

TLC 101

**Janey
Chapel**



KIP fumbled his cell phone off the nightstand and poked at it. He hit the right button on the third try, cutting off the Flo Rida ringtone before it could start spinning right round again. He peered blearily at the clock: 6:22 a.m. As in six in the *morning*. Clearly too early to be anyone in the Minnesota clan, given the time difference, and they'd know better than to time a peptalk with the first day of spring break. So that left local trouble.

"Hello?" he said, dropping his head back on the pillow. Fuzzy cell reception answered him. He held the phone up, checking to see how many bars he had, then tried again, a little louder. "Hello?"

Damn it, if Truck Abernathy had busted up some bar, he could call some other sucker from the coaching staff to go clean up his mess. Kip hoped trouble had found somebody else; he'd talked the manager at Suds-n-Duds into letting Truck work off the damage he'd done, but a second transgression could mean suspension from the team.

A voice growled in his ear: "Rigsbee. What the—Rigsbee? Can you hear me? Come and get me."

The hell? That sounded like... "Coach Browne? Uh... Greg? Is that you? Where are you?"

For a brief, sleep-fogged moment, Kip thought this was it... the long-desired booty call. His morning wood perked up

at the thought. What could he say? Terse with a side of taciturn turned him on, especially when it came with broad shoulders and killer quads. Then his higher brain functions pointed out that since Greg's apartment was right overhead, if he had decided now was the time to act on the long looks and general sniffing around he'd been doing since they met, he could have just walked downstairs and knocked on the door. And he probably wouldn't have picked the buttcrack of dawn to do it; Greg seemed more like a late-night, possibly hammered, booty caller.

"What? I'm—ow, fuck," Kip heard Greg say. "What's that? I don't want any of that shit."

"Any of what shit?" Kip asked, yawning. Really, who could be trying to give Greg Browne something he didn't want at this time of day? Some waitress at the IHOP trying to sell him on the joys of orange marmalade?

"Nothing. Never mind. I'm at South Guilford Hospital," Greg said, his voice clipped. "Come get me. *Please.*"

The unexpected courtesy snapped Kip awake. He shook off the last blur of sleep, his hard-on subsiding at the word "hospital."

"Wait, what happened? Coach?" A mutter of background voices told Kip that the line was still open. "Uh... Greg? You still there?"

"Am I speaking with Coach Rigsbee? Kip Rigsbee?" Another man's voice, not wound quite as tight. "This is Dr. Llewellyn."

Kip sat up and transferred the phone to his other ear, tucking it against his neck as he reached for a pad and pen in the nightstand drawer. He found condoms, three quarters,

one gray sock, and—ah ha—a birthday card, but no pen. He turned the card over so he could write on the back.

“Yeah, hi, this is Kip. I work with the team, but I’m not a coach. I’m a sports psychologist.”

Dr. Llewellyn didn’t seem to care. “Well, you’re Coach Browne’s I.C.E. There’s been an—hey, Coach, where do you think you’re going?”

His voice faded as background noise drowned him out. Raised voices, beeps, and a snarled “*Fuck off*,” came over the line.

“I’m what?” asked Kip. He peered under the bed. There, a pencil; a dusty pencil, but it would do. “I’m his who?” He stretched for the pencil, rolling it with the tips of his fingers until he could grab it. “And can you spell your name for me?”

“His I.C.E. ‘In Case of Emergency’. And it’s L-L-E-W-E-L-L-Y-N.”

“Thanks,” Kip said. He scribbled the doctor’s name on the back of the card. Whoa, that was a lot of Ls and Es. “Wait, he put *me* down? You’re kidding. That’s kind of funny, because—”

“Trust me, there’s nothing funny about this,” the doctor said, and then he bit off a curse himself at another upsurge in background noise.

“Hello?” Kip said. “Dr. Llewellyn?” But the line went dead. Shit.

Kip poked the SEND button to redial the number Greg had called from, tapping the pencil on the bed as the phone rang again and again, but nobody picked up. He jumped out

of bed and tugged on jeans and a T-shirt, stubbing his toe on the end of the futon as he poked around underneath it for his flip-flops. He tried the call again from the bathroom while he peed and quickly brushed his teeth, but still no one answered.

He went out to the living room and picked up his backpack from the floor by the couch, pawing through it for his car keys. When he realized his hands were shaking, he stopped, took a breath, and then blew it out, pushing down the panic. Greg had called himself, so he couldn't be in too bad a shape, right? They wouldn't let a head injury make his own call. He patted his back pocket to make sure he'd picked up his wallet and headed out.

As soon as he got the car backed out of its narrow space outside the apartment house, Kip tried the number again. Finally, a woman's harried voice answered.

"Hello?"

If anything, the background noise had increased. Kip raised his voice and said, "Hi. Can I talk to Dr. Llewellyn?"

"He's busy right now," she said. "You'll have to call back."

"Wait," Kip said. "This is Kip Rigsbee. I was just talking to him. Can you please tell Coach Browne that I'm on my way?"

"I can try," she said doubtfully.

"Please," Kip urged her. "It's important."

"I'll try," she repeated.

It looked like that was as good an answer as he was going to get. He thanked her and ended the call. He coaxed

his old Honda to go a little faster along the dogwood-lined streets and mulled over the mystery: why would Greg call him instead of one of his buddies on the coaching staff?

He downshifted as he turned a corner and sped past the stadium, its long rows of seats empty in the morning air. He'd run bleachers with the players his first week and puked right along with them when Coach Turner finally blew the whistle. The players appreciated the gesture; the assistant coaches seemed to think he'd been sucking up. They'd pretty much circled their wagons with him standing on the outside, setting the tone for the rest of the season. Greg, the defensive coordinator, usually walked a fine line between the two; he didn't dismiss Kip's approaches out of hand. He listened and *then* dismissed them. But he must have had some reason why he'd picked Kip as his... what had the doc called it? Right, his I.C.E.

It could be an explanation as simple as being his closest neighbor, but Kip hadn't given up entirely on the idea that maybe it really was a booty call cleverly disguised as a plea for help.

"TOUCH me with that thing and you'll pull back a stump," Greg warned as another hand with a hypodermic in it approached him.

The voice attached to the hand said, "Sir, if you'll just let me—"

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, his voice ringing in his throbbing head.

He had staked out high ground on the exam table, and he had no intention of relinquishing it. He lifted his bad leg up on the table with him; leaving it dangling had been excruciating. He could see both flanks, and his rear was covered. There were worse places to wait out a siege.

The walls felt like they were closing in on him, even though there weren't any walls, just curtains that opened and closed according to some complex formula he was too tired to figure out. Every time he opened his eyes, more people had crowded into the partitioned space where they'd put him.

When he first arrived, they'd taken him down a hall with yellow walls, wheeling him along a bright green stripe on the floor, like one of those maps on the History Channel where they traced the route an army had taken. They'd gotten him from the chair up onto a bench and taken what seemed like a million X-rays, and then they'd shoveled him off to this little hellhole with its floating walls and multiplying needles.

A hand with a pair of scissors in it appeared. Greg growled deep in his throat.

"I need to cut your pants for the cast," someone said.

Yeah, they said that now, but Greg didn't trust them for a minute. He didn't intend to let anyone anywhere near him with anything sharp. Christ, he hated hospitals. Hated doctors, nurses, and if that big dude in the corner didn't stop glaring at him, honestly, he couldn't be held responsible for his actions. They all looked at him like he was some kind of freak, like they thought he might go postal on them. He couldn't tell the doctors from the nurses; the ER staff all looked alike in their green uniforms. What did they call

those? Shrubs? No, that didn't sound right. Scrubs, that was it. He couldn't tell by looking who would be content to talk to him and who would want to poke him with something. Consequently, every time anyone got close enough to touch him, he flinched.

"What the hell is taking Rigsbee so long?" he asked the scissors.

"He's coming," the scissors told him. "He called to say he's on his way."

The relief that flooded through Greg left him dizzy. That pissed him off too.

He had never had any trouble separating his personal life from his life on the field; he'd been downright ruthless about it until Rigsbee showed up. Okay, it was true, Rigsbee had a great ass and hot, dark eyes that seemed to say one thing while his mouth went a mile a minute about something else, but that stuff should have been offset by his incessant patter and wacko ideas. The *involuntary* aspect of the attraction irritated Greg as much as anything: he didn't *want* to want Kip Rigsbee. He didn't need the aggravation.

But even if he didn't eat up Rigsbee's namby-pamby positive-thinking crapola with a spoon like Coach Turner did, he couldn't deny that the guy always seemed to know the right thing to say. Much as it chapped his hide to admit it, right now Greg needed him. *That*. Needed that about him.

Greg's eyelids felt incredibly heavy, but he struggled to keep them open. Who knew what they might shoot him up with when he wasn't looking? But God, he was tired. Maybe he'd just rest his eyes for a minute.

"Coach Browne," he heard a voice say. It sounded young

and male, but it wasn't the right voice, so Greg ignored it. He'd know Rigsbee when he got there. He'd certainly heard his voice enough to recognize it; all the guy did was talk. Yak, yak, yak, blah blah blah. You couldn't shut him up for love or money. He talked to the players, the coaches, the fans, the field crew, and if he wasn't talking to someone in person, he had a cell phone attached to his ear.

He had answered when Greg called, though. He'd actually picked up the phone. It was barely light out on the first day of spring break, but he'd picked up the damn phone.

"Coach." The voice had a pissy edge to it now. Somebody didn't like being ignored.

"What."

"While we're waiting for the X-rays, I've got some forms for you to sign."

Greg opened one eye, the one that didn't hurt. One of the men was looming over him. When did he lay down? Had he slept? Jesus, things were spiraling out of control.

"I don't have a pen."

The doctor or nurse or whatever he was showed him some teeth. Was that was supposed to be a smile? "We can get you a pen, Coach. Sign the forms, and then we'll get to work on a cast for your ankle."

"I want a lawyer," Greg said. Wait, that wasn't what he'd meant to say. Criminals said that, people who'd been arrested and jailed, even if they said they were innocent. He'd meant to say he wanted *Rigsbee*, but that wasn't right, either; he couldn't want Rigsbee, damn it. Hadn't he just

decided that?

Ruthless. Be fucking ruthless. “Get out of my face and take your goddamn forms with you.”

“There’s no need—”

“I’m not signing the goddamn forms!”

The guy backed down, and Greg closed his eyes again. He could hear them talking about him; he wasn’t *deaf*. There was some discussion of sedating him, but nobody volunteered to be the one to try to give it to him. Maybe they were finally catching on; they could lead the horse to water, but they couldn’t give him tranquilizers.

Rigsbee would be there soon. He’d make them see reason.

A shift in the air raised every hair on his body. He jackknifed up, and the pain that arced up his leg made him see stars. He blinked them away in time to see another goddamn hypodermic hovering just inside his field of vision.

“Don’t you fucking people listen?” he roared.

“OH SHIT.”

Kip skidded into the lot outside the emergency entrance to South Guilford Hospital and slammed on the brakes at the sight of Greg’s Sebring convertible leaning drunkenly against a concrete parking barrier, listing to one side with its front fender plowed in.

That wasn’t good. Understatement: that really, *really* wasn’t good. Greg loved that car; he hand-washed it in the

driveway outside their apartment house, rubbing it down until the paint shone and the chrome gleamed. His enjoyment seemed vaguely sexual, though that might just have been Kip's projection. The man had good hands; leave it at that.

Kip pulled carefully into a parking space and then jogged into the hospital.

No need to stop at the desk; he could hear Greg bellowing all the way down the hall. As someone who spent most of his waking hours around a football team, Kip thought he'd heard it all, but Greg's language could have stripped paint. Then he rounded the corner and saw just how bad things were: Greg sat on an exam table with both arms straight out, keeping the staff at arm's length. He looked like a cornered animal. Holy crap. If three RNs, a couple of MDs, and a lab tech the size of a linebacker couldn't handle Greg, how in the hell was Kip supposed to?

