

A man with short brown hair and a light beard is lying on his back on a bed. He is shirtless and has his eyes closed. His arms are raised above his head, and his hands are cuffed together. He is wearing a purple blanket. The background is a dark, ornate metal headboard.

**Lenore
Black**

**RULES
WERE MADE
TO BE
BROKEN**

“FITCHLEY’S SPORTING GOODS,” Aaron answered the phone for what felt like the millionth time that day.

A voice blared in his ear. “These damned straps won’t come off!”

Aaron recognized the caller right away: Jerry Bryson, ninety-four years old, hard of hearing but still amazingly sprightly for his age with the spirit of adventure, if not the manual dexterity, of a much younger man. He’d been in the store earlier that afternoon to pick up a life jacket for the canoeing trip he was taking with his family next weekend.

“Mr. Bryson, you see the buckles? You just need to press in on the sides.”

“Reba!” Ida Mae Saunders called out from the dressing room—or shouted, actually, if you were going to be technical about it.

“Reba isn’t here today, Mrs. Saunders,” Aaron called back to her. “Remember I mentioned that when you first came in?”

Ida Mae wasn’t forgetful so much as she had a hard time accepting what she didn’t want to hear. She’d come in to try on bathing suits, telling anybody who would listen that she’d joined the gym out at the community college and planned to start swimming a mile a day if it killed her. She’d had her heart set on Reba helping her pick out the right suit.

“Reba?” Mr. Bryson shouted into the phone. “What does Reba have to do with anything? I don’t know why they have to make everything so dang fiddly these days. You can’t do a thing with stuff if you’re a day over twenty. What do these life jacket people expect me to do? Spend the rest of my days looking like I’m about to jump overboard?”

“Try to take it easy, Mr. Bryson,” Aaron said in his most soothing tone. “Is one of your grandchildren around who might be able to help you?”

“I don’t want them kids thinking their old grandpop can’t do things for himself. So don’t you go calling them, Aaron Fitchley, you hear me?”

“Okay, okay,” Aaron said. “Just—”

“I can’t tell if this bathing suit does a thing for me,” Ida Mae complained loudly from the dressing room. “I don’t know why Reba couldn’t come to work today.”

“Give me just a minute,” Aaron told her, “and I’ll see what I can do to help you.”

Bertie Simmons, an old friend of Aaron’s father and frequent loiterer at the sporting goods store, lounged on a stool behind the counter. “Why is Reba out today?”

“Her kids have the flu,” Aaron told him distractedly, and then he said into the phone, “How’s it coming there, Mr. Bryson? You having any luck yet?” If Jerry couldn’t get himself free, Aaron would have to go to the rescue. That meant closing up early, since he was the only one working today and Bertie had proven on more than one occasion he didn’t have much of a knack for operating a cash register.

A few more customers approached the counter, no one Aaron recognized, most likely tourists. Mortonsville was situated in a nice little spot in the Colorado high country with a lake just outside of town. They had campers passing through in the summer and skiers all winter.

“I’m kind of in a hurry,” one lady said.

Aaron nodded and started ringing up her purchase, the phone crooked against his shoulder. He could hear the distant sounds of cursing, which suggested Jerry Bryson was still waging war against the life jacket.

“Your daddy would have told Reba she had to come on in here if she wasn’t sick herself,” Bertie said conversationally, as if he were just making an observation, not a judgment.

In the seven months since Aaron had taken over the family business, he’d heard a lot about how his father would have done things, much of it in the almost daily phone calls from his parents. Apparently they were having some problems transitioning into the carefree life of fun and relaxation they’d retired to Florida to enjoy.

Bertie shook his head. “I know, I know. You couldn’t be hard-hearted with Reba. You’re a good boy. Going to be just like your daddy and your granddaddy, a real pillar of the community. Yep. That’s what I always tell them down at Nona’s Luncheonette.”

Aaron smiled weakly. “Thanks, Mr. Simmons.” He was thrilled to be the topic of conversation among the town’s most unapologetic gossips—*not*.

“Well, if no one is coming in here to help me, I’ll just have to come out there,” Ida Mae huffed in exasperation.

She threw back the curtain of the dressing room and stormed out. Everybody in the store turned to look and then couldn’t seem to stop staring.

“I’m thinking it’s a tad small.” Ida Mae plucked at the strap of the Speedo, her forehead scrunched up in a thoughtful frown.

A *tad* was rather an understatement. Most of Ida Mae’s underwear hung out where the swimsuit was cut high along the thigh. Aaron was pretty sure he was seeing parts of her no one had laid eyes on since Mr. Saunders had passed on to the great ice cream social in the sky.

“I feel certain we’ve got something that will work better for you,” Aaron told her. “That style doesn’t look all that comfortable.”

Ida Mae shook her head. “Like wearing a rubber band. I don’t know why they make things so persnickety these days.”

“Here.” Aaron passed the phone to Bertie. “Take over for a minute.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Bertie asked, trying to push the phone back at Aaron.

“Just—” Aaron waved his hand. “Try to be encouraging.”

“How about if I tell Jerry what an old fool he is? Is that encouraging enough?”

Aaron shot him a *be nice* look and hurried off to help Ida Mae. He searched the racks of swimsuits and found one with a much fuller cut.

“You ready for this other one?” he called in to her.

“Hold your horses. It’s like fighting the devil trying to get this thing off.” Aaron could hear rustling and thumping and one rather loud thud, and then Ida Mae’s pale hand shot out from between the curtains, the rejected swimsuit dangling from her fingers. “All right then. Let me have that other one.”

He traded swimsuits with her. Again he could hear rustling, but thankfully no thumps or thuds this time.

“Oh, this is going to do me much better.” Ida Mae pushed back the curtain. “What do you think?”

Aaron nodded. “I think you’re going to swim laps around those other people at the pool.”

Ida Mae broke into a big, pleased smile. “I think you’re right.”

Aaron hurried back up front to Bertie. “How’s Mr. Bryson doing?”

Bertie shook his head sadly. “Still an old fool.”

“Not helping.” Aaron took the phone back. “Mr. Bryson? You still there?”

He heard scuffling in the background and then a resounding “Glory be,” and then Mr. Bryson’s too-loud voice boomed over the line, “I finally taught the blasted thing a lesson.”

“That’s good.” Aaron smiled to himself. “I’m sure you showed that life jacket who’s boss.”

“Darned right I did,” Mr. Bryson agreed, and after a pause, added a little sheepishly, “I might have to come in on Monday and get a new one.”

“We’ll be open until six,” Aaron told him.

Ida Mae finished changing and brought the swimsuit up to the counter as Aaron hung up with Mr. Bryson. He got her sorted out with the goggles, swim cap, pool shoes, and earplugs she needed. She gave him a jaunty wave on her way out, the bag dangling from her wrist. “Tell your mom and dad ‘hi’ for me when you talk to them.”

Aaron checked the time on his cell phone: eight o’clock, closing time, *finally*. He nudged a reluctant Bertie Simmons toward the door.

“I could help you straighten up,” Bertie said, dragging his feet.

Translation: *my wife’s mother is visiting, and I really don’t want to go home just yet.*

Aaron shooed him on out. “Thanks, Bertie, but there’s not much to do. I’ve got it under control.” Bertie’s notion of “helping” involved chattering away about the latest news he’d picked up down at Nona’s and getting underfoot while Aaron desperately tried to finish up for the night.

He locked the door, leaned his back against it, and let out his breath. It was quiet for the first time all day. No phone ringing. No one wanted anything. And for a few hours, anyway, nobody would be reminiscing about the good old days when Aaron’s father and grandfather had run Fitchley’s Sporting Goods.

A loud knock broke the silence, and Aaron nearly jumped out of his skin. He whirled around and found his best friend Dale Lambert grinning at him from the other side of the door. Aaron's pulse did a little hop, skip, and jump. Dale had been making Aaron feel hot and tingly since he hit puberty, a fact Aaron carefully kept to himself. In fact, he'd devised a "Big List of Rules For Hiding That You're In Love With Your Best Friend" just for this purpose. Rule #4 was: *seeing the guy really shouldn't make your heart beat faster, so just pretend it doesn't.*

"You going to let me in, buddy?" Dale rattled the lock. "Or am I going to have to talk to you through this glass?"

Aaron opened the door, and Dale sauntered inside. He had on an ancient Metallica T-shirt and jeans he'd probably owned since high school, and as usual, the sight of him made Aaron's mouth go dry. He was tall, tan from working outside, with messy dark hair, big brown eyes, and dimples that turned the girls he flirted with into puddles of JELL-O. At the moment, he wore an innocent expression that Aaron knew from long experience meant nothing but trouble.

Early on in their friendship, Dale had decided it was his mission in life to keep Aaron from becoming a total stick in the mud. Under Dale's auspices, Aaron had tasted his first beer (because Dale had dared him to), experienced his first run-in with the Park County sheriff's office (because Dale insisted spray-painting graffiti on the wall of the Mortonsville High gym was a rite of passage), and been fired from his first after-school job making deliveries for old Mr. Lindsey at the greengrocer's (because Dale had convinced him playing hooky just once wouldn't be a problem).

“I can’t go to Dizzy’s,” Aaron said preemptively before Dale could start up the usual strong-arm tactics. “I’ve still got stuff to take care of tonight, and I have to work tomorrow.”

Dizzy’s was the raucous town dive where Dale spent his off hours—and actually much of the time he was supposed to be working. Aaron had never stepped through the doors down at Dizzy’s without straggling out as the sun came up. It was just that kind of place.

“But tomorrow’s Saturday!” Dale sounded as indignant as if Aaron had said he’d be working on Christmas.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “It’s also our busiest day of the week, which you know perfectly well.”

“Come on, Aaron. You’re missing out on the summer girls! The other night I hooked up with these two blondes, synchronized swimmers from Colorado State. Man, were they limber, and they liked to do everything—and I do mean *everything*—together.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“You have the worst taste in women.” Aaron did his best not to sound bitter about it. Rule #9 said: *you’re not supposed to be jealous of the girls who sleep with your best friend*. It was always the hardest rule to follow.

Dale laughed. “At least the ones I pick are fun. What was the name of that girl you dated in college? Karen?”

Aaron’s jaw tightened. “Carla.”

“Man, was that girl uptight.” Dale shook his head sadly. “Whatever happened to her?”

