He was the guy at whom everyone glared at funerals because something struck him funny, and he couldn't stop laughing. The giggle threatened even harder when the gray-haired man puffed up.

“I said tell me a fucking joke, unless I'm the fucking joke. Am I the fucking Joke, Private?” Spittle came from the shorter man and landed on Ryan's chin.

That was all it took. One minute he was containing the giggle, and then next he burst into hysterical laughter.

“I'll be fucked; I think he thinks you are the joke, Robert!” Roach exclaimed. “This little fucker thinks you're a joke.”

Ryan paled, even as he laughed even harder. Oh fuck, they were going to kill him, and make it look like a training accident.

“Oh, so I'm the fucking joke? Do you think I'm the fucking joke, Private?” he asked, sincerely looking hurt.

Ryan tried to speak, but those damn nervous giggles kept on coming. He took a deep breath, and managed a brief-- “No, Sir. I don't think you're a joke!”

Jeff let out a breath of disgust. “Oh, so he's fucking lazy too?”

Robert's eyes widened and he suddenly looked like he was ten feet tall. "So, you think I'm not funny. That's what he said, Jeff. He thinks I'm not fucking funny, and I'm fucking lazy. Little bastard."

Ryan blinked. What the...Shit. "You're funny, Sir," he added, hoping to keep the man from having a heart attack.

"So, I AM a fucking joke?" Robert snarled. "Am I, a fucking Staff Fucking Sergeant in the greatest Military in the world, a fucking joke to some fucked up little piss-ant of a pussy?"

What the fuck? Ryan could feel the giggles stop instantly. Now, what was he supposed to say? He would kill his fucking recruiter; they didn't mention that nothing he said would be right. "No, sir, you're not a joke, but you are funny?" Ryan finally answered, praying that was the right thing to say.

"Oh, so now you want to be a funny man? I swear to fucking God, the Army is so hard up, they send us fucking funny men to serve this great nation," SSG Beaver said, shaking his head sadly.

“I would be more pissed at being called lazy than a joke,” Jeff offered.

Robert paused to consider it. “I’ll give him a pass on that one. Seeing how he doesn’t know that officers are called Sir, and I’m a Staff Sergeant, so maybe he doesn’t realize I work for a living.”

And, just like that they both stalked off and started in on a guy named Brendon or Michael. Ryan let out a relieved sigh.

A week later, Ryan finally figured out something. He did not want to be in the United States Army, because it was blatantly obvious that the men that were already in were abso'fucking'lutely crazy. He was quite sure they were perfectly normal before they went in, but something about this job had sent them straight to Lala land. They were finishing with reception, and would be doled out into their new units when they actually went to basic. That

was another fact that his recruiter never told him about. This was supposed to give them a taste of military life. Instead, they stuck them with two men that could have been stand-ins for R. Lee Emery during 'Full Metal Jacket.'

He had met and become fast friends with another guy, who hailed from Oklahoma. Patrick Smith was the cool guy Ryan wished he could be. He took everything in stride. A Drill Sergeant yelled at him. He just said 'yes, Drill Sergeant' and that was that. He didn't giggle like a girl when he was yelled at. He didn't cry like Brendon Murray did when SSG Roach told him that his girl was probably out fucking some guy named Jodi. And he didn't cuss out SSG Beaver, just because he thought he could get away with it, since his daddy was a Major, like Kenneth Roslin did. Later he cried worse than Brendon did when both Drill Sergeants schooled him on Military manners. SSG Beaver and DSG Roach were fucking insane men who thought that yelling and screaming were the only two available forms of communications. On the first day, they went and had all their hair shaved off. SSG Beaver made it a point to tell Ryan he looked like an ass end of a St. Bernard. On the second day, they got their new uniforms, and graduated from fucking pussies to just plain pussies.

It didn't surprise Ryan at all when they were all lined up, in their perfectly pressed uniforms, and told they were going to go see "Big Daddy". Shit you not, they said Big Daddy. Patrick even mouthed the name back at Ryan.

"Alright, boys. Your stay with SSG Beaver and my cozy little home is done. Now, you're heading to the craziest fucking home in the world. Big Daddy has been waiting on you fucks since you first got here. I told him this was the most fucked up platoon in the history of fucked up platoons. He wants to personally make sure you little fuck-wits won't get yourself or some other poor SOB killed."

"I can't wait until Grabowski sees you piss-ants. Hell, I may take a video camera and a bucket of beer. He's gonna love you little pussies right to *death*," Robert Beaver crowed. He put a heavy emphasis on death.

"Hell, I woulda thought they got rid of Grabowski when he killed that other recruit last phase, but I guess when you need the soldiers you keep even the crazy fuckers," Roach intoned.

"I bet he'll make Gracin his new BFF, take him on romantic dinners, and shit."

Ryan had been there long enough to know that being the crazy Drill Sergeant's new BFF was not a good thing. He winced visibly. Yeah, he didn't want to even meet the new Sergeant. When he was able to leave this crazy farm, he would find his recruiter and kill that son of a bitch with all the new fancy killing techniques that Uncle Sam was teaching him.

The cattle truck, and yes, it was a cattle truck, much to Ryan's dismay, seemed to drive to their new home slowly. Every man in the truck looked for all intents and purposes like men heading to their deaths. The ride was difficult under normal circumstances, but now an uneasy quiet descended on each and every boy/man in the thing. The heat was so oppressive that several were taking deep breaths and some looked faint. Even normally calm Patrick's blue gaze was darting back and forth nervously.

Ryan was still mulling over the Drill Sergeant called "Big Daddy" Gas-y something or other. He was fairly sure that the whole killing a recruit thing was just to make them more nervous than they already were. But, of course, it could be true, which made Ryan want to giggle like a mad man. Fuck, he seriously hated the Army.

The cattle car lurched to a stop.

For ten long seconds, nothing happened. They all started looking around expectantly, like they thought someone would just magically appear in their midst. When none did, a few smiles broke out. Maybe reception was the worst of it all. Maybe the actual training wasn't all that bad. Just as that hopeful thought entered their minds it was dashed when they heard the scream.

“GET OUT OF MY FUCKING CATTLE CAR! AND DON'T FUCKING SCRATCH THE PAINT OR I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!”

That was all the motivation they needed to scramble out of the cattle car, past a tall dark-haired man who looked like he was Superman or something.

Another Drill Sergeant started pointing to the places he wanted them to stand, which they weren't doing right, because he dropped everyone and made them do push-ups until half thought they were going to puke, and the other half did.

Finally they managed to get all lined up, alphabetically. Ryan once again cursed his last name. He would much prefer to be in the back behind all of the others. Instead he would have a front row seat for the hell that was Drill Sergeant Phillip Grabowski.

“I am Drill Sergeant King. And this is Drill Sergeant Connelly. And-- we are your new mommy and daddy for the next eight fucking weeks. Now, I know ya'll have heard about Drill Sergeant Grabowski, and he's not as bad as they say,” Drill Sergeant King said with a friendly grin. And that grin was just bad fucking news, according to the scuttle butt Ryan had heard before he left for this god forsaken place.

Drill Sergeant Connelly just laughed evilly. “No, he's much fucking worse.” That seemed to be a cue, because as soon as that was said they heard a door slam, and looked forward to where another man was coming straight for them.

The tallest man Ryan had ever seen walked slowly down the steps of the building directly in front of them. His hair was cut short, and the cadre round bill hat was firmly on. His uniform looked like it was tailored to suit a man his size. The cuffs were neatly folded around bulging muscles that made Ryan want to cry. His boots were so shiny they reflected the sun. He

had to be at least a good three feet taller than Ryan himself. He couldn't get a look at the man's face, but he was sure it would be ugly. It had to be, because the crazy SOB, Sergeant Grabowski wouldn't be handsome. He couldn't be.

“Eyes forward, Gracin. This isn't a nudie show. SSG Grabowski will love knowing how you were eyeballing him though.” Drill Sergeant King snapped Ryan's head forward until he was staring straight ahead.

Fuck. Good fucking way to start a bad fucking day.

Ryan kept his eyes forward, and had to squelch the need to gulp when the mysterious SSG Grabowski strolled by without even pausing to stop. So, far he hadn't said a word. He just walked through the lines.

Ryan could feel his fellow soldiers tensing. Hell; he wanted to run like the wind. The other ones were really loud, but not SSG Grabowski. He just continued his walk like he was taking a leisurely stroll in the park.

Once he went around each and every man, he walked slowly to the front. Unlike Sergeants Connelly and King, he never raised his voice.

“My name is Staff Sergeant Grabowski. Welcome to Charlie 3/10. This will be your new home for the next eight weeks, and it's my job to personally see that each of you are fit, and trained properly.” For a Drill Sergeant, he was remarkably soft-spoken. He didn't yell, or scream. He just spoke like they were all hanging out. “Do not test my patience, because I have none. Is this understood?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!” came the answering cry.

“I can't hear you.”

“YES, DRILL SERGEANT!” This time, it was a battle cry. Each man shouted from their diaphragm.

“Good.” The man began walking again. This time he did stop in front of Ryan.

Ryan kept his green gaze straight forward, not looking at the man, which was not hard, since his eyes were level with the strong chin of the Drill Sergeant.

“Gracin. I’ve heard of you.” Really, the man's voice was nice. It was deep, and had a nice cadence to it. Yeah, Ryan would admit it was kinda gay, but he was gay so he figured that was okay.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant,” he said, trying to keep his military posture as much as possible.

“Private, I would appreciate if you looked at me while I was talking to you,” SSG.

Grabowski said.

That's all the instruction Ryan needed. He finally, actually looked at the man. He felt his breath being stolen from his body. The man was absolutely gorgeous. His face was perfectly shaped, intense hazel eyes met his green ones, and for a moment, Ryan wondered if he was allowed to lust after the man. He felt he could, due to the fact that the Military finally got over the 'Don't ask, don't tell' crap, and allowed gays in the Military.

Drill Sergeant J Phillip Grabowski was fucking sex on a stick. Ryan hadn't felt like this for any guy since David, back in high school. Hell, he hadn't even thought about David like this.

A slow, lazy, dimpled grin formed on the Drill Sergeant's face. One that caused Ryan to smile back.

Ryan actually, was kinda sorry he'd had all those unkind thoughts about the man. He seemed...different than the others they had dealt with so far.

That thought proved to be so fucking wrong, Ryan didn't even want to go into detail how wrong he was. Not only was Grabowski as insane as everyone made him out to be, he was fucking evil as hell.

"Aww, how cute. Look, William, I think Private Gracin has a crush on me," Grabowski called, his eyes never leaving Ryan's. "Do you have a crush on me, Private?"

Ryan's smile froze. Fuck. He could feel a giggle. So, instead of speaking, he shook his head.

"Wrong Private. You will answer me when I ask you a question. So tell me, do you have a crush on me?"

At this point, Ryan knew saying anything would be wrong, but saying nothing would be wrong too. So, he answered. “No, Drill Sergeant Ga...G...Gas...”

His eyebrows rose clear to his hair line. “So, I'm not worthy of being crush material then?” Phillip asked. “Am I that fucking ugly?”

“God, no. I mean no, Drill Sergeant.” Ryan didn't even try to say his name again.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” the other man supplied, and waited for Ryan to say it.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski.”

“Good, now, back to our conversation. So, you *do* have a crush on me? Come on, Gracin, make up your mind.” He growled. “Do you think I'm easy, is that why you're crushing on me?”

Ryan colored, and snapped his eyes straight forward. “No, Drill Sergeant Grabowski, I don't think you're easy.”

“I think he does, Phillip. Hell that would piss me off,” Connelly offered, coming over to stand at Phillip’s side.

“Yup, he thinks you’re a slut, Phillip,” William King added, as if Grabowski needed a reason to hate Ryan even more.

“I’m a slut? Do you think that?” Phillip asked and with that fucking evil ass grin firmly planted on his face. “Am I easy, Private Gracin? Is that what you heard?”

No, as a point of fact, that was not what Ryan had heard. He had heard that Drill Sergeant Grabowski was fucking insane, and he liked to kill the people who pissed him off. “No, Drill Sergeant Grabowski!” he shouted.

“Oh so now I’m a prude. IS that what you think, Private Gracin?”

There comes a point in the whole process where even the strong break. Ryan figured he’s rapidly approaching his. He felt the giggles start. Before he even managed to breathe, he was giggling like crazy...again.

“Oh for fuck sake, get down, Private Gracin; count them off for me,” Phillip demanded.

Ryan fell to the ground and began to do push-ups. He counted loudly between giggles, praying that that would stop the whole scene. He realized two things. One, he just made a 'special' friend out of Drill Sergeant Grabowski, and two, trying to do push-ups while giggling is damn near impossible.

It seemed to work, because Phillip continued down the line. Every time he stopped, whoever happened to earn his wrath ended up pounding his face into the ground. By pounding his face, Ryan meant they ended up doing push-ups. A lot of fucking push-ups.

They day droned on, and everyone realized that all the rumors they heard about Drill Sergeant Grabowski were true. He was a sadistic bastard, whose only true pleasure came when he was trying to kill someone.

The first week of Basic went off without a hitch. Each man got their own special nickname from the three Drill Sergeants. Currently, Ryan answered to three names. Drill Sergeant King's own nickname, 'DSL', an acronym for his 'dick sucking lips'; 'Pretty boy', Drill Sergeant Connelly's own 'special' nickname for him, and fucking Freckles. Phillip's nickname, because of the blonds' smattering of fucking freckles.

They had just come back from dinner, and were sitting in their rooms, bemoaning another day in Hell. Luckily, Ryan ended up in the same room as Patrick, Brendon, and Kenneth. He was thankful for that because they were his close friends. At least, they had the most in common. They were all from somewhere in Ohio, except Patrick, who was from Oklahoma. And, most importantly, they all had come to the realization that the Army was so fucked up, that they all wanted out.

“Dude, I think Grabowski is trying to kill us. I really do. Those rumors weren't really rumors, he's fucking evil,” Brendon whined, as he fell onto his bunk.

Patrick sighed, and leaned against the wall. “I think he has a hard-on for you,” he said, looking at Ryan.

Ryan snarled at that. “Yeah, well I hope he chokes on it. He's the fucking anti-Christ.”

“I prefer the term Boy-King, actually.” The voice came out of nowhere. All four men groaned, and Ryan wondered if he could hide in his footlocker.

“Ten hut!” called Patrick who folded his arms behind his back. His hands rested on top of each other, with his elbows poking out; his feet were a few feet apart.

The other three snapped to the call, and stood in regimented formation.

“Don't let me stop the conversation, Privates. Continue on. I would like to hear it,” Drill Sergeant Grabowski said, as he took a seat on Patrick's bed.

Kenneth blinked, and turned a cautious head toward the Drill Sergeant. He felt the need to explain that he didn't say a damn word, and should be excused. But instead he just snapped his head forward. All thoughts of dropping his daddy's name left him completely.

Brendon looked like he was doing his very best to swallow his tongue and choke so he could die and not have to take part in THAT discussion.

Patrick had found his happy place and refused to look anywhere but straight ahead.

That left Ryan struggling to find something to say that wouldn't get him killed.

“Now, y'all were talkin' just fine, before I came in,” the man on the bed said. “Come on, I wanna hear it.”

Ryan was pretty sure he didn't want to hear it, as much as he wanted to kill them for talking like that about him.

Patrick cleared his throat, and finally broke rank. “Sorry, Drill Sergeant Grabowski. We were just blowing off steam,” he stated.

Ryan thought Patrick had big balls.

“Uh huh, blowing off steam, Gandhi. I get that. So, where were we? I had a hard on for Freckles and he wanted me to choke on it. Right?” Phillip supplied.

“And he said you were the anti-Christ,” Brendon added helpfully.

Ryan thought Brendon had no balls; they were probably sitting on his girlfriend's mantle back at home.

“We went over that. I prefer Boy-King, remember, Furry?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant Grabowski, I forgot,” Brendon responded.

“So, tell me why I'm the anti-Christ, Freckles,” Phillip said pleasantly.

Ryan so did not want to tell the drill anything. He actually didn't want to even breathe in the same room as Drill Sergeant Grabowski, because he knew without a doubt that it would be the wrong way.

“Umm, I thought...I said that because you're...difficult to...work with,” Ryan said, finally. Yeah, he stuttered over his explanation, and it wasn't so much true, as they were the words he managed to put together in a short amount of time.

Phillip rose suddenly and stood directly in front of Ryan. He had his cadre cap off and it struck Ryan how truly beautiful the man was.

“I'm difficult? Of course I am. My job is to train you, and all of your fuck-up friends, to do battle. To safeguard this great nation. My job is to make sure you are ready to face any and all threats, Private. So you won't be a threat to the man next to you. When you leave here, I won't be reading your obituary because you were poorly trained. I'll know I did all within my power to train you correctly. That means making sure you four fuck-ups get with the program. So, you can continue your little conversation, bitch like a girl about how fucking evil I am, but don't forget the training I'm doing is going to save your fucking lives one of these days.” With that said, he did an about face and strolled out of the room.

No one said a word, until Brendon let out a deep breath. “Wow, I thought he was going to go Full Metal Jacket on our asses and kill us.” He stood up straight, and pasted a fierce look on his face. “It's a good thing he left, otherwise I would have so jacked him the fuck up.”

Patrick, blinked, and then laughed. “Yeah, Brendon. We could see how you were going to fuck him up, seriously.”

Kenneth nodded. “Adding the bit about the anti-Christ was just to lull the big guy into thinking you were a kiss ass, so that you could sucker punch him, right?”

“Fuck you all, bitches. I had it under control.” Brendon snarled.

Ryan just stayed quiet and shook.

CHAPTER TWO

“This group is the most ate-the-fuck-up platoon I have ever had the displeasure to train,” Drill Sergeant Connelly told them. “First, how many of you fucking assholes got through kindergarten without the ability to know your left from your right?” he spat out in disgust.

“Apparently, Mark, every fucking one of them,” Phillip intoned dryly. “Even Freckles doesn't know his left from his right and here we had him pegged for a certified genius.”

Drill Sergeant Connelly just snickered.

Ryan was getting used to the extra attention that Drill Sergeant Grabowski was giving him. Getting used to being the key word, because he was sure that the Drill Sergeant was trying to drive him crazy, and it was working.

They were out in the midday sun trying to learn to march. It's like everything else in the Army. Nothing you knew prior to basic was right. The fuckers had to teach each man how to walk, talk and fucking breathe right. Ryan swore if he heard 'your Military left' again he was going postal and kill everything in front of him.

To Ryan it became a game. He wouldn't let Grabowski drive him to quit. So each time the dreaded drill would single him out he would stand tall, eyes straight ahead and take it.

Ryan could take all of the physical stuff, the running, the push-ups, the sit-ups. Hell, Front, Back, Go, was more of a game than anything else. They learned during their first day that Front, back, go was Drill Sergeant Grabowski's favorite punishment. He was extremely fond of letting them do the exercise until 'he was tired' - the bastard never got fucking tired.

“Alright, I’ve dicked around with this enough,” SSG Grabowski said. He rounded on the group and yelled out “HALF RIGHT FACE!”

It was two in the afternoon and they had been on the drill field since noon. Each man was sweating like a pig and all had to suppress a groan.

They executed a short cut to the right and waited for the next order.

“FRONT LEANING REST POSITION, GO!” Grabowski shouted the order, daring anyone to deny him.

Like anyone in the group would tell the nine foot, two hundred pound gorilla ‘no’, Ryan thought sarcastically. He dropped down into the ‘up’ position of a push-up. His body was arrow straight and he was looking straight forward.

“I don’t get it, Privates. We are explaining this like we’re talking to a bunch of five year olds and yet you amazing fuck-ups aren’t getting it. What exactly do we need to do to help you along with this?” Grabowski said. It went without saying that it was a rhetorical question.

“Down.”

This was their call to dip down with the body still straight and head still raised.

“I mean, seriously. What can we do as your instructors to help you with this?” He sounded sincere but Ryan knew it was just another mind-fuck.

Unfortunately, Brendon didn't get the memo because he chose that exact moment to tell Drill Sergeant Grabowski what would help.

“Well, Drill Sergeant Grabowski ...” Brendon started.

“Holy Mary mother of fucking Christ on a stick!” Drill Sergeant Connelly yelled. “Furry, what the fuck do you think you’re fucking doing?” His long stride had him in front of Brendon in seconds. He dropped down and was on his knees, kneeling until he could look Brendon straight in the eyes. “Did you just infer that Drill Sergeant Grabowski was fucking up?”

If they had been somewhere else every single man in the platoon would have killed Brendon. SSG.Grabowski wouldn't have had to lift a finger.

“Down!” Phillip commanded. “Did he say I was fucking up, Mark?”

“I think so.”

“Well, hell! Private Furry, Recover. And ONLY Private Furry,” Grabowski said. “At ease!” he demanded of Brendon, who let all of the tension drain out of his body.

Sgt. Connelly stood behind Brendon who was red-faced and wanting to kill himself, just to save the guys the trouble.

“Since Private Furry has decided that I'm fucking up he will watch the rest of you take my punishment for me. You should all thank Private Furry for pointing out this grave injustice,” Grabowski told the group.

A round of ‘thanks’ and ‘way to go, hero’ were making its way through the soldiers.

“Up!” Grabowski said, as he began to walk through the bodies still on the ground. “If I had *any* idea that I was fucking you up so badly, I would have had Top court martial me. I mean hell, ‘cause if I'm causing the fuck ups, then I should take the responsibility. I'm charged with taking care of you and babysitting your asses. So, anyone else want to tell me how I'm fucking up?” He paused and thought for a moment. “Down.”

“Ahh, I'm not even doing this right. Fuck it,” he said. “BACK!” With that said every single man flipped over to their back and lifted their legs up a few inches from the ground.

There were already a few grunts and groans when they began to kick their feet up and down. Ryan thought flutter kicks sucked ass. They looked deceptively easy to do until you had to keep your BOOTED feet off of the ground a mere few inches and kick them up and down like you were a fucking cheerleader.

“Furry, do you think that I have learned my lesson?” Phillip asked, turning his full hazel-eyed gaze onto the 'resting' man.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” Brendon answered, praying the drill would stop this insanity.

“Fuck that, don't be a weak momma's boy, Furry. I fucked up. Make me suffer sooo good.” Phillip had an evil look in his eye when he reached for his bottle of water. Cracking open the top, he took a long, deep drink.

The fucker was trying to kill them. Ryan wanted a drink of water so badly he was thinking about licking the sweat around his mouth, just to get something wet on his tongue.

“Go!” Phillip called and watched as each of them stood and began to run in place.

“Front!” All of them dropped suddenly, and landed in the up position of the push-up.

As they all looked forward, Phillip took another drink of water, letting it dribble down his chin.

Every single man in the platoon wasn't sure who they hated more - the Drill Sergeant who was mocking them with the ice cold water, or fucking Furry who was standing there all relaxed.

“Back!” The Drill Sergeant wasn't even close to finishing.

What seemed to be hours later, when it had actually only been a few minutes, they were standing in front of their Drill Sergeants, breathing heavily while sweat was running down into their eyes. Ryan cursed his BCG's because the fuckers were fogging up from his overheated breath. BCG stood for Birth Control Glasses because the damn things were so ugly that you

would never get laid wearing the damn things. To top it off, they were damn near impossible to break.

“You have thirty seconds to finish off your canteen, privates!” Connelly shouted, as he and Phillip walked over together. “Fall out!”

Ryan snorted. It wouldn't take him fifteen to finish the fucker off, much less thirty seconds. They all ran to their discarded equipment and grabbed their canteens.

But what Ryan learned was that thirty seconds wasn't long enough to finish a full canteen of water. He had to admit that all three of the Drills were good about making them drink water, and keeping a full canteen, but Ryan was feeling water logged after drinking half the canteen.

“Fall in! Bring your canteens with you.” The command came suddenly as Ryan was just finishing the canteen, allowing more to dribble down his chin.

They jogged back over and stood at attention.

“Water check,” Grabowski said.

Every man lifted his open canteen over his head. Water could be heard splashing onto the hot concrete.

Fuck, just... Ryan sighed and knew he shouldn't have drunk all of his. There was always some idiot who thought they wouldn't check.

“Rosy-Ass, you fuck,” Connelly shouted, racing toward the wet Private. “What did I fucking say? Do you not fucking care?”

“He thinks his daddy will be all over the big bad Drill, Mark. You silly NCO, you,” Grabowski offered.

“Is that it? You think I'm scared of your daddy, Rosy-Ass? Oh fucking hell, no. Your daddy is nothing but a pogue officer that hasn't seen the outside of his office since his daddy spilled his seed into the unfortunate crack of your granny!” Connelly stormed.

Ryan was beginning to sense that every single drill had something to hold against every single one of their parents because that was a standard. He found out through SSG King that

his momma should have swallowed him instead of allowing that damn Gracin guy to knock her up. Speaking of the prick, he was currently headed their way.

As a unit all three Drills set about making their platoon the best damn marching platoon in the land. Around five o'clock they were heading toward the chow hall.

Every single recruit was dead on his feet. They had been going since four o'clock that morning.

The chow hall was cool and Ryan let out a breath of relief. He hated fucking Missouri even more than he hated Grabowski. At that time there was a stir in the line and Ryan looked back. He was seconds from being served his food. But damn if the Drill didn't stop right behind him. He pulled his arms back, folding his hands neatly into his back and yelled the required "AT EASE, MAKE WAY!"

Every time a Drill came within distance the first soldier to see them was to yell 'At ease, make way' so the Drill could move in front of them. Ryan was happy because he had at least four in front of him. That meant SSG Grabowski would move way up ahead of him.

“Aww, Freckles, I knew you cared.” The Drill sneered and then placed himself
BEHIND Ryan.

Ryan decided that God really did hate gays because if he loved gays, the dick behind him
would have gone way up front instead of right behind him.

“So Freckles, how are you enjoying Uncle Sam's hospitality?” Phillip asked, with that
damn fucking mega-watt smile of his out in full force. If Ryan didn't hate the bastard so much
he would totally be hard just from that smile.

This one wasn't a rhetorical question. This one he actually wanted Ryan to answer. “I
like it, Drill Sgt. Grabowski” he said, pleased he wasn't giggling at all.

“That is just fucking outstanding, Freckles. Outfuckingstanding!” Phillip exclaimed.

Somehow the line slowed down to a freaking trickle. So Ryan had enough time to find
out that Phillip, who was a confirmed asshole, smelled like fucking heaven. He smelled like
sunshine and musk. That's when Ryan decided he could most definitely lust after a guy he
couldn't fucking stand.

“Are you going to stand there all fucking day, Freckles? Or are you just staring at the beauty that is me?” Phillip asked. Something flashed across his face but disappeared before Ryan could actually make it out.

Make that Ryan REALLY FUCKING couldn't stand the guy. He actually blushed as he turned forward and grabbed his tray. He was behind Brendon, who was trying like hell to appear like he wasn't listening.

He followed Brendon out to the tables and watched in absolute horror as Brendon walked past their normal table and sat down at the Drills' personal table. There was a 'no talking' rule in the chow hall unless it was the Drills who were doing the talking. So warning Brendon about his HUGE mistake was out of the question. He could see both Kenneth and Patrick staring at their goofy friend in horror too.

“Well, fuck. I told you Furry liked us, guys!” Phillip called, as the other two drills made their way to the table.

“You were right, Phillip,” Mark said as he sat down beside Brendon. Phillip sat down on the other side. “He thinks he's good enough to sit with us now you know, ‘cause he feels he can tell you exactly how much you were fucking up.”

William just smiled and sat down directly across from him. “So how are ya, buddy?” he asked, picking up his roll.

Ryan, Patrick and Kenneth watched, unable to tear their eyes away.

“Dude, I can't look away. Why can't I look away?” Patrick whimpered softly.

“It's a train wreck,” Kenneth answered in a whisper.

They paused in their conversation when Brendon looked around him, and they swore he was going to have a stroke and die right there.

All three of their cadre were eating and joking it up, expecting Brendon to join in. When the guy didn't they started asking different things of him. 'Pass me the salt.' 'Hey, hand me an extra napkin.' Each time Brendon would do so without a freaking word. Ten minutes into their game they seemed to get bored.

“Get the FUCK OUT OF MY SEAT, PRIVATE FUZZY!” Drill Sergeant King yelled. In a flurry of movement, he stood and slammed his fist down on the table. The other two drills just watched, mildly amused.

Brendon was up and out of his seat before anything else could be said.

Ryan, Kenneth and Patrick all looked away and back down at their trays, all three shoving food in left and right.

Brendon had nearly made his getaway when Phillip stood up.

“So, you want me to clean up after you too, Private Murray?” The use of his last name caused cold fear to crawl down Ryan's spine. For Drill Sergeant Grabowski to use a last name, they had already learned, meant he was seriously pissed off.

Brendon froze in his retreat, and turned slowly. “N..N...N..No, D...D.. D...Drill Sergeant G..Ga..Grabowski” he stuttered.

SSG Grabowski grabbed his tray and Brendon's, then walked toward Brendon in a slow steady gait. “Am I put on this planet to pick up after you, Private Murray?”

“N..N. No, Drill Sergeant,” Brendon muttered, standing at attention without being told to.

Grabowski pushed Brendon's tray into the stuttering soldier's arms roughly, causing the glass of milk to spill all over SSG Grabowski 's perfectly-shined shoes.

A pin dropping would have been offensively loud in the silence of the chow hall.

Patrick happened to look over when it happened and the roll he had just bitten into fell out of his mouth. That caused both Ryan and Kenneth to look again. Oh fuck. Ryan could feel himself blushing for Brendon.

“Everyone throw your shit away and get out to formation now,” the Drill Sergeant growled.

For a minute, no one moved. Everyone was too stunned to move.

“I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE RIGHT THE FUCK NOW!” Phillip thundered.

It was the first time any of them had heard the dark-haired cadre yell and it proved terrifying enough that the sound of screeching chairs scooting across the linoleum filled the air. Boots thundered across the floor, but no one said a word. Not one single word was uttered.

Once outside they all lined up in a hasty formation. Brendon came out last. Ryan didn't even want to know what happened when they left but he could see tears on Brendon's cheeks.

"I have been fairly nice." He had? "But, it seems that when I'm fucking nice you take advantage of that. No fucking more. Get the fuck down, Murray," he said, hissing. "Now, you all know that one table is reserved for us. How dare you *allow* him to sit there all alone? Do you not care what happens to your fellow team mates? Is that what you're fucking learning?"

Brendon dropped down into the front leaning rest position.

Everyone kept their eyes straight forward, but some were going red with shame. "Then you fucking gawk when he's in trouble?" he hissed. "Up!"

Brendon lifted his shaking body off the ground.

“Is this what we have to look forward to? Who the fuck cares about the man next to him? Fuck them as long as your ass is safe? Is that what this Military has to look forward to?”

Grabowski 's voice was rising ever so slightly. “Down!”

Ryan blinked and for the first time he saw Phillip for what he was. He was a man training boys how to look out for one another - ones who would live and die for the man next to him. He was in third squad, which included Patrick, Kenneth and normally Brendon. Their squad leader was a guy named Justin Smith , who just stood there not doing anything.

Connelly and King came out and flanked Grabowski, staring at them all with unrelenting disgust.

For the first time in Ryan's life he did something no one expected. He broke ranks and joined Brendon on the ground. Patrick followed closely behind and he was followed by Kenneth. The four of them faced their platoon in a show of support for their battle buddy. No matter how fucked up Brendon was he was theirs, therefore all the punishment he got they would take too.

The three cadres turned as one and watched the battle buddies ready to suffer for each other. A small smile played on Phillip 's face as he commanded them to get up.

“Maybe there's hope,” Phillip said, looking at the others. “The four of you will report to me tomorrow morning for extra PT. You broke rank from a formation,” he said, as he dismissed them to go back into the formation.

That night, all four men lay in their beds thinking about the days' events. Brendon had cried when he got back. Ryan sat on Brendon's bunk and tried to console him but there was nothing doing.

“My father was right, you know. I'm nothing but a fuck-up. He told me when I joined that I'd be nothing more than a big fat loser who couldn't hack it,” Brendon sobbed.

Patrick sighed and looked at the boy. “Well, fuck him too, Brendon. You don't need that shit any more. You got us.”

Somehow in the space of two weeks the four had forged a bond. It wasn't like the bond they had made with their friends in high school. It was deeper, stronger, one that would last the test of time.

Ryan nodded. “I joined in the middle of my sophomore year in college,” he offered. “I finally told my parents I was gay. They didn't take it well and yanked my support. So my choices were to drop out of college and get a job at a fast food joint or join the military and get my degree that way. Here I am.” He said it quietly, waiting for the explosion. When it never came, he was grateful for the friends he had picked.

Kenneth just smiled. “I joined because I'm Major Robert Roslin's son and I fucking hate the old man. I decided instead of being an officer I was going to be an enlisted man and give my father the finger as we march past,” he admitted. “That and I didn't want to hear how I fucking got promoted because of who my daddy was. I know I let y'all think I was all about Daddy, but not really. I don't get why I did that the first day.”

Patrick looked at Kenneth. "You were scared. It's easy to fall back onto the things we know when we're scared."

"What's your story, Patrick?" Brendon asked, quietly.

"It was either stay, kill my father and go to prison, or join the military. I chose the military. Killing in the name of your country is better than killing your father because he was an abusive bastard."

"You're gay, Ryan?" Brendon asked.

"Yeah." He sighed, waiting for Brendon to say something stupid.

"That's cool. At least Kenneth and Patrick won't have to fight with you over the girls. I think you'd win."

Everyone looked at Brendon and then burst into laughter.

"LIGHTS OUT!"

The men sighed and turned out the lights. A few minutes after the lights dimmed soft sobbing could be heard from Brendon's bed. No one said anything but if they were to check the other three men, they would've found their eyes were as wet as Brendon's.

The next morning all four battle buddies went out to the exercise field and met SSG. Phillip Grabowski. He seemed slightly different today. For one, he was dressed in PT clothing and Ryan thought there wasn't another man who filled out the clothing more perfectly. And, two, he was actually grinning.

“So, Gandhi, Rosy-Ass, Furry and Freckles, you showed up. Color me impressed,” Phillip said.

He began to lead them through stretching exercises. Once he figured they were warmed up enough he took them on a short run. It wasn't nearly as bad as Ryan thought it was going to be.

At the end of the run they walked for a bit.

“What you four did was what I wanted the whole platoon to do,” Phillip said, suddenly. “I'm proud of the fact that you four actually realized that the man next to you is dependent on you for their survival.” He stopped, causing all four to stop with him. “Now, head back to the barracks and get dressed. The Platoon will be back in forty-five minutes. Blouse your sleeves today. It's going to be hot as a motherfucker.” With that said he took off back toward the area where the platoon was out and shouting about 'Liking and loving it.'

All four men blinked in surprise, and none of them talked on the way back to their bay.

Everyone was standing in formation when Drill Sergeant Grabowski called them to attention. "Toad, front and center!"

Justin looked around but quickly did as he was told. He stood in front of Phillip and frowned when the Drill called Ryan up with them.

"After last night's piss poor performance and the inability to control your squad you're demoted. Freckles, you're the new squad leader." He ripped off the band around Justin's arm and fastened it onto Ryan's. "Dismissed."

Both men walked back to the formation a little stunned. Ryan didn't want to be squad leader, and Justin was pissed that Ryan was squad leader.

"RIGHT FACE!" Drill Sergeant Grabowski called. The platoon turned as one.
"Forward, MARCH!"

They started on their left and began to march across the quad.

On the second step Phillip began to call the cadence. "*Momma, momma, can't you see what the Army's done to me.*" His voice was powerful. It sent scary chills down Ryan's arms. It

carried way over their formation and into others. Ryan believed that Phillip 's voice was better for calling cadence than any drill Sergeant's voice on the post. He wanted to look around and see what others felt when they heard their senior Drill Sergeant calling the cadence, but didn't.

Instead he just answered back, the way he'd been taught.

“Momma, momma, can't you see what the Army's done to me.” Every voice rose as they echoed the drill's call.

It was a beautiful thing to hear all those voices join as one. It was loud and proud. Their flag was being carried in front, proclaiming all who saw them to be C3/10. They WANTED people to know who they were.

“Momma, momma, can't you see what the Army's done to me,” Phillip repeated. Yeah, Ryan could easily listen to the man call cadences all day long.

“Momma, momma, can't you see what the Army's done to me.”

“They took away my faded jeans. Now I'm wearing Army greens.”

Ryan was seriously starting to question his sanity. He really..*really* wanted to hear that voice whispering extremely dirty things to him.

“They took away my faded jeans. Now I'm wearing Army greens.”

When they got to the chow hall, they were dismissed and filed in, swiping their soft caps off their heads as they entered the building for breakfast.

After morning chow, they were marched to the armory. They were finally getting their M16s. Everyone was giddy about that fact. They had spent the first two weeks in class rooms learning everything under the sun. They learned military protocol, the correct way to tell time and the Army alphabet.

It seemed the Army had a new way to do everything. Ryan had some trouble with the whole twenty-four hour clock but with Patrick's help he had it nailed perfectly. Brendon had a bitch of a time with the ranks but with Ryan's help he caught up. Patrick had problems with the PT test but Brendon and Kenneth had helped him with that. They found they could do damn near anything as long as they all worked together. Even Grabowski complimented them on their teamwork. Justin had dropped out, right after he had been stripped off his squad.

But now they were on their way to pick up their weapons and every man was damn excited about it. When they reached the place, King stopped them and Connelly strolled into the dirty gray building.

He came out with an M16 and stood before them. "This, Privates, is the most important part of your uniform. You'll fucking sleep with it, eat with it and shit with it. It is called your weapon. Not your piece and if I hear any one of you motherfuckers calling it a gun, I'll kick your fucking ass so fast it will make your momma's head swim." He grabbed his crotch and said, "This is my fucking gun." Then he held the M16 up. "This is my motherfucking weapon. Got it?"

Everyone answered in affirmation. They marched single file into the building. As they came out each man had a huge smile on his face. They were gonna get to shoot something!

Ryan carried his M16 out with his cleaning kit and sighed happily. He actually felt like a soldier now. Patrick came out behind him.

“I have a gun! No one would believe this back home.” Patrick laughed. It died on his lips when he heard an unearthly boom.

“GUN?!”

“Fuck.” Patrick's smile fell as he turned slowly. Standing five feet away, Drill Sergeant Connelly looked downright murderous.

“Sorry, Drill Sergeant Connelly. My weapon, I have a weapon.”

That didn't please Connelly, not one bit. His brown round came dangerously close to the top of Patrick's head. “What in the fuck did I say about your fucking weapon?”

“It's a weapon, not my gun, Drill Sergeant Connelly!”

“That's right. Turn and face your platoon!”

Ryan didn't even want to know what was going to happen now.

Drill Sergeant Connelly leaned close to Patrick and Ryan could see Patrick's eyes widen.

He didn't have to wait long to see what Connelly was going to do with Patrick.

Patrick ran back up the steps, and stood right before the entire platoon. He had his M16 in one hand, and his dick in the other. “THIS IS MY WEAPON!” he shouted, holding the M16 up high. “This is my gun!” He took his dick in his hand and shook it in front of them. “This is for killing.” The M16 surged up, again. “And this is for fun!” He shook his cock again. That happened over and over again. Until even Ryan blushed like crazy.

When Drill Sergeant Connelly dismissed Patrick he came running over. “Dude, I damn near masturbated in front of everyone,” he hissed in disgust, face red.

Ryan snickered but didn't say anything.

“Now, we're all men here. I want you to name this beautiful piece of machinery. When I come to you, you better have a fucking name!” King shouted.

Ryan blinked. A name? Holy shit. He thought hard on it. He would call it Phillip, but that was just too fucking weird.

“Bertha,” Kenneth shouted. Fucking Kenneth named his ‘Bertha.’ He couldn't wait to hear Brendon's. King gave Kenneth some shit about it but left quickly.

“Sophia,” Brendon answered. Sophia? Brendon named his fucking weapon ‘Sophia?’

“Furry, you realize that your girl is probably fucking your buddy Jody instead of waiting for her piss-ant boyfriend, right?” King cackled. They had found Brendon's weak spot and all three of them took pleasure in turning it on the blond.

He came up to Patrick and looked at him seriously. “Alright, Gandhi, let me hear it.” Ryan was getting more nervous by the minute. He wasn't sure what the hell he was going to name the fucking thing.

“Terminator,” Patrick replied easily.

“Now, that is an out'fucking'standing name. Gandhi, that's fucking great. I like it!” King didn't stay long with Patrick.

“Well, Freckles, what's it gonna be?”

Ryan froze. He hadn't thought of a name yet. He was panicking. Then it came. “I will call him George,” he blurted out.

King blinked a few times; his mouth opened and shut. Then he looked at Connelly, whose mouth was hanging open. Kenneth wasn't nearly as reserved and burst into laughter, quickly followed by several more guys.

“You will call him ‘George’,” Sergeant King said. “Fucking ‘George?’ Like from Loony Toons?”

Ryan's face turned bright red. “Umm, no, Drill Sergeant King. George. Like...George Patton.” Score one for US History class.

William gave Ryan a skeptical look but moved on. Ryan let out the breath he was holding. Patrick leaned over and whispered in his ear. “From Loony Toons, right?”

“Fuck yes,” Ryan muttered back.

Their first BRM, which stood for Basic Rifle Marksmanship class, was boring as hell.

Ryan was having problems with the whole cleaning thing. He had cleaned his weapon at least five fucking times. Each time, fucking Grabowski swore he saw dirt in the barrel. Ryan didn't see any dirt. Hell, it looked pretty fucking clean to him.

They were sitting outside next to their barracks, trying hard to clean the bitch the way Drill Sergeant Grabowski ordered but so far no one, not even Patrick, had been able to get them clean enough.

Ryan took one last look and walked up slowly toward SSG Grabowski.

Grabowski took one look at Ryan and burst into loud, obnoxious laughter. “Freckles, you think you have it now?” he asked, looking very amused.

That look gave Ryan pause. Whenever the drill looked like that someone was about to get smoked. “Yes, Drill Sergeant Grabowski!” he answered. At least, he hoped it was ready. He had a feeling that it wasn't going to be a pretty scene if it wasn't.

Phillip reached for it and Ryan accidentally let it go too soon. The weapon crashed to the ground. His green eyes widened in horror. Oh shit!