"Oh, thank Christ," Greg said when he caught sight of Kip. "Get me out of here, Rigsbee."

Kip stepped into the curtained area and made his way cautiously closer, wincing when he saw Greg's left leg. Greg wasn't going anywhere until that leg got tended to, that much was clear. Besides the leg, the left side of Greg's face was darkening into one big bruise. He looked like somebody had hit him with a baseball bat. The side of his face that wasn't turning nine shades of purple looked chalky gray.

"Rough start to the day, huh, Coach?" Kip touched one of Greg's arms, gently nudging it down.

Greg blinked rapidly and lowered his arms. "Yeah."

From what Kip could glean from the cacophony of voices

babbling at him, they'd tried to numb Greg's leg to put a cast on it, and he'd lost it in a big old way, railing about how pain medication went against his religion or his Boy Scout code or who the hell even knew what. He wouldn't take it. Period. He kept saying so, even now, with blasphemous clarity.

The scene gave Kip a massive Suds-n-Duds flashback, but Truck had been drunker than a skunk; Greg looked furious and, though Kip would never tell him this, petrified. Still, he figured the same principles applied. He put one hand on Greg's shoulder and then cased the room for the person in charge. "Dr. Llewellyn?"

A young man with no-rim glasses separated himself from the crowd and came over. Under Kip's hand, Greg's shoulder muscles tightened into rock. Kip squeezed once, then took his hand away, and moved in front of Greg, drawing the doctor's attention with him.

"Hi. Kip Rigsbee," he said, injecting as much calm as he could into his voice. He put out his hand, and when the doctor shook it, the tension level in the room dropped from Code Red to Code Orange.

"We need to put a cast on that ankle, and there are certain protocols to be followed—"

"No, I get that," Kip said, nodding. Greg stirred behind him, but Kip kept his focus on the doctor. "I'll help however I can."

"I don't want—" Greg hissed at his back, but Kip cut him off with a slicing motion of his hand.

"I got it," he said, looking at Greg over his shoulder. Damn, the guy looked a mile of bad road. "I hear you. Settle down, okay? You're scaring people."

Greg subsided, muttering under his breath, so Kip turned his attention back to the doctor.

“Maybe if you break it down for him, tell him what steps you’re taking, it’ll be easier,” Kip said. “Use small words.”

He heard Greg suck in an outraged breath.

“And you,” Kip said, moving so Greg could see the doctor, “pay attention.”

Greg looked up at him, misery written clear on his face.

Kip leaned in and said quietly into his ear, “Whatever you’re worried about... don’t. I’m not going to let them fuck you over.” He set his back to one of the curtains, watching as the staff got down to business. Greg still looked like a thundercloud, but he let them do their job. Half an hour later, Greg had traded one leg of his sweatpants for a drying plaster cast.

The final kink in the works turned out to be a handful of prescriptions that the doctor tried to press on Greg. When that didn’t get him anywhere, he motioned for Kip to join them.

The doctor said, “It’s in his best interest to—”

“Oh, like I haven’t heard that before,” Greg huffed under his breath. “Fucking jackals.”

Kip pivoted to face him. Greg met his gaze for a second and then dropped his eyes. “I don’t believe in that shit,” he said, his voice so low that Kip had to lean forward to hear him. “Never have. Trainers tried to pump me full of it when I played.”

Kip sighed. He’d seen it happen, too, from time to time, and had seen the injuries that could result.

“They’ll do anything to get a player on the field,” Greg said, pointing his finger accusingly.

Kip wondered if Greg might be hallucinating; it would explain a lot.

“You know nobody’s expecting you to play, right? You’re a coach now.”

Greg lifted his chin and stared at him, his blue eyes sharp in his bruised face. “What the hell is wrong with you? Of course I know I’m a coach. I’m not brain-damaged.”

“Okay, okay,” Kip said, putting both hands up. “Just checking.”

He glanced over at the doctor, then back at Greg. Maybe he could soothe the savage beast. “I think trainers forget sometimes that pain is a message the body’s supposed to listen to,” Kip said quietly.

Greg nodded.

“Which you did,” Kip pointed out. “You drove yourself to the ER so they could help you. They’re just trying to help. That’s all.”

“Don’t use that tone on me,” Greg said, moving the accusing finger in his direction. “It doesn’t work, and it’s really fucking annoying.”

So much for soothing. “Greg.”

“Forget it. I didn’t take that crap back then; I’m not taking it now.”

Fair enough. Kip turned back to the doctor. “You heard the man.”

The doctor had to push it one step further, spouting something about his responsibilities as a physician, but

Greg wouldn't even look at the forms, so Kip finally took them and tucked them in his pocket, a move that didn't earn him any points with Greg but pacified the doctor, so he called it a win.

By the time Greg signed the discharge papers, the put-upon staff had a wheelchair ready and waiting. While they moved him from the table to the chair, Dr. Llewellyn filled Kip in as if he were family; must be more of that I.C.E. privilege at work. Kip did his best to look I.C.E.-worthy while behind him Greg snapped at a nurse who jarred his leg.

"Use ice on his face. I know it looks bad, but it's mostly superficial," the doctor said. "I'm more concerned about the ankle. Keep him off that leg as much as possible until the cast dries."

"Okay," Kip said.

"No stairs. No weight on his leg for three days," the doctor continued. "We'll see about a walking cast then."

"Anything else?" Kip asked. "How about some valium for the driver?"

The doctor gave him a wry smile and shook his head. "Good luck, Coach."

"I'm not a—" but he'd already moved on.

Greg bitched the whole way out in the wheelchair, cursed Kip's name as he wedged himself in the passenger side of Kip's Civic, and then snapped in increasing decibels the whole way back to the house. It didn't seem to dawn on him until Kip pulled in the handicapped space out front that things weren't going to go his way.

"Okay, out you go," Kip said, wedging his shoulder

under Greg's arm as he heaved himself out of the car. Greg probably had three or four inches on him; the difference in height made it easy for Kip to shove his shoulder in Greg's armpit and serve as a living crutch. They hobbled through the front door, but Greg stopped when Kip started to steer him toward his downstairs apartment instead of toward the staircase.

"No. No way," Greg said, putting his foot down. Just the one, mind you, but still surprisingly solid; Kip couldn't budge him. "Just get me some crutches from Sports Med. I'll be fine."

"No stairs," Kip reminded him.

"Fuck that."

Kip sighed. "It's only for three days. I think you can take it."

Greg resisted Kip's tug on his arm, his mouth set in a thin line of pain and discontent. "I'll scoot up the steps on my butt."

"Uh huh. Okay, go ahead," Kip said. "I'll bring you a bowl you can piss in."

Greg looked at him in disbelief, and Kip shrugged. "You heard the doc. Stay off the leg until the cast dries."

Red color crept up from Greg's neck into his face, blotting out the grayish tone. An improvement of sorts, if you discounted the bloody murder coming out his eyes.

"I'm just following orders," Kip said. "Suck it up, Coach."

Greg stared at him for a minute and then clenched his jaw tight enough that Kip could see the muscles bunch in his cheek.

“Fine,” Greg said shortly, turning toward Kip’s door.

Kip made sure Greg had his balance set before he unlocked the door and pushed it open. “*Mi casa es su casa.*”

Greg frowned at him but hopped forward just the same.

Kip stepped in behind Greg and closed the door. The apartment floor plan probably looked familiar; Greg had given him his landlord’s number when Kip was looking to get out of the student slums after finishing his doctorate. Kip ended up directly under Greg. The Freudian implications of that were about as subtle as a brick to the face.

“I, uh, wasn’t expecting company,” he said.

Greg glowered at him, then at the room. “I can tell.”

Seeing the place through Greg’s eyes didn’t improve it any: a living room with a slip-covered couch and boxy TV, books stacked in precarious towers, laundry everywhere, his unmade futon visible through the bedroom doorway. He’d gotten permission to paint the walls, so he’d picked a nice rich maroon and gold, good Minnesota colors, but he hadn’t had time to do much more than that. Greg seemed like the kind of guy who’d have matching furniture grouped around a fifty-two-inch plasma, and his plants were probably green instead of brown. Kip wouldn’t know, since he’d never been invited upstairs.

Not that he was bitter or anything.

“I’m still getting settled,” he said, hearing a touch of defensiveness in his voice.

Greg harrumphed.

“Look, I owe you, big time. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be at that Roach Motel over by student housing,” Kip said,

“but if you think I’m spending the next three days running windsprints up those stairs or doing bedpan duty, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Nuh uh. No way, no how. He’d carry Greg to the john if need be. That was a pretty funny picture, Kip bent over, carrying King Greg to the throne. He was still enjoying it when Greg glared at him. He bit his lip, trying to quash an entirely inappropriate grin at the scowl on Greg’s face.

Okay, okay, got it. No smiling for the duration. Geez.

FUCK.

If Kip didn’t wipe that not-quite-smile off his face, Greg might have to smack him upside the head with his drying cast. Kip looked like he was trying really hard not to laugh. Yeah, the whole thing was fucking hilarious. A real side-splitter.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The apartment smelled a little like a locker room, like sweat and deodorant and testosterone. It smelled familiar. It smelled.... Greg rubbed his nose. Stop. Just... stop. No need to go there. Rigsbee had made himself perfectly clear; he was returning a favor, that was all, and that was fine by Greg. It made everything simpler.

“Uh, Greg?”

What now? Kip was pointing toward the kitchen. No, toward his room. Oh, that was just great, the perfect capper to the perfect day. Sure, fine, whatever, put him in Kip’s bedroom with its piles of laundry and books and God knew

what else in the corners. Maybe he'd catch a virulent staph infection and die. At least then he wouldn't have to face Coach Turner or the team or, oh God, the other coaches, ever again.

Or himself in the mirror, for that matter.

"Here," Kip said, shoveling clothes onto the floor until a chair revealed itself just inside the door to his room. "Have a seat. I'll, um, I'll clear a path."

When Greg looked at him, he had this bland, innocent, completely un-Kip-like look on his face. If Greg tried hard enough, he could probably blame this whole thing on Kip. It wouldn't kill Kip to get up early, like Greg did, and do a little training. He wasn't scrawny or anything, but a few times around the circuit wouldn't hurt him. Too bad he seemed content to shrink heads instead of build muscle. If he'd been pumping iron instead of sleeping away his vacation, then Greg wouldn't have had to drive himself to the hospital and... oh dear Lord. He sank into the chair, flinching as the change in position sent a shockwave down his leg.

"The Sebring?" Greg asked, his stomach churning as Kip's bland face blanked into panic momentarily before he got it under control.

"It doesn't look good," he said with all the appropriate gravity.

It was just a car; Greg knew that. But he liked the color, and it had leather seats and a sweet, low center of gravity that even made slow feel fast.

Fuck.

What a day.

What a God-awful day.

“I’ll have to get it towed somewhere,” he said. “It can’t stay in the hospital lot.”

“Do you have AAA?” Kip asked. When Greg nodded, he said, “I’ll take care of it. But I think it can wait. Let me get some ice for your face.”

Kip went out into the living area and a minute or so later, Greg heard ice rattle. Then Kip was back, handing over a dishtowel wrapped around a plastic bag filled with ice. “I can get a pack from Sports Med later, but this should work for now,” he said.

Greg thanked him with a lift of his chin. The ice felt fantastic on his sore cheek and jaw.

Kip slipped past him into the bedroom, and as Greg watched, he yanked the sheets off the low futon. Okay, he got credit for that, anyway. If Greg had to live in Kip’s crate of a room, at least he’d have clean sheets.