I brought her home to meet you. Carla had spent one night out with them at Dizzy's, a pinch slowly forming between her eyebrows as she looked from Aaron to Dale and back again. She'd been quiet the rest of the trip, and as soon as they got back to school, she'd broken up with him. Aaron could still remember the pitying look she'd given him. It had taken her one evening to see what Dale hadn't figured out in nearly fifteen years.

"It just didn't work out, I guess," Aaron said aloud.

"Huh." Dale gave Aaron a scrutinizing look. "I had this idea you were going to marry her."

Me too, Aaron thought.

Dale slung his around Aaron's shoulders. "Okay, so no Dizzy's, but it is Friday night. I've got my cooler in the back of the Bronco. You're not too old for a beer in the parking lot."

Aaron did his best to ignore the fluttering in his stomach. "Oh, yeah? When will I be too old for that?"

"When you're dead. Come on." He steered Aaron out the door, hurried him through locking up the store, and hustled him over to the Bronco.

Dale slid behind the wheel, and Aaron settled into the passenger side. Dale reached over the seat, fished around in the cooler, and came up with two Heinekens.

"I'm only having one," Aaron said as he accepted the bottle.

“Mmm,” Dale said noncommittally. “Just one beer” amounted to heresy as far as he was concerned, a fact Aaron knew all too well.

“Have you given any thought to what you’re going to say if you get pulled over by the cops with that huge-ass cooler of beer in the car?”

“I really haven’t.” Dale angled in his seat to look at Aaron. “So, you’re really not going to come out with me tonight?”

“I’m really not.” Aaron took a sip of his beer. “I’ve still got the books to go over when I get home, and that’s going to take....” He shook his head. “I don’t know exactly, but way too long.”

Truthfully, he felt bad to be missing out on whatever shenanigans Dale had planned—and there would definitely be shenanigans, because there always were with Dale. This all-work-no-play thing had been happening way too often lately. Running the business without his father had proven a much bigger job than he’d anticipated. He spent almost every waking moment working at the store, thinking about the store, or feeling vaguely guilty he was somehow neglecting the store. He desperately needed some help, an assistant manager, somebody he could share the responsibilities with the way he and his dad used to do. Until he found the right person, though, he was stuck working long hours with no possibility of shenanigans in sight.

“I’m beginning to think you like that store more than me,” Dale said sulkily.

When Aaron first took over the business, Dale had been patient about it, or at least what passed for patient with him, but lately he seemed to be feeling neglected.

“You know that’s not true,” Aaron told him tiredly. “Things will be different when I can get some help.”

“Yeah, I know. You’ve just got to find the right person.” The words came out strangely clipped, and Aaron had no idea what that was about.

“Hey.” He nudged Dale with his elbow.

Dale turned a look on him, and slowly his expression softened. “Okay, but tomorrow is party night.” He pointed his finger at Aaron. “You’d better get your ass down to Dizzy’s. We’ve got a serious fun deficiency to make up for.”

Aaron smiled and tipped back his beer.

THE next morning, he arrived at the store bright and early to find Bertie Simmons already waiting at the door. Also camped out was the delivery guy from one of his wholesalers, hand truck at the ready, with what looked to be about a million boxes stacked up on the sidewalk.

“This was supposed to come on Monday,” Aaron said, not the least bit pleased to have a big delivery arrive on their busiest day.

The guy shrugged. “Guess we’re ahead of schedule. ‘Cause it’s here now.”

Aaron let out a sigh and unlocked the door. Bertie made a beeline for his stool. He had a crossword puzzle book tucked under his arm, and his reading glasses sat perched on top of his head.

“Where do you want this?” the delivery guy asked as he wheeled the first load of boxes through the door.

Aaron pointed him back to the storeroom, trying not to think about how long it was going to take to get all that merchandise squared away.

The bell on the door chimed, and Reba hurried inside. “Sorry, sorry!” she said in a fluster. “I meant to get in earlier, but Jay Lee couldn’t find his glasses this morning, and nobody could go anywhere until we’d hunted them down. You know how men are.”

Aaron smiled. Reba Alderson had been married to her high school sweetheart for over twenty years. She had four children, six dogs, too many cats to count, various gerbils, hamsters, and guinea pigs, a full-time job, and a bustling, cheerful outlook on all of it. She reminded Aaron more than a little of his own mother.

“How are the twins?” he asked.

“Full of puke.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how so much throw-up can come out of two such small bodies.”

“You sure you don’t need to be home with them?” he asked with concern.

“That’s sweet of you, Aaron, but I’m not going to leave you in the lurch again today. The kids are feeling better, and Mom’s looking after them.” She laughed. “Honestly, coming

to work feels like a vacation. I might just pop over and check on them at lunch.”

“Whatever you need.”

She nodded. “Thanks. Now, you go on and take care of the inventory. I’ve got things covered up here.” She set to work sorting cash and coins for the register.

Aaron went off to the storeroom to tackle the boxes, breathing out a sigh of relief that Reba was back. He felt a lot more confident leaving customers in her capable hands than in Bertie Simmons’s.

By midday, he’d worked up a sweat and was sick to death of unpacking boxes, but at least he’d nearly finished.

“Aaron?” Reba called out. “I’m going to head on over to the house to check on the kids if you think you can do without me.”

“That’s fine, Reba. I’m almost done in here.”

“I’ll be back in an hour.” The door chimed as she left.

Aaron picked up the pace so he could get back out on the floor. Perspiration started to drip off him, and his T-shirt clung to his chest. He grew grumpier with each box he heaved up onto the shelf.

“Aaron? Hey, Aaron,” Bertie Simmons’s voice rang out. “Yoohoo!”

Aaron thumped the last box into place, barely restraining the urge to curse. “Yeah?”

“It’s kind of hot in here, don’t you think?”

Aaron had thought it was just him, but now he cocked his head to listen for the hum of the air conditioner and heard nothing. “Fuck!” He clapped his hand over his mouth, hoping there were no customers in the store to hear him.

He fished the toolbox out of the cabinet where he kept it, headed off to the utility room, and hunkered down under the AC unit. He checked the connections and tinkered around with a few things, all to no avail. He was so caught up in his epic battle with the stubborn piece of machinery he didn’t realize anyone had come into the storeroom until a boot connected with his shin. He jerked in surprise, banging his head. “Fuck!”

He sat up with a scowl and found Dale grinning down at him. “Buddy, you look like you fought that air conditioner and the air conditioner won.” He stood so close that Aaron’s face was breathing distance from his crotch.

Aaron swallowed hard and repeated Rule #10 in his head like a mantra: *don’t stare at your best friend’s dick. Definitely don’t drool.*

“What are you doing here?” he finally managed to ask.

“Bringing you lunch, and you’re welcome.” He tossed Aaron a bag from Nona’s. “Come on out from under there and let me take a look. Not to hurt your manly pride or anything, but you’re not exactly what I’d call mechanically inclined.”

Aaron glared. “You think you can do better?”

“I sure do.” Dale made shooping hands.

Aaron scooted away from the air conditioner and opened the lunch bag. "I'd call you a jackass, but you brought me fried chicken."

Dale grinned broadly. "I can't tell you how often I hear that."

He wielded a wrench and dipped his head under the AC, and five minutes later, the unit chugged back to life.

Aaron stared at Dale in amazement. "How'd you do that?"

"You just had a little issue with your compressor." Dale plunked the wrench back into the toolbox. "You should make sure that assistant manager you want to hire knows his way around a wrench." He turned an expectant look on Aaron.

Aaron nodded. "Yeah, good idea. I'll be sure to ask about that."

A moment passed, as if Dale were waiting for him to say something more, and then he abruptly got to his feet. "Guess I should let you get back to work. 'Cause one minute after closing time I'd better see you down at Dizzy's. I'm not taking no for an answer.

Aaron smiled. "I'm not saying no."

Dale nodded with satisfaction. "That's what I like to hear."

OF COURSE, it was just Aaron's luck he'd get stragglers at closing time. A woman in a sun visor and sensible shoes

dilly-dallied by the tennis rackets. Two teenage boys had been pawing over skateboards they had no intention of buying for the last two hours. Aaron checked the time on his cell phone every three seconds, pretending he was interested in his messages. At ten past, he finally gave up being subtle and went into his routine of tidying up the stacks of T-shirts on the display tables. The woman got the message and nodded politely on her way out. The teenagers probably would have stayed until three days after the end of time, so Aaron finally had to shoo them out.

“Come back after school on Monday.”

He dragged the vacuum cleaner out of the supply closet and gave the place a quick going-over. He cashed out the register and counted the money, making sure the drawer balanced. He’d swing by the bank on his way to Dizzy’s. Just a few things to straighten up in the office, and then he was out of there.

His phone buzzed, and he flipped it open to read the text from Dale: *where r u loser?*

Aaron grinned and texted back: *c u in a few.*

He locked up the store’s books in his bottom desk drawer and was heading out when his phone rang again. “Yeah, I’m on my way,” he said.

“Son?”

Aaron stopped in his tracks. “Oh, hey, Dad.”

“Am I catching you at a bad time? Sounds like you were going somewhere.”

Aaron pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, no, it’s fine, Dad. What’s up?”

“I was just calling to make sure—”

“That I’m keeping up the sales tax records,” Aaron finished the sentence for him.

His father had an obsession with the store’s paperwork. He called at least three times a week to check on it. The whole letting go and taking it easy thing did not come naturally to him.

“I’m on top of it,” Aaron assured him.

“Good, good.” His father cleared his throat. “I, uh, was sure you would be.”

Of course you were, Dad. He looked to the ceiling, as if he were going to find some extra patience hiding up there.

“So, you paid the invoices already?” his dad prompted.

Aaron glanced over at his desk, where a stack of invoices sat on the corner.

“Well, not yet, but—”

“What about the purchase orders for next week? You’ve taken care of those, haven’t you?” Aaron could practically hear the pinch forming between his father’s eyebrows.

“Dad, we’ve still got a week before the invoices are due, and I just got a delivery from the wholesaler’s today. I’ll take care of all this on Monday. There’s plenty of time—”

“What did I always teach you?” his dad interrupted, making Aaron feel about five years old.

He let out his breath. “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today, especially where paperwork is concerned.” He trudged back over to the desk and sat down. “I’ll take care of it tonight.”

