



If I Must



AMY LANE

If I Must
by Amy Lane

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Chapter One

Joel very carefully taped the phone list on the refrigerator, and then his itinerary, and then the magnetic calendar with the dry-erase reminders, all in bold, black, square, print-block writing.

"Ian... Ian? Ee, are you listening to me?"

Joel's roommate, Ian Cooper, pulled his head from whatever genius realm it usually occupied and aimed his slightly crossed blue eyes at the list. He nodded soberly and focused his Siamese-cat gaze over his crooked beak of a nose, and then smiled. That goofy, game smile was probably the only reason Joel had made it through five months as Ian's roommate, but it did nothing to reassure him now.

"I've got you, Joel; don't worry, mate. I've lived on my own for a lot of years now. I'll survive four days without you."

Joel wasn't so sure. In fact, he was reasonably certain that Ian's survival to this moment was a matter of sheer stinking luck.

"It's five days, and if you're so sure it's going to be easy, repeat after me: this is my itinerary in Colorado, this is where I'll be and when I'm going to be there. Here's my mom's number, my sister's number, my cell phone number, and when the returning flight gets here. Can you deal with all that?"

"I *have* your cell number, you goofy bastard," Ian protested, and Joel refrained from rolling his eyes. Yes, Ian did have his cell number, except it was in *Ian's* cell phone,

and Joel knew for a fact that Ian had needed to buy at least five new cell phones in the last four months.

"This is just in case your cell phone gets lost or stolen," Joel explained patiently, and Ian interrupted him with an earnest nod of his head.

"But even if it gets lost, mate, I've got your number in the regular phone!" Ian smiled triumphantly, and Joel had to concede. Yes, his number *was* in both handsets of the house phone. Because Joel put them there. After he bought the house phone. After Ian had lost his third cell.

"Okay," Joel conceded after he looked twice at the kitchen table to make sure that both handsets were plugged in, charging, and not broken. (They'd had to replace one of them after Ian's ill-advised in-line skate parabola/hyperbola experiment. For that matter, they'd had to replace the table too.) "So, the phones are set. Now, don't forget Manky Bastard's vet appointment on Tuesday."

Ian blinked, a sudden look of panic crossing his appealing features. He had one of those faces where the cheekbones left shadows in the hollows of his cheeks. Not even a goatee could make Joel's broad-cheeked, square-chinned Hispanic face look anything better than plain in comparison to Ian's narrow, Roman-nosed, Aussie profile. Typically, Ian truly didn't seem to notice his own good looks.

"Uhm, what day is it again today?" Ian asked apologetically, and Joel squeezed his eyes shut in an attack of good humor. Of course, his own looks weren't the only thing Ian Cooper didn't notice.

"See here—this is the calendar. Today is Saturday, see? Big plane, says 'Joel goes bye-bye'?"

Ian's giggle was as endearing as his open-hearted goofy smile. "Go ahead, treat me like a child, mate! I'm good for it!"

Joel shook his head and resisted the urge to fall into that smile. "How long were you up with your paper?"

Ian blinked, and because Joel knew him, he could see the light red patina of sleeplessness in Ian's spring-blue eyes. "Haven't been to sleep yet—Riemann, he was calling me, right?" Joel nodded. He knew. Ian was a genius—a certifiable, IQ in the stratosphere genius. U.C. Davis was willing to pay for Ian's room and board, just so Ian would write them a paper and give a few guest lectures. Ian made the rest of his money working as a CPA for the faculty and their high-toned friends, which explained why he could replace things like cell phones and kitchen tables on a whim, because he was cracking good at it. It was the day-to-day that needed a little work.

"I gotcha, Ee. Now try to focus here. The cab will be here in a minute. There's frozen food in the freezer, milk, bread, and lunchmeat in the fridge, fruit on top of the microwave, and peanut butter and jelly in the cabinet. For Christ's sake, *eat!* Right?"

Ian nodded soberly. "I won't make that mistake more than once, I promise."

Joel couldn't even think about it; it made his stomach hurt. "I'll hold you to that. Now Manky Bastard has been barfing more than usual. I made her a vet appointment on Monday. You've got to take her, E. I'll give you a call to remind you,

but you need to be able to find the phone and get your ass in gear, you hear me?"

Ian nodded earnestly. "I hear you, mate. She's been a good cat. I hate to see her feeling so sickly, right?"

Joel's smile softened. "Right."

And that right there was the thing that kept Joel from leaving, in spite of the chaos of living with Ian Cooper.

Ian's heart was as big as the goddamned sky. It was as simple as that. How could you desert a guy who would take in a mangy cat, give all his cash to the homeless people who abounded in the city of Sacramento proper, and who would, no matter how angry Joel got at his goofiness, simply smile that open-hearted, guileless, spring-blue smile and say, "You're right, mate. I'm a disaster. I'm lucky you're here."

There was a knock on the door, and Joel had his answer.

He could leave Ian because his mother called him and asked him to visit before the holidays.

Ian blinked at the door and the open, cheery expression he usually wore changed drastically. "Oh right," he murmured. "You're going."

"I'll be back Wednesday evening," Joel said, reaching up from his stocky five foot nine inches to embrace Ian's rangy six four. It was a quick, "manly" hug, the type with the double-thump with the fist. "Don't worry, I've got a Thanksgiving dinner ready to cook in the freezer, and I can catch a cab home—"

"No!" Ian was neither dreamy nor sleepy now. In fact, his arms tightened for a moment around Joel's shoulders. "I'll come get you."

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Joel didn't want to contradict him—it would hurt his feelings—but he didn't want to be waiting at the airport for hours either. "I'll call you when I land," he temporized, thinking that if he could get Ian's attention when he landed, the wait wouldn't be that long.

Ian *was* a genius. "And I'll answer that call at the gate!" he said with dignity, and Joel grinned, rolled his eyes, and grabbed his luggage. "Have a nice visit, mate!"

"Take care of yourself, Ee!"

"If I must," Ian replied mildly, and then, as Joel disappeared out the door, he hollered "Take care!" at full volume.

Joel tried to wince while Ian could still see him. It was six-thirty in the morning, and Ian probably just woke every last tenant in their three-story refurbished Victorian. Oh well, he would be out of the city before old Mr. Pomerantz could move his ass from bed to his doorway to complain.

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Chapter Two

"I like the goatee, *pappi*, but you look skinny. You not eating enough!"

Joel rolled his eyes at his sister—all big boobs, long stomach, and inviting hips. "You should talk, *mammi*, what? You stuff your bra with apples to keep that tummy so small?"

Melody Martinez laughed and ruffled her little brother's hair. It was late Sunday night, their mother was in bed, and they had lingered so long over dessert to catch up that they had done the dessert dishes and then just broken out the pie and sat, each of them with a fork, and finished it off.

"No, I been working out, *mammi*," Joel said now through a forkful of pie. "That's where I met Ian."

"Your psycho roommate?" Melody took her own. Pecan, it was their favorite. Since neither of them planned to stay for actual Thanksgiving, their mother had chosen to go all out for the four days before they both boarded planes and left Denver, Joel for Sacramento and Melody for Los Angeles.

"He's not psycho, Mel," Joel said seriously. "He's just focused."

"Yeah, psychos is focused you know! He probably stalking you at that gym!"

Joel shook his head, remembering the first time he'd seen Ian Cooper. "The only thing Ian stalks at the gym is bodily injury!"

Mel laughed, but Joel couldn't.

Ian had been so helpless under that barbell.

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Joel's co-worker had introduced Joel to the family gym, and Joel was grateful. There was an eclectic mix of people there—hardcore weight-lifters with tattoos and motorcycles, toned business women working the machines, spry elderly people enjoying the yoga and arthritis classes, and even children running around the ball pit in the day-care. Joel, who had grown up in a Hispanic neighborhood in South Denver, had been reassured by the diversity. It felt like a real community, and not just a place to be stalked by gym bunnies

*Those girls had never really appealed to Joel anyway
And the bulletin board added to the community, everything from free puppies to offers to carpool and, Joel hoped, roommates.*

When he'd first come to the city, he'd ended up in one of those prairie-dog apartment warrens, the kind where every apartment was the shape of a cracker tin and you could tell what your neighbor was doing upstairs whether you liked it or not. Joel might have toughed it out in one of those until he could afford to rent or buy a house, but he wanted to ride his bike to work. Since he had to move anyway, he was looking for something with... well, character. He'd driven around the city in his little hybrid, and he'd seen the neighborhoods with the Victorian-era houses. Some were high-toned, some were run-down, and some were in between, but they had seemed... eclectic. Interesting. They had character, and Joel was in a strange city on his second job. His first job had been

in a cubicle; he'd made sure this one was in a big, open-air office with people who knew what the others looked like. He wanted character

Then the first chuffing sound penetrated Joel's involvement with the bulletin board. He swung around to see a lanky man, shirtless, being crushed under a barbell that looked seriously overloaded for such a slender frame

Joel dropped his duffel bag and hurried over to rescue the poor bastard, and as he pulled the barbell up and rested it in the cradle, he was treated to an upside-down version of that sweet, goofy grin that would dominate the next five months of his life

"Thanks, mate. That 'bout bugged me." The man was in his mid-twenties, like Joel, and his curly blonde hair was a spiky, sweaty, halo all over his long skull. Joel would learn that, with the exception of the sweat, it always looked like that

"Well, you need to make sure you always have a spotter," Joel told him seriously

"Yeah, mate, if I must. Here, you want the job?"

Joel was going to say no—he'd actually been on the way out of the gym—but that smile appeared, and it was so winsome and so trusting that Joel found himself standing over Ian and helping him with what appeared to be a ridiculous amount of weight

After a couple of sets, he had to admit that the weight wasn't ridiculous. The strength in that long, rangy frame was the outstanding thing

"Thanks, mate," Ian panted when he was done. He sat up and rubbed his face with a towel. "I was lucky you came along. What were you looking at over there?" He jerked his head in the direction of the bulletin board, and Joel looked over and grimaced

"A roommate," he sighed. "I want to live someplace interesting, but I don't have enough money for interesting. Just cheap."

The young man blinked, and his head went through a series of bird-like movements that Joel had come to associate with Ian thinking on the fly

"A roommate, you say?"

"Yeah, a roommate. Why? You know someone who lives in a cool house downtown who wouldn't mind a broke computer programmer in their spare room?"

That grin again—except without the goofiness, it was full-on blinding. "Yeah, mate, me!" The young man had extended a long-fingered, bony-knuckled hand. "I'm Ian Cooper, and I've got a cool top-floor and a spare bedroom.

* * * *

"So just like that, he offers you a room?" Mel was very carefully wiping the bottom of the pie tin with a manicured finger.

