



J.A.
Snyder

The
Tattooed
Heart

THE TATTOOED HEART

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Lee shifts a little on the table to take his weight off his throbbing cock. He can't meet Chris's dancing gaze in the mirror. "You know how I am."

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THE TATTOOED HEART

BY

J. M. SNYDER

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THE TATTOOED HEART
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To my own tattoo artist at Lucky 13

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When Lee enters Tattoo 804, Chris is just finishing up with a client. Though it's less than thirty minutes to closing time, April's behind the counter and knows Lee's a friend, so she waves him back to Chris's booth. "Hey, man," Chris says, glancing up from the ornate Celtic knot armband he's been coloring in for a while now. The client, a pretty woman in her late twenties, grins at Lee with gritted teeth. Chris motions to a nearby chair. "Have a seat. I'm almost through."

Lee's two years older than Chris but they go way back. The first day after winter break when Chris had been in the fourth grade, to be exact; Lee had been a burly sixth grader, scary as shit, patrolling the playground at their elementary school with the other tough boys in his class. Chris, always on the small side, often fell

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prey to the bullies. When Lee came over to pick on him that cold January afternoon, Chris was sitting on the frozen ground, one pant leg pulled up to expose an intricate pattern he'd been drawing on himself with a ballpoint pen. He expected to be laughed at, jeered, maybe even punched if he couldn't dodge fast enough. The last thing he'd been ready for was to find the older boy hunkering down beside him as Lee pulled up the leg of his own jeans. "Great tat. Think you can do one on me?"

Funny how life turns out. At thirty, Chris rents a booth at Tattoo 804, an up-and-coming tattoo parlor in Richmond located less than a mile from the schoolyard where he first met Lee. Most of his clients aren't looking for anything custom, not yet—they want hearts on their wrists or paw prints on their ankles, or someone's name scribbled somewhere on their bodies. His own art is hidden away in portfolios he never shows anyone but Lee. They've been friends forever, and when Chris has a new design he'd like to etch into someone, who else would he call?

Lee sinks onto a stool near the mirror by Chris's booth. He leans down to look at the armband, careful to stay out of the light. "That's tight, man. Real sharp. You oughta do one for me."

"I got plans for you," Chris promises. He wipes away excess ink and a trace amount of blood, studies his handiwork, then dives back in.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Lee in the mirror—it's June and already hot out, so Lee wears one of those faded tank tops called a wifebeater that shows off the ink on his arms. Chris did every single tattoo on Lee's body, each a custom design, a tribute to his art. He's not the only one looking; the woman in his chair turns her head and checks Lee out. Dark, mussed hair that looks like he just got out of bed. Warm eyes that crinkle into half-moons

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when he laughs. Heart-shaped lips most women would kill to have. They'd look girly if he wasn't so damn built. Lee works construction, and Chris is never sure if he wears those dirty jeans and clunky boots for looks or function. Noticing his newest tattoo, a colorful maze Chris did a month ago spiraled around Lee's left elbow, the woman says, "Nice tats. Where'd you get them done?"

"Here." Lee gives her a wink that makes her blush. "You're in the hands of the best, babe. Nobody inks me but Chris."

When the armband's finally done, Chris wraps it in cellophane and tells the woman to keep it clean. "I know what to do," she promises, slipping him a neatly folded ten when he helps her out of the chair. "You aren't my first. I really like your touch, and those designs on your friend are killer. I'll definitely be back."

Lee waits until she reaches the front desk before he takes her place in the chair in front of Chris. "What's up?" he asks, watching as Chris cleans his station. "I ain't heard from you in a while. Keeping busy?"

A slow smile spreads across Chris's face. "You could say that. I got a man now, Lee. I have to be home nights."

Lee claps his hands and whoops, a little too loudly. "All *right!*"

Chris ducks his head, embarrassed, but there aren't many people in the parlor this late. "Keep it down," he says, even though he can't stop grinning. "It's not all that."

"Not yet," Lee points out. "But you want it to be?"

Chris laughs. "I think so, yeah. I think he's the one."

As he clears away the small cups of ink and water from his table, his mind drifts to Barry. The dude is everything Chris wants in a lover, there's no denying it. Tall, slim, sexy, even if he doesn't have any tattoos yet. That'll change. Chris has offered to ink Barry himself for free and Barry said maybe, yeah. Another couple

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months and Chris thinks that “maybe, yeah” will turn into “please.”

“Where’d you meet him?” Lee’s voice is quieter now, subdued. “Is he hot?”

The look Chris gives his friend says it all. “Shyeah. Hot as shit. He plays guitar in April’s brother’s band and we met after his set one night at the Code downtown. Just hooked up and hit it off. I am officially in love.”

When Chris glances at his friend, Lee’s grin slides into place, but when he turns, he sees it slip away in the mirror. There’s something unsettling about how Lee stares at him, something that says wheels are turning inside that bushy head of his. “I know what you’re thinking,” Chris says.

That earns him an amused grunt. “What’s that?”

“It’s too early to tell.” Chris laughs and shakes his head. “Man, whatever. He’s all into me, that’s all I’m saying. Finally, you know? A guy who wants to be with me twenty-four seven, who likes my art, who wants me to draw something special for his first tattoo and put the image on him myself. Where else am I ever gonna find someone like that?”

In the mirror, Lee’s heart-shaped mouth twists into a strangled knot. “Hell if I know.”

When Chris turns toward him, that sour pucker has smoothed out and he thinks maybe he imagined it. “What ’cha got for me tonight?” Lee asks, clapping his hands together. “Are they cool with you staying late for a client?”

“A client? No.” Chris reaches for his portfolio, tucked into the space between his table and the wall. “But man, you’re a friend. This ain’t a sale. Let me show you what I’ve been doing. How’s your own love life going?”

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Lee takes the offered portfolio and flips to the back without being asked, where he knows Chris's newer work is kept. "Pssh," he says, dismissive. "My problem is the guys I like never like me back. These sketches are good. More mazes?"

"They're not really." Chris rolls his stool around so he's beside Lee's chair and leans against his friend's arm as he traces one of his more elaborate drawings. "It's one continuous line, see? They just bend sharply and fold back behind the first line, sort of like that old Windows screensaver, I guess. You know, the one with the pipes? I can leave 'em hollow or color them in, any color you want. I'm thinking they'd look damn cool on your shoulder and flowing over down your arm, you know? I can do as much or as little as you like."