“You’ll be glad you did, son,” his dad said with satisfaction.

Aaron seriously doubted that, especially when he had to break the bad news to Dale. “Just try not to worry about the store so much, huh?” he said to his dad. “And tell Mom ‘hi’ for me.”

He hung up and texted Dale that he was going to be later than he thought. He eyed the piles of forms balefully. He had a couple of hours of work ahead of him if he was going to get through all this. He let out a heavy sigh. Maybe one day he’d develop an immunity to his dad’s guilt trips, but sadly, that day wasn’t today.

At least he still had the sandwich he’d packed that morning, so he wouldn’t starve. An ancient bag of potato chips in his desk drawer had some crumbs in the bottom of it. The mini-fridge was stocked full of Mountain Dew, so he’d have all the caffeinated reinforcement he needed. He bit into his PB&J and started in on the paperwork.

He’d barely made a dent in the stack of forms when his phone started vibrating again with another text from Dale. *stop working! its party nite get ur butt over to dizzy’s 4 fun.* Aaron shook his head and texted back: *patience!* A moment later he got Dale’s retort: *Beer!* He had to laugh.

Sadly, the mirth didn’t last long. The stack of forms just seemed to get taller and taller, and Aaron’s estimate of a few

hours to plow through it all proved sadly unrealistic. By the time he finally finished, he barely had the will to go on living, much less the energy for Dizzy's. His back ached from hefting boxes all morning, his feet hurt from standing behind the counter for twelve hours, and hunkering over the paperwork had left a kink in his right shoulder that made him think he should go see the chiropractor. He shook his head sadly. He sounded way more like a nonagenarian than Mr. Bryson ever did.

He knew Dale was going to be pissed, but he texted him anyway: *2 tired gonna crash see u 2morrow*. He locked up the store and trudged out to the parking lot. His phone rang, and he fumbled with it as he unlocked the car door, expecting a rant from Dale.

A familiar voice sighed in his ear. "Why are you answering a call from your mother on a Saturday night?"

His lips quirked into a smile. "Because I'm a good son?"

His mother sighed again, more heavily. "You should be out! On a date! With some nice girl who'll make me a lovely daughter-in-law. I'm not getting any younger, you know. If I don't get to your wedding soon, I won't have the strength to lift my glass when it's time for the toast."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "You're the strongest, healthiest person I know."

In fact, she'd probably outlive him. Her idea of a good time was an action-packed day of yard work, on patrol with a weed whacker in one hand and a trowel in the other. Underbrush lived in fear of her.

“That’s not the point, Aaron,” his mother said. “The point is you need to be out there meeting people. Any girl would be lucky to have you. Smart and responsible and so good-looking, with your grandpa’s sandy-colored hair and your daddy’s green eyes.”

Aaron’s mother had a tendency to overestimate his personal charms, being just a little biased on the subject. Aaron himself had long ago made his peace with the fact that he was the kind of guy most people looked right past. He was medium height, maybe a little on the scrawny side, not overly handsome, although not homely either, just kind of... average. It would come in handy if he ever turned to a life of crime.

“And of course, you’ve got your Uncle Marty’s strong jaw,” his mother said, continuing her laundry list of his genetic inheritance.

“Not to mention Aunt Lauralee’s hand-me-down dinette set in the basement just waiting to be put to use by my lucky bride,” he teased her.

His mother didn’t laugh. “I hope you’re not wasting the whole weekend doing wild bachelor things with Dale. You know I love that boy, but he’s hardly a good influence when it comes to getting serious about life and settling down.”

Aaron couldn’t argue with that. The last thing he thought about when he was with Dale was meeting a girl and getting married.

“Actually, I was working late. I’m just on my way home now,” Aaron said as he fastened his seat belt.

“You’re working too hard.” His mother had on her concerned voice. “Your father is working you too hard.” She shouted at his dad in the background. “Did you hear me, Earl? I said you’re working Aaron too hard. How is he ever supposed to fall in love if he spends every minute down at that store?”

Aaron might be all grown up now, a businessman and pillar of the community in-the-making, but it still made him squirm to hear his parents bicker. He blurted out, “I’ll talk to you later, Mom. Love you.” And quickly hung up.

He’d tried to discourage his mother’s meddling, but clearly he’d been too subtle about it. His sister Kelly kept insisting he should have *the talk* with his parents so they’d get off his back about finding a wife. Aaron contended he liked girls too. Maybe not as much as he liked guys, but the possibility still existed that he might one day get married. So there really was no point in having a big awkward discussion about his sex life with his parents.

Kelly rolled her eyes at him whenever he said that. “You are such a chicken. They’re going to be fine with it. All they want is for you to be happy. You just need to tell them who you are.”

Maybe Aaron would do that. Someday.

HE PULLED into the driveway, parked the car in the garage, and headed inside. He’d bought the place from his parents, contents and all, when they’d decided to move into their fully furnished retirement villa in Boca. His mother had made a

big point of telling him it was his home now, and he should feel free to redecorate. Her feelings wouldn't be hurt. So far, Aaron had left it all exactly the way it had been when he was growing up, down to the dishes and the wallpaper and the last stick of furniture. He kind of liked it that way.

His phone started buzzing again as he unlocked the door. Another text from Dale: *loser get down here ur missin all the fun*. Aaron was torn between grinning and shaking his head, so he did a bit of both. He texted back: *2 tired 4 fun c u 2morrow*. He glanced up at the big rooster clock ticking away on the wall above the stove. It was all of half past twelve, and the only thing Aaron could think about was going to bed. He made a face at himself. He was quite possibly the most pathetic twenty-eight-year-old guy on the planet.

Aaron's phone rang, and he didn't even bother to check the number. "Seriously," he said as he answered it. "Way too tired."

"Aaron!" Dale's voice boomed in his ear.

Aaron could hear the dull roar of Dizzy's in the background, a voice yelling out, "Miller Lite!" He had to smile. "Sounds like you're having a good time."

"It'd be better if you got your butt down here and bought me a beer."

Aaron was pretty sure Dale had already had several. "You only love me for my ready supply of cash," he said.

"Not true, not true, buddy. I'm also pretty fond of your well-stocked fridge," Dale declared. "You, on the other hand, don't seem to have much use for me these days."

“You know that’s not true,” Aaron said, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “I’ll meet you at Nona’s tomorrow for lunch, and then we can do whatever you want for the rest of the day.”

He headed upstairs after hanging up, already yawning, changed into his pajamas, and faceplanted onto his bed. He had no idea how long he slept, but the next thing he knew, an evil blaring noise jolted him awake. He sat bolt upright, heart pounding, and slowly realized the phone was ringing. He glanced blearily at the clock. It was almost three in the morning, and his mind raced with the worst possible reasons somebody would be calling at that hour. Something had happened to his parents. Or his sister at college. Then a little more of his brain woke up, and he realized: Dale.

Aaron snatched up the phone. “Not my idea of fun.”

“Aaron! Buddy! What’s up?” Dale greeted him jovially, as if there was nothing the least bit unusual about calling in the dead of the night.

“Do you know what time it is?” Aaron asked, scowling.

Dale laughed. “Naw. Don’t own a watch, remember?”

Aaron heaved a sigh. “Look, whatever you’re up to, I’m sure it’s really cool and all, but seriously, count me out, okay?” He yawned widely. “I’m not getting out of this bed until at least noon.” He started to hang up.

“Wait!” There was a pause. “Just don’t go, okay?” It was soft and throaty, a little bit of begging in it, the kind of voice that belonged to the middle of the night.

The muscles tightened low in Aaron’s belly, an insistent warmth spreading through his body. Most of the time, he was convinced Dale had no clue about the effect he had on

him. Then there were times like this when he really had to wonder.

He took a breath and let it out. “What’s going on?” Rule #7 was: *don’t sound like you’re getting turned on by a simple phone conversation with your best friend*. Mostly, Aaron thought he’d managed to abide by it. *Mostly*.

“I, uh, kind of need your help,” Dale admitted.

“What have you done now?” Aaron could only imagine.

“Can you come over?” Dale asked, using that coaxing tone of his that had talked Aaron into all sorts of ridiculous nonsense over the years. “Please? I really need you.”

It was like being sucker-punched, hearing those four little words. Aaron closed his eyes and tried to think about all the unsexy things in the world: polar bears stranded in the melting Arctic, children starving in Africa, Ida Mae in that first swimsuit she’d tried on the other day. “What kind of trouble are we talking about?” he managed at last.

“Maybe it’s better if I just show you?”

That was never a good sign. Aaron had flashbacks of some of the other colorful scrapes Dale had gotten himself in to over the years: when he’d spray-painted his entire body orange and couldn’t get it off, that time he’d decided it would be big fun to climb to the top of the town’s water tower and had gotten stuck up there, the misadventure with duct tape.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Dale lived on the other side of Mortonsville. *The slightly wilted part of town*, Aaron’s mother called it, being rather

generous. While Aaron had been away at Colorado State getting his degree in business administration, Dale had stayed put at home.

“Doing odd jobs,” he liked to say.

“Spending all day sitting in front of the TV in his underwear,” Dale’s father preferred to call it.

At last, Dale and his parents had come to an agreement that they’d all be a lot happier and less likely to end up in the state penitentiary for manslaughter if Dale found himself some other place to live.

He’d shown up at Aaron’s freshman dorm room, duffel bag in hand, a big smile on his face, obviously intent on staying.

“Okay,” Aaron had told him, “but whatever you throw up on, you clean yourself. That’s the rule.”

The sternness had been all bluster. The truth was that Aaron had been so happy to see Dale he’d wanted to throw his arms around him, hug the hell out of him, and beg him never to leave. College had not turned out to be the big adventure he was hoping for. He studied his ass off, had managed to make exactly no new friends, and was so homesick he really didn’t know if he was going to last or not.

Dale being there made all the difference. He slept on the floor next to Aaron’s bed, the sound of his breathing familiar and reassuring. He annoyed the crap out of Aaron’s snooty roommate, much to Aaron’s delight. And every night after Aaron had finished studying, he insisted, “Okay, enough with the books. It’s time to party!”

By the time Dale headed back to Mortonville, Aaron felt like he finally had a grip on the college thing. He had met some new people, stopped worrying so much about his grades, and rediscovered the concept of fun.