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Ryan could see the storm brewing on Grabowski's face. He was so fucking fucked, that he would go down in history as the most fucked-up fuck in the platoon. Even as he thought it he wanted to snicker. Who knew you could actually use fuck in so many creative ways?

“What in the blue fuck, Private Gracin!” Phillip thundered, rising to his full height. He fucking towered over Ryan, and Ryan was over six feet tall.

“I..” Ryan didn't have anything to say to that. Seriously, not one damn word to say. How exactly do you answer a question like that, especially knowing that you were about to be killed?

“You what? You just realized that you were a fuck up that just dropped his fucking baby on the ground, and hasn't even picked the motherfucker up yet?” Phillip snarled.

His baby? The M16 was his baby? Holy fuck, it was increasingly clear that Grabowski was fucking insane. Ryan watched in horror as the drill picked up the gu..er.. weapon and cradled it like a fucking BABY!!!

“It's okay, tiger. This little fuck won't abuse such a fine piece of United States Army equipment ever again. Drill Sergeant Connelly, watch the rest of the fuck-ups. Private Gracin and I are going to have a little alone time.”

Dread filled Ryan. He was going to have ALONE time with Drill Sergeant Grabowski. And Ryan pretty much doubted that it would be filled with hugs and kisses. The last time Brendon had 'alone' time with Grabowski, the little blond had come back crying and shaking so hard that everyone was worried he was going to have a nervous breakdown.

Patrick and Kenneth were watching. He could see Patrick grimacing and Kenneth whistling. The bastard was probably whistling “Taps.”

He knew it was bad because the Staff Sergeant hadn't handed him his M16 back. God! Grabowski was going to kill him with his own fucking gun.

Ryan trailed after the over sized Drill, mentally making out his will. He would give his socks and underwear to Brendon because the guy was constantly losing his. His deodorant and toiletries would go to Kenneth ‘cause the bastard never smelled right. And to Patrick, his obvious best friend, he would leave his entire stash of M&Ms and other assorted snacks he had managed to hide.

When they were far enough away to satisfy the bastard he turned suddenly. Ryan snapped to 'attention' and stared straight ahead. He was so fucked.

Grabowski practically threw the weapon into Ryan's hands. “Over your head, Private,” he barked.

Ryan lifted the weapon over his head.

“Bench-press the fucker, Gracin. I want you to feel the weight. I want you to realize that this fucking piece of metal and plastic is all that stands between you and death. Every fucking time you drop it you are fucking killing yourself or someone who will be depending on you to protect them,” Grabowski barked. “Count them the fuck off.”

“One!” Ryan yelled, as he pulled the weapon down, and lifted it back up in rapid session. He paused in the up position.

“Freeze!” Grabowski ordered, and walked around Ryan. “Your pretty-boy looks probably had you coasting through life, not realizing that there are things bigger than your fucking ego. Down!”

Phillip was stalking him like a fucking lion going in for the kill. Ryan brought the gun down. “Two!”

“You treat this weapon like it's some bitch! A weapon like this is not a one-night-stand, Gracin. This fucker deserves to be caressed. Kiss it like you mean it, Private!”

Ryan blinked. Did he seriously want him to kiss the fucking weapon? When Phillip glared at him, Ryan decided that he did really want him to kiss it. So, he brought it down to his lips and placed a chaste kiss on the stock.

“Tell me something, Private Gracin, do you ever get fucking laid? If that is how you kiss when you mean it? I seriously doubt it. You're a fucking pussy virgin, aren't you?”

Well, saying it like that, Ryan figured he was. He hadn't ever been with a girl before. So, he WAS a pussy virgin.

“Up!” Phillip moved lethally. Ryan was sure he never saw a man move with as much grace and pure sex in his life. He quickly grabbed the rifle out of Ryan's hands.

“Now, pay attention, Private. This is how you kiss it to mean it.” Phillip leaned in and placed a soft, yet way too fucking arousing kiss on Ryan's M16. Ryan's eyes went wide. “You fucking caress it and love on it, Gracin. You don't drop it on the fucking ground.” He sighed with disgust. “Down!”

Well, to Ryan's way of thinking, if he could get Grabowski to show him that kiss again, he would take real good care of his baby, because the bitch had gotten the one thing Ryan had been dreaming about since he first saw the crazy bastard.

Fifteen minutes later Ryan was dragging his ass behind the Drill, quietly walking back to his spot. Who knew a light weight piece of shit M16 was so fucking heavy after bench pressing the bitch for twenty fucking minutes straight?

“Was it good for you?” Patrick asked, with a smirk.

They were going into their fourth week, and things seemed to get easier. Even the Drill Sergeants were backing off slightly. Ryan still found himself the butt of most of Grabowski's jokes but it wasn't that bad. Hell, he was harboring a huge, fucking crush on the man.

Patrick had been the first to figure it out. He just smiled knowingly at Ryan and didn't say a word.

It was Sunday afternoon and they had a 'day off'. Drill Sergeant King was inside, actually bullshitting with some of the guys. .

Patrick, Ryan, Brendon, and Kenneth had gone outside and sat under a tree.

"Where are you going after basic?" Brendon asked.

"Ft. Knox, I'm 19D Cav Scout," Ryan answered.

"Dude, so am I!" Patrick exclaimed. Both men gave each other smiles.

"What about you?" Ryan asked.

"19D, same as you guys!" Brendon exclaimed.

"91W, Ft. Sam Houston." Kenneth smiled at Brendon. "Dude, we'll need shit when we're out in the desert."

"Ahh, hell, Kenneth is gonna be a medic?" Patrick laughed.

“Hell, yeah, you guys are gonna need someone to patch your asses up when they get shot to hell.”

“Damn, I'm freaking tired. I wonder if they have any idea how much they are killing us?”

Brendon whined.

“It's their sole mission in life. To fucking kill us and have Uncle fucking Sam put us back together,” Patrick answered.

“There is a rumor that Grabowski is gay,” Kenneth said. “That’s why he’s a hardass. He gets off on our sweat.”

“Oh that's bullshit. No way can that man be gay. He takes being a man way too fucking seriously!” Brendon exclaimed. “What does your gaydar say?” he asked Ryan.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Dude, just because a man is gay doesn't mean he wants to be a fucking girl,” he said. He doubted that Grabowski was gay himself but fuck, that would be really cool. He failed to object to the gaydar comment because, well, to be frank, his gaydar sucked.

“Hey, did you guys hear about the Davis Club? It's down the road and open on Sundays.

I heard the Drill Sergeants can't even enter!” Kenneth said.

All four guys turned, and looked at him. No Drill Sergeants? Holy crap. “We have to go,” Brendon said, nodding his head vigorously.

They all decided to risk the wrath of King, just to get into a place where the Drills couldn't go. They used every ounce of knowledge between them to locate a way to sneak out and head straight for the club.

Once inside, all of them grinned.

“This is fucking great!” Brendon yelled, over the music.

“Oh my god, is that a girl? Seriously, dude!” Kenneth hit Patrick hard enough to cause the smaller man to stumble. “Oh, fuck me. That is a girl with TITS!” For five weeks all the guys had been bitching about the lack of military females, or how the females that they did see were fucking scarier than Grabowski, and that was saying a whole helluva lot.

Patrick was staring at a pretty blond, and smiled at her. “Oh yeah, boys, I hate to break this up but I see a blond and she's got my name all over her.” He strolled off, leaving the rest behind. Shortly after that Kenneth walked off to chat up another girl.

Ryan and Brendon both still stood close to the door. “Dude, go dance. I'll be alright,” Ryan coaxed.

“Nah, I've got Sophia back home; she'd be upset. But I'm gonna go grab some drinks, ok?” Brendon said, while they claimed an abandoned table. Ryan sat down and tapped his feet to the music.

He had a feeling someone was staring at him. But he figured it was his over-active imagination.

He decided it was a good time to go to the restroom.

Before he was able to get there, he felt a strong hand reach out and grab him. He found himself against the wall so quickly he didn't have time to make a sound. Then he didn't even think about making a sound when a pair of hard lips slammed on top of his.

In a normal situation, Ryan would have fought against the hold, but there was something vaguely familiar about the hands holding him in place.

A tongue pushed back his lips and dared him to respond. That's all the encouraging he needed. He bucked to life and began to duel the questing tongue for dominance. A hard thigh worked its way between his knees and forced them apart. It seemed like the kiss was never ending but then the lips left his and trailed down to his neck. Sharp teeth stung as they sank into the flesh that connected his shoulder to his neck. Then those lips found his and the kiss started all over again with both men grinding against each other.

Ryan groaned as the hard cock rubbed against his leg. Whoever it was, he was fucking hung. God, but he was..yeah. It was all Ryan could do not to beg his unseen make-out partner to fuck him within an inch of his life.

Ryan moaned into that incredible mouth. That mouth was making him forget everything except the here and now. The kiss was hot, demanding and steady. Heat flushed Ryan's body when his cock gave a jerk. God, to be naked against that thigh. Hands were scouring his body, leaving heat in their wake as they darted all over him. The lips left again and Ryan took a second to find out who the guy was that he was making out with.

He opened passion-heavy eyes and noticed one thing. The lips belonged to none other than Drill Sergeant Grabowski. He fucking froze. The object of his hate and lust was currently nibbling down the side of his neck and Ryan knew this was all sorts of wrong but damned if he would stop it.

He didn't need to.

Drill Sergeant Grabowski jerked away, and growled. "Get your battle buddies and get back to the barracks." With that said he left Ryan standing there, shaking and completely confused. He stumbled away from the wall and shook his head to clear it from the lust-clouds that were threatening him.

He found the guys, told them Grabowski was in the john, and they all ran back to the barracks. Luckily King hadn't been out to check on them.

Later that day Grabowski called a formation.

"From now on "The Davis Club" is completely off limits. If I find you there you will receive an Article Fifteen. Is that clear?" he barked.

When the guys gave him an affirmation he dismissed them to midday chow.

As Ryan chewed on his lips he couldn't quite look at the brooding Drill Sergeant.

CHAPTER THREE

The very next day they went on a road march. Everyone was trying to be manly about it.

Carrying fifty-pound rucksacks and their shiny new M16A1's, they started out.

Ryan kept thoughts of the kiss as far out of his mind as he could. It was a crying fucking shame that Grabowski could kiss that well. It had been the best kiss of Ryan's life. It devoured him, made him want more. He sighed and got back on track.

Patrick looked kinda uncomfortable but didn't say anything. He just nodded and kept pace with everyone else.

They marched for about a mile before Ryan realized that it was getting seriously fucking uncomfortable.

The soft cap was heavy under the steel pot on Ryan's head. When they began to wear the Kevlar it had been cool - for all of twenty seconds, before they realized that the damn things weighed a ton and it was really fucking annoying to have it bobbing up and down on their heads as they double timed anywhere. And people seriously didn't want Ryan to go on about the fucking chin strap. The damn thing either wouldn't snap or would unsnap at the slightest provocation.

“Dude, this metal is like digging in my back,” Brendon whimpered. He fidgeted with the gear that was sticking straight into his back because of being on the bottom.

“Brendon, we have two more miles. If you think I'm going to listen to you pitch a bitch for the next two miles, you're sadly mistaken,” Kenneth grouched. He too was uncomfortable.

“How can this fucking *weapon* feel like it weighs a fucking ton?”

Patrick was walking slowly and sweat was pouring down his face. “My work boots were really dirty...I couldn't wear them. These fucking boots are fucking killing my fucking feet,” he whispered.

Ryan gave Patrick a sympathetic look. One did not want to 'break in' a new pair of boots during a road march.

They were all on separate sides of the road about ten feet apart. While the Drill Sergeants were far away, they bitched to each other like this.

They were completely unprepared for the sudden ‘bang bang’ that went off around them.

Grabowski appeared from nowhere. “Gracin, Smith, Murray, Roslin, you're all dead.

Lay down on the road.”

Ryan blinked and lowered himself onto the road. The rest did the same. He could hear Patrick's groan from where he lay.

“GATHER THEM IN!” the taller man ordered.

All of the soldiers began to file in slowly.

“Alright, so you see these dead guys? They are that way because they were too fucking busy talking and not paying attention to their fucking surroundings. That means they just got themselves killed, along with half of the fucking platoon!” Phillip said. “Brodrick, Trainer, Weatherly, Brody, get your asses over here and pick up their weapons and their rucksacks. This is what happens when you’re fucking around on a real patrol. You get dead and then some other

fuck has to pick up the fucking slack.” Phillip looked down at the four of them and blew out a disgusted breath.

The other four soldiers came and took the extra equipment. The expressions on their four faces were as stormy as hell. They would pay for this one, no doubt.

“Wait for the truck to pick your asses up, fucking assholes. Next time think about the man beside you because they depend on you as much as you depend on your fucking selves.” He stormed and then ordered them all to continue their march.

The four men looked at each other and sighed.

“Fuck.” Patrick snarled and managed to get himself up.

“Well, the metal thing isn't killing me anymore,” Brendon said, trying to make light of the situation they found themselves in.

“Weatherly hates my fucking guts anyways. He's going to put a fucking snake in my ruck, I know it,” Kenneth bitched and picked himself up.

Ryan felt like crying. He hated that Grabowski put them all on the spot. He hated the fact they'd let everyone in the platoon down even more.

The military hummer pulled up and William King got out.

“The fuck-ups are at it again, I see. Get in the fucking hummer,” he growled as they all crawled in the back.

By the time they made it to the range, all four were nervous.

Ryan walked over to Jason Trainer and offered a small smile. “Dude, I’m so sorry.”

“No worries. If Grabowski had walked down to where we were, you guys would have been carrying our stuff.” Jason dismissed it just that easily.

Kenneth and Brendon found out that Weatherly and Brody weren’t so forgiving. Brodrick just shrugged, and handed Patrick his stuff.

Once everything had settled down Drill Sergeant Grabowski stood in front of them and explained what they were doing there. He went through the mechanics of firing. Again.

Ryan was starting to think that he, Grabowski, thought they were all stupid, but everything was like that in the Army. They explained everything over and over again.

“Brody, Gracin, Smith, Roslin, and Murray, you’re up first,” Connelly shouted.

They left their rucksacks on the ground and walked toward the fox holes quietly. Their LBE were tight against their chests. It was the first time they’d had a ‘live fire.’ Yesterday and most of the morning they had been practicing with a washer balanced on the tip of their weapons and a seriously fucked up Nintendo game. King said it was to help teach them all how to pull the trigger without jerking.

They paired off with a Drill Sergeant and Ryan found himself standing behind Grabowski.

Ryan wanted to blush or something. He had tried so hard to forget that little scene in the “Davis Club.”

“What do you do before you jump into the fox hole?”

“Uncover and make sure there are no spiders or snakes,” Ryan said. When the dark-haired man nodded, he did just that.

They heard an unmanly scream and Ryan knew it was Brendon. He was flinging his hands up and down animatedly.

Grabowski ignored it but Ryan was almost giggling. Brendon looked and sounded like a girl.

“Second?”

“Put my earplugs in.” Ryan put them in and looked up at Phillip. The Drill nodded and gestured for him to jump in.

“Load your weapon!” Grabowski shouted.

Ryan knocked the magazine against his Kevlar and then inserted it with a snap.

“The targets will be popping up and down. Do not fire until I give you permission,” he said.

The permission came quickly. The first target popped up at fifty meters. It went down easily under his shot.

The random “pop pop pop” came from each of the fox holes.

They fired the first twenty and then a cease fire was called.

“Get out of the hole and fire from the prone position,” Phillip shouted.

Ryan got out of the hole and slid down to his belly. He used his arms to prop the M16 up and aimed down field.

“Reload!”

Ryan did it again and they fired the last twenty rounds.

“Cease fire.” Phillip shouted. “Drop magazines!” He stood up and then shouted, “Police your rounds!”

They did as they were told and then locked their bolts back to the rear. Before they left the range, Grabowski checked to make sure there were no rounds left in the weapons.

They headed back to the staging area and sat down.

“Murray, why the hell did you scream like a girl?” Kenneth asked.

“There was a fucking snake in my hole. Connelly actually wanted ME to go in and get it.” Brendon shivered and the others laughed. “He got a fucking stick and pulled it out without even saying a word.” There was a sort of weird awe in Brendon's voice when he stated that.

Patrick just smiled. “Now, that's funny.” He snorted, causing the others to chuckle.

“How did you think you did?” Brendon asked them.

“I sucked ass. I had a misfire and didn't get to finish the last fifteen rounds,” Kenneth said, glumly.

“I used to go out shooting with my dad back home. I'm hoping I did well,” Ryan said.

“I think I shot the shit out of the close targets, but completely missed out on the 200 meters and above,” said Brendon.

Patrick just shrugged. "I think I did well."

They could hear the "pop pop pop" from the next group and lapsed into a comfortable silence.

After they all fired, King stood up and announced the scores.

"Brody - 25, Gracin - 17, Roslin - 15 Murry - 30, and outfuckingstanding, Smith - 40 - a perfect performance!" King even shot Patrick a grin.

The Oklahoma native grinned broadly, his blue eyes dancing. "Thank you, Drill Sergeant!"

Ryan congratulated his friend and then pouted because it seemed that all that shooting he had done with his dad was useless.

“It's time to indoctrinate you on the fine military cuisine called the MREs,” King said, with a grin. Three boxes were carried out and placed in front of the formation. “You will walk up to the box in a single file line and take the first one you see. If I see any of you being a bitch and picking what you want I will pull your ass out of the line and make you watch as everyone else eats their chow.”

After everyone grabbed one of the plastic covered meals they all sat around. Surprisingly, all three of their Drill Sergeants joined them.

Ryan read off what he had from the stamp in front of it. “Tuna a la King? I got Tuna fucking a la King? Seriously?”

Brendon guffawed.

“Freckles, that is the food of the Gods,” Phillip said, a small joking smile on his face. “If you don't want it we can always put it back. You don't mind waiting until dinner at the chow hall, right?”

“No problems with the tuna for me, Drill Sergeant,” Ryan quickly said. If he didn't eat soon he was sure he would kill Murray and eat his spleen. Even thinking that caused him to pause. Well, shit, Grabowski *was* driving him crazy.

“Dude! I got pork,” Brendon said happily. He began to open it, and found it was a lot easier said than done. After two minutes of fighting with the plastic he got pissed. He finally felt the plastic give. His pork steak went flying through the air and landed neatly on the ground.

“Ouch! That sucks.” Kenneth laughed. He had his cheese opened and was spreading it across the hard cracker.

Brendon blinked and proceeded to pick up the pork and wiped off any dirt, sloshed it under water from his canteen and then ate it.

“I think this stuff was around when my grandfather was in the Army,” Patrick said, looking at a substance that resembled spaghetti. He took a small bite and grimaced. “Or maybe pre-civil war era.”

“You boys don't know how easy you got it,” King said. “You have heaters. When I joined we ate this fine food cold.” The other two Sergeants nodded in agreement.

Brendon let out a squeal and held up his treasure. “Holy shit! I have M & M's!”

Every man in the platoon turned and glared at the blond.

“I hate you,” Ryan muttered, thinking now would be a great time to cut out Brendon's spleen and steal the fucking M & Ms. He looked in his back and found the charms hard candy. They were like Jolly Ranchers only not as good.

Kenneth finally opened his entrée and gagged. “What *is* it?” He held it open so the others could examine it.

“A hair ball?” Ryan guessed.

“Dog vomit,” Patrick said.

Phillip leaned over and took Kenneth's bag. His grin was broad when he handed it back. “Egg omelet. The best damn MRE in the world.” At his pronouncement Connelly and King both gagged.

Kenneth stared at it. Ryan could tell he was warring with himself. He could either suffer through it or eat it. A rumble from Kenneth's stomach settled the debate for him and he dug in.

It seemed Brendon's M & Ms had made him stupid because he looked up at the Drills and opened his mouth. "What's it like? The real deal. Not all of the basic and stuff, but when we are actually doing our job."

A silence came over the platoon. Ryan was wondering if they could hide Brendon's body in the woods somewhere. It sounded like a damn good idea to him.

Connelly cleared his throat, wiping his mouth at the same time. "Once at your unit you'll find out that everything you're taught here will just click into place. BCT and AIT will give you basic knowledge, but at your unit is where you'll really learn your job."

"My advice to everyone single one of you is to keep your mouth shut and learn from those who've been there," King added.

“Unit cohesion is different everywhere. Some units will be squared away and others you'll want to take a bazooka and blow them the fuck away,” Grabowski said.

It seemed that Brendon had started something. Another man asked another question and that led to another, and another. The Drill Sergeants would answer each question and for one moment they didn't look like sadistic dicks who got off on the recruits' misery but just regular guys.

It didn't last long.

On the way back they were picked up by the five-tons and driven back to their barracks. Patrick was limping pretty badly when they got to their room.

Their room was trashed.

Personal items were lying all over the ground.

“Oh shit!” Kenneth exclaimed. “Which one of you forgot to lock your footlocker?”

Ryan flushed bright red. He glanced at his bed and let out a vile curse. “Oh shit. Shit. Shit. I’m dead. I’m fucking deader than dead.”

Patrick limped over to his bed and burst out laughing. “I TOLD you not to hide them in your footlocker.”

Lying on top of his bed were four Three Musketeers wrappers, two empty Twizzler packages, a Gummy Bear package, and a can of soda he had bought at the PX. Directly in front of the wrappers was a note:

Thanks for the snacks, Freckles.

Regards

Your Friendly Drill Sergeants.

“You left your locker open with that shit in it?” Brendon snorted.

Ryan nodded his head. “It was the good stuff too. They ATE my food.”

“Your contraband you mean. Right, Freckles?”

Ryan paled and gulped.

Grabowski entered the room and everyone went to 'Parade rest'.

“Now, we have been over this already. It seems that Freckles didn't get it the first time.”

He stated. He walked slowly toward Ryan until he was inches away from the younger man.

“Drop, Gracin.”

Ryan went down. To his surprise Brendon, Kenneth and Patrick followed suit.

“Now, don't do that, boys. You're gonna bring a tear to my eye.” Drill Sergeant

Grabowski sneered. “Down!”

All four went down and held themselves there.

He continued on until all four were sweating and panting. “You have fifteen minutes to get this mess squared the fuck away.”

He got them up and walked out. His booming voice announced that inspections started in fifteen minutes.

That evening Ryan had CQ duty. His shift was 1200 in the morning to 0100, right after Patrick. That night Phillip was staying with the privates. He was nervous as hell for some reason-- maybe because at night when his head was cleared of all of the day's events he thought back to that freaking kiss. The Drill Sergeant hadn't brought it up and Ryan damn sure wasn't going to.

Patrick woke him up and Ryan slipped down to the desk carrying paper and a pen. He could hear soft talking coming from the office and figured Grabowski was watching TV. Ryan would kill to be able to watch a few minutes of TV. Hell, he even missed the news. The door opened suddenly and he was confronted with Grabowski.

“Gracin,” he was greeted.

“Drill Sergeant, anything I can get you?” he asked politely.

“Nah, come on in.” Grabowski gestured for him to enter the office. It was unsurprisingly clean.

“How is training going?” Phillip asked; as he sat down to polish his boots.

“It's going fine, Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” Ryan said, as he stood. The other man gestured for him to sit down. Ryan's eyes strayed from the drill, who looked fine as hell in the black PT shorts and plain white shirt he had on. The office was rather big. Beside the desk there was a large cot set up. He figured that was where the three slept when they stayed the night.

“Good,” Grabowski said with a grin. It disappeared when he opened his mouth again.

“That kiss should have never happened and I'm sorry for putting you into that position.”

Ryan's mouth fell open and he looked back at the dark-haired man. “Umm. It's cool. I know..” he said, trying not to appear like a thirteen-year-old girl. If the guy had any idea how fucked up that kiss made him he didn't wanna know.

“You've got potential, Gracin. Real potential.”

“Thank you?” Ryan answered. He was dumbfounded and just not sure what to say.

He looked toward the television set and his mouth fell open. “Holy shit! Is that a football game?”

Phillip laughed huskily. “Yeah, my mom DVRs and then burns games for me so I can watch.”

Ryan felt like crying. “Is that Ohio State?” Being an Ohio boy he, of course, rooted for the “Buckeyes.”

“Ohio State versus Texas.” Phillip laughed harder when Ryan damn near started to drool. “Texas won. You like Texas, right?”

Ryan shook his head. “I’m from Columbus, Ohio.”

“Oh God, no wonder! It all makes perfect sense now.” Phillip smirked and picked up a pair of panty hose.

Ryan was about to ask what made perfect sense but he saw the panty hose. He blinked and then looked away.

“Freckles, panty hose applies the world’s best shine on these boots,” Phillip informed him. “Go grab your kit and boots. Might as well show you how it's done.”

Ryan ran up the stairs and did what he was told. When he got back he saw that the panty hose had been cut and one leg was lying on the sofa next to where he’d been sitting.

He spent the next forty minutes learning the value of a spit shine and panty hose.

CHAPTER FOUR

Morning PT runs sucked ass, especially since King was the one who ran the Alpha group that Ryan was in. He started them out slowly and increased the pace gradually. His voice was loud and strong as he started calling the cadence. A mile in and the bastard changed cadences. Ryan seriously wanted to kill him.

"Superman is the man of steel!"

“Superman is the man of steel,” came the cry of fifteen voices.

“But he ain’t no match for an army drill.”

“But he ain’t no match for an Army Drill!” The fact that King was still running without sounding winded proved to Ryan that the bastard probably was in fact, Superman.

“Me and Supe got in a fight”

“Me and Supe got in a fight!”

“Hit him in the head with some kryptonite”

“Hit him in the head with some kryptonite.” Ryan was barely able to repeat that one.

Drill Sergeant King seemed like he was trying to kill them.

They arrived at a small building and Ryan eyed it warily. He could already see other platoons in line. Each man looked like they were going to run off as soon as the Drill's back was turned.

They were given the order to be 'at ease' so Ryan looked around and pulled at his uniform. He hated running in full dress. His feet felt like they were going to fall off and he had sweat in places he didn't realize he could sweat in. He wanted to deck Brendon because he was all smiles.

"NBC today. I'm kinda excited!" Brendon said.

"Oh boy, that's so how I want to spend a day. Snot bubbles and blinded," Patrick stated.

"FALL IN!"

Everyone rushed into formation and waited.

“Today Privates, you're heading to your own personal hell. It is called The Gas Chamber,” King announced and Ryan could swear the man had a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“You'll treat my gas chamber as if it was my fuckin' bedroom, understood? There will be no puking, snotting or crying in my bedroom. Got it?”

Ryan was getting worried. He heard a very unmanly scream coming from the other side of the building.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski, anything you'd like to say?” King called.

“One thing. Just make sure you fucks take a deep breath. I will be in the room with you and you will make me happy or we're going to be in there a long fucking time.”

“GAS, GAS, GAS!” shouted Drill Sergeant Connelly. Everyone dove for their gas masks.

With that said, they were placed in lines to enter the chamber. The closer they got to the building, the more the gas was affecting them. Ryan could feel his skin prickling. It seemed the sweat that was beading on him was capturing every molecule of gas and trapping it against his skin. “Dude, this sucks” he whispered to Patrick. Though he had to admit that all of them standing around with Military Issue gas masks on their faces *was* pretty damn funny. They all looked like they could be stand-ins for the next “Star Wars.”

Patrick's eyes squinted sharply. “And fucking Brendon is bouncing around like a pinball.”

“It's gonna get worse,” Kenneth said glumly. “We could always kill him and say it was an accident.” He glared at Brendon, who still hadn't calmed down.

The four of them, plus Brody and Weatherly, all entered together. Ryan didn't think it was that bad until the gas clung to his uniform, burrowing deep into his skin. Damn, that was rather uncomfortable. He flinched when the door slammed and something was pressed against it.

“Crack the seal, Privates!” He looked up and damned if Grabowski wasn't walking around the room like he was breathing fresh air. Everyone took their masks off.

He went down the line slowly. Ryan cursed the fact that he was the last fucking man in the room. He could hear them all choking and spitting. He vaguely wondered if King could see that they did, in fact, spit in his room. Patrick was having a hard time opening his eyes. Kenneth couldn't get ‘Roslin’ out to save his life. Fucking Brendon just zipped through the bitch. Brody was actually crying and Ryan was sure his death was on the cards.

The gas seemed to freeze right in front of his eyes only to burst right under his fucking nose. He hacked, bending over and hoping he wouldn't puke. Spitting in King's house was bad enough. He didn't want to know what happened if you puked.

“Alright hero, open your eyes and take a deep breath. DOB, Social, full name!” Phillip barked. He sounded like he was outside, that the gas wasn't even touching him. That shit wasn't fair. Ryan cracked his eyes opened and wanted to curse. The bastard didn't even have so much as a grimace on his face.

“Come on Freckles, we're waiting on you. You don't want your buddies to suffer any more, do you?” he asked, a smirk planted firmly on his face.

Fucker.

Ryan struggled to do it. "01 March 1982" He coughed out. He choked on a lump of spit that seemed to gather in the middle of his throat. He repeated his social. After another round of hacking and coughing he finally got his whole name out.

When he was finally finished Grabowski went to the rear door and pounded on it.

The door burst open and everyone was nearly running to get out.

"Fucking walk!" Grabowski ordered. So instead of a slow run they did a fast walk until the air hit them.

"Holy fucking shit! This fucking sucks!" Patrick barked as he tried to keep the snot from hitting his mouth. His face was tracked with tears and other substances that were best for them to ignore. He flapped his arms out wide like they were told to do earlier that morning.

Kenneth ran over the top of Brody, sending the other guy straight to the ground while he stumbled and tried to rub his eyes. That was a big mistake. A split second later, Kenneth's howls filled the small clearing.

“Don't fucking rub your eyes, numb nuts!” barked Connelly. “Stupid fucking private!” Connelly grabbed Kenneth with one hand and his canteen with another. He began to pour the cool water over the other man's eyes.

Ryan came out and blindly walked straight ahead or as straight as it seemed to him. He was thankful for his ugly BCGs at that moment, mainly because tears were streaming down his face. Spit came foaming out of his mouth like he was a rabid dog. He just prayed that no one would shoot him.

He heard Brendon cursing and then a quick thump.

“GAWD DAMNIT! FURRY YOU FUCKING RAN INTO COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR OAK!” King shouted, as he tried to pick Brendon up off of the ground in front of a huge oak tree.

Brendon was stuttering and muttering. Ryan resisted the urge to rub his eyes. He was thinking it might be worth the pain just to see what the hell Brendon was bitching about.

“APOLOGIZE TO THE COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR RIGHT THE FUCK NOW, FURRY!”

Brendon mumbled a quick apology to the Command Sergeant Major.

King then turned on a dime. “Furry, you fucking moron, that's a fucking tree!”

Brendon's vision seemed to clear because he turned and stared at the tree. “It's a tree,” he repeated dumbly.

“No shit, hero. It's a fucking tree.” With that said King left Brendon alone to attend a fresh batch of newly-inducted recruits barreling out of the chamber.

“Gracin, flap your arms like a bird, come on. Fucking flap them!” Connelly shouted from his place beside Kenneth, who was still whimpering.

Ryan wasn't sure what the hell for but he raised his arms and started flapping. Instantly he felt like the world's biggest ass.

Afterwards they were all sitting in the shade.

“Holy hell, that fucking sucked,” Brendon muttered.

“At least you didn't rub your eyes. That really fucking hurt,” Kenneth grouched.

“You didn't run into Command Sergeant Major Oak either, Kenneth.” Brendon sighed.

“And how did Grabowski stay in that place so long? When he came out he looked bored as hell.”

“They live to make us look like asses,” Ryan muttered. He looked over at Patrick and laughed. “What's wrong?”

Patrick had a funny look on his face. “Dude, I puked in King's house,” he said, making everyone laugh again.

That night after mail call Drill Sergeant Connelly stuck around and bullshitted with them. Ryan had to give the guy credit. He was funny as hell. He was telling them stories from his first tour in Iraq.

It was personal. It made every single one of them feel like they were not just recruits. They were finally soldiers.

Ryan laughed when Connelly started talking shit about 'Scouts.'

"Fucking crunchies, they think they are cool as shit," Connelly said, using the term 'crunchies' as a derogatory name for the 'Scouts.'

There was a snort from the doorway and all eyes turned to Phillip Grabowski.

“We are cool as shit.” He grinned. “So fucking cool that when you take a tanker out of his tank and into a Humvee, they cower behind the big boys and pray we don't leave their asses behind.”

“Oh now, see you gotta dis a man's wheels,” Connelly said sadly.

“That's it? That's all you could come up with?” Phillip asked, his grin widening to its most maddening brilliance.

That fucking smile sent Ryan back in his own mind. That mouth should be illegal.

“NO!” came a roar from his left that brought him back to the present. He looked at Brendon who was staring wide-eyed at a letter in his hand. The paper fluttered from the blond's fingers. He rushed out of the room, barreling into Grabowski without even noticing it.

Both Drills looked startled but Grabowski recovered first. He took off after Brendon.

Ryan rose.

“Sit down, pretty boy. Big Daddy will take care of your girlfriend,” Connelly ordered.

Ryan didn't want to follow that order but he did. He sat back down and picked up the letter. He opened it while Connelly began another story.

Dear Brendon,

I know this is a horrible way to do this but I don't have any other choice. I fell in love with someone else. I know I promised that I wouldn't do this but I couldn't help it. He's here and you're not. I need someone here, Brendon. Not someone hundreds of miles away. I hope you understand.

Sophia

Ryan bit off a curse and looked at Patrick.

'Broke up?' Patrick mouthed.

Ryan confirmed it with a short nod of his head. Patrick frowned and nodded to Kenneth. They all wanted out of the room so they could check on their friend.

Connelly sighed and grabbed Ryan's attention. He thumbed his head toward the door.

Ryan stood up and walked out of the door.

He slowed his gait and stood outside of the room. He was surprised to hear Grabowski talking.

“Murray, this happens all the time. When we were deployed to Iraq several guys had wives file for divorce. I can't tell you how many guys had girls breaking up with them during the middle of the tour claiming it was too hard to deal with.” Grabowski said. His voice was so soft

and soothing. Ryan couldn't believe he was the same man who barked orders at them all the time.

"But why now? Why couldn't she wait?" Brendon asked. Ryan could hear tears in his voice.

"It's better now, Murray. Trust me. You don't want to be out in the sandbox and get that sort of letter." There was something tingeing Grabowski's voice that told Ryan that Phillip had lived through that.

Ryan scooted closer to the door, just in time to have a face full of Grabowski.

"Freckles," he greeted him, a small smile on his lips.

It was the closest Ryan had been to the Drill since 'the kiss'.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” Ryan said. He knew he should be in there with Brendon, and right after he memorized the brunette’s smell he would be.

The Drill left without another word. Ryan walked in and looked at Brendon.

“Hey buddy,” he said softly. “Sorry about your girl.”

“I don't care,” Brendon said, the sound muffled by the pillow he was holding over his head.

“It sucks but after you get all buffed up she'll be crying because she can't have you, dude,” Ryan said. He really sucked at comforting anyone.

Patrick and Kenneth came into the room a few minutes later.

Kenneth pushed Ryan aside and sat down. “Know what? Fuck 'em. Girls like that chick are a dime a dozen. Brendon, we're gonna go out after basic and fuck the first girl we see. Then we're gonna toast to that bitch of an ex of yours,” he said, bitterly.

Ryan nodded his head.

Kenneth snorted at Ryan. “We'll find you a guy.”

Ryan flipped him off.

Patrick just laughed. “She's not worth it.”

Brendon took the pillow off of his face. “Guys, not right now, okay? Just... not now.”

All three sighed and nodded. Quietly they all got ready for bed.

CHAPTER FIVE

It had taken Brendon a few days to get himself back to so-called normal. The Drills didn't let up until the only thing Brendon could think of was getting squared the fuck away to get the Drills off his back. Ryan felt sorry for the boy but hey, the Drills seemed to know the right thing to say and do. By the second day Brendon didn't even mention Sophia again.

That morning Patrick and he pulled KP duty. To Ryan's way of thinking it was great.

They got up and dressed. Once in the Chow Hall they noticed who was in charge. It was none other than Drill Sergeant Grabowski.

“Aww, fuck. I was hoping for someone else,” Ryan said low under his breath.

“Hell, I just want people to see how fucking crazy he is so they don't think I'm insane when I tell them,” Patrick said, watching the others as they looked at the reputedly crazy Drill.

“Bet they have no clue how insane he is,” Ryan said back.

“Fall in!” Grabowski shouted.

All of the soldiers reporting for KP duty fell into formation and awaited instructions.

“My name is Drill Sergeant Grabowski. I know most of you like KP duty because it's so much fucking fun. Well I am here to change your mind. Today I expect this place to run smoothly. Is this understood?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

Quickly they were all assigned to different duties. Ryan was working with a guy from Delta Company. It was all he could do not to roll his eyes at the bastard. He was a fucking moron.

“So, dude, what's that guy like?”

“He's a Drill Sergeant,” Ryan said tiredly. He was going to kill someone. The guy hadn't shut up since they began to peel potatoes. Patrick came in carrying a pan of scrambled eggs. He snickered when Ryan made eye contact.

“No, I heard he killed a guy!” Matt or Mark said.

“I think that's a rumor,” Ryan muttered. He really wasn't sure if it was a rumor or not but it kinda pissed him off that another soldier from a completely different fucking unit was saying shit about HIS fucking Drill.

“They say he's a real bastard. We got lucky and got Drill Sergeant Davis. He's cool as fuck.”

Ryan bit his lip to keep from defending the guy who had made his life a living hell so far.

“I'd hate to be stuck with a crazy fucker like Grabowski.”

“Dude!” Ryan said, staring at the guy. “You don't fucking know him.” Not that Ryan did either but still. “So shut your fucking mouth.”

“Not enough work, Privates?”

Just fucking great. Ryan sighed. They both snapped their mouths shut.

“Private...What the fuck? Private, you'll answer by No-Name because that is the world's most fucked-up name.” Grabowski said, looking at the soldier that Ryan was talking to. “Y'all want to tell me what you were talking about.”

Private No-Name blinked and shook his head. His eyes widened and Ryan felt like giggling. His Drill Sergeant hadn't even warmed up yet.

“Freckles, wanna tell me?”

Ryan could either tell him or not. It was a no-win situation. On one hand he could stick with the Drill Sergeant and tell him what the soldier was talking about or he could lie.

“Let me guess. No-name here wanted to talk smack about the Drills?” Grabowski said knowingly. “Hear that I'm a crazy fuck, No-Name?”

Ryan let out a breath of air. Grabowski didn't make him answer the question.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant Ga..Gask..”

“For fucks sake! Freckles, No Name sounds just like you did.” Phillip exclaimed. “Grabow-ski. Say it with me, No-name.” He repeated his name and the Private said it with him.

“Fucking recruiters, they send the dumbest fucks they can find here,” he grouched.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski, after all he *is* from Delta Company,” Ryan said and froze in shock that he'd opened his mouth without being asked to.

Phillip burst into laughter. “That he is, Freckles. Only fucking morons get sent to Delta Company. Are you a fucking moron, No-name?”

The private flushed and didn't answer.

“Come on, No-Name. What's the answer?”

Ryan figured this was one of those no correct answer things.

“No, Drill Sergeant Grabowski! We are not morons!” The private finally answered.

“Then you think Charlie Company are fucking morons?”

Ryan had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing. It was a Catch-22 when answering these sorts of questions with Drill Sergeant Grabowski. Nothing that was said was ever correct.

“No, Drill Sergeant Grabowski.”

“Your Drill Sergeants got a fucking wiener when you arrived, didn't they, Private?”

Phillip blew out a disgusted breath. He turned so he was only facing Ryan and the other private couldn't see his face. He winked once and then threw up his arms. “Fuck it! Finish this shit up.”

He stormed off.

Ryan looked at the bewildered soldier. “Yeah, he's crazy but he's ours.”

They finished the potatoes, and were all sitting around bullshitting. Grabowski was actually pretty laid back on KP. Ryan kept sneaking looks at him when he could. It was a damn shame that he was crazy as fuck. He really was an extremely beautiful man.

“Has anyone asked you about Grabowski?” Patrick asked.

“Are you crazy? Everyone is asking if he's insane. He nearly had that Matt guy in tears.”

Patrick snorted. “Does it piss you off when people talk shit about him?”

For Ryan this was a loaded question. He looked at Patrick and thought about it. It did piss him off. Not because he had a big ol' crush on the man but because no matter what he was THEIRS. "Yeah, I guess it does. It's like he's ours to.....defend."

Patrick nodded. "I just about decked that guy over there. He called him a fucker." He hissed. Ryan got slightly angry too. Maybe he and Patrick were both going insane.

"We get to call him a crazy fucker, not anyone else." Ryan growled.

"Exactly!" Patrick agreed. They both looked disgruntled when they were told to get up and serve the incoming soldiers.

Ryan marveled at the 'Us versus Them' mentality they were both supporting.

There was a difference in Grabowski during KP. He watched over Ryan and Patrick like a father would. Patrick had nearly gotten into a fight with a guy who was fucking around.

Grabowski appeared out of nowhere and stopped it.

Ryan was damn near ready to stab No-Name with his peeler if the young private didn't shut up. Grabowski would come and interrupt them just to stop No-Name's rambling.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski, may I use the latrine?” Ryan asked just to get away from the still-jabbering Private.

Phillip waved him off.

Ryan strolled into the bathroom, thankful that he was away from that stupid asshole who still thought he had the right to trash talk Grabowski. He had barely been in the bathroom for a minute when the door opened.

“Freckles,” the Drill Sergeant said.

Ryan decided that being yelled at was a vast improvement over holding his dick when the Drill talked to him. He looked up and he recognized the look in Grabowski's eyes. God, that was fucking hot as hell. His hazel eyes were full of smoky, unspoken promises. Ryan had no doubt fucking Grabowski would be an experience of a lifetime.

It took him a moment to realize that Phillip had entered the Soldiers' bathroom. Of course, as a Drill he had the right to go anywhere he wanted. “Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” Ryan answered.

He finished and moved to wash his hands. Their bodies brushed lightly and Ryan thought for sure he heard Grabowski groan.

“Sorry, Drill Sergeant!” Ryan said and beat a hasty retreat.

On his way out he heard a breathy whisper.

“Me too.”

Basic was flying by. Ryan couldn't believe that they had already been there six weeks.

The past two weeks had gone by in a blur. They were currently sitting around watching the

Drills show them different maneuvers during the hand-to-hand phase of their training.