Lee's arm burns through Chris's shirt. "Whatever you want," he murmurs. "It's up to you."

Chris looks up to find his friend staring at him openly and he grins to alleviate the sudden tension between them. "Great! Let's get started. Take off your shirt for me, will you?"

* * *

Lee's first tattoo was a black and red star on the back of his right hand. It was the first tattoo Chris ever did, and no matter how much Chris tries to cajole Lee into letting him redo it, Lee won't let him. "It's crap," Chris has said. "I've gotten so much better."

But Lee is adamant. "I like it. Shows just how far you've come. You can touch it up but don't you dare cover it over."

As Chris sets up for Lee's next tattoo, this Möbius strip-like pipe, Lee flips through the portfolio in his hands. Chris is an awesome artist, one of the best. A consummate professional, too,

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with a light touch and unique designs. The moment they met all those years ago, Lee knew Chris would be doing something with his art later on in life. Lee couldn't draw stick figures, let alone these gorgeous sketches that fill Chris's portfolio. There are dragons and birds, vicious sabertooth cats, sexy women and hulking men, hooded skeletons, Celtic-inspired knots, and everywhere these new pipe things Chris currently favors.

At the bottom of each page, a pair of young boys scamper at the edge, seeming to move when Lee flips the pages. The boys look suspiciously like the two friends did as children—one is small and slim, obviously Chris, the other stocky and tall, like Lee himself. He stops at one image where the boys hunch down beside a short stream. "What's this?"

"Up." Chris motions Lee to stand so he can adjust the chair properly. It needs to lie flat so Lee's back and shoulder will be within easy reach. As it adjusts, he glances at the page Lee holds open and laughs. "Just something I'm playing around with, man. They're kind of cute, aren't they?"

Lee grunts, noncommittal. "They look like—"

"They're Barry and me," Chris tells him, then shrugs. "Or they're supposed to be. I'm still figuring out just what I want them to be doing when I tattoo him. Sit."

Without a word, Lee closes the portfolio and sets it aside. He stretches, savoring the pop in his muscles because he isn't sure when he'll get the chance to stretch again. Those two boys dance around his thoughts, but he pushes them aside and climbs onto the now stretched-out chair beside Chris's stool. He lays on his stomach, right arm angled out, left arm curled under his cheek. In the mirror, he watches Chris prepare to get to work.

Those two boys looked like himself and Chris, not this Barry

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person Chris just met. Doesn't he know Lee would let him put that image anywhere he wanted? The boys could be doing anything, anything at all. Lee's body is Chris's canvas and always has been. Why can't Chris see that?

Lee catches a glimpse of his own troubled reflection and looks away.

Chris works in silence. He sets up the ink he'll use—just black tonight, since he'll just do the outline first—and debates which gauge needle to use. Lee watches him, wondering once again what it is he finds so attractive about his friend. Chris isn't much to look at, to be sure. He's always been a head shorter than Lee and scrappy thin. He has a long, narrow face, bushy black eyebrows, and shoulder-length hair the color of spilled ink. He wears it tucked behind his ears, and while at work he hides it under a baseball cap, so the ends want to curl when they escape. His dark hair and naturally dusky skin frame his pale blue eyes perfectly—they're large, expressive, and more than once, Lee's thought of them in his sleep and woken with a bad erection. Dreamy eyes, Lee might call them, if he let himself think of Chris that way. Soulful eyes. *Damn.*

In addition to his multiple tattoos, Chris has a few piercings, as well. A silver hoop juts from one eyebrow, and a circular barbell hangs from his nasal septum. Lee hasn't gone in for any other body mods himself—Chris doesn't do the piercings, so Lee isn't tempted to let his friend talk him into one. But if Chris did? Lee knows he'd look like a human pin cushion in no time. Whenever Chris calls him up, Lee's already heading for Tattoo 804. He just can't tell Chris no.

After Chris applies the transfer, which sets the tattoo's image onto Lee's skin, he asks, "Do you want to take a look before we

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get started?”

“Nah, man. I’m cool.” Lee grins and gives Chris a wink. “I trust you.”

“Ready, then?” Chris wheels his stool up close and runs a hand along the sensitive underside of Lee’s arm. Despite the latex gloves he wears, Lee’s skin warms at the touch.

Lee nods as Chris settles in. “Go to it.”

As the needle buzzes, Lee’s mind goes blank. He stares at the mirror, at his own eyes staring back, until he can’t stand to look at himself any more and shifts his gaze to watch Chris. His back grows hot where the tattoo takes shape—it always feels like rug burn to him, not painful but not really all that great, either. Still, seeing Chris hovering above him, concentrating so readily on his body, creating something personal and new where before there was nothing but blank skin...a familiar ache settles into Lee’s balls. When Chris sits back to shift into a better position, Lee takes a moment to bend one knee, just slightly. Just enough to let up on the pressure at his crotch, where he’s already sporting wood. Chris doesn’t miss the gesture. “You getting hard?” he teases.

Lee shifts a little on the table to take his weight off his throbbing cock. He can’t meet Chris’s dancing gaze in the mirror. “You know how I am.”

“Man,” Chris drawls, turning back to the tattoo. “I wish getting inked turned me on.”

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Too late, he realizes his question might be misinterpreted—he means which artist tattoos Chris, not who gets his friend hard. He doesn’t want to hear about this new guy of Chris’s, Barry whatever the hell his name is. Each week Chris seems to find someone new, and the way he goes on and *on* about his latest piece of ass always

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makes Lee sad. How long has *he* been waiting here for his chance? When will Chris finally tire of everyone else and notice *him*?

Fortunately, Chris knows what he's asking. They've been friends so damn long. "April did my last one," he says, pulling Lee's skin taut so he can continue his design. "Don't move. This is tricky."

"There's your problem," Lee jokes. "A chick isn't going to get your blood pumping, even if she does have an ink gun in one hand and piercings up the wazoo."

Chris snickers; Lee feels his friend's breath cool his heated flesh. "I don't know if she has any piercings *there*."

"God, I don't *want* to know," Lee smiles when Chris laughs, careful not to laugh himself and ruin the tattoo. "All I'm saying is get a hot guy to ink you, then let me know if you get hard."

