

Scarecrow

A novella by
Kody Boye

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This is for you, Matthew. You didn't deserve to
die... You didn't deserve to have your life taken
away from you.

You've earned your wings. Now it's time for us to
earn ours.

The bicycler stopped and drew his coat around him. He was nuts, riding out in the cold like this, but rain or shine, he *never* missed his daily bike ride.

After checking to make sure that everything was in order, he started off again. He continued down the road, keeping to the right. There were no cars out today. No, not today; it was raining, and it was so cold that frost would start developing.

Shouldn't have gone out today, shouldn't have gone out today, shouldn't have...

He stopped when something on the side of the road caught his eye. He frowned, wiped sweat from his brow, and noticed that it was a scarecrow. He smiled and stepped off his bike.

Didn't know the old man was keeping a scarecrow up this late in the year.

The bicycler stopped, frowning. This wasn't a scarecrow, it couldn't be. The old farmer *never* left a scarecrow out this late. He...

The man stepped forward. He whimpered when he saw it closer. A man, a younger man, tied to the post, beaten and bloody, frost covering the wounds.

"Oh God," he said, reaching into his pocket, desperately looking for his cell phone. "He needs help."

Once the bicycler made sure that his cell phone was where it was, he untied the man, careful not to drop him. The wounds on his body were too horrible and too many. If he didn't handle the man the right way, he could kill him.

"It's ok," the man whispered, pulling his coat off and wrapping the younger man in it. "I'm going to get you help."

He grabbed his phone and dialed 9-1-1. When he explained what he had found to the operator and where he was, the operator asked if the victim had a pulse.

"I... I don't know."

"You need to see if he's still alive, sir. Is he breathing?"

The bicycler reached out and pressed his fingers to the younger man's throat. He frowned, closed his eyes, waited.

"No, he doesn't..."

And there it was; a faint, almost undetectable pulse.

"Yes! Oh God, he's alive!"

"All right, sir. There's an ambulance headed your way."

The bicycler thanked the operator and threw his phone down. He stripped out of his muscle shirt and wrapped it around the young man's head. The body's heat escaped from the head quicker than anywhere else.

"Oh, please God, don't let him die."

He heard the sirens and walked to the road, waving the paramedics over. They came out with a stretcher and carefully lifted the young man up on to it.

“You did a good job, sir. What about you? Are you all right?”

The bicycler nodded, crossing his arms over his naked chest. He looked at his bike and grabbed it.

“I’ll follow you to the hospital.”

“It’s a long ways, sir. We’ll be going faster.”

“What hospital are you going to?”

“The county one, down the road. It’s about three miles.”

“I’ll be there,” the man said.

The paramedic nodded and set a hand on the bicycler’s arm. When the paramedic got in the ambulance, it sped off. The bicycler could only wonder what had happened to the young man, and what he had done to be beaten and tied to a post to be left for dead, as he started off after the ambulance.

It wasn’t long before he saw the red and blue lights of police cars. He stopped, looked at the ambulance, and sighed. He could get to the hospital just fine, later, after he had spoken with the police.

“Good evening, sir,” the policeman said. “We got a report that said you found a man on a post?”

“A young man, yes.” The bicycler took a deep breath, then expelled it. “Back there. I... I don’t know what happened. I just found him.”

*

Underage, at the bar, with a fake ID; he was lucky he hadn’t got caught. Kyle lifted his drink to his lips. He heard snickers and looked up to see a group of men in the corner of the room, pointing and laughing at him.

They don’t like the little faggot.

Kyle sighed and closed his eyes, leaning back in his seat. He ran a hand through his short hair and came away with sweat. He wiped it on his pants and took another sip, gesturing to the waiter, asking for another martini.

They don’t like me at all.

Cold, miserable, just wanting to get out of the cold, he’d come into the bar to fill his belly with a warm drink. The martini was *always* warm, and the sensations it gave him made him feel better than anything. You had to do what you could to survive, and sleeping in an all-night bar was what he did most of the time.

Dad didn’t like me either.

His whole problem was fueled by the fact that he was gay, and he *hated* it. His dad had thrown him out last year when he came out, he’d gone from city to city, staying in bars and restaurants, sometimes sleeping with a man or two for an extra buck. Hell, sometimes the porn he did only gave him three-hundred; *that* sure as hell wasn’t enough to keep him going for long.

You need to get a job.

Or a sugar daddy. He used that one a lot, and it usually cheered him up. He smiled at the thought and accepted the martini that the waiter brought back.

The waiter's been checking me out. He's not too bad looking.

Young, long, brown hair done back in a ponytail, a thin jaw beard and a chisled face. Maybe he'd ask the man for his number.

Oh, wait... I don't have a phone.

"That's me," Kyle sighed. "Little fag boy with no phone or money."

The bartender walked up and set another martini down.

"Figured you'd want another."

"I don't have enough money, sir."

"It's on the house."

Kyle nodded.

"Care if I sit here?" the bartender asked.

Kyle shook his head and scooted over. The man took his seat and lit a cigarette. When he offered one to Kyle, he took it and let the man light it.

"Thank you."

"No need to thank me. I've noticed that you come in here a lot."

"I guess." Kyle shrugged and took a drag off his cigarette. "I don't live anywhere."

"You don't?" the man asked. "You're homeless?"

Kyle nodded.

"Yeah. I'm Kyle, by the way."

"I'm Young. Yeah, I know; weird first name, but that's what my parents named me."

Kyle smiled.

"It's nice to meet you."

"I've seen you watching me sometimes."

"I hope that doesn't creep you out. I'm not a serial killer or anything."

"I didn't think you were. It's flattering, actually."

So he is gay.

"You need a ride somewhere?" Young asked. "I mean, I can't put you up at my place right now. My brother's here for the week."

"I'll be ok," Kyle said, standing. He grimaced. The world spun and he would've fallen had he not caught himself on the table.

"Are you sure?"

"Just a little tipsy, that's all. Don't worry; I've had my share of martinis to know that I'll be fine as long as I don't drink too many."

Young nodded and stood. He shook Kyle's hand, smiling.

"I'd give you my number, but..."

"Yeah, I know." Kyle blushed. "Don't have a phone."

"Come back tomorrow night. My shift starts at seven."

"All right," Kyle smiled. "I will."

Kyle made his way out the door, ready to find an alley to sleep in.

He stumbled and caught himself on a nearby wall.

Dumbass...

He chuckled and straightened himself out. He was about to get going before he heard a car pull up.

"Hey, kid. Watcha up to?"

Kyle looked up and grinned. The guy driving the car was *hot*.

"Not much," Kyle smiled, running a hand through his hair. "Just tripping over myself."

The man driving laughed. Kyle noticed a few of the guys that were pointing and making fun of him at the bar, but he ignored them. Apparently, if they were letting their buddy hit on him, they were fine.

"Well, why don't you get in? I can give you a ride, if you want."

"Don't have anywhere to go," Kyle laughed. "I'm homeless."

"Well, why not come back to my place. I could use a little company."

The guy winked. Kyle blushed, rubbing the back of his neck.

God... I feel so fucking stupid.

"I-I don't know, I mean... I don't want to bother you or anything."

"No worries, kid. You won't bother me. Hey, Rich; get in back, will ya?"

The man in the passenger seat said something to the man driving before he crawled out. The man driving gestured Kyle into the passenger's seat.

"What's your name, kid?"

"It's Kyle," he smiled. "I... I never got your name."

"It's Terrence," the man said. "Just sit back and relax. We'll be there in a little bit."

Kyle nodded and leaned back, closing his eyes.

"Where are we?"

Kyle looked around. The long stretch of road wasn't familiar to him. The only thing that he had any remote knowledge of was the old man's farm that lay behind the fence.

"Just making a quick stop."

"Why?" Kyle asked. "How come..."

"Get him!"

Kyle panicked. He dove out of the car and made a run for it, but he tripped before he could get anywhere. One of the guys grabbed him, pulling Kyle against his chest.

"Fuck the fag up!"

The first punch hit his face. Kyle screamed as blood streamed from his nose. The next hit him in the gut, driving the air from his lungs. The next one hit his lip, where it split open. And after that, he couldn't tell where all the other punches were coming from. At one point, the man who was holding him let go.

Kyle collapsed.

They weren't done.

They kicked him so hard that he felt like his kidneys had exploded. He felt someone kick his ass and he squealed. It felt like someone had just drove his spine an inch higher up his back.

"I think he's done," Terrence said. "Pick him up."

"What?"

"I said *pick him up*," Terrence repeated.

"Fucking sick, dude. What if he has AIDS?"

"Then don't get his blood on you."

Kyle whimpered as someone picked him up. He kept his eyes shut, hoping to feign death.

"Go get the rope."

Kyle shivered and felt someone hit his arm. He grimaced, but made no attempt to escape. Another guy grabbed his opposite arm and pushed it behind a post. Kyle started crying when he realized he was being tied up.

"Please... Don't do this," Kyle whispered. "I, I'm sorry. I don't know what I did, but I didn't mean it."

"I'm glad to hear that," Terrence said in a low voice. "Because the reason we did this is because you're a dirty fag."

Kyle nodded, hanging his head. He heard the footsteps and then heard the car drive off. It was only then that he came to the dark realization that he was being left for dead.

It was so cold.

He shivered. His hands were numb, and his lips were sealed together. Kyle wasn't sure if it was because he hadn't opened them or because they were frozen.

I didn't deserve this...

Then again, who deserved to get beaten? Who deserved to get raped? Who deserved to die? Who deserved to have *anything* bad happen to them?

Kyle started crying. His lips cracked. He tasted blood when his tongue darted out along them.

He closed his eyes, hoping sleep would catch him.

When he woke, his body was the coldest it had ever been. His mind was too. He couldn't think straight. He was seeing prisms, rainbows trapped within

shapes. They dangled in front of his vision, suspended by silver chains. They mocked him, taunted him, especially the rainbow trapped inside the triangle prism.

Even the Gay Pride sign was taunting him in his moment of anguish.

I wish I wasn't gay.

The words made him cry. How could he say such a thing about himself?

Maybe he was saying it because, if he wasn't gay, he would've never been beat. Yeah, that was it; he was just saying that because he wouldn't have been beat.

No. I'll live. I'm strong. All I have to do is wait for someone to come along.