The cast felt like it weighed a hundred pounds and the entire left side of his face was one big throb. He could tell by how careful Kip was being around him that he wasn’t a pretty sight. That’s right, Rigsbee, you just keep your distance.

“So... you want to tell me what happened?” Kip asked as he remade the bed. He probably thought he was going for casual, but Greg knew better.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kip looked up, catching Greg’s eye as he put a fresh case on a pillow. Plain white, surprisingly bland compared to the mustard and ketchup walls. Not really what Greg would

have pictured. Not that he'd been picturing what Kip slept on, or in, or with.

"Come on, Coach. Tell me. Think of it as practice. You know people are going to ask."

Fuck. He was right about that.

"I slipped in the shower." There. Short, to the point. Covered all the bases.

Kip glanced up. "Where? Upstairs? I didn't hear anything."

Greg shifted in his seat. "At the field house."

Kip froze for a second and then kept smoothing down the covers. No bed had ever been so lavishly tended to, but Greg knew it was designed to keep him talking. See? He'd learned something: keep a player occupied, and he talks more. Greg hadn't tested the theory himself, and he didn't appreciate it being tested on *him*, but at least he recognized the play in motion.

"What? What were you—"

"I slipped on the soap, all right?" Greg snapped. "I slipped on the goddamn soap, my leg went out from under me, and I tried to break the fall with my face. And then I wrecked my car getting to the hospital. Happy now? Want to run off and tell all your buddies on the team?"

"What buddies?" Kip asked, his voice a little hollow, then he straightened and faced Greg. "Wait a second. You drove yourself to the hospital with a busted ankle?"

Greg looked down; he'd clenched his hands into fists without realizing it. "I didn't know it was broken at the time."

"Still. I don't get it." Kip stepped closer, so Greg leaned

back. “It’s spring break. Why the secrecy? Were you there with Coach Turner’s wife or something?”

One thing Greg respected about Kip was that he never backed down from a challenge. He’d watched an offensive lineman get right up in Kip’s face once, towering over him, a guy who made opposing teams quake in their cleats, but Kip had stood his ground, continued with his unending stream of psychobabble, and eventually the guy backed down. Either that or Kip had hypnotized him; Greg wouldn’t have put it past him. In general, Greg admired Kip’s dogged tenacity. He just hadn’t expected to have it turned on *him*. It made him cranky. Crankier.

“I turned the big four-oh a couple of weeks ago,” Greg growled.

“Happy birthday,” Kip said, turning away when Greg expected him to do that laser focus thing he’d seen Kip do with the kids sometimes when he really wanted something out of them. Instead, he started clearing the floor, shoving books into taller piles, tossing clothes on the floor of his closet, creating an unimpeded trail from the door to the bed.

“I’m getting old,” Greg said. After a minute, he admitted, “Out of shape.”

Fuck, it hurt hearing that out loud. The other coaches had taken him out, made all the stupid jokes stupid men make on stupid occasions. They’d given him Depends and a cane and some reading glasses, and he’d laughed at it all, like he was supposed to. Then he’d come home, set his alarm for four-thirty a.m. and had been at the weight room by five every morning since.

Kip hesitated and then went back to stacking books. He

made some sort of non-committal, encouraging sound. The Psych Department probably taught a class in that.

“The players hog the weight room all the time, so I’ve been getting up early and going in.”

“When you can be alone,” Kip said, studiously avoiding Greg’s eyes.

Yeah. Greg knew he couldn’t compete with a bunch of eighteen to twenty-two year olds. It wasn’t that, exactly. But struggling to press one-eighty when the young bucks around him were tossing up two-fifty without breaking a sweat wasn’t exactly something he wanted to advertise. He could get medicine to grow hair or get a hard-on, but nobody had come up with a formula yet to heal damaged male pride.

Kip finally stopped cleaning, stood, and looked at Greg, sliding his hands in his front pockets. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet and deliberately looked Greg over from head to toe.

Holy *shit*. Greg could *feel* that look as it skimmed over his body. His face flushed under the ice bag, the bruise on his jaw throbbing in double-time, and his cock jerked, hardening abruptly.

“Well, you look good to me,” Kip said.

Before Greg could form any kind of coherent response, Kip brushed his hands together and said, “You hungry? Want some soup? I’ve definitely got tomato; I’m a little iffy about chicken noodle.”

Greg blinked. One minute, Kip had subjected him to the longest, dirtiest eyefuck in recent memory, and the next he was talking about soup.

Maybe he'd just imagined the look in some pain-addled fantasy.

"OR, I know, how about a grilled cheese sandwich?" Kip asked. "That's a perennial favorite, right? Guaranteed to cure whatever ails you."

Greg curled up his lip.

"Peanut butter?" The sneery lip dropped back into place, but the eyebrows scrunched. "Hummus on pita bread?" It wasn't nice to fuck with him, Kip knew that, but it seemed like reasonable payment for what was sure to be a pretty grim three days. Besides, odds were good that Kip could beat him in a footrace if it came down to it.

Better to focus on feeding Greg than on the ever-growing list of ways Kip wanted to show him that, forty or not, he still had it *all* going on. This definitely wasn't the time for *that*. It looked like coughing up that little hairball of personal info might have been more painful to Greg than breaking his ankle. At least the litany of abuse had slowed; that seemed like a good sign. Maybe if Kip could get him more comfortable, then he could cajole the guy into taking something that would knock him out for a few hours. Say, for example, a few shots of tequila.

"Grilled cheese," Greg finally mumbled.

"No problem. One grilled cheese, coming right up."

Kip went out to the kitchen and pulled a loaf of bread out the fridge, a leftover habit from his previous digs. He unwrapped three slices of American cheese, slathered the

bread from crust to crust with margarine, and then slapped the whole thing on the griddle that lived on his stovetop. He ignored the restless sounds coming from his bedroom and concentrated on achieving perfect browning.

When he brought Greg the sandwich, Greg traded the ice pack for it and ate every bite, even the crumbs off the plate, but shook his head when Kip offered to make another.

“Thanks,” Greg said, handing him back the plate. “That was good.”

There, the guy had manners after all. Good to know. It looked like he might be starting to droop; maybe they could leave Jose Cuervo in the cabinet.

“Come on. Let’s clean you up a little. You smell like a hospital,” Kip said.

“Let’s? As in we? I think I can handle this by myself,” Greg said, pushing up off the chair.

“Okay, whatever. You just yell if you need anything.”

Kip went to sit on the couch while Greg lumbered his way to the bathroom, leaning on pieces of furniture as he went.

One. Two. Three. Four.

“RIGSBEE!”

He made it a whole count longer than Kip thought he would.

Ordinarily, Kip might have enjoyed finding a mostly naked Greg Browne in his bathroom. He’d looked at Greg a lot, he couldn’t deny that. Greg had looked back, too; nothing would convince him otherwise. So far Kip had been smart enough not to fuck around with the status quo by,

you know, fucking around, and today really did not seem to be the day to head into *that* little melodrama, but he'd have to be neutered not to appreciate the view.

Poor Greg. He'd tangled himself up good. The shirt was gone, the pants were somewhere around his ankles, and he stood bent at the waist wrestling with his briefs, which had somehow gotten stuck on the cast.

"Would have been a good day for boxers, Coach," Kip said, leaning against the doorframe.

"When I get these off, I'm going to make you *eat* them," Greg snarled.

Kip grinned. "From here, it looks more like *if* you get them off."

"Just help me, all right?"

"Sure, Greg." That turned out to be easier said than done. Kip leaned over, reaching for the tighty-whitey tourniquet at the same time Greg straightened up, and then suddenly, *boom*, Greg's crotch was right there in his face. And he wasn't exactly down for the count, either. Helping a hurt guy in a cast get his underwear off shouldn't be arousing, should it? Should it? Because Kip had to admit he was getting a little warm.

Okay, okay, done. The shorts were off. The elastic would never be the same, but Kip couldn't bring himself to worry about that. He was a little worried about Greg, though; getting a hard-on while a colleague yanked off his underpants might have been the final straw in his sucky day. He looked straight over Kip's head, not making eye contact. Kip couldn't say he blamed him. The near-collision between Kip's mouth and Greg's dick had thrown Kip for a

loop too, and he had the advantage of still having clothes on. Greg was just out there waving in the breeze.

Yeah, that last bit of perceived humiliation might just have put him over the edge. Time to squash the libido and get the man scrubbed up, in some clean duds, and stretched out somewhere soft.

Kip could do that.

He could.

Really, he could. “Put that thing away,” Kip told him. “You could poke somebody’s eye out.”

Even *he* could hear that he was trying too hard. Greg looked at him like he’d grown another head and covered himself with his hand. Aw, shit. He hadn’t meant to make Greg even more self-conscious. He was supposed to laugh, even though it wasn’t really funny. No funnier than the three million don’t-drop-the-soap jokes Greg had to look forward to every time he stepped into the locker room from now until the end, amen.

“It’s all right, Greg,” Kip said, backing off a little, handing him a towel. “No biggie.”

That made Greg snort. “Speak for yourself,” he muttered, holding the towel around him with one hand and propping himself up on the wall with the other.

That was better. That was *much* better. If Kip could keep his hands to himself, and Greg could stop looking so damn good despite the bumps and bruises and perpetual scowl, maybe they’d make it through this. He’d go with that theory, at least until his jeans loosened up again.

GREG'S leg hurt. Whatever they'd shot him up with at the hospital had started to wear off. At least pain was familiar; when you played ball, something always hurt. But the cast was another story.

The thing itched like a son-of-a-bitch. Close, but not quite tough enough.

The thing itched like a motherfucker. That worked.

"Hey, Rigsbee?" he hollered out at Kip. He'd been banished to Kip's bin of a room while Kip got the whole couch to himself. *And* the TV. Kip had given Greg the latest copy of *Sports Illustrated* from the coffee table and showed him how to play *Grand Theft Auto* on his laptop, but then he'd left Greg there to amuse himself, and that gave Greg way too much time to think about that accidental almost-blowjob in the bathroom.

He didn't know what he had expected, but having Kip's face suddenly in his groin wasn't it. Locker rooms made nudity an everyday occurrence, nothing to get excited about, but once Kip was right there in the bathroom with him, Greg couldn't do anything about what had happened. Concentrating on the pain in his leg hadn't worked. Imagining the look on Coach Turner's face if he could have seen them hadn't worked. Nothing worked except Kip's breath on his dick, and that worked just fine. So there he was: leg throbbing, head throbbing... and dick throbbing. Perfect. Just perfect. And then, when he'd just about decided truly nothing could make the day worse, Kip had to go and make some smartass size joke.

What a jerk.

And then he acted like nothing happened. He washed Greg up like he was a puppy Kip found at the SPCA, ran upstairs and got clean clothes for him, and then herded Greg back into his claustrophobic room, where Greg had been ever since, bored out of his fucking mind, thinking about Kip's mouth and listening to the cast dry.

Kip wasn't answering him. Maybe because Greg had been making him do things for him every ten minutes or so. "Kip!"

"What?!" he yelled back.

"This thing itches like a motherfucker."

"Yeah, the doctor said it would probably itch," Kip called back, totally unconcerned. "Try ignoring it."

Thanks for the tip, dipshit. Come on in; Greg had an itch he could scratch. Maybe the pain was making him loopy, but he was having a hard time remembering why he'd ever thought keeping Kip at a distance was a good idea. Maybe it was attraction, maybe just distraction, but whatever it was, Greg felt better when Kip was there.

"I tried that already," Greg yelled through the door.

Greg heard Kip sigh. The day had probably been almost as much of a trial for him as it had for Greg. But he didn't have three shades of purple on his jaw line, and he wouldn't have to lug around a cast for six weeks. Three days like this, then they'd put him in a walking cast. They'd promised. Three days of massive boredom and torturing himself with the smell of Kip Rigsbee's sheets. Piece of cake.