"Don't let Barry hear you say that," Chris warns. He's only teasing, but his words sting and the smile fades from Lee's face. "He probably wouldn't like knowing my best friend thinks I'm hot."

Lee doubts this Barry ass is smart enough to put two and two together. Hell, Lee's known Chris for going on twenty years now and Chris has never clued in.

* * *

Because of its intricate design and sheer size, the tattoo takes several weeks to complete. The first night, Chris outlines the entire thing, which takes longer than he expected—the tattoo is a writhing mass of sharp angles and long lines starting just above a freckle on the back of Lee's upper arm. It curves up his bicep, around his armpit, following the lines of his body. Around his

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shoulder it flares out, filling up most of that side of Lee's back, then trickles down to end a few inches below his shoulder blade. The outline itself takes a good two hours of nothing but intense concentration, Chris's hand steady as he grips the tattoo gun, his world nothing but black ink on pale skin and the faint smell of Old Spice deodorant wafting up from Lee as he works. It's a smell Chris has come to associate with late nights at the tattoo parlor, the buzz of the needles, the cool splash of surgical soap against the plastic gloves he wears. It's a smell that slips seductively into his unconsciousness and seizes him by the balls, kneading them like an attentive lover. If getting inked turns Lee on, inking Lee turns *Chris* on. Having someone lie beneath him, patient and still, while he draws his art into their willing flesh...it's a heady rush, he has to admit.

In the quiet parlor, Lee watches Chris in the mirror as he works. Neither speak; neither have to. Chris traces his own outlines carefully, leaning in close to ensure every pore is filled with dark ink just where he wants it. When he finishes a section, he squirts the green soap onto it, wipes away the excess ink and faint traces of blood from his art, then moves onto the next section. And the next. And the next.

Lee heals quickly—he always does. When he comes in at the end of the following week, the tattoo has already finished peeling. Chris redoes the outline, darkening it, then begins to fill in one little corner of the image with a vibrant blue. He thinks maybe he'll color the whole design with this color—it's gorgeous, really, and with Lee looking back over one shoulder to watch Chris work, Chris can see the shade mirrors the same sexy blue of his friend's eyes. He'll fade it, though, and the final touch will be a thin line of paler blue, maybe silvery white, right through the center of the

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pipe to make it look like it's reflecting the light. When he's done, it'll look fucking awesome.

He only colors in part of the tattoo that second night. Lee comes back a third week, and a fourth, before the whole thing is done. By the end of the month, Chris is back to touching up the first fill work he did so long ago. Solid colors sometimes fall out a bit when healing, and intricate designs such as this take longer to complete. He'll have Lee come back again, maybe one more time, because even though most of the tattoo has healed nicely, Chris doesn't want to spend all night at the parlor. He has plans. Lee must sense his excitement because there's a faint look of amusement dancing in his eyes. "You still seeing that guy?" he asks when Chris sits back to shake the cramps out of his hand.

"Barry? Yeah." Chris grins and knows he's on the verge of gushing. It's been over a month now, and things are going strong between them. "You gotta meet him, man. You two will get along great."

Lee's gaze drifts away and he frowns as he tries to look over his shoulder to see the tattoo taking shape behind him. "You inked him yet?"

With a laugh, Chris leans in to tackle the last bit of touch-up he plans to do tonight. "He's holding out on me. He's worse than a damn virgin afraid of popping his cherry. I tell him it don't hurt but he doesn't believe me." He runs a hand down the curve of Lee's back where a dragon's spine is tattooed—the first large tat Chris did, and it *still* looks killer. "I gotta introduce you two. Then *you* can tell him it doesn't hurt all that much. Hell, it even turns you on."

Playfully, his hand drifts over Lee's taut buttocks to poke at the soft sac hidden between them. Through Lee's jeans, Chris barely

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feels a thing, but his friend gasps as if goosed. “Don’t move!” Chris chides, laughing. He holds the tattoo gun high to avoid touching Lee with it. “I don’t want to fuck this up now.”

“Don’t cop a feel,” Lee says. The grin on his lips barely reaches his eyes. “What’d Barry have to say if he saw *that*?”

“Please.” Chris holds Lee’s arm steady as he finishes with the tattoo. “We’ve been friends for so long, Lee, you’re like a brother to me. I can tease you if I want. Besides, what happens when I run out of room up here and have no where else to ink but your cock and balls? You expect me to do it blindfolded?”

Lee’s eyes go wide, but Chris can’t interpret the emotion glistening in them. Fear? Excitement? A little bit of both? “You’re not inking my balls,” he whispers. “Are you?”

Chris winks at him but doesn’t reply. For a long moment the two friends stare at each other, unable to look away, each assessing the other. Then one of them snickers—Chris doesn’t know who does it first, him or Lee, but soon they’re both snorting with laughter. “You ain’t inking my balls,” Lee says again. “You ain’t *touching* them.”

“You never know,” is all Chris will commit to at the moment.

Of course, he doesn’t mention it to Barry. He doesn’t have to—he and Lee were just goofing around. But he *does* talk up the new tattoo to his lover. He can’t help it. The design turns out gorgeous, if he says so himself, and it took a good six weeks to finalize. He has every right to be proud of it. The next time Barry comes over to Chris’s studio apartment after a long practice set with his band, Chris can’t stop bragging. They sit on the futon, which is folded up into a couch at the moment. An empty pizza box rests on the coffee table before them and the TV is on low, tuned to one of the reality shows which have replaced the music videos MTV used to show.

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“God, babe,” Chris sighs, finishing his last slice of pizza. “You gotta see it. It goes from here—” He touches Barry’s arm where Lee’s tattoo starts, then spreads his hand and walks it along a path over Barry’s shoulder to halfway down his back. “All the way down to here. It’s fucking amazing. You’d love it.”

Barry’s jaw works as he chews. “Hmm.”