At that moment, Kyle wished he had something to tell time by. He opened his eyes and was met with darkness. He thought he saw something scurrying below his feet, but he was too scared to try and figure out what it was.

He closed his eyes, thinking of Young, the nice man who had offered him a ride home.

If he could go back in time, Kyle would've taken that ride.

He wouldn't be here if he would've stayed at the bar with Young.

The third time he woke, he was slipping away. He wasn't sure if he was slipping into death or into a comma, but either way, he tried to fight. He brought Young's face into his mind and used that as leverage.

Come back tomorrow night. My shift starts at seven.

"I'll... Come. I'll make it, Young. I will."

Kyle's world went dark.

*

"I'm sorry, I don't think I ever got your name."

The bicycler looked up at the paramedic.

"It's Jonathan Newman," he said. He looked over at the young man. "Is he going to be all right?"

"I don't know," the paramedic sighed. "He's in a coma."

John nodded. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Now he bared a burden. He bared the burden of knowing that he had saved the young man from the cruel torture that had been set upon him.

Normally, that wouldn't have been a bad thing, but it was. John knew it was a bad thing, because if the young man died, there would be a part of him that would feel responsible for his death.

His phone rang. He frowned and reached into his pocket, pulling it out.

"Hello?"

"John? Where are you?"

It was his wife.

"I'm at the hospital, Nora."

"The hospital! Why? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," John sighed. "Nora, I..." John started cracking up. He took a deep breath and exhaled it before speaking. "I found a young man on the side of the road, Nora. He... He was... He was tied to a post."

"Dear God."

"I need to stay here and make sure he's all right, Nora. God... I feel like I need to."

"Well, as long as you're all right. Love you, John."

"Love you too, Nora. Bye."

"Bye."

John hung the phone up. He looked up as a paramedic peeked into the room.

"You're not supposed to be here if you're not a member of the family, sir."

"I'm staying," John sighed. "You can't tell me I'm not. I'm the one who found him."

The paramedic was about to say something, but the doctor John had been speaking with kept him silent.

"Thank you, Dr. Johnson," John said as the paramedic left.

"It's all right, John. I think Kyle will be fine."

"Kyle? That's his name?"

"Yeah," Dr. Johnson sighed. "His driver's license was bent to hell, but I could still make out his last name."

John nodded. He went to the side of the bed and pushed the young man's hair away from his forehead. At that particular moment, the young man reminded John of his own teenage son.

He closed his eyes.

Be strong, kid. Be strong.

John sighed and opened his eyes. The kid's heart monitor was gradually rising up and down, up and down, up and down. It was a normal heartbeat, thank God.

He wished he could do more.

Sitting made him feel helpless.

So this is what it feels like... Being in a hospital room, waiting for someone you care about to wake up.

Even though John didn't know the young man lying in the hospital bed, he still felt a small connection to him. John knew it was because Kyle reminded him of his own teenage son. Travis couldn't be too much younger than Kyle. Kyle looked like he was seventeen or eighteen, which would only make him a year or

two older than his own son.

“You’ll be ok,” John said. “Just hang in there, Kyle. You’ll wake up.”

A week later, Kyle was showing signs of recovery. The doctors said that his eyelids had been flickering, revealing higher brain activity.

“This is good,” Dr. Johnson said. “I wasn’t sure if he was going to come out of this coma.”

John nodded. He had only left the hospital once, and it had been brief at that. He had went home to check on his wife and son and make sure they were ok before returning to the hospital.

Kyle had no one; he needed John.

“Told ya you’d be ok,” John said, wrapping his fingers in Kyle’s.

Even though John couldn’t see it, he could feel that, somewhere, deep down inside, Kyle was smiling.

“You’re determined to stay here until he wakes up, huh?”

John looked up at Dr. Johnson. He had curled up on the couch when the man walked in.

“I feel responsible,” John said, sitting up. “I found him.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to stay here until he wakes up, John.”

“I know, but...” John shook his head, sighing. “I found him. I need to make sure he’s ok.”

“He might not wake up, John.”

John looked at the young man. He closed his eyes, trying to contain his emotions.

“I know, sir,” John said. “I need to get some sleep.”

Doctor Johnson patted John’s shoulder before leaving the room.

“You’re gonna be ok,” John said, patting Kyle’s hand.

The young man’s warm but otherwise lifeless body felt strange under John’s hand. It felt like he was touching a gravestone of someone who was about to die. It felt like that person wasn’t there, but the impending knowledge of knowing that person *would* eventually be there would seep into your brain. It would spark something deep inside your mind, the kind of thing you only feel when you hear about someone being murdered or someone meeting a tragic fate. You’d feel bad, but deep down, it didn’t really mean anything.

John sighed. Kyle *didn’t* mean anything. John had only found him. Other than that, Kyle held no significant meaning in John’s heart.

If he dies, what’ll I do?

John sighed. He didn’t know what he’d do. Would he cry for the loss of a young man? Would he cry for the loss of someone’s son? Would he cry for the

loss of someone's brother, maybe even someone's lover?
Would he really cry?

John stared at Kyle. The faint moonlight shown across one of his eyes, creating a dividing point on his face. John shivered. Kyle looked like something divine that had fallen from grace. He looked like an angel who's wings had been torn away, who had been pinned to the cross for violating a god's mighty will. He looked like a pearl that had been cracked and was now left to remain at the bottom of the ocean, untouched, tainted, broken.

Kyle...

John closed his eyes. On a subconscious level, the young man was keeping John awake. Maybe Kyle was trying to reach out to him from the deep, dark world that he was in.

Maybe, just maybe, he was starting to die.

No... He's not going to die.

John slipped into sleep.

"John... John, wake up."

John opened his eyes.

Doctor Johnson's face filled his vision.

"What is it?" John asked, sitting up. "What's wrong, Dr. Johnson?"

"Kyle, John... He's gone."

John looked to the bed. He stood and walked to the young man's side. His skin was already starting to get cold.

He stared at the young man for a moment before turning. His hands went to his head, where he gripped his short hair. No, no, NO! This *wasn't* supposed to be happening. Kyle *should not* be dead.

"DAMMIT!"

John kicked one of the chairs. It flew into the wall, where part of its plastic broke off.

"John, it's ok. He's in a better place now."

"He's not supposed to be there!" John cried, turning. "You see him?" John pointed at Kyle. "He's not supposed to be dead! He's too young."

The doctor looked at Kyle's young face and nodded. He bowed his head in respect, then pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, John; I know. He didn't deserve to die."

John nodded. He looked at Kyle, then back to the doctor.

"He can't be a John Doe," John said. "We have to find out his name."

"We don't know who his family is, John. That might be impossible."

"No." John shook at his head. He looked back at Kyle, saw the young man's smooth face, his blonde hair, and sighed. "I'm going to find out who he

really is.”

He arrived home at eight. When Nora and his son, Travis, came forward, he immediately caught the look of peace in their eyes.

“He’s gone,” John said.

Nora stepped forward and hugged him. He held on to his wife for a long moment before he broke away. Even his son, who wasn’t a regular hugger, stepped forward and embraced him.

“How old was he, Dad?” Travis whispered.

“I don’t know, son,” John sighed, tightening his grip on the boy. “I don’t know.”

He closed his eyes and started crying, knowing more than well that something like that could’ve easily happened to Travis.

It was then that John decided that he wasn’t just going to find out Kyle’s last name.

It was then that he decided the people who killed Kyle would go behind bars, for good.

They took the picture on Kyle’s driver’s license, scanned it, blew it up, then sharpened it. An artist had come forward and recreated most of the image, since the enlarging process had all but destroyed the picture.

A week later, John had a full color picture of Kyle in his hand.

“Maybe you shouldn’t do this,” Nora said, setting her hands on his arms. “What if the men who hurt him try to come after you?”

“They didn’t hurt him, Nora,” John said, slipping into his jacket. “They killed him.”

Nora didn’t say anything. John slid his hand out of his wife’s grip and gathered the stack of flyers up. He tossed the staple gun on top of the flyers and shoved the pack of staples beside the flyers.

“I’ll be fine,” John smiled. “Besides, if anyone tries to mess with me, I have a staple gun.”

“I don’t think a staple gun would help you if they wanted to kill you, John.”

“Yeah, but I’d put up one hell of a fight,” John grinned.

He walked out the door.

Do you know the name of this young man?

Name: Kyle (surname unknown.)

Age: Late teens

Height: 5’9”

Weight: 130 lbs.

Eyes: Blue

Hair: Blonde

Tattoos/Piercing: Small black stud in right ear. Tattoo of the male gender sign on lower back.

If you have seen or know any information about this young man, please call the number below immediately.

The number below was John's own. He already knew that he wasn't going to get any help from the justice department. Doctor Johnson had already made it clear that the police headquarters ran a search on the first and last name of the young man, possibly even the picture, and that they weren't working with anyone outside of the police department.

Kyle's ID was fake.

They didn't know his last name.

He was a John Doe, in their book. He'd go in an unmarked grave as well if no one paid for a tombstone.

He's getting a tombstone, John thought, firing four staples in a flyer. I'm going to take a deposit out of my bank account and get him one.

He'd already told the morgue this, so they'd hold his body until they knew more information. It killed John to leave Kyle's body in a morgue, but until John knew Kyle's real name, he would not be buying a tombstone.

"Excuse me," John said, stopping a man who worked inside the nearby doughnut shop. "Could you help me?"

"Yes sir," the man said, crushing his cigarette. "Whatcha need?"

"Could you put this in your window?" John handed the man the flyer. "I'm trying to find out who he is."

"I can put it in the window," the man said. "Just gotta ask my manager. Why? Is he missing?"

"No. He's dead."

The man frowned, then looked back down at the picture.

"Dead, you say?"

"Yeah," John sighed. "He was tied to a post out by the old man's farm and left to die. I'm the one who found him."

"That must've been horrible. I couldn't imagine finding someone like that."

John nodded. He saw the look on the man's face and it troubled him even more.

"Thank you, sir. I have to go get the rest of these up."

"Good luck. I hope you find out his name."

John forced a smile and walked away from the doughnut shop.

“How did it go today?”

“Got all the flyer’s passed out,” John sighed, placing his hands behind his head. “That’s all I care about.”

Nora set a hand on his chest.

“You know that the people who killed him could...”

“Let’s not talk about this, Nora. I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

John closed his eyes. He thought he was going to get a peaceful night’s sleep before Nora sighed.