Joel shrugged and grinned at his big sister. Mel was a buyer for a department store in L.A. On most days, she was one hundred percent Vogue, one hundred percent of the time. But during holidays, for family, she wore ratty sweats and piled her hair on the top of her head and ate whatever she

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wanted. In return, Joel wore his accent in his voice like a badge of honor, and together, they could be themselves.

"I think he just doesn't like living alone," he told her honestly. Ian certainly didn't need the money.

* * * *

Somebody's phone was ringing, and Joel couldn't find the damn thing. With a sigh, he started picking through the disaster in the living room. He'd just moved in the day before, and although Ian had made a good-faith effort to clean up, Joel had found him, a pile of dirty clothes in his lap, typing feverishly after about an hour of housecleaning. The man said he got distracted by his work, but until that moment, Joel thought it was probably just a charming personality quirk, not an impediment toward health, living quality, and good hygiene

With a grunt Joel tripped over a free weight and landed on all fours in a pile of blankets that smelled like sex and beer. The ringing got louder, and Joel reached under the oxblood leather couch to be rewarded by the tiny cell phone buzzing in the palm of his hand

"Jesus, Ian," he griped, "don't you have a house phone?"

"What?" Ian looked up from his room blankly and then turned back to the paper he was typing—something about imaginary numbers and Riemannian geometry, and Joel was damned if he could follow half of what Ian said when he was talking about it

Joel rolled his eyes and sat on the floor, leaning against the couch, to answer the phone

"Hello. Ian Cooper?" The voice was educated, older than thirty, and female

"No, I'm sorry. This is his roommate."

There was a subtle pause. "Roommate?"

"Yeah, roommate." As if! "What can I do for you?"

"This is Florence Kohl from U.C. Davis. I was just calling to remind Dr. Cooper that he has a lecture tomorrow."

"Does he know where it is?" Joel asked, looking around the spacious top-floor apartment a little desperately for a pen and paper. He'd already started a grocery list in his head: laundry hampers, vacuum cleaner bags, Swiffer, sponges, dish soap. He added "pen and paper" to it now, so he didn't have to make the next list in his head

"Oh yes." Florence laughed appreciatively. "Just get him to the campus around ten o'clock, and he'll probably show up by ten-thirty."

The nice woman with (presumably) Ian's paycheck in the palm of her hand rang off, and Joel took a deep breath and looked around. The apartment was gorgeous: oxblood leather furniture, hardwood floors, cream area rugs and a burgundy accent with white trim. And it was huge; the rent was a steal. The fact that it currently looked like a thrift store clearinghouse because of the sheer volume of clothes on the floor, in the corners, on the couches, and over the coffee table, and that it smelled like a monkey's ass notwithstanding, the situation had potential

But first, there had to be some semblance of order. That was okay. Joel was good at order

"Ian," he said, standing up and dusting off his hands, "buddy, you have a lecture to give tomorrow."

The effect on Ian was electric. He stood up abruptly, left his computer, and started running around his room, rifling through clothes, throwing items from the pile on the bed onto the pile on the floor, and digging through stuff in the pile on the floor and tossing it to the lone basket at the foot of the bed

"Oh fuck," he was muttering. "I don't have anything to wear!"

Joel had to suppress a laugh. "Then what is all this shit on the floor?" he asked with good nature, and Ian sent him a panicked look from his wild-blue eyes

"It's not funny, mate. All this shit, it's wrinkled! I've got to do laundry! I've got to find a laundromat! Jesus, I've got to get quarters!"

He was so distraught that Joel couldn't laugh anymore. "Ian... Ian... Ian!"

Ian stopped so abruptly that he tripped over a dress shoe and fell sprawling on (what else?) a pile of clothes. Joel was over to him before he could pick himself up, crouching down to see if he would live

"Ian. pop... buddy... you okay?"

Ian blinked up at him like a startled child. "I'm fine," he said softly, and a troubled version of that smile appeared. "I hadn't meant for you to see me lose my nut quite so soon. I'm sorry. I just- I completely forgot...."

Joel looked carefully at his roommate, saw the bloodshot eyes and the dark bags, and recalled that Ian hadn't slept the

night before, he'd been so intent on his work. Joel took a deep breath, snagged a paper and a pen off the clutter that was Ian's desk, and sat down to put his tidy mind to work

"All right, Ee. Here. This is a list of shit we need. I can pay you back for my half..."

"No worries," Ian assured carelessly, and Joel had rolled his eyes. He'd pay the guy back. He didn't like being in someone's debt. "No, really!" Ian assured him. "You're helping me out of a jam here. Let me pay, right?"

"Ian, it's no big deal," Joel laughed, and he was surprised when Ian's long-fingered hand wrapped around his wrist and stopped him from writing. Joel looked up and met those spring-blue eyes. They were intent and laser focused, and Joel's breath had caught in his chest

"It's a very big deal," Ian said seriously. "You didn't sign up to be my keeper. I've made a piss-poor showing here. I appreciate it.

There was something naked in his eyes, something stripped bare. Ian was afraid of what Joel would think of him

Joel tried a tentative smile, although there was still something in his chest that wanted him not to breathe. "Yeah, well, I wasn't doing anything else." This was true. Christ, when was the last time he had a date?

"Well, if I get in the way of you getting laid, let me know, right, mate?" Ian grinned, and Joel blushed for no good reason he could think of

"Whatever. Look, man, just get this stuff." He had a thought. "Do not stop, do not pass go, do not get anything but what's on that list."

"What about some takeout for dinner?"

"And dinner. And by the time you get back, I'll have clothes ready to go in the washer, and we can go together."

Ian blessed him then with the widest, sweetest, most grateful smile. "Well, if I must do laundry, I couldn't ask for better company."

* * * *

"So," Melody said seriously while washing out the pie tin, "you keep his life for him, and he pays for dinner. Sounds like you're his houseboy or something!"

Joel had to roll his eyes. "Not even that glamorous. And it's not like that. He just... he loses track of the world so thoroughly, you know? All those clothes on the floor? It was just easier for him to go out and buy new clothes than it was to find what he needed in what he already had. I went through and organized, and he had, like, three pairs of the same jeans!"

Melody laughed for a minute and then looked at him thoughtfully. "Doesn't that get old though? You know, keeping someone's life for them?"

Joel shrugged. "He's kept it up since I organized it. And trust me, he's got his own life. In fact, I think he fucks anything with a pulse!"

"Oooh... lots of hot women coming in and out of your pad?"

Joel flushed. "Like I said, ...um, *anything* with a pulse."

Melody turned to him in titillation, her well-crafted eyebrows reaching her hairline and her mouth making a little moue. "Really. An equal opportunity kind of guy?"

Joel's blush intensified. "Yeah, um, I can't say much for his taste, though."

* * * *

The boy with the unbuttoned jeans and bare chest was pretty, Joel would give him that. The kid's hair was tousled, carefully streaked, and his little heart-shaped face and brown eyes were truly charming

Joel would have been more impressed if he hadn't found the boy rifling through Ian's pants and palming his credit card

Christo! Joel had to shake his head. On the nights that Joel worked late, he would sometimes find Ian gone when he got home. In the morning there would be a stranger doing a red-faced walk of shame out of Ian's room. Usually the stranger was female, but not today

"Hey, you, what the fuck you think you doing, punto? You get the hell away from shit that don't belong to you!" Joel's accent—the product of being brought up in a mostly Spanish-speaking home—only came out when he was back at home or really, really pissed off

The kid started guiltily and dropped the jeans and wallet, scattering the credit cards on the (clean!) floor. "Hey, baby, don't get mad at me because your boy got takeout last night!"

It was probably the ingratiating smile on the kid's face, but in about two seconds, Joel had him pinned to the pretty purple wall with his forearm at a slender, corded throat. "I

could give a shit what he sleeps with, as long as it doesn't take him on the twinkie express when it's done."

"Yeah?" the kid hissed. "What're you gonna do? For all you know he liked what he got!"

Joel rolled his eyes. "Yeah? For all you know, he thinks you someone dead who was doing some sexy math in his dreams."

In less than a minute Joel had hustled the kid out onto the landing and slammed the door in his face, ignoring his cry of, "But I don't even have my shoes!" Then, in as quiet a huff as he could manage, he tiptoed into Ian's room. He tried to ignore Ian's sprawled, naked body on top of the covers as he began to quietly pick up the clothes on the floor he knew for certain weren't Ee's

"Mmmmm," Ian groaned, just as Joel was about to close the door and let him sleep, "Joel? S'that you?"

"Yeah, popp, uh, Ee. What you... what do you want?"

"What're you doing?"

"Saturday chores?" Joel tried, and Ian sat up sleepily. God, his chest and abs really were cut! And his... never mind. Joel wasn't going to look at that. It was huge, but he wasn't gonna look

"Saturday?" Ian murmured. "Don't we usually get breakfast on Saturdays?"

Joel resisted the temptation to say something catty, like Well, yeah, did you want to take your Friday Night Special too? And instead concentrated on the fact that Ian seemed to have forgotten about Twink Lightfingers who was standing half-naked on the landing.

"Yeah, Ee," he said with a sigh, "but first I've got to take out the trash.

Later, over pancakes at IHOP (because it was Ian's favorite, that's why) Joel read him the riot act

"For Christ's sake, Ian, he was stealing your cash! I hope you at least wore a raincoat, you feel me?"

Ian blinked. "Why would I want a raincoat, Joel? I was having sex."

Joel put his face in his hands, closed his eyes tight, and prayed that when he looked up and opened them Ian would be kidding

He wasn't

"A condom, Ian, I hope you used a condom!" Oh God, he was not having this conversation with a twenty-something bisexual college professor. It was not possible

"Why would I?" Ian asked seriously. He looked anxious. It was as though he understood he'd done something wrong, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was. "It's not like either one of us can get pregnant, right?"

"Disease, Ee?" Joel realized he was on the verge of tears. How had this man managed to live on his own and be this innocent? "You know, HIV, herpes, shit that'll make your dick fall off?"

Ian's eyes were suddenly saucer-shaped, and his mouth was wide open. Oh yes, now the light bulb was on. "Oh, well, shit, mate, I never thought about that! I just...." He cocked his head, something suddenly occurring to him. "And how would you know about that? I didn't know you swung that way, do you?"

Joel shook his head. "I want to Catholic school, where they teach you everything with a healthy dose of 'God will hate you if you do that, but if you want God to hate you go ahead'. Or maybe that was Sister Margaret." Joel tried a laugh, but Ian was looking more and more distraught, so he tried some kindness instead. "Look, Ee, we'll get you tested. It'll be no big deal."

"Do you believe that?" Ian asked suddenly, a pinch around his eyes. "You don't believe that God hates me, do you?"

Oh crap. Heaven save Joel from literal mathematical geniuses. "No," he said softly, trying to do anything to take that pinched look from those Easter-sky eyes. "I think as long as you care about the person, and you're being good to each other, God's all fine with it. But that's why this worries the hell out of me, Ian. You don't even like these people. I mean hell, I don't think you even remember that kid's name!"