“The colors just pop,” Chris continues. He’s gushing but he can’t help it—he loves talking about tattoos. “I didn’t really know how it’d play out at first, you know? Having that blue blend into the white like that, but it really came together in the end. Lee thinks it’s wicked cool. He says—”

“Chris, please.” Barry turns toward him, a sardonic look in his eyes. He looks haggard and worn out, the day-old scruff on his chin a dark contrast to his pale skin. His dyed black hair frizzes out around his head like a disheveled halo. Eyeliner smudges look like bruises around his dark eyes. Speaking slowly as if afraid Chris won’t understand him otherwise, Barry says, “I am exhausted. Physically and mentally. The last thing I want to talk about is your friend Lee. *Capice?*”

With a laugh, Chris tells him, “You two are so much alike. I can’t wait for you to meet him. Then you’ll get a chance to see my art first-hand instead of just in my portfolio.”

“Chris.” Barry whines this time and rolls his eyes. “Please. Two minutes without talking about tattoos or your goddamn friend. Is that too much to ask?”

Chris frowns, confused. What’d he say? “You don’t want to talk about tattoos?” What *else* is there to talk about?

Barry sighs, defeated. Turning his attention back to the television, he mumbles, “You didn’t even ask how my day went.”

“You said you’d been practicing—”

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"I didn't say *why*." Another sigh, this one exasperated. Barry bites into his slice of pizza and tears at it viciously.

Chris knows why they were practicing. Hello, it's a band? Isn't that what they did? When Barry came over, the first thing Chris asked was how he's doing. That right there should've been opening enough to tell him anything Barry wanted to share. His response had just been a short grunt. How was Chris supposed to interpret that? They weren't saying anything a moment ago, just sitting here eating, watching TV, and he mentioned Lee's new tattoo in passing. If Barry wants to talk about something else, he can just bring it up. No use playing these stupid games.

But there's an uneasy tension between them and Chris doesn't know if it's his fault or not, so he'll play along for now. "So why?"

For a long moment, Barry doesn't answer. He's sulking a little, Chris knows. To draw him out, Chris trails a hand over Barry's shoulder, a ticklish touch Barry tries to shrug off but can't. Chris lets his fingers explore, smoothing down the ragged threads from Barry's torn sleeve then rubbing over warm skin, counting the freckles that dot Barry's shoulder one by one, following the trail they create which leads to a tender spot behind Barry's earlobe. There Chris runs his forefinger behind Barry's ear, softly, oh so softly, tracing the curve of skin and feeling it warm beneath his touch. Around the top of Barry's ear to the stud pierced into the cartilage. Chris swirls his finger around the stud, turning it clockwise as he leans close to his boyfriend, closer, *closer*, until his mouth is inches from Barry's lobe and his breath heats the space between them. "Tell me why," he purrs in a low voice.

From the way Barry shifts beside him, one hand drifting to adjust the bulge at the front of his jeans, Chris knows just what he's doing to the man. Whatever argument had been brewing

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minutes ago dissolves beneath Chris's words. "Barry," he sighs, nipping Barry's earlobe between his teeth. "You gonna tell me? Or do I have to guess?"

A hand drifts to Chris's knee, gives it a squeeze, then rubs higher up his thigh, easing under the hem of his shorts to rub along tender flesh. "Tell you what?" Barry asks, dazed.

Chris snickers and fists his hand in the mess of curls atop Barry's head. "About your band, remember? You wanted me to ask about your practice. So I'm asking. Why—"

Suddenly Barry turns toward him, cutting off his question with a forceful kiss. Chris finds himself pressed back against the futon, pinned beneath Barry, whose hands fumble with the zipper on Chris's shorts. Somehow amid hungry kisses they manage to lose the clothing between them, and any further attempts at conversation disappear.

* * *

Less than two weeks go by before Lee gets another call from Chris. "Swing by the parlor tonight, could you?" his friend asks.

As if he'd say no. "What's up? You got another design in mind so soon?"

When Chris laughs, the sound warms Lee up inside. "Just come on over around closing time. I'll see you then?"

Of course. If Chris wanted him there now, Lee would drop everything to comply. But he waits until quarter to eight, his whole body humming with nervous energy that chases him around his small townhouse, up and down the stairs, nipping at the edges of his thoughts. Chris and he alone in the parlor after hours, the room dark around them, the only light coming from the small, hot lamp

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shining down on Chris as he inks another design into Lee's skin. The insane pressure that builds in Lee's groin when his friend is tattooing him—he's never let another artist work on him so he doesn't know if it's the pain that turns him on or if it's really Chris, leaning over him, breath soft against Lee's skin, hands firm and commanding while holding Lee in place.

And the last time they'd been together, when Chris joked about inking Lee's boys? God, if it ever came to that, Lee knows he'll be rock solid hard the whole time. He'll have to sit on his hands to keep from jerking off. He pictures Chris between his legs, leaning in close, tattoo gun in one hand buzzing and the other holding Lee's erect cock up out of the way. Chris's soft breath *there*, his firm touch in places Lee's only dreamed of it...Lee will be lucky if he doesn't shoot a load right in his friend's face before the needles even touch his flesh.

Who is he kidding? Getting inked doesn't turn him on—it's an excuse, nothing more. It's Chris that gets his blood pumping, his heart hammering, his dick stiff. It's always been Chris.

He wears his tightest jeans, not so much for looks but because they constrict around an erection like a gloved hand. He has a cock ring on under them, too, and no underwear to add to the sensation. His balls hang low—if Chris pokes at them tonight, Lee's sure to feel it. He's been waiting *years* for that touch. He won't miss it a second time.

A clean white tank top completes the look. It's August in Richmond, hot and sticky out, and he likes showing off the ink on his arms. Chris's handiwork is drawn onto every inch of his skin, and Lee's damn proud to let others know he's a marked man. With a last look in the mirror and a wet comb run through his hair in some attempt to tame it, he heads out the door at a quick trot,

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hoping he doesn't hit any of the lights between his place and Tattoo 804. Even if he's late, though, he knows Chris will wait for him. They have a date...though Lee doesn't let himself think of it like that.

A date. The word implies so much more than what they have together. So much more Lee would like.

Outside the tattoo parlor, he pulls to a stop at the curb and is surprised to see Chris already outside. Hands shoved into the pockets of his own painted-on jeans, Chris leans against the bus stop sign in front of the building. His eyes look hooded and mysterious in the dying sunlight, and his hair is tousled from running his hand through it to keep it from his face. Lee's heart skips a beat—though Chris isn't exactly a Hollywood hottie, something about him always seems to take Lee's breath away. Lee should tell him sometime, he knows, but there's that other guy in the picture at the moment. Once he's gone, though...