“What is it now?” John asked.

“I think you should let this go, John,” Nora said. “I think...”

John crawled out of bed. He sighed and leaned against the wall.

“Honey.”

“Don’t honey me,” John said.

“Why do you care about him so much anyway?”

“Because I found him!” John cried, throwing his hands in the air.

“So? You did what you could. He’s gone, John. Accept it!”

“You didn’t see how he looked back there, Nora. You didn’t see how bad he was hurt. You didn’t see all the blood!”

“John, you...”

John didn’t listen.

He stormed out of the bedroom.

The next morning, he left the house without showering, shaving, or his coffee. He left in the clothes he had worn yesterday, with only his second stack of flyer’s and staple gun in hand. The whole while he was stapling flyers, he couldn’t keep his feelings contained.

Every single time he stapled a picture of Kyle to a telephone pole or asked a shop owner to put a flyer or two in their store, a piece of him was ripped out of his chest.

You didn’t deserve to die, John sighed. You didn’t.

*

Young nearly broke down in tears when he saw the flyer. He had been walking from the bar to his hotel-like apartment when he caught sight of the notice. He stopped, stared at the young man, and felt something inside him die.

Kyle...

Young leaned against the telephone pole. A tear escaped his face. Kyle had been such a nice guy; why... Why did he have to die?

It doesn’t say he’s dead.

No, the flyer didn’t say he was dead, but there was a part of Young that

already knew Kyle's fate. A flyer was never posted unless someone was missing, had been kidnapped, or had died and could not be named. Kyle was homeless, not missing, and he definitely *had not* been kidnapped.

That could only mean that he was dead.

"Call this number if you have any information," Young sobbed, reaching into his pocket and entering the number in his 'notes' page on his cell phone.

When he looked up to double-check the number, Young noticed that it wasn't the police department's number.

Someone... someone wants to find out his name.

Young closed his eyes, took a few deep, even breaths, and walked toward his apartment.

*

John looked up from his computer and sighed. He was running flyers off with the last of his computer ink. Even though he had already used three ink cartridges, he was more than determined to get a hundred more out.

His cell phone rang, startling him out of his reverie. He grabbed for it, lifted the phone, checked the number.

Who...

John stopped. A shot of joy went through his chest when he realized that this person could be calling to tell him Kyle's last name.

"Hello?" John asked, trying to keep his joy contained.

"Hello, sir," the man said. "I, uh, found your flyer. Your name's John Newman, right?"

"Yes sir," John said. "Thank you for calling me. Do you know anything about the young man on the flyer?"

"Yes sir, I do," the man said. "It's late, I know, but... Would you like a drink?"

A drink?

"What are you..."

"I want to talk to you, sir. In person."

John nodded.

That was understandable.

"All right," John said. "Which bar?"

"Pat's," the man said. "Be there in a half hour."

John nodded as the connection ended.

He sighed.

Maybe he'd finally figure out who Kyle really was.

It's still there, John thought, patting his side pocket.

He sighed, thankful that he had brought the pocket knife along. While Pat's bar was an older establishment, made out of more wood than anything else,

it was still a popular place. Who knows if he'd get jumped for associated himself with the young man who had been murdered.

A man stepped forward and asked if he was John.

"Yes, I'm him," John said, offering his hand. "I never caught your name."

"I'm sorry, sir. My name's Young, Young Jakes."

John nodded and followed Mr. Jakes to a table. Jakes called over a waiter and had John order something, while Jakes himself sipped a martini that was already on the table.

"You want a tab on that, Young?"

"No. Take it out of my check."

The older bartender shrugged and walked back to the bar.

"You don't have to do that..."

"His name is Kyle Marks."

John's eyes flickered with interest.

"Marks?"

"Uh huh," Young said, taking his glasses off and wiping them with the tail of his shirt. "I served him a few times. Figured he was younger than the twenty-one that was on his license."

"How old do you think he was?"

"Seventeen, maybe eighteen. He doesn't look that young though."

John nodded and accepted the light beer that the bartender set in front of him. He sipped it, yawned, then rubbed his eyes.

"I'm sorry to bring you out here so late, Mr. Newman. I... I wanted to speak to you in person."

John nodded. He looked up at Young and forced a smile.

"I appreciate you giving me his name."

"It's no trouble," Young sighed.

John frowned.

"You ok?"

"No," the man said. "I... Well, it'd be impolite for me to say."

"It's ok. I don't judge."

"He was supposed to meet me here a last week, the night he... He left the bar."

John was about to ask why, then it clicked.

Young was gay.

"Oh," John said. "I see."

Young nodded. He stirred his martini and sipped the drink.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care about that," John chuckled. "Don't worry."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"Now that I know his last name, I can buy him his tombstone," John said.

"I have to ask though. Do you know who might have killed him?"

Young closed his eyes, letting a breath he had obviously been holding out.

"There were a few guys who were saying things about him."

"Would you tell the police about this?"

"Of course," Young said. "I want his killers to be brought to justice just as much as anyone does."

"It's agreed then," John said. "We'll get the guys who killed him."

John was sleeping in his and his wife's bed. Nora had tried to close the distance between them, but John had nonchalantly refused, pretending he was too tired for anything. He stared at the wall.

Kyle wouldn't leave his mind.

Maybe she's right. Maybe I am obsessing over this.

Then again, was it possible to obsess over finding the identity of a person? Who killed them? Was it possible that a good thing *could* be an obsession? Last John knew, most obsessions were bad or just outright childish.

But Kyle...

No. What John was doing wasn't childish or obsessive; it was honorable. In his mind, he knew that if he found the men who killed Kyle, he would have done the one *really* good thing that he felt he was destined to do.

I know I'm supposed to give him the justice he deserves, John thought. *I just know it.*

John fell asleep with Kyle on his mind.

"You told them everything you knew?" John asked.

"Yes sir," Young said. "I told them every single fucking thing I knew about those men. Their names, their birthdates, what kind of cars they drove, how old they were."

"You remember stuff like that?" John smirked. "You must have a good memory."

"A photographic one, actually," Young smiled. "But yeah, I remember stuff fairly easily."

"What'd the police say?"

"That they'd go and question them," Young said. "Until they have some kind of proof that they *are* the murderers, they can't do anything."

"Questionable proof?"

"If they found fingerprints on the one guy's car."

"Would they look for something like that?"

"Most likely," Young said, sipping his drink.

John nodded, taking a deep breath. This whole ordeal with finding Kyle's

identity, and now finding Kyle's killers, was a heavy weight on his shoulders. He hadn't shaved since he found the young man.

"I look like shit, huh?"

"What, sir?" Young frowned.

"I asked if I look like shit."

"How do you..." Young trailed off, frowned, then nodded. "Oh. Kyle."

"Yeah," John said. "I haven't been taking real good care of myself. Haven't shaved since I found him, haven't trimmed my fingernails. Hell, I haven't even bit them."

John looked down at his hands and sighed.

"They'll get them," Young said. "I know they will, Mr. Newman."

John nodded, taking Young's words to heart.

For the next several months, John went back to work, but in an emotional stupor. Oftentimes, it was hard to actually concentrate on his teaching. The high school students were noticing this more and more. John had even considered going to a counselor to see if he could get put on antidepressants.

The lunch bell rang and his students scrambled out of the room. He sighed, took a deep breath, then set his face in his hands.

Oh God, please don't start crying again.

He took a few more deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. He was a bad actor when trying to keep his emotions intact. He wasn't the hard-assed man he'd like to be.

A knock on the doorframe caused him to look up. John saw Young leaning in the doorway. He forced a smile. It had been the first time in three months since he had met the man in person.

"Hey," Young said. "I figured I'd stop by and see how you were doing."

"I'm ok," John smiled. "Come in. You can close the door, if you'd like."

Young nodded and closed the door. He walked between a row of desks and took a seat in a nearby chair.

"You're not going out for lunch?"

"Not hungry," John laughed, though it was more forced than anything else. "Haven't been eating much lately."

"I've noticed."

John blushed. Had he really lost that much weight?

"That bad?"

"Your cheeks aren't as full as they used to be. I'd call you gaunt, but you're not that bad... Not yet, anyway."

John smiled. The smile was real, unlike the ones he'd been forcing.

Young gave John a small nod. He looked at the desk for a moment before picking up the book John was having the class read.

"Lord of the Flies?"

"Yeah," John said. "I have my classes read it every year."

"You like it?"

"Yeah. Don't you?"

"It's one of my favorite books, actually," Young said, sliding his glasses up his nose. "My boyfriend makes fun of me because I'm always reading something."

John nodded. The deep thud in his chest wasn't easy to take.

"Y-You got a boyfriend?"

"Yeah..." Young sighed and set the book down. "I still think about him every night, John."

"I know."

"I don't want you to think I stopped caring. A part of me died when I saw Kyle's picture on the telephone pole."

"A part of me died when I found him on the post."

Young didn't have anything to say. He looked down at his hands. John's eyes followed Young's attention. The man was twiddling his thumbs.

"I wasn't trying to make you feel uncomfortable."

"I know, sir."

"It's John, remember?"

Young looked up. He nodded. His expression seemed so unnatural that John felt like he should pinch himself, just to make sure he hadn't fallen into some imaginary funhouse.

"Your boyfriend knows about the whole thing?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"He's cool with it. He feels bad, actually. I don't think a lot of people can say that someone they could've given a place to sleep ended up dying. I don't think most people understand the feeling of knowing that a few simple words could've saved someone's life."

John reached out and gripped Young's shoulder.

"It's not your fault, Young."

"It feels like it's my fault."

"It's not."

"Well, tell that to the little devil on my shoulder. It's always reminding me."

"Well, let me tell you something I did." John walked around his desk, got down on one knee, then set his hands on Young's shoulders. "I told that little devil of mine to fuck off, because at least I was trying to get a young man's murderers in jail while he was trying to make me feel like an asshole for not saving his life."

“Dad?”

John looked up at his son. He had fallen into his thoughts and hadn’t realized that he was supposed to throw the kid the ball.

“Sorry, Trav.”

“It’s ok, Dad.”

John tossed the baseball to his son. He caught his son’s return throw, then threw it again. The next time Travis threw the ball, it slipped through his fingers. He was immediately reminded about how Kyle had slipped away so easily, like sand pouring through your fingers and falling into the ocean below.

“Dad?”