Once at the training area they were told to take everything off their uniform, empty all of their pockets and take off their belts. Ryan was slightly worried over that. His uniform wasn't as tight as it used to be; without the belt he was worried that it would fall off completely.

If Ryan heard Phillip mention 'mounting' one more time, he was fairly certain he would fucking kill something, probably Patrick who was his battle buddy and his practice dummy. The word itself was funny to fifty percent of their class. But for Ryan it was funny in a whole number of ways, because he could really see how mounting would be a whole helluva lot of fun with his Drill.

Patrick punched him in the shoulder. "Dude, he's been calling your name for like ten minutes!" He hissed.

Ryan looked up and blushed.

"Freckles, come on. You're the honorary dummy," Phillip drawled.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant!" He popped up and hoped his hard-on wasn't noticeable.

Phillip leaned in and smirked. "Don't think this means we're dating, Freckles."

Ryan blinked but wisely didn't say a word.

"Now this is your chance, Freckles. You get one freebie. If you hit me, you're golden,"

Grabowski said, and that fucking smirk was pasted on his face. "If you don't, well, you're in a world of hurt."

A freebie? Seriously? He glanced around and knew that everyone was thinking the same thing. If he managed to *hit* Grabowski, would he be killed right away or would he take his time and savor Ryan's blood as it hit the ground?

Drill Sergeants Connelly and King looked on half amused.

"For fucks sake, Freckles, what are you fucking waiting for? Should I send out engraved invitations?" Phillip tormented him.

That was it. Ryan moved quicker than he thought he could and made it to the other man just in time to see the sky and sun beat down on his face, a position that should have been physically impossible since he was standing on his feet. A sudden flip and he had a face full of wood chips and a heavy knee in his back.

“Now, does anyone know where Freckles fucked up?”

Ryan knew where he fucked up. He fucked up when he decided to join the Army and got assigned to Drill Sergeant fucking Grabowski.

After Phillip went through all of the things Ryan did wrong he stood up and settled with his back on the ground.

Ryan rose slowly and stretched out his back. That kinda fucking hurt. But the picture Grabowski made caused Ryan's mouth to drool. The man was put together better than most

gods and Ryan wasn't stupid enough to deny that fact. He had just gotten himself under control when he heard Grabowski speak.

“Alright Freckles, mount me.” Again with that stupid, freaking smirk.

Ryan blinked, then blinked again. He couldn't believe he heard that. Of course the smirk on Grabowski's face made him want to run back to the barracks and barricade himself in.

He slipped over the bigger man's body until he was settled against hips and stomach.

Good God! He wasn't a blushing virgin by any means. He could do this. His hands were grasping the other man's shoulder. He figured it probably wasn't a good idea to really want to *feel* the flesh under his hand but damn, it was firm.

“Got a good hold, Freckles?” Phillip asked.

Ryan wasn't a small man by any means but having his body on top of Phillip made him feel like a shrimp. He was completely annoyed with that fact. Green eyes clashed with hazel.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Are you *sure*?” he asked again. Ryan could practically taste the skepticism.

The bastard was toying with him.

His grasp hardened and he held on tight. “I'm sure, Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” Ryan smirked. He should have known better.

“The object of this exercise is to get your opponent off of you in a timely manner. This is the trap-and-roll,” Phillip explained. “So Freckles has me down, he's trying to keep me down.”

His hips bucked forward and he grinned when Ryan's eyes widened.

This was not the kiss but it damn well could have been. He could feel every hard plane of the Drill's body. His hold was strong and the bucking didn't cause much to happen.

"You will want to lift your back up and buck as hard as you can." He proceeded to show them. His back lifted off the ground and Ryan was pitched forward.

Ryan's hands were pulled off Phillip so easily he felt like he was a child getting caught in the cookie jar.

"With one hand, grab their wrist tightly." As he explained he demonstrated to them. "The other hand will come up to the opposite shoulder and grasp it lightly. You won't need a firm grip."

The way Ryan lay he could smell that musky scent that was solely Phillip's. He nearly whimpered when the smell went straight to his dick. This was so not good. Rolling around with the man he was secretly lusting over did not make Ryan feel better. *I am a fucking twenty-two-*

year old man who can and will control his dick. With that thought he steeled himself for the next movements.

“Thrust upwards again.” Holy fucking shit. This was going to kill Ryan. He was starting to think that Grabowski was torturing him just to be an asshole.

“Now lift your foot over the ankle on the same side of the wrist you’re holding and trap it there.” He did it and Ryan let out a soft moan. It wasn't loud enough for anyone to hear but him and judging by the look on Phillip's face he also heard it.

FUCKKK! Ryan would have happily died right then and there. Maybe the next move, Phillip would actually kill him. That would be great. Or hey, if he were lucky maybe the earth would crack open and swallow them both. The fucker was enjoying this.

Phillip smirked and bucked up again. “Buck forward, pulling them closer at the same time and this time roll to the side, taking them with you.” Suddenly the position drastically

changed. Phillip was between Ryan's spread thighs, pressing his hard body against Ryan. Ryan was flat on his back, with the Sergeant's lower body pushing into his and his upper body leaning backwards. "Keep your body away from there and hold this position." Ryan's legs wrapped around the larger man, but the hand holding the arm across his neck tightened, until he thought for sure he would end up suffocating. Thankfully that hold made him forget his cock for a moment.

Yeah, Ryan was going to die. He had to because there was no chance in hell that Phillip COULDN'T feel his cock.

Amusement entered Phillip's eyes. "That, private, is how you do it." He rose slowly.

Ryan could have sworn that Grabowski let his body brush against his for as long as possible - the bastard.

He looked over the soldiers. “Now one more and you will practice these moves with your battle buddies.”

Hold the fuck up. Ryan's mind went black. He had to actually roll around on the ground with Patrick while he had the fucking hard on from hell? That had to be a joke. Please God, let that be a joke.

“Drill Sergeant King.” Phillip stepped back toward Ryan.

Oh fuck no! Ryan would have cried if he was all alone. There was no way in hell he would demonstrate another fucking position with King.

“Drill Sergeant King will be explaining the next one,” Grabowski called as King strolled up.

Ryan damn near jumped for joy but hey, that had killed his erection. Now no longer a raging hard-on but just a plain hard-on. Fucker. He would have shot Grabowski a dirty look but the bastard was watching him with intense green eyes.

“Privates, this is called the ‘Rear Naked Choke’,” King started. There were a few snickers and more than a few chuckles.

‘Rear naked choke?!’ Ryan blinked rapidly. Crappy, shitty, fucking hell. Couldn't they have a choke called, well, ‘choke-hold’ because dear God, this was going to fucking kill him. His face flushed and he knew he looked like a fish. He couldn't get enough air to his lungs. He looked up at Phillip and saw that damn smirking smile on the man's face.

“Are you ready, Gracin?”

Fuck no.

“Sit down,” Grabowski ordered.

Ryan sat down.

Grabowski smirked. “Everything okay?”

Ryan shook his head rapidly, absolutely terrified to open his mouth. Knowing his luck like he did he would blurt out something like 'fuck me' or 'can I have another, Drill Sergeant?' Instead he just shook his head.

He was only half listening to what King was saying but he caught “Wrap your legs around your opponent’s waist.”

Phillip did so and slid them down, hooking them tightly behind Ryan's knees. Ryan couldn't move if he wanted to, which he really didn't because damn....

Strong biceps went around his neck. Ryan figured he could happily die now and probably would. He was pulled tight against the rock-hard body behind him. It took him a second to realize that not only was the upper body hard and tight, but the lower matched.

His mind went completely blank. He would have a hard time repeating any of these moves. He knew he would.

He was jerked up and the biceps tightened, not hard enough to stop his blood flow, just enough to feel pressure.

He could feel hot breath against his ear and a low chuckle filled his senses. This was so not right.

“Wanna know what I wanted to do to you at the club, Gracin?” The voice was silky smooth. It was dark, promising. “I wanted to fuck you.”

Ryan took a deep breath and shuddered. He fucking shuddered.

Then that honeyed voice went in for the kill. “Right against that fucking wall.”

He didn't get a chance to reply because the bicep around his neck began to tighten and he was pulled back tighter against the Drill. His other hand slid over his head like he was giving Ryan's head a lover's caress. It might have felt good if Ryan wasn't currently trying not to pass out.

Ryan tapped at the arm and he wasn't sure if it was to try and jerk it loose, or to hold him tighter. Later when this was all over he would blame the lack of blood going to his brain for even thinking this was sexy as hell.

As soon as it was over Grabowski scooted away and Ryan fell backwards. “Go on back to your battle buddy, Freckles.”

The bastard looked like nothing even happened. Ryan was damn near immobile. He rolled over to his side, managed to pick himself up off the ground and grabbed his BDU pants before they slid down his lean hips. His BCGs were steaming up.

He made his way back over to Patrick, who was grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

“Alright, begin!” King shouted.

“Damn. You okay?” Patrick asked.

“Uh huh.”

Patrick gave him that stupid grin again. “Dude?”

“Wha?”

“You have a hard-on.”

Patrick kept joking about the hard-on until Ryan went to adjust himself.

Somehow he made it through the rest of hand-to-hand after that.

They were in their bunks not paying attention to Kenneth and Brendon, who were arguing over who was hotter, Jessica Alba or Jessica Simpson.

Patrick crawled out from his bottom bunk and looked up at Ryan.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asked in a low tone.

Ryan shook his head.

“Might help.”

“And say what? I've got the hots for Grabowski? Dude, do you realize how much of a girl I sound saying that?” Ryan shuddered.

“He *is* hot. Evil, scary and sadistic but hot nonetheless,” Patrick told him with a smile.

CHAPTER SIX

It started out innocently enough. One moment they were right on point, then the next thing Patrick was cussing and Ryan was stumbling over a tree limb. If they weren't in the forest Ryan could have found their way out. At least, that was what he was currently telling himself. He did know one thing though - Night Navigation freaking sucked.

“Dude, face it. We're lost,” Patrick muttered.

“We are not lost! I never get lost,” Ryan muttered. Well, except for this one time.

“We're lost and going to be eaten by some fucking bear.”

“You sound like Brendon.”

“Fuck you, Gracin,” Patrick snarled and then sighed. “Any clues whatsoever, oh fearless navigator?”

“Um, sure; it's somewhere in this general direction,” Ryan said.

“I hope you die,” Patrick muttered.

They continued their walk. “Hey, that looks familiar!” Ryan said, pointing at a tree.

Patrick looked. "You're right! It does! Where have I seen *that* before?" He paused and thought about it.

"Oh that's right we're standing in the middle of a fucking FOREST where all the fucking TREES look like the same FUCKING tree as that ONE!" Patrick hissed.

Ryan reddened. Yeah, he knew he had gotten them lost. He looked down at his compass and sighed for the millionth time.

"Dude, I doubt the Drills will even bother to look for us," Patrick said glumly.

"Sure they will. They have to," Ryan replied. They got paid for making sure all their soldiers actually survived the basic training part.

“Okay, we sit. That way we're not moving and we don't get fucking lost any more than we are. Maybe one of The Drills or possibly other guys will find our asses,” Patrick said, finally taking charge of the exercise.

“Fine.” Ryan didn't argue. He would just do what Patrick wanted because he was the one that had got them so fucking lost.

They stood around quietly for a moment and then Ryan looked at Patrick. “Do you seriously think Connelly is better looking than Grabowski? And more importantly, when did you become gay?”

Patrick blinked and then laughed, his mood changing as rapidly as he changed his socks. “I didn't say that and Ryan, not everyone has to be either straight or gay. I'm sorta in between. I can appreciate attractiveness in either sex.”

It figured Patrick would answer the question only to leave more questions open. It wouldn't do Ryan any good to ask again. Patrick would just say something like 'frogs can spontaneously turn into the opposite sex,' or something equally as creepy.

"But I didn't say that I would turn down Connelly if he should ever come onto me either."

Ryan gritted his teeth. "I hate you."

"You both know now is not the time to be out finding cool new places to fuck, right?" A deep voice came from their left. They turned and both nearly let out a squeal of delight to see Connelly.

"Yes, Drill Sergeant Connelly!" Ryan shot Patrick an 'I-told-you-so look.'

"Dumbass," Patrick mumbled under his breath.

“I didn't hear that, Gandhi. What did you say?”

“I called Private Gracin a dumbass, Drill Sergeant,” Patrick repeated.

The look Ryan shot him this time would have melted steel.

Connelly chuckled. “Come on, Fuck-ups. You two are the last team to make it back.”

Ryan glared at the men across the way. Delta had shown up to withdraw their weapons from the armory the same time Charlie did. There was a deep-seated hatred for the bastards of Delta Company.

“They look so fucking smug,” Kenneth complained.

“That's because they fucking smoked us last time,” Brendon said, glaring just as hard as Ryan.

“Dude, they were totally trashing Grabowski during KP,” Patrick said.

“No one gets to trash Grabowski except us!” Self-righteous anger zoomed through Brendon.

“That's fucking right!” Kenneth growled.

“Well damn, the girl scouts are in town,” called Drill Sergeant Davis.

Phillip just grinned. “Hell, yeah; mark me down for two boxes of Thin Mints, Davis,” he said, causing the guys in his platoon to laugh.

“Charlie Company! Attention!” The guys snapped forward. They did it as one.

“Gawddamn that was pretty!” yelled Drill Sergeant King.

“About FACE!” They all pivoted on their left and swung around to face Delta Company.

“FUCKING BEAUTIFUL!” cried Connelly.

“Down by the river we took a little walk! We ran into Delta and we had a little talk.” His voice rose with each word until all that could be heard was his battle cry.

“We pushed them down!” It was obvious that Charlie Company was looking for a new bitch and Delta got the duty.

All three Drill Sergeants joined in. “*HEY!*”

“*We kicked 'em!*” Every man in the platoon's voice rose together. They looked through Delta and straight to the Drills. Delta's Drills had nothing on Charlie's. They would fucking slit their throats if they messed with any of 'em.

Again Grabowski, King and Connelly joined in. “**HEY!**”

“We threw them in the River and laughed when they drowned!”

“*WE DON'T NEED NO DELTA A-RUNNING, A-RUNNING AROUND!*”

Grabowski called.

It was a glorious thing to hear forty-something voices joining together and making the ground shake with their thunder. Windows rattled. Even a few of the Delta guys were wincing.

They had let their Drill Sergeants down before. They wouldn't do it again.

Delta was called to attention and started their cadence.

Charlie burst out laughing. Delta sounded like complete asses. They didn't get it this time. Drill Sergeant Davis made a big show of sighing.

“Fuck, I shoulda known better,” he shouted, looking at his own platoon. “HALF RIGHT FACE!” He proceeded to heap embarrassment onto his belittled platoon.

“Make that three boxes of Thin Mints,” Phillip called, grinning wildly. He looked over his platoon with pride.

“And two boxes of those Caramel Delight things!” King added.

“Don't forget those peanut butter ones. Those are awesome,” Connelly cackled.

Overall that day freaking rocked.

The day started out with a cattle car ride. Ryan crinkled up his nose at that. Riding in anything that smelled like week-old cow shit wasn't pleasant for anyone. Hell, at eight o'clock in the morning it had already been in the eighties, so not only did it smell like shit it was hotter than hell. By the time they got to their 'campground of love' as the Drills called it, they were all bitchy. Brendon was calling Kenneth a jackass and Kenneth was calling Patrick a moron and

Ryan was calling them all girls. They were given twenty minutes to set up their two-man tents.

Ryan wanted to laugh over that one.

He hadn't set up a tent since he was ten. Come to think about, it his father actually set that one up. Luckily Patrick fucking Smith AKA Mr. Fucking Perfect knew how to do it. Yeah okay, maybe Ryan was having a bad day too. It was more than a possibility. By the time night came they were all ready to bed down but, oh no, Drill Sergeant Grabowski wanted to play a game.

They sighed as they put on their MILES gear. To Ryan this was some sort of fucked up laser tag game. He stared at the small receiver and wondered if ANYONE could actually make a shot that would hit the little sensor. It criss-crossed their chests and lay across their Kevlar vests. Grabowski even set one off so they would hear what it sounded like.

Ryan thought it sounded like a bird getting its head lopped off.

Ryan, Patrick, Brendon and Kenneth were stalking through the forest, paying close attention to their surroundings. Any little thing could be a booby trap and knowing their enemy, it would be.

They all hunched down, staying in each other's footprints. Brendon was pulling point. Ryan was behind him. Kenneth followed Ryan and Patrick was pulling up the rear. They were quiet. They were deadly. They were United States Fucking Army.

At least that's what they were telling themselves when a shot came out of nowhere, taking their medic down.

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.

"INCOMING!" Brendon shouted and they dove to the ground.

"Where did the shot come from?" Patrick shouted, as he low-crawled to Kenneth.

“Dude, I'm dead and if you use my body as a fucking shield I'll haunt your ass,” Kenneth warned.

“Came from the left!” Ryan shouted.

A grenade went off twenty feet from Brendon. Then another muffled shot.

“Fuck!” BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

“Man down!” Patrick yelled.

“No shit, Sherlock!” Brendon shouted over the loud-assed beeping.

Ryan looked at Patrick who was watching to his left.

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.

“I'm dead,” Ryan said as he dropped his head down to the ground. He seriously hated these fucking beeps.

Patrick was the only one left. If he could just get to the tree - BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.

“Motherfucker!” Patrick snorted.

“GAWD DAMN, YOU FUCKERS MADE IT TOO FUCKING EASY!” King shouted.

Just what Ryan wanted to listen to - the annoying as fuck beeping and King shouting like a fucking mad man.

“HAVE ANY OF YOU PAID ATTENTION TO THE CLASSES?” Connelly shouted over the beeps.

All four just hung their heads. This was fucking pitiful.

Luckily Grabowski was off hunting some other group. That made Ryan’s night, at least until they heard more beeps heading their way. “Well, fuck.”

Instead of four beeps they turned into eight solid fucking beeps. It was enough to make Ryan want to rip the shit off and stomp on it.

“For fucks sakes. You four, too? Have you piss-ants been paying ANY attention at all?” Phillip asked.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

“EIGHT FUCKING DEAD. YOU MOTHERFUCKERS CAN'T BE PAYING
THAT MUCH ATTENTION!”

All eight men looked down at the ground.

“Un-fucking-acceptable! What is your major malfunction?” Phillip shouted. A storm
brewed in his eyes until it exploded in a rage that made all eight want to take a step backwards.

Ryan realized that he didn't have to shout very loud to be heard over the racket. It
proved to Ryan that maybe Grabowski *was* God.

“March your asses back to camp. Get that shit turned off and then meet me in front of
the latrine. We have some training to fucking do!”

Ryan thought the Drill Sergeants were the ones to turn it off. It wasn't until they were halfway back that he realized this extended beep torture was just to make them feel like assholes - like they needed Grabowski for that anyways.

By the time they got to bed Ryan was dragging his ass. There was no fucking way he would be able to move in the morning. He giggled; he supposed it was already morning. The bastard had fucking smoked the hell out of them. Even Brendon, who NEVER got fucked up was seriously dragging some major ass.

“Dude, you just giggled,” Patrick said tiredly. Then he too giggled. “God! I'm fucking tired!”

It seemed the giggles were catching because no sooner had Patrick giggled, Big David Brodrick giggled. If that wasn't enough, Brendon took one look at David and began to howl with laughter. They all paused, giggling like lunatics, all eight of them.

“Jesus! That was a fucking nightmare. I didn't realize these bastards made such a fucking racket,” Ryan snorted.

“I did! How did they get you three?”

“He got caught in their cross fire. They lined us up and it was like a fucking turkey shoot.” Patrick snorted too.

“Fucking Grabowski and two others I've never seen just fucking over ran us. We were dead before we even fired a shot.”

On that note everyone went quiet.

“If that had been real there would have been eight KIAs and someone delivering the news to our parents,” Patrick said quietly.

Every single one of them went silent. Suddenly they knew the reason they walked back into camp with their MILES gear blaring. The Drills were making a point that Phillip had planted those long weeks ago.

The goddamned MILES gear was beeping like crazy. Ryan was about to lose it. “Patrick? Patrick? Where the fuck did you go?” he called. He tugged on the gear seeing if he could beat the bitch into submission and found he couldn’t. “Kenneth? Brendon?”

"Freckles!"

Just fucking peachy. It made sense that he would be the one to find him.

"Phillip!" Ryan froze. Hell, everything around him froze. Did he just call...? Son of a bitch!

He did. He called his Drill Sergeant by his first fucking name. He could see the storm mounting on

Phillip's face. Fucking hell!

"So now we're buddies?" Phillip asked. There was a terrible smirk on his face.

"No, Drill Sergeant Grabowski," he muttered out.

"You deserve a punishment."

Okaaaay. Since when did his punishment come out sounding like that? Grabowski NEVER said it that way. It wasn't until the Drill Sergeant grabbed him did he realize how truly fucked he was.

He was in the middle of the woods with a man he wasn't absolutely sure was sane and the gleam in Phillip's hazel eyes wasn't the average 'you're so fucked' look. This one said 'you're so fucked and you're gonna fucking enjoy it!' "Take off your clothing," Phillip commanded.

"Umm." Ryan began to back up. Phillip advanced on him steadily.

"Or I'll rip them off." Phillip's grin was wolfish. Oh fuck, he was so fucked.

He thought about denying what he felt, telling the Drill Sergeant to go fuck himself. But that wasn't bound to happen after six weeks of getting hard instantly when the man brushed against him, listening to the deep cadence of his voice and finally feeling that hard body against his. He decided to say 'fuck it.'

Ryan's hands slipped to his BDU top and popped the first button free, then the second. He continued until he could slip the shirt off. A quick tug and the brown shirt came off over his head.

He watched Phillip watch him. It was so fucking hot that he thought he was going to die just from those fucking hazel eyes.

Phillip's hand reached out and touched Ryan. Ryan moaned as the hard, callused hand stroked his chest. One hand played with a nipple while the other just continued to rub soft circles down by his belly button.

"Keep going." Phillip ordered. He was towering over Ryan, giving him no way of moving.

Ryan's hands shook as he worked on the belt of the pants. He wanted Phillip so badly that he could barely step out of his pants without falling over.

"Don't fucking move," Phillip growled.

Then the Drill Sergeant did something Ryan never thought possible. He dropped to his knees.

One minute Ryan was breathing and the next his breath was completely gone. He couldn't have breathed if someone was holding a gun to his head.

Phillip placed wet kisses across Ryan's hipbones. Nibbling at the protruding bone like it was some sort of rich chocolate. His tongue darted out and left a wet trail from one side to the other.

Ryan's cock hardened almost instantly, shooting sparks of pleasure throughout his body. Holy fuck! He could feel Phillip moving lower, nibbling, sucking and licking everywhere he went. The damn bill of his hat kept Ryan from being able to see. His hand moved toward the hat and was grasped by a firm hand.

"Touch the hat and we stop," Phillip warned.

"Yes Sir," he said, without thinking.

Phillip laughed huskily. "You're just trying to make this harder on yourself, aren't you Ryan?"

The way Phillip said his name should be illegal – just another reason to lust after the man.

Phillip sank lower and nipped at the inside of Ryan's thighs. He dropped Ryan's hands and continued his exploration. He took his time, not giving any time to regroup. By the time Phillip's hot mouth found his cock Ryan was ready to hurt something.

The wet, warm mouth around his cock slowly slid lower. Ryan's legs were shaking. He wasn't sure how much longer he could do this....he was so close. So fucking close...

“WAKE THE FUCK UP Freckles, WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!” The sounds of bombs going off landed beside the tent. There was the retort of M16s going crazy. Ryan jerked awake in the middle of his wet dream to Phillip shaking their tent.

By the time they got themselves and their weapons out, Grabowski was shaking the two-man pup tent so hard Ryan thought it would fall down around him and Patrick. He automatically started to stand. Patrick was still on his hands and knees.

“Get down, you fucking moron. We're under attack. Low-crawl! LOW-CRAWL!”

Ryan was still half-hard from his fucking porn dream about Grabowski. Low-crawling across the forest floor was not on his list of fun things to do. Matter of fact it was so far down there that he would have to crawl UP to get to it.

Grabbing his weapon and cradling it in his arms he began a slow low-crawl across the ground. He winced and whimpered every time his dick came into contact with something sharp or just fucking got jammed against the ground.

This whole time Grabowski was throwing smoke grenades, firing the blanks out of his M16 and yelling at the top of his voice about what a cluster fuck everyone was. Ryan couldn't believe that he had been having a sex dream about this insane man.

By the time he low-crawled to his fox hole he was pretty sure his dick would never work again. Patrick, the bastard, was smirking like a mad man. He rolled onto his back and cupped himself. He fucking hurt like fucking hell.

Phillip leaned down until Ryan could see his face, even though his BCGs were dangling from the strap round his neck. "If I ever hear you say my given name again, Freckles, you're going to fucking regret it, got me?" But there was a look in Phillip's eyes that said he really liked it. That didn't help though when Ryan felt his camouflaged cheeks turn red. With that said the Drill stalked off.

Patrick snorted and rolled over. "Dude, you were like moaning his name and I think you whimpered a few times too."

“Fuck you, Patrick,” Ryan said, rolling over finally. “God, my fucking dick hurts.”

The next day they were eating their MREs when all three Drills came and sat down in the middle of the group.

Ryan could feel Phillip's gaze on him. He had four-day-old camouflage on his face, his uniform looked like hell, the boots were even worse and his BCG's were hanging off his nose at an awkward angle because Kenneth had sat on them their second day in.

He didn't feel hot but under Phillip's gaze he could live with it. It always made him feel hot when the other man was watching him.

Ryan glanced up at Phillip through his long eyelashes. The man didn't ever look less than tidy. Hell, even his uniform looked freshly pressed. His white teeth flashed when he smiled, making Ryan take a deep breath. It was not right how good the Drill looked. Ryan was pretty sure that the 'enemy' could smell every single one of them. He stunk like hell. He should have known it was a dream when he couldn't actually smell himself in it.

“Freckles, after this where are you going?” Grabowski asked.

Every set of eyes was on him. He didn't realize this was a round robin. “Umm....Ft. Knox. AIT,” he said.

“Tanker or Scout?” King asked.

“Scout all the way!” Ryan said, with a smile.

“Fucking crunchies.” Both Connelly and King said it at the same time.

“Don't hate on us because you're not cool like that,” Phillip said easily, smiling wide.

“Gandhi?”

Patrick looked up; that seemed to be his cue to start talking. Ryan knew it already, so he just kept his eyes on Grabowski.

The road march back to the barracks sucked so much ass that Ryan didn't even want to go into just how much ass it sucked. The 15 miles at the end of FTX was brutal. Every one of

them had on at least seventy-five pounds of equipment. They started out at seven in the evening and at midnight they were still marching. Guys were falling out left and right.

“Dude, if I walk one more step I'm going to pass out,” Patrick said from his right.

“Fuck, no. We're finishing this bitch, Patrick,” Brendon said stubbornly.

Ryan felt like butt-stroking Brendon. He had been channeling Richard fucking Simmons for the past two hours. Even Kenneth, who could handle Brendon longer than either he or Patrick could, was rapidly becoming grouchier and grouchier with their friend.

Patrick muttered something like 'fuck you' but kept on walking.

“Come on, Privates!” Phillip's voice came from behind them. He walked steadily, not even hunched over. Hell, the man looked like he was taking a leisurely walk in the fucking park.

Ryan hated the man all the more now.

Brendon grinned. "Right with ya, Drill Sergeant Grabowski."

The other three men glared at Brendon.

"If I slit his throat before we get back do you think we can rule it 'justifiable homicide?'"

Kenneth asked.

"Nah, Rosey-Ass, you planned it while I was standing behind you," Grabowski retorted.

"Furry is a fucking squared-the-fuck-away soldier. Lean, mean and ready to fucking kill. Right,

Furry?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant Grabowski!"

This time Ryan and Patrick looked at the blond and glared at him.

When the Drill picked up his pace Ryan sighed. The man had the world's longest legs.

"Furry, you fucker! Why don't you kiss the fuck up some more?" Patrick bitched.

"Don't hate me because I'm young and in better shape than you old farts," Brendon teased.

"Yeah, well fuck you too, son. When we get back to the barracks I'm going to tie you to your bed and let everyone have a blanket party all over your ass," Patrick warned.

Ryan snorted. That would be the day. The night after Brendon had gotten them smoked for talking when he shouldn't have, four guys came into the room, going to give Brendon his own wake up call. Patrick had been awake and all hell broke loose in their room. Needless to say the blanket party didn't happen and there hadn't been a threat since.

“Can you believe it? Dude, two more weeks and we're all out of here.” Brendon sounded sad.

“Two weeks furlough and then off to AIT.” Kenneth sighed.

Patrick, Brendon and Ryan all snorted. “AIT first, then we get leave for two weeks.”

“It doesn't seem possible, does it?” Ryan asked. “Six weeks ago we didn't know each other...”

“And now we would die for each other,” Patrick finished with a grin.

“Speak for yourselves. Y'all get shot I'm gonna patch your asses up and ship you right back to the front.” Kenneth laughed.

“Evil fucker.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

They slept for nearly twelve hours. After the 15k all three Drills sent them up to shower and then finally they were allowed to sleep like babies. Strangely once they all made it to bed none of them felt like sleeping.

“Are you guys asleep yet?” asked Brendon.

“Not really,” Kenneth answered.

“Nah,” Ryan said.

“Me either.”

“Can you all believe that we've got a week before we leave?” Brendon was just full of questions.

“We made it,” Kenneth said. Everyone heard the grin in his voice.

“Not yet. I still haven't passed that damn PT test,” Patrick grouched.

“You're gonna pass it this time,” Brendon stated with dogged determination.

“That run kicks everyone's ass unless you're Gracin and are freakishly bowlegged.”

“Fuck you, Kenny,” Ryan said good-naturedly. “You’ll pass it, Patrick. I’ll run with you.”

Everyone in the room laughed at that. It was a well known fact that out of the four of them Ryan was the best runner. He had a long stride and flew through the two-mile course.

“No. Stay with Furry. Make sure he maxes out. Perfect three hundred.” Patrick nodded.

It was Brendon's goal to max out the PT test. All four men worked hard to make sure Brendon could do that very thing.

“If you all think I’m going to run a thirteen-minute two-mile you have lost your damn mind,” Patrick muttered.

The very next morning they were all in their PT clothing. Surprisingly all three of their Drill Sergeants were there in BDUs.

After stretching they all patted Brendon on the back.

“Go after it!” Ryan encouraged.

“You got this in the bag, man,” Kenneth said.

They arrived in front of King, who smiled. “Alright, Furry. Seventy-one push-ups in two minutes. You can do this!” he commanded. “GO!”

Brendon went down. It was a blur for him after that. King would yell out his numbers every time he came back up.

“Sixty-six,” King said. “Forty seconds.”

Ryan tensed.

“He's got it. He saves a burst for the end.” Kenneth said, confident his friend would make it.

“Yup. No one is going to stop Murray,” Patrick intoned.

“Seventy!” King cried. “Twenty seconds, come on Furry. You got this!”

That seemed to push Brendon harder than anything else. His Drill knew he had it. He pushed out five more push-ups.

Ryan let out a rebel yell. Kenneth cheered and Patrick just smiled.

The other three went through their push-ups easily, not coming close to Brendon's seventy-five but happy with their own scores.

They moved over to where Connelly was standing.

He didn't say much, just looked at Brendon and nodded. That seemed to do the trick.

Brendon was off doing sit-ups like a shot. Kenneth held his feet tightly, shouting encouragement at the little blond.

"Seventy," Connelly called. "Fifty-five seconds."

"Come on, Furry. You can't fucking quit now!" Ryan snarled when it looked like Brendon was going to have a hard time finishing.

Connelly looked down at Brendon and said the only thing that would have made Brendon mad enough to finish.

“You gonna go back and tell that girl that you couldn't fucking finish, Furry?”

Brendon growled and pushed out the remaining eight sit-ups with ten seconds left to finish.

Kenneth hated sit-ups nearly as much as Patrick hated the run. Ryan knew this. He patted Kenneth on the back and nodded. “Fifty-three, you can do it, Kenneth. We know you can.”

Kenneth snorted. “Thanks, mom. If I do this will you have warm cookies and milk waiting for me?”

Ryan chuckled him in the back of the head with a laugh.

Brendon was still breathing hard when he grabbed Kenneth's feet. Their eyes met and a pact was made. No one, absolutely no one would flunk this fucker.

Kenneth finished with the bare minimal sit-ups required. He wasn't bitching, a go was a go.

They all flew through their sit-ups and push-ups. That was the easy part.

The run came next.

They all hated the run, every last one of them. The monotonous circling was enough to drive anyone crazy. Patrick's normally reserved demeanor was tense.

Ryan knew it was because this was his last chance to graduate with this class. He had to pass this one.

Grabowski was the grader for this run. He looked over at Patrick and nodded. Like the other two, he greeted Brendon with encouragement. "Thirteen minutes, Furry. That's all you need. Do this and I'll personally give you a coin. You gonna do it, Furry?"

Brendon nodded. "Yes, Drill Sergeant!"

They were off with little fanfare. Ryan and Brendon were in the front. They kept pace with each other. Kenneth and Patrick were behind them. Way behind them.

"If Patrick fails we all do," Brendon said suddenly.

"He's not..." Ryan looked at Brendon, for the first time seeing the man behind the boy. He nodded and they both slowed way down. People passed them easily.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Patrick barked.

“A perfect three hundred will suck if you're not beside us at Graduation,” Brendon said, dropping beside Patrick.

“We're finishing this together,” said Ryan. He felt the sudden urge to cry. He started to wonder if they could sound any more like girls than they did right at that point.

“This is a bad fucking cliché,” Kenneth said, but grinned at the other two.

Patrick growled and pushed himself a little harder.

“Come on, Smith!” Grabowski yelled when they came around past him. Ryan happened to look over and he could have sworn the Drill Sergeant was grinning.

This was no longer about Brendon scoring perfectly. This was about four boys who grew up together. If one failed they all failed, and that was not going to happen.

Grabowski was shouting out times as each soldier passed. When the four of them passed he shouted the time. This time Ryan looked over and smiled when Grabowski grinned at him. He noticed that the other two drills came over and stood with Grabowski the timer.

On the last leg of the two miles Patrick was huffing and just wanted to do nothing more than sit down.

“You will not fucking walk!” Brendon barked. This run was actually pretty easy for him. “Fifteen minutes flat. We can fucking do this in fifteen minutes.”

Ryan had run behind Patrick. “You slow down and I’ll run your ass over, Patrick, so fucking move!”

“You’re not fucking quitting, Patrick. We’re not letting you.”

They were fifty feet away from Grabowski when others who had already finished their run began to shout encouragement at Patrick. Even King and Connelly were shouting at them.

They made it to Grabowski, who yelled. "Done."

Patrick was huffing even worse as he jogged off the track. The other three were right behind him but looked back at Grabowski.

"15:12."

They cheered and thumped Patrick on the back.

After the last man finished Grabowski walked around congratulating each of them.

When he got to Brendon he stayed longer.

Ryan couldn't hear what was being said but he saw Phillip shake Murray's hand. He noticed tears welling up in Brendon's eyes. He would ask about it once they got back to the barracks.

Back in the barracks all four men were gathering their stuff for a shower.

“What did Grabowski want?” Kenneth asked.

“He shook my hand and said he was proud of me,” Brendon whispered and then held out his hand. In his palm was a silver coin.

Getting a coin from someone like Drill Sergeant Grabowski was a huge honor. It meant even more because Brendon had given up his goal of a perfect PT test to make sure Patrick finished the race.

They were woken at three the next morning. Ryan wasn't surprised when they were ordered into BDUs. Their BCT was almost over. In six days they would all be heading to their individual schools. They would no longer be together and Ryan was extremely sad about that. Kenneth. Patrick. Brendon. They were all his best friends. They were men who had taken everything BCT had thrown at them and come back for more. He was pretty certain that while high school friends were easily forgotten those three men would forever remain his driving force.

They were in formation and marched to a clear, open field. Once there they were ordered into an 'open ranks' formation.

Drill Sergeant Grabowski cleared his throat. "Eight weeks ago you came into this not knowing what to expect. You were all different people and acted like such. Over these last eight

weeks I had the privilege to watch you all grow and become a working machine. This is one of my best classes. I have been honored to be with each one of you.”

Ryan glanced down the line. Patrick was biting his lips to keep from crying. Brendon actually was crying and Kenneth kept blinking like he wanted to cry, but not in front of them.

“Now you men are United States Soldiers,” Phillip said, his voice strong and proud.

“Repeat after me!”

All of them stood a little taller.

As I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death! I will fear no Evil!”

“As I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death! I will Fear no evil!”

Phillip's face grew hard. “For *I* am the baddest motherfucker in this valley!”

They repeated it at a dull roar.

“HOOOAH!” Phillip yelled.

“HOOOOAH!” It was the first time they had been allowed to use the term. Each man was nearly giddy that the Drill Sergeant demanded they say it. It meant in *his* eyes they were *soldiers*.

Ryan on the other hand was crying like Brendon. All those weeks had changed him. Suddenly it wasn't all about him. It was about the guys who he served with. The guys who he cried, bled and sweated with. This was what it was all about.

Grabowski, King and Connelly had done their jobs and done them well. They had broken each of them and remade them into men who would gladly die for each other. It seemed odd to Ryan to think of the Drill Sergeants as anything but evil bastards who wanted nothing

more than to kill them in their sleep. Now he thought of them as men who built character and team mates.

Grabowski was standing in front of Ryan. "Congratulations, Private First Class Gracin," he said, in his soft oh-so-sexy voice. He held his hand out and Ryan took it. He could feel the plastic tag slide into his hand. As he walked away he smiled one more time at Ryan. King and Connelly both congratulated Ryan and moved down the row with Grabowski.

"Congratulations, Private Smith."

Ryan was crying. He didn't care who saw. They had made it. They were Soldiers. Together. Even stoic Patrick was crying.

After the ceremony they were sent back to the barracks to clean and pack their bags.

Three days after, he was about to get the shock of his life during 'Family Day'.

The day was beautiful. Ryan knew that each man was excited to see girlfriends, parents or siblings. It saddened Ryan some that no one came for him. He had called home and told his parents he was graduating, but they claimed they didn't have time to come and watch it. So, unlike his friends, Ryan would be back at the barracks. Thankfully he wasn't the only one.

Drill Sergeant King came in smiling more than normal. Following him was a four-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl.

Ryan smiled. At one point he would have sworn that King was just a machine assembled at Drill Sergeant School but seeing him with his children made the man seem....human.

The Drill Sergeant laughed at something his daughter said.

“Privates, I know it's hard to imagine that anyone ever willingly had kids with Drill Sergeant King,” Connelly said.

“Hims MY daddy,” the boy said, grinning wildly.

Jamie King stood off to the side. Ryan thought she was really pretty.

They had been in the formation for a while now. Parents and family members were mingling alongside each other, not saying much of anything, just grinning at their loved ones.

“DADDY!!” came the loud cry of a dark-haired little girl. Ryan figured she was Connelly's daughter, even though she didn't look one bit like him. That's when it hit him. The little girl was the spitting image of....

“Smidge!” Phillip said, wrapping his daughter into his arms.

Ryan must have swayed or something because Patrick whispered 'steady' to him as he watched the two in front of him embrace. He noticed a pretty, petite, dark-haired woman standing at the side smiling at the two. He wanted to seriously cry. Then he wanted to beat the living shit out of Grabowski. What was it with him and finding the wrong freaking men every single fucking time?

Ryan didn't feel like going to the 'Davis Club' with the others who didn't have family show up. Instead he went back into the barracks. It had been nearly eight hours since he saw Phillip and his family together. He was still fucking miserable. Kenneth, Brendon and Patrick had almost stayed with him until he threatened to kick their asses. He wasn't a fucking girl, for

God sakes. He was thankful that Graduation was tomorrow. He couldn't stand the thought of seeing Phillip again.

The man, who had kissed the hell out of him, fucked with him and in general made his life unbearable was fucking married with a kid.

He noticed the Drill Sergeant's office door was open but didn't go in. Instead he just went back to his stripped bed.

He lay down on the bed that had been Patrick's and thought about his life. He didn't hear the heavy footsteps that stopped just outside his door.

Phillip stood just outside Ryan's door. He smiled to himself thinking of the first time he had seen Ryan. He had decided to run over to reception and see what the new recruits looked like.

Bob had laughed about Ryan, calling the blond a little 'twink'. Phillip agreed, but Ryan was easily the best-looking twink he had ever seen. Even if he was a four-eyes.

Ryan had run off the bus with his hair flying. Phillip remembered how his breath had caught. He had never seen a more beautiful man in his entire life. Right then and there he prayed that Ryan would be assigned to anyone but him.

When he noticed that Ryan had been assigned to his platoon he wanted to kill someone - or bend the young recruit over the couch in the office and fuck him senseless. Ryan nearly made his military bearing a complete sham. It had been over since Phillip had seen how beautiful Ryan's green eyes were. They were so clear and so youthful that it almost hurt Phillip to look at him.

King and Connelly had teased him unmercifully about his 'crush' on the raw recruit. He had to make sure that it wasn't found out by the other recruits.

That would have been a very bad thing but it didn't stop him from kissing Ryan when he noticed him in the 'Davis Club' - a place where he shouldn't have been but had followed the four in like a guard dog.

The whole set-up during the combative came from Connelly. That fucking bastard. Once Ryan's body touched his, Phillip had been a complete mess. After that it was less about teaching and more about rubbing against that hard body.

To say that he had taken advantage of his position above Ryan was a gross understatement.

"Freckles," he said.

He watched as Ryan surged to his feet. After eight weeks of hearing his voice Phillip knew that it was a conditioned response. “At ease,” he said quietly.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” Ryan greeted him, his tone a bit icier than normal.

“PFC Gracin,” Phillip replied. “Why didn't you go out with your friends?”

“I didn't feel like going to the Club, Drill Sergeant.”

Phillip thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “Come to my office.” He about-faced and walked into the office, not paying attention to whether Ryan was on his way in or not. He wanted to be alone with the kid. He wanted to be able to look at him without disguising his looks, but most of all he wanted to be able to have the moment alone with Ryan that he had wanted since the first time he saw him.

Ryan entered behind him. His face was hard to read.