Who am I kidding? Lee leans across the passenger side to roll down the window as Chris saunters over to his car. *I've had all the time in the world to tell him and I ain't said shit yet. Why ruin what we have now?* How'd they ever get back this easy camaraderie between them if Chris didn't feel the same way Lee does? *That's* what's stopping him from saying anything. He'd rather have any little piece of his friend he could than nothing at all.

Chris leans into the window once it's down. "Hey," he says with a grin. "Change of plans. You feel like clubbing a bit?"

At first Lee thinks he's joking. "What?"

Chris reaches in and unlocks the passenger side door. Before he drops into the seat beside Lee, he unlocks the door behind him as well. "April's got free passes into Toad's and wants us to tag along. Barry's band is playing there tonight—can you believe it?"

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Toad's! That's like a major gig for them."

Barry, yes, of course. That explains the glint in Chris's eye and the excitement in his voice. Lee's smile feels tight across his face as he puts the car into neutral. "Toad's. Cool. We going?"

"You have to meet him," Chris is saying. He glances back at the parlor but the doors are shut, the lights inside out. Leaning across Lee, he hits the horn on the steering wheel with a short blast. "C'mon, April. Hurry the hell up."

As if the horn triggered a reaction, the door to the tattoo parlor opens and two, three, *four* giggling women tumble out. "Christ," Lee mutters under his breath.

They're all in their twenties, scantily clad, with high heels and teased hair. There's more ink on their legs, arms, and midribs than clothing. Three of the girls huddle together while a fourth—April, Lee recognizes her from the parlor's reception desk—locks the door behind them. She tugs on it once to ensure it's latched, then leads her friends to Lee's car. They tumble into the back seat like Keystone Kops. The stench of sharp perfume hits Lee at once, and the sound of breathy giggles drowns out the song on his stereo. Mini-skirts are pulled down, tight T-shirts readjusted, as the four of them squeeze together. Lee glances into the rear-view mirror and just sees a row of painted faces smiling back.

It's going to be a *long* night.

He knows April by sight—she's part Asian, so she stands out from her friends. The other three sort of all look the same, white, perky, cute. Two are blonde and the third looks like she tried dying dark hair the same bleached shade and got a head full of honey-colored curls instead of pure white strands. Every time Lee looks back at them, that one with the honey hair is staring back. When their eyes meet in the rear-view mirror, she gives him a saucy wink

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he chooses to ignore. Just like he's ignoring the hand Chris rests on the space between the front seats, a hand that taps out a beat from the radio and nudges Lee's hip with every other note.

We aren't alone, Lee reminds himself. *Christ, we're going to see his boyfriend play*. But that does little to stem the start of an erection filling the front of his jeans.

Toad's is downtown near the Canal Walk, in a section of the city so low in altitude it's called the Bottom. Lee knows in theory where it is, but he's never been, so the first time he drives down the cobbled street where he thinks it's located, he turns before he reaches the water and misses the club completely. A harried drive around one-way streets through Shockhoe Bottom and he gets back to where he needs to be only to find there's no parking nearby. Oh, there's a deck, but, God damn it—he refuses to pay seven bucks to park in the same city where he lives. His mood darkens as he begins to crawl through the side streets, looking for somewhere to stop...

He's just about to head back to Toad's and drop off the giggling girls at the club just to get rid of them and let himself *think* when that hand Chris keeps between them touches Lee's thigh. "There," he says, pointing at an empty spot at the end of the block that isn't flanked by No Parking signs.

At first Lee doesn't respond. He can't—his mind is whirling out in a blur from that casual hand still resting high up on his thigh. *Little to the left*, he prays, holding his breath. *A few inches that way and you'll know it isn't your tattoo skills that turn me on*.

Chris gives his leg a squeeze. *Damn*. "Lee? Right there. We can walk."

With a glance over his shoulder that shows him nothing of the road—just a quartet of girlish smiles and batting lashes—Lee cuts

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across two lanes to pull into the spot. His hand brushes Chris's when he pulls up the parking brake, and he yanks on the brake a bit harder than necessary. "We're here."

The girls tumble out in a rush, then stand on the street corner like half-priced hookers running a two-for-one special. In the car's bright interior light, Chris flashes Lee a quick grin, then climbs out after his friends. There is one brief moment where Lee considers putting the car back into gear and tearing away from the curb—just leaving Chris and the girls to fend for themselves and heading back home. An evening alone *has* to be better than watching Chris drool over his new boy toy, right?

Right?

But Lee can't do that, not to Chris. So he unbuckles his belt and pulls the key from the ignition, resigned. At least Toad's has a full bar. Enough booze in his system and Lee won't give a fuck who Chris flirts with tonight.

Chris leads the way, practically racing through the back alleys and side streets to reach the club. The girls teeter on high heels as they hurry to keep up, and Lee trails behind, reluctant but unable to do anything but follow. He watches his steel-toed boots move over the cobbled street, his mind blank, his face devoid of emotion. When someone ahead of him stumbles, he almost runs her over without noticing.

She catches his arm as he passes, her red-tipped nails digging into his skin like claws. It's the honey blonde, and this close Lee notices how dried out and frizzy the dye has made her hair. With a winning smile, she leans against him as she wobbles unsteadily on her heels. "Hi there," she purrs, looking up with half-closed eyes. "My name's Melanie."

Lee tries to shake her off and can't. "Hey."

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The others are drawing ahead. Lee starts after them and finds this Melanie chick holding him back. “You’re Lee, right?” If she knows already, why’s she bother to ask? With a throaty giggle, she whispers, “Chris says you’re gay.”

Lee plucks her fingers off his arm one by one. “Chris is right.”

If he hopes that will deter her, he’s mistaken. “I love gay boys,” she gushes, launching herself at him before he can move out of reach. As she lays against his back, he feels pert little breasts push into his shoulder. “I think it’s hot when two guys go at it, you know? *So* hot.”

Lee drops all pretense and shoves her away. “Back up, bitch,” he growls.

Before she can respond, he storms after Chris, who has stopped at the corner and waits, hands on his hips, for everyone to catch up. Lee glares at his friend as he approaches, but the grin on Chris’s face only widens. “What?”