John couldn’t help it. He took a deep breath and walked to the swinging bench, where he sat down. He would’ve started crying if his son hadn’t been there. John knew he had to be strong for his boy.

“Are you ok, Dad?”

“No, Travis, I’m not.” He gestured for Travis to come sit by him, and when the boy was at his side, he took another deep breath. “Every time I think of Kyle, I imagine you being on the post too.”

“Me?” Travis asked. His voice creaked like a door in need of an oil change. That was fear in the boy’s voice. “Me, Dad?”

“Yeah, son.” This time, a tear fell from John’s eye. “It’s hard enough being the one who found him, even harder being the one who was in the room when he died, the one who was *asleep* when he died. But you know what’s the hardest thing, son?”

“No, Dad. What is it?”

“The hardest thing is knowing that you could’ve easily been Kyle. You could’ve accepted a ride from a friendly stranger and his friends, then could’ve been beat to your last breath and tied to a post.”

Travis nodded. He stared at the baseball resting on his legs.

“A part of me,” John continued, knowing that Travis’ attention was still peaked, “feels like one of my sons are dead, one I hadn’t seen because I’d let my wife convince me to put him up for adoption.”

“I love you, Dad.”

John nodded. The unexpected words brought him a smile, a luxury he could rarely afford in the past months.

“I love you too, Travis.”

Young invited him to his place a few days later. John stood at the door to Young’s apartment, waiting for the man to come to the door. After a few minutes of waiting, he was about to knock again before the door opened.

“Hey, Young, I was just gonna...”

John stopped when he saw a different man. This man was bigger, with a

chest adorned with muscles and tanned skin. He looked like he had some Italian in him.

“Oh... Hi. You must be Young’s boyfriend?”

“Yeah, Young’s in the shower. Come in.”

John nodded and passed through the doorframe. He took a look at Young’s boyfriend, saw that he wasn’t wearing shoes, then took his own off.

“Sorry, I never got your name.”

“That’s ‘cause I never introduced myself,” the man smiled. “I’m Santo.”

“And I’m John, Young’s friend.”

“Yeah, he said he was gonna invite a friend over.”

“Yeah.” John rubbed the back of his neck, not sure what to say.

“You’re the guy that found the kid?”

John nodded, sighing.

“Yeah. Young was talking about you when he came to see me at the school. He said a lot of good things about you.”

“I try to be good to him,” Santo said. “He thought I was gonna make a big deal of him being upset over the kid.”

“I assume you weren’t?”

“No. I’ve been more concerned than anything.”

John nodded and took a seat at the counter, sliding up into a stool.

“Sorry, may I?”

“Yeah, I don’t care.”

John nodded. He had just accepted a soda when he heard Young speak.

“Hey, Santo! Did John here get yet, I...”

Young stopped speaking when he saw John. John gave the younger man a small smile when he readjusted the towel around his waist.

“Sorry. I would’ve taken a shorter shower if I’d’ve known you’d be here so quick.”

“It’s all right,” John smiled.

“And besides,” Young said, walking over to Santo. “Mr. Italian here’s got a bad habit of not letting me know when people are in the apartment.”

“At least you’ve taken to putting a towel on,” Santo grinned.

“Last time I walked out without anything on, and in front of my brother too!”

“Ah, he got a kick out of it.”

Santo winked. Young punched his shoulder, then kissed Santo before walking down the hall.

“You two seem to get along well.”

“We do,” Santo said, leaning against the counter. “He’s a nice guy. You pick up hot guys at the bar, you know? You get ‘em before they get old and fat.”

John smiled and looked up as Young appeared out of the hall. He pulled a

shirt over his head before he reached John.

"Go get a shirt on, babe."

"You like seeing my big muscles," Santo said, lowering his voice. "It turns you on."

"But not in front of my guest."

Santo winked and kissed Young's cheek before walking down the hall.

"Thanks for coming over, John."

"It's no problem. How come you wanted me over?"

"Because I wanted to talk about... About Kyle."

John nodded. He followed his friend to the living room and sat down on the couch. Young, meanwhile, took his seat in a small recliner and let his elbows rest on his knees. He stared at the glass coffee table for several long moments before speaking.

"I called the police department to see if they could tell me anything. They said they couldn't tell me anything."

"Same here.."

"I asked Santo if he could find some stuff out for us. One of his friends is a police officer."

"And?"

"And the guy told Santo he'd get fired if he went poking around for info. He also said Santo could get arrested for conspiracy to disrupt an investigation, or whatever the hell it's called."

John sighed.

So much for whatever connections Young had.

"So... I guess we're gonna be waiting then, huh?"

"Seems that way."

John nodded. Santo came out from the hall, saw Young's worried face, then walked to the recliner, where he leaned over it.

"Hey, babe. You ok?"

"Yeah, just bummed about not knowing anything."

"I know," Santo sighed. "It'll be ok, Young. They'll get 'em."

Young nodded. He reached up, touching Santo's face, then brought the man down for a kiss. And as John watched the two men, he felt an intimate spark of love between the two of them, one that he wasn't sure he should be feeling or not.

"Nora?"

Nora looked up from her book. John sighed and reached out, touching her arm.

"I'm sorry about everything."

"About what, John?"

“Worrying you when I went and posted flyers, my mood swings, me not being a good husband and a good father.”

“You’re a good husband, John, and you know you’re a good father. Travis thinks the world of you.”

“I feel like a lousy husband and a shitty dad though.”

“It’ll get better, John. I promise.”

John nodded. He rolled over and stared at the wall, where the light from his wife’s lamp wasn’t as bothering.

“John?”

“What?”

“Are you still thinking about him?”

“Every day, every other minute,” John said. “Don’t tell me not to, Nora.”

“I won’t. I was just asking.”

John nodded. He closed his eyes and saw the young man’s face. He saw his smile, his joy, his happiness. He saw everything about Kyle. Most importantly, John saw everything he needed to see, when he had never seen it.

He rode out to the field the fourth month after the investigation began. As he approached the curve of the road that led to the field, John couldn’t help but wonder if he would see Kyle. He couldn’t help but wonder if he would see Kyle’s body lying there, tied to a post, and he could not help but wonder if he would see the attack through some form of ghostly communication. Would he see the brutal blows that were delivered to his other son? Kyle, the young man who had captured John’s heart with a simple look?

No, don’t think about that.

He gave the bike an extra boost, pumping his legs harder. He came around the curve, keeping his feet still to slow the bike down.

Then he saw it.

The post.

He stopped and stared at it. The urge to step forward and touch it was great, but he resisted. Maybe if he touched the last place Kyle was, it would bring the two of them closer. Maybe, just maybe, if he touched the post where his blood and sweat and tears had once been, John would know the pain the young man suffered. Maybe, just maybe, just maybe...

He cried. John got off the bike, let it fall to the side of the road, and cried. So many emotions were coming at once. Hurt, anger, pain, misery, agony; five emotions that set his body on fire in ways that he had never felt. He wanted to tear the bastards apart, to spit in their mouths, to piss on them until they drowned.

“No,” he choked out. “You’re not like that.”

But what was he? Really, what *was* he? What was he becoming? Here he was, on his knees in front of an old field, crying over a boy he had never even

spoken to.

"He was my son," John sobbed. "He was the son I had only just found that night."

John had never held and nurtured a complete stranger like Kyle, so it was only natural for him to think of the young man as his son. When he saw Kyle's face in his mind, he saw Travis, and when he saw Travis at home, he saw Kyle. Two different young men separated by a few years, a few DNA strands. But at the core, Kyle and Travis were the same men. Because when Adam and Eve made love, they gave birth to the first two sons, and one who murdered the other, separating two brothers...

That was when John realized that his son and Kyle were separated by life and death. And that was also when he realized that, no matter how hard he tried, Kyle would never come back, never again to grace the world with his presence.

That was when John took a deep breath, stood, and got back on his bike. He pedaled back home, wanting to hold his son in his own two arms.

"Dad? You ok?"

John nodded. He leaned against the counter and took a few deep breaths. The tears on his face were more than obvious.

"You went the same way on your bike ride, didn't you?"

"Yeah," John choked. "I did."

John kept his head down. He didn't want his son to see how red his face was.

"Dad?"

The hand on his back made John feel so much better.

"Where's your mother?"

"At a friend's."

John nodded. He took another deep breath, then expelled it. His hot breath tickled the whiskers on his face. He resisted the urge to scratch them.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"It's not your fault, Trav. I should've gone a different way."

"It was the first time you went riding in four months... I should've went with you."

"It's ok, Travis. I'll be fine."

"You keep telling me you'll be fine, but you keep crying, Dad."

John looked up at his son and smiled.

"Kinda hard not to cry when you're in my situation, kid."

Travis nodded. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around John's chest.

"It's ok, Dad."

"It'll be ok," John agreed, setting his hand on his son's back, resting his

head in the boy's neck. "Everything will be fine."

The fifth month, he was put on antidepressants. The look on his boss' face when he told him a psychiatrist had put him on depression drugs had been priceless, that of worry and fear.

"I'll be ok," John said, looking up at the principal. "You know that, sir."

"You've been putting too much of yourself into something that happened five months ago, John."

"I found him tied to a post, sir."

Jordan Hock, the principal, had nothing to say. Most people didn't have anything to say when John told them he had found the young man beaten and bloody on a post. It was almost as if, by telling someone the young man's fate, they were stoned inside their mind, rocks bouncing off their ribs until they finally shattered and pierced their lungs.

"Well... I can understand how that might be affecting you."

"No, sir," John sighed. "You can't."

"You don't have to call me sir, John. But you're right, I'll probably never understand it." Jordan Hock leaned back in his seat. John knew that the man was trying to figure out what to do. "Look, it's May, right? The school year's almost done."

"Yes sir. I... I feel uncomfortable, so... I'll just call you sir."

"I can get a substitute in for the last three weeks."

"I have tests, sir," John said. "I..."

"There are other English teachers, John."

"I know, but..."

"Please, John. I'm not asking you if this is ok."

John nodded. The realization that he was being told to leave was slowly sinking in. He stared at his hands, waiting for Mr. Hock to say anything else. When he finally didn't, John sighed and looked up at the man.

"Am I being fired?" he finally asked.

"No, you're not being fired. You've been with us for five years, John. Why would I fire you?"

"I don't know," John said. "I think I'm going through my mid-life crisis or something. I turned forty last month, you know?"