"Benji," Ian supplied helpfully, and it was all Joel could do to not make gagging motions with his fingers

"Yeah, whatever, it's like when I'm not there, you wander out and bring back a warm body. You deserve better than that, Ee. What you're doing is dangerous, and you could get hurt, and I don't want that to happen.

Ian shrugged and looked away. "I don't know, mate. I used to be okay, but now... you're not there. It gets lonely in the place, right?"

Joel did laugh now. "Jesus, Ian! Get a cat!"

That lost look went away, and Ian looked across the table and grinned back at him. "That's an idea. I like cats."

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They were sitting near a window, and Joel found himself fascinated by the way the light hit that halo of curly blond hair and brought out the reddish hints in Ian's eyelashes. He stopped himself and thought of a way to keep Ian safe

"Okay, then, you look for a cat, and I'll promise to call when I'm going to be late, deal?"

The look on Ian's face transcended "pleased" and bordered on "sublimely happy"

"Right, mate. If I must!"

* * * *

Joel and Melody made it to the couch, each one sitting on the end and tangling their legs companionably in the middle. Melody was channel surfing with the sound off, listening avidly to Joel's latest story, and when he was finished, she leaned her head back sleepily. Joel was pretty tired himself, but, well, he missed his big sister. They'd bickered, like most children, but he'd always loved knowing she had his back—bullies at school, his first broken heart (a girl from public school their father hadn't approved of)—she was Joel's own personal pit bull, and really, until Ian, his best friend.

"Honey, that's sweet and all, but really, don't you think you got enough to take care of with this Ian person? You really want a cat?"

Joel felt his expression go soft and a little dreamy. He couldn't help it—he knew how it must look, but...

"Ee actually takes care of the cat," he said truthfully. "Ian feeds it, and he's the one who took it to the vet when we first got it."

Melody snorted, her eyes half closed in sleep. They'd talked until nearly one in the morning. "So he can't take care of himself, but he can take care of the cat? How's that work?"

Joel shrugged. "I think he thinks the cat's more important."

* * * *

A week after their little sex-ed discussion, Joel came home to find a little tin of high-priced cat food on the landing

The thing eating out of it and snarling through spittle-covered whiskers barely passed for a cat

"Ian?" Joel called, jostling his bike and his backpack over his shoulders and hoping they could co-exist for just a few more steps. He'd just come from work and was wearing his bike shorts. "Ian?" Gingerly he reached over to open the door (Ian rarely remembered to lock it) and swung a leg over the threshold. The cat—a dark brown short-haired behemoth with pale tortoise-shell stripes on its side—stuck out a massive paw and clawed his bare ankle

"Ian!" Joel screamed, not wanting to kick this new development off a three-story landing and not wanting to lose any more blood, either

Ian popped out of his room—shirtless, as usual—and trotted over to help Joel through the door

"He got you? Why would he get you?"

Joel glared at the cat who looked at him and growled some more. "Because I interfered with his evil plan to rain destruction down on mankind," he said sourly, and the freaky thing licked its whiskers and damned near smiled

Ian laughed, and now that Joel was safely inside, he sank to his haunches and scratched delicately under the cat's chin. The feline monstrosity had the balls to purr

"Hullo, you manky bastard," Ian murmured. "You giving Joel a hard time? You can't, you know. He was here first.

Joel looked at the cat in a mixture of humor and horror. "Well, it's nice to know I rate!"

Ian's grin appeared again, and Joel wondered why the cat suddenly looked more like a cat and less like a refugee from a zoo. "Rate? Brother, you're more important to me than Riemann!"

Joel had to blink. Wow—Riemann was like the guy's god—or at least the subject of his latest paper. Joel took a big breath and realized most of his irritation with the animal was gone. All that was left was his perpetual good humor

"Jesus, Ian! I said get a cat —I didn't say to just let one wander up to the house."

Ian turned that sunny smile up at Joel one more time, and although he refused to admit it, Joel's heart stuttered in his chest. "I don't know, brother. That's sort of how I got you, isn't it?"

Joel's mouth went sober. He met Ian's gaze and flushed, and Manky Bastard (as the female cat would forevermore be known) sank her pointy, street-cat teeth into the ball of Ian's thumb

Ian shouted and stood, and the little opportunist took that moment to run inside the apartment and sit, snarling, in the corner of the bathroom between the toilet and the tub. Joel, still a little dizzy from that long look he'd shared with Ian,

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went out and got cat litter, a box, and a pooper-scooper, and they put it where the cat seemed to want to stay. Ian had already bought enough food to last the damned cat a year. (They still hadn't gone through even half the Fancy Feast under the counter.

Joel made two appointments the next day: one for the cat, which Ian kept, and one for Ian, because his thumb turned blue and doubled in size. Joel took Ian to that one. While they were there, he made Ian take a blood test too

The results were negative, and Ian had promised to go back after the window period was over. "Well, if I must!" Whenever he said that, Joel had no doubt he'd do it

* * * *

Melody seemed to have gotten her second wind. She sat up on the couch and was staring avidly at Joel's face. Joel wondered if she could see something he couldn't.

"So now you got a cat?" she asked, her face soft in the glow from the television. Joel had no doubt his sister could be hard as nails when she was driving a bargain or running her staff, but with him, she was all Little Mommy.

Joel nodded and grimaced. "You should see Ian with her. He brushes her, feeds her shit that cost more than my food, and she thinks he put fish in the damn ocean. But she's sick. I think she's just old." He shuddered. "I hope she's okay. Ian really loves her."

"Mmm-hmm." Melody's voice went up at the end of that, and Joel found himself sitting up and looking at her funny.

"What was that for, *mammi*? It sounds like you thinking something you shouldn't!"

Melody shook her head. "I'll tell you when I'm ready, little brother. So, you think he'll take care of the cat when he can't take care of himself?"

"I know he will," Joel answered softly. That was one story he *didn't* want to tell Melody. For some reason it just hurt too much.

* * * *

Joel had been gone for a two-day seminar. He'd asked Ian repeatedly, "You going to be okay, Ian? You going to be okay?" But he had to go—what, he was going to tell work he was going to turn down free training because his roommate was a flake

He got back to find a mound of open, empty cat food tins on the floor, and Ian sitting shirtless on the couch. (He was always shirtless. The man would have clients come over to get their taxes done, and he'd meet them in cargo shorts, flip-flops, and sweat.

He was eating cat food out of the tin, and he was stinking drunk

"Ian?" Joel asked, dropping his luggage on the floor inside the door. "Ian, what the hell? You said you'd meet me at the airport! I had to take a cab!"

"I'm sorry, mate," Ian said, sounding more than distraught. "I was gonna." He nodded solemnly. "I was gonna... but I woke up this morning, and there was nothing in the fridge but beer. And cat food. There was lots of cat food.

So first I drank the beer, and then, when I threw up, I ate the cat food!" He sniffled a little, sounding pathetic, and then he had what looked to be an attack of clarity

"What kind of asshole lets a friend down like that?" he asked himself cruelly, and he sniffled again

Joel stared at him in blank horror.

"Jesus, Ian," he said softly, walking to the refrigerator and feeling lost. "There's corndogs in the freezer, you know that, right?"

Ian started to giggle softly, and he put the cat food down on the floor next to the couch. "Thank God, mate. I thought I was going to have to puke again!"

Joel told himself it was anger as he threw the corndogs on the plate and broke out a can of corn to nuke with them. Jesus. He and Mel had been fixing themselves dinner since the third grade; you'd think a certifiable genius with an IQ of 170 would be able to fix his own goddamned lunch, would be able to....

Joel turned to Ian, who was sitting on the couch looking so dejected that Joel's heart lurched

"I'm sorry," he muttered, not even trying to meet Joel's eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm a pain in the ass. I know I am. I- I'm up all night and I never wear clothes and... I just... when you're not here, all I am is the stuff in my head. I've got curves and hyperboles and Riemann and Gauss and they're sayin' shit and the world looks clear but time... it just passes, and I don't see it. How come I know mathematical theory, but I can't count to sixty? What kind of right is that? And the only thing that makes me more than the shit in my head is doing

something for Bastard or..." Ian swallowed, hard, "or when you're here. You're the only one who makes me... real."

Joel realized that helpless tears were running down Ian's face. Oh God. He hadn't even said a word—not one goddamned word—and here he'd gone and made Ian cry

The microwave dinged in the silence between them, and Joel grabbed a towel and brought the plate over, not forgetting the fork for the corn and the ketchup

Ian took a bite of corndog and seemed to pull himself together, smiling that sunshine smile through his muddle-headed misery, and Joel wanted to do something, stroke his face, pet his wild hair, do something that would reassure him

He thumped him heartily on the thigh and hoped that worked okay. "Look, Ee," he said softly. "I'm mad at you because you're my friend here. I come home, and you're falling apart. How's that supposed to make me feel? I can take care of you for you, but you can't take care of yourself for me? C'mon, Ian, I worry about you."

"I was just fine before you came along, I swear!" Ian nodded eagerly. "I pay bills. I've got money. I make it to my lectures." He smiled for a moment, shaken out of his despondency. "You should see me give a lecture, mate. I sound... smart, you know?"

Joel nodded seriously, because he actually had seen Ian lecture one day, when Ian hadn't known he was there. Ian had been poised and intelligent, and even funny, but that man was hard to see in the lost soul Joel was feeding now. Something in Ian's handsome, sweet-natured face haunted him. Ian may have stayed alive, he may have made it

through school across an ocean and into a job, and he may even have managed to pay the bills (he was, after all, an accountant), but whatever he had been before Joel got there, Ian had obviously not been "just fine." No amount of thinking about teaching the guy to take care of himself would ever assure Joel that he would be "just fine" without Joel, himself, personally, to help in the task, and he just didn't want to think any further than that

Instead, he cleaned up the cat tins, helped Ian into the shower, and then pulled out a T-shirt and some jockeys for the guy. When Ian was dressed, Joel made absolutely sure he lay down in bed. He slept for sixteen hours, and Joel thought he'd probably been up for the seventy-two before that. He woke up apologetic and sheepish and more than ready to accept any crap that Joel wanted to ladle out for him being (his words) a manky arse, but Joel didn't want to bring up the incident again

"Just do me a favor, Ee. Feed yourself, okay?

"Right, mate!" And then, to make it a promise, "If I must.

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Chapter Three

Joel and Melody actually fell asleep on the couch, probably in the pause between "Ian stories," but Joel couldn't be sure.

They staggered to their own beds in the wee hours of the morning and slept late, which was what you got to do over your Thanksgiving break, wasn't it? But Joel didn't sleep too late. As soon as he was awake enough, he snagged his cell phone from the end table and remembered to call Ian.