Without answering, Lee keeps walking. Chris falls into step beside him and drapes an arm around Lee’s shoulder. “This is great,” he says, excitement evident in his voice. Lee’s glad one of them feels that way. “I’m so happy you finally get to meet Barry. You’ll love him, I just know it.”

Lee has his doubts.

* * *

Despite the early hour, Toad’s is hopping. Chris leads his friends around to the canal entrance, where April hands their passes to a bouncer blocking twin glass doors that vibrate from the pounding music inside. Once they’re waved through, Chris takes the stairs two at a time to reach the second floor, then hurries down

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the bare corridor to the open door of the club. Inside, the lights are doused, pitching the club into darkness; the only illumination comes from the stage, where Barry's band is already playing. Chris pushes through the mass of bumping bodies, grinding between strangers as he shoves toward the stage. He manages to get up close—this is a small club, and there's nothing separating the stage from the dance floor, so Chris bullies his way into the crowd until he's right up front. Barry's on bass guitar above Chris, eyes shut, fingers ripping over his strings, completely lost in the music. Chris calls his name like a rabid fan, then whoops loudly, but the guitar riff drowns him out. Still, he raises his arms in the air and sways in time to the beat, letting the people around him move his body as the music washes over him. That's his man.

Some time later, Barry sees him and winks. Happy his boyfriend knows he's here, Chris drifts back to the bar, where he finds Lee glaring at the trio of giggling girls who fawn around him. April is nowhere to be seen, but her friends sigh over Lee as he guzzles down a beer straight from the bottle. Sidling up behind his friend, Chris claps Lee on the back and shouts to be heard over the noise. "How many have you had so far?"

"I lost count," Lee hollers back.

With a laugh, Chris signals the bartender and orders what Lee's drinking. He takes the seat between his friend and the girls, then points at the stage. "I'm dating the guy on guitar."

The girl who hit on Lee earlier shrieks. "Oh, my God! That's so hot!"

Chris thinks so, too. But when he turns to grin at Lee, he sees something troubling in his friend's expression, a haunted look in Lee's eyes that disappears before he can comment on it. Leaning closer, Chris asks, "You okay, man?"

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Lee tips his bottle as if he's toasting Chris. "I'm cool. So that's him?"

A goofy grin threatens to split Chris's face. "Yeah. God, he's fine. And in bed? Shit. Don't get me started."

Lee doesn't. He eyes the stage warily, his face an unreadable mask as he drinks down the last of his beer, but when he sets the bottle on the bar, he smiles at Chris and that seems to chase away the shadows haunting his features. "That good, huh?"

"Dude..." Chris drawls, nodding his head.

Suddenly April appears between them, elbowing her way to the bar. As she waves her bottle of beer at the bartender, she glances at Lee and notices the new tattoo Chris inked onto his shoulder. "Sweet!" She pulls the strap on Lee's tank top aside to get a better look. "This is wild, man. How long did it take?"

If there's anything Chris likes to talk about more than his boyfriend, it's his tattoos. Sliding off his stool, he steps around April to tug up the bottom of Lee's shirt. "You have to see the full thing to appreciate it. Isn't it awesome?"

April's friends circle around for a look. Lee slumps his shoulders and hunches over the bar, a low growl in the back of his throat. "Chris, really..."

"Let them look," Chris chides. He runs a hand down Lee's bare back—the skin is warm beneath his palm, familiar. He intimately knows the curve of Lee's spine, the freckles that dot his flesh, the three moles right below his ribs that form Orion's Belt—the constellation was one of Chris's first tattoos. The girls ooh over the dragon bones that trail down the center of Lee's back; they love the intricate piping Chris finished last week, the colors still bright. Proud of his work, Chris beams as they comment on the tattoos, their polished nails tracing the lines of ink.

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After a few moments, Lee shrugs them away. “All right, already. Get off me, will you?”

“Just showing off my portfolio,” Chris teases.

As he starts to smooth down Lee’s shirt, one of the girls notices something just above the waistband of Lee’s jeans. “What’s this?”

Chris glimpses the tip of a tiger’s tail and laughs. “That’s one of my best. Lee’s year of the tiger, see, in Chinese astrology?” The girls nod, but from their vacant expressions, he knows they don’t have a clue what he’s talking about. Still, it’s one of his best tattoos to date. Tugging down a little on Lee’s pants, Chris points to the orange and black swirl that comprises the tail of his abstract, Asian-inspired tiger. The beast runs from Lee’s waist down to his upper thigh. “This one’s bitchin’. You can’t see it all but Lee, pop your fly. Let’s give the girls a show.”

He tugs again on Lee’s jeans as the girls giggle, and is surprised when he hears his friend tell him, “No.”

The word sounds so foreign in Lee’s voice that Chris refuses to believe he said it. “Show off a bit,” Chris says, spinning Lee around on the bar stool. As his friend chugs back another beer, Chris fumbles with the button on the front of Lee’s jeans. “Come on, they ain’t going to see anything major. I just want to show them the tiger—”

“No.” Lee’s hand drops to his lap and pushes Chris away. “Not here.”

Too late. Chris has the fly undone and starts to unzip Lee’s jeans. “So they see your undies,” he chides, laughing. “So what? Unless you’re not wearing any...”

That thought tapers off as the zipper eases down inch by inch and Chris sees no fabric beneath it. No jock strap, no tighty whities, no boxers. Lee isn’t looking at him—his hard gaze is off

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in the distance somewhere, a million miles away from this crowded bar and the girls huddled around behind Chris. When the first curly strands of dark hair peek through Lee's open fly, Chris covers them with his hand to hide them from view. His laugh now sounds forced. "Christ, Lee. Why didn't you tell me you were free-balling?"

Now his friend's gaze shifts to find Chris. The expression in those bright blue eyes is unreadable. "What's it to you what underwear I'm wearing?"

"Or *not* wearing." Chris tries to rezip the jeans, but the tiny metal teeth catch in Lee's skin, leaving red little bite marks behind. An awkwardness descends over Chris—this isn't happening, it can't be, and why the hell isn't Lee helping him out here? He pokes under the zipper, ignoring the flutter of soft skin and the faint curls that tickle his fingertips as he tries to undo the damage he's done. Lee's staring off again, past Chris's shoulder, at something only he can see. With a growl, Chris mutters, "Lee, damn it. Help a man out here, will you?"