"I didn't," Jordan said. "Happy birthday."

John smiled.

"I never imagined I'd go through something like this."

"Most people don't."

John nodded. He stood and went for the door, then stopped. He turned and offered his hand to his boss.

"Thank you, sir."

“Just take some time to get your life back together,” Jordan said, gripping John’s hand. “You’re a strong man, John. A lot of men would’ve cracked under the kind of pressure you’re going through.”

“Your mother still at work?”

“Yeah, Dad,” Travis said. “How come you’re home so early?”

“It’s four, son.”

“You don’t usually get home until five.”

John sighed and gestured his son to sit down. John stood beside the table, balancing his weight on one foot, then the other. He looked at a nearby picture of him and his family before speaking.

“Your principal let me go.”

“He fired you?”

“No... He just told me that I needed to take some time off.”

“How much time?”

“I’ll be working next year, if that’s any news.”

Travis nodded.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know, but still; Mr. Hock let you go.”

“Probably for the better anyway.”

“Dad, why...”

John held up his bottle of pills. He wiggled the container in his fingers, then set it down and passed it to his son. Travis picked up the bottle, his eyes darting over the prescription.

“You’re on antidepressants, Dad?”

“Yeah.”

John rubbed the back of his neck and sat down beside his son. He tried to reach out and wrap his arm around his boy, but stopped. He took another deep breath, tried again, and failed.

“Dad?”

“I feel like a bad dad, Travis.”

“You’re not a bad dad.”

“I feel like one.”

Travis reached out and wrapped his arms around his father.

“Don’t say you’re a bad dad.”

“All right, I won’t.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

When school was out and June was just beginning to grace its presence,

the sixth month since Kyle's death, Young called John and asked if he wanted to go on a roadtrip with him and Santo.

"Where are we going?" John asked, looking over at his son, who was watching TV in the living room. "I mean, where are you guys going?"

"Jersey."

"How come?"

"Just to get out of New York."

"I don't know if I should go... I have a wife and son here, Young."

"Well, we won't be gone for too long. It's just gonna be for a week."

"I'll stay here. Nora's been working longer hours and doesn't get home until really late. I need to be here for my son."

"All right. I'll call you after we get back, John. Bye."

"Bye."

John hung up the phone.

"Young was inviting you up down to Jersey?"

"Yeah. I wanted to stay here though."

"How come?"

"Wanted to spend some quality time with my son," John smiled. "Hope you're not getting tired of your old man yet."

"I'm not, Dad. Why would you think that?"

John shrugged and wrapped an arm around Travis, following him into the living room.

He took Travis out on a guy's day. Nora had decided to go visit her parents down in Ohio and would be gone for a few weeks. After a long packing session and an even extra long wait for Nora to leave, John packed him and his son in his small car and drove into downtown New York.

"Anywhere in particular you want to go?" John asked, stopping at a red light and taking a glance at his son.

"Not really."

"The mall?"

"I don't care."

John nodded and continued down the street. Neon signs, beggars with signs, women broadcasting themselves with the signs of their bodies; all of them were signs, just like the sign he had put up for Kyle's death.

He'd walked this road all those months ago, posting flyers of the young man who's identity he was trying to find.

"Dad?"

"What?" John asked, blinking.

"You still there?"

John nodded. He was thankful that his son had taken to watching him,

especially when he was driving or cooking. He'd almost burned his hand when he'd been cooking breakfast that morning, and just now, he could've rear-ended a car or hit someone walking across the street.

"I'm here, buddy."

"Ok. I was just making sure."

"Thanks for watching out for me, Travis. It means a lot to a man when he knows his son is keeping an eye on him. It makes me feel a little shitty though."

"Don't feel that way, Dad. I try to make you feel better, Dad. I've been trying since... you know."

John nodded.

Oh, how he wished he didn't know. How he wished Kyle hadn't been hanging from that post on that cold, December morning, that December morning when there had been no snow but a terribly cold chill. He wished Kyle would've been at *someone's* house.

Young felt guilty because he didn't take Kyle home with him.

And Young *still* felt guilty. John wasn't sure if the younger man would ever forgive himself for not offering Kyle a place to stay that night.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"The mall's here."

John nodded and pulled into a parking spot.

"Thank you," John said as the waiter placed the burgers and fries in front of them. "I appreciate it."

The man smiled and left John and his son to their food. John unwrapped his burger and took a bite out of it. The hot, juicy tastes made his head spin. God, that burger tasted good.

"You got everything you wanted on yours, right, Travis?"

"Yeah... The only thing I didn't get was onions, pickles and lettuce."

"You only got cheese and tomatoes," John laughed. "That would've been easier to say."

"I guess," Travis shrugged.

"They're ok though, right?"

"Yeah, Dad. Thanks."

John nodded. He grabbed a handful of fries and put them on his hamburger wrapper. He dipped one in ketchup and lifted it to his mouth.

Blood...

John shivered and quickly bit into the fry. He pushed the ketchup away. The overt redness of the condiment was disturbing. For some strange reason, the thick, pulpy substance reminded him of blood.

"Here, don't open that," John said, stopping Travis before he could open

his packet of ketchup. "Take mine."

"You don't want it?"

"Nah," John said. "I'm ok."

"I thought you ate your fries with ketchup?"

"Not in the mood for ketchup."

Or blood, his conscience taunted.

Travis gave him an odd look, but shrugged and squeezed the rest of John's ketchup out. John watched the boy and sighed, taking another bite of his burger.

"Are you sure you're ok, Dad?"

"I'm sure, son. Just thinking about some stuff."

Travis didn't say anything, nor did he make any gesture that would give John any reassurance. He bowed his head and decided to keep quiet, but keep his attention on his son in case he wanted to ask something.

That night, John slept on the couch while Travis went to his room. He felt better in the living room, where he could trace the lines of paint on the ceiling. So far, he'd followed one line to the other side of the room, then followed it down the wall.

It's pretty sad...

It was pretty sad when a man was following a line of paint to try and keep other thoughts from his mind. He felt like going to his son's room and asking if he could lay down with him, but felt like he shouldn't.

He didn't want to worry Travis any more than he already was.

They say some drugs can't cure all pain, Johnny boy. And the drugs you're on can't cure yours.

The antidepressants had done little to keep him from thinking about Kyle. While they had improved his mood and outlook some, they hadn't done much to help the depression. Just knowing that Kyle was still in a morgue, his body frozen in time, waiting for his killers to be found, was horrifying. He'd wake up from bad dreams thinking he was lying in the holding chamber with Kyle, touching the young man's smooth, pink lips, or trailing his fingers down his long, defined jaw.

"Dad?"

"I'm here, Travis," John said, blinking, looking up at his son. "You ok?"

"I should be asking if you're ok," the boy said. "You've been laying there for five minutes. I don't think you've blinked more than a few times."

John sat up. The yawn that escaped his mouth made him dizzy. The center of his head hurt for a short moment, and it wasn't until the pain dulled that he felt like talking.

"I'm just thinking, Travis. And before you ask, I can't help it."

"I know you can't, Dad."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me sorry."

"I'm trying here, son."

"Trying to what, Dad?"

John sighed and stood.

"Trying to be a good dad. I feel like I'm upsetting you because of the mood I've been in."

"You haven't, Dad; don't say that."

John gave the boy a short nod.

"You care if I lay down with you, son?"

Travis shook his head and gestured for John to follow him.

The seventh month yielded no further results. It was almost immediately when Young and Santo came back from their extended vacation that they invited John to their apartment.

"Your wife's still been upstate with her mother?" Young asked, sipping his coffee.

"Yeah."

"What about your kid?"

"He's out with his friends."

John set his hands on his knees. He felt comfortable around the couple. Young, with his calm, reserved outlooks, and Santo, with his attractive smile and his forward personality.

John wished he could be like the two of them.

"How have you and your son been getting along?" Santo asked, crawling over the couch and sitting down behind Young, scooting up closer to the man so he could set his hands on Young's abs.

"Fine," John said. "I just wish I could quit acting like a depressed dumbass around him."

"He's picking up on it," Young said, more as a statement than a question.

"Yeah, he is."

"You've been spending more time with him like I suggested, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

"As long as you're doing things with him and making him happy, you shouldn't have to worry about him. It's only natural for a boy to worry about his father when they're close."

John smiled. Santo gave him a quick wink and nuzzled his head in Young's neck.

"Have you two ever considered... Uh..." John shook his head.

"Adopting?" Young asked.

"Oh, no," Santo chuckled. "You know how hard it is for two guys like me and Young here to get a kid?"

"I'm not good around kids anyway," Young sighed. "I'm ok if they're not mine, but I don't think I'd be a good parent."

"You would too, baby."

"I work at a bar from seven at night to three in the morning. That's not really the kind of schedule a parent should have."

"What about you, Santo? What do you do?"

"I work at a restaurant. I start at four and get off at eleven at night."

"I can see where you guys are coming from," John sighed. "I'm glad I don't have jobs that keep me away from my son."

"You do what you do, right?" Young asked. "I tried to go to school, but I couldn't do it."

"I've got a degree in cooking, but it doesn't really help," Santo added. "I can get jobs at restaurants easy, but that's it."

"We're trying to get a house," Young sighed. "We've got a long way to go."

John nodded. Just looking at the two men and seeing how much they cared about each other made him wonder why someone could say bad things about gay men. Sure, there were the flamers who yelled 'Hey bitches!' every other minute, and there were the sex hounds who ran the porn industry, but then there were couples like Young and Santo, who were two normal guys trying to make it in the world as a loving couple.

It made him wonder why a person would kill someone just because of their sexual orientation.

Please, don't start again.

In a way, he felt comfortable around the two men. But in another way, they always stirred up memories of Kyle. If only he could have heard the young man's voice...

"John?"

"Yeah, Young?"

"Are you ok?"

"I'm ok," John said. "Kinda tired. I've been sharing the bed with my kid since Nora's been gone."

"You sleep easier that way?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing wrong with that," Santo said, crawling out from behind Young and standing. "Is your kid gonna be home tonight?"

"Yeah," John said, eyeing the Italian. "Why?"

"I was gonna make some stuff for me and Young, but I can make some extra for you guys."

"You don't have to do that," John said. "Really, it's fine."

"Nah, that's cool," Santo smiled. "I make a mean party potato and damn good beef soup. It'll give you and your kid something to eat for the next few days."