For Phillip it was hard to grasp. Ryan's face had always been so easy to read he almost felt bad for the kid. He followed Ryan's gaze and saw it was resting on a picture of Katie. "My daughter," he said, smiling. "My ex brought her up today because after tomorrow I have a week off." He watched as Ryan's demeanor changed rapidly. "She's with my mom right now. I drew babysitting duty tonight."

"Ex?"

"Yes, Gracin. I'm a dick but I wouldn't fuck around on a spouse." Phillip kept his tone light. He sat behind the desk and motioned for Ryan to sit down.

Phillip could practically feel the tension melt off Ryan.

They sat in uncomfortable silence before Ryan broke it up.

“How long have you been in?” he asked carefully.

Phillip knew that it had to kill Ryan to be so informal with him. After he had graduated from Basic he had been the same way. Suddenly instead of being the FNG (fucking new guy) he was the ‘been there, done that’ guy. His Drill sat down and drank a beer with him even though he wasn't old enough. The whole time Phillip figured he was just one fuck-up away from the smoking of his life.

“I joined when I was seventeen. Graduated early from high school and followed my father's footsteps,” Phillip said proudly. “That was nine years ago.” Anywhere else in the world he and Ryan would have been peers, but not so much in the Army.

Surprise was all over Ryan's face. Phillip knew how that went too. Something about Drills always made them think of the old hard-nosed veterans that his dad hung around with, not some young guy that had already seen way too much of the world.

“Surprised?” he asked.

Ryan seemed to think about it for a second. “Yeah, I guess so, Drill Sergeant.”

Phillip laughed then. “How about we knock the Drill Sergeant stuff off for the moment?” He laughed again when Ryan paled and looked nervous. “It's just us and you're practically out of here anyway.”

They lapsed into the same silence as before. Phillip had never had this hard of a time with anyone he was attracted to before. He knew he should just let the kid go back to his room and forget him but somehow forgetting Ryan Gracin was going to be a lot harder than he thought.

“Um, I should go back to my room. I have to...” Ryan rose and turned.

Phillip waited all of one second before he too rose and was around his desk. He caught the back of Ryan's uniform and turned him around. "Fuck it," he growled before slamming his lips down on Ryan's.

Something about kissing Ryan brought out the madman in him. He couldn't stop kissing him if his life depended on it. His tongue demanded entry and Ryan was all too willing to give it to him. He was surely going to hell if he didn't stop this.

It didn't surprise Phillip one bit when Ryan didn't. Instead he just slammed the door shut with his foot, never breaking the kiss.

He pushed Ryan against the door and let his hands wander down the blonds' sides. He pulled his lips away from a mouth that should be absolutely illegal. His mouth wandered from those lips to the nicely-carved cheekbones, to the long, graceful neck that disappeared beneath his BDU top.

He paused only for a second. "If you don't want this, now would be a good time to say so."

For a moment Phillip thought Ryan was going to leave. Ryan's hand settled on the door for a moment-- and then turned the lock on the door.

A soft click was heard and then a deep growl. Phillip grabbed the smaller man closer to him, crushing their bodies tightly together. That was all the affirmation he needed.

He lowered his lips again and pulled Ryan over to the couch, then paused as if he were thinking about something. Phillip smiled wickedly. He eyed the pull-up bar on the opposite side of the office. Oh yeah, he had plans, but that would wait.

He sat down on the couch and pulled Ryan with him. For now he wanted to kiss Ryan. He wanted to kiss him for every single time the kid had made him hard - for every single time when the need to kiss Ryan became almost too overpowering to stop himself from doing so.

He was ravishing Ryan's lips, nibbling outright, biting them when Ryan would try to take over the kiss. One hand reached up and cupped the back of Ryan's neck, angling it so he was the one in control. He nearly dropped Ryan when the other man's hands slid up and down on his chest. He had wanted to feel those hands forever. It had been hell having Ryan rubbing against him during the class but he wouldn't have changed it. Nope, because it was a way he could feel Ryan's hands.

His other hand was busy on its own. He was trying to unbutton the top and get it off Ryan. He didn't want anything to be in his way and he HAD to touch Ryan right the fuck now. "Fucking top," he snarled against Ryan's lips. Buttons began to fly. He finally got the thing off Ryan and then pulled away enough to take the brown t-shirt off. Finally he was touching alabaster skin.

With Ryan across his lap he could tease and taste everything he wanted. His lips grazed one little nipple and Ryan moaned. His tongue caressed it until it was pebble-hard. His breath

was hot against Ryan's cool skin. "You are so fucking hot, Gracin. I thought about doing this to you all the fucking time." He breathed out, trailing hot kisses across Ryan's chest until he could give the other nipple the same treatment.

Ryan was mumbling things Phillip couldn't understand. He laughed huskily as he went to work on the belt and pant bottoms. His tongue traced a path back up to Ryan's throat. He wasn't giving the man time to think about what Ryan wanted to do to him. He just kept up the proverbial mind-fuck on. His mouth and hands never stopped moving, never once stopped in their exploration. One hand left Ryan's neck and the other slid confidently over his rapidly-filling cock. When he finally got the pants unbuttoned he pushed Ryan to his feet. With skillful hands he pushed the bottoms and his briefs from his body. They pooled around his boots. Ryan bent at the waist and tried to pull the boots off but his hands were shaking so badly that he was making a mess of it.

Phillip pushed Ryan's hands away and finished it himself. He grinned wolfishly when Ryan was standing there in absolutely nothing.

“You're overdressed,” Ryan said. They were the first words he had uttered. Phillip liked how breathy and low the other man's voice was. Phillip's cock throbbed unmercifully.

The push-up bar was six feet off the ground. Phillip grinned evilly at it. He watched as Ryan turned and looked at it. “Not ready for it,” Phillip said dismissively. “What we *are* going to do is play a little game.”

He nearly howled with laughter when Ryan blinked owlshly at him. “Shh, it's a fun game.” He rose and led Ryan over to the bar. “See this bar?” When Ryan nodded Phillip continued. “You're going to grab this bar. Hold on with every ounce of control you have. If your hands leave it at any time I'll stop.” He did laugh when Ryan swallowed hard.

Phillip watched as Ryan's shaky hands reached up and grabbed the bar.

“Got a good hold?” Phillip asked; his voice was rough, gravelly. “Don't fucking let go.”

Ryan watched as his Drill Sergeant sank to his knees. It was quite possibly the hottest thing he had ever seen in his life - Phillip in full uniform sinking to his knees. Yeah, Ryan could die now and be a happy man. At least he thought that until the hot mouth that had given him many a wet dream drew the tip of his penis into it. His fingers flexed on the cool, steel bar.

A pair of large hands reached around and cupped his ass. Then that fucking mouth began to slowly descend down his aching cock. The hands flexed, kneading his ass until Ryan wanted to cry. Both hands left and Ryan could still feel them on him.

He glanced down and saw Phillip fumbling in his pocket. He was vaguely surprised to see him pull out a tube of lube. "Fucking boy scout," Ryan mumbled. Then he couldn't talk at all.

Phillip chuckled huskily around his cock sending vibrations of pleasure shooting through every nerve in Ryan's body. The dark-haired man slowly and tortuously slid his mouth up and down the length of Ryan's dick, swirling his tongue around different spots so slowly that Ryan wanted to growl.

Ryan hadn't felt this horny since he was in high school. His hips began to move forward but a strong arm caught them and the mouth left.

“Didn't you get the memo, Gracin? I'm in charge here,” Phillip said smokily. “No moving, nothing.” The hands that had left his ass came back.

Ryan could feel the wetness on them. One hand parted the cheeks and the other slid between, rubbing against his tight hole. Ryan could count on one hand how many times he bottomed but he knew that this time would probably be the best. He moaned low in his throat

as one long finger circled him. Then finally that mouth settled back down on his cock. As

Phillip slid his mouth lower a finger sank into him.

The moment the finger rubbed against the little bundle of nerves Ryan nearly screamed like a girl. The sensation of being penetrated along with the wet heat of the mouth on his cock was slowly driving him insane.

Phillip had his timing down to a fine art. As his mouth slid up his cock his finger slipped out. When his mouth went down his finger pushed in. Ryan wanted to wrap his hand around the other man's head and force him to go faster but in the back of his mind he knew doing so would stop this. So instead he tightened his grip on the bar.

The hand behind him slipped away and Ryan DID cry out then.

“Fucking teasing prick!” he breathed. It was saying something when he could call the man on his knees that.

Phillip raised an eyebrow at that but his hazel eyes were hot with both amusement and want. It was a lethal combination.

When the hand came back Ryan sighed. He could feel two fingers carefully entering him. Phillip took pleasure in stroking against Ryan's prostate. It seemed to last forever and not long enough. Phillip scissored his fingers inside of Ryan, preparing him. Phillip's mouth left his cock and slid lower, licking and tonguing his balls. It was the best blow job Ryan had ever received.

Ryan wanted more, so much more. "More!" He demanded it.

Phillip did that low, vibrating chuckle around Ryan's cock again and a shudder tore through Ryan's body.

Soon enough Phillip had sunk three fingers into him and Ryan was nearly in tears. Every time he felt like he was close Phillip would withdraw his fingers and mouth. He would whisper suggestions so dirty that the closeted kink inside of Ryan would roar to life.

Phillip's mouth left his cock and began to nibble on his hips. "You taste so fucking good. I could spend forever tasting you and never get tired of it." He growled. He slowly began to move up. He stepped back and his hot gaze slid up and down the blonds' body.

"Do you have any idea how fucking like a God you look? You're driving me fucking insane." Phillip's hands grabbed one of Ryan's wrists and then the other, tugging them down together until one hand had a hold of another.

Ryan had never felt small before, not before this man. Phillip made him not only feel small but feel almost delicate, not to mention making him harder than a fucking stone.

Phillip leaned in and lazily kissed Ryan's mouth.

Finally Phillip allowed Ryan to unbutton his BDU top. Up until that point Ryan thought Phillip was going to just unbutton his pants and fuck him like that. Not that Ryan would have cared. He could have dealt with it as long as Phillip was inside of him.

The kiss broke and Phillip's grin turned evil. "I'm going to fuck you," he said. He moved away and he took over removing his own clothes. "I'm going to fuck you in every inch of this office so when you're gone I'll have the fucking memories of it."

It was a good thing Phillip stripped himself because Ryan's knees chose that moment to go weak. His hands shook harder than before. Green eyes widened and he managed a weak grin. "Talk's cheap," he said, amazed that he was able to say anything.

Maybe this was one of those times when he should have just kept his mouth shut.

Phillip's gaze turned hotter, his mouth in a firm line of determination. Oh yeah, Phillip was going to make him pay.

“Look who's gotten brave all of a sudden,” Phillip said, as he advanced on Ryan slowly.

He reminded Ryan of a wolf slowly stalking its prey. The man didn't even blink.

Ryan took a step back.

Phillip grinned.

Ryan decided he should probably run but remembered he couldn't. He was in a fucking locked office.

He took another step but the other man's long gait had caught up to him.

“Do you know what happens now, PFC?” Phillip asked. His voice was beyond hot. It was the sun, slowly burning Ryan.

“Um, I put my clothes on and leave?” he asked. Oh God, he was just begging for it.

“Nope, I fuck you until you beg me to stop,” he whispered and then took Ryan's mouth. He grabbed both cocks and rubbed them against each other wantonly. A needy moan tore from Ryan.

Phillip cackled and pushed Ryan until the man was sitting on his desk. Papers and knickknacks fell when Phillip slammed his hips forward. He moved away only to grab his pants. He pulled out a condom and grabbed the lube.

Ryan slapped his hands away and took over there. He had wanted to touch Phillip for eight fucking weeks and the man wasn't going to deny him. He stroked the man several times before tearing into the packet and slipping the condom out. He expertly rolled the condom over the Drill Sergeant's impressive girth. It would figure that Phillip would be fucking perfect. He popped the top off the tube and squirted it generously on his hands. Slowly he slid them up and down over the other man's sheathed cock.

Ryan took great pleasure in hearing the man not only groan but whimper as Ryan's hands worked over him.

When Phillip could take no more he grasped Ryan's legs and pulled them up around his waist. They were face to face and both men had mirrored expressions of want and need.

Phillip seemed to take pity on him, finally. He pulled back and lined himself up with Ryan's opening. Slowly he began to push inside, past the outer rings until the tip was sitting

snugly inside of Ryan. It burned and was a little painful. Ryan hissed but refused to let him stop.

Phillip paused and looked at him. Ryan smiled shakily up at him.

“Don't take this the wrong way but you're fucking huge,” Ryan said, breathlessly.

Phillip chuckled and kissed the top of Ryan's head. If Ryan hadn't enjoyed it so much he probably would have bitched about it, but as it was Phillip didn't give him time. He began to suck on the flesh at his neck and then slipped back up to Ryan's red, puffy lips. Nothing to bitch about then.

Phillip's mouth went back to Ryan's neck. Ryan moaned and tried to push his hips down but strong powerful hands stopped him and teeth stung as Phillip bit down. Hard.

Ryan gave up even trying to pretend he was in control. He began to wiggle and whine.

Phillip finally pushed in further until he was deep inside of him.

Both men were breathing hard, trying to calm down some before they continued.

“God, you fucking feel so good,” Phillip hissed when Ryan tightened around him. He pulled out and slowly sank back in.

The pain and burn began to melt away. All Ryan wanted was what Phillip had promised him. He threw back his head and cursed. “Are you fucking going to make me beg you to stop? Or are you just full of hot air?”

Phillip's hazel eyes turned into slits. His grin turned devilish. “I'm not the one with a dick up my ass and will have problems marching tomorrow.” With that said he pulled out and then slammed back in.

Ryan howled. His hands came to rest on strong, muscled shoulders. Neatly trimmed fingernails broke flesh when Phillip started a pace that was sure to leave him not only bruised but walking more than a little funny.

The desk shook under Phillip's thrusts. Papers fell over the sides. A name plate crashed to the floor and Ryan's cries were echoing off the walls.

“You're a fucking loud piece of ass,” Phillip said hotly and slammed his lips into Ryan's.

Ryan would have been offended if he didn't see the wicked, pleased gleam in the other man's eyes.

Phillip angled the thrust and nailed Ryan's prostate over and over, making Ryan leave a red streak of nail marks down Phillip's back. That seemed to spur Phillip even more. This time it was his cries that filled the office.

“You're a fucking loud piece of ass, Grabowski!” Ryan breathed.

“Phillip. Call me Phillip,” the man ordered.

Put like that, Ryan didn't have a choice. "Phillip." God, he was saying it for real.

"Fuck!" Phillip moaned. His hand went to Ryan's cock and expertly pulled. "Come for me, Ryan." The pace and strength of his thrust both sped up and became stronger.

Ryan's eyes went wide and then it was all over. The cock slamming into him, the hand on his cock and Phillip saying his name for the first time ever sent him careening over the edge. He screamed Phillip's name again and came in long spurts all over the other man's hand and on his own stomach.

When Ryan's muscles clamped tight around his cock Phillip knew it was over. He came hard into the condom, chanting Ryan's name like a prayer.

He rode out his orgasm and then slumped down against Ryan's belly. "Holy shit," he gasped.

Ryan wasn't saying much. He was trying to keep himself from crying like a girl. He had never come that hard before in his life. He was still seeing stars.

Slowly reality came back. Ryan knew this was a one-time deal. The idea of running into this particular man was a laughable notion. Ryan didn't believe in fate or destiny. This was just a really great fuck - one that when he got older, he would think back to, the time with Phillip, and smile happily.

"I think I just broke about fifty Army regulations," Phillip said huskily.

“That’s okay. It's not breaking the rules when we both enjoyed it,” Ryan said, his voice hoarse.

Phillip chuckled and pulled out. Ryan hissed but didn't move.

“You okay?”

Ryan nodded his head. “Umm, sure. I'm just the latest in desk decorations.”

Phillip laughed at that. “Then I'll take two - one for my desk here and one for home.”

Then it was as if he realized what he had just said and his mouth slammed shut.

“Luckily for you there’s a ‘buy one, get one free’ special.” Ryan opened his long lashed eyes and looked at Phillip.

“It's cool. I'm not some clingy chick who’s going to go all crazy on you.”

Phillip nodded.

The younger man decided that there was never a better sight in the world than a post-orgasmic Phillip Grabowski.

“Come on.” Phillip helped Ryan get up and then settled their bodies together on the couch. Ryan’s BCGs were over there.

They looked at the clock. It was getting close to the time for the guys to come back.

Phillip looked at Ryan and grinned. Phillip's hands began to travel down and he winked.

“I think we can manage one for the road.” And they proceeded to do just that.

An hour later, Ryan was getting ready to leave. He found his scattered buttons and glared at the Drill Sergeant, who commented on his 'messed up uniform.'

"I wasn't the one who ripped the buttons off." Ryan defended.

Phillip just sucked his own bottom lip into his mouth and then broke into that heartbreaking grin.

On his way out Phillip called him back. "Ryan, here." Ryan warmed at the nickname and barely caught what Phillip had thrown at him.

It was a sewing kit.

The next morning Ryan woke slowly. He was wonderfully sore in all the right places. He didn't bother covering up the hickey close to his collar. It felt good to have it there, like a sign to show him that he hadn't dreamed it. He stretched and winced. There was a reason he didn't bottom and he was feeling it now.

“Dude, come on!” Patrick said, poking him. “We gotta get dressed.”

“Patrick?” Ryan asked huskily.

The other man rolled his eyes. “No, I'm a short Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” Patrick laughed when Ryan's eyes popped open.

Kenneth and Brendon came in at that point and kept the conversation light.

Ryan rolled out of the bed and walked gingerly to his wall locker.

“Dude!” Patrick exclaimed. “You alright? I mean you always were bow legged but...damn is there something worse than bowlegged?”

Kenneth watched Ryan for a minute and then declared, “You're walking like you had a two-by-four up your ass.”

Brendon blinked and didn't get right away why everyone burst into laughter.

There was something about marching in front of the view stands that made all of them stand a little taller. Drill Sergeant Grabowski had marched them to the field. He called a cadence that was low and sad. His voice fitted it perfectly.

Onto the field they marched. At the call of 'Eyes Right!' everyone except the one closest to the stands snapped their heads to the right. It was a salute without being a salute. The ceremony seemed to go too fast for Ryan to remember it all that well.

Drill Sergeant Grabowski in his Class A's was a sight to behold. He looked absolutely untouchable, which made Ryan a happy man because he had already touched him.

They stood still for the speeches. Instead of being bored out of his freaking mind by all the buttering up 'they came here as boys and left as men' speech, Ryan actually listened this time. Hell, he thought he had tears forming.

His mind drifted over all of the trials they'd been subjected to since they arrived there. Brendon and sitting at the Drill Sergeant's table; Ken damn nearly knocking Drill Sergeant King's hat to the ground; Patrick being called 'Patricia' by Drill Sergeant Connelly. It was the small shit that Ryan would always remember.

Running with Patrick to make sure he passed his PT test; the look of pride in Drill Sergeant Grabowski's eyes when Brendon gave up his goal of a perfect PT test; the small things that made this whole mess the absolute best of times.

Being called DSL, Freckles, fuck-up and all of the assorted nicknames didn't make him feel any less of a man. Instead they seemed like badges of sorts.

Afterwards they marched back to the barracks. No one was really leaving. Some would go straight to training while others were going home for a week or two. Ryan decided to just head straight to AIT.

“Well. That's that,” Ken said. For the first time he sounded gruff.

Brendon who never was one to hide his feelings was already crying.

Even stoic Patrick was 'leaking'.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ryan said, taking a deep breath.

“Without sounding like a girl, we have to keep in touch,” Ken said stiffly.

“AKO,” Patrick said.

“Patrick!” A middle aged woman came running up to the man. “God, you were great!”

The other guys just smiled when Patrick rolled his eyes.

“Guys, mom...Mom, Guys.” Patrick introduced them.

“This one has to be Ryan. He has those beautiful green eyes!”

Ryan had to bite his lip not to laugh at that.

“And you must be Brendon. So young. That would make you Ken.” The woman beamed at the other two boys.

Ken snorted, then nodded. “Why Patrick, you didn't have anything to describe me as?” He batted his eyes at his friend, who flipped him off behind his mother's back.

“Kenneth,” a gruff voice called.

Ken sighed and straightened his shoulders. “Sir.” Ryan could see relief on Ken's face to see his father not in uniform.

Even Brendon's family had caught up with him.

Ryan was feeling a bit awkward and excused himself. He walked up the barracks steps and realized it was probably the last time he would do it.

“PFC Gracin. You have guests,” King called from the other side of the walk way.

Ryan blinked and turned around. A smile broke across his face.

“Did you really think that Mom and Dad would keep us away?” his brother Josh asked.

Even his baby sister Mackenzie was there.

He ran and hugged both of them. He couldn't believe they came.

“We wanted to get here last night but Mom refused to let Mac get out of school early.

So we left right after school let out.”

“Freckles.”

Ryan turned suddenly and caught sight of Phillip. His breath caught and he blushed.

The man looked entirely too good in uniform.

“Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” he said respectfully.

“DUDE! That's Grabowski?” Josh blinked. “You didn't mention he was freaking huge...”

“Yeah, and hot!” Mac echoed her brother.

Maybe having his siblings here wasn't such a good idea.

Grabowski just grinned that 'shit-eating grin.' After seeing the post-orgasmic grin on the taller man, Ryan wasn't sure which one he loved the best.

“Mac, Josh. This is Drill Sergeant Grabowski. Drill Sergeant, these are my siblings.

They're normally locked up but someone left paper clips lying around and they broke out.”

He ducked when Josh tried to hit him.

Phillip's grin deepened.

Mac was staring at the brown cadre hat on Phillip's head. Ryan bit his lip when his sister reached up "Mac!" Ryan hissed, grabbing her around the middle. "Don't touch."

"But...Why not?" Oh perfect, she was pouting.

Phillip took a step back and smiled at Mac. "If you touch my hat I may have to be evil to your brother."

Ryan frowned when Mac actually had to consider it. "Brat."

“I wanna see the punishments. Did they spank you?” Mac gave her very best ‘I’m innocent’ look.

“Get bent, Mac.” Ryan sighed.

He spent a few hours with his siblings and then waved as they drove off. Patrick and Brendon were waiting back at the barracks. All three had a four AM bus for Fort Knox.

Ken had already taken off with his father, with the promise to keep in touch. Ryan looked up and saw Drill Sergeant Connelly walking toward them.

“Get your stuff together. It's time to go.”

All three took one last look around their barracks room.

“Why am I so sad?” Brendon asked.

“Because no matter how hellish this place was...It was probably the best place we've ever been,” Patrick said quietly.

Ryan nodded. “What's that old quote? It was the best of times and the worst of times.”

They walked quietly out of the room. Ryan was the last one out. With one last look he turned off the lights.

At the bus station Connelly dropped them off. He grinned at them all. Then he surprised the shit out of both Ryan and Brendon by leaning down, whispering into Patrick's ear. When Patrick turned around he was blushing.

“Dude!”

“You did not!”

Both Ryan and Brendon didn't quite know what to say.

“First off, don't dude me, Ryan...you were walking awfully funny this morning for a reason.” He turned to Brendon, who was doing his best impression of a goldfish. “Brendon, don't think about it. You'll just melt your brain.”

The bus pulled up and all three got on. Ryan was kinda bummed that Phillip hadn't come, but he didn't think he would. He looked out the window and sighed.

That's when he saw him. Phillip was standing in civvies, with a tight, white shirt that proclaimed him a 'Cav Trooper' and tight jeans with cowboy boots on. Their eyes met and for a split second Ryan thought about jumping off the bus.

Phillip smiled softly and raised his hand in a mock salute.

Ryan smiled and raised his hand.

That was it. No more. No Less. Basic training was officially over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ryan,

25Jun02

Hey bud. I'm over in the suck now. I can't believe it's been over a year already. The unit I'm assigned to are a bunch of jack-offs. I wished they would have had Grabowski as a Drill. Maybe they'd get that this shit is serious. Anyways it was good seeing you and Patrick last month. Nice send off. I hear Brendon is kicking ass and taking names. Who would have thought that the kid had it in him?

Kenneth

PS did you know that Patrick and Connelly were going at it like bunnies all through
BCT?

Kenneth

26Jun02

Good to hear from you man. We're at NTC now. Got our orders to head over in a few months. I guess I got lucky on the unit part. These guys are pretty squared away. I ran into a guy who had Grabowski. He didn't have a favorable opinion of the man but he's a fuck up so most likely Grabowski rode him hard.

I heard from Brendon last week. He loves Korea. I fucking hated it. I think we all knew he was going to be good at this stuff. He's goofy but he was always a team player.

What the hell? Dude, they were fucking? I'm going to kill Patrick.

Ryan.

Patrick,

5July2002

Fucker! How in the hell did you and Connelly do it?

Ryan

Ryan,

7July2002

Nice to hear from you too! It's all about keeping sex away from the job. You're just pissed off because it took Grabowski eight fucking weeks to get into your pants. Mark and I started during the third week.

Patrick.

Patrick

9July2002

You suck ass.

Ryan.

Ryan,

9July2002

Dude, if that's what you think pleases a man like Grabowski no wonder it was a
onetime deal.

Patrick (who got laid more in BCT than you did!)

Ryan, Patrick, and Kenneth.

20Aug2002

WTF? Seriously. Was everyone except me having sex in BCT?

Brendon

Brendon,

21Aug2002

Nope. Kenneth didn't have sex either and his palm doesn't count.

Ryan

Everyone,

22Aug2002

Fuck y'all. Rosey and her girls fucking rocked it out in basic.

Kenneth

Everyone

23Aug2002

Did you guys hear? Brodrick was killed.

Brendon

Brendon,

23Aug2002

When? Where?

Ryan

Everyone

24Aug2002

Last week in Baghdad. Fuckers. I hope they got the bastards.

Brendon

Everyone

27Aug2002

Anyone know where he's from?

Patrick

Everyone

28Aug2002

California. He just got married too. I hate this fucking war.

Kenneth

Everyone

30Aug2002

Sent flowers to his funeral from us. Seems stupid as fuck to do that.

Patrick

PS Anyone hear from Ryan?

Patrick

01Sept2002

I did. He called and said he was headed over. In Kuwait by now. He tried calling you.

No answer.

Brendon

Hey Guys,

05Oct2002

I'm here. Everything is good. Went out with my BC and we ate Haji food. Don't do it.

Not even if someone in higher rank orders you. I haven't been able to walk two steps without
shitting. I fucking hate it here.

Ryan

Hey guys

02Feb2004

I'm getting out. Two tours and I'm done. I never want to see blood again. Ever.

Kenneth

Kenneth

22Feb2004

Don't blame you man. I've been giving some serious thought to it myself. If I do another fifteen-month tour I may just decide to get the fuck out. Good to know your home though.

Ryan

Hey guys,

02March2004

Made it here. This place is the most godforsaken place I've ever been in.

Brendon

Furry,

03March2004

Keep your head down and ears open.

Grabowski

Hey guys,

04March2004

Y'all will never guess who I got an email from.

Brendon

Brandon

04March2004

Grabowski.

Ryan

Brandon

05March2004

Grabowski

Patrick

Brandon

05March2004

Grabowski

Kenneth

Everyone

12March2004

How did you guys know?

Brendon

Brandon

13March2004

Second day in country he emailed me. Never answered an email though.

Ryan

Everyone

25May2004

Patrick got hit today. He's okay. Just grazed.

Kenneth

Patrick

26May2004

You okay? I heard you got hit. Let us know.

Ryan

Ryan

27May2004

I'm fine. Like Rosey said Just a graze. Fucker couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. My

BC nailed his ass to the wall.

Patrick

Guys,

10June2005

Heading back over with the Tenth. I'll email when I'm in country.

Ryan.

Freckles,

11Nov2005

I know you probably hate that name, but I kinda got attached to it. Anyways I heard through the grapevine that y'all lost your first buddy. It's hard and it sucks but keep on soldiering on. Don't let that get you down, otherwise you could be next.

Drill Sergeant Grabowski.

Drill Sergeant Grabowski,

15Nov2005

Thanks for the note. It actually helped out a lot and I hate to have to admit that.

Freckles or as I like to be addressed now,

Sgt. Ryan Gracin.

SGT Freckles,

25Nov2005

I like Freckles. It has a nice ring to it.

DRILL Sergeant Grabowski. (Or as I'm called now "the fuck up who is now an E5
again.")

26Nov2005

“The Fuck Up”

Dude! How did you lose a rank in five years? Aren't you supposed to gain rank?

SGT Gracin.

Sgt. Freckles Gracin

11Dec2005

Fucking pogue, just out of ROTC snot-nosed little fuck of an officer tried to make my men leave the chow hall after a twenty-four hour QRF. It was a bad day. I didn't react well.

Forever YOUR Drill Sergeant Grabowski

Phillip (we're the same rank get over it.)

24Dec2005

Did you clock the bastard good? I fucking hate those butterbars. They piss me the fuck off. They should have pinned a fucking medal on your chest. I bet the bastard got a purple heart for the ass-kicking he got.

Sgt. Gracin

Sgt Freckles

01Jan2006

Yeah, pissed me off too but I'm outta here in three days and a wake-up. Catch you on the flip side.

Keep your head and ass down. If you do get shot do it in the head. An ass that good shouldn't get fucked up.

Phillip.

Phillip

09Jan2006

You're home now. It's good. Have a beer for me.

Ryan.

Ryan loved Fort Hood. The weather rocked mostly and it was a damn sight better than Iraq. He pulled his pick-up truck into the parking spot outside of the main PX. He had been pleasantly surprised to see Patrick had already been there.

It had been a minor miracle that had them both stationed at Hood. Ryan was very thankful for it though. Patrick had two tours under his belt and Ryan was working on his third. It had been crazy since basic, some five years ago.

Brendon was still kicking it up over at Fort Lewis. Ryan kinda missed the kid. They hadn't seen each other since before Ryan shipped to the freaking box. It had been good to get home after fifteen months.

Kenneth had gotten out a few years back. The stress of being a combat medic got to him, not that Ryan blamed him. Some days he thought it would be a good time for him to get out.

He grabbed the black Stetson on the seat beside him, and pulled it low on his head. The gold braid band was sitting in its spot.

“Ryan, you just like wearing the hat and spurs because it makes you look like a cowboy.” His best friend Patrick laughed, as he pulled in next to Ryan on his motorcycle.

“Yeah, cause the ACU digi pattern is what all the cool cowboys are wearing this year,” Ryan replied dryly.

“Holy shit! Freckles, aren't you just a sight for sore eyes.”

Ryan would know that voice from anywhere. It's the only voice that made a cold sweat break out on his skin. He turned slowly and blinked. Sitting behind the biggest fucking black truck he had ever seen was none other than Drill Sergeant Phillip Grabowski.

Ryan considered himself a good, proper soldier. He had great military bearing and he damn sure wasn't a green FNG. But seeing the Drill Sergeant again made him want to stand at ‘parade rest.’ “Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” he said, by way of greeting. He felt like ramming his head into his truck. He felt like such a dork.

“Keep that up, Sergeant.” Grabowski slurred the words out, making them sound a helluva lot dirtier than they were. “Freckles, I might think you liked me dominating the hell out of you.”

Patrick was biting his lip to keep from laughing. He cleared his throat. "So, *Drill* Sergeant Grabowski, you making a statement with that truck of yours? Over compensating for somethin'?"

Ryan could kill Patrick and probably get away with it. Damn combat stress anyhow.

"I dunno, maybe you should ask your buddy," Phillip said, laughing.

Ryan sighed. This was why he refused to buy a lottery ticket. His luck sucked. That could only explain why Drill Sergeant Fucking Grabowski would be at Hood at the same fucking time as him. "It wasn't anything to write home to momma about," he muttered.

"Dude!" Patrick's eyebrow raised and he burst into laughter. "You walked like a fucking duck all day."

“You know, Patrick, they say that combat stress sometimes takes a while to manifest. I been home for like six months now and I'm starting to feel stressed.” Ryan spoke offhandedly.

“You know what your problem is?” When Ryan didn't answer Grabowski finished anyway. “You don't get laid enough.”

Patrick laughed so hard Ryan thought he was going to fall off his motorcycle. “I keep telling him that but you know our Ryan. He's waiting on his prince to come.”

“You both can kiss my ass. I have an hour lunch and would like to eat if y'all don't mind.” Ryan left both men there. He heard Phillip's truck roar into a parking spot he would have sworn was too small to fit that huge-assed truck into, then two sets of feet pounding behind him.

“Aww, come on Ryan. We're playin' with you. You know you love me,” Patrick said.

Ryan turned and thanked whatever God it was that made him able to look at Grabowski, all six-foot -four inches of him in ACU's, black Stetson and gold spurs and NOT make an ass out of himself. It seems that not only did the man age well, but he fucking looked hotter.

Ryan turned and flipped Patrick off.

“Damn, he's gotten bitchy,” Phillip said with a grin.

They sat at the food court at the PX. Ryan was happily munching away at his Subway Foot long while Patrick ate Popeye's. Both of them were looking at Phillip like he had grown another head.

“Seriously? You're gonna eat all of that?” Patrick blinked.

Phillip had gotten something from just about every fast food place in the joint.

“I'm hungry. I had to get Katie off to school and didn't eat breakfast.” Phillip defended himself as he tore into a Wendy's cheeseburger.

“How in the hell do you eat that shit and not weigh five hundred pounds?” Ryan asked.

The former Drill Sergeant shrugged. “Dunno, good genes I guess.”

“I can't watch. My arteries are already clogging just from being so close to so much grease,” Patrick said as he stood up.

“Mark said y'all were having a reunion this weekend,” Phillip said.

“Yeah. Kenneth and Brendon are coming in. Brendon's on leave and Kenneth comes up about once a month.” Ryan answered for Patrick. “Mark said that King was doing well.”

“Yup he and Jamie had their fifth kid last year.” Phillip smiled widely. “They named him Phillip. How fucking cool is that?”

Patrick snorted. “Don't feel all superior, they named their daughter “Marcy”, he reminded Phillip.

Phillip just grinned.

“Anyways I'll catch you both later. Coming to the bar tonight Phil?” Patrick grinned when Ryan blinked.

Ryan wished he could be as easy with Phillip as Patrick seemed to be. Even fucking the guy the last day of BCT didn't ease Ryan. The man was still the bastard that had fucked with him so hard he still winced whenever someone said they were a Drill Sergeant. He was twenty-seven years old but around Phillip he was back to being twenty-two.

“Probably not. Sandy's coming to pick up Katie-did. She lives over in the Cove.”

Patrick nodded. His phone rang and he smiled. “Awww, I tell ya Mark is like fucking clock work. I'll see y'all later.” He flipped the phone open, carrying his chicken and walked out the door, leaving Phillip and Ryan alone.

Ryan ate quietly, unsure what to say. This was ridiculous. “So, five years,” he said stupidly. He NEVER had issues talking to men, not even men he'd slept with on one occasion.

Phillip grinned at Ryan. He wiped his mouth and nodded. Ryan figured he really shouldn't be staring at the man's mouth. “Five years.”

“What have you been up to?” Ryan asked. Could it possibly get any weirder than it was right now?

“Aww, Freckles, small talk? Really?” Phillip chuckled huskily. “I went off the trail about a year after your class. Went to Lewis and ended up in Iraq twice before I got assigned here. I PCS'ed a month ago.”

“Wow. Did you know Mark is around?”

“Yup. I called after I got my orders,” Phillip said.

Ryan felt like choking Patrick. If Phillip had called Mark then Mark would have told Patrick, and it fell to Patrick to fucking tell him these things.

“You know, I loved the fact that I could always tell what you were feeling. Your face always gave it away. I'm not seeing that much anymore,” Phillip said.

Ryan blinked in surprise and then shrugged. “Times change.”

“Yeah, I guess they do. Sad though.” Phillip grabbed his drink and took a long draw on the straw. He looked at his watch and sighed. “I gotta get back.”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, me too.” They both rose and cleaned off their table.

“Well, it was good to see you,” Ryan said. Phillip nodded as they walked out the door. Both men were sliding their black Stetsons over their heads.

“You too, Freckles.” Phillip grinned.

Ryan chewed on his lip. “I'm not that boy anymore,” he whispered.

Phillip turned suddenly. His smile was nearly blinding. “Nope.” He moved closer.

“You're much better.”

For a second Ryan thought Phillip was going to kiss him right there but then the taller man stepped back.

“Catch ya later, Freckles.” He whistled 'She Wore a Yellow Ribbon' as he walked away.

Ryan shook his head. Five years later Phillip Grabowski still had the ability to make him feel like a sixteen-year-old girl.

That afternoon at formation Ryan was talking to Alexander Krutz. Alexander was a cool guy who had transferred to his unit when his decommissioned.

“Did you hear they are bringing in some new guy? He's taking over third squad,” Alexander said.

“Great. Just what we need.” Ryan rolled his eyes. Most of the new guys ended up being assholes. They'd seriously lucked out with SGT. Krutz. He was a 'been there guy' who didn't like bragging about his 'war exploits'. “Last time they pulled in a new E6 he was a bigger fuck-up than most of the just out of basic guys are.” He rolled his eyes some more.

“What I heard is he's an E5. He's taking over for Smith. More time in service I guess,” Alexander said.

“Some of the guys were talking about him. He's like Chuck Norris.” The guy grinned.

“Great, we don't need a Chuck Norris,” Ryan said with disgust. “Those guys don't know shit about what they are doing.”

“Company! Attention!” called their Platoon Leader.

Alexander and Ryan ceased talking and snapped to attention.

Lieutenant Kripke looked over the platoon and grinned. “Not much to say except PT starts tomorrow at five am. We have TA-50 layout at two and I would like to introduce a new squad leader until we get another E6. Gentlemen, give a good Comanche welcome to Sgt. Phillip Grabowski.”

Ryan blinked. What the LT had said was ‘welcome Sgt. Phillip Grabowski.’ What Ryan heard was ‘Welcome Drill Sergeant Grabowski, who is here to make your life a living hell.’

“He came from the eighth but we're lucky to have him. He's already had three tours of duty in Iraq. Those of you who haven't been in Iraq would be smart to listen to him.” With that said the man in question marched up to the front. Grabowski saluted the LT and then went to his position at the head of Third squad. He leaned across and breathed in Ryan's ear.

“Will you please make up your mind? I'm either the Anti-Christ or Chuck Norris. I can't be both.”

CHAPTER NINE

When formation was dismissed Ryan felt like running to his truck like a girl and taking off. Out of all the fucking units in the Army and all the fucking platoons, even at Ft. Hood, how in Holy Hell did Grabowski get assigned to Ryan's?

Alexander was talking to him but Ryan was busy trying to dodge a six-foot-four two hundred-and-something-odd-pound man, which was ridiculous. Ryan had served in the US Army for five years. He wasn't green and he didn't harbor a crush on the man. Well, not a big crush on the man, anyway.

“Freckles.”

Alexander blinked and looked at Ryan.

Ryan sighed. “Sgt. Krutz, this is Sgt. Grabowski. When I knew him it was Drill Sergeant Grabowski,” he said by way of explanation.

Alexander blinked and then blinked again.

“Drill Sergeant?” Alexander asked and then began to laugh. “That explains the ‘deer in the headlight’ look from you.”

“No, Freckles doesn't do ‘deer in the headlight’. I trained him better than that. That's his 'I'm gonna fuck you up' look.” He smirked when Ryan shook off his silence.

“Yeah, yeah. Y'all are so fucking funny. I knew I should have gotten out last year,” Ryan said.

“Listen to Mr. Ohio talkin' like a Texan. I like it, Freckles.”

“You're gonna love this then.” Ryan smiled and flipped the former Drill Sergeant off. He didn't know what he expected from Phillip, but laughter wasn't really that high on his list of wanted reactions.

Ryan was convinced that the Army put something in everyone's water that made them act like teenage boys once they got around their Former Drill Sergeants. He never EVER had an issue with anyone else. Not even officers. Not like he had with Phillip. He changed the subject.

“Alexander, Patrick wanted me to ask if you wanted to come by the bar and meet some of our buddies? Kenneth and Brendon are both coming in.” He glanced at

his watch. “Actually I need to get out of here now. I have to pick Brendon up at the airport. Kenny is driving in.”

“Yeah, I might do that,” Alexander said with a little wave.

Phillip just smiled. He followed Ryan to his car. “So we're back to where we started. I'm kinda your superior.”

Ryan didn't stop moving until he got to his truck. He didn't say a word. He unlocked the doors and then turned to face Phillip, a wide smile sliding across his lips.

“Yeah, kinda sorta but not really.”

“But admit it, I can still order you around. That kinda turns you on,” Phillip said, stepping closer.

Ryan just smirked. He knew what Phillip was doing. Two could play at that game. He closed the distance until they were inches apart. “Just remember, *Sergeant*

Grabowski. You may be able to order me around, but we both know who makes *your privates* stand at *attention*.” He even licked his lips. He did an about-face and got into his truck. He couldn't resist a look backwards. It was so worth it. Phillip stood stock-still, not even blinking. Yes! Score one for Sgt. Freckles!

Ryan turned the key in the ignition and his truck roared to life. He had finally left Phillip speechless. Go him! He was happy all the way to the airport in Killeen, at least until he felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it out and read the simple text message.

-prove it

Motherfucker! He wasn't even questioning how the fucker got his cell phone number. He was, after all, fucking God. Ryan cursed all the way to the gate where Brendon stood.

Brendon and Ryan entered 'Fubar Bar and Grill' a couple of hours later. 'Fubar' in Army terms stands for 'Fucked up beyond all repair.' It was a phrase Ryan, Patrick and Brendon were very familiar with. Ryan damn near pissed his pants when Patrick told him that was the name Mark was using for his bar.

"Fubar, that's the shit man! I fucking love that name." Brendon laughed.

Brendon had changed a lot since basic. He lost his baby fat and grew hard muscles in all the right places. His blond hair was slightly longer but not much. He had a tight, white shirt on and tight-assed jeans. He looked good but he also didn't look like the twenty-three-year-old man he was. He looked older. His eyes were sharper. There wasn't an air of innocence around him anymore. He was leaner, harder and in a lot of ways meaner.

It sometimes made Ryan sad to see Brendon like that but he was a grown man now. He had seen war and faced hardships that most men his age never dealt with.

"Fuck me. That's Furry?" Mark Connelly asked. A small grin played on his lips.

“Oh Shit!” Brendon squeaked. “Drill Sergeant Connelly!”

Ryan laughed, happy to see that he wasn't the only one with Drill Sergeant issues.