Kip appeared in the doorway, patient and impatient, both at once. "It's not too late for me to get one of those

prescriptions filled.”

“*No.*”

Kip leaned on the doorway and looked at him, focusing on him like Greg was one of the kids and he just needed to find which lever to pull to get Greg to do what he wanted.

“How about some Aleve?”

Greg shook his head.

Kip sighed. “All it would do is reduce some of the swelling. It might make your face feel better too.”

Greg shrugged. He’d rather ride it out, like he had back in the day. Of course, he hadn’t made the final cut for the Panthers, either. He couldn’t say for sure whether his disdain for cortisone had anything to do with that, but it probably hadn’t helped.

After a minute, Kip stepped over and sat on the side of the bed, close enough that Greg could feel how warm he was. It made Greg wish he’d settled down long enough to get more than a pair of boxer shorts on. At the time, getting away from Kip’s helping hands had seemed more important. Now he wouldn’t mind a little more camouflage. Maybe they had been better off when Kip was on the couch, way out in the other room. Greg was *this* close to asking him to scratch that itch, and it had nothing to do with the cast.

KIP had thought if he could get Greg over the grumps and into self-pity, he’d be more docile. Yeah, well, *no*. Scratch that. Sorry-For-Himself Greg wasn’t any easier to deal with than Bite-Your-Head-Off Greg, and it wasn’t as easy to be

firm with him. Angry Greg could be pushed around, shouted at; Kip could give as good as he got. Pitiful Greg was just sort of... pitiful.

And sexy.

Really, really sexy lying there in the light of Kip's laptop and the forty-watt on the end table, in a pair of boxer shorts and a bright white cast. He barely fit on Kip's futon. He'd put the leg with the cast up on a pillow, with a towel under it to keep the pillow from getting cast dust and damp on it. Kip never would have thought to do that.

Kip took a deep breath. It wasn't Greg's fault he was irresistible like that. He was sure Greg wasn't lying that way on purpose, with his legs spread and one hand above his head, propped against the pillows. He looked like he was ready for someone to feed him a grape. He couldn't be doing it on purpose, could he? Kip got less sure when Greg arched his back.

"Come on, Greg, it'll be better tomorrow," Kip told him. "Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Can't," he said. "It itches."

Man. Mules had nothing on him when it came to stubborn.

"Okay, okay, chill," Kip said, putting his hand up, but catching it before it made contact with Greg's bare skin. That, he didn't need. "Let me think."

Greg scoffed under his breath and wriggled on the bed, setting off a chain reaction of muscular ripples that made it really hard for Kip to concentrate. "I'm not in the mood for any of your motivational bullshit, Riggsbee."

Kip shrugged. “Do you want to feel better or not?”

Greg grumbled under his breath but finally muttered, “Yeah.”

“Okay, then. Let’s try some breathing exercises.”

“Can we braid each other’s hair too?”

“Stop being a dick and pay attention,” Kip said, testing his coaching voice. He didn’t use it much, but sometimes nothing else penetrated thick skulls.

Greg squirmed again on the bed, trying to get comfortable. Kip could see the muscles in his stomach pull when he slid down farther in the bed. The leg without the cast on it just happened to fall against Kip’s hip when he moved. Then Greg’s arm came down, and he just happened to end up with his fingertips riding against Kip’s knee. If he wasn’t doing it on purpose, Kip was going to look really stupid.

If he *was* doing it on purpose, Kip was going to take some lessons from a master. “Close your eyes.”

Greg looked at him hard for a minute and then obeyed. Without his eyes to pull focus, Kip could see the skin around his mouth was tight, his jaw clenched. He wondered if “itch” was Greg’s word for “hurts like a mofo.” A broken ankle was no picnic. With his eyes closed and his mouth shut, Greg didn’t seem so fierce. He looked beat-up and worn out. Kip decided to ignore the pup-tent under construction in Greg’s boxers for the time being. If Greg could pretend it wasn’t there, so could Kip.

“Take a deep breath,” Kip said, and wonder of wonders, Greg did it without fussing about it. Lots of lung capacity in

a chest that size. “Now let it out, slowly.”

Damn, he looked good. The bruises were on the other side of his face, so there was just that clean profile to look at, which Kip felt utterly free to indulge in since Greg’s eyes were closed. “Again.”

Kip watched Greg follow his directions and breathed right along with him. “Deep breath in, now let it out,” Kip said, dropping his voice to a murmur. “Deep breath in, now let it out.” Greg started to relax in minute increments. First his shoulders dropped a little. Then the fingertips at his knee twitched and opened. The pup-tent was almost fully erect, and the lines around his mouth were gone. Part of Kip hoped Greg was falling asleep. Part of him didn’t.

Three guesses for which part, and the first two don’t count.

“Greg?” he whispered.

“HMMMM?” was all he got.

Kip started to move, but Greg’s hand clamped down on his thigh before he even got his balance shifted.

“Don’t,” Greg mumbled. He tightened his hand, holding Kip to the bed. “More.”

More.

“More breathing?” Kip said.

Greg made a low sound in his throat.

Kip waited for a minute, his heart thumping in his chest. “Breathe, Greg, come on, nice and deep.” Greg breathed just like Kip told him to, but he was getting restless. His hips had started to move, and he was breathing faster, deeper, without any coaching.

Kip stared down at him for a minute, and then he did it: he reached out.

“Or more of this?”

And Kip put his hand on the center of Greg’s boxer shorts, straight through the placket, right over the heat at the heart of him. Greg flattened himself down on the bed with a groan, his hand flexing hard on Kip’s leg, his hips lifting into Kip’s palm.

“That. More of that,” he bit out.

Under Kip’s hand, Greg felt hot and so alive it was a wonder he didn’t set off sparks. Kip maneuvered himself on the bed to a more comfortable position. Greg flexed his hand on Kip’s thigh but didn’t stop him. The shift in position gave Kip the added benefit of a little bit more room for his own dick to breathe. Not enough, but better than before. If he’d been doing this for himself, he’d have used his left hand, but right-handed was the option open and so that was the one he took; never let it be said he couldn’t go with the flow. Greg’s free hand twisted in the sheet. Kip no longer had to encourage him to breathe; he was breathing just fine—hard and fast—in time to his hips, which were doing all the work, pushing his dick up into Kip’s hand.

Oh, man, was that good. Good for Kip, and, if those noises were anything to go by, damn good for Greg.

The endorphin rush: Nature’s painkiller. Hey, it was as good an excuse as any, if an excuse turned out to be needed. Kip always tried to keep an extra in his back pocket, just in case.

He let his other hand slide down the front of his jeans and rubbed a little, just to take the edge off. Greg’s eyes

opened and zeroed in on Kip's hand on his zipper. He darted his eyes up—huge pupils, half-wild—then back down to where Kip's hand was still stroking.

"Take them off," Greg said, his voice husky. Oh shit, how sexy was that?

Kip could totally do that. Greg let go of his leg long enough for Kip to stand up and slide out of his jeans. He flipped off his T-shirt, and there they were, just Greg and him, in matching tented boxers.

GREG wanted Kip's hand back on him. Now.

Kip hadn't argued or stalled. Smart Kip. Greg was in no shape to talk about this. This or anything else. Screw talking, start doing. Embarrassment lost out completely to arousal. Hell, they were breathing like one person sharing a set of lungs. Greg felt almost selfish enough, and almost gone enough, to grab Kip before he got his clothes off and tell him to just get on with it, and he'd make it up to him later. But he managed to restrain himself, and fortunately Kip was quick, stripping like a kid at camp, no finesse, just the essentials, and then Greg could see skin.

No matter the weather, Kip always wore long pants and a team jacket. Maybe he was cold-blooded by nature, or maybe he thought the more formal dress gave him an authority his face couldn't provide—he looked younger than half the team. Most of the players and no small percentage of the coaching staff had ink somewhere: biceps, usually; shoulders, sometimes, chest, back, neck. But not Kip. Once Kip got his clothes off, his arms, shoulders, and chest

stretched pale and smooth, unmarked by anything more than an arrow of silky dark hair and surprisingly prominent musculature in his torso. The guy was packing; who knew?

Then Kip tossed his boxers. Greg guessed it would be polite to look at his face, but he couldn't seem to focus on anything except Kip's dick. It was at least as big as Greg's, maybe bigger. He'd decide later if that bugged him. That dick made him drool. *Damn*. Hard, naked Kip was something to see.

"Get over here," Greg said.

Kip gave him what he needed. He nudged Greg's legs apart, and Greg opened wide to let him in. Kip knelt in the space Greg had made, looked down at him, and grinned, his dark eyes hot. He didn't bother to take off Greg's boxers, thank God—Greg well remembered the hassle of getting them on—he just reached in the flap and took him out. Greg looked down at that for a minute, but it made his balls curl up and his dick twitch in Kip's hand, and he didn't want this to be over quite that fast, so he dropped his head back onto the pillow, unclenched his jaw, breathed deep a couple of times and did his damndest not to come. It wasn't easy. He could hear little whimpers coming from his throat. Then Kip leaned closer and whispered, "Easy, Greg, easy. Let me do the work."

Oh *God*.

Greg put both arms over his head, opened himself up as wide as he could, and Kip rewarded him with a strong, sure grip on him. Kip took it slow, his hand a tight, hot tunnel for Greg to thrust into. His hand felt... Greg couldn't even describe it. Right. It felt *right*, like it belonged there.

He pushed up into Kip's hand over and over until there was no pain in this world. None at all. The only thing Greg felt was good. The futon creaked beneath him, and when Greg looked down, he could see Kip jerking himself off with his other hand in the same rhythm. Bring him up two feet, and he could slide right inside Greg, fuck him instead of his own fist. The thought made Greg groan, a sound Kip echoed, sounding like he might be the one in pain, but Greg knew better.

"Greg, I'm...."

Kip didn't finish his sentence, but Greg knew. He knew. Kip started moving faster, the bed shaking, his hand trembling, and Greg knew he'd done it, he'd made it, he could let go now because he'd held out longer than Kip had. He held out long enough to hear what Kip sounded like, looked like when he came. Kip's eyes slid shut and his mouth opened up on a breath, and Jesus, Greg could smell him now.

That did him in. Not just the tight grip of Kip's hand, not just the look on his face. It was the smell of Kip's skin, and his come, and his sweat. It was opening his eyes wide and looking down at his dick in Kip's hand—in his *hand*.

That was what did it. Greg tried not to bonk Kip with the cast; he couldn't stop thrashing around. Now he could pick up his own scent mixed in with Kip's, hear Kip panting softly in time with him. The whole thing made his head swim.

At least he didn't hurt anymore; Kip had jerked the pain right out of him.

CHALK one up for motivational bullshit.

Think about it. Pre-handjob? Itchy and cranky. Post-handjob? Feeling no pain. In fact, Greg looked pretty darn happy.

He wasn't the only one. Kip raised his head and stretched, feeling tendons pop in his neck and shoulder as he braced himself on one palm and looked Greg over. They'd wrecked the bed, but he sure as hell didn't care, and judging by the little smile on Greg's face, he didn't give a shit, either. If only there were a way to bottle up the intimate satisfaction that came from making someone else feel good. It'd be a great way to end wars and slash the divorce rate, but then nobody would ever want to leave the bedroom, and that couldn't be good for the global GNP, or dogs waiting to be walked, or universities, which would have to close their doors and put up a sign that read, *"Too fucked out to teach. Come back tomorrow."*

Kip got off the bed and rummaged around on the floor for a T-shirt he could use to wipe up the mess.

"They make these great things now called Kleenex," he heard Greg say. "They come in a handy box and everything." He looked over his shoulder. Greg had pushed himself up on one elbow, looking at him over the side of the bed.