"Santo..."

"Don't try to stop him, John," Young smiled. "I learned firsthand that trying to stop Santo from doing something good for someone else is useless."

When John got home, carrying the pan of potatoes and the big container of soup, Travis was pulling a soda out of the fridge.

"What've you got there, Dad?"

"Young's partner made us some onion potatoes and beef soup. You want some?"

"I guess," Travis shrugged. "Have you eaten?"

"Yeah, and he's a damn good cook too."

Travis smiled and accepted the plate that John offered. John opened the stuff and got a small plateful of potatoes and a bowl of soup for his son.

"That stuff's still warm, so watch out."

Travis nodded. He lifted some of the potato off the plate, blew on it, then took a small nibble before eating what he had on his fork.

"It's good."

"Told ya," John winked. "Glad you like it. I got the recipe from Santo, so I can make it."

Travis nodded and continued eating. John smiled at his son and rubbed his back.

"You ok, Dad?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," John smiled. "I've felt better than I had in a really time."

The eighth month brought John more happiness. Nora was back home, Travis was at a friend's place every other day, and John was feeling better than he had in a long time. He'd even started teaching college classes for the summer.

"It's good to hear that you're feeling better," Young said on the other end of the phone. "You're teaching down at the local college?"

"Yeah, I have."

"That's good." The sound of Santo yelping cut Young off. "Shit, I gotta go; Santo just dumped something all over the floor."

"All right," John laughed. "Bye."

"Bye."

John pushed his cell phone into his pocket and stood. He'd go get lunch from the cafeteria, then come back and teach his next class. He made his way up

the steps and out the door.

He saw a group of young men pushing around another man.

"Hey, fag. What'd you say to me?"

The hairs on John's neck and arms went up.

Kyle...

Everything was thrust into a few months ago. He saw Kyle tied to the post, he saw him lying in the hospital bed, he saw a sheet being pulled over his body before he was transferred on a gurney, where he was wheeled out of the room.

No, that's not going to happen.

"Hey!" John yelled. "Get out of here!"

The young men looked up and bolted when they saw John. The young man lying on the ground was bleeding from his lip.

"Hey," John said, getting down on one knee and placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "You ok?"

"The bastards beat me up," the young man said, spitting blood.

John looked into the young man's face. The eyeliner and pink strands in his brown hair made him an easy target.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Thank you, sir."

John nodded. He helped the young man to his feet, then bent down and picked up a cell phone. He saw the crack in it and grimaced.

"Your phone..."

"Better than my face," the young man said, forcing a laugh, which came out more nervous than anything else. "Thank you, Mr..."

"Newman," John said. "I'm teaching English for the summer."

"Newman," the young man said. He wiped the blood off his lips with the back of one hand, smiling, his teeth tinted with red. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"It's no trouble," John said, smiling. "I'm glad I could help."

The young man smiled and walked off. In the bottom of John's heart, he knew that he wouldn't be able to teach here, not when something like this had just happened.

He turned and made his way back to his office, ready to pack everything up. He'd been so excited about starting the summer off, but now, with tears in his eyes, he knew that wasn't going to happen.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Travis," John smiled. "Just realized I couldn't work at the college."

"How come?"

John sighed and told his son everything about what had happened. When he was done, Travis nodded and offered John his hand.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“He reminded me of Kyle,” John sighed. “When I saw them beating on him, Travis, I saw what happened to Kyle...”

John took a deep breath and tightened his grip on Kyle’s hand.

“It’ll be all right, son. Everything will be fine.”

Nine months after Kyle’s death and the beginning of the investigation, John started back at the high school. He worked in the mornings and went home before lunch, specifically assigned by Jordan Hock after hearing that he was still on the medicine.

“You’re still not at your best, John. You need to take it easy. I thought everything would be fine by now.”

“No, it’s not fine, Jordan. They still haven’t arrested the guys Young saw that night, the ones that were making fun of him.”

John set his hands on his lap and looked up at his boss.

“This works. I like the schedule. The first week was good.”

“I just wish you were at your best, John.”

“In all honesty, I do too, sir. A man can’t control his emotions; no one can. You already know that.”

“Some people can, John.”

“No,” John chuckled. “They can keep them bottled up, but you can’t control them.”

Jordan nodded and gestured John off. John left the office and walked out into the parking lot, where he climbed into his car and made his way home. His mind started drifting back to the past, back on Kyle, and it wasn’t long after that he found himself traveling on a familiar road.

He was traveling on the road Kyle had died on...

Again.

“Why am I doing this to myself?”

He pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. Although he wasn’t near the corn field, he would be there soon. Just the thought of passing by it again made him nervous, anxious, even. Anxious because he wanted to see Kyle’s killers brought to justice, nervous because, in his mind, he was still afraid of seeing Kyle on that post.

John made a u-turn and headed for home.

When John got home, he expected his son to be there. It wasn’t long before he remembered that Travis was still in school.

The thought settled John’s mind.

At least he's somewhere safe.

Travis was straight, he was cool, everyone liked him. School was like a playground for him. He never complained of anything, except the occasional bad grade on a test, but that was it.

Some kids had it so easy. Some had good parents that gave them whatever they wanted, some had good friends that would do anything for them. And some kids weren't given the biological abnormality of homosexuality, something that occurred in only a small percent of the total human population.

Some kids were lucky.

John wished Kyle had been that lucky.

He walked to the phone and saw the answering machine blinking. He pressed the button and heard a cough on the other end before the person started to speak.

"Hey John." It was Young. "Hope you've been doing ok. Not sure what you've been up to, but I wanted to let you know that I'll be bartending tonight if you want to come down for a drink. It's on me. Santo would come, but he's always dead after getting home from the restaurant. Thanks John, see you later if you decide to come to the bar. If you don't come, no sweat. I'll see you around. Bye."

John smiled. He didn't have a lot of friends, and the few he had rarely called or invited him out. In the few months he had known Young, they had developed a strong relationship.

He considered the man his best friend. He didn't share with his friends what he and Young had. No; he and Young were bound by the sporadic occasion of coming into contact with a young man that had been murdered.

They shared a bond, a bond that most people didn't understand.

They shared a bond of blood.

"Thanks for inviting me, Young."

"Hey, no trouble," Young smiled. "I get bored here anyway. The only people that come here are straight assholes."

"I'm straight," John muttered.

"Yeah, but you're not an asshole," Young laughed.

Young looked up from his drinks and gave John a quick wink before delivering a few drinks to a couple across the room. While John waited, he looked at the neon on the wall and the bottles on the shelves.

It was a nice bar.

"Sorry," Young said, slapping his shoulder before stepping behind the bar.

"What're you telling me sorry for? You're working."

"Yeah, but I wish we could just sit and talk. I'm the only one here right

now.”

John nodded and accepted a quick drink Young mixed for him.

“I’ll pay you for these.”

“Don’t sweat it, John. Besides, the reason the drinks costs so much is because we have to add royalty price on it.”

“Royalty price?”

“It’s the mockup. You know? It costs a dollar to make a pack of pencils, but they always charge five? It’s the same with beer.”

Young’s smile made John relax a little more. If he had been in Santo’s place the first time he had met young, he would’ve made a move right away.

“Did you meet Santo here?”

“Yeah,” Young smiled. “He was sitting right where you were, actually.”

“How’d he get your attention? He say something bad in Italian?”

“Heh, no,” Young laughed. Then, leaning in closer, he whispered, “He only does that when we’re having sex.”

John grinned and patted Young’s shoulder.

“Well, from what I’ve seen of him, he’s a great guy. I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah. Santo’s told me to get you over there when we’re both not working or don’t have to work.”

“Work sucks, huh?”

“Yeah, it does,” Young sighed.

“I wish I could really complain about it. I’ve only been working for four hours in the morning. My boss still doesn’t want me to work full days.”

“How come?”

“I’m still on the antidepressants. Well, that, and he doesn’t want me working so long anyway. He says half-days are good enough. I really have no choice though, since he’s got another teacher for the other half of my day.”

Young frowned, looking up to listen to a man who shouted an order.

“I’m sorry, John.”

“They’ll get them soon, Young.”

“I know.”

“It probably hasn’t been bothering you all that much, huh?”

Young shook his head, picking a tray up.

“No, John... I’m still thinking about him.”

Ten months after Kyle had died, the weather was starting to chill. Around town, boys and girl wore masks of leather or plastic to conceal their identities, toting around containers that would reap the sweets of the town.

John wasn’t into Halloween, although he was always stuck doing some kind of assignment on it during the school. It wasn’t because he *wanted* to; it was because he *had* to. The other English teachers were studying old Halloween

legends, so, naturally, all of his students expected him to.

He feared a riot otherwise.

“Hey, stud; watcha reading?”

John looked up at Young and smiled.

“I’m sorry, young man, but I haven’t seen you in my class before.”

“That’s because I’m an ex student,” Young winked, closing the door.

“What’re you reading?”

“*Dracula*,” John said, holding the book up.

“Ooh,” Young smiled. “That’s cool. Santo’s telling me I need to be a vampire for Halloween. He doesn’t plan on letting me go anywhere though.” Young winked and sat down beside the desk. “Little does he know I enjoy playing the roll of a... Well, not blood sucking, but...”

“You’re a perv, you know?” John laughed, punching Young’s shoulder.

“You’re lucky I’m in here by myself.”

“Is that an invitation, Mr. Newman?”

John blushed and turned his head away for a brief moment, smiling when Young started laughing.

“I don’t do students.”

“What about ex students?”

“Did you come in here just to tease me, or did you need anything?”

“I got bored, so I came down here. Santo’s at work.”

“I see why you were bored,” John said, returning Young a wink.

“Hey now, we don’t have to start doing that.”

“*We?*”

“All right, all right, you win.”

John smiled and looked down at the book.

“You know how hard it is trying to get sophomores interested in *Dracula*?”

“About as hard as... Uh... I...” Young stopped to try to think of something, but ended up failing in the long run. “No, I don’t.”

“Hard.”

“I can imagine. The book’s not the most exciting piece of literature in the world. You should’ve picked something else. Salem’s Lot is a vampire novel.”

“Most of the guy’s stuff is banned in our library, Young.”

“Well, that fucking sucks.” Young ran his tongue along his lips and smiled. “You still on lunch for a little while longer?”

“A half hour.”

“You care if I hang out?”