Only years later did Aaron figure out that Dale's homelessness had been somewhat exaggerated, a convenient excuse to come visit and do something about Aaron's whining about how much he hated college. This was the way Dale operated. He liked his messes to make the evening news and the nice stuff he did to fly under the radar.

Aaron probably should have realized at the time what an unlikely story it was that Dale didn't have anywhere else to go. Luck always did have a way of shining down on him. Just as he got his eviction notice at home, he heard through the grapevine at the bowling alley that the Tarletons—an ancient old couple whose only son lived in Boston and hardly ever visited—were looking for somebody to live in the apartment over their garage in exchange for some minor repair work around the place.

The Tarletons' ramshackle old home had been the pride of the neighborhood back in its heyday, but that had been so long ago now even Mr. Bryson didn't remember it as anything other than a wreck. Dale knew his way around construction when he could be bothered, and an arrangement worked out well for everyone involved. Dale kept the place from falling down on the Tarletons' heads, and with no rent to pay, he was free to keep on shirking adult responsibility, dabbling at jobs in fits and starts, mostly just working for beer money.

Aaron had had his heart set on one ambition and one ambition alone since he was nine years old, and that was to take over the family business. And yet, he still sometimes found himself envying Dale just a little bit.

He parked on the street and jogged up the rickety set of stairs to Dale's apartment. He had his own key, because that made it easier when he had to drag Dale's butt home after a long night of fun-having. Dale liked to play coy with his keys when he had a few (dozen) beers in him.

Aaron let himself in, the door whooshing closed behind him. The apartment had a living room and a strip of kitchenette along one wall, and as usual, it looked like a tornado had just touched down. Crusted-over plates stood stacked up on the counter. Newspapers had been thrown down wherever Dale got finished with them. Empty bottles of Jack lay abandoned on the floor. Aaron shook his head with a familiar, fond sense of exasperation.

"Aaron?" A hopeful voice drifted out from the bedroom.

Aaron headed that way braced for whatever colorful mess Dale had gotten himself in to this time—although maybe not braced quite enough. He lurched to a stop in the doorway. "What the hell?" he said when he could actually speak.

Dale sprawled on the messy bed, wearing just a skimpy pair of black silk briefs, his "going-out underwear," as he liked to call it. He was handcuffed by one wrist to the headboard, his long, tanned legs stretched out in front of him, the muscles of his chest and belly sharply defined by the splash of light from the bedside lamp. His dark hair fell in his face, and his forehead beaded with sweat, like he'd

been exerting himself trying to break free. His mouth looked wet and pink, even more so than usual. The words *Dale is wearing lip gloss* floated surreally through Aaron's head.

Aaron had no rule about never being in the same room with his best friend when he looked like the star of a very kinky porn shoot. Clearly that had been an oversight.

"You're wearing lip gloss." He couldn't keep himself from stating the obvious. "And—" He gestured at the handcuffs.

Dale unleashed a blinding, shit-eating grin. "What can I say, buddy? She swore up one side and down the other it would be hot." His smile deflated. "Then she took my wallet and split."

Aaron blinked slowly. "Who?" His mouth didn't feel like it was quite connected to his brain at the moment. It didn't matter that he'd known Dale since he was nine years old. Dale's sheer gorgeousness could still take him by surprise: his full jaw and sharply cut cheekbones, his wide-set dark eyes, the raw sensuality that radiated off him.

"It was this girl, Kandi," Dale said and then added, as if it mattered, "With a K and an I. Just somebody I met at Dizzy's."

Aaron put his hands on his hips. "Your taste in women really, really sucks, you know that?" He didn't give a damn about Rule #9 right at the moment.

"She wasn't all bad," Dale said. "I mean, she totally could have marooned me here if she'd wanted to. You know the Tarletons are half deaf. I could have screamed until the end of time, and they never would have heard a damned thing. But Kandi, she said she didn't want to cause me any

more trouble than she had to, and she tossed my phone over there.” He jerked his chin, indicating a spot on the floor a few feet away from the bed. “It took some contortionist tactics, but I did finally manage to grab it with my toes and haul it in.”

“Wow,” Aaron said dryly, “that Kandi sounds like a real peach.”

Dale pulled at the cuffs. “So, can you get me out of these or what?”

Aaron let out a sigh and sat down on the bed to get a closer look. Rule #5: *don’t stare at your best friend’s half-naked body like a starving man who’s been set loose on an all-you-can-eat buffet*. He kept his eyes determinedly focused on the mechanism of the lock and away from Dale’s bare chest.

“I don’t know what you expect me to do,” he declared at last. “These aren’t trick cuffs. There’s no little button I can push and they’ll magically spring open.”

“Bolt cutters?” Dale said hopefully.

Aaron regarded him skeptically. “Do you own bolt cutters?”

Dale snorted. “Don’t you? What kind of businessman are you?”

“The kind who doesn’t need bolt cutters.”

“Well, can you, I don’t know, maybe rent some or something?” Dale smiled winningly, actually batting his eyelashes, like the incorrigible flirt he was.

Rule #8: *don't fall for your best friend's manly wiles, no matter how bright his eyes are or how pretty he looks when he's smiling.*

Aaron adopted a put-upon tone. "At this time of night? Do you know what a pain in the ass that's going to be? I'd have to wake up Mr. Ritter to let me into the hardware store and explain to him why I have an emergency need for bolt cutters at three o'clock in the morning."

Dale threw his head back and laughed. "Oh hell, I'd love to see the look on old man Ritter's face when you tell him about this."

"That's not—" Aaron started to say, but he could feel the corners of his mouth turning up despite his best efforts not to smile.

"Oh, come on, buddy." Dale bumped his shoulder against Aaron's. "It's pretty damned funny."

Aaron began to picture Mr. Ritter's reaction, the way he squinted and his cheeks puffed out, his entire face turning hot pink when he complained about "all these crazy shenanigans people get up to nowadays." He tried to choke back a laugh, but the Mr. Ritter in his head reiterated with a displeased scowl: "Shenanigans!" Aaron's shoulders started to shake.

Dale joined in, hooting at the top of his lungs. "Told you it was funny."

Their arms brushed, and Aaron realized they were sitting so close together there wasn't a strip of daylight between them. He abruptly stopped laughing, his stomach

going hot and fluttery. Dale gave him a sidelong look. A *fond* look.

Aaron swallowed hard. “You’re going to owe me.” He tried to make it sound light, teasing, as if sitting on the bed with his handcuffed, half-naked best friend mere inches away had no effect on him whatsoever.

Dale held Aaron’s gaze, his dark eyes liquid and warm. “I’ll do something real nice to make it up to you, I promise,” he drawled.

Aaron stared. Dale was just teasing, right? Had to be. This did nothing to calm the simmer in Aaron’s stomach. He’d had the beginnings of a hard-on since he’d first seen Dale handcuffed to the bed, and now he wanted—God, he just *wanted*.

He leaped up like he’d been scalded, backing away from the bed.

Dale frowned. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’ve, uh, got to—” He jerked his thumb toward the bathroom.

“Aaron!” Dale called out in exasperation.

But Aaron had already shut himself up in the bathroom. Shit, shit, shit. Rule #3 said: *never let your best friend see you break into a sweat over him (and definitely don’t let him know you’ve got a hard-on for him)*. Aaron stood at the sink, staring at himself in the mirror. The expression on his face was practically a neon sign spelling out: *I want my best friend so bad I can barely stand it*. He was completely screwed.

No, he told himself sternly. *Just stop panicking.* He ran the water, splashed his face, and took a deep breath. He'd kept his feelings a secret from Dale for almost fifteen years. He wasn't going to be defeated by some lip gloss and a stupid pair of handcuffs. He just wasn't.

As he was turning to go, something behind the soap dish caught his eye, glinting in the hard fluorescent light. It was a bobby pin—not as sure-fire as bolt cutters, but it might still do the job. Aaron had to wonder if Kandi had left it behind on purpose. Maybe she really was a petty thief with a heart of gold.

"About damned time," Dale huffed when Aaron returned to the bedroom. "What the hell were you doing in there? I thought you'd fallen and couldn't get up."

"Hey, I found this. Maybe it'll help," Aaron held up the bobby pin.

He did his best to project a businesslike air, just a guy trying to solve a problem for his best friend, not thinking about getting into his underwear at all.

Dale sat up a little straighter. "Well, don't just stand there. Get your butt over here and pick this damned lock!"

Aaron knelt on the mattress, bending over the handcuffs. He eased the bobby pin into the lock and started to fiddle with it.

Three whole seconds went by, and then Dale had used up his store of patience. He started to squirm. "You are way too law-abiding to know a damned thing about picking a lock, aren't you?"

"Will you just hold still?" Aaron glared at him.

“No!” Dale thrashed petulantly. “I can’t feel my fingers, and my butt’s going numb, and I want these things off.” He yanked his arm, making the cuff bite into his skin. There were already angry-looking gouges, probably from those contortionist tactics he’d used to retrieve the phone.

Aaron held Dale’s wrist firmly. “Don’t. You’re just going to hurt yourself.” He stroked his thumb gently along the red marks.

Dale went still, his chest rising and falling like he was out of breath from just that little bit of exertion. Aaron couldn’t breathe himself; he was suddenly so *aware* of Dale, the solid presence of his body, the way he smelled, warm and male and just really, really good. They were so near together their cheeks almost touched, and Aaron could feel Dale’s breath on his skin. Rule #6: *never stare at your best friend’s mouth, no matter how pretty it is*. But up close like this, it was impossible not to. Dale’s mouth, with that sinfully full bottom lip, had starred in Aaron’s favorite fantasies since he was fifteen years old, and now it was wet and glistening, more obscenely pretty than ever.

“I’ve almost got this.” Aaron’s throat was so dry the words felt like they were getting stuck.

He jabbed at the lock more urgently, sweat starting to break out on his forehead. He needed these cuffs to come off so he could get the hell out of here, put a safe distance between them, and go over the rules in his head a few (thousand) times.

“Oh my God, you are going to give,” he snarled at the lock, “if I have to—”

Against all odds, it sprung open, and just like that Dale was free. The only person more surprised than Aaron by his unlikely lock-picking success was Dale. Neither of them moved, just sitting there staring at each other. So close that one more inch, and they'd be....