“It's just Mark now.” Mark smiled. “Patrick is upstairs grooming. For a man with so little hair he takes forever to get pretty.”

“And for a fat old Drill Sergeant you talk a lot of shit!” came the raspy reply from the stairs.

“Watch it, lover boy. I know where you sleep.” Mark smirked and poured three beers.

“I ain't worried. You sleep there too. You fuck it up and guess who's sleeping in the wet spot...and it damn sure isn't me,” Patrick replied with a grin. “Fuck, Furry. Did you get bigger?” He gave Brendon a quick back-slapping hug.

“Nah, you just got shorter.” Brendon grinned.

“Yeah, fuck you buddy.” Patrick smirked. He grabbed the mug and slugged it back.

Brendon pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up.

“New habit?” Patrick asked and then bummed one. “Mark is like a woman. He doesn't mind smoking down here but I can't fucking smoke at home. Dick.”

“Keep it up, Patricia and I'll show you woman,” Mark said, then walked toward the sound stage.

All three guys burst out laughing.

“Where's Ken?” Brendon asked when everyone settled down.

“He's about a half an hour out.” Patrick said. “He called, seems Texas State Troopers don't like smart-assed Ohioans.”

Ryan grinned. “Sounds like Ken.”

“How fast this time?”

“Hell, Brendon, speed limit is seventy and he was pushing ninety-five. He talked the guy out of taking him in. How I'll never know.” Patrick smiled.

“He's led a charmed life,” Ryan said as he finished off his beer.

“Who's led a charmed life, you beautiful fag, you!” Kenneth strolled into the bar a full twenty minutes earlier than Patrick said he would.

“Kenneth, any other guy I would knock his teeth down his fucking throat....”

Ryan's reply died in his throat. “You're fucking bald!”

“I know; cool ain't it?” Kenneth beamed at Ryan. He slid his hand over his shiny skull. “Goddamn, look at you three. Brendon, you're a fucking God, Ryan still as beautiful as ever. And Fucking Patrick-- God, you're shorter!”

Patrick flipped Kenneth off. “Dude, we're still in and you're the one who went all Kojak.”

“Yeah but I'm in a phase, don'tcha know?” He leaned back against the bar. To Ryan he looked a little rough. Kenneth had always been slim but now he was almost gaunt. He knew that look in Kenneth's eyes too. He would talk to the other guy tomorrow. Not tonight though. Tonight they were going to have a good reunion.

“Damn, Rosey. You look like Lex Luthor.” Mark smirked.

“Yeah yeah. Barkeep, load us up!” Kenneth demanded.

Seems Kenneth didn't have that Drill issue either. Damn.

Mark smirked. “Get your ass behind the bar and load your buddies up,” he ordered Patrick.

“Bossy bitch isn't he?” Ryan drawled. He had been around Mark long enough that he didn't get that same 'Oh shit' feeling he got with Phillip.

“Dude, you have no idea,” Patrick said. He jumped over the bar and began doling out beer and shots.

“What are you up to, Kenny?” Brendon asked.

“As little as possible. Living off Daddy just to piss the bastard off. He wanted me to become a doctor.” Kenneth wrinkled his nose in distaste. “If I was gonna do that shit I would have stayed in patching y'all up.”

Ryan watched Kenneth. There was a twitchiness to his movements that hadn't been there before. All of them could drink a normal man into a coma but Kenneth was tossing the beer back like a pro.

“Did our Ryan tell y'all who got transferred down here?” Patrick drawled.

“Yeah, about that, Patrick. Mind telling me why I JUST found out?” Ryan asked. “Seein' how he called Mark *before* he PCS'ed?”

“Who?” Kenneth asked as he leaned closer.

“Yeah, who?” Brendon wanted to know.

“Wait, if *he's* calling *Mark*....And *Ryan* is all in a snit...then it can only be Grabowski,” Brendon said before Patrick could answer.

“You're fucking Sherlock Homes, Brendon. Really,” Ryan replied dryly.

“Holy shit!” Kenneth exclaimed when Patrick broke out into a wide grin.

Fucking Brendon wasn't as stupid as he pretended. “Yeah, and the hero here didn't fucking tell me,” Ryan grumbled.

“Someone still has a cruuuuusssshhhh.” Kenneth sing-songed.

“I do not either.” Ryan denied it.

“Oh hell. He sounds like a girl. Do ya want me to send him a little note or talk to him for you? Dear Drill Sergeant Grabowski, Ryan wanted me to ask you if you liked

him. Check 'Yes' or 'No'." Kenneth snorted at his own joke. Brendon and Patrick both were laughing like the bastards they were.

"Fuck you all. I'm taking my beer and going home." Ryan flipped them all off.

"That's my beer, buddy." Patrick smirked.

"Asshole."

"Bitch."

"Fucker."

"Cocksucker."

"Alright, you win." Ryan held up his hands in surrender.

“Why is it when y'all get together your ages regress to twelve?” Mark asked from behind them.

“Aww, Babe. I thought you loved my twelve-year-old ass.” Patrick made a kissy face at Mark and had them all laughing again.

“That statement is beyond wrong and I'm not even going to explain to you why,” Mark said. “Phillip is coming later tonight. Sandy picked up Katie early,” he remarked casually. He left without waiting for responses.

Brendon and Kenneth turned and grinned at Ryan.

“Don't fucking say it,” Ryan growled.

“Dude! If you get laid tonight then you won't be all bitchy tomorrow. I think it's a great plan since I'm staying with you,” Brendon said.

“Mark, I would kick out Brendon now. He's a known pain in the ass, most likely he'll break up your pretty bar,” Ryan called.

“And that's different from you and Patrick how exactly, Ryan?” Mark called.

“You're singing tonight, by the way.”

Ryan sighed. “Then I better be good and drunk.”

All four men looked at each other and nodded.

Patrick pulled out four shot glasses that had each of their names engraved on them. Then he grabbed seven extra shot glasses and a bottle of bourbon. Before leaving he filled up four pitchers of beer and then they all carried a pitcher, shots and mugs over to a corner table.

They all sat down. One by one four shots were poured until all that remained were the seven extra shot glasses.

“Brodrick,” Patrick said, filling one shot glass. “Davis,” he said, filling another.

He passed the bottle to Brendon.

“Ackers.” Brendon said, filling one. He passed the bottle to Ryan.

“Smith,” Ryan said. He filled the next one. “Marks.” He filled up one more and passed the bottle to Kenneth.

Kenneth looked at the bottle and back to the shot glasses. “Perry,” he said, quietly. “Williams.” He poured the shots and sat the bottle down gently.

They all stared at the glasses and what they represented. Seven glasses in a small circle. One by one their glasses were raised. “We're fucked in life and fucked in death but fuck it all anyways. Bottoms up, Troopers,” Ryan said.

They tossed their drinks back and then placed them next to their dead buddies' glasses.

For a long moment none of them spoke. Brendon broke the silence.

“Dude, do you remember back during the first week of Basic when I went down in that run? Brodrick stopped and put his arm around me, lifted my ass up and looked me straight in the eyes. He told me that I couldn't fall out of the first fucking platoon run. If I did I was a fucker that was gonna fall out of every fucking run. I fucking hated that guy.” Brendon said it with a grin; they all knew he didn't. They all smiled.

“I remember when Kenneth super glued the guy's toothpaste and toothbrush together. I thought we were gonna have to bury Kenny somewhere.” Ryan laughed. His eyes were bright.

Kenneth laughed. "He was so fucking pissed at me. He couldn't even say my name he was so mad. I was almost scared. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists like he was going to take my head off."

"What was it that King called him?" Patrick asked.

"Angel', 'cause he was so purty. He looked like one of the cherubs, but even King said he thought it sounded odd to call him 'Cherub'." Kenneth snorted.

"Goddamn," he muttered. "Fucking leaking." He rubbed at his eyes and downed his mug of beer.

"Yeah. Me too," Brendon admitted.

"Brendon, you fucking leak all the time," Patrick said. His eyes were suspiciously bright too.

A few hours later they were back in the mood to party. They had made several trips back to the bar to refill. Patrick brought out the tequila and Mark was keeping them in fresh lemons and limes.

Kenneth was giggling like mad over a story Brendon was telling and Ryan was just leaning back in his chair watching them all. He loved when they all got together. It was a time when it didn't matter who they were, what they did. They understood each other better than most families did. Hell, he hadn't talked to his parents more than three times since he joined the Army, but he talked to these guys at least once a week.

The seven shot glasses remained untouched on their table. The place was picking up. A lot of off-duty guys came in and Patrick was up on the stage singing.

“Holy fucking Shit!” Brendon exclaimed. “He's fucking bigger!” Kenneth and Ryan turned to see who Brendon was talking about.

Ryan groaned and Kenneth giggled again.

Phillip had changed out of his uniform and to Ryan's drink-hazed mind looked pretty fucking edible.

Tonight he wore another shirt that on the front proclaimed him a 'Cavalry Trooper' and on the back, printed in big black block letters it read 'If you ain't Cav then you ain't shit.' It was a shirt guaranteed to cause a riot if any Infantry guys were in the bar. Of course, that was if they dared to attack a guy who was six and a half feet of pure muscle and steel. Ryan sighed like a girl. He fucking sighed. It wouldn't have been so bad if Kenneth hadn't chosen that exact moment to look at him.

"Dude...you are such a girl!" He laughed. "Gracin siiiiiggghhed." He pointed at Ryan when Brendon turned to look at him.

“Dude! You're macking on Drill Sergeant Grabowski still?!” Brendon asked.

“Holy shit!”

Ryan just ignored them. The best way to deal with Kenneth and Brendon was to ignore them. They were both like puppies. If you didn't give them any attention they would go away and play with something else.

“Well shit. Looky at who the cat dragged in!” Kenneth said when Phillip strolled up to them.

Phillip had that picture-fucking-perfect smile plastered on his face. “Rosey-Ass and Furry. Damn, y'all are lookin' good.”

“I don't swing that way,” Kenneth said primly. He ruined the effect he was going for by giggling. “But our boy Ryan, now *he* does!”

“Kenneth, if you don't shut your hole I'm gonna have Mark cut you off,” Ryan warned.

“Now, Ryan! Don't be bitchy. This is a non-bitchy night!” Kenneth gave Ryan a look that dared Ryan to push him further.

Ryan knew Kenneth better than that. Even drunk Ryan knew not to push. Kenneth would just tell Phillip to take him in the back room and fuck him senseless.

Brendon stood up and shook Phillip's hand. “Good to know you made it back,” he said. He was much more relaxed now that he was drunk.

Phillip smiled. “Good to be back. Nice to see you guys. I'm gonna go over and hang with Mark.” He left quietly.

Ryan blinked. Well...that fucking sucked.

“Don't pout, Freckles. We'll get him back over here,” Brendon said, patting the other man on the shoulder.

“M not poutin',” Ryan replied, pouring himself another shot.

Alexander Krutz strolled into the bar not long after Phillip did. He waved to Patrick and walked to the table that the others were sitting at.

“Hey ya Alexander,” Ryan said happily. “This is Brendon...and that's Kenny!”

He introduced them. “Guys, this is Alexander, the coolest E-5 in the platoon.”

“Except for our new guy.” Alexander grinned.

Ryan just grinned. He didn't deny it but he wasn't gonna say he agreed either. He wasn't *that* drunk. He kept on glancing over to the corner of the bar where Phillip sat talking and laughing with Mark.

Patrick finally stopped singing and came back to the table. "You guys have to love me," he proclaimed.

"Why'z that?" Kenneth slurred.

Patrick pointed at the two girls at the edge of the stage.

"Cause I found y'all dates."

Brendon was practically drooling. Kenneth was grinning like a mad man.

"Patrick, I love you man. In a purely non-gay way. You are like my fucking God," Brendon announced drunkenly.

"I know. Bow down and worship the greatness that is Smith." Patrick laughed.

Kenneth gave Patrick a look that said 'thank you and kiss my ass' all at the same time.

The two men walked, or stumbled, toward the women.

“Patrick, you are like the best,” Ryan said, with a sigh.

“I know. Hey Alexander. Pull up a chair.” Alexander sat down and took the beer that Lacey, the part-time waitress handed him.

“Thanks,” he said to her.

Ryan laughed when Lacey shuddered. “Dude. Stop doing the orgasm voice. The girl has to work still.”

Alexander just smiled and took a drink. “Enjoying the reunion?”

“Yup,” Ryan said. “Scuse me. Gotta take a piss.” He got up and swayed on his feet. “Whoa. Beer rush!” He walked slowly into the bathroom.

“Ryan, don't pass out in there,” Mark called.

Ryan grinned. “Not that bad off yet, Mark.”

Phillip grinned.

Ryan walked by them and overheard Mark.

“Don't fuck him in my public bathroom, Phillip.” That was followed loudly by
“I fucking mean it!”

Ryan pushed the door open and damn near fell on his ass when he was pushed further into the bathroom.

“We gotta stop meeting like this,” Phillip said, silkily.

God but the man had a fucking awesome voice. Ryan just smiled. “We did this one already,” he said and let himself be pushed against the wall.

“Did we?” Phillip asked.

“Uh huh,” Ryan said and waited until Phillip began to lean in. He moved quickly and gave a mental cheer when he didn't fall flat on his face. He pushed Phillip into the wall instead. “I think it's my turn.” He pulled Phillip's mouth down to his and sealed their lips together.

Phillip realized something right away. This wasn't the twenty-two-year-old man who had allowed himself to be dominated. If Phillip was gonna be doing any

dominating he knew he was damn sure gonna earn it. He opened his mouth and nearly moaned as Ryan's tongue slid in knowingly. The other man tasted like beer and tequila. It was enough to get Phillip drunk on just his taste alone. He groaned and his hands closed over strong hips. He pulled Ryan closer and rubbed against him.

They both groaned at the contact. When Ryan removed his lips from his Phillip took a much-needed breath.

Ryan's mouth attacked his neck and Phillip moaned. Fuck if he wasn't careful he would come in his pants like a schoolboy. They were moving against each other in delicious rhythm.

Cocks brushed against cocks. Thighs pressed against each other.

Ryan raised his mouth and looked up at Phillip over his specs. "Well," he said.

A small smile turned into a sexy little smirk. "I think I just proved it," he said. His hand slid down to Phillip's erection.

He laughed when Phillip looked like he was going to strangle him.

"Cock tease," Phillip muttered.

Ryan pulled back and smiled. "Dude! You can't just push me into a bathroom and expect me to get on my knees."

"Well, how about my house then?" Phillip grinned.

"Can't leave. Brendon's spending the night," Ryan said and almost regretted that Brendon would be at his apartment. He walked to the stall and did his business. The man behind him let out a resigned sigh.

“That I can understand.” And Ryan knew he did.

“Alright, Freckles, go back to your buddies.”

“Ya'know they wouldn't mind if you joined us. Technically you're one of us.

Albeit the bastard that scarred us for life, but you're still one of us,” Ryan said. He couldn't believe that he was talking this frankly with Phillip.

“I know.” Phillip grinned and waited for Ryan to wash his hands. “But tonight is a good night for old Army buddies to get together and cuss their Drill Sergeants. We were mean bastards.”

Ryan grinned. “Yeah, but we know you just had our best interests at heart.” He laid his hand over his heart and laughed at that lie. “How many times did y'all stand back and laugh over the shit you did to us?” It was a question he hadn't had the guts to ask Mark.

“So many times y'all would have been highly pissed off if you knew,” Phillip responded with a grin. He pulled Ryan close again. “Freckles, one day in the not so distant future I’m gonna take you home and keep you in bed all fucking night.”

“Talk’s cheap, Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” Ryan smirked.

“We’ll see,” Phillip said. And that was a fucking promise. Ryan knew it without a single doubt in his mind.

As it turned out Brendon wasn't the one who broke the bar up. It was Phillip.

It started out fairly innocently. An infantry guy took offense at Phillip's t-shirt.

Phillip took offense at the guy’s offense.

The guy punched Phillip in the gut. It should have been laughable. Phillip had to have nearly a foot on the guy. Not to mention he outweighed the guy by a good fifty pounds. Phillip bent at the waist but blocked the heavy fist that came toward him. He sent the guy sprawling with a vicious upper-cut.

And of course the guy's friends took offense at Phillip's offense.

Which led to Mark taking offense. He pulled one guy off of Phillip and was knocked backwards for his trouble. Of course Alexander took offense because he wasn't willing to leave their new Sergeant on his own. Patrick took offense because of two reasons, one was Mark, and the other was Grabowski; he was theirs too. Ryan and Brendon because of varying reasons. (And Ryan was using a drunk's logic that at some point Phillip would be his lover and if he had to heal up...well that wasn't acceptable.) And Kenneth just wanted to fight.

All five stood up and headed toward the fray. They jumped in and the fight was on in earnest.

Chairs were overturned, beer bottles were thrown, cops were called. It was just a typical night at the 'Fubar.'

Phillip, Ryan, Patrick, Brendon, Alexander and Kenneth all sat in the Killeen Jail waiting for Mark to bail all of them out.

When the cops came they all claimed they started the fight to keep Mark from getting into trouble, and when Phillip tried to take all the blame no one would let that happen. All in all Phillip thought it was a clusterfuck and informed them of it.

It didn't really matter though, because like in basic, if one guy got in trouble they all did.

Ryan wasn't real sure why Alexander had thrown himself into it. When he asked, Alexander just grinned.

“Simple. We're in it together. Besides, that was the first bar fight I've been in for YEARS,” the other man said. “My wife is going to kill me though. She said this would happen.”

Brendon laughed. “Welcome to the club, Krutz.”

Alexander and Ryan were surprised to see Lt. Kripke come into the jail.

“Yeah, those are my men,” he said with a sigh. He pointed to Alexander, Ryan and Phillip.

They were waved out, but Phillip and Ryan both shook their heads.

“Sorry Sir, We don't leave guys behind,” Phillip said easily.

Kripke sighed again. "Which ones?"

Phillip pointed toward Kenneth, Brendon and Patrick.

"They are too."

Once they were out of the station, Eric Kripke turned on the three. "I don't even wanna know, but I would really appreciate y'all not doing this again."

"Sorry Sir," Alexander mumbled.

"Grabowski, if I didn't like you I would be seriously pissed off, but it's hard not to like the man who schooled me and kept my ass out of the shit. So, we'll say this was just a big misunderstanding and let it go. Don't fucking wear that shirt to a bar again!"

Phillip mumbled 'yes, sir'.

They all watched the LT leave.

“Y'all got a cool as hell LT,” Brendon said.

“M Hungry,” Kenneth said and everyone realized that they were still hungry and that the LT had left them all alone.

“Come on, you fuck-ups,” came the call from inside a van. “I can't fucking believe this shit. Next time you guys keep me from coming with you I'll kick your motherfucking asses. We clear?”

This time everyone grinned at Mark.

“Of course, mom. And we didn't forget to wash our hands after using the jails' urinal,” Phillip quipped. They all piled into the van and headed toward an all-night diner, if they could agree on one.

CHAPTER TEN

They decided not to go out for food. Instead they decided to go back to the bar.

Mark took them all back there except for Alexander, who thought his wife would be happy if he came home. Kenneth called him pussy whipped but said he understood. Brendon just smiled. They all waved as they pulled back out of his drive.

Once back in the bar Patrick went into the kitchen to make them all something to eat.

“Okay, buzz is wearing off must have more,” Kenneth declared and slipped behind the bar, filling mugs again.

“Damn Kenny...give a fella a break!” Brendon said, and then proceeded to drink his beer.

Both Ryan and Phillip shrugged and drank the beer given to them.

“Damn, Freckles, where did you learn all that fancy hand to hand stuff?” Phillip asked, grinning at the other man.

“Picked a few things up,” Ryan replied with a smile.

“I wouldn't fuck with Ryan too much, Phillip. He can almost kick my ass now,” Mark said after taking a drink.

An hour later Patrick came in with fried bologna sandwiches and chips. He looked around the bar and sighed. "At least the place didn't get broken up too badly."

For the next two hours they all drank and ate. Laughing at silly stories. No one noticed that Phillip and Ryan grew progressively more affectionate.

It started with little touches, progressed into hands running down sides. Soft little nuzzles and kisses followed quickly. By the time they were actually kissing everyone was watching.

Phillip slid his mouth over Ryan's and his tongue slid in to taste the younger man's mouth.

Kenneth and Brendon were watching them intently.

"Dude, I can't look away!" Brendon exclaimed.

Kenneth nodded his head drunkenly. "I can't either!"

Patrick giggled. "It's like a train wreck."

Mark sighed. "Which one of you wants to go break it up? I'm not gonna let them have sex in my bar in front of us."

Three pairs of eyes turned to Mark. All three of them blurted out excuses.

"I'm not doing it; they would break my poor face," Kenneth announced. He was already sporting bruises from the fight earlier.

"Dude, that's not happening," Brendon affirmed. "Phillip is like a fucking giant who could turn me over and spit in my ass if he wanted too!"

Patrick nodded at Brendon's announcement. "He's your friend. You do it!" he said as he looked at Mark.

Ryan and Phillip ignored what was going on around them. Ryan was starting to think that Phillip was some sort of witch or something. Every time he got near the man he wanted nothing more than to fuck his brains out...or let the man fuck his brains out. That was odd for Ryan. He was a top, he didn't bottom often. Not at all since Basic. But he knew if push came to shove he would bottom again for the man who was taking his breath away with those fucking lips. He also knew it wasn't *if* they had sex again, it was only a matter of when.

Ryan growled when Phillip's lips left his and trailed across his defined cheek bones. He whimpered when the lips settled against his neck. He should feel like a girl but he didn't. Phillip's hands were rough as he pulled Ryan off of the stool and over to the booths in the corner.

He pushed Ryan back into the booth and followed him down. They were both making little noises of both need and want.

Those noises became all out growls when cold water was sprayed on them.

“Now, I get y'all have this big crazy thing for each other. Phil, I know that you have wanted the boy since you saw him, and wanted him more than once...I get it. Hell, look at numbnuts over there. I didn't have the patience you did...but damn, guys. None of us want to see your white asses poking up in the air,” Mark said calmly.

Ryan looked at Phillip, who looked like he was about to kill Mark.

“Dick,” Phillip hissed. He pulled away from Ryan reluctantly.

Ryan blinked hazy green eyes at Mark, and then looked at Phillip. He really shouldn't be drinking around the man.

Phillip gave him that heart stopping smile, and Ryan didn't care if they were drunk or not. He was very tempted to take Phillip into the bathroom and not stop until they were both happy or they died of exhaustion, whichever came first.

He grabbed Ryan's hand and led him back to the stool. Both of them shot Mark dirty looks until the man just threw up his arms.

“If y'all would have just fucked all the way through basic like normal people this wouldn't be going on,” he grumbled.

Patrick snickered.

Kenneth snorted

And Brendon just sighed. “All the way through? I shoulda been gay.”

Ryan was having a good dream. Phillip was curled around him holding him tightly. Even though Ryan wasn't a cuddler by any sense of the word he figured being cuddled by Phillip wouldn't be such a bad thing. He curled into his pillow and sighed. The damn thing was being a bitch. He pushed and prodded at the fine downy feathers until he realized that his 'pillow' was grunting. He woke slowly, only opening his eyeballs when he was sure they wouldn't explode. He blinked. First off he was not sleeping on his comfortable bed. Instead he was lying against a hard wall of warm flesh. Secondly, his pillow had its arms around him, holding him tightly. A nose was nuzzling his head even as lips peppered soft kisses around the crown of his head.

“Umm...Phillip?” he said groggily.

The body rumbled beneath his. “Wha?”

“Gotta take a piss.” Ryan muttered, not sure if every part of his body would actually come with him. He was too fucking old to sleep on the ground even if he did have sexier than hell pillow. He looked over at Brendon who was leaning against Kenneth's back. Both of them were sound asleep. It was a pose Patrick and he had done...a lot through basic. They would press their backs together and then nod off just like that. How Brendon and Kenneth slept that way he would never know. “Come on, Stretch. I need to piss.”

“Freckles, if you're this bitchy in the mornin' I'm not too sure I want you to spend the night,” Phillip said roughly, but let the other man up.

Ryan just smirked and headed toward the bathroom. The previous morning/night was kinda fuzzy. He remembered the fight mainly because he was aching in all the places he would after a fight. Then add on the fact he had been laying on the floor with Phillip. Yeah, he was fucking sore.

He ran into Mark, who was coming down the stairs. “Morning.”

“Mornin.' What time is it?” Ryan asked.

“Ten. Patrick is still sleepin'. He's laying on the stage. Y'all just passed out; didn't see any reason to wake you up.” The older man looked at Ryan for a few moments and then grinned. “That hickey looks painful,” he drawled as he strolled to his lover who was curled and covered up on the stage.

Ryan blinked and grabbed his neck. Shit. Once inside of the bathroom he headed straight to the mirror. Sure enough there was a huge ass hickey on the side of his neck. Not to mention bite marks. He could only pray that Phillip looked like a chew toy too.

He finished up in the bathroom and walked back out. Everyone was in varying stages of waking.

“God, my head won't stop thumping,” Patrick bitched.

“You don't need to yell!” Brendon complained.

“Will you both shut the fuck up?” Kenneth snarled, holding his head in his hands.

“You girls need to learn how to hold your liquor,” Phillip boomed.

Of course Phillip wouldn't have a hangover. He was the perfect fucking man, Ryan thought grouchily.

Even Ryan winced at the sound.

Kenneth said something that suspiciously sounded like 'fuck you'.

“My mouth taste like ass,” Brendon muttered.

“Come on we'll head on home and get cleaned up.” Ryan said, trying to find his keys.

“Behind the bar,” Mark called.

Ryan grabbed his keys and headed toward the door, when he was dragged backwards.

A slip of paper was tucked into his front pocket. Ryan looked up at Phillip. He smiled at the man. Phillip looked like he'd been sucking face with a muffler. The smile left when Phillip lowered his lips to Ryan's.

“Nice hickey,” he whispered before he leaned down and planted an obscenely innocent kiss on his cheek.

Ryan smirked at Phillip. “Yeah, Fido. I know. You know, I'm not a chew toy.”

He paused. “And I'm not a girl.”

Ryan and Brendon walked out while hearing Phillip's booming laughter.

Ryan opened his apartment door and both of them walked in. The night before, Brendon had seen his apartment. It was a mess. It actually looked like a military truck had puked in his front room. Gear from last month's field exercise lay spread about all over the front room. Uniforms, spare dog tags, extra pairs of boots and God only knew what else littered the floor.

“Dude, you should really see my home. It looks the same.”

Ryan snorted. He doubted anyone had a house any more cluttered than his. “I like to think it's my own private fuck you to the Army. But, it's mainly when I get home I just want to not move.” He sighed.

“Yeah, will go with the first,” Brendon said.

“Wanna take a shower first?”

“Nah, you go ahead.” Brendon sat down on the couch, which Ryan had thought to uncover before he got there.

Fifteen minutes later when Ryan was brushing his teeth and feeling half way human again, his phone rang. “Can you get that, Brendon?” he yelled.

He figured Brendon got it because it stopped ringing. He slipped on his shorts and walked out. Brendon was still on the phone and was using that 'sexy' voice on whoever was on the other end of the line. Ryan smirked at Brendon.

“Hang on, he just got out,” he said, handing the phone over.

“This is Gracin.” Ryan barked into the phone. Okay, so he didn't have the phone manners his momma tried to teach him.

“Mac?!” He choked and looked at Murray. Murray was making that sexy voice at his baby sister? Well shit, it looked like he would have to kill his friend. “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot Brendon?” He glared at the blond, who just shrugged. Whiskey Tango Foxtrot was their radio speak of asking WTF?

Ryan rolled his eyes at his sister's reaction. “No, Mac, I don't think you're stupid. Yes, Mac, I realize that you're nearly twenty-two. No, Mac, I don't think you're a little girl anymore.” Like hell. She was his baby sister and even though he didn't see her as often as he should, she was still his baby sister. “Mac! Don't talk like that. No, I figured you knew what Whiskey Tango Foxtrot was. Fine. Fine. Yeah...I'm a bastard. For fuc...Fine, Mac. Yeah. Okay. So are we done playing bitch Ryan out?”

He glared at Brendon when the other man began to laugh. "No! No...as in HELL no," he barked. "I will not! You have lost your fucking mind, Mackenzie. I will not let you talk to Brendon."

"Dude! Don't be a jerk. Let me talk to your baby sister," Brendon drawled out lazily.

"Brendon, I love you, man. I do. But, you even think about Mac I'll fuck your shit up," Ryan griped. "Fine. Fine. Yeah. No. Mac...seriously shut up! Alright. Yeah. Love you too." He hung up the phone and glared at Brendon for the millionth time. "Don't even think of it, Murray. I'll fucking kill you."

"She sounds cute...from what I can remember she was cute when I saw her." Brendon waited until Ryan was just feet away and then ducked. "Dude, come on. Give me a break; I wouldn't mess with your sister."

Ryan wanted to believe Brendon. But he knew the guy. Brendon didn't know limits when it came to women. Ryan couldn't even find the boy Brendon had once been. Sophia had done a number on Brendon. After AIT Brendon went back home. Sophia had taken one look at him and suddenly wanted him back. Two days before he left again he caught the girl in bed with some other guy. From then on Brendon had been the love 'em and leave 'em type.

But he settled for a fake punch and a warning growl, for now. They sat down.

“So, Kenneth's worse,” Brendon said.

That took the steam out of Ryan's self righteousness. “Yeah. We have to do something.”

Brendon nodded. “Hell, we're all bad off. Patrick still can't handle the Fourth. Mark said Patrick had to medicate himself last year.”

“Yeah, he did. I still grab for my weapon when a car is moving toward me too fast.”

Brendon nodded. “I can't handle loud noises if I'm not prepared,” he admitted.

“But Kenneth is drinking the biggest part of the time. Last week he called from some chick's house saying he didn't remember getting there. He sounded almost scared.” He sighed. “He's looking rough. I don't think he's eating. And his drinking is getting worse and worse.”

“He's drinking and driving,” Ryan said. They both looked at each other. “What are we going to do?”

Patrick was on board with their plan. He saw the difference in Kenneth too. All three were sitting at the bar waiting for Kenneth to get in. He refused to stay with Ryan or Patrick. Instead he was staying at a local motel.

“You know what? Fuck this. Let's go.” Patrick grabbed the keys to Mark's truck.

They all piled in and went to see their friend.

When they got there Ryan winced. Kenneth's car was double parked and it looked like he hadn't bothered to shut the door. The car had been ransacked already.

“Fuck.”

“Room 231,” Brendon said.

They all got to the room door after locking Kenneth's car up. Ryan started pounding. When that did no good Patrick started pecking on the window. And Brendon began yelling.

The door opened slowly. “Y'all are worse than a woman. Fuck,” Kenneth groaned.

They all went in and looked at the place. Four bottles of cheap whiskey sat on the table; one had already been drunk.

“Dude!” Brendon exclaimed. “When did you have time to drink a bottle of Jack?”

“I’m good like that,” Kenneth said roughly.

All three looked at each other. Patrick was the one who started.

“Kenneth...”

“Let’s not do this, guys. I’m not stupid. Is this your version of an intervention?” he asked. His voice was so low that all three had to strain to hear him.

“It’s our version of we don’t want to watch you to kill yourself,” Patrick said bluntly.

Kenneth let out a sound that indicated he didn't buy it. "Get real. I...I can stop at any time."

"Then do it now," Ryan said. They had all sat down with him, on his level.

Kenneth was going to feel attacked enough.

"I don't *want* to," Ryan thought Kenneth sounded child like. He could tell everyone else did too.

"Dude...you have to get some help," Brendon said gently. "You're my battle buddy. I won't let you drink yourself stupid."

"Too late," Kenneth said, grabbing one of the bottles. He opened the seal and looked at them as he took a long drink. "I'm fine."

“Uh huh. Kenneth, we just spent the better part of the night drunk off our asses.

When did you get the booze?”

“I brought it with me,” Kenneth said, shrugging. “Y'all don't get it.”

“What don't we get?” Patrick asked.

“You just wouldn't get it...guys let's not...” Kenneth started and then stopped.

Ryan could see Kenneth was closing off. He did it so quickly that Ryan knew that he was about to blow a gasket. That was the thing about Kenneth. He could go from zero to sixty in seconds flat.

“Ya know what? I don't feel like doing this today,” Kenneth hissed.

“You don't have a choice,” Brendon said as gently as he could.

“Fuck you, Murray.” Kenneth snarled. “You wanna know?”

“Yes, we want to know,” Ryan replied, his voice soft and low like he was talking to an injured animal.

“Really? Okay, how many of you were there when your buddies got hit?”

All three of them had; just different versions.

“Fine, then. How many of you were asked to hold a wound? None? Yeah that's because that's where a combat medic comes in. We get to hold wounds closed. Find an artery to pinch so we don't fucking lose some bastard because Ali Baba had his good day.” Kenneth looked like he was going to cry. “We have to try and save limbs because we don't want our buddies to...Fuck, half the time we can't even save them.”

Ryan winced. All three of them had seen their share of shit. But Ryan couldn't imagine what Kenneth went through.

“My buddy in AIT always said we were like all the kings men. We always got to put Humpty Dumpty back together again...but you know what? Sometimes you can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Sometimes he just fucking dies and there isn't jack you can do about it.” Kenneth's voice was high, too high. His eyes looked wild.

“Kenneth...” Brendon started.

“No, you wanted to know. This is it. No matter what I do I can't save the ones I lost. Those men...God, some of them were just boys...they're all gone. They just died. I...I couldn't...God it's so hard.” That's when Kenneth began to cry. “I...just want them...to live. I don't want to see them anymore.” Kenneth sobbed hard. So hard that he couldn't stand. Brendon, Patrick and Ryan all put their arms around him. Cocooning him in.

They would keep the world at bay for their friend.

The next day Ryan had to go to work. Brendon had decided to bunk with Kenneth. Kenneth was still over the edge and no one wanted to leave him alone. But Ryan was back in formation after morning PT. He was thankful no one said anything about the faded hickey on his neck. At least until Phillip got a good look at it after they got finished with their run.

“Looks like it's fading,” Phillip had commented.

“Yeah, hickies do that,” Ryan said reasonably. He looked at the former drill sergeant. If there was anyone in the world that would know what to do with Kenneth it would be Phillip. But he couldn't ask. Not yet. He couldn't betray Kenneth's trust.

“I'll have to try harder next time.”

Besides, it wouldn't matter because Ryan was going to kill Phillip. The man was too cocky for his own good. Phillip had the ability to be cocky and not make everyone around him hate him. He always had that goofier than hell smile. The one he was currently beaming at him.

"You're a dick, ya know that?" Ryan asked.

"I know. It's good to see the whole Drill Sergeant thing is finally leaving you. I was worried I was gonna have to break old Smoky Bear out." Ryan's grin took a turn to become dark and seductive. Ryan really fucking hated him.

"Putting on your cadre cover isn't gonna scare me anymore, Grabowski." Ryan almost choked on the words. God, he really was fucked up. The mental image of Phillip in his rounded brown hat made him nearly groan. If he didn't watch out his glasses were gonna fog up.

"Nope, but it will turn you on," Phillip retorted.

“Whatever. I think you have the world’s best freaking ego.”

“Aww, Freckles, you're hurting my feelings. The only way you can make it up to me is by buying me lunch.”

“Get real,” Ryan muttered, strolling to his truck.

“No I'm for reals!” Phillip chuckled and followed Ryan to his truck. “Don't tell me you don't feel it. I have bite marks to prove you do.”

“It's called lust. We'll get over it.”

“You know, you really are bitchy,” Phillip said, looking at Ryan.

“I guess bitchy equals not easy, to you. Listen Phillip, what we had in basic was...fun.” Hot. Incredible. Sexier than homemade sin. “But, we're both older and we

know that sort of shit doesn't last a lifetime-- and I'm kinda done with the part time relationships." He wanted what Patrick and Mark had.

"Who says I just want to fuck you, Freckles?"

"Your body, Grabowski."

That ended the conversation. Ryan got into his truck and drove off without waiting for a reply. He sighed when his cell vibrated.

Body wants u. Mind needs U. Dinner w/me?

Ryan was going to say no. Really he was. But his fingers refused to type what he wanted. So instead he sent:

Yeah. When?

2morrow. 1700. I'll pick u up.

Fine.

CHAPTER TEN

Ryan couldn't believe he was going out with Phillip. He had been tempted to beg off but Kenneth had threatened to tie him up, while Brendon said he would carry him to Mark's truck and Patrick was going to drive him to Phillip's. Any way he looked at it he was fucked. So instead he was sitting in his living room with three daddies doing their best to make sure he looked 'beautiful' without appearing sleazy. At least that's what they were all saying. Brendon picked him up-- as in picked his ass up and carried him into his bedroom with the other two following him.

“Dude, you are not wearing just a t-shirt.” Brendon clucked his tongue and grabbed a button-down.

“Those jeans are dirty...get them off. Ryan, you're going out on a date with the man of your dreams.

Dirty jeans are not right,” Kenneth bitched, going into his closet. He came out with a pair of black slacks.

Patrick thankfully hadn't said anything, even though he was staring at Ryan's head with a critical eye. He hadn't had a chance to get a haircut since the guys got there. His flat top had grown out some. But still it looked good. At least he thought it did.

“You really should have gotten a haircut.” Well, there went Ryan's happiness about Patrick not speaking. The shorter man excused himself and went into the front room.

“Dude, you're right!” Brendon muttered. “God, you're a fucked-up mess.”

Kenneth snorted but agreed. “Put these on.”

“Make sure you have clean underwear on,” Brendon ordered. Hell, the blond went to his dresser and pulled out a clean pair of black boxer briefs. “Too bad you don't have some cute underwear.”

“For fucks sake he's not seeing my underwear. We're just going out to dinner,” Ryan bitched.

“Yeah, okay. 'Cause you two going on a date is gonna end before six the next morning? Thank God I'm bunking with Kenneth now.”

“You should be happy, Furry. Otherwise you would hear moans and screams coming from Ryanny and his boyfriend.”

“If I kill both of them do you think I'll go to prison, Patrick?” Ryan asked.

“Yup. Then you're fucked anyways. Just go with it.”

Patrick really wasn't any help at all. There was a knock on his door and Ryan actually flinched. He looked at the watch on his wrist and wondered who it could be. It was only three in the afternoon.

Patrick went and answered it. He came back in with Mark following him.

“I brought the hairdresser.” Patrick smirked.

“Jesus...ya'll are insane,” Ryan bitched as he stepped out of his pants. He grabbed the slacks Kenneth was holding only to have a pair of boxers shoved under his nose.

“Change them,” Brendon ordered.

“I'm not takin....Kenneth what the fuck are you doing?” Ryan jerked forward when Kenneth pulled his boxers down.

“There, we've all seen your cock - it's lovely. Now change your fucking underwear,” Kenneth told him.

Mark chuckled. “Aww, Ryan. You're gonna look bootiful.” He cackled when Ryan blushed and flipped him off. “Do you know I think you're the only man I know who thinks flipping someone off is actually like saying hello.”

“Yeah, fuck you too, Mark,” Ryan said, smirking. He jerked his clean underwear from Brendon and slipped them on. “I should just kick you all out.”

“Ryan, you should remember that I'm gonna be the one with a pair of clippers,” Mark murmured as he slipped his arm around his boyfriend.

“But we have your best interests at heart,” Brendon pouted. Ryan blinked and couldn't believe it-- for a moment he saw the old Brendon in there.

“Fine.” He grumbled and grabbed the slacks. He put them on and buttoned them, only to have Kenneth hand him a belt.

“Go get your hair cut so you won't look like a woolly mammoth,” Patrick said.

He followed Mark into his bathroom and sat down on the stool. “You don't have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do. Patrick threatened to cut me off. Dude, I'm not missing out on any sex just for you,” Mark said, grinning. “I cut his hair all the time. Get those specs off.”

Mark smiled the whole time and had his hair cut in ten minutes. It looked good.

“Why am I paying four bucks for a haircut when you can do it for free?”

“You never asked,” Mark said as he cleaned his equipment. “He thought about you all the time, you know.”

“Pardon?”

“Phillip. He used to wonder about you. He even ran a search on you after you left Basic. When he heard that guy got killed from your unit he freaked out a little bit.”

Ryan didn't know what to say. Well, he did, but it seemed stupid so instead he just nodded. Phillip had looked for him. He had freaked out a bit when he thought that Ryan had gotten killed.

“He never got attached to anyone before or after you. He's the most professional soldier I have ever served with. So if you're thinking he picked a boy out any other time, you would be really wrong. I don't know what it was about you, but he really cares.”

Mark said it offhandedly. He continued cleaning the clippers. “I'm just telling you this so you know. If you hurt him, Ryan, as much as I care for you I will fuck you up.”

The way Mark said it Ryan believed him. He cleared his throat and nodded.

“So if this isn't what you want, you tell him now before it gets out of hand.”

Ryan nodded again and wondered what he did want. He had looked for Phillip too. He actually would ask about Phillip when he talked to Patrick, in a roundabout way.

He walked back into his bedroom, happy that the other three had gotten bored and vacated it. He slipped on the shirt that Brendon had picked out. He noticed a pair of boots sitting beside his bed and figured that they had been picked out for him as well. He sighed and put them on. Having those three guys was worse than having a sister. And Mac could be a pain in the ass when she felt like it.

When he strolled into the living room he turned around and walked right back out.

“Phillip is going to have a fit when he sees Ryan's apartment. He's somewhat of a clean freak,” Mark was saying.

“It's a pig sty,” Brendon agreed.

“Doesn't look that bad to me,” Patrick offered.

“That's because you both have the same decorator.” Mark rolled his eyes.

“Hell.” Kenneth sighed.

Ryan heard the sound of shit being thrown out onto his patio; Mark grumbling that he'd just made an observation; and Patrick telling Mark to get his ass in gear. They had fifteen minutes before Phillip got there.

Ryan sighed for the millionth time and walked back into the room. “Alright, knock it off. If he doesn't want to see me because of my lack of housekeeping skills, then so what?”

“Dude, you have spent the last five years pining after the guy,” Brendon argued.

“Yeah, and asking me to ask Mark how he was doing,” Patrick reminded him.

“You always sigh when his name is mentioned,” Kenneth added.

“I never asked you to ask Mark how he was doing,” Ryan rebutted, glaring at Patrick.

“Not in so many words. But, dude when you ask 'So how is Grabowski doing?' I figure you want to know, so I'd ask Mark,” Patrick said, grinning. “And you were bitchy when you found out Phillip came to visit Mark while we were at Lewis.”