"Hey, Ee." Oh geez did he sound like he just woke up? Did he sound like he was calling from bed? Suddenly the inappropriateness of calling from bed hit him, and he swung his legs over the side of the mattress and sat up so he would feel less self-conscious.

"Joel, you having a good time?" Ian sounded happy to hear from him, and just hearing his voice on the other end of the line eased an ache Joel hadn't known he'd harbored in his chest.

"Yeah, mom's trying to make me fat, and me and Mel are catching up. You staying sober?"

Ian laughed. "I should be. You left enough food in the freezer for a horde of wild barbarians. I even went out and bought vegetables. Aren't you proud?"

Joel thought about his sweet, brilliant roommate, who would probably go down in history as the guy who... well, whatever it was Ian knew that the rest of mankind didn't, he'd go down in history as the guy who figured it out.

"I'm always proud of you, Ee," he said sincerely. "I just miss you is all." Oh God. That must have sounded.... In his mother's little house in the Denver suburb, Joel fought the urge to tuck his head under his pillow in embarrassment.

But if he sounded like a weepy asshole, Ian didn't seem to notice. "Miss you too, mate. Here, I'll call you after I get home, how's that?"

Joel doubted he'd remember, but it sounded promising. They spoke a few more moments and then rang off, and Joel showered and prepared to face his family. He couldn't think of why, but he thought he should be embarrassed to say good morning to Mel. Had he really talked all night about Ian? What an asshole! This morning he needed to ask her about her job. Mel being Mel, there would probably be a quiz later.

But Mel being Mel didn't want to talk about work. As their mother bustled about in her flowered housedress and apron, pouring coffee and cleaning up the last of the breakfast dishes (corn pancakes—Mommy was definitely trying to send them both home fat!) Mel made it perfectly clear that what she wanted to talk more about was Ian.

"Ian?" Mommy asked, sitting down to drink her coffee with them. "Isn't that the man you share a house with?"

"More like an apartment, Mommy," Joel said, telling them about the vast top floor of the Victorian that dominated the block.

"His roommate is a real character," Mel said, looking over her coffee at Joel. "Seems like he couldn't find his ass with both hands if Joel didn't hand it to him all labeled and neat, you know?"

Lucia Martinez nodded. "That's Joel—even as a *nino*, he kept neat—you remember his room? He used to save his shoeboxes to keep his toys straight."

"I liked knowing where to find them," Joel said with dignity, and then, because he couldn't stand that his sister thought badly of Ian, "and Ian's brilliant." *Lost, but...* "Don't let me give you the wrong impression. He's just eccentric."

"Eccentric?" Mel had what Joel always thought of as her "evil" look now. She was teasing him, trying to get him to say something that she could get him with later. "You told me the guy once forgot his own birthday!"

Joel regretted telling that story. It was a fun, glib story you could use to get someone to laugh, but now it felt wrong. Now it felt like Mel was getting to know Ian, and Joel wanted his big sister to like the guy.

"He remembered his birthday," Joel corrected seriously. "He just forgot how old he was!"

"Well, it must be nice to get so wrapped up in your work you can't remember you're getting wrinkles, eh *papi*?"

Joel shivered, and the mood at the kitchen table grew inexplicably sober. "No," he said quietly. "No. No. Nothing nice about it at all."

* * * *

On the days Joel didn't bike to work, he dragged Ian to the gym. Ian usually went willingly, but, if left to his own devices, he forgot how long it had been since last he went. On this day, Joel got home a little early and breezed through the

living room shouting, "I'm gonna get my stuff, Ee, are you ready?"

"Ready? For what?"

Ian stuck his head out of his room and turned that lost-Siamese-cat gaze toward the calendar on the wall. "What are we doing again?"

Joel came out of his room wearing only his work khakis. "The gym? Working out? It's Wednesday, remember?"

"Wednesday? Wednesday the what?"

"Wednesday, September twenty-fourth," Joel told him patiently. He was unprepared for Ian to stand up off his rolling chair and peer at the calendar closely as though the damned thing had lied

"Really? The twenty-fourth?"

"What's the matter, Ee? You miss a lecture?" Joel didn't think so. Since that one phone call from Ian's supervising professor, Joel had put all of Ian's guest lectures on the calendar and taken to giving him one reminder the night before and one reminder as he left the house. Florence Kohl had sent him a case of really good wine, but mostly, Joel did it so Ian wouldn't have to look lost and miserable the way he had the last time he'd been caught unaware

"No, I just...." Ian turned around and squinted at Joel in that way that told Joel he hadn't looked away from his computer in a while. "I think today's my birthday."

Joel's face split into a grin. "Well, awesome! Fuck the gym, let's go out!" Ian had treated Joel to a gigantic steak and a nice bottle of wine in Old Town when Joel turned twenty-seven. The least Joel could do was get him out of the house

"How old are you, anyway?

He was unprepared for the dismay this question seemed to cause

"I- I don't know," Ian murmured. "Twenty-five? No. Maybe? Twenty-six?" He looked up at Joel in a panic. "Oh God, what if I'm thirty?

"Ian." Joel should have been used to this feeling by now, this jarring, violent make-fit between Ian's world and the real world, but it never seemed to get any easier

"I don't remember." Ian held out his hands and started counting on them. "Let's see, I was fourteen when I left the orphanage and went to University...

Oh God, Joel had known he was an orphan. He'd even known he was a genius, but he was unprepared for the idea of a fourteen-year-old Ian, turned loose on college life

"... and I must have been twenty or so when I got my doctorate, and then I came over here. How long have I been here? I renewed my visa last year... or was it the year before? Or do I have to do that every year?

Ian's gaze went from inward to outward, and he looked up at Joel with open palms. "I don't know. I- you need to have people to tell you that's important, don't you? I- I guess I don't have any people? How old am I? Jesus.

There was a certain panic to Ian's voice, and Joel felt it, right in his gut, how adrift this man could be without a person in his life to care for him. He could live, yeah, but what a vague surfing of the years, without any markers like birthdays or holidays, without any solid, real moments to anchor him to the here and now

Joel took Ian's hands in his own, feeling calluses from weightlifting and the softness from not doing much else, and made sure Ian had his attention

"Don't worry, Ian," he murmured. And then, grinning a little bit self-consciously, he leaned forward and reached around Ian toward his back pocket, making a little whiffle of disgust as he did so. "Christ, Ian, when's the last time you showered? You smell like monkey ass!"

Ian laughed, which was the point, because in reality he smelled a little sweaty but very human, and not bad at all. "Yeah, I'm a little ripe, mate. What do you have there?"

Joel held out Ian's wallet and grinned triumphantly. "Your wallet, genius. You've got your driver's license in here.

Ian's smile was brilliant, blinding, as excited as a child's. "Excellent! So, don't keep me in suspense. How old am I?"

Joel looked at the date on the driver's license and grimaced. God, Ian really had been young when he'd been cut loose on an unsuspecting world, hadn't he

"You're twenty-three, boy, which makes you four years younger than me and seven years younger than thirty. Congratulations and happy birthday!"

"Outstanding!" Ian crowed, practically knocking Joel over with the force of his hug. He held the hug for a moment, crushing Joel's face up against his bare chest, and Joel had to wonder that his heart seemed to be speeding up and that Ian's scent was seeming less and less a liability with every passing second

Joel pulled back with difficulty and kept his smile bright. "So, you ready to shower and go out?"

If I Must
by Amy Lane

Ian made a little strutting motion with his shoulders and his head, his whole rangy, lean, man's body showing a child's happiness. "If I must, mate—if I must!"

* * * *

"Oh, *papacito!*" Joel's mom still used the endearments she'd used when they were children. "It's so nice you finally found someone!"

Joel stared at his mother as though she had two heads. "Mommy, he's my roommate. I'm not gay."

"Oh honey," Lucia Martinez smiled sweetly, "of course you are. You just remember to wear your rubbers, you know?"

Well, maybe growing another head would have been an improvement. "Mommy, he's my friend!"

And now Melody laughed, throwing her head back and letting the coffee-rich sound roll from her stomach. "Oh right. He's your friend and I'm a virgin!"

"*Mel!*" Because even their mother knew *that* wasn't true. "Have I said *anything* that would—"

Mel shook her head. "Joey, *pappi*, it's not what you've said. It's how much you've said it! Three days, you been here three days. In five minutes you told me about work, your boss who's okay, and the receptionist who had the world's cutest baby. The rest of the three days? It's been Ian Cooper. I know more about that man than I know about your last three girlfriends, including the fact that I think I like him better already."

"You liked Penny—"

"I liked to shop with her. I didn't want her in my family."

Joel hadn't thought he could blush anymore than he already had, Shows how much he knew! "Melody, he's a friend! I'm not... you know... I can't be...."

His mother stopped his stuttering with a quiet pat to the hand. "I know, baby. Poppa would have told you, Mexicans, they can't go all gay. But Poppa was an asshole, and we all know that."

Joel wondered if he'd eaten something poisonous and then gone to sleep on it. His stomach was starting to hurt, that was for damned sure.

"Mommy!" he objected, and Melody took pity on him.

"Mommy, we're starting to freak him out. You need to leave for a minute, so we can talk, okay?"

Lucia rolled her eyes. "You kids. You think we don't know anything. Gay was a thing in the eighties too, you know!"

"I'm gonna throw up," Joel muttered to himself, and he hid his face in his crossed arms.

"Why, Joey?" Melody asked him softly. Just like she'd done when they were kids, she crossed her arms too and looked at him from about six inches away, eye level.

"You think I'm gay, Mom says Pops was an asshole—"

"What's so wrong about being gay, *pappi*?" Melody asked seriously, and Joel grimaced.

"I don't know. You know, Pops used to—"

"He used to say faggots should be burnt at the stake. I know. He also used to say sending a girl to college was like teaching a dog to read, and you know what? I said fuck him. I know he's dead, and you want to think the man was perfect, but he wasn't. He loved us, but fuck him. I do what Pops said,

I be a mommy for real now, and I wouldn't be any good at that, *pappi*, I really wouldn't."

"You'd be great at it, Mel," Joel said softly. "You took good care of me when Mommy was at work."

Melody's hand came out and ruffled his hair. "You were the best kid in the world, Joey. In fact, you were too good. Nothing get you riled. Nothing make you too mad. Nothing make you cry. I worried 'bout you. I thought, 'He's a good kid, but he got no passion', you know? And I still think that. You go get your degree in computers because that's what you're good at. But it's not what you love. No, I stand by it. You do what you got to in your heart to make it right, because this Ian, you got more passion in your voice for him than you got in your life for anything."

"He's a friend," Joel insisted, but his argument was weak, even to his own ears.

"You always love your boyfriends more'n your girlfriends, you know that? In grade school it was one thing, but in high school and college? Joel, *pappi*, why you got to lie to yourself?"