"This is more ecologically friendly," Kip said, demonstrating as he mopped up his stomach. Greg grumbled a little when Kip started cleaning him up and took the shirt from Kip's hands, swiping it over his torso. Kip took it back and started wiping the sheets, but it was a lost cause.

“Um, that’s my last set of clean sheets,” Kip said.

“Why does that not surprise me?”

Kip flipped him off. “I do laundry.”

Greg looked around skeptically.

“When necessary,” Kip said.

Greg reclined back. He didn’t seem inclined to argue the point. Still feeling good; Kip could tell by the way he relaxed on the spunked-up sheets.

Kip pulled on his discarded jeans and made another trip upstairs. On his first trip, he’d been too rattled to notice much, but surprise, surprise, this time he was much more relaxed, and he took a minute to poke around. The plasma screen he’d pictured was all that and then some, but instead of matching furniture, Greg had two huge leather chairs and a couch that filled one entire wall—big, practically decadent furniture. The rest of the place looked a little sterile, but slap some paint on the walls and throw in a few potted plants, and it’d be almost homey.

He found the linen closet by process of elimination and pulled a set of sheets from the shelf, an act that felt as intimate in its own way as wrapping his fist around Greg’s dick.

By the time he got back downstairs, Greg had managed to get back to the chair next to the bedroom door. He’d also stripped the bed and conjured a laundry basket from thin air.

“Where did you find that?” Kip asked. “I thought I lost it in the move.”

“It was in the closet,” Greg said. He refrained from

adding, “Duh,” but Kip could hear it just the same.

“Go on. Say it. I’m a slob.”

“You’re a slob. Did you find the sheets?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

“That’s because I’m *not* a slob.”

“No, just a little anal-retentive,” Kip said. “Seriously, you color code your linen closet.”

Greg looked offended. “I do not. I just put darks on one side and lights on the other.”

“That’s just *wrong*.”

Greg rolled his eyes.

“Here, make yourself useful,” Kip said, handing Greg two pillows and clean cases to put on them while he made the bed.

Of course, Greg’s bed was bigger than his, but Kip made it work, and once he got the futon made up, he couldn’t even tell the difference. He took a minute to appreciate the symbolism of that. He helped Greg into clean boxers and a fresh T-shirt, feeling virtuous about the way he didn’t let either hands or mouth stray in the process, and got him back into bed. He pulled the top sheet carefully over the cast and sat back down beside him.

After their little therapy session, Greg didn’t look anywhere near forty. Kip thought about bringing him a mirror and setting him straight on a few things but decided it could wait until morning. What grilled cheese and a sponge bath hadn’t accomplished, Kip’s little breathing exercise had; Greg’s lids were heavy, the long length of his body relaxed.

“You need anything?” Kip asked.

“Nope.” A corner of Greg’s mouth quirked up. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

Kip raised his eyebrows.

“Not *that*,” Greg said sleepily, his words almost slurred. “The other thing, the breathing. They teach you that in head-shrinking class?”

“I’m a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. I don’t shrink heads,” Kip said.

“You say potato, I say tomato.”

“That’s not how that goes.”

Greg shrugged. “So? I’m a coach, not an English teacher.”

Kip sighed. “My dad taught me. I had asthma when I was a kid, and I’d get attacks when I got too excited about something. Focusing on breathing helped.”

“Were you one of those kids with an inhaler in your pocket?”

“Yeah, I was,” Kip said. “Were you one of those kids who’d steal a kid’s inhaler and flush it down the toilet?”

Greg grimaced. “Lunchroom trash can, if I remember right.”

“Ah, the more *public* humiliation. Got it.”

All that earned him was a furrowed eyebrow, a step in the wrong direction. Kip shifted on the bed. He didn’t mind talking about his life; hey, for all he knew, this was Greg’s idea of cuddling.

“Water under the bridge,” he said, waving his hand. “I

was a peanut of a kid in a big family of football players. They stuck up for me a lot, but every once in a while I'd end up wheezing on the school nurse's floor."

"What happened, you grew out of it?"

Kip nodded. "The asthma went away when I hit puberty, and I grew almost a foot in high school. Compared to my cousins, six feet is nothing, and I never bulked up like they did, but at least I could stand up for myself."

Greg gave him a fleeting grin. "I've noticed that."

Oh really? How interesting.

"You said a family of football players," Greg said, yawning. "Was your father a coach?"

Kip could honestly say he'd never imagined sitting on a bed and dissecting his childhood with Coach Browne. One for the books, for sure. And he didn't mind the idea of sharing the Knudson-Rigsbee saga, but Greg looked like he'd finally hit a wall. "Look, it's a long story and it's been a long day. I'll give you the whole scoop tomorrow."

Greg nodded slowly, so slowly Kip wasn't even sure he'd been listening, and, as Kip watched, his eyes slipped closed and his breath evened out. Asleep. Well and truly asleep, without the assistance of any narcotic beyond a dose of serotonin administered via Kip's hand. Kip reached over to turn off the light and noticed the time on the clock: 6:12 p.m.

Okay, that was a really long twelve hours.

One day down; two to go.

He got up slowly so he wouldn't disturb Greg and went back out to the living room, mentally reviewing the contents

of his pantry to figure out what he could throw together for a late dinner. He usually cooked for one, but it looked like Greg had made his peace with staying there for the duration, and he'd probably wake up ravenous at midnight. Things were working out pretty well. No, scratch that. Things were working out *really* well. All he had to do was keep Greg in snacks and clean boxers; the rest would take care of itself.

Definitely something to be said for playing to his strengths. Kip could think of all kinds of good things to do with Greg while he was horizontal, and that didn't even include beating his ass at *Gauntlet*.

Ow.

Greg jerked awake, one arm falling heavily over the side of the bed and hitting the floor. What the...? Oh, *right*.

The locker room, the fall, the hospital, the claustrophobic bathroom.

The futon from Hell.

Kip.

Jesus.

Greg opened one eye and stared blearily at the clock on the nightstand beside him. Just after seven, it told him, and judging by the milky light coming in the blinds, that meant a.m., not p.m.. He'd managed to sleep through the whole night; a fact reinforced by his insistent bladder and growling stomach.

Time to take stock. The ankle wasn't as bad as

yesterday, though that might change the minute he tried to move it. He shelved that option and moved on. He had a crick in his neck from sleeping on his back, and his empty belly felt like it was trying to claw a hole through him, but otherwise? Honestly? He felt pretty good. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept twelve solid hours, and aside from the throbbing weight of the cast, his body sent him low, steady hums of approval. He should ask Rigsbee what he put in that grilled cheese.

Greg scrubbed his hands across his face and groaned. The grilled cheese hadn't put the smile all over his body and he knew it. Kip's hands on him had done that. Shit. Too bad he couldn't blame his utter lack of self-control on Vicodin. He'd caved in a weak moment; that's all there was to it. He'd dropped his guard and given in to the temptation he heard in Kip's voice. Too bad it was just one more thing he should probably shelve as over and done.

He'd always been careful. *Always*. Forget the small town; football culture didn't roll out the red carpet for queer players, and certainly not for queer coaches. He'd made his choice long ago and lived with it: he didn't fuck around on his home turf. Period. It hadn't been hard or heroic; he had outlets available when he needed them. Road trips. The off-season. His loyal right hand. He'd always considered himself pretty lucky; he had good friends, he had fuck partners, and he had football. But until now, until crazy Kip Rigsbee, the fireball *wunderkind* Coach Turner had shoved down their collective throats, there had never been any overlap.

He heard a soft knock, followed by the sight of Kip's dark head in the doorway.

“Hey,” Kip said.

Greg started to answer him but coughed instead, another consequence of sleeping on his back. He’d probably snored too.

Kip stepped into the room and moved behind him, then helped him sit up, and smacked his back lightly. Greg nodded his thanks once he finally stopped coughing.

“How’s the leg?” Kip asked.

“Sore,” Greg said. “I haven’t really tried moving it yet.”

Kip nodded and looked him over. “Your face looks better.”

“Better than what?”

“I’m not touching that,” Kip said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I bet you’re starving. Want some breakfast?”

Greg felt a swell of gratitude well up. “I’d eat this mattress if you put a little ketchup on it.”

That made Kip smile, which made Greg smile, which made him want to shoot himself in the head because it was so freaking *ridiculous*. It was so... junior high. Kip braced one leg and reached around, getting a good grip under Greg’s arm. “Hang on,” he said, and with one big heave, he lifted Greg from horizontal to vertical.

“That’s impressive,” Greg said. He was no lightweight, so that little move had taken some serious strength. The thought sent a shiver down his back that he decided to credit to the central air conditioning.

Kip shrugged. “It’s just leverage. Tackle someone at the right spot and they’ll go down, no matter how big they are. It’s all in the approach.”

Huh. Greg looked carefully at Kip's face, but he seemed to just be talking about football. "You played?"

"A little. Hey, look, let's get you to the bathroom, and then I'll make some pancakes. Sound good?"

It sounded awesome. Hell, if the pancakes passed muster, he might never leave.

Negotiating the narrow bathroom wasn't much easier than it had been the night before, but thanks to the boxer shorts, he accomplished what he needed to do without breaking any more bones or sticking his dick in anybody's face. Kip had leaned up against the wall outside the bathroom, and when Greg emerged, he offered his shoulder again without saying anything and helped Greg hop to the small table adjacent to the kitchen. Half the surface space had been allocated to stacks of books and CDs that Greg thought he recognized from the bedroom floor. He eased himself into one chair and lifted the leg with the cast onto another. Kip tossed him a pillow from the couch, and he slid that under the cast while Kip moved around the small kitchen with what looked like practiced ease.

"You need bookcases," Greg said once he'd made himself comfortable.

"They're on the list," Kip said as he pulled a griddle from the dish drainer and set it on the stove. "I figure once the semester's over, I'll have time to check off a few things."

"Didn't you graduate?"

"Yeah, in December. I moved in here—thanks again, by the way, for the tip—and then we geared up for spring training. Things will calm down once summer rolls around."

Greg nodded and looked around. It looked like Kip had dumped boxes straight from the moving truck out onto the living room floor.

“I thought you had this big family. How come they didn’t help you move?” In his family, moving was the modern equivalent of a barn-raising: everybody pitched in and took their payment in beer and KFC.

“They’re all up in Minnesota,” Kip said over his shoulder as he stirred pancake batter with one hand and shoved a glass bowl of frozen berries in the microwave with the other. His kitchen, unlike the living room and bedroom, seemed to have a place for everything and everything in its place. He didn’t keep things in a shamble at the office either. Not that Greg had ever gone looking for him there, but he might have passed the open door on occasion. Distance, remember?

“I don’t spout off about this much,” Kip was saying. “But since you shared the whole big four-oh story, I figure, why not?”

Oh, Lord. See, he knew Kip would want to be all talky talky about shit.

Greg cleared his throat. “You don’t have to say anything. Really, it’s better if you don’t.”

Kip laughed and sent a look over his shoulder that made Greg’s cock jump. He scooted closer to the table to hide it, feeling like his body betrayed him for its own interests. Stupid body. First it couldn’t manage to stay upright; then it rolled over and begged for Kip Riggsbee. Stupid, demanding, uncooperative body.

“I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing, but I wouldn’t mind coming back to that at some point,” Kip said,

deftly flipping pancakes.

“I would,” Greg grumbled, but Kip either ignored him or didn’t hear him.

When he’d piled up about a dozen pancakes, Kip slid the plate onto the table and handed Greg a fork. “One more thing,” he said, taking a bottle of maple syrup from the pantry. He opened the microwave, poured syrup over the berries, and then set the timer for another minute. When it pinged, he opened the door and handed the bowl over. “Careful, it’s hot.”