Aaron quickly looked away, busying himself with the other lock, getting the handcuffs off the headboard. "There now. That's all taken care of." His voice pitched up nervously. "Hey, Mr. Ritter will be really glad he doesn't have to sell me those bolt cutters, huh?" He laughed, but it sounded forced, even to him.

"What the hell is up with you?" Dale frowned.

Aaron shook his head. "Nothing. Huh-uh. I'm good. I just—" He tried to scare up some excuse to run the hell away, but his heart pounded so hard it was kind of distracting.

Dale stared at him, and then his eyes went wide. "Oh my God. This turned you on. You *want* me."

Aaron shook his head desperately. "What? No. What?" His voice cracked. "I don't—"

"Yeah, you do." An expression crossed Dale's face, and Aaron had no idea how to interpret it. His stomach lurched. He hoped to God this wasn't the end of anything.

But Dale was always surprising. "Well, come here, then," he said softly.

Aaron couldn't make any sense of that. It was like the words weren't even in English.

Dale's mouth turned up in amusement. "Okay, fine. I'll come to you."

He took Aaron's face between his hands and kissed his mouth, thumb stroking along his cheek. It was all instinct on Aaron's part to lean in and kiss back. A dazed part of his brain noted that the lip gloss that looked as sticky and sweet as cotton candy was actually quite bitter. Dale tasted good, though, and that was all that mattered. Then a freaked-out voice started shrieking in his head, reminding him of Rule #2: *don't even think about kissing your best friend on the mouth.*

Aaron jerked away, gulping down a shaky breath. "Hey, you don't have to put out just because I came to the rescue." He laughed feebly, desperately trying to pass the whole thing off as a joke.

Dale wasn't having any of it. "Get back over here." He hooked a hand behind Aaron's neck and kissed him more insistently.

His mouth was hot and wet and just.... Aaron had been waiting for this forever. All the rules went right out of his head. He curled his hand around Dale's bare shoulder. Dale fell back against the pillows, pulling Aaron with him. The kissing progressed quickly from friendly to determined to fierce so fast Aaron was left gasping for air.

Dale ran his hand over Aaron's thigh, nails scratching at the thick denim of his jeans. "I don't know why I never thought about this. Hell, maybe I just never let myself go there. But now I'm thinking it's one hell of a good idea, and I'd really like to do some dirty, filthy things to you." His breath tickled Aaron's ear.

Aaron's cock surged, pressing painfully against his zipper. His heart stuttered in his chest. Explosions of heat went off all over his body. A part of him was genuinely surprised the sheets didn't burst into flames, a conflagration of long-denied need. Aaron ran his hand up Dale's arm, fingertips delighting in the touch of bare skin. God, Dale felt so good. Aaron moaned softy, and Dale swallowed down the sound with another greedy kiss.

This was the stuff of Aaron's most cherished fantasies. This was....

The biggest mistake you're ever going to make! What is Rule #1? Don't fuck up the best friendship you've ever had. Well, that's exactly what you're doing!

He pulled back from the kiss and tried to squirm free of Dale's arms. Dale tightened his hold stubbornly, frowning in a decidedly "what the hell?" kind of way.

"We can't do this," Aaron said emphatically.

Dale leaned in to kiss Aaron's neck. "Oh, we can. We really, really can." He licked the curve of Aaron's ear and lowered his voice to a silky whisper, "And we can be damned good at it too."

Aaron shivered, his eyes fluttering closed, but no, he couldn't let himself get carried away. He took a deep breath. "Come on. You're my best friend. I don't want anything to screw that up."

"Oh, for the love of—" Dale breathed out in exasperation and then fixed Aaron with a look. "You know you're really not leaving me much choice here, buddy."

Before Aaron could ask what that meant, Dale flipped Aaron onto his back, grabbed his wrists, and cuffed them to the headboard.

“What the hell?” Aaron kicked at him. “Let me go!”

Dale dodged his thrashing feet. “No,” he said, chin tilted up at a stubborn angle. “You’re just going to run out of here and try to pretend this never happened. And I’m not letting you pull that shit, Aaron.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing. But just let me go, okay?” Aaron put on his *be reasonable* voice. “You don’t suddenly get attracted to someone after fifteen years of just being friends. I know you don’t want this. You’re just doing it because I—”

“Does this feel like I don’t want you?” Dale pressed his body against Aaron’s. He was hard. God.

Still, Dale always jumped into things feet first—Kandi was a prime example of that—and then he jumped right back out again. It didn’t *mean* anything. It didn’t *last*.

Dale narrowed his eyes, as if he could read Aaron’s mind. “You’re not like anybody else. You know you’re not.”

He bent his head, and the kiss was deep and wet and unapologetic. By the time he pulled back, Aaron’s head was buzzing, his chest heaving.

Dale inched his hand beneath Aaron’s shirt, stroking his fingers over bare skin. “I’ll stop touching you and take the cuffs off if that’s what you really want.” He kissed Aaron again, lingering over it, his tongue tracing the shape of Aaron’s bottom lip appreciatively. “But I don’t think it is.”

"I don't want to screw up here," Aaron said, feeling totally fucking scared.

Dale kissed Aaron's neck. "Hey, I'm probably the worst decision you've ever made, and look how well that's worked out." He lifted his head and flashed the cocky grin that had made Aaron feel weak in the knees since he was fifteen.

"God," Aaron said breathlessly.

Dale ran a hand exquisitely slowly up Aaron's chest, grinning. "Usually people don't start calling me a god until after they've slept with me, but, hey, feel free to start early."

Aaron sputtered indignantly, and Dale swooped in for another kiss. "I don't know why I never put two and two together. I guess I'm just an idiot. Because all I've wanted since I've known you was to have your attention. I've hated pretty much every girl who's ever been interested in you. Hell, I've been jealous of the damned *store* since you took it over. So I really wouldn't call this sudden."

"*God*," Aaron said again, with more vehemence.

He surged up, pushing his body into Dale's with a sweet drag of friction that made him moan. He yanked futilely at the handcuffs, desperately wanting to touch every part of Dale he could get his hands on.

"Unlock me," he said urgently. "Come on. I'm not going anywhere."

Dale gave Aaron a considering look. "I could do that. But I don't think I'm going to."

"What?" Aaron demanded.

Dale ran his hands up Aaron's arms, circling his palms around his wrists, stroking his thumbs along the metal of the cuffs. "People always call you the responsible one, and they're right. You are. But I know the truth about that. I know how much you like being in control." His voice dropped an octave. "I also know how much you *love* giving up that control to me. So I'm going to be in charge tonight."

A hot thrill shot through Aaron's body, followed by an edge of trepidation.

Dale whispered against his ear, "Trust me, you're going to like me being the boss of you."

"Oh God," Aaron moaned, feeling kind of dizzy.

Dale grinned. "Now, how are we going to get you out of this?" He fingered the collar of Aaron's T-shirt, frowning ever so slightly. "This isn't one of your favorites, is it?"

Aaron blinked. "Why?"

"Cause I've got something under here that could solve all our problems." Dale reached under the bed, fumbled around, and came up with a pair of hedge shears, courtesy of one of his many odd jobs. For the life of him, Aaron couldn't imagine why he kept them under the bed.

"What—" he started to ask.

Before he could get the sentence out, Dale neatly sliced the shirt off him.

"Handy for taking care of more than just boxwoods," Dale said, looking pleased with himself.

"You—that was my shirt!"

Dale nodded. “Yep. And here go your pants.” He went to work on Aaron’s fly, thankfully with his fingers and not the hedge shears, stripping the jeans and underwear off him.

Aaron felt way too exposed, his cock dark with blood and wet against his belly, the rest of him pale, almost pasty from sixty-plus hours a week holed up in the store. Meanwhile, Dale looked like he should be doing Coppertone commercials, dark bronze from working out in the sun, muscles sharply defined from slinging drywall and wielding a hammer. Self-consciousness flashed through Aaron, hot and uncomfortable. He tried to hide himself with his hands, only to be reminded rather rudely by the metal biting into his wrists that this was all Dale’s game.

“Oh, you’re not covering up any part of this body.” Dale slid his palm very slowly, very deliberately up Aaron’s belly.

Dale’s hands were huge, long-fingered and hard-knuckled, and Aaron had only imagined how they’d look touching him about a million times in his life. The reality was so much better than the fantasy, so good it made him shiver. Dale brushed his thumb over Aaron’s nipple, a drive-by little tease, and Aaron shook even harder.

“What am I going to do with you?” Dale cocked his head, considering the question. “I figure I can have pretty much anything I want. That sound about right to you, Aaron?” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Aaron’s belly.

Aaron whimpered—he couldn’t help himself—the muscles of his stomach trembling beneath Dale’s mouth. “Just do *something*.”

Dale nodded. “How about we start with this?” He kicked off his briefs.

Aaron’s mouth went dry at the sight of him. It didn’t matter that they’d been naked with each other lots of times before: during sleepovers and in the locker room back in high school and nowadays down at the gym. Aaron had never seen Dale like this, naked with intent, hard for him.

Aaron licked his lips unconsciously, and heat flared in Dale’s eyes. “Uh-huh. I like the way you’re thinking there.”

He stretched up Aaron’s body and kissed him, tracing the seam between his lips with the tip of his tongue, like he was asking to be invited in. Aaron moaned at the slide of skin, the naked press of their chests and bellies and cocks. Dale took the opportunity to deepen the kiss.

“I want—” Aaron pulled futilely at the cuffs. “Come on. Let me touch you.” He wanted so badly to wrap his arms around Dale and pull him closer.

Dale trailed kisses down Aaron’s throat. “Next time. I’m feeling greedy tonight.”

Next time. “Shit,” Aaron said, all the air suddenly gone from his lungs.

Dale nodded as if Aaron had asked a question, still kissing a path down his body. “Lots of next times.”

He swirled his tongue along the rim of Aaron’s belly button. The shivery, ticklish sensation made Aaron dig his heels into the mattress. Dale carefully skirted Aaron’s erection; it twitched hopefully anyway at the mere possibility of being touched. Dale settled his mouth on Aaron’s hip bone, sucking on it as if he wanted to leave a mark only he

would ever see. A frustrated little noise spilled out of Aaron without his permission. All he wanted was Dale's mouth on his cock.

Still, he couldn't imagine that Dale had ever done this with a guy before, and he was Aaron's best friend, and....

"You don't have to. I mean, if you don't want to."