Joel didn't have any answer to that. As much as he didn't want to think about it, it was probably true.

Melody sighed and continued to stroke his hair. "I taught you that stuff you know."

"What stuff?"

"That putting the calendar on the fridge, making lists, how to do laundry."

Joel managed a pale grin. "You done good, *mammi*, it come in handy."

"Yeah, well, I tell you. I could have done it all pissed off and all. You were my little brother. I had better things to do, that what you think when you young, you know?"

Joel frowned thoughtfully. "You didn't. You were a good teacher."

"Yeah, Joey, 'cause that's the sort of thing you do for family."

Joel closed his eyes tightly and fought a very real temptation to cry. "I- I never let myself think about it, you know?" he admitted at last.

"I know, Joey. You got Pops in your head, telling you it's wrong. We seen it, Mommy and me. We seen you—every time you set your sights on a girl, it was like watching you wage brain warfare in your own head. I want you to do something for me, can you do that?"

Joel closed his eyes and ignored the stiff hair of his goatee getting slick with salt water. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Think about him in the dark, *pappi*. When no one's looking, close your eyes and hear his voice in your head, see his face. You don't got to tell no one what happens next, but you think about him in the dark and see what happens. Then you forget all about things like being Mexican and being gay, and you tell me what you want more than anything, yeah?"

Joel managed a weak nod. "Yeah," he mumbled, too tired to even object to what she was suggesting. "Yeah."

"I'll leave you alone now. Me and Mommy, we won't talk about it none, it make you feel bad. But you already know we love you, so you don't worry 'bout that, 'kay?"

If I Must
by Amy Lane

Joel managed to pull himself up straight like a real man and look at his big sister with watery eyes. "I love you, Mel."

She bent and kissed him on the cheek. "Love you too, little brother." And then she moved gracefully out of the kitchen, like she was dancing.

* * * *

Think of him in the dark

There was a story that Joel hadn't dared tell anybody, not even Melody. That night, he lay in the narrow twin bed from his childhood, looking at the walls painted beige with navy trim, and allowed himself to remember the sound of Ian's voice, the look in his eyes, the smell of his skin, on Halloween.

* * * *

Their Victorian was in a nice residential area, and everybody decorated for Halloween. Joel bought a bunch of spooky purple and orange face lights, and he strung them around the window facing the landing. He bought plastic pumpkins and a carving kit and made Ian leave his computer to carve the faces and put the flashlights in. He even bought eight pounds of chocolate in spite of the fact that only the really brave would trundle up a three-story walk-up in search of candy, and together they strung spider webs and one of those funky-scary motion-activated ghost things on the front porch

It was hot that day. Sacramento sometimes gave fall a complete miss and went straight into winter sometime around

If I Must
by Amy Lane

November, so they opened their door for the ventilation, turned off their lights, and sat and watched Poltergeist while they waited for their ghost to go off so they could give out candy

They got a surprising amount of traffic for being so high up, and one of their last groups of kids had a little girl of no more than three with dark hair, dark eyes, and a little witch costume with a pointy hat and a broom. When Joel gave her an extra big handful, she thanked him in rapid patter Spanish, and Joel returned with his own greeting

He left the doorway and came and sat down on the far side of the couch, stretching his legs out as far as he could without kicking Ian. He was just about to press play on the remote when he realized Ian was looking at him in the dark

"What?" he asked, puzzled

"You speak Spanish." Ian's voice was as full of wonder as though he'd said, "You glow in the dark!"

Joel shrugged. "Yeah? Lots of people in California speak Spanish."

"But you're from Colorado."

Joel scrubbed his hand across his face and smoothed down his close-cropped goatee. "Yeah, they got- have- there are Mexicans in Colorado."

Ian tilted his head, like he was listening to faraway music. "You... you translate, don't you? You suppress your accent. Why do you do that?"

Joel shrugged and let his accent coat his voice when he spoke next. "I don't know, Ee. You get told, you know? They tell you not to sound Mexican or you not get no job. It's called

'code-switching', you just know, you talk Mexican at home and white at school."

"But you don't talk- speak 'Mexican' at home." Ian sounded hurt, and Joel couldn't figure out why.

Joel shrugged, wishing he'd pressed "play" so he could get lost in the movie instead. "Unless I'm talking to someone else who speaks Spanish, or I'm at home, I just... I'm just comfortable speaking like this, you know?"

"Oh." With that little word, Ian stood up and moved down the hall, and Joel wondered again what he'd done wrong

"Ian, hey, Ee? What's the matter?" Joel caught up with him in the hallway in front of his room. Ian stopped, and Joel stopped short, arrested by the Ian's hurt, shiny eyes in the dark. "What?" he asked, kidding, "you not like me anymore 'cause I'm Mex?"

"That's not funny," Ian said softly

"Then what, pappi?" The endearment came so naturally. He'd been fighting it for months, and now, in the forced intimacy of the dark, it sounded like what he'd wanted to call Ian since they'd met

"I thought this was your home." Ian swallowed and then looked away. "Forget it. I'm being stupid. Let's go finish the movie. I've never seen it before."

Joel chuffed out a sigh, and they were standing close enough for Ian to close his eyes from the passage of their breath. He put what he thought was a companionable hand on Ian's shoulder and squeezed. "Tell you what, Ee. I won't fight it here, okay? I can't promise I'll suddenly sound like I do in my Mommy's kitchen, but I won't fight it. It might be

sort of a mindfuck, you know. I could suddenly start swearing in Spanish and blow your mind."

Ian grinned then, and as always, the expression made Joel's stomach do a little drop-flutter. He sort of just... forgot... that he'd been touching Ian for longer than American male protocols strictly called for

Ian leaned closer. "You're too good for me, mate," he said softly, and Joel's heart thumped in his ears. Ian was wearing a T-shirt tonight—surprise!—but it had been warm, and they'd worked quickly getting the house ready, and he smelled like clean sweat. Like Ian. Earthy, warm, real. Human and kind

"You're a good man, Ian," Joel rasped. Ian's face was looming a little nearer, and he was close enough that their chests brushed, and his skin buzzed in anticipation of more contact. Joel closed his eyes and breathed in that earthy, human smell, and he was disappointed when Ian's warmth suddenly disappeared

He opened his eyes and Ian was laughing self-consciously; his smile was the goofy one that said he was laughing at himself because he knew he wasn't like everybody else

"I'm sorry. I know, I know, I probably smell like monkey ass."

Joel gasped out a laugh and opened his mouth to say what? To say "No, you're actually really turning me on?" To deny the monkey-ass thing and tell him they should go watch the movie

The fact was, Joel had no idea what he would have said, and right then their little motion-sensitive ghost thing went

off, and the last group of kids for the night called out "Trick-or-treat!" from the landing

* * * *

Joel's hands roamed his own body. His chest buzzed from the remembered contact, his hand tingled from where the heat of Ian's shoulder had warmed it. His nipples were pointy and sensitive under his pinching fingers.

His cock was hard enough to joust with.

His eyes were closed, and in his mind's eye, he'd stopped Ian, he'd buried his nose in Ian's throat and breathed deep and licked the skin of his neck. In his mind he pushed Ian back against the wall and ground up against him, tangling his hands in that blond halo of curls and pulling Ian's puzzled, open face down to his in the dark and opening his mouth for their kiss.

In real life, he grasped his prick so hard the head was purple and the skin of his palm was skating on pre-come. His thumb came up to smear the thickness of the pre-come over the sensitive head and around the crown, and in his mind, Ian had whirled him around and against the wall and was grinding up against Joel too. In fact, he'd worked his hand down Joel's jeans and was fumbling for a good hold, a firm grasp, and a stroke so rough it was almost painful—

Joel gasped and spattered a thick jet of come up against the inside of his underwear and along his stomach and over his chest under the covers. His eyes opened in the dark of his old room, and what he'd been thinking and doing hit his arousal zones, and he shot again and again and again.

He stopped, gasping, suppressing a groan, panting in the narrow light, so in awe of what he'd imagined to happen that when his cell phone went off next to his bed, it was all he could do not to jump and scream.

Ian's voice on the other end of the phone was so welcome, it made him hard all over again.

"Ee?" Joel murmured, wondering if Ian could hear the sex in his voice. Oh God, what if he could? What if he didn't want it? A thought intruded on Joel's panic: maybe Ian had wanted Joel all along? When Ian started speaking though, he sounded so lost that all of Joel's designs on his roommate's body faded away.

"I had to leave her at the vet's, Joel," Ian said, obviously upset. "They said she was old, and they didn't know what they could do for her, and..." deep, shuddering breath, and the obvious suppression of a little boy sob, "... and we may have to put her down tomorrow. I- I just came home and sat, and there's no one here, you know?"

Oh God. "I know, Ian. Look, *pappi*, I tell you what. I'm getting my laptop right now. I'll find a flight out tomorrow, right?"

An audible sniff. "Joel, no, that's wrong. You're home with your family. I can't ask you to just ditch out on them for this idiotic albatross you put up with for cheap rent—"

"Shut up, Ian!" Joel snapped, anger washing over him even as he pulled out his laptop and booted up. "Shut up. I'm with my family, sure, but you're my home, Ee. You got to know that, right, *pappi*? You, that damned cat, no worries, right?"

If I Must
by Amy Lane

Another sniff, this one sounding relieved. "You'll never get a flight out. It's some sort of holiday, you know?"

"Yeah, Ee," Joel replied dryly. "I know. You sit tight. I'll be out by tomorrow, I promise."

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Chapter Four

Melody looked at Joel in bemusement. "Well, that was a damned fool promise to make, *estupido*! It's Thanksgiving. Have you not noticed all the damned planes is full? And it's snowing. It's not like they gonna get any less full, you know?"

Joel tried not to roll his eyes. He'd changed his clothes and showered, but the lapse of time hadn't done anything to make the ticket situation on the computer look any better.

"Look, Mel, I don't know what else to tell you. Ian has to put the damned cat down, and the cat was the only reason I thought I could leave him alone in the first place."

Melody put her hands on her hips. "Is this the roommate that's only your friend?"

"No, Mel," Joel snapped, a little desperate. "This is the roommate that I'm totally in love with and I'm afraid for, because all he has in the world is me and a soon-to-be-dead cat! And I'm too stupid to hold on to him, and did I mention the dying cat?"

His face felt taut and cold, and he tried to tell himself that he was overstating things, but he couldn't. If only.... Ian had needed to know that, if nothing else, Joel would always come home. Even if they weren't going to be lovers, even if they were *never* meant to be lovers, Joel had become home to Ian, he'd become time, he'd become Ian's anchor to reality, and he'd just- just left. Without a "I love you, man," without a "Look, you know I'm coming back," without even letting his guard down, even a little, and telling him face to face, "Take

care of yourself for me, *pappi*. You what I'm coming home to, okay?"