Greg set the bowl down and got a whiff of something warm and sweet. He took the plate Kip handed him, pulled a few pancakes over, and poured the berry stuff on top of them. He took a bite and flavor exploded in his mouth. He might even have moaned.

He raised his eyes to find Kip looking at him with something complicated showing in his eyes, some combination of heat and satisfaction that made Greg’s chest feel tight.

“Good, huh?”

Yeah. Good. Greg assumed he nodded because Kip tucked into his own breakfast. He let Greg eat in peace, pausing only to ask Greg to pass the berries. When Greg had downed two plates of pancakes and a tumbler full of orange juice, Kip put the dishes in the sink and ran water over them. As he scrubbed, he talked.

“What I was going to say is that my whole extended family lives in Minnesota. My mom is Lisa Jo Knudson.”

Knudson. *Knudson*? No way. “Joe Knudson’s daughter?”

Kip nodded. “He’s my grandfather.”

“No shit.”

Big Joe was a football legend. Between his sprawling family and the high school academy in Minneapolis where he’d taught for forty years, a place that had become known as The Factory since so many great players revolved through its doors, the Knudson name had instant recognition for even a casual football fan, let alone a coach.

Kip shrugged. “I know, it’s wild, right? Big Joe and Mormor—that’s my grandma—had Joe Junior, John, Jake, and then a few years later, my mom, Lisa Jo. Among the four of them, they’ve spawned two Heismans and five Pro Bowl selections.” He paused. “And me.”

“I remember the Junior generation,” Greg said. “I watched John and Jake when they played. They took Minnesota to eight straight bowl games, didn’t they?”

Kip finished washing up and handed Greg a towel and some wet dishes. “Yup. They set a school record with the eighth one. And Junior took the Vikings to the Super Bowl the same year. I was just a baby at the time, but I’ve heard the story a million times.”

“They were like *gods* to me,” Greg said.

Kip nodded. “Me too.”

Greg dried the plates and berry bowl and handed them back to Kip; then he draped the damp towel over the back of the chair his casted leg rested on.

“You don’t look like a Knudson.” As soon as the words left his mouth, Greg wished he could take them back. Try telling the guy something he didn’t know. The Knudsons

were all big and blond.

Kip didn't miss a beat. "I take after my dad. He was my mom's big rebellion, I think. She came to North Carolina for college, met my dad in a pottery class, and they eloped over fall break their freshman year. I think the only reason Big Joe forgave her is because they both transferred to U of M after winter break and I came along about eight months later."

"You're close?"

"We're all close. It's hard to explain if you're not right there in the middle of it, but when I say it's one big happy family, I really mean it."

Wiping his hands on his jeans, Kip went to the coat closet near the door and rummaged around on a shelf. He came back with a photo frame in his hand. "Here, this does a better job than I ever could."

Greg took the picture and bent over it. It looked like a family reunion, but for all he knew, maybe it was just Sunday dinner or a random Tuesday afternoon. Generations of broad-shouldered blonds stood side by side with kids of varying sizes tucked in around them. He picked out Kip's dad right away; he was right in the middle of the pack, but he stood inches shorter and narrower than the rest of the men, and he had straight dark hair that fell across his forehead. He had his arm around the shoulders of a woman who was exactly his height; must be Kip's mom. She had the signature Knudson grin: a wide mouthful of even white teeth that Greg could see reflected back at him in Kip's smile.

In the picture, Kip was probably eight or so, all thin arms and legs and a shock of dark hair that he obviously got

from his daddy. He sat on Big Joe's shoulders, clutching fistfuls of thick blond hair. One of his teenage cousins had a hand on his back. Another had hold of his ankle, keeping him steady.

Greg felt his eyes go hot and blinked quickly. He handed back the picture and watched Kip's face as he looked down at it. He'd only known Kip for a handful of months, but he knew for certain that he'd never seen that particular look on his face.

"I was kind of their mascot," Kip said. "My mom was the baby of the family, and I was her baby. They spoiled me rotten."

"I can see that," Greg said, though he didn't, not really. Kip didn't look spoiled; he looked *loved*. "So what're you doing down *here*?"

Why put a thousand miles between him and his family? And why struggle against virtually impossible odds on a team with no clout in a job nobody understood? Kip could probably be coaching any team in the state of Minnesota, and probably even Wisconsin, Michigan, or South Dakota. The guy was a legacy, for Christ's sake.

Unless... "Is it because you're—"

Kip tilted his head.

"You know," Greg said, exasperated. Why make him say it out loud? He motioned towards Kip's crotch, scowling when Kip's confused look melted into a wide Knudson smile.

Wow.

Apparently, men who didn't talk much learned how to cut through the bullshit. Way to bring it home there, Coach.

"They didn't banish me because I'm queer, if that's what you're trying to say."

The line between Greg's eyebrows smoothed out. "Then why the hell would you want to come all the way down here?"

Kip took a minute to wipe down the counter while he composed himself. He might have been a little messy, but nobody liked ants in the kitchen. He hadn't told the story more than a handful of times; he wondered if his skills were rusty.

"My dad's parents live along Pottery Road, a little south of here," Kip said, leaning back against the counter. "Since Dad's up in Minneapolis, I like being nearby. They're getting up there in years."

"Okay," Greg said slowly. "But why this job?"

Kip stretched, catching the look Greg shot down his torso. Greg put up a good front, but Kip knew when he'd hooked somebody, and unless he'd never learned anything, Greg Browne was currently flopping on the dock.

"It all started when I was fifteen," Kip said, smiling when Greg's eyes widened. This here's what they call a conversation, my friend. Not every dialogue ended with, "Yes, sir."

"When I was a kid, I worked the sideline: crunching stats, filling coolers, icing muscles. Looking back on it, I'm pretty sure Big Joe made up jobs for me to do. But I had fun, I learned a lot, and he always made me feel like the work

was valuable.”

Greg relaxed a little in his seat; he seemed perfectly comfortable with ball talk.

Shocker.

“By my sophomore year, I finally got big enough that they put me in at wide receiver, but putting my face that close to the field made my asthma flare up,” Kip continued. “So Big Joe made me a kicker.”

“No wonder your name didn’t sound familiar. We don’t recruit kickers.”

“Not many schools do. It’s a dying art, but whatever.”

Greg gave him a ghost of a grin at that, which was encouraging.

“Last game of the season, we were down two on St. Pete’s five-yard line, with just enough time on the clock to put up a field goal. Big Joe looked at me, and somehow I knew that I wasn’t going to make it. Don’t ask me how, and we’ll never know, but Big Joe had a state championship riding on my foot, and I realized I would have been a lot happier—and a lot more useful—on the bench going over stats, so he’d know which kicker had the best percentage from that range. I could have pulled that stat from memory and saved us a time-out.” He shrugged. “We talked it over, and he put in Nils Larson. Nils put it through like he was threading a needle and we won.”

“So, what, you decided to bench yourself?”

“Pretty much.”

“And Big Joe let you make that kind of decision at sixteen.”

“Fifteen. My birthday’s in July.”

“Why? Would he do that?” Greg looked mystified; it wasn’t as attractive a look as arching his back and shoving his hard-on up into Kip’s fist, but it had its appeal too.

“He trusted my judgment.”

Greg scoffed and pushed his chair back, lacing his hands over his stomach.

“He took the word of a kid with the state championship on the line.”

“I told you,” Kip said. “We’re close.”

“There’s close, and then there’s crazy.”

Kip laughed. “It was a pivotal moment; it set my course. I went back to the sideline my junior year, started reading everything I could get my hands on about what motivates winners, what has to happen in their heads to drive their bodies, and, well, here I am.”

Greg shook his head. He seemed to be having some trouble wrapping his head around the idea that Kip had been able to play but chose to do something else. Kip butted up against that attitude a lot; it had correlatives that led football players to think they deserved special treatment and that they could get away with just about anything as long as they put up big numbers on Saturday afternoon. Unfortunately, that turned out to be true too often for Kip’s peace of mind. In his view, it made his job harder. He did everything in his power to help them find the motivation and initiative within themselves to achieve their goals on the football field, but he wanted more for them than that.

Statistically speaking, less than two percent of all

college players ended up playing professional ball. Kip lost sleep over what the other ninety-eight percent did after college. Some never finished; they played out their eligibility and then disappeared into retail jobs and manual labor. Coach Turner had told Kip when he hired him that he wasn't there to be a guidance counselor, but he also told him he'd decided some of the players needed a different approach, a nontraditional approach. Kip agreed, and they'd sealed the deal with a handshake.

"You couldn't have done this," Greg waved his hands vaguely around his head, "up there?"

"I wanted to make my own path," Kip said.

Greg's eyes narrowed. "Your own path."

Kip nodded. "It's good to know I've got people behind me, a home to go back to if I want it, but I'm just getting started here. It feels good to know I'm doing it on my own."

Greg tilted his head and stared at him. Processing? Or information overload? Maybe he'd better try a different tack.

"Enough about me," Kip said. "Let's talk about you."

"Let's not."

Well, that was short and to the point. "I get it. You're a man of action."

Now Greg moved from mystified to wary. "What do you mean?"

"You'd rather *do* than *talk*."

Greg sighed with relief. "You got that right."

"Which is why you think my job is so full of crap."

"Exactly," Greg said, pounding the table lightly with his

fist before he stopped abruptly, looking slightly ashamed.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Kip said, laughing. “I like laying things out on the table.” Time to reel him in. “Like last night, for example.”

“What about it?”

Kip had him now; he knew it. Now to see if that line was as tight as he hoped. “Last night was... great. Really great. I’d love to do it again.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Really? I think it’s a fantastic idea. I’m single, and unless you’ve got a wife stashed in that cavernous closet of yours, I’m betting you are too.”

“What cavernous—” Greg snapped his mouth shut and glared at him.

“We’ve already gotten over the biggest hump, if you’ll pardon the expression, so... where’s the downside?”

“You don’t shit where you eat,” Greg said shortly, ducking his head.

“Okay, wow, there’s an image I didn’t need at the breakfast table.”

“I don’t do this. Here. I don’t do this here.”

Kip stepped closer. Surely he didn’t mean he never.... “Greg.”

Greg’s head snapped up. “It’s not smart. It’s not safe.”

Now it was Kip’s turn to feel mystified. How could Greg live like that? “What do you do for...” he mimicked Greg’s gesture toward his crotch, “you know.”

With a sigh, Greg rubbed his hand across the back of

his neck. "That's none of your business."

"Really? Because I think you kind of made it my business when you came all over me last night."

Greg flushed a deep red, the color making his blue eyes stand out. He was a handsome man, reasonably well-behaved, obviously smart. But he'd chosen to cut off a huge part of himself, dole it out in pieces, or submerge it in favor of different pursuits, channeling his sexual energy in other directions. Once again, Kip could see the muscles bunch in Greg's jaw. It looked like he was literally holding in his words.

Jesus.

Greg wasn't just closeted; he'd locked and barricaded the door.

But Kip remembered the look on Greg's face when he touched him for the first time, remembered the heat and urgency in Greg's response to him. It seemed a shame, almost a crime that he didn't allow himself to be known fully in all his sexy, irascible, short-tempered glory.

Kip stepped even closer, close enough that Greg had to look way up to see him. He leaned back against the sturdy table and crossed his arms over his chest. He took it as a good sign that Greg didn't move away and maintained eye contact.

"You know what? It's just you and me here," Kip said, sliding along the table until Greg had to move to accommodate him. The fact that Greg let him spoke volumes. He ended up between Greg's spread legs, taking care not to jostle the casted leg still resting on an adjacent chair.

“The team’s probably partying in Daytona, and for once we’re not scheduled up to our asses. I say go for it. Knock yourself out. Go to town. We’ve got two days to fill however we want.”