Dale raised his head, using Aaron's thigh as a chin rest. His eyes shone bright and hot, the way they did when Dale was focused on some girl of the moment. Aaron had never expected to see that look leveled at him. "Oh, I want. And I'm going to *have*."

There wasn't a moment to take a breath or anticipate what it would feel like. Suddenly Dale's mouth closed over his dick, tongue eager and impossibly hot. Pleasure was a white-out in Aaron's head, blinding, necessary. He panted desperately as Dale kept going down and down, effortlessly, all firm lips and mind-blowing suction and seemingly nonexistent gag reflex. Aaron stared down at him, at the top of his bobbing head, the long, scraggly hair brushing Aaron's skin, the tanned fingers clenching and unclenching on his thighs. He was so familiar, *Dale*, and yet nothing about this was familiar at all.

The cuffs felt jarringly cold in contrast to Dale's hot, sweet mouth, their hold rigid and absolute around his wrists, a reminder that he was helpless in the hands of his best friend. His best friend who knew how to give one hell of a blowjob, who was more of a mystery than Aaron ever would have guessed.

"I didn't think you'd—" Aaron's voice caught in his throat, his breath a hot rasp in his lungs.

Dale lifted his head, and Aaron instantly regretted saying anything. He'd much rather have a demonstration of Dale's cocksucking skill than an explanation for it.

"I've sucked guys before." Dale looked like he was trying not to smile.

"When?"

Dale shrugged. "Lots of times."

"Name one," Aaron challenged.

"Okay. So, you remember that time after the game against Dillsburg?" Dale drew circles along the inside of Aaron's thigh.

"You mean the time you ditched me like a jackass when you were supposed to drive me to Gale's party, and I finally had to hitch a ride home with the coach to pick up my car, and I was seriously late, and Gale treated me like I had a disease for the rest of the night? Yeah, I remember that," he said dryly.

Of course, that had been years ago, and the thing with Gale was never going to work out anyway. Still, there was the principle of the thing.

Dale laughed completely unapologetically, so very Dale. "I never told you what I was doing." He wrapped his palm around Aaron's cock, squeezing, and pressed dry little kisses along the shaft.

Aaron's thighs trembled. "You, uh—" It was hard to have anything like a conversation when Dale was teasing him that

way. "I thought you got into it with one of those guys on the Dillsburg team."

Dale grinned wolfishly. "Oh, we got into it, all right."

Aaron stared at him. "You mean—"

Dale nodded and bent down to lick at the head of Aaron's cock. "Under the bleachers. That guy could suck like a Hoover."

Aaron scowled, belly tightening, and okay, jealousy was kind of ridiculous when Dale was here with him now, sucking his cock. "Fuck you," he said anyway, on principle.

Dale gave him a look through his lashes. "You totally can. I'll let you."

"Oh shit!" Aaron bucked up into Dale's grip and would have come if Dale hadn't tightened his fingers around the base of his cock.

"Not just yet," Dale told him. "I'm not finished with you."

Without further comment, he went back down, intent on driving Aaron completely out of his mind, using his lips and tongue and the delicate hint of teeth to take him right up to the edge, but never over it. Aaron tried to push his hips up to get more, but Dale held him down. He yanked wildly at the cuffs, but they were an immovable force. There was no way he could get his hands on Dale, slide his fingers into his hair, make him do what he wanted. He was totally at his best friend's mercy.

Exactly where he'd always wanted to be, he realized.

"God," he moaned.

Dale let Aaron's cock slide from his mouth. Aaron started to protest, but then Dale stretched out on top of him, rocking his hips into Aaron's, kissing him roughly. Aaron gasped. God, it was good, Dale's mouth and the heat of his body and Dale's cock sliding against his own, making his eyes roll back in his head. He wrapped his legs around Dale's waist, intent on pulling him closer

"Fuck." Dale bit his lip, his control starting to slip.

"Yeah, yeah," Aaron encouraged him, pushing up into him, wanting more, as much as he could get.

Dale slid his hands beneath Aaron's hips and pulled him into every thrust. "Come on. I want you to do it. Want you to come."

Aaron's thighs trembled, and he could barely breathe, feeling that telltale tingling at the base of his spine.

He tried to grab for Dale, forgetting the cuffs. The headboard rattled against the wall with the force of his desperation.

Dale bit him on the neck. "Do it. Do it for me."

Aaron squeezed his eyes closed. He could hear the roar of his own blood in his ears, and everything else spiraled away from him.

"Fuck!" Dale called out, his voice bouncing off the walls. He thrust wildly, once, twice, and then he came, too, wet and hot against Aaron's belly. He slumped heavily on top of Aaron, panting like he'd just run a race.

Aaron let him stay there, enjoying the closeness, the warmth of Dale's body, the kiss of skin, until finally Dale's

weight started making it hard to breathe. “Hey,” he said at last.

“Hey,” Dale mumbled against his shoulder.

“You know you’re heavy, right?” Aaron said, the corners of his mouth turning up fondly.

Dale lifted his head, grinning. “Don’t go thinking you can insult my girlish figure now that you’ve had your wicked way with me.”

Aaron pulled at the handcuffs, eyebrow raised. “*My* wicked way?”

Dale pressed a quick kiss to his mouth. “You’re very commanding for a man who’s chained to the bed.” He reached over to the bedside table for the bobby pin, started to work on the lock, and then hesitated.

“What?” Aaron said, frowning in consternation. “Don’t tell me you’re too upstanding a citizen to know how to pick a lock.”

A quick grin lit Dale’s face. “Not even a chance. I was just thinking how good you look like this. Maybe I should keep you handcuffed to my bed all the time.”

Aaron scowled at him, although without any real force.

Dale laughed. “Just kidding, buddy. Well, mostly.” Aaron poked him with his toe. “Okay, okay. Has anybody ever mentioned that you can be damned impatient about getting your way?”

“Has anybody ever mentioned that you talk too much when you’re supposed to be working?” Aaron shot back.

Dale's eyes sparkled with amusement. "All the damned time."

He bent over the lock again, and now that he was actually concentrating, it took about two seconds for the cuffs to come off. Aaron stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders, which were a little stiff from being held in the same position for so long. Dale rubbed gently at Aaron's wrists.

"Look at us." He held up his arm against Aaron's, comparing red marks. "We're a matched set."

Aaron laughed. "Yeah, we're both a big mess." He wrapped his arms around Dale and held on tightly. It felt so good to finally be able to do that.

Dale stretched out, and Aaron tucked himself close against his side, resting his head on Dale's shoulder. After a moment, he asked, "So, you really never knew?"

"Nope." Dale stroked his fingers through Aaron's hair, raking his nails lightly against his scalp. "Never had a clue. Maybe I'm just dense. Although it's not like you ever stared at my dick or anything."

Rule #10, Aaron thought absently and then decided the whole rules thing should probably stay his little secret. Aaron had no doubt Dale would give him shit about that for the rest of his life if he ever found out.

"Of course, looking back on it now," Dale said, rubbing his hand in thoughtful circles over Aaron's arm. "I can see how some of the things I did—well, like, remember that time we double-dated with those cheerleaders from Alton, and I talked you into driving out to the lookout?"

Aaron snorted. “You mean, the time you had sex with that girl in the backseat while I had to try to make conversation with her friend and pretend like nothing was happening?”

Dale grinned. “That’s the one. I think maybe I was trying to tell you something there.”

“Seriously? By sleeping with someone else right in front of me?”

Dale’s voice dropped down to a husky whisper. “I may have been having sex with her, but I’m pretty sure you’re the one I wanted to make hot.”

Aaron frowned, confused. “Then why didn’t you ever—”

Dale shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess there’s some part of me that’s not totally crazy.” He smiled wryly. “I’m a fuck-up, but I never wanted to mess us up.”

“Hey.” Aaron pressed kisses along Dale’s jaw. “Me neither.”

Dale smiled and kissed Aaron lazily.

“Um, so.” Aaron leaned his forehead against Dale’s. “Does this mean—is this going to be, you know, something?”

Dale rolled his eyes fondly. “Buddy, this has always been something. Now it’s something with sex.”

Aaron mulled that over for a moment. Could it possibly be that simple?

“Just one thing, though,” Dale continued, and Aaron thought: *yeah, nothing is ever that easy*. “I’m tired of you standing me up. I don’t want to be the little woman in this relationship, stuck at home with dinner all burned and shit

while my workaholic husband spends all night at the store. 'Cause that's not cool."

"Dinner?" Aaron snorted. "You don't even know how to boil water."

"I'm serious!"

"Yeah? Then why don't you come down to the store and help me?"

Dale met Aaron's eye, his expression more serious than Aaron had ever seen it. "Why don't I?"

Aaron needed a moment to process that. "Really?"

"You need help. And I'm more useful than people generally give me credit for." He sounded practically eager.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "I know. I just thought—"

"I'm not against responsibility on principle," Dale told him. "I just haven't had much reason to get me some of it. Until now."

Aaron pulled him closer and kissed him. "I'd really like that."

"Good." Dale rolled over on top of him. "Now, I remember you mentioning something about not getting out of bed until noon." He strung kisses up Aaron's neck. "I'm thinking we should change that to Monday morning when we have to go to the store."

Aaron grinned. "We might need those." He nodded at the handcuffs on the bedside table. "And, hey, Kandi didn't happen to leave that lip gloss lying around somewhere, did she?"

Dale's eyes gleamed mischievously. "I like the way you're thinking."

THIRTY straight hours of sex had a way of discouraging serious contemplation about the future. So it wasn't until bright and early Monday morning that Aaron started worrying about when that proverbial other shoe might drop. His eyes popped open well before the alarm went off, all the many ways things could go wrong buzzing around his head. *Oh shit, oh shit.* Dale snoozed soundly, half sprawled over Aaron, peacefully drooling on his shoulder. Aaron stared up at the ceiling. *Just calm down. You're fine. Dale's fine. Everything is fine.* His heart continued to race like an engine. It was hard to be calm when he'd broken every rule in the book.