Mel put her hand on Joel's shoulder and interrupted what he dimly realized was a full-out spin into panic.

"Easy, Joey," she murmured. "No worries, right? My ticket, it's for tomorrow night. I stop in Sacramento. I'll spend the day trying to get a flight from Sacto to L.A. right?"

"It shouldn't be too hard," Joel said out of a dry throat. "There's a lot of commuter flights in and out. You should be good."

"Yeah," Mel said, giving him a long hug and a laugh. "Wait 'til I tell the girls at work my brother is gay. I swear, my coolness will shoot up like a rocket!"

"Yeah," Joel muttered into his sister's shoulder, "you got cooler the minute I was born."

"I knew that, *pappi*. You know I did."

* * * *

Joel called Ian in the morning and told him when his flight arrived. He called him from the airport and told him when it left and how long it would be in the air. He called when he landed, and Ian answered, "I know you're here, mate. I'm at the baggage carousel, waiting for your shit."

He sounded happy, Joel thought. He hoped it was true; he'd feel like a first-class asshole if he'd stolen his sister's ticket and left his mother's home early for a guy who wouldn't even notice he was there.

But any doubts he would have had faded away when he saw Ian, slouching near the back of the baggage carousel, looking towards Joel's gate.

Joel had the curious sensation of the chaos of the airport fading to a dull swish in his ears, and suddenly, the only person in the world was Ian. He was unaware that he was trotting at all possible speed, dodging luggage, children, and reuniting families, just so he could get there and see Ian smile.

It was blinding.

Their hug went on longer than was probably appropriate, but Joel didn't give a ripe shit, not when Ian was there, warm, needing, and grateful.

They released, but Ian kept his arms around Joel's back, and Joel didn't pull away. "You know," he said, looking somewhere else, "you didn't have to do that. You did tell your sister thank you for me?"

"Tell her yourself. She's sleeping on the couch for Christmas," Joel said with a soft smile.

Ian blinked, befuddled. "Why would she want to do that?" he asked. Together they saw Joel's bag and moved toward it, Ian's arm still looped around Joel's shoulders. Joel refused to comment about the arm. Ian's casual touch was sustaining him, anchoring him to the world, making all those revelations he'd had about Ian when he was alone in his child's bed seem real and solid and true.

"I'll tell you later," Joel said, hoping that by then, Ian would still want it to be true. Ian snagged his bag—those amazing muscles managing the entire case without benefit of

wheels—and together they headed outside and across the street to Ian's little Prius.

When they'd loaded up, Ian hesitated for a minute before turning the keys in the ignition.

"How's Manky Bastard?" Joel asked quietly into the silence. It was the one thing Ian hadn't talked about, and the one thing Joel was pretty sure he knew the answer to.

"In a vase on the mantel," Ian replied, his voice catching.

Joel put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry, *pappi*. I'm sorry she had to die. I'm really sorry it had to be when I was gone."

Ian nodded, looking determinedly to outside his window. "It wasn't your fault," he said softly. "I just... I just hope, you know... you don't... you won't think...." Ian looked at him, helplessly, waving his hands and sniffing, wiping his face on the back of his hands and looking embarrassed about that.

"Ian—"

"I took care of her, Joel. I can take care of another one, honest! I can take care of myself, I swear. I just don't want you to...." He trailed off, and Joel unbuckled his seatbelt and turned, grabbing Ian's shoulders and shaking him a little.

"Ian... *pappi*, you need to calm down. I know you can take care of yourself. I know you took care of her. Why is this so important? You're not—" Oh Christ! This thought didn't even bear thinking about but he had to say it anyway. "You're not thinking, you know, that you don't need a roommate no more, are you?"

Ian shook his head. "No, no, mate. I'm just worried...." Ian's face crumpled like a little kid's and suddenly he was

sobbing in Joel's arms. "I just thought the only reason you stayed was because of the *caaaaaaaaattt....*"

In spite of himself, Joel found he was laughing quietly into Ian's hair. "No, Ian. No. I'm not leaving, I promise, *pappi*. You can't shake me that easy. Shhh. Shhhh."

Ian pulled himself together eventually, but not before Joel got a wonderful muscular armload of despondent Aussie genius.

"I'm sorry," Ian sniffled, wiping his face on his shoulder and pulling on his belt again. "You're going to think I'm some sort of hormonal poofty queen. I'm not like this. I- I think the only times I've ever cried in my life are around you."

"Lucky me," Joel said softly, meaning it. "Look, Ee, let's get home, eh? I'm tired, I been stuck in that tin-can most half of the day, and I probably smell like monkey ass. I want to sit on the couch witchu, talk some." He wanted to lean on him, stroke his chest, kiss his blond, stubbled cheek, feel his heart under a circling palm. "You know," Joel finished weakly, "reconnect, right, *pappi*?"

"Joel?" Ian said, after he'd started the car and maneuvered to the freeway on ramp.

"Yeah, Ee?"

"You know you're wearin' your accent on your sleeve, right, mate?"

"That's 'cause I'm home witchu, *pappi*. Don't ever doubt it."

The twenty-minute ride home was pretty quiet after that, the rain that had threatened the skies as Joel landed staving off until they arrived. Eventually Joel was bathed, wearing a

pair of sweats and an old T-shirt, and sitting on the couch with a new afghan his mom had sent home with him. Ian grabbed him a soda from the fridge (Joel had taken pains to not keep any beer in there) and sat down on the opposite end of the couch. Together they looked at the little black vase over the mantle on the purple colored wall, and Joel nudged Ian with his bare toe.

"Can I say I'm sorry again?"

"No," Ian replied with a self-deprecating smile. "I might cry again, and that would suck for us both, now wouldn't it?"

"Can I tell you I'm really glad to be home?" Joel poked Ian's thigh again and was rewarded when Ee slid his long-fingered hand up Joel's calf.

"I'm glad you're back." Ian's gaze—that spring-blue, wild-sky gaze—was suddenly very sharp and very focused on Joel, sitting back in his worn T-shirt and his gray sweats. Outside, the rainstorm that had threatened since Joel got off the plane suddenly spattered the windows, and Ian looked away from Joel's searching eyes and turned that way.

"It threatens to get nasty out there," he said inanely.

"No worries, *pappi*. All we need to do in the next two days is go get milk tomorrow. I got all of Thanksgiving in the cupboards. I even bought some new placemats and napkins and shit."

Ian's next look was simple and direct, pure and full of gratitude. "It sounds nice, but you know. Why? I- I'm dying to have Thanksgiving with you. And Christmas, too, if you must know the truth, but why? You take such good care of

me, and I can't even keep...." He looked up at the mantel, and they both knew how he'd finish that sentence.

If Joel had expected Ian to simply pick up on all his unspoken cues, he'd been living with the wrong man for the last five months. With a sigh, he swung his legs over, sat up, and then moved in closer to Ian than they usually sat. "I like taking care of you, Ee," he said into the rain-spattered quiet. "I like knowing you're going to be happy. I like knowing I'm, you know, your anchor to the world."

"I'm a colossal asshole, brother. I've got all this high-level shit in my head, and nothing real," Ian said, rolling his eyes at himself, but Joel wouldn't listen to that.

"No, no, Ee. You're amazing. You're smart, and you're funny. You've got a heart as big as the sky, you know that? You don't need a roommate. You just took me in 'cause I liked the apartment—"

"I took you in because I wanted to get in your pants," Ian supplied crossly, and Joel's grin made Ian blink.

"Yeah? You never made a move!"

Ian shrugged. "You don't swing that way. And besides..." Ian looked at his bedroom, with its king-sized bed and its jumbo cluttered computer desk, and then he looked back, meeting Joel's eyes with a resigned expression. "Everybody I slept with ran away in the morning. I- I'd do almost anything to keep you from running away."

Oh God. Joel leaned close and rubbed his thumb on Ian's lean bottom lip. "Brother, I've got news for you," he said quietly, hoping he could treasure the awestruck, worshipful expression on Ian's face forever.

"Yeah?" Ian leaned closer, and Joel could smell him underneath shampoo and deodorant and... was that cologne? It didn't matter. He still smelled earthy and human and real.

"I do swing that way. And I just invited my sister to stay with us for Christmas so she could meet you and make sure you were worth her plane ticket. I have no intention of running away from you, Ee."

"Why would she want to meet me?" Ian asked, and he was close enough to bump noses with, so Joel did, rubbing the smooth part of his cheek along Ian's stubbled one, feeling the silk of Ian's breath on his face.

"Because I love you, and she wants to welcome you to the family." It was bold. It was probably insane. But it was the truth, and if Ian kicked him out for it now, Joel would know it was never meant to be.

Ian kissed him.

Their lips met, met again, and Joel opened his mouth, letting Ian inside. He tasted like Dr Pepper and... and just like Ian. All of that joy, all of the kindness, all of the earthy humanity, all there on Joel's tongue for the tasting.

Joel groaned and pulled Ian closer, tangling his fingers in that halo of blond hair just like he'd imagined doing, pulling Ian on top of him, loving his friend's weight, pinning him to the couch.

Ian moved his kisses to Joel's neck, and Joel's head fell back as he made an "ahh ahh" sound, and then that mouth, eager, questing, fascinated by the texture of Joel's skin, continued on. With some shifting Joel found he was bare-

ched, and Ian's big hands were spanning his chest, rubbing his nipples, stroking the tender flesh of his abdomen.

Ian paused for a minute then and peered into Joel's face owlishly. "Mate, uhm, just how long have you swung this way?"

Joel's smile was a little embarrassed. "Probably forever," he muttered, thinking about his sister's astute assessment of his love life. "But I've only really known since I jerked off in my old bed, dreaming of you," he finished. Ian grinned and then looked thoughtful. "Why?"

"Because now I know what you've done and what you haven't, and what I'm going to do next."

"Ian, you don't even know how you're going to get to work."

Ian shook his head. "This is different, mate. I've been dreaming of this for months. I'll be damned if I bollix it up now."

And then, as though he couldn't help himself, he lowered his head to Joel's chest and opened his mouth over a tanned nipple and suckled, and Joel arched against him, hard and needy.

"Oh God, Ian, Ian?" Because Ian kept kissing down to Joel's tender stomach. He kept kissing while Joel arched his hips to give better access to pull down the gray sweats, and then he kissed down the trail of black fur from Joel's navel to his— "Oh God... *Ian!*"

Ian was a lot of things, but subtle wasn't one of them. With an open mouth, he engulfed Joel's cock and pushed his lips all the way down until they touched the dark, curly hair at

the root, and he stayed there for a moment, swallowing to make it fit.

Joel's fingers stayed tangled in that surprisingly soft hair, and he moaned in the back of his throat and tried not to squeeze his eyes shut in pleasure. Ian pulled back up his shaft, sucking as he went and swirling his tongue around the broad, purpling head. Joel thought his eyeballs were going to pop out of his skull, and then he thought he was going to scream, and maybe die, and love every minute of it.