“No, I don’t care. Besides, I usually just speed read through *Dracula*.”

“You probably know everything about that book if you read it every year.”

"Yeah. I rarely switch it up. It's *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*."

"I feel for you, buddy."

John smiled and watched Young fumble through a shoulder pack at his side. He went through it for a minute before he pulled out a hamburger carton.

"I stopped to get stuff for me and Santo."

"You didn't have to do that."

"It's no trouble, John. Keep your damn wallet in your pants."

"I'll pay you back."

"No, John; don't pay me back."

"I'll feel guilty."

"Don't," Young smiled. "All I ever need from you is friendship."

After he had eaten with his wife and son on Thanksgiving day, he drove over to Young and Santo's apartment building. He knocked on the door and pushed his hands into his pockets.

It's getting cold.

Although Young and Santo lived in a small hotel-like apartment, it probably wasn't as warm as living in an actual apartment building. With the snow falling and the wind blowing, it was nearly freezing out here.

"Shit, dude," Santo said, opening the door. "Get your ass in here."

Santo grabbed John by his coat and pulled him into the apartment, closing and locking the door behind him.

"Hey, John," Young said, looking up from a book he was reading, sipping his coffee before adjusting the blanket around his shoulders. "I didn't think I'd see you over here."

"I can leave, if you want."

"I'm the one who told you to stop by if you felt like it," Young smiled. "You want a blanket?"

"No, I'm awake. I can't see why you and Santo aren't wearing shirts though; it's freezing in here."

"We've got the heater going."

"You were in the cold too," Santo said, slapping John's back. "You want something to eat?"

"Oh no, I'm stuffed," John laughed. "Nora cooked enough food to last us for days."

"Guess that means you don't want us to stock you up?" Santo grinned.

"No, that's fine. You guys have done a lot for me and my family, more than anyone else has done."

"We're your friends," Young smiled, sitting the book down. "You want some coffee, John? Or hot chocolate?"

"Coffee sounds good."

"I'll get it," Santo said.

"No you don't. You sit down, big guy."

Young grabbed his boyfriend's arm and gently pushed him into the recliner.

"You've been running around all morning, you just sit and relax."

"All right, babe."

The two exchanged a kiss before Young walked into the kitchen, pouring John a cup of coffee.

"Hope it's all right. Me and Santo drink ours with flavored creamer."

"That's fine," John said, sipping the drink. "Tastes better flavored anyway."

"Santo can't stand the taste of coffee without creamer."

"The shit's nasty without it," the Italian laughed.

John smiled and looked out the window. The snow was pouring down harder than ever.

"You probably shouldn't leave until this lets up," Young said. "I wouldn't drive in this if I were you, and I doubt Santo would."

"Hell no I wouldn't."

John smiled and raised his coffee cup in a short gesture of agreement.

"I was gonna work at the bar tonight too," Young said. "Not for more than an hour or two, but they're paying double-time. I think I'll just stay here tonight."

"Good," Santo smiled, moving from the recliner to the couch, positioning himself behind Young. "You need a break, baby."

"So do you. You work just as hard as I do."

"Yeah, but you work until three in the morning."

"That's when I don't have to close," Young laughed. "I'll stay here. Besides, I'd rather go to bed with you than work tonight anyway."

"I think John's gonna have to stay too," Santo winked. "The storm's getting worse. I wouldn't be surprised if the power went out."

"I should call my wife," John said, standing, reaching for his cell phone. "Tell her I'm spending the night here."

"Psst, John. You ok?"

John opened his eyes and nodded at Young. The man smiled and sat across from him, shivering.

"Should've put a robe or something on."

"It's freezing in here and you're walking around in your underwear."

"My point exactly," Young laughed. "I came out to check on you."

"I'm ok."

"You sure? You warm enough?"

“Yeah, I’m warm enough.”

Young nodded and walked to the fridge. He reached in and grabbed a soda, sipping on it for a short moment before looking back at John.

“You want something?”

“No, I’m ok.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Thanks anyway.”

Young nodded and closed the door. He gave John a short goodnight wave before disappearing down the hall.

It felt good to be here, with a friend.

It felt like the best thing in the world.

On Christmas day, eleven months after Kyle had been murdered, John celebrated a joyous holiday with his family. And while he himself wasn’t Christian, nor very religious for that matter, they still celebrated.

The look on Travis’ face after he had walked out in the driveway and saw the car with the bow on top made John feel like the best dad in the world.

Now, he sat at the counter, sipping coffee and slowly trying to wake up. Christmas morning was always hectic, what with presents and Nora’s need to constantly take pictures.

Ah well, that’s Christmas for you.

It only came once a year; he could deal with it.

“Hey, Dad?”

“What is it, sport?” John asked, rotating in his bar stool until he was looking at Travis.

“Thanks for the car.”

“You’ve told me only a hundred times,” John laughed, pulling his son into a hug. “It’s no trouble, bud.”

“How’d you pay for it?”

“That’s a secret,” John winked.

“Dad!”

“I’m kidding, son. I got some money from the teachers at the school, as a Christmas present.”

“And you bought my car with it?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“That money sure as hell wasn’t going to go anywhere otherwise.”

Travis smiled and wrapped his arms around John again.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You don’t have to thank me, buddy,” John whispered.

John closed his eyes. He saw Kyle’s face in his mind and opened them

once more, making sure that it was his own son he was holding and not anyone else.

“I love you, son.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

John tightened his grip on his son and rested his head on the boy’s shoulder.

He hoped the feeling of love between him and his son would never be broken.

“So... It’s been a year,” Young said.

John nodded and sighed.

“Yeah, I know.”

“They’re being held under suspicion?”

John looked up at Young, nodding.

“Yeah. They’re trying to get a warrant for the car.”

“I hope they do it soon,” Young sighed. “Even though it’s been a long time, every night before I fall asleep, I see Kyle’s body lying in a cold storage unit. It... It hurts, John.”

John reached out and gripped Young’s shoulder. The younger man accepted John’s gesture and openly cried. A few of the other patrons turned and eyed them, but they quickly returned to their own business after John glared at them.

“I know,” John whispered. “It’s almost over, Young. Kyle’s killers are going to be brought to justice.”

“Dad?”

“What is it, Travis?”

“Are the guys in jail?”

John nodded.

“In jail, as in ‘under suspicion.’ Some of the tests came back, but not all of them.”

“Oh.” Travis stabbed at the onion potato that Santo had brought over earlier, sticking some of it in his mouth before speaking. “What kind of tests?”

“I don’t know, buddy. All Young was able to tell me was that the guys are being held under suspicion. They’re not being charged with anything right now.”

Once again, Travis nodded.

“Does that make you feel better?”

“What?”

“Knowing the guys that killed him are behind bars?”

John nodded. The needle in his heart dug deeper, but the pain wasn’t extremely bad. The pain was mostly from the unexpected question that Travis had

asked.

"It makes me feel better, yeah."

"You've been depressed a lot the last year, Dad."

"I know, son. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to tell me you're sorry. I know how it must feel."

"I hope you've never felt like I have," John sighed. "I'd hate for you to feel like that."

"Is it bad, Dad? What you've felt?"

"Bad enough to where family and friends can't help lessen the pain? Yes, Trav; that's how bad it is."

Travis nodded and went back to his potatoes. He wasn't sure whether or not his son had suddenly dropped the conversation because he was nervous, or because he didn't want to hurt his father.

"Love you, kid."

"I love you too, Dad."

John smiled and stood, walking for the doorway. He stopped, set his hands on the frame, then turned.

"I'll be up in my office if you need me."

He'd retreated to his office to try and drown out what he was feeling. A book was always a good thing. He'd been stuck on the novel he'd been writing for the past few months, and while he'd written a little in the most recent weeks, it wasn't a decent dent in the overall progress. Twenty pages in three weeks wasn't a whole lot, in his opinion.

Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief...

"Good old Shakespeare," John laughed. "Please, fair sun, kill the envious moon that hangs over my life. Please, just make all my pain go away."

He normally didn't get moody when reading a book, but Shakespeare always did it to him. The man's powerful language and dialogue made it easy to fall into his worlds. Maybe that was why he was considered the greatest writer of all time.

John marked his place, closed the book, and stood. Nora was out visiting her friends in California, so that left him and Travis to themselves for the next few weeks. He sure as hell hoped that his depression didn't suddenly kick up a notch, because he got moodier than hell when it did.

The doctor gave you the pills for that.

Maybe he'd take the month off. Yeah, maybe he would. He'd just tell Jordan that some stuff had come up and that he needed a little break. It had happened before, last year. His boss had given him the rest of May off without little question.

But he suggested that.

Oh well; he'd ask anyway.

"Dad?" A few knocks on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, Travis; come in."

The door opened to reveal his son. John smiled.

"What's up, bud?"

"Not much. I was just wondering what you were doing."

"I was reading," John smiled, lifting up *Romeo and Juliet*. "I got bored."

"Oh," Travis nodded and looked around the office. "I haven't been up here in a while."

"That's because I'm hardly ever up here."

"I know, but still..."

Travis sat down in one of the leather recliners and leaned back, closing his eyes.

"Did you need something, son? I mean, other than to see what I was doing?"

"Not really."

"Travis..."

"All right, all right." Travis stood and walked back toward the door, ready to leave. He stopped and rubbed the back of his neck. "I was wondering if you wanted me to make dinner or not."

"I'll make it." John stood and followed his son out of the room, sighing.

"Sorry, I didn't know how late it was."

"It's ok, Dad."

"No, Travis, it's not," John sighed. "It's about time I get my head out of my ass and start acting like a real father."

The next few months flew by with little to no activity. There hadn't been any calls from the police for him or Young, saying that they needed to ask a few more questions. Nor was there anything being said on the news about the young man who had died so long ago.

No one had said anything about the young man who was sitting in the morgue until John was able to pay for a tombstone.

I've got the money.

John looked up at the police office and sighed. He had originally decided to go in and ask someone about the case, but then he had decided not to. Something about the tall building with the badge insignia jutting from its face intimidated him.

Something about that building reminded him of death.

Kyle.

Yes, it was Kyle. It was Kyle that reminded him that the police

department office meant death, and it was Kyle that reminded him of how long justice took. What if he had decided to hunt the men down himself? What if he had chosen to become a vigilante and end the men's meaningless existences with a few bullets?

That's not true punishment though.