He slid out of bed and crept to the bathroom. He needed to get ready for work, and the shower made a convenient place to hide. He turned on the water and stepped beneath the spray. He closed his eyes, rubbing his hands over his face, trying to clear his head. *It doesn't have to be complicated. Remember what Dale said?*

Of course, Dale would say anything during sex. What he'd do in the hard, cold light of Monday morning remained to be seen. Maybe he'd clap Aaron on the back and send him on his way with a casual: *that was fun, huh?*

Aaron turned that depressing little possibility over in his head a few (thousand) times, his panic level ratcheting up by the moment. When the bathroom door banged open, he

startled so hard he nearly took a header on the hard, cold tile. “Fuck!”

“You okay?” Dale peeled the shower curtain back and stepped into the tub. He wound an arm around Aaron’s waist and pressed a kiss to his neck.

“Um. Yeah.” The panic of the last fifteen minutes seemed suddenly ridiculous with Dale’s cock nestled intimately against his hip.

Dale yawned widely. “It’s too damn early.” He grabbed the soap and started to lather up Aaron’s back.

Aaron relaxed into his touch. Possibly he needed a new set of rules: “How to Sleep with Your Best Friend without Giving Yourself a Heart Attack.”

They got dressed, made coffee, and drank it black because the milk in Dale’s refrigerator would have to be carbon-dated to figure out how old it was. They piled into Aaron’s car, and the whole way to the store, Aaron kept waiting for Dale to change his mind about the assistant manager thing. But Dale just fiddled with the radio and drummed his fingers on the dashboard, humming tunelessly under his breath.

Aaron parked, and they headed inside. Reba had Mondays off, so it was just the two of them, at least until Bertie Simmons showed up. Aaron stalled by the front counter, looking around absently, trying to figure out what to give Dale to do, not coming up with anything.

Dale, though, seemed to have plenty of ideas. “I was thinking I could reorganize a few things in the storeroom. Make it easier to get at stuff that needs a lot of restocking.

The other day I noticed the socks and sunscreen were tucked away in a back corner. Not too convenient. Also, there's been lots of tourists coming into Dizzy's talking about kite surfing on the lake. Maybe we could do a display with some of the gear. We'd probably sell right out of it."

Clearly he'd given this a lot of thought.

It took Aaron a moment to get over his surprise. "Yeah, sure," he finally managed. "Sounds good."

Dale smiled, leaned in for a kiss, and headed off to the storeroom. Aaron was left to contemplate how weird it was to come to work like he always did, go through the usual routine, same old, same old, when his whole life had changed.

The door jingled, and Bertie Simmons tromped inside, the ubiquitous crossword puzzle book in hand. "Was that Dale Lambert I saw?" he asked as he settled onto his stool.

Aaron became so flustered he knocked over the dish of pennies he kept on the counter. "Um." He bent down to scoop up the spilled change. "Yeah. Dale's working here now as assistant manager."

If Bertie had seen them kissing, Aaron's dad—not to mention half of Mortonsville—would know about it before the day was out. Aaron had every intention of telling his parents, naturally, just as soon as he felt a little more sure about things with Dale. He hoped they'd take it well, thought they probably would. But it would definitely be better if they heard about it from him and not the town's biggest gossip. He straightened up before he could start hyperventilating. Breathing into a paper bag was hardly keeping a low profile.

Bertie filched the pen Aaron kept by the cash register and opened his puzzle book. “Glad to hear that about Dale. He’s needed to get himself a real job since he graduated from high school.”

Aaron waited, heart thudding, for Bertie to say something more, but he just chewed on the cap of the pen and bent over his crossword. Aaron took a breath and let it out. He seriously needed to stop freaking out.

The store opened at nine, and customers started streaming in not long afterward. Jerry Bryson was among the first to arrive, wearing an eye-puckering lime green track suit and a gray fedora tilted at a jaunty angle. He had the hapless life preserver in hand.

“Dang fiddly stuff.” He plunked it down on the counter for Aaron to take a look.

Aaron spotted the problem right away. “It’s not broken, Mr. Bryson. You just need to pull this strap through that buckle. There.” He handed it back, the life preserver once more in working order.

Mr. Bryson turned it over in his hands, marveling. “You’re a miracle worker, Aaron Fitchley. That’s what you are.”

Aaron smiled. “Glad I could help.”

The front door banged open, and Ida Mae Saunders stormed in, stopping in front of the counter, hands on her hips. “I went to my bridge club last night, and I was telling all the girls about my swimming, and do you know what that awful Claudette Rayney had the nerve to do?”

Aaron had no idea, but he felt sure Ida Mae was going to tell everyone in the store, whether they wanted to hear it or not.

“She started boasting about how she’s training for this here senior triathlon thing. She just kept going on and on about it! And giving me these pitying looks like swimming a mile every day is practically lying around on the sofa eating bonbons. Well!” Ida Mae sniffed disdainfully. “We’ll just see about that. I need Reba to show me some of those bicycle shorts. Where are you hiding them?” She glanced around the store. “And where are you hiding Reba? She’s not out sick again, is she?”

Aaron shook his head. “Reba has Mondays off, Mrs. Saunders.” He didn’t bother to add that she knew this perfectly well, because it would do absolutely no good. “I can help you, or if you want to come back—”

“Actually, I’d say this is a job for the assistant manager.” Dale came striding up the aisle from the storeroom.

Ida Mae gave him a look over the tops of her glasses. “Dale Lambert. What in the world are you doing working here?”

“Keeping an eye on my buddy here, so he doesn’t become a total workaholic.” He smiled, a spark in his eyes that made Aaron’s stomach feel suddenly too hot. “Come on, Mrs. Saunders. Let’s go pick you out the best-looking bicycle shorts this store has. I’m thinking hot pink. Claudette Rayney won’t know what hit her.”

Ida Mae nodded. “I like that plan.” She charged off toward the women’s clothing, calling back over her shoulder, “Well, don’t just stand there. I’ve got a chicken-legged windbag to show up. Chop-chop.”

Aaron shot Dale an apologetic look. Waiting on Ida Mae wasn’t the easiest way to get started in customer service. “You sure you can handle it?” he asked anxiously.

Part of him still half expected Dale to go out at lunch and never come back. That had happened with a stock boy he’d hired one year for the summer rush.

“Don’t worry,” Dale assured him. “Old ladies love me.” He winked—bringing a sharp blush to Aaron’s cheeks—and went off to help Ida Mae.

Aaron turned back around to find Bertie Simmons and Mr. Bryson watching him expectantly. “Um,” he stammered, trying to come up with some reasonable explanation why he was suddenly acting like a schoolboy around his best friend.

Bertie had his mind on other things, though. “What’s a five-letter word for trout basket?”

Mr. Bryson leaned in confidentially. “I don’t want to put you on the spot here, Aaron, but there’s something I got to ask you.”

He braced himself. “Go ahead, Mr. Bryson.”

“Ida Mae Saunders, is she seeing anybody, do you know?”

Aaron blinked. “What?”

“She’s one hot tamale, that one.” Mr. Bryson let out a wheezy chuckle, nudging Aaron with his elbow.

Bertie shook his head sadly. “Still an old fool.”

Jerry loitered around while Dale helped Ida Mae put together a cycling ensemble, everything she’d need to best her nemesis Claudette Rayney. When she was finally ready to go, Jerry held the door for her. “I could carry those packages for you. Probably need to save up your strength for that triathlon thingy.”

“Training does take a lot out of a body,” Ida Mae said, handing over the bags.

She walked off, regaling Jerry with tales of what a hopeless bridge player Claudette Rayney was. Aaron watched them go, wondering if he’d just witnessed the beginning of not-so-young love right there in his store. When he turned back around, he found Dale regarding him with an expression he recognized from many nights down at Dizzy’s, the one he got when he was about to sneak off with somebody and go have sex. Aaron’s cock leaped instantly to attention.

“You should probably see what I’ve been doing in the storeroom.” Dale’s eyes flashed like neon signs: *come to the back so I can do dirty, filthy things to your body.*

“Um.” Aaron darted an anxious look at Bertie.

He waved his hand, not glancing up from his crossword puzzle. “Go on. I’ll watch the register.”

Dale took Aaron by the arm and hurried him to the storeroom, his intentions clear to every customer in the place, Aaron felt certain. Dale shut the door behind them and pushed Aaron up against some boxes. They were neatly

stacked, Aaron noted appreciatively. Then Dale was all over him, and Aaron had other things to think about.

“God.” Dale’s breath came hot against Aaron’s skin as he kissed his neck. “How have I kept my hands off you all these years?”

A picture took shape in Aaron’s head: Dale bending him over a box, spreading his legs as wide apart as they’d go, and fucking him until he cried out, his voice raw and broken.

Then he imagined a store full of customers hearing that, and the responsible businessman in him piped up, “We probably shouldn’t.”

“You owe me a coffee break,” Dale said, as if that made all the sense in the world.

“But—”

Dale slid to his knees.

“Shit.”

Dale grinned up at him. “I thought you’d see things my way.”

He pushed Aaron’s shirt out of the way and kissed his belly, wrangled his belt loose, and unzipped his fly. Aaron sucked in his breath at the touch of Dale’s mouth, hot and wet and eager. Dale curled his hand around Aaron’s cock and went at him, no foreplay, no teasing.

It occurred to Aaron that this was what it would have been like if Dale had sucked him off beneath the bleachers back in high school instead of some jerk from Dillsburg: quick and dirty, with an edge to it because anybody might catch them at any moment. Aaron tightened his hands in

Dale's hair, possessiveness burning through him. This was all his now and nobody else's.

He came in Dale's mouth, panting his name.

Dale sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth with his hand, looking pleased with himself. "Best coffee break ever or what?" He grinned as he tucked Aaron's cock back into his jeans.

"Get up here." Aaron tugged at Dale's shoulders, urging him to his feet.

He shoved his hand down Dale's pants and squeezed his cock. It felt hot and alive, and he curled his fist around it. Dale pushed into his grip impatiently, and Aaron jerked him off hard and fast. Dale came without making a sound, his mouth a perfect circle, his expression dazed.

He laughed shakily and pressed his face against Aaron's neck. "Shit."

Aaron brushed a kiss to the top of his head. "Clearly, I've been doing coffee breaks all wrong."

"Buddy, I would have been all over this job thing before if I'd known about the fringe benefits."

They cleaned up the best they could, although it proved fairly hopeless, and emerged from the storeroom loose-limbed and messy-haired, a veritable advertisement for what they'd just been doing. A couple of customers milled around the display of golf shoes. They didn't even glance up as Aaron and Dale passed by. Of course, they might have just wandered in. Bertie Simmons still hunkered down on his stool, pencil poised over his crossword. He'd been there the whole time. God only knew what he'd heard.