"Mmmmm... *God... oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck...*" and then he didn't have anything to say at all, because he was coming, spurting into the back of Ian's mouth, and Ian was still swallowing, letting just enough hot spend dribble out of his mouth to make Joel's prick sloppy and slick and sexy.

Joel's head flopped limply on the back of the couch, and Ian pulled himself up and peered down with as smug expression as Joel had ever seen.

"You're looking pretty damned proud of yourself, you know that?" Joel chuckled, stroking the hair back from Ian's temple.

"It's a limited skill set for a bloke," Ian said with dignity, and Joel laughed.

"Well, you're a master of it, *pappi*. If I didn't love you already, I'd stay with you for the blow jobs alone."

Ian's eyes grew anxious, and Joel cupped his face, glad that he could. Ian looked anxious far too often. Joel's new job was going to be to erase that pinched look from his eyes as often as possible.

"You do love me? Really?"

Joel lifted up and kissed him, tasting his own spend and not caring. "Yeah, Ee. I do."

"I think you could be the only person ever to love me. And I love you back." Ian kissed him again, deeper, stronger, and Joel lost himself in the kiss, in the knowledge that Ian needed him—not to keep his house or buy his food or set his schedule, but just to love him. Maybe it was all Ian had ever wanted.

It had been a long day, and they went to bed shortly after that. Joel lay in Ian's arms and kissed him again, and again, and harder, until Ian pulled back and said, "No. We're not doing that tonight."

"We're not?" Joel asked, a little amused and a lot tired.

"It needs to be good. I want to be awake, and I need to know you'll be here in the morning."

Joel might have been hurt at that, but then, so many people had failed Ian. Joel understood the impulse to make sure this was real before they took it all the way. He settled down in Ian's bed, feeling strong arms wrapped around his shoulders and listening to a man's breathing in the dark and smiled a little to himself.

It was real. And it would be there in the morning.

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Chapter Five

Joel knew exactly where he was when he woke up in the morning. He knew Ian's smell, he knew the feel of the arms around his shoulders, and he had a good guess as to what that thing was poking him in the ass-cheek.

He shivered and swallowed a little, and then he scuttled quickly out of bed.

"Where you going?" Ian asked sleepily.

"Gotta brush my teeth, Ee," he muttered. "My breath smells like—"

"Monkey ass?" Ian supplied, pushing up on one arm, and Joel turned around and went in for quick peck on the lips before pulling back.

"That monkey, he gets around," Joel quipped against Ian's mouth. "I'll be back in a sec," and then he trotted off.

When he got back, Ian was scrambling back into bed, a little bit of toothpaste on the corner of his mouth, and Joel grinned.

"Ian, do you think people who've been married for a couple of years kiss with morning breath?"

Ian blinked. "I dunno. Maybe we'll find out, you think?"

Joel moved in closer, so all he could see were those spring blue eyes. "Yeah, that'd be nice." But then Ian kissed him, and Joel was suddenly in Ian-land: there was no future, there was only the now.

Ian took charge again. Joel had two brain cells, maybe, to be amused that Ian could be in charge in the bedroom when

he couldn't organize his own sock drawer—and then his sweats were down around his ankles again, and Ian's mouth was on his cock.

"Ahhh... *Christo, pappi*, you good at that!" Joel groaned, and Ian grinned at him from his position at Joel's groin. Then, very deliberately so Joel could see him, he stuck a finger in his mouth and pulled it out, slick with spit. He took that finger and traced it down the underside of Joel's erection, down, between his darkly furred balls, to the ticklish space underneath. Joel knew where he was heading, and he gasped as Ian stroked his taint and gasped again when that finger teased his entrance, circled... tested... invaded....

Then Ian's mouth was on him again, and Joel came so hard his vision blacked behind his eyes.

Ian chuckled around him, the vibrations getting him to being hard again, and then he swallowed and pulled back. "You keep coming like that, I'm not ever going to get to fuck you proper."

Joel blushed and found he was stammering. "I... honestly, Ee... I don't think it'll fit."

Ian laughed again, his mouth open, his slightly crooked teeth flashing in a clean smile, and then he moved sinuously against the bed. Joel realized that his new lover had gotten him off twice and not gotten off himself at all.

"You want to see it?" Ian asked ingenuously. "You get to know it for a bit, maybe it won't be such a bugaboo, you think?"

Joel's mouth went dry, and his cock, which was still wet and semi-hard in Ian's hand, got a little harder. "I think," he rasped.

Ian reached down one hand and wriggled right out of his briefs, and then he swung his hips up over the bed and crooked one leg up over Joel's head. Joel found himself face-to-face with the most tender part of Ian's body.

He swallowed. It was amazing. Tentatively he ran his palm from the curly blond hair at the base to the flared head the tip, and then he wrapped his hand more firmly around it and pumped.

Ian gasped, his breath tickling Joel's own erection and making it just that much harder. "You can be a little rougher there, brother," Ian breathed. "That thing won't bite!"

Joel laughed and stuck out his tongue to taste Ian's pre-come. "Yeah, Ee, but it sure does drool!"

Ian sucked in a hard breath, and Joel tried his tongue again and licked that broad head firmly, and then under the crown, and then, fascinated by the way Ian's body jumped and throbbed in his palm, he opened his mouth and engulfed the thing, stroking his hand down to the base and pushing his mouth to his hand. Ian groaned and pulled Joel into *his* mouth, and Joel sucked harder because, well, because, oh God, it just felt so good!

He focused for a minute, not wanting to come again, not before Ian, and began to pay attention to details. Like the way Ian grunted when Joel touched his blond, furry testicles. He took his other hand and massaged them. He heard Ian's gasp when his lips brushed the sensitive little harp string on

the underside of the purpling head, so Joel tried, very gingerly, to brush that with his teeth.

Ian pulled back then and started to beg. "Not yet, mate, want to be inside you."

Joel made a negative sound in his throat. He didn't want to give this up. He loved the taste and the power and the noises Ian made when Joel pleased him.

There Ian's fingers joined Joel's cock inside Ian's mouth, getting them slick at the same time they slid around the sensitive head. Those wet, slick fingers slid down, to Joel's backside, and then—

"Gaaaahhh! Ian!"

Ian's reply was garbled, and then those fingers moved again and stretched, and Joel found his mouth was slack and open and Ian's cock was bobbing lightly on his cheek as he tried not to blow his wad with his mind.

Ian took advantage of Joel's complete submission, and in a moment Joel found he was on all fours and Ian, the bastard, was using his strength and his height to haul his ass in the air, and then, oh God, was that his tongue?

Joel whimpered into the sheets and concentrated on his breathing because it felt soooo good. "Jesus, Ian... it... wait... condoms...."

Ian was suddenly over his back, nibbling his neck and his ear, and Joel turned his head to meet his kiss, which was musky and spicy and not like monkey ass at all. Ian pulled away and murmured, "I got tested again this week. I'm clean. You?"

Joel had gotten tested after his last girlfriend, who had been a skank ho, and he might tell Ian that story later, but right now, "I'm clean," he gasped.

Ian reached over his shoulder now and fumbled at the nightstand and came up with a little bottle. There was a click and then— "S'cold!" Joel shivered, and then Ian was using his two thumbs to stretch and pull and stretch some more, and Joel was dimly aware that he was gibbering into the sheets again.

"God, please, Jesus, Ian, fuck me!"

One of Ian's arms came around Joel's chest to pull him up, and Ian's other hand disappeared. Joel was stretched again, and he whimpered in pleasure, and then Ian slid home, and Joel swore again. *"Fuck me, Ian, oh God, please!"*

"If... I... must...." And then his hips started pumping, and Joel lost all words, all coherent thought. Ian's hand came around to his cock, and he damned near lost consciousness. He came, spattering up his stomach and on the sheets, and then Ian grabbed his hips and both hands and thrust and thrust and thrust.

"Gaaaaaaaawwwwd," Ian swore, and his hips jerked against Joel's even as Joel fell forward.

They stayed there for a moment, face down, Ian's body still spasming. Joel thought he could probably stay there and feel Ian's pleasure forever.

"Ian?" he murmured, and Ian grunted, "Am I crushing you?"

"I'm good, Ee."

"You're awesome, mate."

Joel laughed, but not hard because he really couldn't breathe that deep, and Ian put a long-fingered hand over Joel's shorter, blunter one as it clenched the sheets.

"I really love you, you know?" Joel gasped, because, dammit, the guy was *heavy*.

Ian kissed the back of his neck, and his ear, and he shifted so he could kiss down Joel's jawline. The shift pulled him out, and Joel closed his eyes and savored the feel of Ian's spend trickling down the inside of his thigh.

"I love you too."

Joel closed his eyes. "Good, *pappi*. That's good."

* * * *

"So you got tested this week?" Joel asked later, when they were both dressed and in the kitchen. Joel had put Ian to work spreading the piecrusts in the tins, and he was fixing the pumpkin pie filling over the stove. He was planning on pecan, too, having gotten the recipe from his mom before he left, but he was a little nervous about that one because he'd never made it before.

"Yeah," Ian muttered, and Joel gave him a glance and then laughed as Ian blushed.

"What?" Joel gave the filling a final stir and then moved up to wrap his arms around Ian's waist and rub his cheek on his back. "No, you can't get all embarrassed and not tell me!"

"I hoped," Ian mumbled, paying scrupulous attention to ready-made piecrust. "I wasn't sure, but, you were so close. I just hoped that maybe someday, and even if it didn't happen you...."

If I Must
by Amy Lane

"What?" Joel asked softly. He had to move in a minute to stir the pie filling again, and they had lots of work to do if they were going to have dinner ready the next day, but this was worth hearing.

Ian stopped and looked Joel in the eyes, smiling a little at their closeness. "You cared for me, Joel. Even if we were never lovers, you cared for me. It made it seem worthwhile, you know? To care for myself." Ian grinned. "Now go stir that. You're dying to, I can tell!"

"Oh, fine," Joel murmured. "If I must."

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Chapter Six

Thanksgiving was a success.

They ate too much, and had leftovers for a week, but that was fine, because Ian had never had the full Thanksgiving works before, and he had become extremely fond of stuffing and gravy.

They made love a lot—but not every night. Some nights they just brushed their teeth and went to bed together. Joel started to wonder, in a very real way, if he'd ever be able to go to sleep again without knowing Ian was next to him, breathing in the dark.

They still talked over dinner and worked out on Monday/Wednesday/Fridays and watched every science fiction show on television. *Supernatural* was still their favorite, only now when they watched it, Ian confessed to a long-time crush on the shorter actor who played "Dean." Joel wished he could have claimed a crush on the taller guy who played "Sam," but really, "I've only got eyes for you right now, Ee. We can crush on other guys later."