“Yup, I remember that,” Mark agreed. All four men smirked at Ryan.

“I really hate you all,” Ryan bitched. There was a hard knock on his door and he looked at it like it was a snake. He was fucking nervous as a sixteen-year-old chick waiting for her prom date. He wouldn't have been except he had three daddies who had to make sure he was perfect.

“Wait. No cologne!” Brendon exclaimed and jogged back into the bathroom. He came back out and spritzed Ryan, who coughed.

“You got it in my mouth, dude!”

“Shut up.”

There was another loud knock and Mark made a disgusted sound. He went to the door and opened it.

“Sorry, Phillip. The girls weren't ready,” he said, grinning.

The tall man walked into the room. Ryan blinked and felt his world tilt. Phillip was wearing a pair of tight gray slacks. He had on a soft-pink button-up shirt. Only Phillip could wear pink and make it look manly. He had also had a haircut. God he looked like sex on a popsicle - the sort that you would want to put in your mouth and suck on it until it was drained dry.

Kenneth, Brendon and Patrick stood back smiling.

Ryan looked at Phillip through his girlish eyelashes. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” Phillip replied. His voice was huskier than normal and Ryan was suddenly thankful for the extreme makeover his friends put him through. “So we ready?”

“Now wait a second--” Kenneth butted in.

“Yeah, we haven't asked you the questions yet,” Brendon finished for Kenneth.

“Yeah, like what are your intentions toward our little Ryan,” Patrick added, smirking.

“What do you do for a living?” Brendon added.

“Can you support Ryan's shoe fetish?” Kenneth threw his question in the ring too.

“I don't know them.” Ryan said. “They are complete strangers.”

Phillip threw back his head and laughed. Even taciturn Mark laughed at them.

“Hmm, okay, here are my answers. I plan on feeding him, dancing with him and God willing fucking him until he can't walk straight. I help infertile chickens have baby

chickens, and I think so. I'm hoping his feet are about my size. We can share shoes and everything," Phillip answered.

Everyone in the room laughed...except Ryan. He hadn't heard any answers past the fucking part.

"Alright, sounds like you have his best interests at heart but Ryan doesn't put out on the first date," Brendon said.

"The hell he doesn't. Just remember to use a condom and lube. He has to be able to sit SOME time," Kenneth retorted.

"I don't have anything to say except if you hurt him...I'm still the best shooter in my platoon." Patrick's grin wasn't his 'funny' grin. It was the one that Mark had given him earlier that day.

Phillip nodded. "You ready, Freckles?"

“Yeah. God, yes. Get me out of here.”

Kenneth, Brendon and Patrick all leaned on each other, sobbing.

“Our little boy is all grown up,” Kenneth whimpered.

“My baby boy is going on his first date. Hold me, Mark. Look at him all grown up.” Hell, Patrick dabbed the corner of his eye.

Brendon pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of them. “I got the picture. We have to scrapbook it so we remember this day for the rest of our lives. Have him home by ten!” With that said he let out a big sob and pretended to blow his nose on Kenneth's shirt.

Ryan groaned and reached for his ball cap but Mark grabbed it on his way out.

“No cap,” he ordered.

“See you all later,” Ryan said.

Phillip touched his elbow and ushered him out. “Don't wait up for us.” He grinned as the door clicked shut.

“You have some very cool friends, Freckles.”

Ryan grinned. “Yeah I do,” he said softly.

He was beginning to think this date would be great.

The date had in fact turned into a disaster. They arrived at the restaurant and were seated promptly. After ordering drinks and an appetizer they had stared at each other for a long time.

Ryan wasn't sure what to say. It was odd being out with Phillip. Okay so he had a thing for the man since BCT and yeah he was in a little bit of awe over him ever since. But now he was on a date with him.

“Alright, this silence is killing me,” Phillip said easily. “Let's do this differently.” He took a drink of his beer and held out his hand. “Hey, nice to meet you. I'm Phillip Grabowski. I serve in the Army, and I think you're really fucking hot.”

Ryan chuckled, and took the hand in his. “Hi there. You too. I'm Ryan Gracin. Funny that, me too! And I guess you're pretty hot yourself.”

Phillip beams at Ryan. “You guess? I'm like fucking smoking.”

“And you're modest too. Damn, I shouldn't have played so hard to get. Good looks, sexy smile, dimples and modesty. You're freaking perfect,” Ryan said dryly, taking a drink of his beer. “You gonna release my hand any time soon?”

“I know. It's a hard thing to admit when you find perfection but don't worry. I'll keep you too busy to be awed by it for long.” Phillip dimpled, showing Ryan just why that smile was so dangerous. It sent heat straight to his cock. “I dunno. I kinda like holding your hand.” The grin that passed across Phillip's face this time was mischievous.

“Uh huh.” Ryan wiggled his hand out of Phillip's and laughed at the pout on his face. “I may be bitchy, but Dude, seriously you have a bitchin' pout face...” He stopped suddenly as if realizing he just called Phillip ‘dude’. A part of him cringed but he refused to allow that to show.

“It's alright-- dude. We're not in BCT and I'm not the evil bastard that will smoke your sexy little ass for doing that shit.” Phillip took a drink and grinned. “I used

to love watching you do push-ups. It was like fucking evil on my part but you looked so fucking sexy.”

“Oh man! That explains why you would constantly drop me all the time!” Ryan said, tapping his forehead as if all the pain during basic finally made sense.

“Nah, you seriously fucked up a lot. I wanted you... don't ever doubt that. But I couldn't let my lust come between making sure you got the absolute best training you could have. The world would be a sadder place without you in it,” Phillip said quietly.

It dawned on Ryan that this conversation explained Mark's warning. Phillip did want him but his first job was to make him a soldier. It made Ryan respect the man before him a little more.

“How's William? Mark says he doesn't talk to him much.”

“He's good. We talk just about every other week. He and Mark were kinda like oil and water. They would bend over backwards for each other but conversation was always a bit strained,” Phillip answered. He leaned back as the server came with their chicken wings.

When he asked if they needed anything else Phillip raised his eyebrow at Ryan who shook his head.

“Alright, my name is Paul. Anything at all you need, you let me know.” The guy was seriously starting to piss Ryan off. It was obvious they were on a date and the little fucker was hitting on Phillip.

“Nope, thanks,” Phillip dismissed the guy, who frowned.

Ryan was thankful for Phillip. That look drove him insane in BCT, but now it just made him grin.

“Dude, I'm serious. I think you liked me topping you.” Phillip teased when he noticed the grin.

Ryan laughed. “I dunno. It's been a while and I was young...”

“Coy doesn't suit you, Freckles,” Phillip said, grinning as he bit into a wing. Juice and sauce dripped from full, sexy lips. Ryan wanted to lick the sauce off the other man's lips.

“Yeah I know but I thought I'd give it a try,” Ryan replied back.

“Nah. If I wanted coy and fake I would have asked another guy out,” Phillip said simply. “I kinda like bitchy and snarky.”

“Then according to my friends you'll love the shit out of me,” Ryan said, grabbing his own wing.

“That's kinda gross.”

“Yeah, but I'm cute enough to pull off ‘gross’,” Ryan returned as he bit into a wing himself.

“Yeah, probably.”

They chatted all through their dinner. It was easy conversation. Ryan was surprised just how easy they could talk once they had cut through all the bullshit. He liked Phillip a whole lot more now. Phillip was funny. Intelligent. Cute as hell. Fuck. If Ryan wasn't careful he could very well see himself falling for this man.

After dinner they sat back and stared at each other.

“You are a very attractive man, Ryan,” Phillip said simply. He smiled when Ryan smiled at him.

“Alright, Phillip. This is insane. You have got to have faults somewhere.”

Phillip laughed. "I have an insane temper. Haven't you noticed that?"

"Eh I guess I have a pretty bad temper myself," Ryan said.

"I haven't seen it."

"That's because we're on a date...and I was trying to be bitchy to dissuade you."

Ryan grinned.

"Yeah, didn't really work. You should wait and see if bitchy is a turn-on for a guy." Phillip gave Ryan his advice. "I shouldn't have fucked you...back then." He held up his hand when Ryan looked surprised. "I should have waited...that was extremely unprofessional of me but sometimes I don't play by the rules well."

"See, that's where you and I differ. I play by the rules too much. Patrick says that I'm one of those guys who should just get the rules and regulations tattooed on my

chest. I guess growing up a minister's son you either are one of two things-- the bad boy who breaks every rule or the good boy trying to follow every rule. I tried the good boy...My brother Josh was the bad boy." He smiled at Phillip.

"Ahh! A paradox. Being gay and not wanting to break the rules." Phillip grinned.

"You're telling me! I was devastated!" Ryan grinned.

"I was actually very lucky. My mother asked me if I was gay on my second wedding anniversary." Phillip smiled softly.

Ryan coughed on the beer in his throat. "Dude! And I thought telling my father was bad...seriously?"

Phillip just laughed. "It was probably the easiest thing I have ever done. Sandy had just had Katie. We had sex one time before we got married. It was the night before

I shipped out to basic. We were both young, and stupid. Anyway I kinda knew where my likes and dislikes lay, but Sandy and I had been dating since like seventh grade. It was common knowledge that we were gonna get married...anyway we had sex...nine months later Katie was born. We got married when Sandy was two months pregnant.”

Ryan nodded, waiting for Phillip to continue.

“Sandy always knew I was gay. I knew I was gay. Apparently everyone in my family knew I was gay. Finally they all got sick of waiting for me to admit it. Our anniversary party was turned into my ‘coming out’ party.” Phillip smiled softly at the memory.

“Sandy was okay with it?” Ryan blinked several times. He couldn't believe that.

“Ryan, she spent those two years telling me that we could work it out, that Katie would never not know love, or me. Sandy is my best friend out of the Army.”

Ryan shook his head and wondered how Phillip had found such a great woman and family. "You got lucky."

"Don't I know it? I thank God for them all."

Ryan nodded. Phillip was that rare guy that had fallen under a lucky sign. He had it all - good looks, good family and damn good fortune.

"So, tell me about the Gracin family," Phillip said gently.

Ryan chuckled darkly. "They didn't have a 'coming out' party, that's for sure." He took a drink of his beer, sighing because it was empty. Phillip held up his own bottle and nodded at the server, holding up two fingers.

"I figured out I was gay about the same time I entered college. First frat party I went to a guy hit on me. We ended up making out in his dorm, and I realized that I was gay. I tried hard to ignore it because like I said, my father's a pastor. I was raised

thinking it was a sin and I would burn in Hell,” he said grimly. “The guy ended up being my first and he took me to a few meetings and a new church. As I got settled into being me...I decided I was going to tell my folks. When I did my father screamed at me about how I was going to burn in Hell unless I changed my ways. I told them this was me and they could either love me or not. They both told me to leave. I was disowned, just like that.”

Phillip's face turned grim and he actually looked pissed off on Ryan's behalf.

“Two weeks later I was told I had to leave school if I couldn't find a way to pay for it. A week later I joined the Army. And the rest, they say, is history.”

“Fuck 'em. Ya know, Ryan, if they can't see the man you are, then fuck them. They don't deserve to know you. I take it your siblings didn't see it that way.” Phillip remembered Graduation Day, when Ryan had been shocked to see his brother and sister there.

That brought a smile to Ryan's face. He was surprised to see Phillip lean forward. The man had a soft smile on his face. It wasn't a smile Ryan had been aware of. He knew Phillip was the man of many smiles, but this smile was something he had never seen. It was soft, warm and inviting.

“Ryan, I'm gonna kiss you. If you don't want me to do so in like five seconds you better tell me now.”

Ryan would have to be an idiot not to want Phillip's kiss. He just smiled deeper.

Almost in slow motion Phillip leaned forward, took off his glasses and kissed Ryan tenderly. It was a sharp contrast to their other kisses. This one was slow. It asked for permission. Phillip didn't push his tongue between Ryan's lips; instead he traced them gently. He waited for Ryan to open his mouth. When permission was granted Phillip slipped his tongue into the warm recess of Ryan's mouth, exploring slowly and then drawing away. He smiled at the younger man and kissed his lips again.

“Ryan Ross Gracin. You're totally worth the blue balls you gave me all through BCT.” He smirked at Ryan and drew back. His cell phone rang and he cursed. “If it's Post I'm gonna kill someone,” he growled. “Yeah, Sergeant Grabowski.” He rolled his eyes. “Yeah...no doubt...yeah can you...yeah I'll be there...Austin? Yeah...I got them. No worries.” He slammed the phone shut.

“So, how do you feel about Austin?”

“Got a couple of dumbasses?” Ryan smirked.

“Oh yeah. They are going to hate me...”

“Oh-oh, does this mean Drill Sergeant Grabowski is getting ready to make an appearance?”

“Nah, it's Phillip who was having a kick ass date, interrupted by a couple of knuckleheads. They wish they'd lucked out with Drill Sergeant Grabowski.” He grinned. “Wanna go with me?”

Ryan smiled. “I guess I should stay behind.”

“I think you should come with me. After I put them to bed, then we'll go dancing.”

Ryan adjusted his specs and laughed. “Dude...how about we go get your privates and then we'll see afterwards?”

“You know, I think that's probably the best idea ever.” Phillip leered at Ryan.

“Come on, asshat. Let's go.” Ryan chucked him on the shoulder and Phillip threw down a hundred.

“They are seriously fucked. I didn't get my steak.” His phone rang again and he flipped it open. “Sgt. Grabowski,” he barked. They hadn't even made it out to the truck yet. “What? Shit. Is she okay? Yeah. Alright, fuck. Listen Sandy, I need to call Sgt. Almonz. Yeah. I'll be there. Just give me a half an hour.” He flipped the phone shut and cursed. “Katie climbed a tree and fell out.” He cursed again.

Ryan looked alarmed. “Is she okay?”

“She broke her arm. I need--”

“Call the platoon Sergeant. Tell him I'll go get the guys in Austin,” Ryan replied easily.

“You--”

“Don't. Just do it. I'll call Patrick and have him bring my truck over,” Ryan said while he dialed. “Hey Patrick, we have an emergency. I need someone to bring me my

truck. We're at the Roadhouse. Yeah. Thanks." He hung up and smiled at Phillip, who stared at him. "He's bringing my truck. Now call Sgt. Almonz and tell him I'll go get them. I'm not on call tonight. Alexander is, so our guys will be taken care of. And Staff Sergeant Veas won't have to be called. I think his kid has a recital or something."

Phillip nodded and called the Platoon Sergeant who agreed. "Ryan, you're just....thanks." Phillip leaned over and kissed Ryan gently. "Call me when you're back on post."

"Will do." Ryan said. He waved off Phillip, who got into his truck. As far as first dates went this one kind of sucked, but he was willing to help Phillip out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Patrick brought his truck and he was off. Once he made it to Austin it was easy to find the police station. It wasn't odd for them to have to go and pick up the errant drunk-assed soldier. He got there and waved to Paul. It was a sad fact that he was on a first name basis with the guy.

“Damn, Sgt. Gracin, want us to give ya a desk?”

“Hell no. Just give me my kids and I'll be out of your hair. Drunk driving?”

“Public intox.”

“Go figure.” Ryan sighed. When two of the newest guys were led out he sighed.

“Not the best ‘hello’, guys,” he told them. He signed the paperwork and led them out to his truck.

Ryan called the platoon Sergeant and let him know they were on their way in.

Thirty minutes from post Phillip called.

“Hey, I can do this, ya know,” Ryan said by way of answering.

“Didn't your momma teach you to say hi? Bad, bad manners, Sgt. Gracin.”

“I'm a bad, rude man.” Ryan grinned. “It was Smith and Welson. They thought it would be fun to drink and then take a walk. Nah, everything is cool; they have a fine to pay but otherwise it's good.”

"Yeah? Do you need me to meet you there?"

"Taken care of. How's Miss Katie?"

"Clean break. Sore but not as bad as it could have been. Sandy says she's sorry for interrupting our date. She'll make it up by making you the world's best steak sandwich when you get back in. She's sticking around for a bit until we know how Katie's medication is going to affect her."

Ryan heard a scuffle and then a soft, drawling voice came on the phone.

"Oh my god, Ryan...you don't mind if I call you that right? Anyway, sorry about the whole interruption. Children are the world's best cockblocks. .So...I totally owe you a sandwich. When you're done, come over to Phillip's. I'm not staying long, just long enough to make sure Katie doesn't have a bad reaction to her pain meds...and the whole concussion thing...God, I'm really sorry."

Ryan blinked and then laughed huskily. "It's cool, I swear. You must be Sandy."

"Phillip! You didn't say he had a killer voice. He talks about you constantly. Phillip!

You hit me again I'll kick your oversized ass."

This had to be the weirdest conversation Ryan ever had.

"Anyway I insisted you come over so I can feed you. You have Phillip's address, right?"

He did. Phillip had given it to him on the slip of paper he slipped into his pocket. "Yeah. I'll be over in about an hour."

"Alright, I'll have them made."

The woman hung up on him. He smirked at himself and whistled as he drove the two back.

Once back at the Enlisted's Barracks he signed them in. "They are under house arrest. No drinking. No partying. And they don't go anywhere without Sgt. Grabowski's orders."

The guy nodded and helped them drag the loud mouth asses back into his room.

"PFC Welson, your best bet is to keep your mouth shut. Sgt. Grabowski will talk to you both in the morning." He warned and left.

Fifteen minutes later he was standing outside Phillip's front door. He didn't even get to knock before the door was thrown open.

A petite brunette grinned widely at him. "You're Ryan. God, you've grown up. Phillip pointed you out on Graduation Day." She didn't even pause while she hugged him tight. "Come on. You can help me finish up. Phillip is with Katie. She's not comfortable."

He couldn't believe how easily Sandy had let him in. Hell, he was feeling like he fell into a rabbit hole.

She led him into the kitchen and pointed toward the fridge. "Get the steak sauce out...and a few beers."

Ryan did as she ordered and then smiled when Phillip came into the kitchen.

"How did it go?" Phillip asked when he leaned against the counter.

"Not bad. I felt like knocking them out."

“Why?”

“They pissed me off.”

“Really, how did they piss you off?”

“They interrupted our date.” Ryan grinned.

“Wait, you're not punching me out, right?” Sandy laughed.

As if. Ryan grinned at her. “No way. Phillip's much bigger than me.”

Sandy laughed harder and got out three plates. She placed large steak sandwiches on them and then put them on the table. “I'm really sorry y'all's date got so screwed up.”

“No she's not. She's still carrying a torch for me,” Phillip said as he ripped into his sandwich.

“Please. Phillip, I love you. You know that, but sex and you...” Sandy curled up her nose.

“It's probably because you got girl parts,” Ryan said, grinning.

She laughed and nodded. “I offered to get a fake one. He got all bitchy about it. I think he was worried about the whole size thing.”

They talked for another hour, with occasional checks on Katie's condition. Sandy Grabowski was one of the funniest women Ryan ever met. She told him all about Phillip and much to Phillip's dismay launched into a Halloween story that made Ryan feel for the guy.

“Okay, I think I can load her up and go home. She's acting normal,” Sandy finally declared.

A tall dark-haired girl came out with a bright neon-green cast. She looked pale and drowsy but otherwise she seemed good. “Hey daddy, Love you,” she whispered. Phillip rose and wrapped his arms around her.

“Katie, I want you to meet Ryan. Hopefully one day when you're not hurt you can hang out with him.”

Ryan waved to the girl who waved shyly back. “ 'ice to meet you, Ryan. G'night daddy.”

“Nice to meet you too, Katie.” Ryan smiled warmly. Phillip had to be the luckiest man on the planet.

Sandy grinned and kissed Ryan's cheek, then repeated it with Phillip. "Alright, call if you need anything. I'm gonna go ahead and take her home." Phillip helped them to the car, asking twice if Sandy didn't want to stay there and sleep in Katie's room. She begged off and winked at Ryan. "Don't do anything I wouldn't." The door slipped shut, leaving Ryan and Phillip alone.

"You have the coolest ex," Ryan said with a smile.

"I do. I really do," Phillip murmured. "Wanna watch ESPN?"

"Why not?" They carried their beer into Phillip's living room. They both sat down and began to watch 'Sportscenter'.

"There's talk we're heading back over," Ryan said.

“Yeah, wouldn't surprise me,” Phillip agreed. “Everyone is gonna have two or three tours in before they get out. Fucking Army. I love it but damn. They have to give us some room to breathe. Too many of us are getting home, just to be sent out again.”

Ryan agreed with that.

“William's heading back for his fourth tour in March.”

“God. You're on your fourth, aren't you?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah.” During their little conversation they moved closer and closer until they were practically on top of each other.

“Ryan...” Phillip warned.

“Uh huh.” They both leaned forward at the same time. Soft chaste kisses were exchanged.

“Everyone I talk to says you had it bad for me in basic...” Ryan breathed against Phillip's lips.

“I *did* have it bad. You were so fucking sexy. And you had that cute little...God, Ryan I wanted you so badly I was walking around hard half the fucking time.” His mouth trailed hotly from his mouth to his neck.

“I'll tell you a secret,” Ryan whispered. “I thought you were the sexiest thing I had ever seen.” Ryan tilted his head allowing Phillip access to his neck. “I dreamed about you...so many times.”

“I know. You would moan my name in your sleep.” Phillip growled and turned the kiss from chaste sweetness to dirty and hard. His lips slammed over Ryan's and their mouths devoured each other as they both arched closer together. Neither could get enough. Hands tore at each other's clothing.

In Ryan's fog-covered mind this wasn't exactly how he saw the date going. Sure, in his wet dreams they had done this, but this was reality. Phillip seemed to sense Ryan's reluctance. He pulled away jerkily.

“You...God Ryan, how do you always taste so good?” he said breathlessly. They both slipped apart, trying to slow down their raging libidos.

“Good genes,” Ryan said slowly. But then he slipped his hand from his pocket and showed Phillip the breath mints he had started carrying around ever since Phillip sneaked back into his life.

Phillip chuckled and slipped an arm around Ryan, pulling him close.

Ryan had never been a cuddler but he seriously loved being held by Phillip. It was the only time in his life he felt small. “This is kinda nice.”

“Yeah it is. Ryan...” Phillip released him and looked him in the eyes. “I want to...see where this goes...”

Ryan was about to answer when his cell went off. “Shit.” He looked at it and swore again. “I have to answer it. Patrick wouldn't be calling unless it was important.” He looked at his watch and noticed it was going on 1 am. This had been the most fucked-up date ever. They had been interrupted by everyone and their brother.

Phillip nodded as Ryan answered.

“Patrick?”

Kenny's off the reservation. We can't find him anywhere.”

Ryan cursed and got up. “I'll be over in twenty minutes.” He closed it and looked at Phillip. “I have to go.”

“What's wrong?”

“Kenny's taken off.”

“I take it he has some problems.”

“Yeah, he's drinking too much...he's not dealing well.”

“Want me to come and help?”

Ryan thought about it for a moment. If anyone knew how to deal with Kenneth it would be Phillip. He didn't know how he knew it but he could feel that deep in his bones. “Please.”

“Let's go. You take your truck I'll meet you over at Mark's. Brendon gonna be there?”

“Yup. See you over there.”

Half an hour later they were all at ‘FUBAR’.

“Apt name, Mark,” Phillip drawled.

“I know. He ran off on Brendon,” Mark said grimly.

“Dude, he decked me and ran off,” Brendon bitched, holding an ice pack to his chin.

“Alright, we know this area. We split up,” Ryan said.

“Brendon, you can take the van we use to drive people home in,” Mark said.

“Hit every bar, every place that even serves booze,” Patrick added.

“Find out of the way places. He's going to think you'll hit the big clubs. He'll want enough leeway that we won't interrupt until it's too late,” Phillip said quietly. “I would even go to Belton.”

“That far away?” Ryan asked.

“It's about as far as his cravings will let him go.”

They all split up. Ryan was heading toward Belton, hitting every bar he came upon. Not until he was at his wits end did he actually run into Kenneth. The man was sitting on a park bench. Two bags lay around him. He was babbling incoherently.

“Kenny?” he whispered walking toward the bald man.

“Ryan! What about your date? Did you have sex? I hope you did,” Kenneth babbled.

“Why don't you come home with me?” Ryan asked softly.

“Don't wanna. Don't have a home. Just wanna stay right here.”

He texted the guys and prayed they could make it before Kenneth slipped away from him.

“Can I hang?”

“Yeah, you hang. Everyone likes to hang.” Kenneth wasn't making any sense.

Ryan wasn't even about to try and make him. Instead he just stood there quietly, letting the other man babble on.

It seemed like hours. Hours of Kenneth babbling, and drinking one drink after another. Ryan persuaded Kenneth into letting him have a drink every once in awhile.

Ryan would tip the bottle back and instead of drinking it he let it dribble down his chin.

Patrick strolled up and sat down next to Ryan. “Gonna share, bro?” he asked causally.

Kenneth blinked and handed the bottle over hesitantly. “What are you doing?” Kenneth asked. His eyes were darting back and forth between the men and the darkness. “They're coming,” he whispered.

Brendon came a few minutes later. He leaned causally against a tree. “Not nice to not share after what we went through.”

Kenneth blinked and stepped away from the three.

He looked like he was going to run. All three tensed. Kenneth didn't get a chance.

“GAWD DAMNIT! I told you four to get back to the barracks. What has the Military given to me? Four fuck-ups that can't fucking do one thing right?” came a deep voice out of nowhere. “Get the fuck down, all four of you.”

Ryan blinked and dropped without hesitation. Brendon and Patrick followed quickly behind.

Kenneth stared at Phillip who appeared behind him wearing that fucking brown Drill Sergeant cover. Kenneth blinked blurredly at Phillip, and then slowly dropped down into a push-up.

“Nice of you to join us, Rosey-ass. I was engraving your invitation,” Phillip barked.

That's when Ryan got it. Phillip was taking Kenneth back to a place where he was actually safe. They pushed it out until Kenneth collapsed. His shoulders were shaking and they knew it wasn't from exertion.

“Everyone up. ATTENTION!” All four of them, even Kenneth popped up. His cheeks were wet and they all waited.

“LEFT FACE!”

They turned left and Phillip began to march them toward the van. “Everyone in and back to the barracks,” he ordered. Ryan watched as Brendon slipped Phillip the keys. They all got into the van without a word being spoken.

Phillip drove them back to Ryan's apartment and nodded at Ryan slowly. They all got out, helping Kenneth up the stairs.

Hours later Brendon, Patrick and Ryan began to trickle out of Ryan's bedroom. They found Phillip and Mark in the front room. Coffee and sandwiches sat on the table.

Ryan's face was pale and tears had dried earlier on his face. Brendon and Patrick both looked the same. It didn't take a genius to realize that they were all shaken to their core. Ryan's hand shook as he reached for a cup of coffee.

Phillip slipped an arm around him, not asking what happened. He knew that was between the four of them, but he could support Ryan now.

"He's sleeping," Ryan said. His voice wobbled ever so slightly.

Patrick burrowed into Mark's chest, sobbing silently.

And Brendon just sat on the edge of Ryan's sofa staring at nothing.

"He's moving in with me. I need to see if I can take a week's leave. I'm going to go help him pack."

Mark shook his head. "Doesn't matter if you don't. I'll go with him," he said.

Ryan looked around the room. Every time he felt a wave of sadness at not having a family he remembered this one. Now Phillip and Mark were part of it too. It made him thankful for joining the Army.

Brendon sniffled. "You know...When I left home...I was scared. I hated my dad, but he was the known evil. But I wouldn't trade y'all for anything."

Patrick snorted in agreement.

Mark chuckled. "Are you sure we're the gay ones? 'Cause, Furry, man...that was kinda gay."

All of them let out breathless chuckles.

A few days later they all said good bye to Brendon. Kenneth hugged Brendon tightly and then stood off on the side.

“Let us know when you get home,” Ryan ordered.

“Always do.” Brendon said. He walked toward the gates and turned around.

“Ryan?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m calling your sister when I get home.” With that said he took off down the hallway before Ryan could go after him.

“Dude! I’m gonna kill him.”

“No, you’re not,” Kenneth said softly.

“You can't. He's family.” Patrick said.

“My sister!” he wailed, to general laughter.

Over the next two months things slid into a routine. Ryan would go to PT and flirt with Phillip, who would flirt with him. Alexander would tease them both. They would go out after work. Dinner. Hang out with the guys. Phillip had started to spend a lot of time with Kenneth. They would go for runs. Then Phillip would take him onto post.

Ryan never asked what they did and they never told him.

Mark took Kenneth home and they packed his stuff up. Two weeks later Kenneth was a permanent fixture in Ryan's home.

It was two weeks before the start of the spring that they got the news. In August they were headed back over to Iraq.

In between training and going to NTC in California they spent time with each other. Phillip and Ryan went out a few more times but spent a lot of time at his house or Ryan's apartment. Ryan met Katie, who loved him. Sandy had become a fixture in his life as well as Phillip. He was as likely to find her in his apartment as Kenneth.

He had just gotten off work and into his apartment when Sandy came bursting in.

“Katie wants you and Phillip to take her to see ‘John Cena’,” she said.

“Uh huh, and you came here why?” Ryan said, as he pulled off his boots.

“Because she's driving me insane. She has her first crush-- she's with Phillip telling him about it. I thought I should warn you.” Sandy grinned and walked into his kitchen. She grabbed a soda as Kenneth came out of the shower.

“Hey ya, Kenny. Still on for tonight?” she asked.

Ryan blinked and wondered if he was in the right apartment.

“Yep, I just have to clean up my car.” Kenneth was doing better but still wasn't 'fixed'. Ryan knew he probably wouldn't ever be fixed. But he was functioning a lot better. He still drank, but it was only at ‘FUBAR’ and only when all of them could keep an eye out on him. He was going to AA meetings and talking to other Combat Medics.

All in All Ryan was happy with what was going on-- except for the part where it sounded like Kenneth had a date with Phillip's ex-wife.

“So, anyone tell Phillip about this?” he asked. “I don't wanna piss on anyone's parade but...seriously...”

Sandy burst into laughter and Kenneth sent Ryan a cocky smile.

“We're going to the Ball. Phillip's 'taking' me and you're 'taking' Kenny.” She smiled. “But Kenneth and I are arriving together.”

Ryan felt relief. He wasn't sure how Phillip would take Kenny and Sandy dating.

That evening Ryan got dressed in his dress blues. He was slipping the cuffs on when he heard the bell ring. He cursed when he stubbed his toe on his way to open the door. Phillip stood behind it, looking like home-made sin.

His uniform was fitted flawlessly to his body. The black stetson on his head just made him look like perfection. Ryan felt his mouth watering. He had always thought Phillip was hot but in dress blues, he looked...like sex personified.

“See something you like?”

Ryan slowly nodded his head. “We could always not go...”

“No way. Sandy will be pissed. She's got the hots for Kenny.”

Well, that answered Ryan's other question. Not that he cared about it anymore.

“Give me a minute. I need to find my shoes.”

“How you find anything in here I'll never know,” Phillip teased. He took great pleasure in giving Ryan hell for his lack of cleaning ability.

“Hey, I've gotten better. Who knew that Kenneth was a neat freak?” he called as he went into his bedroom.

“It's a good thing!” Phillip called back.

When he came back out Phillip was sitting on his couch. Ryan still wanted to skip the ball.

“Freckles, you look good enough to eat.” Phillip leered.

Ryan grinned and slipped on his shoes. “You won't let us just stay here...so get over it.” He slipped his own Stetson on and grinned up at Phillip. “Come on. We don't wanna be late. Alexander is meeting us there with his wife. Mark and Patrick too.”

They arrived at the hall, meeting Kenneth and Sandy outside. They filed in and got their wrist tags. Everyone looked at the photographer.

“Fuck it. Come on, Freckles.” Phillip grabbed his arm and led him over.

Ryan was pulled into Phillip's arms and they both smiled for the camera.

Sandy declared it was a damn pity they were gay. Women all over the world were crying after that picture was taken.

Sandy talked Kenneth into taking a picture with her and afterwards they all walked into the hall.

Kenneth and Mark both wore black tuxes. Patrick also donned his blues. It was the only time they could continue wearing their Stetsons indoors, so none of them took them off.

They had to switch place tags so they could all sit together but they did so with minimal problems. Alexander and his wife Victoria were already inside.

“Tory, if you ever wanna turn me straight, just let me know. We can make Alexander disappear,” Phillip said, smiling.

“Phillip, if there were a man I'd leave Alexander for it would be you, but I see you came with Ryan. Are we gonna make him disappear too?” She laughed.

Phillip looked Ryan up and down hotly. “Can't I keep him on the side?”

“Nope.”

He sighed longingly. “Sorry baby. I gotta let you go,” he said.

Sandy snorted. “He's not good at the hetero sex stuff. It makes him itchy.”

Ryan began to laugh.

Alexander just shrugged. "That's alright. I'll just hook up with Ryan. I'm down with boy-on-boy sex."

Everyone started to laugh at that.

Kenneth shook his head at the server and ordered a soda. Everyone looked at him with a smile. "Oh for fucks' sake, it's not like I just created the cure for cancer."

"Nah but I'm proud of ya man," Phillip said.

Sometime after the scene in the park Phillip had become Kenneth's go-to guy. Ryan could see happiness on Kenneth's face, knowing that Phillip was proud of him.

After drinks were ordered they all sat down. The Company commander called everyone to 'attention'. Chairs squeaked back and everyone rose.

After the ceremonial 'Carrying of the Colors' they had a moment of silence, then made the 'Cav' grog. All five men grinned. It was gonna be a good night.

The ceremonies were over and food was placed in front of them. Then a small man was introduced who was an old trooper. He spoke about going into battle in Vietnam. He talked of actions taking place before most of those in attendance were born, but it didn't stop them from leaning forward to hear more about it.

After dinner and the speech everyone let loose. Jackets came off. Bow ties loosened. Phillip had his arm over Ryan's shoulder while they spoke to just about everyone there.

Ryan looked up and grinned. Kenneth and Sandy were dancing to a slow country tune. He wasn't aware of what Phillip was doing until they joined the dance floor too.

"I'll even let you lead, Freckles."

Ryan laughed, because Phillip was already leading them into the dance. He felt Phillip's arm tighten around him and he sighed. They hadn't really ever gotten to dance. It was depressing that just dancing with the man made Ryan ridiculously happy.

Phillip leaned down and kissed the side of Ryan's throat. "You smell really good," he whispered.

"Do I?" Ryan leaned into Phillip's lips. "You *feel* really good."

Phillip chuckled and sighed.

"Good lord y'all stop that. You're making me hot!" Sandy laughed, hugging Kenneth tightly.

Mark and Patrick even joined them.

“If’n y’all get naked on this dance floor I’ll kill ya both,” Mark warned. “You two have a thing about making out in public.”

“Public indecency laws are in effect, guys, but keep on doing that. Tory likes it.” Alexander offered. “It will make getting laid tonight so much easier.” He let out a breath when his wife hit him on the arm.

Ryan laughed and pulled Phillip tighter. “Don’t look! I’m gonna kiss him.” He leaned up and kissed Phillip softly. Yeah, things were progressing slowly but Ryan was pleased - really pleased with the results. At least until he saw Phillip in his dress blues and decided that they were moving too damn slow.

The song ended and something faster came on. All the couples left and went to get another drink. Phillip and Ryan were both sporting rosy cheeks. Patrick’s nose was rosy as well. They leaned back in their chairs and sighed happily.

“Ya know this may be our last get-together...before the going 'way party,”

Patrick said. He lifted his drink and toasted the men at the table. “Dude!” He scrambled up and ran to the front.

A few minutes later they saw him jump onto the stage holding a microphone.

“Alright..Alright. Everyone get ya cup'o'grog. It's time for a sing-a-long.” He looked toward the others and motioned them forward. “Ryan, Mark, Phillip..Alexander, get up here!”

The guys knew it was a bad idea but went anyway.

“This is for our esteemed Airborne gentlemen and for all of us Troopers. If ya know it sing along!”

The band stepped back and grinned. Glasses were passed around to the rest of the guys as they climbed onto the stage.

Patrick's voice deepened as he began to sing. *"He was just a rookie trooper and he surely shook with fright He checked off his equipment and made sure his pack was tight; He had to sit and listen to those awful engines roar, 'You ain't gonna jump no more!"*

Phillip's face broke into a grin as soon as he heard the first note. He held up his cup and the rest followed suit. All four began to sing the chorus: *"Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die. Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die. Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die. He ain't gonna jump no more!"*

Cheers filled the hall. Old Paratroopers jumped up to sing with the guys. Arms were tossed around shoulders and it seemed the whole hall was swaying to the song. Ryan thought it was fitting that Patrick sang "Blood on the Risers." Phillip thought it was a gutsy song choice given it was about Paratroopers.

But Patrick made up for his choice by starting his second song.

“Around her hair she wore a yellow ribbon. She wore it in the springtime. In the merry month of May. And if you ask her why the heck she wore it. She wore it for her soldier who was far, far away.”

The other four sang the chorus. *“Far away, far away. She wore it for her soldier who was far, far away”*

By the end of Patrick's impromptu sing-a-long everyone was smiling. The guys jumped down and sauntered off toward their table. Kenneth was holding Sandy loosely in his arms, and Tory was laughing at a joke he was telling.

“WE have returned. I sounded awesome, didn't I baby?” Alexander giggled, snuggling in close to his wife.

“You did...you did. Very sexy, baby. If you're not too drunk it will totally get you laid.” Tory laughed.

Alexander cheered and the other guys laughed.

“When are you two going to put each other out of your misery and get it on?”

Sandy asked, watching Phillip and Ryan rub against each other.

“I dunno. Ryan is all 'bout takin' it all slooooow,” Phillip complained.

“Bullshit. Phillip said 'Ryan, I wanna do this right.’” Ryan giggled when Sandy snorted.

Phillip rolled his eyes and cupped the back of Ryan's head. He pulled Ryan against him and laid a kiss on his lips that had everyone hooting and hollering.

“Alright, now *that's* what I'm talkin' about!” Tory yelled.

Sandy high-fived her and let out a shrill whistle.

Kenneth made gagging noises.

Alexander was cheering over the fact that he was definitely getting laid.

Patrick was grinning and clapping.

Mark just rolled his eyes. “See, y'all get them wound up and I have to pour water on them. I'm not liking this. Law of averages says at some point they are going to beat my ass.”

They slipped into Phillip's house, not taking their hands off each other. Hands clawed at gold buttons and belt buckles. Their Stetsons had already been taken off as soon as they got into Phillip's truck. They hadn't bothered with them because they were too busy trying to memorizes the other's taste.

Phillip's hand slipped beneath the overcoat onto the crisp white cotton shirt.

“Fuck, you're way overdressed,” he muttered.

“Blame the Army,” Ryan said as he shrugged out of the overcoat. He got Phillip's blue overcoat halfway off before he attacked the larger man's throat. His tongue and teeth were doing equal time in tearing apart Phillip's neck. He pushed the older man against the wall with a grunt. Shaking hands slid down to the gold belt buckle and undid it. He sunk to his knees, taking Phillip's pants down easily. Phillip moaned when Ryan's mouth began to nip and lick at the flesh that was slowly being bared.

Phillip's hands tore at his own bowtie, and shredded the white shirt he wore until it hung in rags around his massive shoulders. “Fuck, Ryan. Come on,” he hissed.

“No, we're gonna play a game,” Ryan said, grinning at the man. “See that wall?” He nodded toward the wall Phillip was leaning against. “You're gonna put your hands above your head and against the wall. If they move Phil, I'll stop. Trust me when I say you don't want me to stop.” Ryan rose easily and kissed Phillip's Adams apple. “Oh Phillip, the things I wanna do to you. I'm going to suck you off and make you scream.”

He laughed when the cock against his blue pants jumped. “Want me to suck your cock, baby?” His voice was so much deeper than normal. It was rough and Ryan could tell it was driving Phillip completely bat-shit crazy.

“I don't play well by the rules, Ryan. But I'll give you ten minutes,” Phillip said roughly. “Ten minutes and then I'm gonna fuck you hard.”

Ryan laughed. “You're not in control here, Sgt. Grabowski.” He dropped back to his knees and played with the sexy white briefs Phillip wore. He mouthed over the other man's cock, blowing his heated breath right onto the already steaming heat of Phillip.

He slipped his thumbs between flesh and cotton. He tugged them, moving only to pull them down to Phillip's ankles. As he moved back toward Phillip's middle he kissed up from tight calves to strong knees, up to muscled thighs. He kissed everywhere except the one place Phillip wanted him to.

“I swear to God if you don't fucking suck me I'm going to--”

Phillip cut off with a gasp when a wet mouth surrounded his cock.

He looked down at Ryan and warm hazel eyes caught sparkling, green ones.

Ryan just sucked the tip of his cock into his mouth, tonguing around the tip and dipping into the slit. Ryan could already taste Phillip's precome; it made him hot as fuck. His hands slid up and down those well-muscled thighs around to an ass so tight you could bounce a quarter off it and have two dimes and a nickel come back. With an agonizing slowness Ryan sank down, allowing the cock to go back further and further into his throat. He didn't stop until his nose was buried in crisp little hairs.

Phillip let out a sound that almost sounded like he was in pain.

“Fuck..Jesus..fucking..Christ!” He gasped as Ryan began to bob up and down on his cock. “Fucking..William..Was..fucking..right.. You have cock-sucking lips...holy fucking shit...”

Ryan growled when Phillip mentioned William's name. He knew that the vibration around Phillip would make the man moan but still, cock-sucking manners did not allow a man to say another man's name while his lover was sucking him off. He stopped moving and slapped Phillip's thigh.

“Ry...fuck damn.” Phillip winced. His hands still stayed above his head.

“Sorry...but you do have the prettiest fucking mouth I’ve ever seen.”

Ryan purred at that and returned to his slow torture of Phillip's cock. He slipped his mouth off and sucked on two fingers. He grinned when Phillip shook his head.

“My sucking...My way,” Ryan said primly and then didn't give Phillip any chance to think. He slipped his mouth over him again, deep-throating him until Phillip would have agreed to dress in the red dress Sandy had worn to the ball. One hand slipped behind Phillip and parted his ass cheeks with wet fingers. Another reached under the heavy cock and cupped his balls gently. When Phillip relaxed Ryan slipped

his middle finger around the heady flesh until he could push the tip into the other man.