Suddenly from behind him comes Barry's voice, a hard edge to it. "What the hell is this?"

Chris turns, hands still shoved into Lee's pants, and sees his boyfriend glaring at the two of them. In the overhead lights from the bar his disheveled hair looks greasy and unkempt, his face shiny with sweat, but it's his eyes that catch Chris's attention, his *eyes* that won't let Chris look away. They burn with a singular intensity, brows knit together above them, a mix of distrust and confirmation blazing in their depths.

"Barry," Chris sighs. He tugs on the zipper one last time and catches a knuckle in its teeth for his effort. Then Lee's hands brush his away, *finally*, and Chris turns to grin at his boyfriend. "God,

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you guys rocked up there. This is—”

“I know who he is.” Barry’s words are short, each clipped in anger Chris doesn’t yet understand. “What I *don’t* know is why you had your hands down the front of his damn *pants*.”

“I wasn’t...” Chris turns to Lee in mute appeal, but Lee’s impassive gaze is trained on Barry and he doesn’t see Chris’s silent plea for help. “I was showing the girls his tattoo, Barry. Honest, that’s all it was. He has this really great tiger I did—”

“Where? On his dick?”

Chris tries to laugh that off but Barry turns on his heel and shoves through the crowd, away from them. “Jeez,” Chris mutters, then raises his voice over the noise to holler, “Barry! Wait!”

He doesn’t.

Before he can disappear Chris heads after him, leaving Lee behind with the girls. He pushes strangers aside, catching elbows in his side and ducking under arms stretched out as if to stop him. Ahead, Barry hits the exit door with one hard fist and ducks out into the brightly lit hall beyond. Chris is only a few steps behind him; the door doesn’t manage to latch before Chris rams through it. Barry’s ahead, and with no crowd to impede him, Chris races to catch up. “Barry, please. Stop.”

When his hand falls on Barry’s shoulder, his boyfriend shrugs it off. He turns, his face lit with torment, his eyes wet with unshed tears. “What the *fuck* do you want, Chris?”

“Barry...” Chris catches his breath and tries to take Barry’s hand in his. He holds tight to Barry’s little finger as if grasping for straws. “It’s not what you think. I was only—”

“No.” Barry closes his hand into a fist, squeezing Chris’s fingers painfully. “It’s not what *you* think. I knew it all along.”

Exasperated, Chris asks, “Knew *what*? He’s my friend, Barry.

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I've known him since the fourth grade! There's nothing between us. Believe me, I've never screwed around with him, *never*. And sure as hell not since I've been with you. I'm not that kind of guy."

With his free hand, Barry wipes under his eye, careful not to smudge his make-up. He sighs, a defeated sound, and seems to deflate a little before Chris. Despite the venue and the few people passing by, despite the crowd inside the bar and Barry's band mates wandering somewhere nearby, Chris wants nothing more than to take Barry in his arms, hold him close, and take away the doubt and pain twisting on his face. But when he moves closer, Barry's words stop him in his tracks. "I know you're not. But you're half in love with him and I can't stand it."

Chris laughs, relieved. That's ridiculous. "Barry, jeez. I am *not*—"

"You *are*." Barry rubs his hand across his nose as he snuffles. "Don't deny it, babe. Hell, you may not even *know* it, but you are. He's all you talk about twenty-four seven. Whenever we're together it's Lee this and Lee that. It's like living in a threesome without getting laid by both guys. I've always shared you with him, *always*."

"Barry—"

But Barry shakes his head and pulls his fingers free from Chris's hand. "Believe me, Chris. I've dealt with it long enough and I can't take it any more. I just can't. The only time you talk about your work is to tell me what new tattoos you've given Lee. He's first on the speed dial on your cell. I know—I looked. Most of your calls are to him, not me. You spend hours together after everyone else has left the parlor and he's inked in places I don't want to think of you seeing, let alone *touching*, and..." Another sigh, this one so sad, it breaks Chris's heart to hear it. "And he

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likes you back. Don't say he doesn't."

Chris forces a laugh that sounds fake to his own ears. "Barry, really. You've got it all wrong—"

"Do I?" Barry stares at Chris, his face hardened now, his emotions masked. "Did you even notice the look on his face when you were touching his crotch? Or have you seen it so often before, you don't realize what you're seeing anymore?"

* * *

The next time Chris calls, Lee hesitates before he agrees to anything. "This isn't another scheme to get me to go clubbing with you guys, is it?" he asks, dubious, when Chris wants him to swing by the parlor after closing. "Because, dude, you ditched me and I had to fend off three very drunk-ass girls the rest of the night."

"Naw, man." Chris laughs, a warm sound through the tinny receiver on Lee's cell. "I got a new design I want to draw and you're my canvas. My *muse*, even. You coming?"

Keep talking like that and I will, Lee thinks, but he keeps that to himself. Instead he grunts into the phone, noncommittal, but Chris knows him so well, he just laughs again. "See you at eight."

Lee is sure to wear a pair of boxer briefs under his faded Levis *this* time. He arrives at quarter to, like usual. The place looks empty—April's not behind the counter like she normally is and Chris's booth is hidden behind a black folding screen. The buzz of a tattoo needle can be heard over the rush of air from the AC. Knocking on the counter as he steps around it, Lee calls out, "Yo, Chris?"

The buzzing stops. "Back here."

As Lee approaches the screen, he hears a woman ask, "That

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your friend? The gay one?”

“God,” Lee mutters. “Tell everyone, will you?”

Chris laughs as the needles flare to life again. “Come on around, Lee. Check this out.”

On the other side of the screen, a woman lies on her back in Chris’s tattooing chair. She’s topless, her long blonde hair in dreads and secured into a ponytail on top of her head. She has piercings in her nose and both eyebrows and lays beneath Chris’s needle, her small hands holding aside her breasts as Chris inks a large purple and pink butterfly onto the center of her chest. From the smears of ink and faint traces of blood that discolor her pale skin, Lee knows they’ve been here a while. Chris is on the very last bit of the left wing, filling in a curlicue that curves over her ribs.

When she sees Lee, she grins. Her lipstick is black, making her look ghastly. “What do you think?”