Ian flushed then, and Joel enjoyed watching that very much.

Joel told the story of his last girlfriend, Rachel, the "skank ho" who had slept with most of his dorm before breaking up with him.

"Everyone else had to get shots for chlamydia," Joel muttered, shaking his head. "Brother, I was never so grateful for Sister Margaret in my life!"

Ian heard the story with wide eyes and the sudden shock of someone who realizes he'd had a near miss. "I never thought of that," he confessed. "I- I guess I just wanted... a person there."

"Someone to love," Joel supplied, rubbing Ian's calf as it rested on his lap. They were "handsy" lovers—the kind of people who didn't do a lot of public kissing, but once they were alone, in their sanctuary, were always touching. Joel liked it like that; Ian close was good. Ian closer was wonderful.

And really, that was the wonder of becoming lovers. The good things didn't change, they only got better. And the best things, like choosing a Christmas tree and buying decorations, well, those became amazing. Fun. Intense. Anything Joel could do to make Ian's days different from each other, to make reality as compelling as the rabbit hole in Ian's brain that he still disappeared down, well, that was Joel's favorite thing.

Unfortunately, Joel didn't realize that this meant the bad stuff got worse until he walked smack-dab into their first major fight.

Joel was early. At Ian's request, he'd given up riding when it got dark early, and for once, driving actually got him home before his bike would have. As he opened the door, he heard voices coming from Ian's bedroom, and then the door opened, and Ian appeared—sans shirt—talking to the person inside.

Logically, Joel knew it was a client. Logically, Joel knew this was Ian being Ian, completely unaware of his

surroundings, including the weather, which was cold enough to make his chest goose-pimple and his nipples pebble, even inside. Logically, Joel knew it was no big deal.

Emotionally, the glare he cast Ian's way was enough to make his "roommate" trip over his own toes and fall down, right there in the hallway as his client came up behind him.

The distinguished, middle-aged woman was sleekly dressed in a pantsuit with pearls, and she smoothed some of her silver-tinted hair back from her face and smiled at the man sprawled at her feet.

"Ian, good Lord! I always knew you were eccentric. I had no idea you were clumsy!"

Ian started to pick himself up and cast Joel a wounded look. "Sorry, Professor Kohl. My roommate sort of took me by surprise."

"Oh!" The professor's eyes lit up, and she extended a hand towards Joel. "Mr. Martinez, I'm so glad to meet you in person! We sure have appreciated your efforts in the department, that's for certain."

Joel smiled and hoped it looked sincere. "Anything I can do to help Ian, Professor," he said through a dry throat, and he winced as Ian threw him a glare that said plainly the he didn't need any help if Joel was going to look at him like he just did.

The professor looked from one man to another and took in the undercurrents. "I'm sorry, Mr. Martinez," she said with a sophisticated smile, "you do realize we were just going over accounts."

Joel inclined his head. "Absolutely. I knew that."

"Well, next time I'll be sure to remind Professor Cooper to put on a shirt before I come in. Now that I know he has a..." her eyes lit up ironically, "... 'roommate', I think that's more appropriate."

Joel didn't even try to disguise his relief. "Thanks, Professor. That would be great."

The woman excused herself then, even as Ian finally scrambled off the floor and stood to open the door for her, and the two of them were left in the silent, suddenly cold apartment.

Joel sighed and flopped down on the couch, gazing sightlessly at the Christmas tree. They'd gone to a craft fair, and damned near every ornament was handmade—carved tin, quilted, sculpted, crocheted—you name a craft, and it was on the tree, but Joel might as well have been staring at a blank wall.

"Jesus, Ian, you couldn't remember to put a shirt on in December?"

Ian scowled at him. It was an unaccustomed expression for Ian, and it looked more hurt than anything else. Joel tried to not feel like shit. He failed.

"Look, Ee, I'm sorry. I know better, I do, but- but that's your room, and she was in it, and you weren't even dressed!"

"She's twice my age!" Ian pouted.

"I *know* that, Ee! She could have been anyone. I didn't know who you had back there! Can't you, I mean, I can't do this! I can't just walk in and not know what I'm going to see in your room!"

"It's *our* room!" Ian shot back. "You haven't slept in your own bed in a month!"

"Okay, *our* room. *Our* bed. But, can't you see that you being in there with someone when you're not even dressed is *bad*?"

"Don't you trust me? You're going to just throw this in and break up with me and leave me because you don't trust me and I didn't even do anything—"

"Wait a minute—"

Ian stood up and shouted, his face twisted by anxiety and unhappiness beyond anything the situation warranted. "You *promised*, dammit. You *promised* you wouldn't leave!"

Joel stood up and shouted back. "I'm not leaving, asshole! I just want some sort of promise from you that you're not going to change your mind in the middle of this and go back to being roommates!"

"Well, it's not like I can go out and buy you a ring—not in this manky-assed state!" Ian said, sounding completely baffled. "What am I supposed to do? What do you want?"

"Just a promise, that's all. We've said all sorts of 'I love you's, but not once have we said 'only you'—all I want is a promise!"

Ian's entire demeanor changed, a light going on in his face that was brighter than the thin December sun. "Oh," he said equably. "I'll be right back!" And to Joel's surprise he took off for the front door.

"Ian! Your keys, maybe? Shoes? A jacket? A *shirt*?"

Ian's unbreakable grin answered him. "Oh yeah, mate. Right. If I must!"

If I Must
by Amy Lane

Ian was gone in less than thirty seconds, looking very odd and very, well, *gay* in one of Joel's T-shirts that left his navel bare, cargo shorts, and a pair of leather loafers without socks. Socks, thought Joel in complete exasperation, would have interfered with whatever stroke of genius that had sent him bolting out of the apartment.

Joel looked around the empty apartment and closed his eyes. What had possessed him? Here he was, sleeping with a man for less than a month, and he'd just thrown his first overblown hormonal bitch queen tantrum.

Well, shit.

He scowled and looked over at Ian's room, like the location itself had caused all the commotion. *It's our bedroom, dammit!* Ian's words rang in his ears, and suddenly he got an idea of his own.

When Ian returned, nearly two hours later, Joel was covered in dust. He had two cuts on his hand from disassembling Ian's computer desk and a swollen thumb from putting it back together. He also had a bruise on his hip from running into his bureau when it was in the hallway, and another on his shin from tripping over one of the drawers on the floor of Ian's bedroom after he'd decided the damned chest couldn't be moved by just one person when it was full.

But he was done. In fact he was sweeping up the dust buffalo and spare pen caps that had littered the floor under the desk even as Ian walked in.

"What are you doing?" Ian asked, and Joel looked up and grinned.

"I'm fixing our bedroom... wait. What is that?"

Ian looked down at the little fawn-colored fuzz-bundle in his arms, and the thing looked back at him and mewed.

"It's our new cat." Ian licked his lips nervously and ducked his head and then powered through. "He's a boy, but they chopped off his balls, because at the vets I guess that's what they do. He's had all his shots, and he's a baby. So he'll be around awhile. So, you know. You need to stay, at least as long as he does." There was a hopeful look from those wild-sky eyes. "He's my promise, right? I even had a tag made for him."

Joel closed his eyes, opened them, felt them burn a little and squeezed them tight again. Carefully he set down his broom and walked over to the fuzz-bundle and stroked it between the eyes.

Unlike Manky Bastard, who had never really warmed to him, this one started to purr.

"He's awesome, Ee," Joel said softly, wondering what he was going to get Ian for Christmas now. Didn't matter. This meant the world to Ian. Joel wouldn't take it from him for the world. "I think he even likes me."

"He's your color too!" Ian said out of the blue, stroking the light-brown fur.

Joel choked on a rather weepy laugh. "Are you telling me you went out and got a Mexican cat, *pappi*?"

"I don't think so," Ian said with a rather shy smirk. "He doesn't meow with an accent."

Joel laughed and wondered when he'd become such a cat person, and Ian reached around the little neck and pulled out a tag. "See, it's got our names on it."

Joel read the tag and smiled, and his eyes burned some more. "*Joel and Ian's Manky Bitch. If lost call...*

He raised up on tiptoe, leaned over the kitten, and kissed Ian's cheek. "It even has my cell phone on it."

"Yeah, in case I lose the handsets again." It had happened the week after Thanksgiving in an experiment involving radio vectors and Lobachevskian geometry that Joel never did understand.

"I actually found them," Joel said with a smile. "They were under your desk. Here, want to see what I've done?"

Ian blinked and stepped gingerly over the pile of dust on the floor. "You're moving out?" he said with enough uncertainty to make Joel thwack him on the back of the head.

"No, genius, I'm moving in. See, there's your computer desk in the guest bedroom. And that's my drawers, in our room."

"But that's your bed!"

"Not after I get a new comforter, and that way Mel don't have to stay on the couch, because that girl can *sleep!*" Joel was nervous. His accent, which he let slip more and more these days when he was at home, had suddenly gotten even thicker. "Anyway, here's your desk, in here. Even if you don't remember a shirt, it's like an office now. No sex happens in here, I don't pitch a big queenie fit if you forget shit, you know?"

"You didn't pitch a fit," Ian said softly. "You got mad. I'm the one who pitched a fit. I'm sorry about that."

Joel shrugged. "I wouldn't have gotten that mad if I wasn't sort of committed here, you know?"

If I Must
by Amy Lane

Ian put the kitten down to go chase dust buffalo and wrapped his arms around Joel's shoulders. "I know, Joel. You've got to believe that I know."

"So, now we've got a cat and an office and a bedroom that's ours together. Can you relax about me leaving? I'm not planning on going nowhere, *pappi*. I like it here. And I really love you. So, you know, can you just believe in me?"

"Yeah," Ian sighed, resting his chin on the top of Joel's head. "If I must, mate, if I must."

It was the best promise Joel could ask for, the only one he wanted to hear.

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If I Must
by Amy Lane

Amy Lane teaches high school English, mothers four children, and writes the occasional book. When she's not begging students to sit-the-hell-down or taxiing kids to soccer/dance/karate—oh my! she can be found catching emergency naps, grocery shopping, or hiding in the bathroom, trying to read without interruption. She will never be found cooking, cleaning, or doing domestic chores, but she has been known to knit up an emergency hat/blanket/pair of socks for any occasion whatsoever or sometimes for no reason at all. She writes in the shower, while commuting, while her classes are doing bookwork, or while she's wandering the neighborhood at night pretending to exercise and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested and crumbling house in a shoddy suburb and counts on her beloved mate, Mack, to keep her tethered to reality—which he does while keeping her cell phone charged as a bonus. She's been married for twenty plus years and still believes in Twu Wuv, with a capital Twu and a capital Wuv, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

Visit Amy's web site at www.greenshill.com. You can e-mail her at amylane@greenshill.com.

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by Amy Lane

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