No, death wasn't a good enough punishment.

The only punishment good enough for a murderer was to rot in prison for the rest of his life.

A week later, he got a call saying that the men were now being charged with Kyle's murder. After John got off the phone, he rushed to Young's house and woke the man up with his constant banging at the door.

"Santo was too lazy to get out of bed," Young yawned, grimacing as John pushed him aside and made his way into the apartment. "What's with you?"

"They're *charging* them with Kyle's murder."

Young stared at John and broke out in tears. He wrapped his arms around the younger man and held him close to his chest, letting out a deep breath.

"I don't know how long it'll take for them to start a trial, but they'll want you to speak."

"I know," Young said. "I know, John." They broke the embrace and the younger man turned, walking toward the kitchen. "You want something to drink?"

"No," John sighed, sitting down. "Just... Let it sink in, Young. Just let it sink in."

A few weeks later, John got a call at five-thirty in the morning. It woke him, but not Nora, whom had slept through the first three rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, John, it's me." It was Young's voice. "I'm going in for the trial."

"They never called me."

"I didn't think they would. You only found... Yeah."

"I get what you mean," John whispered, throwing his legs over the bed and walking out of the bedroom, down the hall and into the living room. "Anyway, are you heading out the door?"

"Santo's driving me. I can't tell you anything though, so... Until the trial's over, I'll have to keep everything about the case under wraps."

"How long will the trial take?"

"A month, maybe... I don't know though." Someone else was talking in the background, most likely Santo. "I gotta go, John. I'll talk to you later."

"All right. Good luck."

"Thanks," Young said, a bitter laugh escaping him. "I'll need all the luck

I can get.”

“The first day went all right?”

“It went fine,” Young said, accepting the coffee Santo offered. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, Santo,” John said, lifting his cup and letting the man pour some more coffee.

“It’s no trouble, John. You know what they said about telling people about the trial, Young.”

“I know, I know,” Young said, sipping his coffee. “It’s not like I’m going to tell him anything.”

“I know you wouldn’t, baby. I just don’t want you to get in trouble.”

John nodded and smiled as Santo leaned back in the recliner. The man took a deep breath and yawned.

“You guys aren’t used to getting up at five, are you?”

“Especially when you normally get home from work at three,” Young laughed. “I’m surprised I made it through the first two hours.”

“You worked last night?”

“Yeah, dumb idea, huh? Oh well; I’ve got a thing that’ll keep me out of work so I can be at the trial.”

“That’s good,” John sighed.

“Yeah, I agree,” Santo added. “I’m not going to be able to drive you every morning, babe.”

“I know. You took me for moral support, Santo.”

Santo nodded and moved to the couch. He wrapped his arm around Young’s back and pulled him close.

“Don’t worry, everything’s gonna be ok. They’ll get those bastards.”

“I know,” Young sighed.

“Yeah,” John added. He even managed a smile. “It won’t be long until they’re rotting behind bars.”

“No, it won’t,” Young said. “It won’t be long at all.”

The next few weeks moved on slowly, slower than John had ever imagined it would. Each day felt like a year, and each week felt like a millennia. There wasn’t any way that he could describe the anxious feeling inside him, no word that would ever describe how it felt to know the fate of a group of murderers who have stolen a young man’s life.

Sitting up in his office, he was reading *Romeo and Juliet* again. How ironic was it that he would come to the end of this play when he believed the trial was coming to a close?

And the tragic death of Romeo and Juliet will be over when the last page turns, and I’ll be left feeling lost and helpless when I finally put Kyle to rest.

John set the book down just as the door opened. It was Travis.

"Hey, bud."

"I was just coming up to get you. The pizza's here."

"Did you find the money on the counter?"

"Yeah, I did. You want me to bring you a piece up, or..."

"I'll come down," John said after Travis trailed off. He stood and followed his son out the door. "Thanks for offering to bring some up though."

"It's no problem, Dad."

"I know, but still. It means a lot."

Travis nodded as they walked into the kitchen. Travis pulled out some plates and offered one to John before pulling a piece of the Canadian bacon out of its cardboard box.

"How come you haven't been over at Young's house in the past few weeks?"

"He's been in court, buddy," John said, taking a bite out of his pizza.

"How come you're not there?"

A question I knew would be asked.

"I only found him, son. I didn't see the guys who... Who did it."

Travis only nodded. The young man seemed to realize that John didn't want to be asked about anything else relating to how he found Kyle, what Young had seen the night Kyle had left the bar, or about the trial itself.

He's a smart kid. Not too many sons would shut up without being asked.

No. Most normal teenage boys were as curious as cats, sniffing about the air, their bodies exuding so much testosterone that some people might consider it a drug. Most teenage boys wanted to know *anything* and *everything* that was going on in their lives, even if that included what was going on with their family's personal problems. And in Travis' case, that was the murder that his father had a tight connection to.

Travis was a good kid, one who asked questions, but didn't push any buttons when they didn't need to be pushed.

John got to thinking about Young being in court and sighed, hopeful that the younger man knew what he was doing. He knew that Young would be telling the jury what happened, how he had seen the men pointing and laughing at Kyle, then following him out of the building. Young had even said that he had walked outside and witnessed the men pick Kyle up in their car. That, John believed, would be the key factor in convicting those men for murder.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"You ok?"

"I'm fine," John smiled. "Just thinking about some things, son. That's all."

Travis nodded and went back to his food. At that moment, John wanted to stand and give his son a hug. He was so thankful that Travis was still here, still with him, still *alive*.

That feeling of love would never leave John's heart. He knew that already.

After another agonizing week of waiting for Young to call, John had been starting to give up. He was about ready to call Santo and see what was up until his cell phone rang.

Right when I'm in the middle of shopping too.

He pulled his phone out and looked at the number.

Young.

His heart skipped a beat as he flipped the phone opened.

"Young?" John stopped. His world had turned into a strange utopia, leaving him with the feeling that he was the smallest man in the world. "Is that you?"

"Yes, John," Young said. "We did it, John. They've been convicted."

At that moment, John thought he had died and gone to heaven.

"In other news, the men who brutally beat and then left a young, homeless man to die have been tried for first-degree murder. The two assistants, who claimed not to be a part of the beating, were also charged with first-degree murder.

"Kyle Marks, the nineteen-year-old victim, is a young man whom we should all know and remember. His death was fueled by hate toward a young homosexual who did nothing to deserve what happened to him. And while Kyle should not have died, his death will be a flagstone in the fight for gay rights.

"Keep your children close in your hearts tonight, ladies and gentlemen. You might never know when your son or daughter might not come back home. That is all. Goodnight."

John turned the TV off and looked over at Young. They were both upset, Young to the point of crying. But the fact that Kyle Marks' murderers were now sitting behind bars with life in prison brought them some peace.

John looked at the picture he had beside him. A smaller picture of Kyle, a wallet-sized one.

You'll always be in my heart, John said, slipping the picture into his wallet. *You won't be forgotten, Kyle.*

Young and John were the only two at Kyle's funeral, since Santo had decided to stay behind to let the two say their final goodbyes. John and Young had stayed until the young man was safely in the ground.

"It's all right," John said, gripping Young's shoulder.

"I know," Young sighed. "It's just that... if I had left him come back home with me for the night, he wouldn't be gone."

"You can't feel responsible for his death," John said, looking at the headstone they were placing above the burial sight. "You can't live with hurt in your heart, because he'll never be free if you think you're responsible."

Young nodded. When they finished setting the tombstone in, Young bent down and placed his rose beside the grave. He stayed there for a moment, whispering something John couldn't hear, before touching the grave. He let his hand stay there for a long while before he stood.

"I'm going home. Thank you, John. You... You mean so much to me."

John nodded. He hugged the younger man, then waved him goodbye as he walked back to his car.

Well, this is it, John thought. I have to say goodbye.

John stared at the tombstone. An angel bent in prayer sat atop the grave, silently weeping for the one under it. John bowed his head, bent down, and laid his rose there.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you," John whispered, tracing Kyle's name on the stone. "I hope that you'll watch over me, Kyle, for you're in a much better place than I am."

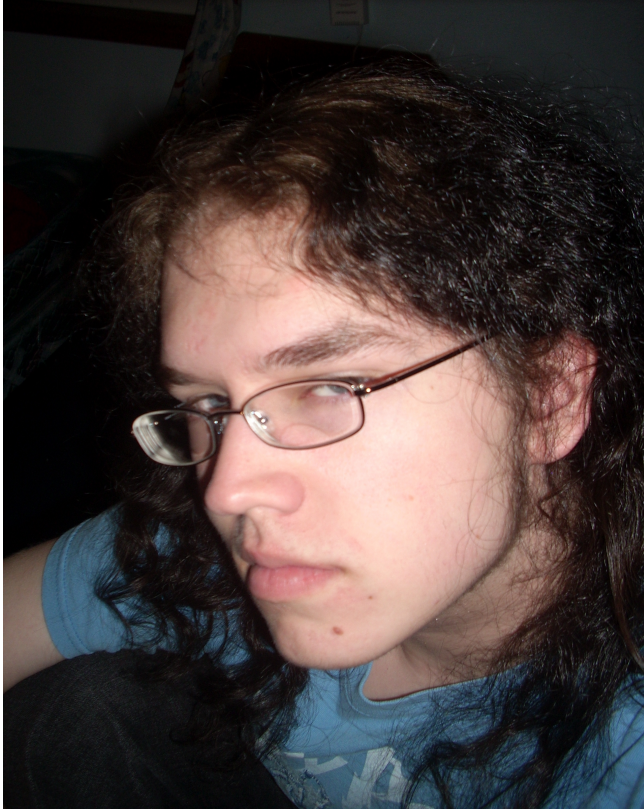
John stood and began to walk away, but before he did, he stopped.

He stared at the words embedded on the tombstone, then walked away.

I am not alone, the tombstone whispered to any and all who stared at it. For I am in the hearts of two men who cared. One who promised he'd be there for me, and another who brought me justice.

My name is Kyle Marks.

And I died because I was gay.



Kody Boye started writing dark fiction in November 2006. In May 2007, his first short story, *[A] Prom Queen's Revenge*, was published.

Scarecrow was based on the story of Matthew Sheppard, but with a different young man and a different story. All proceeds will be donated to the Matthew Sheppard Association.

Visit Kody online at www.kodyboye.itrello.com