Greg dropped his chin, breaking eye contact, but he lifted one hand and slowly settled it on Kip’s hip, molding his fingers around the bone.

Yes.

“What about after that?” Greg asked, his voice still low, but with an added huskiness that made Kip’s cock twitch in his jeans.

Kip shrugged. “You don’t owe me anything, if that’s what you mean. We don’t have to start braiding each other’s hair.”

That actually got a smile out of Greg along with a rueful rub of his hand across his scalp, where, now that Kip took a really good look, there might have been a little thinning at the temples. Testosterone strikes again.

“We’re not so far apart, really,” Kip said. “I’m not exactly flaunting my queer pride in anyone’s face. But Coach Turner knows. Truck Abernathy knows.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He called me when I was on a date, and the other guy answered my phone. He asked, so I told him.”

“You’re either really brave or a real idiot.”

“Big Joe taught me that you have to give trust to get trust back,” Kip said. “And that the biggest rewards always involve some risk.”

Greg looked up at him, his gaze serious.

Good.

Kip reached for the hem of his T-shirt and unceremoniously yanked it off, smiling as Greg's eyes dropped immediately to his chest, then further down. The hand on his hipbone tightened. "Trust me, Greg. Take the risk."

DAMN.

The guy was good, Greg had to give him that. And he had Greg's number. Just like the night before, once Kip pulled his focus, Greg forgot about the dull throb in his leg and the tight, bruised skin on his cheek. He pushed everything aside except the want that raced down his spine, hardening his cock. Maybe Kip was playing him like a piano, pulling those levers he used with the team, but he seemed genuine, his private persona very much in line with his public one. That was something Greg hadn't ever really managed. He admired that. He found it attractive, even seductive.

Or maybe it was just that Kip smelled so damn good up close like this, like berries and soap. Before he knew it, he'd leaned forward and closed his eyes, setting his forehead against Kip's bare torso. He could feel the breath Kip sucked in and the way the muscles clenched in his abdomen. Then Kip's hands came down on his head, stroking along his ears, touching the hinge of his jaw. He opened his mouth and heard the tendons on both sides pop.

"That's good," he heard Kip murmur in his ear.

Kip shifted his focus to the back of Greg's neck, finding knots of muscle with strong fingers, alternating between featherlight brushes that raised the hairs along Greg's arms and legs and deep, penetrating pressure that eased away the tension he found there.

Kip had to know he had him, but he seemed to like words, so Greg said, "Okay."

He felt Kip's hands move back to his jaw, lifting his head. He opened his eyes and found Kip looking at him bemusedly, his breath coming fast and hard. "Just like that?"

Greg lifted one shoulder. "I get it now, how you get the players to do what you want. They'll do whatever it takes to shut you up."

"Nuts, you found me out," Kip said with a grin, scooting back to sit on the table. His foot accidentally bumped against the cast, generating an unwelcome jolt of pain.

"Crap," Greg muttered, automatically dropping back into deep-breathing mode. He rode out the pain with Kip's hand tight on the back of his neck, breathing in unison with him.

"I'm so sorry," Kip said. "Should we move this someplace—"

"Stay put," Greg said, hunching forward, pushing between Kip's legs, advancing until he had both shoulders between Kip's spread thighs. The barricade of his casted leg didn't leave Kip a lot of room, but Greg didn't hear any complaints. What he heard instead was the catch in Kip's breath when Greg slid his hands around Kip's ass and yanked him close. "And shut up."

Kip's laugh trailed off to a moan when Greg set his teeth along the distended ridge beneath the zipper of his jeans. Kip leaned back, bracing himself on his palms, giving Greg easier access. Greg used the leverage of the table to lean up and over Kip, taking a minute to get his balance and settle his weight on his good leg before dragging his mouth along the fine hairs that bisected Kip's torso. Sweat popped out on Kip's chest, standing out against his pale skin. Greg let his mouth wander across the level plane of Kip's belly, his tongue tracing the delineation of his abdominal muscles, which flexed and then contracted into neat rows when Greg blew on them. Farther north, Kip's nipples stood out in sharp relief; when Greg swiped them with his tongue, Kip writhed against him, his hips lifting restlessly, pushing up against him, seeking friction.

Kip's body had basically taken over where his mouth left off, Greg realized. He was a pushy bastard no matter how you sliced it. The thought made Greg smile; he knew a little something about pushy bastards, he just hadn't noticed the similarities because of the constant verbal barrage. Maybe Kip was right; maybe they weren't so far apart after all.

He checked his balance again; the cast seemed pretty secure on its pillowed chair, and though the stance was awkward, it had its advantages. He liked looming over Kip, gaining in sheer size what he lost in verbal aptitude.

"Okay," he said again, to himself more than to Kip.

Kip, of course, answered anyway, with a nod.

Okay. Greg took a breath. Then another. Kip stayed put, good boy, still braced on his hands, waiting.

He'd back off, Greg knew he would, if Greg gave any

indication that they were a no go here. He could tell by the look in Kip's eyes that he almost expected it. He'd put his shirt back on, climb down off the table, and then they'd go play cards or watch bass fishing, and Kip would never say another word about it.

He'd put himself out there, trusted Greg. *Kip* was the one who'd taken the big risk.

Greg could see a fine shiver start in Kip's legs, color flushing up his pale chest, across his throat and into his face. Waiting turned him on, or uncertainty, or possibly just being there with Greg like that, spread out and ready, did it for him. "Okay." One last time. Just to be sure.

Kip dropped down on one elbow and groaned, his other hand stealing down to the strangled lump in his pants.

"Uh uh," Greg said. "Hands off."

Kip closed his eyes tight and lay fully back on the table, lifting his arms above his head, spread out like a feast.

Greg had Kip's zipper down and his dick out between one breath and another.

Christ, he smelled good. Looked good. Tasted good, once Greg slid the hard length of him into his mouth. He glanced up when he heard Kip's choked-off groan; Kip had stuffed his fist in his mouth, muffling the heated sounds. Greg sucked harder; Kip wasn't the only one who understood the value of positive reinforcement.

Greg closed his eyes and let the residual aching throb in his leg fade into the rhythm set by Kip's ragged thrusts, his clean male scent dizzying, the unaccustomed stretch in Greg's jaw just one more sensation piled in with all the

others.

It had been a while, longer than he wanted to calculate, but his throat remembered what to do. He opened wide for Kip's increasingly powerful thrusts, savoring the weight of him, the heat, the way Kip slapped his bare feet flat on the table and lifted his hips, really going for it now, obviously not worried about Greg's ankle, or the scrape of the table legs on the linoleum floor, intent only on getting as much of his dick as humanly possible down Greg's throat.

When he came, he did so silently, his body rigid, his cock swelling to the point that Greg saw stars, then Kip shuddered and his cock jerked, spilling deep in Greg's mouth.

Greg swallowed the first wave, then pulled off, and pumped Kip through the rest of it before leaning forward and lifting Kip's mouth up to his, stabbing his tongue in Kip's mouth, a pale imitation of what Kip had just done to him.

Kip sucked on his tongue, humming happily. He moved his thighs to bracket Greg's chest and tugged on him, telling him without words to let Kip take some of his weight. After a couple minor adjustments for balance, Greg found that with his good foot planted, he could fit his cock to the wedge between Kip's legs and still have enough leverage to thrust as hard as he wanted. He pushed down his boxers, lined up, and went for it. God bless Kip and whoever had taught him about finding the right approach to take big guys down. What Greg lost in flexibility, Kip made up in determination and skill, rolling his hips in ways that made Greg's head spin.

He pulled away from Kip's mouth and panted against

his shoulder, lunging against the rough seam of Kip's jeans, scraping the trapped head of his cock against the fabric until pleasure hurtled through him, making his heart race and his cock jump, coming in sharp bursts on Kip's flat stomach.

The aftermath should have been awkward; they'd defiled Kip's kitchen table, for Christ's sake, and Greg had to look like a stork standing there on one leg with his other foot still resting on a chair, but he couldn't bring himself to care about how it looked when it *felt* so damn good. Given how quickly he'd succumbed to Kip's wooing ways, he had to wonder if his local celibacy was more a negligent coincidence than the result of careful planning. It could be that he'd just never met anybody who made him *want* to take the risk. Or maybe he just hadn't expected to find someone who understood where he was coming from as well as Kip seemed to.

He rubbed his mouth across the strut of Kip's collarbone, gnawing gently on it until Kip squirmed, and Greg felt his cock harden again between them.

Ah, youth.

"Okay?" Kip whispered, his voice scratchy.

Greg nodded against Kip's shoulder and went back to work leaving his mark on his collarbone.

"Do you... want to talk about it?" Kip asked, humping Greg's thigh lazily.

Greg stifled a laugh against Kip's warm skin. God, the guy never gave up. Of course, that same relentless persistence had led them to where they were, so he didn't feel like he had too much room to complain.

“I really, really don’t,” he murmured.

Kip sighed. “Whatever, man. Let’s move this party to the couch.”

FLO RIDA kicked up his heels again, second verse same as the first. Kip blinked blearily at the clock: 8 a.m. He peeled himself off Greg’s chest and reached over him for the phone, jabbing random buttons. The phone stopped ringing mid-jab, so he tossed it on the nightstand and collapsed back down on Greg. A couple minutes later a ping announced new voice mail.

He’d have to remember to check it later. Today was the big day—Day Three. Walking Cast Day. On the one hand, it would be nice to get his place back to himself, not have to feed a St. Bernard-sized appetite, and not have to cajole whole sentences out of his guest. But yesterday had turned out to be great. Really great. Really, *really* great. He kind of hated to see it come to an end.

Kip stretched tentatively, feeling his muscles protest even that small movement. He felt like he’d been run over by a Mack truck, which, sexually speaking, wasn’t that far from the truth. Even down by one leg, Greg had worked him up one side and down the other, making up for lost time, maybe, or delayed opportunities. Once Greg had offered that muttered, repeated “Okay,” he’d dived right in. Boy howdy, had he ever. Put it this way: Greg wouldn’t be the only one limping to the doctor’s office; Kip knew he’d be feeling Greg’s dick in his ass for *days*.

They'd lumbered from the table to the couch and spent most of the day alternating between doing serious damage to the denim slip cover and using their recuperation time to play games on the Xbox, where Kip's finesse edged out Greg's more blunt force approach most of the time. They finally made it to the futon after taking a break for basic sustenance.

This time, Greg hadn't sneered at peanut butter; instead, he'd smeared it along Kip's torso and licked it off, using his tongue on Kip's obliques and pectorals, then adding teeth on Kip's nipples and across his deltoid muscles, leaving Kip rock hard and covered in goosebumps.

Once fortified, Greg had lifted Kip to straddle his lap and fucked him slow and hard, driving deep and holding steady as Kip hovered above him, his thighs shaking with strain, his dick stretched tight. He'd lost himself for awhile there, aware only of the pleasure pulsating through his body, so intently focused that the brush of Greg's hand up his dick made him come abruptly, violently, his shout echoing in his ears. He'd lost his balance then and dropped like a stone, shoving Greg's dick incrementally deeper. Greg went wild beneath him, his hands clenched tight on Kip's thighs, holding him still and thrusting heavily before coming in a heated burst that arrowed through Kip, wringing one last spasm from his exhausted penis.

He'd fallen asleep like that, with Greg's cock softening inside him, splayed on top of him. He remembered feeling Greg's arms slide around him, settling him more comfortably, and then nothing until Mr. Rida started spinning like a record again. Greg must have moved at some point, since they were under the covers and there wasn't a

used condom hanging off Greg's dick, but Kip had missed everything after the holyfrickingsmoke orgasmic meltdown.

"Who was it?" Greg rumbled in his ear.

"Voice mail."

Greg grunted.