At their approach, Bertie looked up, glowering. Aaron's stomach dropped.

"Best picture of 1968?" Bertie complained loudly. "Who the heck can remember stuff like that?"

Aaron looked to Dale, his forehead creased in a silent question: *is he totally clueless or is he just not surprised we were having sex in the storeroom?* Dale shrugged, a gesture Aaron was pretty sure meant: *Who cares?*

AT CLOSING time, Dale straightened up while Aaron took care of the money. They were out the door by six-fifteen. Aaron could get used to this assistant manager thing, he decided. He just hoped Dale felt the same way.

"Um, so," he said as he locked up. "Should I drop you off at your place? Or do you maybe—I was thinking you could come home with me?"

Dale slung an arm around his shoulders. "Buddy, I'm planning to come home with you every night. You're going to have to change the locks if you want to get rid of me."

Aaron smiled, stupidly happy. They got in the car and headed off. Aaron drove on autopilot, contemplating how to bring up the issue of Dale's future at the store.

"So was it okay?" he asked hopefully. "Your first day, I mean. You didn't hate it or anything, did you? Think you'll want to come back tomorrow?"

Dale snorted a laugh, and Aaron felt his heart sink.

“Of course I want to come back tomorrow. For a really smart guy, you can be pretty dense sometimes, you know that?”

“I was just making sure!”

Dale shook his head. “I’ve only been dropping hints that I wanted to come work with you since you took over the place.”

Aaron snatched his gaze away from the road to stare at Dale. “How was I supposed to know that? Seriously. You’ve never wanted a regular job before.”

Dale shrugged. “What can I say? I was holding out for a management position.” His mouth curved into a smile. “Besides, you spend ninety percent of your life at the store, and I like being where you are.”

Aaron stopped at the next red light, reached for Dale, and laid a loud, smacking kiss on him. Because he could do that now. He could kiss Dale whenever he wanted to.

Dale smiled like the tease he was. “Get me home in the next five minutes, and you can have your way with me.”

Aaron stomped on the gas the instant the light changed.

“Four minutes and counting,” Dale announced as they turned onto Wiltmont.

“You don’t even have a watch!” Aaron protested.

Dale just laughed.

Moments later, Aaron pulled into the driveway, hopped out of the car, and dragged Dale into the house.

“I don’t know.” Dale squinted up at the rooster clock. “That might have been more like six minutes.”

Aaron crowded him back against the counter and kissed him like he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“You’re damned hot when you get all pushy,” Dale said admiringly.

“Glad you think so.” He grabbed Dale’s hand and pulled him to the stairs.

The one small change Aaron had made since he’d bought the house was moving into the master bedroom, helping himself to the extra space and adjoining bathroom.

Dale bounced on the bed, grinning like a maniac. “It’s like your parents are going to come home any minute and catch us.”

Aaron made a face at him. “Scarring me for life really isn’t a turn on.”

Dale leaned back, stroking a hand up his thigh and over his erection. “What about this? Is this a turn on?” His voice went rough. His eyes flashed dark and bright.

Every molecule of air in Aaron’s body went up in flames. He took a step closer. His cock thrummed urgently, and Dale hadn’t taken off so much as a sock yet.

Dale shook his head. “I really can’t believe I never figured it out. You’re so not subtle.”

“Shut up!” Aaron huffed indignantly.

Dale patted the mattress beside him. “Come on over here and make me.”

Aaron scrambled onto the bed. He kissed Dale messily, all spit and urgent tongue and the fine edge of teeth, his hands balled up in Dale's T-shirt.

Dale rubbed a hand up and down Aaron's arm. "You got stuff?"

Aaron pulled back from the kiss. "Stuff?"

"So you can fuck me," Dale said slowly, as if Aaron were mentally challenged.

They'd done a lot of things in that day they'd spent in bed together, but somehow not this. Aaron hadn't realized how much he wanted it until now.

"Shit!" he said loudly when it occurred to him that he didn't, in fact, have stuff. That was just his stupid luck.

Dale smirked at him. "It's a good thing one of us is a responsible adult." He pulled a foil wrapper and a small tube of lube from his jeans pocket.

That Dale wanted this enough to actually plan ahead—historically not his forte—pushed every button Aaron had. He couldn't decide what to do first, strip the clothes off Dale or get himself naked, so he attempted to do both at the same time, hands fumbling eagerly. He wanted to be everywhere at once: kissing Dale's nipples, palming his cock, licking his neck. He wanted to be inside him so bad it hurt.

"Yeah, yeah, do me. Come on and do me now," Dale encouraged him.

Aaron fumbled the cap off the lube, slicked two fingers and shoved them into him. Dale sucked in his breath and

pushed down onto Aaron's hand, which was just ridiculously hot.

"Fuck. Fuck yeah," Dale said thickly. "We should have been doing this since we hit fucking puberty."

Aaron's hands trembled as he tore open the foil wrapper. A hysterical voice in his head reminded him that this was the only condom in the house. Happily, he managed to roll it on without incident. "How do you want—"

"Do me like this." Dale pulled his knees back to his chest and let his legs fall open. "Fuck me, Aaron. I want you to. I want you so bad."

"Shit!" Aaron said shakily.

He lined up his cock and pushed in, curling his fingers around Dale's hips, just barely holding on to his self-control. Dale breathed shallowly, biting his bottom lip. His thighs trembled.

Aaron froze. The last thing he wanted was to hurt Dale. "Should I—"

"Move," Dale insisted. "Come on, Aaron. Do it." He pulled at Aaron's shoulders impatiently.

Aaron sank into him, bit by little bit. Dale's expression slowly transformed from pain to pleasure, his jaw unclenching, his mouth falling open, eyes going big and round and bottomlessly dark.

"Please, please." Dale licked his lips.

"Fuck, you are so hot." Aaron stretched forward, fumbling a kiss onto his mouth.

“Make me hotter, Aaron,” Dale begged breathlessly. “Make me.” He raised his hips, riding Aaron’s thrusts.

“Jesus.”

Aaron could barely breathe; his lungs felt scalded. Dale looked so wanton beneath him, his lips full and softly swollen where he’d bitten them, moisture beading on his forehead, his gaze sharply focused like Aaron was the only thing he could see. Heat prickled on Aaron’s neck, and sweat started to trickle down his back. Fucking Dale felt better than anything ever had. There was no way he was going to last.

“Touch yourself.” His voice came out a desperate rasp.

Dale curled his hand around his cock. “Oh fuck.” His voice quavered. “I can’t—I’m going to—” He came all over his belly.

“God.” Aaron’s hips lurched, and then he came, too, deep inside Dale.

His brain must have fritzed out there for a minute. When he came to, Dale was maneuvering him onto his side, tying off the condom, and pitching it vaguely in the direction of the trash can.

“If you get come all over the rug, you’re cleaning it up,” Aaron said blearily.

Dale grinned. “How much would I have to blow your mind for you not to care where I throw the condom?”

Aaron considered the question. “I’m not sure. I guess we’ll have to experiment.”

Dale's grin grew wider. "Have I ever mentioned I fucking love science?" He laid a quick, hard kiss on Aaron's mouth and then settled his head onto Aaron's chest, letting out a contented sigh. "I like being in your bed. It smells like you."

Aaron threaded his fingers through Dale's hair, the strands soft and thick. "So, um." Maybe this wasn't the best time to have a big talk about their future, but Aaron couldn't seem to stop himself. "If you moved in here, we could, uh, you know, change things around. Whatever you wanted."

He felt Dale's frown against his skin. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Oh," Aaron mumbled in disappointment. "I just thought—"

Dale pulled back to look at him. "Everything about this house is perfect just the way it is. When I was a kid, I used to imagine that I was a long-lost cousin or something and got to come live here."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," Dale said with a soft smile.

Aaron went back to stroking his hair. "You know my mom's been after me to settle down."

Dale barked a laugh. "I'm probably not what she had in mind."

"Probably not," Aaron admitted. "But I think she'll be okay with it. Both my parents. They just need to know who I am." He swallowed around the lump in his throat. He hoped that was true. He wanted to believe it was.

Dale rubbed his thumb absently in circles over Aaron's ribs. "If it helps, I can change my name. Dale Fitchley has a nice ring to it. And hey, if they're worried about grandchildren, we can get some dogs. You know, cute little fluffy ones. Your mother can knit them sweaters and shit. If all else fails, we'll find a husband for Kelly. That'll totally take the heat off us."

Aaron reached over the side of the bed, grabbed a throw pillow, and bopped Dale on the head with it. That just made Dale grin.

"Don't you have *any* anxiety about this at all?" Aaron asked, exasperated.

Dale shifted positions so they were face to face. "Would it make you feel better if I was freaking out?"

"No." Aaron sighed. "Okay, maybe a little. I just don't get how you're so calm."

"Buddy, I'm already luckier than I deserve to be that somebody like you wants to be friends with somebody like me. And now this—" He waved his hand between their naked bodies. "I've won the damned lottery."

It took a moment for Aaron to react, and then he clambered on top of Dale and kissed him until he felt dizzy from the lack of oxygen. "I'm the lucky one," he murmured.

Dale ran a hand down Aaron's back and along the curve of his ass. "Hey, we're not old men yet. I'm thinking we can both get lucky again tonight." He leered cheerfully.

Aaron laughed, and Dale pulled him down for another kiss.

“There is just one more thing,” Aaron said against his mouth.

Dale let out his breath. “What is it?”

“Don’t you think it’s just a little weird that Bertie Simmons didn’t have anything to say about you coming to work at the store? I think he might have even seen us kissing. And you’d have to be dimwitted not to know what we were doing in the storeroom. It’s not like he has the gene for minding his own business, so—” Aaron stopped cold as a possible explanation took shape in his head. “Shit.”

Dale’s forehead creased. “What?”

“Do you think it’s possible Bertie and all those busybodies down at Nona’s knew about us before we did?”

For a moment, Dale looked as horrified as Aaron felt, and then he began to laugh. “Oh hell, if that’s true, then we’re the two biggest idiots who ever lived.”

Sadly, Aaron couldn’t argue with that. “Well, I guess if we have to be idiots—”

Dale smiled fondly. “Yeah.”

At least they’d be in it together.

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