Lee whistles low. “Man, that’s wicked. How long’s it taken?”

Chris shrugs as he finishes up. “Couple hours. You like?”

“You’re amazing,” Lee tells him. He doesn’t mean just the design or the tight colors, either, but Chris doesn’t have to know that.

It takes another ten minutes before the customer is pulling on an oversized T-shirt, the cellophane covering her fresh tattoo crackling as she dresses. Lee waits, hands in his pockets, as she tips Chris and he lets her out the front door. Once it’s locked behind her, he steps over to where Lee is, leafing through a book of pre-fabricated tattoo designs. Without warning, Chris leans heavily against Lee’s back, his weight warm and welcome and so damn unexpected, Lee’s dick hardens in his jeans. “You ready for me?” Chris wants to know.

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His breath tickles Lee's ear and, for one precious moment, neither move. Lee wants to reach behind him, touch Chris's waist, keep him close, but he's afraid any move he makes will ruin things between them. So he waits until Chris steps back and tugs on one of Lee's belt loops. "Come on, Lee. Your turn."

Lee forces a grin as he follows Chris. "I sure hope you're not planning on putting a butterfly smack in the middle of my chest," he says, trying to lighten the mood between them. Why does he feel awkward all of a sudden? He's been alone with Chris before. Hiding his true feelings for his friend has become second nature to him now. "Maybe something cool, like a torn wound with a beating heart exposed, or ribs, or something that's not quite so girly, you know?"

With a laugh, Chris disappears behind the screen. Lee follows, but before he can take a seat in Chris's chair, his friend shakes his head. "Jeans come off. No chest tat for you today. I'm going lower."

Fear seizes Lee's heart. God, with the hard-on he's sporting? Oh, *hell* no. Grasping at his belt buckle, Lee starts, "Chris, I don't think—"

"Come on," Chris cajoles. "Don't get all shy on me now. Unless you're going commando again?"

"No, I've got on skivvies. But—"

Chris shakes his head. "No butts. Take it off, sexy. Let me see what we're working with here."

Lee's heart beats in his throat as he unbuckles his belt. When he unbuttons his jeans, his zipper eases down on its own beneath his erection. He fists the front of his boxer briefs, hoping to hide the bulge there, but Chris is busy getting his inks ready and isn't paying Lee any attention. Quickly Lee strips out of the jeans and

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hops into the chair, pulling at his crotch to make the material look like it's just puckering up on its own. As Chris unpacks a fresh needle, Lee jokes, "I wonder what your boyfriend would think if he saw us like this. What's his name again?"

"Barry," Chris answers. His voice sounds a little off somehow, not quite as bright as it was before. "And he's not my boyfriend any more."

Part of Lee wants to whoop with delight, but he manages to contain himself. He hopes he sounds sincere when he says, "That sucks. What happened?"

Chris shrugs. "We broke up."

"Well, duh." Lee shifts in the chair, raising the knee closest to Chris in an effort to hide his crotch from his friend. His dick has a mind of its own, it seems; once it heard Barry was out of the picture, it stood up at attention and wanted in the conversation. Lee wonders if he can excuse himself for a few hot moments in the bathroom alone to show it who's boss. "When did this go down?"

"At Toad's." Chris still isn't looking at him, which gives Lee an excuse to study his friend. Though there's a lingering sadness about his mouth and eyes, Chris doesn't seem overly upset about losing a guy he once called *the one*. "That night we went, remember? We got into it after he found us with my hands down your pants."

Lee snickers. He remembers *that* all too well—those few moments still give him enough to fantasize about when he jerks off. "Dude, we weren't even...I mean, you told him, right? It was completely innocent. Shit, you barely even saw my pubes."

A faint smile crosses Chris's face. "He knew that. But we got to talking and he said some things I hadn't even thought about before, things that really got me thinking, you know?"

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“What kinds of things?” Lee asks. He thinks he knows. From the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he isn’t sure he wants to hear Chris repeat them.

Chris takes a moment to strip off the latex gloves he’s wearing. They’re tossed into the trash, and a fresh pair is plucked from the box on Chris’s desk. He sets them next to the little cups of ink he has arranged there. Then he wheels his stool over to where Lee sits. Guiding Lee’s knees apart, Chris glides in between them, hands on Lee’s ankles. The sadness is gone from his face now. A fierce glow has replaced it, igniting the depths of Chris’s eyes until Lee can’t tear his gaze away from his friend. The hands on Lee’s ankles start to rub up his calves, pushing down his socks to smooth over hairy skin. “Things about you,” Chris says softly. Lee covers his crotch with both hands to hide it from view. “Things about us I never noticed before.”

Lee’s voice sounds like it comes from a million miles away when he murmurs, “There is no us. We’re just friends.”

That faint smile is back, ghosting over Chris’s mouth, curving his lips. Lee stares at it so long, he doesn’t realize it’s coming closer until he hears the squeal of Chris’s stool when it pushes out from under him. Then Chris is leaning above him, the hands on Lee’s legs ruffling his hair as they smooth up to his knees, then over his thighs. They’re in his lap, Chris’s hands, covering Lee’s own for a moment before easing beneath Lee’s fingers to brush over the front of Lee’s boxer briefs. His dick jerks beneath Chris’s touch, dampening the fabric that separates them. Chris’s breath fans over Lee’s upper lip and those eyes stare into his own, larger than life and closer than Lee ever imagined them to be.

When Chris speaks, his words are mere breath against Lee’s mouth. “We don’t have to settle for just that,” he purred. “If you’re

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interested in something more...”

Lee always has been. He kisses away the rest of Chris’s words, every fiber of his being crying out in triumph. *Yes.*

J. M. SNYDER

An author of gay erotic/romantic fiction, J. M. Snyder began self-publishing gay erotic fiction in 2002. Since then, Snyder has released several books in trade paperback format and has begun exploring the world of e-publishing, working with Amber Quill Press and other e-publishers. Snyder's highly erotic short gay fiction has been published online at *Ruthie's Club*, *Tit-Elation*, *Sticky Pen*, and Amazon Shorts, as well as in anthologies by Aspen Mountain Press and Cleis Press. A full bibliography, as well as free fiction, book excerpts, purchasing information, and exclusive contests, can be found at:

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