Neither of them seemed to be morning people. There, that was something else they had in common, right up there with an appreciation for pancakes, a deep love of football, and a marked preference for dick. Maybe Greg was onto something with that caveman, nonverbal thing he had going on. Aside from the trash-talk they'd both spouted while playing Xbox, Kip could honestly say they probably hadn't spoken more than fifty words since sometime the morning before. "*You got condoms?*" had covered just about everything that wasn't food related.

"I should check it," Kip said. "It might be the hospital. It's not like you've been home to answer your phone."

"You shoving me out the door?" Greg asked.

"Hell, no," Kip said. "But if we get you in a walking cast, you can fuck me standing up."

Greg handed him the phone.

The message was indeed from South Guilford, from Dr. Llewellyn's office, informing Kip that Greg's records had been couriered to the orthopedist at the university's Sports Medicine office. The decision had been made that it would be best for all parties involved if Coach Browne received his follow-up care with his employer.

Kip put the message on speaker and played it for Greg.

"In other words, they want nothing more to do with me,"

Greg said. He didn't seem particularly bothered by that.

"That's the feeling I get, yeah," Kip said. "Fuck 'em. They should have listened to you about the pain meds. They created an unnecessarily adversarial environment."

Greg shifted up on his elbow, looking down at him. "They shot the what with the who?"

Kip grinned. "They didn't know how to deal with you."

"Oh." Greg slid his hand across Kip's stomach, his fingers playing in the hair under Kip's navel. "Unlike you."

Kip shivered. Hard to say, really, who was better at dealing with who. Greg had a certain magic at his beck and call too.

After he got Greg fed and watered, Kip picked up the phone and called Ortho, setting an appointment for early afternoon. Then he ran upstairs and got Greg a fresh change of clothes and helped him keep the cast dry while he took a shower, all of it a million times easier now that Greg didn't seem to give a shit if Kip knew that he gave Greg an erection just by walking by.

Greg didn't fit any better in Kip's Civic than he had before, but he was in better spirits about it, joking about using the dashboard as a footrest.

Kip put the car in gear and aimed it at the university, figuring it could pretty much get there on autopilot. It seemed as good a time as any to get an answer to a simple question.

"So, Greg?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why did you call me from the hospital?"

Greg leaned back against the seat. "I needed a ride."

Kip shook his head. "No, why me? Because I'm your neighbor? Why call *me*?"

Greg tilted his head, studying Kip with the kind of intensity Kip was used to dishing out but didn't usually have to take much. "I've seen you with the players, on the field and off," Greg said. "You're good with them."

Kip felt color rise in his cheeks. "Thanks."

"I don't always agree with the crap you spout, but you seem to have their best interests at heart."

Kip nodded.

Greg shifted on the seat and looked out the window at the traffic going by. "You come through when they need you. I know you do. I know what you did for Abernathy."

"You'd have done the same," Kip said.

"Maybe. But he called *you*," Greg said, turning back to face him.

"He's a kid," Kip said. "Kids do dumb things. I get that."

"Like flushing your inhaler?"

Kip grinned. "Yeah, like that."

"You know, those guys aren't always easy to deal with, but you don't let anyone intimidate you," Greg continued, his face open, not hiding anything, not anymore. "Not the players, not the coaches. Not even me. So... that's why."

Kip ducked his head, pleased to such a ridiculous degree that it embarrassed him. "Players respond better to strength. I can't afford to show any sign of weakness."

Greg blinked at him. "Is that why you said you don't

have friends on the team? You think it would undermine your position?"

Of all the things he might have expected to shoot the shit about with Greg Browne, Kip's place in the patriarchal hierarchy of the team would never had made the list.

"It's not that," Kip said. He shifted until his knee touched Greg's leg, taking care not to jar his cast. "I'm still trying to find my space, my place on the team. The players are a tribe, sufficient unto themselves, and that's how it should be. That's how they win."

Greg nodded.

"And the coaches see me as an outsider, maybe even a threat," Kip said with a shrug. "They're pretty set in their ways."

"You could tell them about Big Joe," Greg said.

Kip shrugged. "Yeah, don't think I haven't thought about it. But I really want to do it on my own. It's just going to take some time."

"Hard to teach old dogs new tricks," Greg said.

"True," Kip said, giving Greg a loaded look. "But every once in a while, one surprises you." Greg looked pleased; yeah, he got it. "Anyway, that's all I meant when I said I didn't have any friends on the team."

Greg went back to looking out his window. "Well, you do now."

Kip smiled. "Yeah. That's good." After a minute, he cleared his throat and said, "Just so you know... you do too."

Greg didn't turn back, but he nodded. Acknowledgement? Agreement? Kip couldn't tell from the

back of Greg's head, but he didn't press him. He'd take that silent nod for now.

Sports Med had a couple of disabled access parking spots right at the door. The orthopedic specialist, Doc Foushee, had been with the team for years and met them at the car with a wheelchair. Rather than fuss, Greg seemed to appreciate the gesture; either that or their erotic calisthenics had worn him out to the point where he was relieved to have the help. The doc didn't seem at all surprised to find Kip with Greg. He motioned them both in his office and offered Kip a seat while he reviewed the records and X-rays sent from Regional.

"That's a bad break," he said, before helping Greg up onto the examination table and checking the cast. "You really drove yourself to the hospital with a broken ankle?"

Greg started to turn a little purple around the edges, his obvious respect for the doc arguing with his equally transparent desire to pop him one, so Kip jumped in.

"What's the next step?"

Dr. Foushee looked back at the chart for a minute and then said, "They mention a walking cast, but I think you're better off on crutches, at least for a couple of weeks. I think you'll heal faster."

Kip braced himself for Greg to explode. He was mentally reviewing various techniques for talking down irate players when Greg said, "Whatever you say."

Kip raised his eyebrows. Even Doc Foushee seemed surprised.

"You should be able to get around the facility here

without too much trouble, but what about at home? If I remember correctly, your apartment is up a flight of stairs,” Doc said.

Greg looked over at him. “Rigsbee here lives in the same building. We can make it work.”

Kip nodded, holding Greg’s gaze. “We can absolutely make it work,” he said firmly.

Yes. Yes. The past two days had shown that, and now it looked like they’d been given two more weeks. Maybe Greg would let down a few more walls, and maybe Kip could learn to listen a little more closely to all the things Greg couldn’t bring himself to say.

Doc Foushee turned back to the chart, jotting notes. “Great. Well, you know where the crutches live. Pick a pair that suits you and check back with me in a couple of weeks. We’ll see about a walking cast then.”

Greg reached over and shook his hand. “Thanks, Doc. This beats the hell out of going to the hospital.”

“Happy to do it,” Doc said. “Sorry I wasn’t around on Saturday. I might have been able to expedite things over at South Guilford.”

“That’s okay,” Greg said. He glanced at Kip. “It worked out.”

Doc Foushee stood and went to the door. “Next time, try to break bones during regular office hours.”

That got a wry smile out of Greg and another handshake as the doctor left the office and pulled the door closed behind him.

After he left, Greg cleared his throat and said, “So. I

guess I should have cleared that with you first.”

Kip grinned. “It’s fine.”

“I could try to find—”

“Greg.” Kip stopped him with the raise of one hand. Huh. Have to try that again sometime. He stood and walked over to the exam table. “If you hadn’t suggested it, I would have. Like you said, we can make it work.”

From the look in Greg’s eyes, he didn’t seem to doubt that for a minute.

“I’ll even let you sort laundry if you want. It’ll be fun.”

“Maybe I can build you some bookcases,” Greg said. Well, his voice said that. His body seemed to be saying something more along the lines of, *“I’ll fuck you into next week.”*

“Let’s start with getting your crutches, and then we’ve got to stop at the store. You’re eating me out of house and home,” Kip said.

Greg didn’t even bother protesting that. “I can make lasagna.”

“So can I,” Kip said, laughing. “Don’t worry. You’ll earn your keep.”

Judging by the way Greg’s face went hot, he seemed to like that thought.

“Come on, Coach,” Kip said. He put out his hand and helped Greg off the examination table, then pivoted, and used Greg’s weight to spin him back into the wheelchair. Then he stepped over to the door and opened it. “After you.”

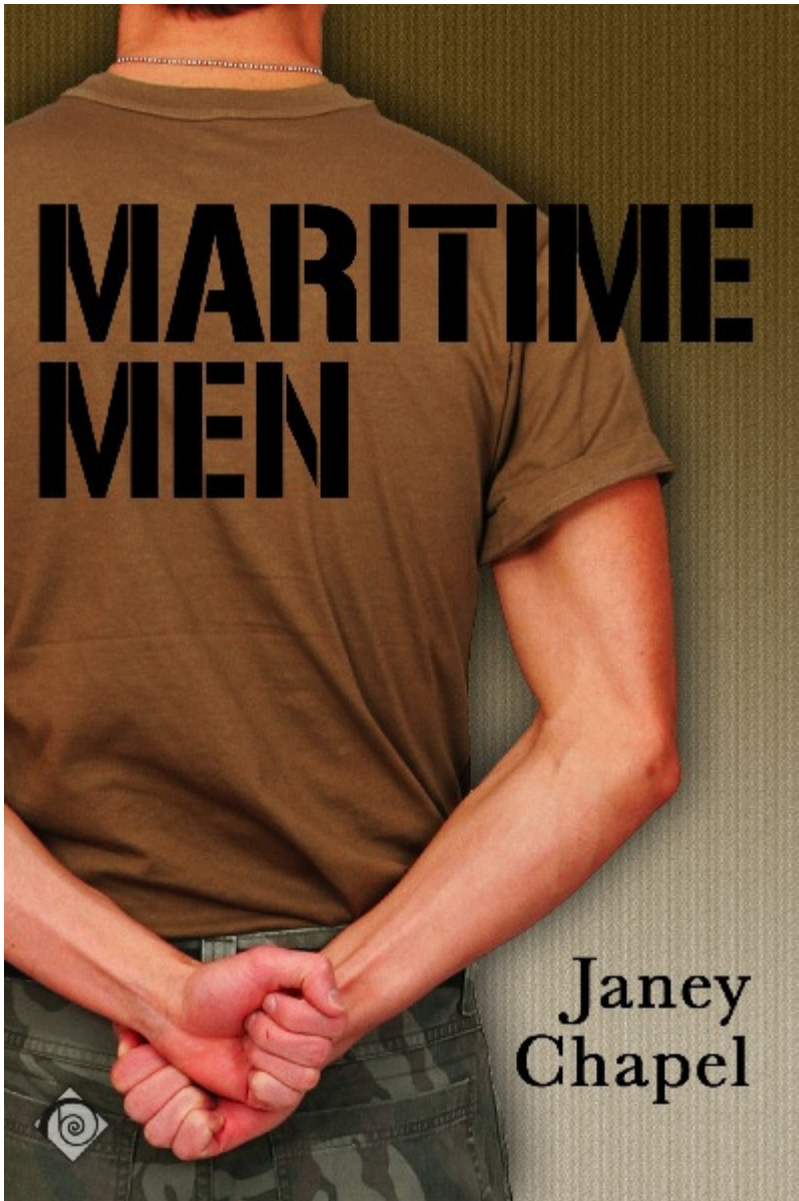
Greg shot him a look that promised things Kip couldn’t

have imagined when the phone rang on Saturday morning and said, “I’ll race you.”

JANEY CHAPEL found a paperback romance in her grandmother's bookcase at the age of eleven, inhaled it in one sitting, and then proceeded to devour thousands of romance novels in a variety of genres over the course of several decades. Eventually, her husband said, "Stop reading! Start writing!" After a lifetime in the South, Janey now lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughter, where she volunteers with the PTO, struggles to adapt to actual winter, and writes fiction in her spare time.

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