He massaged the flesh and continued the bobbing of his head. Up and down he went so slowly that Phillip's hips began to move, demanding him to go faster. While Phillip fucked his face Ryan ever so slowly finger-fucked his ass.

It was fucking heaven.

He pushed a little deeper until Phillip began to whimper and make little sounds warning the smaller man to stop but not really wanting him to. All of it stopped when Ryan stroked Phillip's prostate.

Phillip let out a yell that rattled the windows. He cursed and bucked forward. If Ryan hadn't been ready he would have surely gagged.

When it all became too much to bear Phillip turned away from the wall and pulled Ryan off his cock and winced ever so slightly when the finger was pulled out of him.

“Fuck. That mouth should be fucking illegal.” He growled as they changed their positions. Ryan was rock-hard. He couldn't help it but the smell, taste and sounds Phillip made had him nearly coming in his own pants.

“I wasn't done,” Ryan said, his voice unnaturally calm.

“Oh yeah you are.” A big hand reached down and cupped him through the pants. “Now I'm gonna fuck you good.”

A firm hand caught his. Ryan grinned. “Who said *you* were in charge?” He laughed when Phillip growled at him. It was like laughing at a tiger when you're holding a bloody steak in front of him. But Ryan didn't care.

He pushed Phillip away and the other man came roaring back, pushing him and holding Ryan imprisoned against the wall with his body.

“Phil, do you want to stop?” Ryan asked, grinning.

“The fuck you say?” Phillip growled.

“You're gonna fuck me...But I'm the fucking driver,” Ryan growled back.

Phillip actually sighed. He looked at Ryan through veiled eyes. “I hate you.”

“No you don't.” Ryan began to take his clothes off and pointed at the clothing still pooled around Phillip's ankles. “You should get rid of those.”

The older man pulled off the clothing and glared at the younger one.

Ryan grabbed Phillip by the hand and led them both into Phillip's bedroom.

“Tell me you have lube and condoms.”

Phillip grinned. "I should be a dick and tell you I don't. But then I wouldn't get laid and that would seriously piss me off." He pointed at the dresser. "Top shelf."

Ryan walked to it naked as the day he was born, having left his clothing on the floor in Phillip's hallway. He turned and looked at Phillip. He opened the dresser drawer, pulling out both lube and condoms. Slowly he walked back to the bed where the man had sprawled out like some sort of fucked-out Sex God. He stopped only to prop a foot against the bed. With agonizing slowness he slipped a hand behind himself. He played with his own hole, moaning at the touch.

Phillip groaned.

Ryan watched as Phillip's own hand came forward and began to stroke his own cock. There was nothing more attractive than watching a man handle himself. Ryan would gladly watch Phillip masturbate some other time, though. He had plans.

He left his ass alone so he could pour lube onto two of his fingers. He returned them to his entrance and began to push one inside of himself. He moaned at the pressure rocking his hips back to meet his own touch. When he couldn't bear it any more he pulled his finger out. Lubing up again, this time he pushed two fingers in.

Phillip's breathing was erratic. His jerks became slower...harsher...as if he was trying to stave off his orgasm. "Fuck. You. Are. Fucking. Beautiful," he growled. Ryan could tell this was trying Phillip's patience but he still slowly fingered himself. His free hand went to his cock and began stroking it.

Ryan's moans echoed Phillip's. They were both on the edge. They both needed more. When Ryan finally had enough playing he crawled up the bed and captured Phillip's lips, demanding the other man open his mouth to his questing tongue. When it was given Ryan planted his legs on either side of Phillip's thighs. When the kiss was no longer enough Ryan grabbed the condom and ripped it open. He slipped it down Phillip's throbbing cock and lubed him up thoroughly. One hand reached down and

grabbed Phillip's cock. He didn't take his time this time. He slammed himself down onto Phillip.

He moaned and keened high in both pain and pleasure. "Fucking shit... goddamn... fucking... FUUUUCK Phillip!" He gasped against the man's firm lips.

"Fuck..Fucking hell. Ryan...God, don't fucking move. Don't you fucking move!" Phillip demanded.

Both men paused just enough to get themselves under control. Ryan went back to kissing Phillip and felt his erection bob heavily. He began to slowly move. They both groaned. His hips pushed forward and then pulled backwards.

"God...Ryan...Feels sooo good," Phillip breathed.

Ryan angled his hips and pushed down, feeling Phillip rub against his prostate. "Fuck!" Ryan hissed. "Been waiting sooo long. Want you to fill me up." He groaned.

Their movements were jerky until they settled into a rhythm that made both of them moan, whimper and beg each other for completion.

Phillip's hands slipped up and stroked Ryan's cock. It proved to be his undoing. He was knocking against his prostate with every thrust. Phillip's hand was hot and heavy against him. He didn't stand a chance. He came with a cry. Phillip surged forward, wrapping his arm around Ryan's waist. He took over the thrusting. He sat up, bringing Ryan forward. Ryan tried to keep the rhythm he had set up going but Phillip jerked and spasmed. He filled the condom with a hard cry.

Moments later both men collapsed against each other. Phillip lay back pulling Ryan onto his chest. "Freckles...you're not allowed to do that anymore. I think you're trying to fucking kill me."

Ryan chuckled and blew out a deep breath. "Yeah, you were fucking pretty hard with me too there, buddy."

“Uh huh. And you loved every fucking second.”

“Yup.” Ryan was too fucked-out to lie.

“Hang on. Let me get this rubber off.” Phillip pushed Ryan off and sat up to pull the condom off. Tying it off, he threw it into the trash can beside his bed.

“That was worth the wait.” Ryan yawned.

“And this time we get to wake up and do it again in the morning,” Phillip said smiling. They lay back snuggled against each other.

Sleep found them sooner rather than later.

That morning Ryan was awakened with gentle kisses. Phillip peppered his face and his neck with them. A long, hard thigh wedged itself between his. An already-hard cock pushed against his own rapidly-filling one.

“Mornin’,” Ryan drawled.

“Morning,” Phillip said lazily. “Rise and shine.” He murmured, “I just realized something.”

“Waz that?” Ryan asked.

“We've never tried ‘slow’.”

Phillip proceeded to show Ryan he could do slow and easy very nicely.

Phillip dropped Ryan off at his apartment later that afternoon. When Ryan pushed the door open the first thing he saw leaning against the wall was a two-by-four with a bright red ribbon decorating it.

“Kenny, you asshole!” he called, and was answered with a very manly chuckle and a definite womanly giggle.

A few days later Ryan got the surprise of his life. Phillip asked him to come over for a BBQ. Ryan was nervous because first off, he knew Sandy and Katie would be there. And secondly he was being introduced as ‘the boyfriend’. He wore his best jeans and a casual shirt that Phillip had bought for him. It was another of those ‘Cav’ shirts that Phillip seemed to be so fond of.

When he rang the doorbell he expected Phillip to open it. Instead it was a girl around his age.

“Oh my God! You must be Ryan. Sandy said you were hot but wow. My brother has all the luck.” She sighed. “I’m Meghan, by the way. Come on in!” She opened the door and Ryan was surprised to hear not just Phillip's voice but several he didn't recognize.

“Um, nice to meet you, Meghan,” he muttered, walking in.

“He didn't tell you it was a family BBQ, did he? He doesn't tell people crap.”

“Meghan! Don't scare the poor man. Come on in, Ryan!” came another soft voice that wasn't Sandy's.

“Isn't he hot, Meg? I swear you should have seen him before. He was really twinkly but now all of a sudden he's freaking hot! Ow! Phillip, I'm gonna tell your momma on you!” Sandy called from the living room.

Phillip came out of the living room, smiling at Ryan. He flipped his sister's nose and then laid a soft kiss on Ryan's lips. “Welcome to my madness,” he whispered, chuckling at the dumbfounded look on his lover's face. “Meg, meet Ryan. Ryan, this is my incredibly bratty sister.”

Meg stuck her tongue out at Phillip and smiled at Ryan. “Don't listen to him. He's a dork.”

Phillip slipped an arm around Ryan's shoulders and led him into the living room. “Momma, Daddy, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Ryan. Ryan, this is Sherri and Gerry, my parents.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Grabowski,” Ryan said, clearing his throat.

“Pfft, call me Sherri!” the older woman said. She had the same killer smile as her son and daughter.

“Polite. I like that,” Gerry said with a grin.

Shit! He was so screwed. Ryan blinked and tried to smile but was still not quite there. The brother was Jeff.

“So this is the guy that had you all flustered for so long? Hell, as a straight married man I'm impressed. Very nice, baby brother.”

Ryan actually blushed. He looked at Phillip, who grinned.

“Hot, isn't he?”

“Ryan!” Katie came running in and enveloped Ryan in a hug. “Daddy said you were gonna take me to see John Cena ‘cause he and Momma couldn't handle it. Are you?”

“Yup. Next Saturday right?” Ryan said, hugging the girl back.

“You rock...Really!” Katie squealed and hugged him harder. “You'll see. John Cena is like hot...Hotter than my dad.”

“Hey now! He's mine and you make sure that steroid freak knows it!” Phillip said, glaring at his daughter and then grinning. “We'll be right back!” He pulled Ryan into his bedroom and blinked sheepishly at him.

“Family BBQ? Dude! You set me up!” Ryan bitched.

“I did but I had to do something. Everyone was starting to think you were a figment of my imagination. Well, except Sandy, but she was swearing she never saw you either. So I had to do something!” Phillip laughed when Ryan scowled at him. “I’ll make it up to you...like tonight...after everyone goes home.”

Ryan pretended to think about it and then slowly grinned. “Oh, you’ll make it up to me alright.” He leaned up and kissed Phillip. They didn’t waste any time in tasting each other’s mouths. They were clawing at clothes when they heard a loud bang on the door.

“None of that stuff, you two. Not until we are all gone!” came Sherri’s voice.

Ryan blushed yet again, causing Phillip to laugh.

“Oh baby, they are gonna love you.” Phillip moved out of the way before Ryan could hit him.

Surprisingly Ryan did enjoy himself. He had already been accepted into the Grabowski family without having ever met them. Sherri demanded he call her 'Momma Sherri'. She made his plate and would have cut up his meat if he hadn't stopped her.

Meg had decided that they were gonna be great friends. He felt the urge to remind her that he was gay, that he was not a girl. But thankfully Phillip did that duty.

Jeff decided they could like him even given his bad taste in football teams, mainly because Ryan was the only one he knew who could put up with his brother without wanting to kill someone. Ryan argued that point strongly because sometimes being with Phillip did make Ryan want to kill someone. But only those who interrupted them, a truth which Sandy pointed out to the whole family.

Gerry laughed his ass off while Phillip told them all basic training stories. Ryan just shrugged them off. He wasn't that kid anymore and hell, he had to admit a lot of them were funny as hell.

Sherri happened to be a picture taker. She also seemed to think that Ryan deserved a spot in every family picture she took, plus several pictures of just Phillip and him. She promised to email him all of the pictures. He promised to write her and the family while he was in Iraq.

Before they left Sherri cornered him in the kitchen.

“You know, PHIL doesn't talk about the men he's dated before. You're the first one he's talked about.” She smiled. “I knew you were special. Sandy said he introduced you to Katie and that’s how we all knew you were the one.”

Ryan blinked. He hadn't thought about it. He didn't think Phillip's feelings were up for discussing, and well, they might be gay but they still were male enough that

they didn't talk about their feelings. He knew his feelings for the man. He was falling for Phillip Grabowski and being around the man's family wasn't stopping those feelings from getting stronger.

“I just wanted you to know that you're family now, Ryan. You ever need anything or need someone to whip that son of mine into shape, you call.” She grinned at him and surprised him by giving him their home number and cell phone number. She hugged him tightly. “Welcome to the family.”

After they left Ryan sat on Phillip's couch. “Your family is great,” he whispered.

“My mother thinks you're the ‘cat's meow’. She told me that if we break up they may keep you instead.”

Ryan laughed. “I think I'll keep them...and you, if you don't mind.”

“I was so hoping you would say that.” Phillip grinned and slid down beside him.

“So I owe you.”

Ryan blinked and looked up at Phillip almost shyly. “I think maybe I owe you.”

They both lost their grins and talking became useless. Their mouths had other things to do besides talk.

The weeks flew by. Brendon had called just about every day, talking for hours to all of them. They all knew it was coming. Deployment was never easy. It was nearly August and they were all sitting in the ‘FUBAR’ before it opened to the public for the day.

Ryan was thankful that Phillip would be going with him. He hated that Patrick would be somewhere else, but he knew the smaller man's unit. He felt good about them.

Sandy, Mark and Kenneth were antsy about the whole deal. It was hard for them to watch their buddies and lovers leave. But they could do it.

“Dude! I'll be okay. I haven't had an episode in a while,” Kenneth said, holding up his hand. “Besides, I have Sandy and Mark to keep me grounded.”

“Still...” Ryan complained. “Promise you'll keep going to the meetings.”

“Promise,” Kenneth said, sighing. “Brendon wanted to come see y'all off but he can't get away.”

“Yeah; figured,” Phillip said. He was sitting in a booth with Ryan tight against him.

Sandy sat on Kenneth's lap and watched two of her three favorite men in the world talk. "I expect letters," she said. "And don't worry. Katie and I will keep Kenneth too busy to worry." She smiled at her daughter.

"Daddy, will you send me letters so I can put them in my scrapbook?" Katie asked.

"Of course, sweetness," Phillip said reassuringly.

"You too, Ryan," Katie said. She had accepted Ryan before anyone told her that her dad was dating the other man. It was perfect for her. She adored both Kenneth and Ryan so. Adding them to her odd little family was easy.

"Of course, Miss Katie," Ryan said with a grin.

Patrick came over and pulled a chair up. "I'm leaving in two days," he said bluntly.

"Two days? When did you hear?"

"This morning." Patrick was grim. Mark came in behind him. The older man was used to deployments but that didn't make it any easier to say good-bye.

"You two have everything packed?" Mark asked.

"Yeah. We went over it the other day. It rocks having a former Drill Sergeant as a boyfriend."

Phillip laughed and nipped at Ryan's neck.

"OH MY GOD!! Daddddddddyyyyy you're soooo gross!" Katie made sounds that sounded like gagging.

“Stow it, brat,” Phillip said, laughing. They all sat in silence for a long time -
each contemplating their up and coming deployments.

Three days later Patrick was in Kuwait. A week after that Phillip, Ryan and
Alexander had their boots on the ground.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mark,

22Aug2006

We'll I'm in country. I heard Ryan and the others have gotten to Kuwait. I think this place has gotten worse from my last deployment. Damn, I miss you like hell. Being away makes me realize how much I love you. I think you're right. We should get married.

Patrick.

Patrick,

22Aug2006

You decide this while you're over in the sandbox? You have piss poor timing,
asshole. And you're pretty fucking lucky I love you as much as I do.

Mark

PS. How about R & R?

Patrick and Mark,

24Aug2006

You two are so much like girls it's scary. Anyways Sandy said y'all were gonna
get married on R & R congrats. But, quick question who's wearing the dress?

Phillip

Phillip,

24Aug2006

You are. We're gonna wait until you can be our Maid-of-honor. Too bad you're not a virgin then you could really be the 'maid'. Ryan will have the matching cummerbund. I have a beautiful chiffon dress already picked out. It's baby blue and has flowers. You'll love it. If you want I can change the color to pink...

Mark

PS How's Ryan? No one has heard from him.

Patrick,

27Aug2006

Dude, getting married? Seriously? WTF. We're never suppose to get married it's too...damn. I was thinking Ryan and Phillip were gonna do it. I thought the reason they were sexual frustrating themselves was so they could save themselves until they were married. Ahh, well. I'm happy for ya. Hell, y'all been together for what? Five years, going on Six?

Brendon

Brendon

28Aug2006

Yeah, getting married. Dude, you don't hang with them. If they hadn't finally had sex I was going to 'roofie' them and make sure they did have sex. Phillip is a fucking cranky bastard when he's not getting laid. Six years. I love the man. He wanted to get married sooner but I didn't want to ruin what we have...Now I wish I married him as soon as I got out of AIT.

Patrick

Kenneth,

01Sept2006

Sandy said you had a bad day yesterday. They happen. Did you get a hold of Fred? Remember all of our bad days are just dust on the wind, man. It's tomorrow that's going to be the bitch. Make sure you call Fred if you haven't gotten a hold of him yet. If

he's not around have Sandy let you into my house. There is a Rolodex with Bob

Beaver's phone number, call him. Tell him Phil sent you to him. He runs a home for

Vets who have issues dealing with society. Keep your chin up.

Phillip

Phillip

02Sept2006

Dude! Beaver? Seriously? That man scared the shit out of me at reception. Next thing you're gonna have me do is call Roach. Beaver made me cry...Wait now that I think about it, hell you and King liked to make me cry...Tell me why I am your friend again?

Kenneth

Kenneth,

02Sept2006

You're his buddy because he's fucking me.

Ryan

Ryan,

03Sept2006

WTF? No one has heard from you in weeks and when we do it's to tell Kenny that 's Phillip's buddy because Phillip is fucking you? Have you lost your mind? Too much sand get in your ears? Dumbass. You're not allowed to do that shit. You have family now! I better get a long letter saying how much you love us and how you won't ever do that shit again.

Sandy

PS Kenneth says he loves you too!

Sandy,

04Sept2006

You tell him baby! I tried to make him email ya but he said 'Why should I, she can't do nothing to me.' I kid you not. You should totally kick his ass when we get home.

Phil

Phillip, Sandy, Kenneth, Brendon, Patrick, Mark

05Sept2006

I AM HERE NOW. EVERYTHING IS COOL. IF YOU HEAR FROM
PHILLIP THEN YOU KNOW I AM PERFECTLY SAFE JUST BUSY. I
LOOOOOOOOOOVE YOU ALL.

Ryan.

PS Happy now?

Ryan,

05Sept2006

PMS much?

Mark

PS How come I was last on your list?

Phil,

05Sept2006

You are such a kiss ass! No wonder we got married. I was too young to realize all the bullshit you slung. You just want someone to spank Ryan so you can watch. If it turns you on that much why don't you do it?

Kenneth said to tell you he got a hold of Beaver. I'm not going to ask what that means because if I find out you been telling my boyfriend to get some beaver, I may have to kill you. Katie would be upset...But hey since Ryan is in the picture I may be able to swing it. She likes Ryan more than you anyways. (Kidding. Katie wanted me to tell you she loves and misses you.)

Sandy

They communicated through emails, phone calls and the occasional cam-to-cam chats. For Mark it became routine. He woke up at three am just in case Patrick would send him an IM through Yahoo. Most of the time he had several emails waiting for him in his inbox. He might or might not go back to bed afterwards. It all depended on what was going on that day, or if his friends were keyed up over something. In a war zone everything was subject to change and it did so daily.

He had been deployed and knew the drill. When he didn't get any messages for a while he knew that it was normal. They could be on blackout due to a death or the Internet could be down. So the fact he hadn't heard from anyone for a week didn't make him nervous. What made him nervous was the cold ache that entered him. It was the chill of foreboding. Like, subconsciously, he knew something was wrong.

Even knowing that didn't stop the tendrils of fear when he heard a knock on the door. Patrick had named him as his POC, point of contact, if anything should happen to him. He always paused when he heard a soldier was killed. He knew that the Army would contact him before news leaked, at least he prayed they would.

It was seven in the morning and he was making coffee when the persistent knocking began. The cup in his hand clanged into the sink. He never had company this early. Even though the sun was already peeking through the curtains it was still too early for people visiting. There was only one knock that would be coming this early.

He walked slowly to the door, staring at it, not wanting to believe it was happening. His brain began to work in overdrive, telling him that he knew this could happen. He knew that this could be his reality but he didn't want to think in it. He wanted to remember that he and Patrick were getting married when Patrick came home on R & R. That...he watched as his hand reached out for the door knob. It was like it was on slow mo and it was someone else's hand reaching for it.

The door opened slowly. In Mark's mind, behind it would three Army officers: the CO, a chaplain and another guy stuck on Rear D. Mark only prayed it wasn't Brandingham. Patrick hated the fucker. He wouldn't be held responsible for what he did to that homophobic bastard.

When it was open he was shocked to see Kenneth and Sandy. At first anger coursed through his body. They knew better than to do this shit. He nearly told them so, but as soon as his mouth opened he noticed the looks that were on their faces.

“Oh. Oh,” Mark said, stepping back. It felt like a boulder was sitting on his face.

“I...You shouldn't...”

Sandy was shaking and crying -crying too hard to speak. She tossed up her hands and looked up at Kenneth, who was an unnatural shade of white. He too was shaking, but tears weren't falling. They just pooled in his dark-blue eyes.

“It's Phillip,” Kenneth croaked out.

“Fuck. No.” Mark stumbled backwards. He couldn't believe it. Not Phillip.

Phillip was larger than life. Out of all of them he was the guy who could survive anything.

“What? When?” Mark asked, clearing his dry throat.

“A...suicide bomber...They were clearing the streets...he wasn't in the Brad...They...He tried to get...The bomb went off fifteen feet from him. His back was turned...They...uhh. Don't know if he's going to make it. They're airlifting him to Landstuhl...If...When he is stable.”

Mark turned, not willing to look at them. Sandy's soft sobs filled the room, making him swallow hard.

Then he grabbed Kenneth and pulled him to the side. “What's your professional opinion, Kenneth? What do you think will happen?”

Kenneth swallowed and shook his head. "It doesn't look good, Mark. Both of his legs were broken in the explosion. They said he has multiple fractures. Muscles and tendons were torn. They had to pump five pints of blood into him. His back...they said he has to have skin grafts if he survives. They had to put out the...fire. The concussion threw him twenty feet away. They said it was pure luck he didn't break his back. If...If I were there...I would red tag him and possibly lean toward black tag. He's tore up, Mark. Bad." Kenneth swallowed hard

"So what's...the...fuck..." Mark felt a tear roll down his cheek. "Chances?"

"Forty to sixty if we're lucky." Kenneth said quietly. "But I haven't seen him and I've not taken his stubborn streak into consideration."

Mark nodded and didn't say anything. "Has his family been notified?"

“We're going to head that way. They don't need to have this told to them over the fucking phone. They called at six this morning and fucking TOLD Sandy all of this over the phone. I had to take the phone and talk to them,” Kenneth said bitterly.

“What about Ryan? Any word?”

“No. If I know Ryan he's ready to kill everyone standing in his way. Has Patrick called?”

“No, haven't heard from him in a couple of days,” Mark said. “Want me to go to San Antonio with you two?”

“No, we wanted to know if you could keep Katie for a bit. We're going to get her. She needs to know.”

Mark nodded. It's the kids that suffered the most during deployments. They were the ones who had to steel themselves for this shit. "She can stay with me as long as you need her to."

"We need to contact Brendon. Umm and William, if he's close to Phil."

"I'll make the calls." Mark said. "You two tell Phil's parents. Do you know where he's going to be sent after...after Germany?"

"The Intrepid Center," Kenneth guessed. It was a Military hospital at Ft. Sam Houston in San Antonio, in the Brooke Army Medical Center.

Mark knew that Kenneth hated his father, but for Phillip and all concerned, he would pull every string he could.

“I told him I would kill him,” Sandy said suddenly, tears drying on her face. “I told him it would be fine...because we had Ryan. Oh god. That was the last...” She burst into tears and Kenneth quickly wrapped his arms around her.

“Shhh, baby he knows it was a joke. It's okay. I promise. He probably laughed at it,” Kenneth soothed. “We need to go get Katie. Come on, babe. We'll go get Katie and then go see the Grabowskis.” He looked up at Mark, who waved them off.

After they left Mark stood in the middle of his living room, wondering what he should do first. He picked up his phone shakily and dialed Brendon's number. It was Friday. Brendon should be getting up for PT.

“Hey Mark! How's it going?”

Mark swallowed and cleared his throat. “Brendon?”

“Dude...what's wrong? Which one?”

He could hear Brendon's voice change from being friendly to intrepid.

“It's Phillip. He...Brendon, it's bad.”

He heard Brendon start cussing, and heard something bang against the wall.

“What happened? When? What about Ryan? Is he going to...? Don't...Fuck.”

“They were clearing the road. Phillip was out of the Bradley directing traffic or something. Suicide bomber. He was looking away from it. He's pretty broken up. We aren't sure what is going on, but if they get him stabilized they're shipping him to Landstuhl in Germany.”

Mark could hear Brendon breathing hard. He could hear tears in the other man's voice.

"He can't...He just can't, Mark. He's fucking Superman. Superman doesn't die."

"He's flesh and blood, Brendon. He can and we have to--"

"Fuck you Mark. No he can't. He and Ryan...This isn't happening."

With that said Brendon slammed the phone down.

Everyone had ways of dealing. Mark's way was to take charge and do the grunt work. Kenneth's was to get clinical. Sandy went emotional. But Brendon dealt with it like he dealt with basic. Unlimited hero worship. Mark knew that the younger man had looked up to Phillip and himself like they could do no wrong. Nothing could ever happen to them because they were with the Drill Sergeants. They were indestructible.

When the phone rang again Mark answered it on auto-pilot.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Mark couldn't help but feel the wave of relief course through him. He felt guilty as hell for it, but he pushed that aside.

“I love you, Patrick. I love you so damn much.” Mark choked.

“I know, babe. I do but what the fuck is going on? We had a blackout and I heard a couple guys from the seventh got killed and a few more fucked up badly. What's going on?”

Mark gave Patrick the ‘no bullshit’ story. Unlike with Brendon he didn't sugar coat it. That would piss Patrick off to no end.

There was silence for a few moments before he heard Patrick sniff.

"What about Ryan?"

"No news. He hasn't contacted anyone yet," Mark answered.

"That's not like him," Patrick said.

"I know. I emailed him but didn't get anything back yet."

"I love you Mark. I...fuck." The sob did Mark in. He began to cry and didn't even try to stop it.

The call lasted fifteen minutes exactly. Mark knew because he counted the time off in his head. They said they loved each other. Mark promised to email him if he heard anything.

Katie was sitting in his front room watching TV. She hadn't said much since she got there. He watched her closely and noticed she wasn't really watching TV, just staring at the screen with acute disinterest.

“Uncle Mark?” she called hesitantly.

“Yeah, Katie-bug?”

“Is my daddy going to die?”

Six little words spoken so quietly that Mark had to strain to hear them. “Katie-bug...” he started; she turned and looked at him.

“Is my daddy going to die?” This time her voice was hard. She was demanding an answer.

Mark knew both Phillip and Sandy had been very honest with her. While it was a low probability it was still there.

“He could, Katie. But I have never known a man more stubborn or with as much fight as your dad,” he said, clearing his throat. Thirteen-year-old girls shouldn't be dealing with this shit.

“Is he hurting bad?”

Mark swallowed hard. “Probably not, he's in a coma.”

“Okay.” Her small shoulders shook as tears began to stream down her face.

Mark walked to her and pulled her into his lap. “Shh baby. He's...gonna be fine.”

“Don't lie to me, Uncle Mark. He might not be.”

It hurt to hear those words coming from a girl whose biggest concern should be
'what should I wear today?'

Hey Folks

15Sept2006

I sent a letter to my wife. If you're reading this it means she's sent it to you. I
couldn't get into details through my email but she can.

Last week we went on patrol on Route Whiskey. The Iraqis had a huge-assed
cluster fuck going on. We had to dismount. Phillip got out because his BC was driving
him crazy. Ryan and I just got out. Anything beat staying in that hellhole. We had
enough guys to cover with the big guns anyways.

Phillip had nearly gotten hit by some asshole. Who ever thought every Iraqi
should be given a driver license needs to be shot. It was the fifth time someone almost

got ran over. He was screaming and hitting the guy's hood with his M16. Ryan was about fifty feet from him, grinning. You know Ryan.

A few minutes later I heard someone yelling about a guy walking between cars. It happened so fast that no one even fired a shot. The guy detonated it. After the smoked cleared we all ran towards the guys that were down. Besides Phillip he got Gregg, Mercer and Hawk. Gregg was killed instantly. The other two are still in the trauma center.

Ryan isn't doing well at all. They are trying to get him to take something to sleep but he won't do it. The LT got him in to see Phillip before Phillip was shipped to Germany. He still hasn't talked about it.

All I can say is thank God for LT. Kripke. He's been dragging Ryan into his office. Ryan normally comes out with new information and the LT is trying to get Ryan's R & R bumped up.

Alexander

After Alexander's email Mark called Tory to thank her for it. She burst into tears and Mark damn near started to cry himself.

"I feel awful. When Sandy called all I could say was thank God Alexander is safe. God, I'm horrible." She sobbed.

"No it's normal. I did the same thing with Patrick," Mark said, clearing his throat. "Still feels like shit," he agreed.

They didn't talk long. When he hung up he sat down on the couch. Kenneth and Sandy were on their way back from San Antonio again. Mark had gotten Katie to pack a small bag. They were all heading back that way first thing in the morning.

Kenneth had pulled every string he had to get Phillip transferred to The Intrepid Center at Brooke Army Medical Center. He was being brought in tomorrow. Everyone was getting ready to leave and head that way. Patrick knew that Mark would be there. Hopefully he could leave voice mails or text if he got in.

The hospital was cold; sterile; it smelled bad. And Mark had a hard time breathing. Sandy was holding his hand tightly when they entered the family waiting room of ICU.

Phillip's parents and siblings were already there.

“Sandy.” Gerry greeted her, pulling the young woman into his arms. Katie came over and he slipped an arm around her too.

Meghan was pale and went straight to Mark. She hugged him tightly. “Glad you’re here.”

“Thanks,” Mark whispered.

A nurse came out and frowned at Mark and Kenneth.

“I'm sorry, only family can be here.”

Sharon cleared her throat. “Can't you see? That's Mark and Kenneth. Phillip's cousins. They have been best friends since grade school,” she lied.

Mark blinked and nodded at Sharon, thankful for the woman.

“Can we? Is he?”

Kenneth was trembling. Mark knew what he wanted because Mark wanted to go back there in the worst way.

“Two at a time.” Sharon nodded.

Kenneth looked at Mark and Sandy. “You both should go on in,” he said, willing to wait his turn.

Mark felt like kissing the guy. Both he and Sandy walked into the ICU arm in arm. Mark wasn't sure who was holding who up. All he knew was his legs were shaking and if he stopped at any time they would hear his knees knocking together.

The room was shut off from the outside and the curtain was drawn. He pushed it back looking at the floor. He wasn't ready to look at his friend yet. Taking a deep breath he looked up.

Sandy drew in a sharp breath, and it came out as a sob.

Mark's breath caught in his throat. He felt bile rising and wanted to vomit.

The man lying on the bed wasn't his friend.

It wasn't Phillip who was always the picture of good health.

Phil,” Sandy whimpered.

This Phillip had tubes poking from everywhere. A ventilator was hooked up to keep him breathing. IVs hung all over the place. Plasma, fluids medicines were all being pumped into his too still body. Machines beeped and growled behind him.

But what made Mark die a little more was his friend. Phillip was too white.

They had him lying on his stomach so the burns on his back would heal but his face was visible. Phillip's face was paler than pale. It was sunken and gaunt.

What struck Mark was how small Phillip looked on the hospital bed. That hurt him in more ways than one. He didn't say anything but listened to the beeps of the machines, and Sandy's soft cries.

“He can't be this hurt,” Sandy whispered. “Phillip...Oh god, Mark, he can't be like this.”

“I know,” he said huskily, his voice rough from unshed tears.

They stood beside the bed remembering Phillip as he was. Not what he was now.

“First time I ever saw him I thought he was the goofiest motherfucker I ever seen.” Mark said, breaking the silence. “He...God he wore this fucking straw hat...he was carrying a rubber chicken around. He was telling everyone to kiss his cock.”

Sandy made a sound that was between a chuckle and a sob.

“Anyways, he gets to me and tells me to kiss his cock. He pushes the rubber chicken into my face. Then I kiss the fucking thing and he smiles.” Mark broke off

because the need to cry was so strong he had to gather himself again. “He said ‘Well, that settles it. You and Me, Connelly. We’re gonna be good friends.’”

Sandy was laughing even though there were still tears on her face. “He broke my nose,” she said suddenly. “I was a junior cheerleader in the fifth grade. He played basketball. It was funny because he was so short. Well, he threw the ball at someone and I happened to be standing there. I caught it with my nose.” She smiled sadly. “The very next day he brought me flowers and begged for my forgiveness.”

They both walked closer to the bed. Sandy ran her hand over his head and chuckled. “He would be pissed that no one cut his hair.”

Mark had to smile. Phillip would be pissed about that. He liked his hair short.

Kenneth had told them that while Phillip's other wounds were serious, the doctors would be afraid of infections from the burns. That's what killed most burn victims. Mark was terrified to touch Phillip.

“He's gonna make it,” Sandy said. “He's defied the odds so far. They didn't think he'd make it out of Iraq...and then out of Germany. They don't know Phillip like we do.”

Mark wanted to share in her optimism. But he was a realist. A lot of guys made it home. They just didn't make it out of the fucking hospital.

They had stayed their fifteen minutes.

Sandy leaned over. “Phil...you better get better. Too many people are counting on you,” she whispered. She kissed the top of his head and began to sob again.

Mark leaned over and whispered, “Grabowski, if you die so help me God I'll find a way to Hell and drag you kicking and fucking screaming back.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After three weeks of no change Mark was convinced that they were sitting at 'the best' Phillip would ever get. Phillip was getting smaller and smaller. It was hard for Mark to keep going back and seeing him like that because the man on the bed wasn't his friend. It wasn't the guy who terrorized young recruits.

To his surprise William and Jamie King came and visited the family for a few days. Bob Beaver and Jeff Roach had become permanent fixtures around the hospital. Ryan's sister and brother came in and were staying with the Grabowskis.

Brendon hadn't been able to get leave but called daily to see how Phillip was doing. Kenneth was having more episodes since Phillip got transferred to Texas. Sandy was trying her best but she wasn't what Kenneth needed. So Jeff and Robert both took over when Kenneth went on Baghdad time.

It had been nearly a month after the accident before Patrick finally got his R & R date. Mark had to go get him in Dallas at two am on a Saturday morning.

Ryan finally called Sandy. Mark had held Sandy for hours after the phone call. She said Ryan sounded awful and completely defeated. She was worried his head wasn't in Iraq. They didn't want to bury Ryan on top of dealing with Phillip's condition. But neither one said that in so many words.

Alexander emailed them regularly. He wanted updates. And he would tell them about Ryan. Mark wasn't surprised when he got a call from the cool-as-a-cucumber sergeant.

“Hey Mark. Sorry I'm waking you up.”

“Hey Krutz. Don't worry about it.”

“Just wanted to let you know-- Ryan is back in the game,” Alexander said.

“Some of the guys and I had to do some tough love. But he's back.”

Mark blinked and a small smile played on his lips. “Good. Any word from the LT?”

“Not that I know, but the LT is pushing for his R & R in the next bunch.”

“Good.”

“Well I have to go. Just wanted to let you know he's coming around.”

“Alright. Keep your head down,” Mark said. He yawned and hung up the phone.

Mark waited anxiously by the Gate. Dallas-Ft. Worth airport had the guys coming through customs. He had to give it to the USO people. They were always there. No plane was ever greeted by silence. Ever. It was going on three am and they were still cheering and screaming for every soldier who came down the walkway.

His gaze darted to each face. One by one faces went past him. One by one he checked them off as not being Patrick.

He was starting to worry that he had the wrong time. Even the nice ladies from the USO were starting to think he had the wrong time.

Two more guys walked out together and Mark dismissed them both.

The shorter of the two blinked and held up his hand. "I know I'm looking rough, but damn."

That voice was undeniable, unmistakable. "Patrick!" Mark jumped the guard rail and pulled Patrick into his arms. "BABY!" He lifted up the shorter guy, who laughed and tried to wiggle out.

"Mark, put me down, I'm not a fucking girl, Mark, I'm gonna kick..." He didn't get to finish because Mark laid a kiss on him that made nearly everyone there swoon.

It was an odd feeling for Mark. He was never into PDAs. EVER. That was a Phillip and Ryan deal. But he couldn't stop kissing Patrick. His hands slid over the warm body beneath him. He had to touch. He had to taste. When they broke apart Patrick was breathing heavily.

"Mark, babe...the fuck was that?" Patrick grinned.

Mark took one look at Patrick and started to cry. He was blaming stress. He was blaming the fact that he had spent the better part of a month worried about his best friend. Patrick put his arms around his boyfriend and soothed him.

Mark was the go-to guy. Mark was laid back, strong enough to handle everything and then some. But even he had a breaking point. And this was it. Patrick was safe. He didn't have to be strong anymore.

Patrick led them out of the building and into the drizzle of rain. "I missed you," he whispered.

"Missed you too."

"How is he?"

Mark cleared his throat and shrugged. "No change. He's not worse, and he's not better," he said. "It's the same shit."

Patrick grimaced. “No change? Fuck.”

“Yeah. The burns on his back and legs are healing. The doctors said that he was lucky there wasn't any infection.”

Patrick nodded.

They drove home quietly, just looking at each other. Well, Mark was darting quick, small glances when traffic permitted.

Once they got home Mark was all over Patrick. The door banged open and Patrick practically fell over his own feet while he was being pushed inside. Clothing was dropped on their way to the bedroom. Mark was the aggressor, which made Patrick tease him.

“Aww, you feeling lonely?” Patrick twitted.

“Fuck off, Smith-- and get naked or I swear to God you're going back with one less uniform.”

Patrick chuckled, but knew Mark was serious. He discarded his boots, pants and the undershirt. Mark was nearly purring with happiness when Patrick stood naked in front of him.

Carefully Mark took stock of every ding. Every cut. Every single little bruise. He kissed and licked his way all over Patrick's body.

Patrick didn't say anything. He allowed Mark to look him over. He understood. It was Mark's way to make sure he was okay.

“I know,” Patrick murmured. He did know. He had no doubt that Mark loved him.

They fell to the bed together. Soft little I love yous. were exchanged. Hands slid across dry skin. Even tears. They were desperately trying to keep the ghosts at bay. The what if's or coulda beens.

Mark topped, for the second time in their whole relationship. The only other time was once back in basic when Patrick forgot that Mark was the NCO. Patrick had never forgotten that lesson.

But tonight Mark took his time with his lover. He stroked Patrick until Patrick was begging. His tongue found every single hidden recess that Patrick's body had. When he was finally sunk into the other man's body Mark moaned long and low.

Patrick whimpered at the unaccustomed pain but wanted more. The pain let him know he was alive. The love pulsing through him let him know that without Mark...yeah, he didn't even want to think about it.

“I love you, Patrick. I love you so fucking much,” Mark whispered as he began to slide in and out of his lover. “I want you...I need you...you're my everything.” His breath blew across the back of Patrick's neck. He was so close. Patrick was virgin-tight. His cock felt like it was being strangled to death. His strokes became harder. More demanding. Patrick's cries turned loud and high-pitched until the smaller man came all over the bed and his own stomach.

Mark didn't last long after that. As soon as Patrick came, the vice grip he held him in tightened. That sent waves of pleasure coursing through his belly, straight to his balls. He came with a roar, spilling himself deep into his lover's body.

Patrick and Mark went to San Antonio the next day. Mark was grateful for Marko and Collie, who were running the bar so he could be here. He hadn't been in his own bar in over two weeks. If it weren't for them he would be out of business.

Patrick choked on the cleanliness of the hospital. Mark knew the feeling.

Phillip was still in ICU, he had coded twice since he'd been there. The doctors were taking no chances, especially with the group that hung out in the waiting room for him.

Mark had to smile when Patrick blinked at the two old grizzled Drill Sergeants.

“Roach and Beaver? Wow.” Patrick sent them mock salutes and was then enveloped in a huge bear hug by Kenneth. He was passed around the room until he was standing in front of Robert Beaver.

“I ain't that happy to see you son, but I'll shake any SOB's hand that has been over in that hell hole,” the Drill Sergeant boomed. It seemed completely out of place-- yet not.

Patrick put out his hand and the older man shook it tightly.

“Welcome home,” Jeff said, shaking his hand and patting his back.

Sandy pulled Patrick to the side and informed him that he was Phillip's step-brother, if anyone asked.

“They're being dicks. Sherri and Gerry got everyone in though. Phillip's family is freaking huge now.”

“How's Katie?”

“She's staying with Tory today. They had a major test. She's doing okay. Scared, and doesn't know how to say what she feels,” Sandy said sadly. “She hasn't been in to see Phil since the first time we brought her. She can't bear to see him like that.”

“Yeah.” Patrick nodded, understanding completely. Mark had a hard time seeing Phillip the way he was.

“Mark, why don't you take Patrick back?” Sherri said gently. “Send Mac and Meghan out.”

Mark nodded. As he was leading Patrick back in the room he took a deep breath. “He doesn't look like he did,” he whispered.

They entered the room. Patrick had thought he'd prepared himself, but he obviously hadn't. A sob ripped from his throat and he swallowed. Hard.

“Oh fuck. Oh god.”

Phillip lay against the cold, white pillow and nearly blended in with it. His skin was almost translucent. His once full face was gaunt and sunken in. He looked like some sort of zombie. Patrick couldn't believe this was the same man who'd brimmed with life just a month ago.

Mark slipped his arms around Patrick and held him tight. They both moved forward.

"Hey buddy," Patrick said quietly when they were beside the bed. "You're going to be starving to death when you wake up. And you damn well better fucking wake up."

Mark felt Patrick shaking and knew the man was barely keeping it all in.

The ventilator had been removed when Phillip began to fight it. He was breathing on his own with a little help from the oxygen being pumped in through tubes in his nose.

“He hasn't woken up?”

“No. He has brain activity so the Doctors are optimistic, but the longer he stays down...they just don't know, Patrick.”

Patrick nodded. “Ryan sends his love. He said it exactly that way in his email. He's really fucked up, Phillip. He really needs you to make him right. Alexander said he's driving everyone crazy but I think he's going a little crazy himself. I haven't seen him, just word of mouth through Alexander. He barely emails anyone. He calls Sandy once in a while. But I heard that he calls here a lot. God, Phil, you gotta get better. We can't keep him alive if you don't.”

Mark blinked and wondered at how true Patrick's words were. He knew Ryan. The guy was strong. He could handle just about anything that was thrown his way. But he believed that surviving without Phillip might not be palatable for Ryan.

They stayed their allotted time and then both left.

A week later they were all sitting in the waiting room. Patrick, Mark, Sandy, Kenneth, Bob, Jeff and everyone else, sitting there laughing at the Phillip stories that were being passed around.

It had been the first time in three weeks that they all laughed.

“The first time he walked out in that Smokey Bear I thought I was going to piss my pants. I *knew* recruits were going to piss theirs. He looked downright evil. If they could have seen him during his BCT they would have laughed him straight out of the Army.” Jeff laughed.

“He called me two weeks in and demanded that I come get him.” Sherri giggled.

“Momma, these guys are so fu..sorry momma..crazy. You need to come and get me right the fuc..sorry momma..Now!”

Everyone laughed hard.

“Those two made him sound like the Anti-Christ. Every one of us was scared to death of the guy.” Patrick snorted. He pointed at Robert and Jeff.

“And that was before we actually SAW him.” Kenneth laughed. “When he came out I swear to God *everyone* nearly started to cry. Not only was he crazy but he was a giant. He spoke so softly we all had to strain to hear him.”

“We got back into the Barracks and we're sitting on our bunks wondering what the fuck we did when we si..excuse me Ma'am..signed up. Ryan takes one look at me and says 'Dude, I don't think they were bullshitting us..I think he really killed that guy.' We all looked at him and Brendon burst into tears.” Patrick laughed hysterically.

“I wanted to cry but I was afraid if I did Phillip would have ripped my head off. So instead I lived through Brendon,” Kenneth admitted, grinning.

Mark smiled. "One time Brendon was under his bunk tucking the sheets in. They were trying to get everything in shape before inspections. He's singing...Now Brendon cannot sing. Not one single note...He's singing 'Amazing Grace' or something."

Patrick starts laughing already.

Kenneth groaned.

"Anyways Phillip enters the room quietly. For a big man he's quiet on his toes. No one notices him. And all four of them start to sing. The only two on key...and they were struggling...was Ryan and Patrick. Phil booms 'I command you to stop!' Or something. Kenneth nearly knocks himself out on the steel post of his bed. Ryan turned so fast he tripped over Patrick and landed on his face. And Brendon jerked up and hit the bottom post, yelling 'Oh fuck, is that God?'" Mark's face broke into a smile.

Everyone howled.

That was what Ryan walked in on.

“What the fuck?” he growled. “Why the fuck are you laughing?”

Everyone sobered instantly.

Ryan looked ragged. His uniform was wrinkled and dusty and his face was covered in dirt. His body language was harsh. He couldn't believe everyone was fucking laughing when Phillip was in the other room...dying. Ryan knew it in his heart that his lover wasn't going to pull out of this.

“Is this funny to y'all? Someone tell me what the fucking joke is. I don't see a fucking joke!”

Patrick rose and held his hand up. “Ryan...”

“Ryan Ross Gracin!” He didn't need to say anything. Sherri was all over him.

“Stop this right now. WE needed a break from the stress,” she said, as firmly yet as gently as she could. “Come here!” Ryan's shoulders sank and he slipped into the woman's arms.

No one said a word when Ryan burst into tears.

The nurse argued with Ryan. She wouldn't let him in, as grungy as he was. He wouldn't leave the hospital and she was fucking crazy if she thought he would. They settled it by allowing him to shower in the doctor's shower and put on a fresh pair of scrubs.

Sandy took Ryan back. She held his hand tightly and prayed he could handle it.

Once in the room Ryan stumbled backwards. Tears slid down Sandy's face watching the other man's reaction.

Ryan ended up on his knees beside Phillip's bed. "Love you. God, I love you, Phillip. You have to get better. I can't do this on my own."

Sandy felt like a voyeur.

They stayed for the fifteen minutes and Sandy tried to get Ryan to move. But he wouldn't. She didn't argue with him.

Mark walked slowly into the room. He had been elected to get Ryan to eat. The other man didn't look like he'd eaten for a long fucking time. "Hey Ryan." It had been almost twenty-four hours since Ryan got in. He hadn't left Phillip's side. Not once.

Ryan didn't look up. "I'm not leaving," he said.

"You gotta eat."

“I'm not fucking leaving.”

“Gawdamnit! Ryan, you want to make yourself sick, do it on someone else’s watch. Phil is my friend too, and I fucking die every time I look at him. But he'd be pissed the fuck off if he knew what you were doing!” Mark snarled.

“Fuck off Mark. You don't know shit...Fuck you all...Fucking laughing...Fucking bastards!” Ryan rose and looked like he was heading toward Mark.

“G..otta..eat.” The soft rumble came from behind them, making both Ryan and Mark jerk back toward the pale figure on the bed.

“Phil?” Ryan knocked the chair over as he all but ran for the bedside.

Pale lids shook. Slowly they lifted up over bright, hazel eyes. “Ry..an.” Phillip was having a hard time talking. His voice was weak and shaky but it was there.

“Oh God! Yes, baby. It's Ryan. Oh God!”

Mark darted out of the room and thumping footsteps could be heard coming towards the room.

“You two need to get out!” commanded a nurse.

Ryan was about to give the nurse her very own ‘fuck’ you when Phillip did the one thing that calmed him instantly - the corner of his lips quirked. It wasn't a smile but it was close enough.

Mark pulled Ryan out. “Come on!” He dragged the younger man out of the ICU and into the waiting room

Everyone could see how agitated Ryan was.

Sherri rose with Gerry beside her.

“He...Oh fuck me! He spoke...opened his eyes,” Ryan sputtered.

A cheer went through the waiting room. They didn't care if it pissed anyone off.

“What did he say? Is he...can we go back?”

“He fucking ordered me around,” Ryan said with a sputtering laugh. He was crying again but this time it was a good kind of cry.

It seemed that Ryan was the medicine Phillip was missing. He slowly began to improve. He wasn't awake for long nor was he a conversationalist, but he would wake up and give them a small, quirky half-smile. He just lifted the corners of his mouth. But everyone knew what he was doing.

They transferred him to another room. Ryan would sleep on the recliner they brought in for him when it was obvious that he wasn't going anywhere. He spent a few hours each day with his siblings, who came back down after Ryan came home. He spoke with his friends. Hugged Patrick and spent a long time walking the halls with the other man. He and Kenneth hung together along with Sandy. He called Tory to let her know Alexander was doing fine.

He was currently sitting in Phillip's room reading 'Maxium.'

'You're looking at the men, aren't you?' came the raspy voice.

Ryan looked up and smiled at Phillip. "I am. They all look better than you," he teased.

"Low blow, low blow." Phillip took a deep breath. "I'll pay you good money to put my legs down." He pointed at the contraption that held his legs up over his heart.

“Nope, they’re for your own good,” Ryan said. He put the magazine down and stood up, stretching.

“Sadist. This is pay back for BCT,” Phillip whined.

Ryan laughed and leaned over him. He placed a soft kiss on Phillip's forehead.

“If you're gonna kiss me you better do it right,” Phillip said.

Ryan happily obliged. He leaned down, traced Phillip's lips and then slid his tongue into the older man's mouth.

They broke the kiss when someone cleared their throat.

“Morning,” the nurse said, smiling.

“Morning.” Ryan said.

She checked Phillip's vitals and helped him turn slightly.

“So, cheeseburger?” Phillip asked hopefully.

“You just woke up out of nearly a month in a coma. You have to take it easy.”

Phillip growled and looked at Ryan.

“Don't look at me. I agree.”

“I hate you both. Take him with you, please.”

The nurse laughed. “Honey I would have an easier time moving Mount

Rushmore than I would to move him out of here.” She hitched her thumb toward Ryan.

Ryan beamed at the nurse.

Phillip glared at both of them.

Ryan wasn't sure what woke him but he was jerked awake from a sound sleep. It wasn't until he felt the second spit ball hit him on the face that he realized his lover was trying diligently to wake him up.

“Dude!”

“You sleep like a baby.” Phillip half-grinned.

“You were throwing spit balls at me.” Ryan said incredulously. “Are you twelve?”

“I tried to whisper sweet nothings into your ear but you're way the fuck over there and I'm way the fuck over here.”

Phillip was actually quite adorable when he was pouting. Ryan wondered how in the hell his mother managed to discipline him when he had that...THAT look on his face. He got up and stretched. He leaned down and kissed Phillip's lips gently.

“Ryan, you start to treat me like a girl now I'll kick your ass,” Phillip hissed.

“Phil, I'm kissing you. If you think kissing you makes you a girl then we have issues ‘cause last I remember I'm the bottom ,” he admitted unabashedly.

“And a quite good one too,” Phillip said, leaning back.

“You remember anything from...that day?”

Phillip shook his head. "Not really. I remember looking at you...and I remember you laughing. But after that, not much."

Ryan sat down on the chair next to Phillip's bed. "Phillip I lo..." He didn't get to finish. Instead Phillip's fingers touched his lips.

"We aren't doing this big, gay 'I love you' scene in a fucking hospital, Ryan," Phillip said with a slight grin.

Ryan rolled his eyes but nodded. Trust him to find the one guy in the world that refused to do the gay love scene in a hospital.

"If and when we do, it will be on our terms. Not because some bastard scared the shit out of us."

"If and when? Phil...I don't need 'if and when'. I just need 'when'," Ryan said quietly.

“Oh I know...but I don't want it for today. Today or tomorrow. Okay? Promise me...No big reveal until I say so.” Phillip looked dead serious. It drove Ryan insane but he finally agreed.

“Not until you say so. As long as it's not one of those ‘I'm dying so I'm going to tell you I love you’ kinda deals. That's a rule breaker and I'll kick your ass for it,” Ryan teased gently.

“I wouldn't do that to you Ryan.” Phillip smiled. “My ass is going to be scarred for life,” he said suddenly. “And the backs of my legs.”

“Oh my God you're an ass! Well, lucky for you you're all ass so I'm not worried about it.” Ryan rolled his eyes. As if he cared about a scar or two, or two million. He had thought that his lover was going to die. That he was going to watch Phillip die, and that drove him crazy. He could handle scars. He could have handled Phillip's face being

scarred. What he couldn't handle was Phillip being dead. Yeah, that he couldn't handle at all.

“Just stop, alright?” Ryan said. “When...Phil, you don't get it. I stood there and watched....God I thought you were dead. I wanted to die...I wanted to die. So....ya know... scars? I'm not real worried about them.” He leaned over and kissed Phillip's lips gently.

Phillip blinked and nodded. “Alright. Alright. I forgot how freaking lucky I was with twinkie little old you.”

“You forget how bitchy I am. Otherwise you wouldn't be messin' with me.”

Ryan's lips curled into a grin.

“You *are* spending your R & R at a hospital, Ryan. I don't care if you *are* bitchy.” Phillip looked tired. Ryan held the man's hand loosely.

“Go to sleep, Phillip. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Patrick and Mark arrived at the hospital late the next day. When they did show up they were sporting matching grins and matching rings.

“About time you made an honest man of him.” Kenneth smiled. Ryan was sitting in the waiting room while a doctor was looking Phillip over.

Ryan smiled at both men. He was surprised when Patrick flushed.

“Fuck off Kenny,” Patrick said. “How is he?”

“He's good. He's talking more. Bitching actually.” Ryan did grin then.

“Phillip's bitching.” Mark smiled. “That means he's getting better.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Mac and Josh went on home. The Grabowskis went for lunch. Sandy took Katie down to the Riverwalk,” Ryan said. “The doc's in with Phillip. Phillip kicked me out, the bastard.”

“He cares about you...but he's got to deal with the docs himself. It's hard for him...ya know?” Mark said as he sat down next to Ryan.

“It doesn't matter to me, Mark. God...I keep seeing him...yeah, I never want to go through that again.”

“He's likely to get a non-deployable status. That's going to piss him right off.”

“Yeah, I have no doubts about that. Make sure y'all tell him you two got married.”

“Hinting, Ryan?” Patrick drawled.

“Hell no.” Well, not really. If he couldn't get Phillip to say 'I love you' he seriously doubted he could get the man talking about marriage. “When do you head back, Patrick?”

“Two days.” Patrick sighed.

“Yeah, doesn't seem possible, does it?” Mark slid his arms around Patrick's stomach.

“I go back a few days after that.” Ryan sighed.

“Alright you bitches, I have three hours.” A ragged, hoarse voice sounded behind them. They all turned and blinked.

“Son of a-- Brendon?”

“You didn't go AWOL did you?”

“You stupid son of a bitch!”

Brendon blinked at them all and pointed to the MP standing behind him.

“Reported to them...told them what was going on...they brought me here.”

The MPs just shrugged. “Can't blame him, and he did turn himself in. It's not like he went to Canada.”

“Just let me see my buddy and I’ll go back. I promise,” Brendon said. The MP nodded.

“Go on. You have three hours. Then we have to take you back.”

Brendon nodded.

Ryan led Brendon back and both of them heard Phillip before they saw him.

“I’m telling you Doc. I’m fine. I’m hungry and want a cheeseburger. If you give me a fuckin’ cheeseburger I’ll do whatever the hell you want me to!”

“Sergeant Grabowski, as much as I would love to give you one you can’t eat that yet. You’ve spent nearly a month in a coma. Now you’ve been awake two days. IF your progress continues, then by Friday-- two days from now-- we’ll try some solid food.”

The doctor was talking quietly like he was talking to a five-year-old. That only pissed Phillip off even more.

“I'm not some fucking little kid, Doc. I get it. I do, but I want some real fucking food. Not chicken broth and Jello that was probably made before World War I,” Phillip hissed.

“Good God. You're supposed to be on your death bed not channeling your inner Drill Sergeant, man,” Brendon said as they walked in.

That seemed to shut Phillip up. The doctor grinned at Brendon and Ryan, thankful that they'd interrupted the argument.

“Furry! What the fuck are you doing here?” Phillip barked hoarsely.

“I heard this guy I knew was stuck here. I had to visit,” Brendon said easily. The doctor left quietly as both men looked at each other.

“Are you insane? You told my mom you couldn't get leave. Tell me you didn't just fuck up your career to see me.”

“I already turned myself in. Luckily I got the coolest MPs. They brought me here.”

“Dumb ass!” Phillip sighed and lay back in his bed. He smiled slightly and sighed again.

“Yeah I know. But you should be nice to your visitors.” Brendon pulled out a bag of Gummy Bears. “We bring gifts!”

Phillip's eyes lit up. “I take it all back. You're my favorite. Hell, Ryan, we have to break up. He won't smuggle me a cheeseburger,” he informed Brendon, who grinned.

The blond handed over the Gummy Bears and Phillip made a happy sound -
right before Ryan swooped in and took them away.

“Not until they say you're ready,” Ryan said primly.

“Bitch.”

“Jerk.”

“You both are so stupid.” Brendon rolled his eyes and grabbed the Gummy
Bears out of Ryan's hand. He opened it and took a handful. Then threw the bag right
back to Phillip who didn't give Ryan time before he too had a mouthful.

“Damn it Brendon!” Ryan growled.

“Stop being a bitch, Ryan. He deserves it.”

“Stop being a kiss-ass. He's not your Drill Sergeant anymore.”

“Children, if you can't behave I'm going to kick all of you out.” Nurse Kelly told them. Ryan liked her, even Phillip liked her.

“He FED Phillip GUMMY bears.”

The nurse blushed slightly and hid the bag behind her back.

“Oh...My...Fuckin...God! That's a cheeseburger...Dude, that's a fucking cheeseburger.” Phillip blinked and grinned at the red-headed nurse.

“Uh huh. She wouldn't?” Ryan took a deep breath and cursed. “You did, didn't you?”

Kelly sighed and handed Phillip the cheeseburger. “If you tell on me I'll lose my job!”

“Your secret is so safe with me. Brendon, duct tape Ryan's mouth shut.” Phillip ripped into the bag and sighed happily when the greasy smell of the cheeseburger filled the room. “Oh God. Oh God, I've fucking died and gone to Heaven. Thank you, God!” His hand shook as he brought the burger up to his mouth and his white teeth sunk into it. His groan was orgasmic.

Brendon blushed.

Ryan had to grin

And Kelly sighed. “It would figure the best-looking guy on this ward is gay...and he has a sexier than sin boyfriend...I swear to God I'm going to turn into a man. It's the only way.” She watched Phillip as he enjoyed his cheeseburger. “Only half. I'll save the other half and bring it to you later.”

Phillip blinked but wasn't going to argue with his angel who'd brought him a cheeseburger. He nodded.

“You so shouldn't have eaten that. If you get sick, no bitching.” Ryan griped, but couldn't deny the happiness on his lover's face.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. First Patrick went back to Iraq. It was a tearful affair. They all promised to get together after their deployments to celebrate Mark and Patrick's marriage.

Second, Brendon went to jail but ended up out because everyone kinda understood where the Sergeant was coming from. Even so he was written up and lost his rank. He wasn't going to bitch. It could have been a lot worse.

Ryan was quietly getting ready to go back. He spent every moment with Phillip. They never spoke of feelings or even of the incident from the first few days. But things were easy between them. Phillip talked Ryan into giving him a sponge bath that led to Ryan taking a 'break' in the rest room. Phillip made sure Ryan was hard as hell, then told him to go 'relieve' it because he (Phillip) wanted to hear him come... That made Ryan groan loudly. Nurse Kelly decided to enter the room at that exact moment.

“Oh for the love of....! Ryan! The man isn't better yet and you're in there masturbating?”

Ryan choked and promptly lost his hard-on. “Jesus, woman! No wonder forty-five percent of the male population has thought about going gay at some point!”

“Are you telling me that the sound of my female voice killed your hard-on? You do realize I'm certified in giving you shots-- in your ass I may remind you! And trust me when I say I can make it hurt and not in a good way.”

Phillip chuckled.

Ryan came out blushing like a school boy. “Can we not talk about my hard-on?”

“You brought it up,” she said teasingly. “You're looking good, Sgt. Grabowski.

Your color's coming back and you're looking so much healthier,” Kelly continued,
grinning at the man.

“Baby, I always look good. When is someone going to cut my hair?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Later. Now suck on this.” She pushed a thermometer into
his mouth, then took his blood pressure. After she was done she smiled widely.

“Everything is looking normal.”

She left shortly after that. Aside from the interruption, he liked the nurse. She
was friendly and had a wicked sense of humor.

Ryan sat down in the chair beside the bed and sighed.

“Three more days, huh?”

“Yeah. I'm lucky Kripke got me on this rotation, I guess. I don't want to go back.”

“Hey, none of that. You have buddies back there who are counting on you,”

Phillip said softly. “You can tell them that I'm awake and doing better. It will make all the difference.”

Ryan nodded. He laid his head on the bed looking up at his lover. “I...” He stopped when Phillip's fingers touched his lips.

“Not yet,” the older man whispered.

Ryan nodded and closed his eyes. It was enough to be with Phillip; to hear his voice; to feel his touch.

Phillip tugged on the younger man's hair until Ryan was inches from him. They kissed softly, pouring every ounce of feeling into their gentle kiss.

Phil

25Nov2006

I'm back. Everyone says hello. They miss you. Well not really. You were kind of a dick but they know you did it so they could all make it home but I do miss you. A lot.

Alexander said I'm being bitchy but I figure since you're not here someone has to do it. LOL.

I talked to your mom. She said they are taking the cast off soon. The doctors are surprised at how well you're healing. But they don't know you. Not like we do.

Well I need to go. I just wanted you to know I'm back.

Freckles

Freckles,

27Nov2006

Come on admit it. They love me. It's my charming personality isn't it?

I'm glad you're back safely. I kinda get why Mark is always so cranky when Patrick is deployed. The news sucks and most of the time they give just enough details to make a person go crazy.

Yeah, they're gonna take the cast off and I start therapy soon. I was told I couldn't deploy any more. That seriously sucks. I can't let my guys go and not be there. Bastards. But I would probably be more of a problem than a solution, especially if you're with me. You're a big enough girl to put yourself at risk for me.

I'm counting the days till you come home. When you do...we have to talk.

Phil

PS I knew you loved being called 'Freckles'. It's adorable just like you are. Yes
you are!

The months went by quickly for Phillip. He was finally discharged after six months. His parents wanted him to come home with them but he went back to Hood. He had to get back on the job. His father knew why. They had an understanding. He wouldn't push himself and they wouldn't baby him.

Physical therapy sucked. Phillip hated it. He always felt so weak but it was paying off. He could walk a few steps with the aid of hand rails. But mostly he was stuck in the wheel chair. He made it his personal goal to be standing when Ryan came home.

He also had several projects he wanted to finish before his boyfriend came home - namely moving all of Ryan's shit into his house. Kenneth, Sandy and Mark helped him with that. It was going to be a surprise to Ryan but Phillip didn't think he would mind.

His latest project was to make Ryan's parents open their eyes to whom and what their son was. He got the phone number from Mac and stared at the phone.

He knew that it hurt Ryan. Ryan had always been close to his parents. When he had 'come out' his parents ripped his heart out and Phillip wanted nothing more than to kick their asses and make them see what sort of man their son was.

He dialed the number with purpose.

"Hello?"

Phillip cleared his throat. "Um...Hi. My name is Phillip Grabowski," he started and rolled his eyes. "I'm a friend of your son."

"Josh? Is he okay?" came a soft, pleading voice.

"No... Ryan." He took a deep breath. "We serve together. He's over in Iraq right now."

"Oh. Ryan." The voice went colder and Phillip wanted to scream. "I'm sorry. Ryan is dead to us."

"Yeah. Ryan." Phillip resisted the urge to growl at the woman. Ryan wasn't dead. But he was in a place that could make him that way. Fucking bitch didn't even think about what she was saying. "I know y'all don't...agree with his...life choices but you should be proud of him. He's a great man," Phillip said softly.

"I'm sorry, we don't talk about Ryan. He...broke his father's heart."

Well good, because they broke Ryan's heart.

“Ma'am, I just think you should get to know your son. He's amazing.”

“We know all we need to know. He's made a mockery of everything his father and I tried to teach him. He'll burn in Hell for his sins.”

Phillip took a deep breath and willed himself not to lose his temper. “Ma'am, some would disagree with you. Ryan is well-respected. He's smart and he takes care of the men under him. He saves lives. He's a hero to a lot of guys.”

“That just tells you how bad this world has gotten. He's a queer. He's a sin in Gods' eyes and only a sodomite would ever consider him a hero.”

That did it. Phillip's jaw tightened and he snorted.

“Alright, you know I tried to be nice. I did. But, lady you just went there. Now you shut the fuck up--” The woman began to sputter. “Shut the HELL up and listen to me. First, your son is a GOOD man. God hasn't forgotten him. God loves him warts and all, which is a helluva lot more than his parents did. I would think being the good Christian folks you are, you would know that only God gets to judge. Not some close-minded hypocritical human.” He took a deep breath and continued. “He puts his life on the line so you and your husband can sit back and call him and the others like him a sinner. So you can condemn him to hellfire because he doesn't conform to your idea of what sin is or isn't. Let me tell you this, *Lady*, I've been in the Army a whole lot longer than he has. I can safely say that if I wanted one person at my back it would be your son. Ryan is the best soldier I ever had the pleasure to serve with. He would make a great son if you and your husband would pull your head out of your asses and just look at him!”

The woman was silent. Then she let out a soft breath. “I'm sorry, Mr Grabowski. He's no longer our concern.”

Phillip snarled at that. "Don't you worry, Mrs Gracin. He'll never have to worry about being your concern. He's MY family now. I just wished that you fucking good Christians would open your eyes and stop judging him. He'd love to have his parents back in his life. But, you know what? I was a fucking idiot for even thinking I could talk to you. I hope you have a great life. Don't worry about Ryan. You're right, he's not your concern. He's mine. And know what else? He really doesn't need a mother and father anymore. He's got people that love and respect the hell out of him." He slammed the phone down and threw it across the room.

"Did my phone piss you off?" Mark asked lazily.

"No."

"Then why did you abuse it?"

"Because Ryan's parents are fucking idiots. Wanna go to Ohio with me?"

“Nope, killing them would only upset Ryan,” Mark said.

“Jerk.” Phillip leaned back in the chair and sighed.

“It doesn't really matter anymore; Phil. Ryan has so much family now that those two don't even register.”

“Yeah they do. For twenty-two years they loved him. How the hell they go from loving him to...? God that woman was so fucking cold I'd like to rip her head off.”

Phillip growled.

“You cussed her. Her poor little virgin ears are probably still bleeding. Let's call it even. Besides if you go to jail before Ryan can get back he'll be really bitchy. I don't like bitchy Ryan.”

Phillip,

16Dec2006

Thank you.

Ryan.

Phillip was half asleep when the phone started to ring. It wasn't abnormal for the phone to ring so late. Phillip had several friends who called this late to make sure he was okay or Ryan would call. His hand touched the phone and he picked it up. "Ello?"

He breathed.

"You sound so fucking sexy when you first wake up."

Phillip grinned sleepily. “Keep that up and you’ll be hearing me moan. I know that's what you want.”

“Yeah and all fifty of the guys behind me want to hear that too.” Ryan chuckled.

“Guess who emailed me a few days ago?”

“Umm, Mac?”

“Nope. Good guess though. My mother emailed me. She said she talked to some guy...Grabba something or other. Imagine my surprise.”

“Yeah? Well fuck, sounds like someone was pretending to be me.”

“Uh huh, only thing is supposedly this guy used 'coarse' language with her. Know anything about that?”

Phillip resisted an urge to laugh. “Um...Some asshole used coarse language with a preachers’ wife? What the fuck man? That's horrible.”

“That's what I said. But, it seems whatever this guy said...really made her think. She wanted to let me know that she still didn't like my 'life choice' but she respected the fact I'm fighting the good fight.” Ryan snorted. “She made sure to tell me that this would be her only email and my 'father' would never know. But, in her own way she was proud of me.”

“Wow. So this guy helped to lube up her ass so she could move her head a little bit. This guy sounds fucking awesome.”

“Yeah, he is pretty fucking awesome. Matter of fact when I get back I'm gonna hunt him down. I owe him. Gonna rock his world.”

“Yeah?” Phillip stiffened and grinned. His cock was already half-hard. Ryan was the only person in the world that could get him hard just saying ‘hello’.

“Oh yeah. I have this new game. It's called letting him fuck my mouth until he comes. I think he'll like it,” Ryan said slowly.

Phillip growled. “Oh yeah. I know he'll love it. Like a lot.”

“Think so? I may even--” His voice dropped even lower. “Let him fuck my ass. It's been a long fucking time since anyone fucked me. I bet I'm really fucking tight.”

Phillip agreed with that. “What if you can't find him?” he asked, slowly stroking his aching cock.

“I dunno. I think I'll find him. Don't you?”

“Oh yeah,” Phillip breathed.

“Dude, are you masturbating?” Ryan laughed.

“I hate you.”

“No you don't. You want me. And Phil?”

“Yeah?”

“When I get home...I will rock your world. My ass is all yours. Just for you.”

Phillip growled. “Remember that, Ryan. Because when you get home...oh hell..”

Ryan's breathing became ragged. He leaned into the phone booth, thanking whatever God it was that invented the privacy wall. “Gonna come for me, baby? I would really love to hear that.” Ryan purred. He could hear Phillip moaning. “Please. I need to hear you.”

Phillip groaned. His hand stroked himself faster. He jerked harder and faster until he was nearly losing it. Then Ryan's voice pushed him over the edge:

"Come for me, Phil. Please!"

That's all it took. Phillip growled and came all over his hand and belly.

"Fuck...Ryan...you seriously suck."

"Uh huh, I am the one that has to walk away from here with a rock-hard cock.

Not you."

"Serves you right," Phillip said sleepily. "Gotta go?"

"Oh yeah. I'm getting dirty looks." Ryan laughed. "I'll talk to you soon."

"Uh huh."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ryan,

25Dec2006

I've thought long and hard on what to get you for Christmas. But since you're way the fuck over there and I'm way the fuck over here I couldn't give you what I wanted. Instead I'm giving you this.

I think about you all the time. You are the first thing on my mind when I wake up and the last thing I think of when I sleep. Your name is a constant on my tongue. I wonder how you are; what you're doing; and even if you ate enough that day.

You'd like that I know you that well because every time we fuck I know exactly where, when and how hard to push you.

I know you, babe. I know what makes you tick. You love it when I masturbate. Especially when I let you watch. You love when I run my hand down your chest. Your nipples are so sensitive that a simple breath can make them hard as stones.

You love fucking my mouth. You seriously love when I deepthroat you and then make those little noises that cause my throat to vibrate around you. I can hear your little whimpers and pleas, Ryan. It's the sexiest, fucking thing I have ever heard in my life.

But the thing that makes me realize how close to heaven I am is the way you respond when I'm buried balls deep inside of you. The last time we made love you tore my back to shreds. I loved it. Your mark was all over me. No one would ever be able to get that close to me. Ever.

Next time—when you're home I'm going to take you, Ryan. I'm going to bend you over the couch and fuck you until you can't walk. This time I'm not going to use a condom either. I want a part of me inside of you that you can't wash off.

Then when we can barely stand we're going to start over except this time you're going to be balls deep in ME. I want you to. I need you to. I don't have to tell you how

much pleasure you will get from this but know this. I'll be just as happy. I'll have just as much pleasure from you being inside me as I get from being inside of you.

Now, to get this gift you have to stay sharp. Keep your head down. Don't be a hero unless you have to. All you have to do is survive. I know you can.

Always,

Phil

Guys,

26Dec2006

MERRY CHRISTMAS! We are all eagerly awaiting your arrival back home.

Even though we know it isn't for a long time yet. Katie says for Ryan to hurry up and get home because her dad really misses him and so does she. Ken is sitting here laughing at me for tearing up but I can't help it. I miss you all so much.

Phil is doing pretty well, Ryan. Except he misses you and PT has been kicking his ass. He swears he will be standing and walking before you get home. He refuses to be

in the wheelchair to greet you. I think he's more worried about no sex if he can't walk.

But, that's just me.

Sandy

Phillip,

1Jan2007

You—God damn. You did it on purpose didn't you? I've been a walking hard-on since I read your email. I'll make it home. There is no way I'm passing up an opportunity to fuck you. Not a chance.

I'm going to fuck you senseless. Fuck, I can already feel it. I'm going to gobble you fucking down, Phil. I'm going to suck you off like I never have. You're my fucking everything. I want to taste you. I want you to taste yourself on my lips.

Then I'm going to finger you up good, and slide in as deeply as I can. I'm so fucking hot for you right now I could—burst. September—just wait till September. I'm going to fuck you until YOU walk funny.

I'll be home, Phillip. Don't ever doubt it.

Ryan

Ryan

1Jan2007

You know, I've always found you and Phil insanely hot but I always kinda saw Phil as the top. Probably because he's so damn dominant. Alex says I need to find a new hobby. It freaks him out that I think about you two having sex...now I think he gets what I'm all about, y'all. That was kinda hot...

Tory

Gracin,

1Jan2007

I thank you. Seriously. Thank you. You're the bestest. EVER.

Alex

Dear Ryan Gracin,

2Jan2007

Your letter has been submitted and will be in our July 'Salute to our Troops' edition of Penthouse.

Thanks for your submission,

Penthouse Editors. (AKA Brenden)

Ryan,

3Jan2007

When you check your email, make sure you're replying to the right one, and don't click 'reply all'.

Patrick

Ryan,

3Jan2007

Wow. Can I just say that was the best Christmas present EVER. If you wanna write Phil another one like that please do. I'll even forward a good heading for you.

Something like "Too hot to handle." Or something equally as cheesy. How about 'Be all you can FUCKING be - In The Arrrrrmy!

Tory? Do you think we could make money from it?

Sandy.

Sandy

3Jan2007

Totally! I think we should make it into a book...wait, what if they let us watch? Holy hell, you two. I'm all for that. I'm researching for a new book. Anal Sex: Love it or leave it. You two could be my muses. Come on guys! Work with me on this one!

Tory

Everyone,

3Jan2007

Come on guys! Work with my wife. It will be great. She can debunk all the
nasty rumors about gay sex. You'll be doing it for the greater good!

Alexander

Alexander,

3Jan2007

You just want her to get all hot and bothered so you get laid.

Patrick

Patrick ,

3Jan2007

Duh!

Alexander

Ryan,

3Jan2007

For fucks sakes! Ryan do me a favor...don't ever email me again.

Mark

Ryan,

3Jan2007

Wow, baby I didn't know you were such an exhibitionist. When you get home we'll take care of that fetish.

Girls? You wanna watch? Maybe sell popcorn?

Phillip.

Ryan,

4Jan2007

Well, this is to Phillip too. If you want I can set up a camera we could totally make a killing off it. Gay porn is HUGE. And you two are kinda pretty. Well, Ryan is anyways. Don't worry, I'll make it all tasteful and shit. I'm reading up on how to shoot the correct angles.

I even have cool porn names for you both. We can call Phillip: Phillip Longdong. And for Ryan: Ryan Takesituptherear. Come on admit it. It's pure genius!

I'll even cut you guys in 50/50. Come on Phil do it for your family, man! You'll be rich. And think of this way, Ryan. If you do it you'll be rolling in cash so you won't have to deploy again.

Kenneth (I need a cool porn name.)

Kenneth,

4Jan2007

How about Dumbass McQuetip

Phillip.

Everyone,

5Jan2007

I Hate You All.

Ryan.

The deployment was going slowly. Mark hated that. He was working on his routine and dealing with a grumpy-assed Phillip most days. HE could handle it though. He was happy Phillip was awake and dealing with everything in his own way. Mark knew Phillip had nightmares....a lot. The dark-haired man never talked about them but Mark knew the signs.

He was rolling his cart through the local supermarket, trying to stick with his list. It was a sore spot between him and Patrick. Whenever Patrick went shopping he

never deviated from the list. Mark on the other hand spent an untold amount of money on things that just 'sounded' good.

He normally hated the supermarket, namely because of all the army wives. He knew there were good ones out there. Hell, Tory freaking rocked. But, his dealings with them were limited to his bar and the supermarket. The ones that came to his bar were generally 'war-widows.' The kind that got all dolled up on Friday night when their husband was overseas and scratched an itch that they had. Or the ones that figured since they were in the Army (when in reality it was their husband who was in the Army) they knew all about what was going on.

He couldn't stand either type. He was grabbing a package of cheddar cheese when he overheard two of them talking.

“They send our men over there and turn them into monsters!” one said. Mark felt himself becoming edgy.

“I know! And they expect US to make them all better. Larry damn near tried to strangle me in his sleep!” the other said.

Mark clenched his jaw tight.

“Fucking Army,” the first one grouched.

“We should write the President! This has got to stop. What if he comes home and tries to kill our kids?”

Mark figured he looked like one of those cartoons - steam pouring from his ears, his face beet-red. This was why he didn't like going to the supermarket.

When he turned the corner there they were. He knew one. She came to his bar. She was the 'free' sort when her husband was deployed.

“Well, if they come home and kill us MAYBE someone will pay attention.”

“We'd only be lucky if he came home and killed you,” Mark muttered. He thought he kept it quiet, but both women gasped and stared at him.

“Excuse me?” Her eyebrows went straight up into her platinum-blond locks.

“I said,” he repeated for her benefit, turning to look right at them, “we'd only be lucky if he killed you.” He pointed a finger right at her. “Listen, they don't need you to make them better. They need you to fucking understand.”

Both women glared at him.

“Our guys, they are over there so you can sit on your ass and eat bonbons or whatever the fuck you eat whenever you're not out at the bar crying in some stupid bastard's beer about how lonely you are and getting yourself fucked in the fucking bathroom. They may not like what you say but they will defend your right to say

whatever fucked up asinine shit you come up with. So show them some goddamn respect!" Mark was shaking as his anger coursed through him.

Both women gasped. "How dare you!?"

Mark smirked at her. "Bitch, please. I dare a whole lot more, but I'm being really fucking nice right now. You don't fucking want me to be mean. Take your shit and get the fuck out of here." Patrick would say he was channeling his Drill Sergeant self.

Both women took one look at him and decided he wasn't one to fuck with. They left, mumbling to themselves. Oh yeah. He was so fucking ready for Patrick to get home. He was getting as bitchy as Ryan.

After Mark's trip to the supermarket, Sandy decided she would just get his groceries when she bought her own. Her reasoning was simple. She could kick their asses while Mark could only shred their dignity.

Mark picked up the phone on the second ring. It was close to Patrick's home date. He couldn't wait.

“Hey baby!”

Mark grinned. Patrick never called him ‘baby’ unless he had good news.

“How's Fido doing?”

It was Patrick's way of saying that he was coming home. They worked out their own little code during Patrick's first deployment.

“Pretty good, but getting older by the day.” Mark replied easily, which meant
'when are you coming home?’

“Now you know better. He's just a pup. Three days and our baby boy will be one
whole year old.”

Mark gasped, and couldn't keep the smile from his voice. “Oh really? You
always liked the dog better than me.” That meant 'I fucking love you and can't wait
until you get home.' “Three days-- really?”

“Yup. Anyways, I can't stay long. Just wanted you to know that I was thinking
about Fido.”

“Uh huh. Understood, babe. I'll even give Fido one hell of a birthday party.”

“Good. Love you, Mark.”

After Patrick got home everything began to happen at once. Ryan and Alexander were heading home a week later. Brendon had gotten his orders to head back the same week. He was coming down to Hood before he shipped out.

Phillip was nervous. It was really stupid, seeing how he'd been in several of these. Of course he was always the one coming home, but still. It had been nearly a year since he'd last seen Ryan. Letters, emails, pictures and the cam-to-cam chats were all well and good, but not what he really wanted. Now in one of those six buses sat the one thing he wanted more than his own life, and he was fucking nervous as a sixteen-year-old virgin on her prom night.

The band was playing some sort of cheesy song about yellow ribbons, and everyone looked as nervous as he did. Tory was chewing on her lip so much he was worried she'd make herself bleed.

“They like to do this,” she grumbled. “We KNOW they are in there and they want us to work ourselves into a frenzy. I’m not doing it this time,” she said stubbornly.

“Uh huh,” Patrick drawled, laughing.

“Oh fuck off, Patrick,” Tory muttered. “Look!!” She punched Phillip in the arm when she noticed the guys rising out of their seats on the bus. “They’re coming!”

Phillip couldn’t fault her. He was tempted to nail Patrick who glared at him as if he knew what the much taller man was thinking. Tory’s smaller hand slid into his and they both watched as the buses began to unload their cargo.

What seemed to be forever later, all the buses were empty. One by one they began to pull away.

Pandemonium broke out. Men, women and children were on their feet screaming and yelling themselves hoarse.

He still sat though. He didn't want to tire himself until he could actually see Ryan. So he sat, yelling at the top of his lungs.

Sandy and Katie were behind him doing enough yelling that the whole crowd could disappear and it would still sound like a million people were cheering.

The Color Guard stood in front and slowly the soldiers began to march forward. The Stands were gonna bust. People were standing, pounding and in general making more noise than at a 'Dallas Cowboys' football game. Phillip slowly stood, leaning heavily on the cane that he'd brought with him.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm going to keep this short and sweet. We're back. I had the greatest pleasure serving with each and every one of these men. I would do so again in a heartbeat. Charlie Troop!"

"DISMISSED!"

“SCOUTS, LEAD THE WAY!”

Etta James's smooth, sexy voice filled the area.

At last, my love has come along. My lonely days are over and life is like a song.

Patrick helped Phillip walk towards the platoon. Phillip smiled when he heard Tory's loud, shrill shriek.

“Alexander!!”

He watched as the woman ran toward her husband and threw herself into his waiting arms. There was something to be said for that first hug and kiss. It was like falling in love all over again.

He looked around and still hadn't seen Ryan. This time he was the one chewing on his lips.

Oh, yeah, at last the skies above are blue. My heart was wrapped up in clovers...

He blinked as he scanned every single soldier. Where the fuck was Ryan?

He felt Patrick hit him on the shoulder. He looked up at the guy and saw he was pointing.

The night I looked at you I found a dream that I could speak to. A dream that I can call my own I found a thrill to rest my cheek to. A thrill that I have never known.

Phillip's hazel eyes fell upon the sight he had been dreaming about since he said good-bye to Ryan after his R&R. . . His gaze gobbled the other man up. He stood stock-still, leaning on his cane. He couldn't move. Ryan was right in front of him. It

was slow motion. It was poetry. It was every single, fucking, sappy thing he ever heard about. He started to cry.

Oh, yeah when you smile, you smile... Oh, and then the spell was cast

A slow, happy smile began to blossom on Ryan's face. Phillip slowly began to walk toward him. Ryan began to move too. He dropped his duffel bag and slowly, inches at a time they met until they were a breath apart. Phillip's hand came up and caressed the whiskered, rough cheek of his lover. Ryan leaned into the touch.

"I love you, Ryan," Phillip said, his voice rough with emotion.

"I love you too, Phillip," Ryan replied.

Their lips met and for a split second everything in the world was right. Everyone else disappeared. They were the only two that existed in the world.

And here we are in heaven For you are mine...At last

Epilogue

Carol Harris blew her bangs out of her face. She was told shakedown sucked and she was starting to believe it. They hadn't met all of their Drill Sergeants yet but she knew it was coming.

So far she had been able to control herself, mostly because the Drills themselves were scarier than hell.

Drill Sergeant Krutz called them to attention. Something was going on. She thought maybe that Drill Sergeant Grabowski was coming. They had all been warned about him. He was crazy as hell. She worried her bottom lip when she heard a door slam open.

She heard him before she saw him.

Soft rocks crunched under sure footsteps and she knew it was someone important. She looked forward and prayed that the guy wouldn't look like Igor. But she almost prayed he did. It would otherwise upset her belief in the delicate balance of justice and injustice.

“Good afternoon, recruits. My name is Drill Sergeant Ryan Grabowski and for the next nine weeks I am the motherfucking God you will worship.”

Shit! Her new Drill had a voice fit for sin.

“When you pray, it will be to me. When you eat, it will be only because I have granted you nourishment. At night when you are asleep your dreams will be controlled by me.”

Shit. Double Shit. And throw a fuck in there too.

“I will tell you how to walk, when to talk and how to fucking use the bathroom. Without me your fucking life is useless. Get used to my new commandments, ladies. For you only have the graces I give you!”

Carol blinked several times when the crunching of stones stopped in front of her.

“Look at me, Private!”

She looked and felt like she was going to faint. Holy Mary Mother of God. The drill sergeant was beautiful. Even with the smirk on his face. Those green eyes were ice cold, yet sent heat swirling through her body.

“Where are you from?”

“California?” She was spazzing, she knew she was.

“Are you asking me or telling me? Fucking US Army recruits! They stick me with the dumbest fuckers they can find. Which is it?”

And with that began Carol's trip into the entity known as the US Army experience.